

The Barren Nation
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.
March 19, 2023

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Purpose: No matter the tragedy in life, Jesus calls us to “Repent, for it could have been you!” Jesus in the parable of the fig tree, calls Israel to repent and seek God while there is still time. Jesus is calling us as well to repent if we have fruitless lives. We can take steps to reverse our fruitlessness if we repent, turn to His word and obey it. Our lives will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit if we abide in Him and He in us.

A trucker came into a truck stop cafe and placed his order. He said, "I want three flat tires, a pair of headlights and a pair of running boards."



The brand-new waitress, not wanting to appear stupid, went to the kitchen and said to the cook, "This guy out there just ordered three flat tires, a pair of headlights and a pair of running boards. What does he think this place is, an auto parts store?"

"No," the cook said. "Three flat tires mean three pancakes, a pair of headlights is two eggs sunny side up, and running boards are 2 slices of crisp bacon."

"Oh, OK!" said the waitress. She thought about it for a moment and then spooned up a bowl of beans and gave it to the customer.

The trucker asked, "What are the beans for?"

She replied, "I thought while you were waiting for the flat tires, headlights and running boards, you might as well gas up!"¹

Every night when I turn on the nightly news, it seems there is another crisis brewing. We have read about, and seen pictures of the earthquakes in Turkey. Last week there was a massive volcanic eruption in Indonesia. Nationally, our politicians are getting ready for another round of elections coming up in 2024 – with that comes the traditional name calling and how bad their opponent is. A large bank in California was closed last week which creates fear that other banks may close across the country. Last month, Chinese spy balloons were floating over the US. Last week the United States was participating in war simulation exercises near South Korea. Russia and Ukraine are still involved in a military conflict that has been going on now for over a year. There is a large



blob of seaweed (5000 miles long) floating in the ocean headed towards Florida.

You don't hear much about Covid anymore but people are still getting sick from it. The economy may be good for some people who are still employed but many Americans are struggling simply to get by. The price of food has gone up significantly recently. More families are piling on credit card debt to help maintain their lifestyle without taking drastic steps of cutting back. It seems as if we are living crisis to crisis. Ann Murray said it best in her song, "I sure could use, a little good news today."

But from all that I can see the scripture still rings true, both on a personal level as well as a national level. Psalm 90 reminds us how frail we are. *"We all are like grass that springs up in the morning and by evening it is cut down and withers. We finish our years with a sigh. We are soon cut off and fly away."* (Psalm 90:6, 9, 10) Jesus warned us of the tribulation coming when he said, *"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows."* (Matthew 24:6-8)



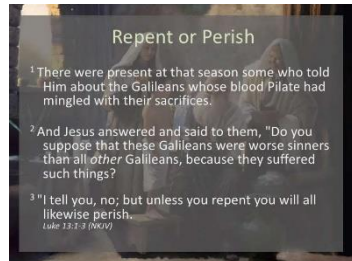
Jesus knew the time in which He lived and still He accomplished the will of God the Father. Jesus even knows the times in which we live and has warned us of all these calamities. The end is not here, but every year it seems to get closer and His trumpet blast seems to be getting nearer.

How are we to live in the midst of such uncertainty? The Jews during Jesus' day had developed the mindset that if you are obedient to what God has taught in His word, then you will not face any tribulation. They also felt that any tragedy that befell someone was the result of sin in their lives. So many people when tragedy comes into their life they will say, "Why me? What did I ever do to deserve this?" They may even argue that they have been a faithful member of a church, given regularly to support ministries, loved their families, and never harmed another person. "Why me?"



The Tragic Death of Faithful Galileans

The first few verses of the passage of scripture that I read for us this morning highlights some faithful Galileans who had gone into the Temple to offer sacrifices unto the Lord. Herod, for some unknown reason, had them killed there in their place of worship. Some felt they were insurrectionists – trouble makers, sinners. One minute these men are presenting their sacrificial offering to God and the blood of that lamb or goat is being poured out and the next minute those same men's blood is mingled there on the ground with the sacrificial animal. What an awful tragedy! No wonder Jesus called Herod a "fox."



Jesus' Response to the Tragedy

Someone came into the room where Jesus was teaching and reported this tragic killing of Galileans to Jesus. You would have thought Jesus would have railed again Herod and tried

to gather a group together to protest this injustice. Jesus simply said, "*Do you suppose these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will likewise perish.*"

I don't know about you, but Jesus' answer catches me off guard. I was expecting something sympathetic towards those that have died. I would have expected a moment of prayer. But Jesus turns His back on those that reported the news and said "*unless you repent, you too will likewise perish.*"

Jesus was making a point that tragedy comes into life. We are all sinners, deserving punishment and judgment. One person is not better than the other. We may think we are superior to our neighbor because of class, education, money, status, land, businesses, or religious affiliation. But we are all sinners. Tragedy hits everyone regardless of what "station" we may feel we have reached. Just because it did not hit you this time, does not mean you will necessarily escape the next.

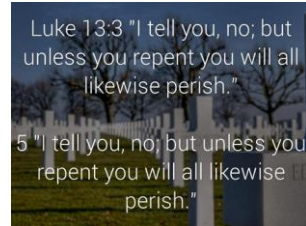
The Tragedy at the Tower of Siloam

Jesus even illustrates the randomness of tragedy by reminding them of a construction accident at the Tower of Siloam.



The Tower of Siloam was thought to be built near the waters of Siloam along Ophelia in the City of David. One day the tower fell and killed 18 people.

Jesus asked, “*Were these 18 people worse sinners than all other men who dwell in Jerusalem?*” The answer to the question is the same answer He gave when it was reported to Him about the Galileans who were killed while bringing sacrifices in the Temple. “*I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.*”



When tragedy occurs, we try to make ourselves superior to the one it happened to. We try to justify ourselves so we are not under the same perceived judgment. If we hear of someone whose house caught fire, we say my house is okay and it wouldn't happen to me. If we hear of people dying in floods, we say we don't live near the water. If we hear of earthquakes, we may think we do not have those here. We dismiss tornados because our house is not a mobile home. Our pantry is full and we won't starve. We dismiss all tragedies because we are not like those people. We are not in the same “station.” Tragedies are not always the result of sin. However, sometimes the decisions we make lead to personal tragedy. Our imagined righteousness does not preclude us from experiencing tragedy. We are all subject to experiencing tragedy and Jesus calls us to be ready to face if it does.

Jesus turned it around and said, “*You need to repent!*”

Jesus turns it around on us and says, “*We need to repent!*”

The Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree

With all this said, Jesus turns and gives His band of followers another parable.

“*A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’ But he answered and said to him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.’*”



What does a barren fig bush have to do with the previous two reports – one where Galileans were killed in the temple as they worshipped and the second where a tower fell killing 18 people? If you will bear with me a few moments this morning, I will try and tie these two together for you.

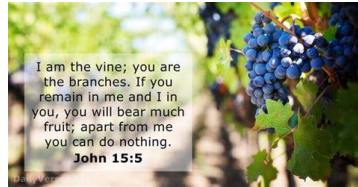
The Parallel – The Barren Nation of Israel

The nation of Israel had always prided itself as the nation that was chosen by God. After all, God chose their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were the recipient of God's promise to make their descendents to be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. He promised to make their offspring as great in number as the stars in the sky. After spending 400 years in Egypt, God rescued them and guided them through the desert for 40 under the leadership of Moses, Under Joshua's leadership, they moved into the Promised Land and established territories for the twelve tribes of Israel. Under David's leadership the nation was united as one people. Under Solomon's leadership the great temple was built but



subsequently the kingdom was divided due to his disobedience to God's commands. After spending 70 years in captivity for their disobedience, the nation of Israel returned to the land, united in their worship of one God – YHWH.

The nation took great pride in their relationship to God. They saw themselves as the fruit of God's labor among the nations. On the gates of the city of Jerusalem was an intricate carving of a grape vine with hanging fruit. Israel saw themselves united with God through this illustration – God is the vine; Israel is the branches.



When Jesus was preaching to his followers in John 15, He used the illustration of the vine and the branches. Jesus said, *"I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."* The Pharisees were upset with this because Jesus was saying He was the source of life – not God. They simply did not understand that Jesus was God in the flesh.

Israel always felt closely united with God. In Hosea 9:10a, God said this about Israel. *"I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the first fruits on the fig tree in its first season."* The purpose of a grape vine is to produce grapes. The purpose of a fig tree is to produce figs. If Israel was illustrated by a fig tree and it was barren and unfruitful, then what was to come of it? It was to be cut down and destroyed.

Jeremiah warned Israel time and time again that if they were not fruitful, they would be consumed. Jeremiah 8:13 says, *"I will surely consume them," says the Lord. "No grapes shall be on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade; and the things I have given them shall pass away from them."*

"I Will Take Away Their Harvest, Declares The Lord. There Will Be No Grapes On The Vine. There Will Be No Figs On The Tree, And Their Leaves Will Wither. What I Have Given Them Will Be Taken From Them." Jeremiah 8:13

Jesus is now walking among His chosen people and they are not repenting. They are not listening. They continue to walk in sin and ignore the ways of God. Everyday a new baby is born into the community and everyday another person dies either from old age or an accident. Either way, the community ignores God and continues to be unfruitful and unproductive.

Jesus gave His followers the illustration of a barren fig tree because the nation of Israel was barren. He had walked among them for three years and few repented. He saw evidence of life, like a green leaf, but He did not see evidence of a changed life. He did not see the fruit of the Spirit of God growing inside of them. He warned of their coming destruction and they simply continued to ignore the warning signs.

Israel Barren – Time Running Out!

- Therefore: John & Jesus ministry (3+ yrs) vs. 3 "Unless you repent, you also will perish!" vs. 5 "Unless you repent, you also will perish!"

- Slain just like Pilate's Galileans Slain just like the Tower 18



- Luke 3:9 "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees: every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

We have an unusual encounter listed in Mark, chapter eleven where Jesus is walking from Bethany. He encounters a lush green fig tree and comes to it to eat of it. As he looks there to enjoy its sweet fruit, it is found to be

barren. There is not one fig on it. Jesus curses the fig tree and the next day when they walk by it again, Peter notices the tree is shriveled up from its root. It was not producing fruit, and once cursed, it died.



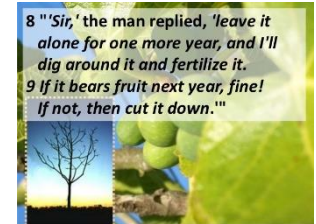
Jesus is the rightful owner of any fruit growing on that fig tree, Israel. He has a right to harvest any fruit growing. He has come to His own people and they are rejecting Him. They have a heart problem and it is sin. They want what He has been offering – food for the belly (feeding the 5000), and healing for their infirmities (thousands healed). But their heart is not right with God. When Jesus really lays out the requirements to become a disciple of Jesus, they simply say it is too hard and they walk away. They are unwilling because they are not fully convinced about Jesus.

The crowds that are following Jesus will enter Jerusalem with Him and they will lay their coats on the ground and spread-out palm branches before Him as He enters Jerusalem one last time. But He knows their hearts and knows they are not willing to repent and make Him Lord of their life. He knows the words of praise on Sunday will turn to words of condemnation on Friday. “*Hosanna*” becomes “*Crucify Him!*”

Jesus’ Timeless Message for the World Today

The timeless message still rings across the world today. There is calamity, wars, famine, earthquakes, sickness, tragedy, plagues, and injustice. We are very fragile people, living on a fragile planet, among a fragile social system. Jesus calls us to repentance in the midst of it all.

When the keeper of the vineyard asked the master for more time, it was granted. The fig tree had not produced fruit in three years, but was granted a one-year extension. The keeper of the vineyard was going to take time to dig around the plant over the next year – upsetting the root system, upsetting its routine and causing it to shock itself back into the mode it was suppose to be in. Then fertilizer was going to be added to make sure it had enough nutrients to produce fruit. If the fig tree didn’t produce fruit, then it may as well be torn down so the land could be used for another more fruitful purpose.



The diagnosis for this fig tree was not good. Its past was not very productive. It had not lived up to its expectations. Its keeper was going to upset its root system and shock it. Fertilizer was going to be added to spur on its growth. It must produce now or be destroyed.

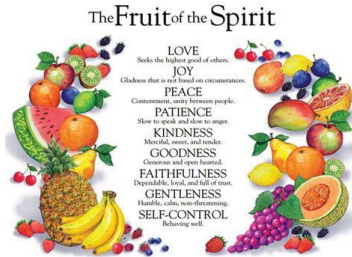
Israel was barren and Jesus knew it. God had provided John the Baptist as the shock treatment to its root system. Jesus came along and added the fertilizer to help it back to where it needed to be. But Israel rejected the message of God and its people were scattered across the world after 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed. To this very day, there is no temple for sacrifices in Jerusalem.

A Personal Application

If we were to take this same analogy and make it personal, what could be its application? Are you barren on the inside and not producing fruit?



Have you accepted Jesus as your Savior? If you have, how fruitful have you been for the Master? How many individuals have you witnessed to and shared the message of Salvation with? How have you spent your time in learning the Word of God and applying it to your life? If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior and you are reading His Word, then how effective are the fruit of the Spirit growing in your life? Do you demonstrate **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control**? How many of us exhibit this kind of fruit all the time? How many people need to work on demonstrating this fruit more?

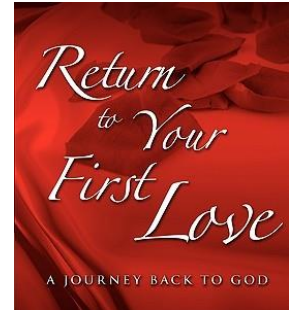


The last thing I wish for my life to be called is fruitless by God. I want to be found faithful until He decides to call me home. It may be when I take my last breath or when the Lord's Final Trumpet is sounded. Either way, I want to be ready and fruitful. I do not want to be found barren.

If we individually strive to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in our life and live according to what God's word teaches us, then our congregation will grow the fruit God desires. We will be involved in ministries that help others during their times of need. We will go out of our way to be a neighbor and friend even when we may feel they don't deserve it. We will continue to support ministries throughout the year as those opportunities arise. We will continue to tell young and old the message of Salvation found in Jesus Christ. It is my prayer that this church be found faithful until the Lord returns.

Israel turned out to be barren and fruitless.

Are you here today and you feel fruitless in your life? In the Book of Revelation, Jesus told the church of Ephesus to *"Return to Your First Love."* He goes on to say, *"Remember there from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent."*



Jesus would say to us individually and corporately, "Repent." That means to turn from what you have been doing and begin to do the things in your life that will produce fruit. The first step is to acknowledge your current situation and commit to grow in His word daily and follow Jesus wherever He leads you.

Is God leading you to commit to Him in a deeper way today? He is calling us to live for Him and not for ourselves. Let us commit to that today!

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹Micky's Funnies, A Trucker Funny, March 1, 2023