

Figs — Olives — Vines

Opening Hymn: #331 — “Christ for Me!”—just verses 1 and 2

Habakkuk 3:17 (NIV) Though the **fig tree** does not bud and there are no grapes on the **vines**, though the **olive** crop fails and the fields produce no food ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. **[all texts from the NIV]**

These are the first three agricultural crops mentioned in the Bible. Adam and Eve, when they realized they were naked, sewed **fig** leaves together to make aprons (Gen. 3:7). To know whether the flood waters had abated, Noah sent forth a dove; it returned with the leaf of the **olive** tree in its beak (Gen. 8:11). After he left the ark Noah planted a **vineyard** and became drunk after drinking fermented grape juice (Gen. 9:20,21).

These three were more than just food. Each represents an aspect of natural Israel’s relationship to God. And each contains lessons for us.

The Fig [Israel’s NATIONAL privileges]

Jeremiah 24:1-8 (NIV) The Lord showed me two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple of the Lord. One basket had very good figs, like those that ripen early; the other basket had very poor figs, so bad they could not be eaten. Then the Lord asked me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?” “Figs,” I answered. “The good ones are very good, but the poor ones are so bad they cannot be eaten.” ... [God then says]: “Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.”

[The text continues saying the bad figs are the rest of the nation which God intends to destroy.] This Scripture equates Israel’s national identity with figs. Undoubtedly all the Jews were familiar with this symbolism and thus a parable that might be obscure to us would be easily understood by them:

Luke 13:6-9 (NIV) A man had a fig tree ... and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, “For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?” “Sir,” the man replied, “leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”

For three years Jesus had spent his time with Israel expecting to find fruits that would be pleasing to his heavenly Father. And what did he find? Leaves—but no fruit. Why bother with this “tree”? Better to work with something that will reward one’s efforts. But the plea comes: Give it a little more time. Soon the time is up!

Mark 11:12 (NIV) The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” [vs. 20] In the morning as they went along, they saw the

fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

According to Matthew this tree was along a public way which meant the fruit was not private property; it could be eaten by travelers. But why did Jesus think he would find something to eat when it “was not the season for figs”? Is that the tree’s fault? Unlike all the other miracles of Jesus which were blessings, does no fruit justify a miracle of cursing which kills the tree from the roots up?

Some say Jesus knew it had no figs and wanted to make a picture of what would happen to the Jewish nation. But Mark says Jesus went to the tree because he was hungry. The fig tree differs from other fruit trees in that it puts forth fruit first, then leaves; so one has a right to expect fruit when there are leaves. “...and seeing a fig-tree from afar, having leaves...” [*Rotherham footnote*: and therefore professing to have figs]. Whether it was the season or not, if one professes to have figs, produce them! It was a perfect metaphor for the nation and its leadership:

Matthew 23:3 (NIV) Do not do what [the Pharisees] do, for they do not practice what they preach. [vs. 5] Everything they do is done for men to see...

The disciples marveled at the quick death of the fig tree and said so. Jesus then drew an unexpected lesson:

Matthew 21:21,22 (NIV) If you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, Go, throw yourself into the sea, and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

The disciples had no interest in rearranging mountains and were not going to order any of them into the sea. But they knew Jesus was not speaking of literal mountains. He was referring to the “mountains” in their lives that were but molehills if they had faith and used prayer appropriately.

What “mountains” do you have? What are you doing about them? If you want to keep them from dominating you, erase all doubt, step out in faith, and pray. Jesus said “you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”—but of course not necessarily the way you expect that prayer to be answered.

There is one more prophecy concerning the fig tree we should consider because it is being fulfilled before our very eyes:

Luke 21:29,30 (NIV) **Look at the fig tree and all the trees.** When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

During this harvest of the Gospel age, we see life returning to the natural “fig tree”—Israel. Perhaps there is no fruit yet, but she is putting forth leaves. And it is not just Israel! It is “all the trees.” And how many might those be? The United Nations currently has 196* member states, including some you’ve never heard of: Bhutan, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Kiribati, Palau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Tuvalu—to name seven.

Jesus told the disciples that if they had faith, they could “move mountains.” In fact everyone has to have faith to have a standing before God. And that brings us to the olive.

The Olive [Israel's RELIGIOUS privileges]

Romans 11:17 (NIV) If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. [vs. 19] You will say then, Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in. Granted, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. [vs. 24] After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

Olives were one of the most important crops in Israel because of the oil obtained by pressing the fruit. Mc&S says the Greek word literally means “oil-tree.” When Moses blessed the sons of Israel just before he died, he said of Asher, “Let him bathe his feet in oil” (Deut. 33:24, NIV). Of course this means Asher’s inheritance in the promised land would abound in olive groves, not petroleum deposits—and it did. The Jews used olive oil like we use butter, cream, and edible fats. It was also used as a medicine.

The cultivated olive can reach a height of over twenty feet. It bears in profusion all its life with comparatively little care. Because it is evergreen and can live to more than a thousand years, it is an apt symbol of everlasting life. Among all nations and cultures a dove with an olive leaf in its beak is a symbol of peace. The victor in the Olympic games received a crown of olive twigs, considered a great reward, but we look for something much better:

1 Cor. 9:25 (NIV) Everyone who completes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

Mc&S says: “Of all the fruit-bearing trees it is the most prodigal of flowers. It literally bends under the load of them. But then not one in a hundred comes to maturity.” That description reminded me of the words of Jesus: “Many are called but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). The Lord is not looking for leaves and flowers. With the fig, olive, and vine he expects fruit.

Olive oil was an integral part of the religious services of Israel. It provided fuel for the lamps of the Tabernacle’s candlestick (Exod. 27:20) and it was a component of the holy anointing oil (Exod. 30:24). But did you know that its wood was used in Solomon’s Temple? If you had to guess where, you might think about the metaphor Paul gives us in Romans about true Christians being like grafted-in olive branches because as it happens, there was olive wood in the Most Holy of the temple:

1 Kings 6:23 (NIV) In the inner sanctuary he made a pair of **cherubim of olive wood**, each ten cubits high. [vs. 28] He overlaid the cherubim with gold.

Thus in the complete temple picture, the spirit beings [cherubim] in the Most Holy are made of olive wood completely overlaid with gold, a symbol of the divine nature!

The Vine [Israel's SPIRITUAL privileges]

Many Scriptures describe the nation of Israel as a vine:

Psalm 80:8 (NIV) You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.

The promised land God gave to Israel was ideal for vineyards. When the spies returned from their exploration of the land, they brought back pomegranates, figs, and one branch of a vine bearing a single cluster of grapes. It took two men to carry it on a pole between them (Num. 13:23). This was so great compared to anything grown in Egypt they knew no one would believe them if they described it in words alone. So they brought the real thing as evidence. Mc&S says Palestine has been called a “land of vineyards.” A picture of a vine was used on Jewish coins in the first and second centuries before Christ. Today a picture of two men carrying one cluster of grapes hanging from a pole can be seen in many places in Israel, including the labels of some bottles of Israeli wine. Every part of the vine is used. The grapes of course, but prepared properly, the leaves are edible too (think of stuffed grape leaves, a Greek specialty). Even the dead wood is used as fuel (Ezek. 15:4) in a land that has very little fuel.

Yet we plant vines to get grapes. But instead of good grapes, Israel produced sour fruit. Here are some poetic words from Isaiah:

Isaiah 5:1 (NIV) My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. ... Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. [vs. 4] What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? [vs. 7] The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.

Israel squandered the spiritual relationship they should have had with God. It was in the third month after leaving Egypt that God calls Moses up into the mountain and tells him to say these words to “the house of Jacob and the people of Israel”:

Exod. 19:5,6 (NIV) Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a **kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**

These were Israel’s spiritual privileges. But when God sent his son to them, they killed him. By rejecting God, he rejected them:

Matt. 21:43 (NIV) I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. [vs. 45] When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them.

Although the leaders did nothing to change their behavior, for those with hearing ears, with faith and a strong desire to bring forth acceptable fruit, Jesus brought a special offer:

John 15:1 (NIV) I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. [vs. 4] No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

In the present time—a time we call it the Gospel age—only a few receive the benefits of Christ’s ransom sacrifice. They are the members of Christ’s body (see 1 Cor. 12) and they have been experiencing what the “head” of this body experienced. When this age of sacrificing comes to an end,

the completed “head with body members,” “bride and bridegroom,” will together bring blessings to all the world beginning by resurrecting from the dead all who have died in Adam. But no one will be a member of that body unless they “bear much fruit.” Unfruitful branches are destroyed.

Other Applications

Figs, olives, and vines are used in other contexts besides showing different aspects of Israel’s relationship with God. Here is one of the better known descriptions of the kingdom:

Micah 4:2 (NIV) The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. [vs. 4] Every man will sit under his own **vine** and under his own **fig** tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord Almighty has spoken.

This is a figure of speech, not a description of what people will eat in the kingdom. Similar words were used to describe Israel under Solomon:

1 Kings 4:25 (NIV) During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.

The olive is used as a symbol of peace in the kingdom in a text from Hosea:

Hosea 14:4 (NIV) I will heal [Israel’s] waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. [vs. 6] [Israel’s] splendor will be like an **olive** tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the grain. He will blossom like a **vine**.

We know the Bible is filled with parables, but there is an interesting one uttered by the youngest and only surviving son of Gideon after Abimelech murdered all his brothers and had himself crowned king over the people of Shechem. Just before escaping for his life, Jotham shouted these words to the people from the top of Mount Gerizim:

Judges 9:8-14 (NIV) One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the **olive** tree, Be our king. But the olive tree answered, Should I give up my oil by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees? Next the trees said to the **fig** tree, Come and be our king. But the fig tree replied, Should I give up my fruit so good and sweet to hold sway over the trees? Then the trees said to the **vine**, Come and be our king. But the vine answered, Should I give up my wine which cheers both gods and men to hold sway over the trees? Finally all the trees said to the thorn-bush, Come and be our king.

Of course the thorn-bush was Abimelech. Jotham meant this to picture what was happening to him and his city at the time, but it also fits the general picture of Israel as a nation. They never truly honored God in their religious relationship shown in the olive, nor their national potential shown in the fig, and they certainly did not attain the prize that could have been theirs spiritually shown in the vine. They went off in a head-strong way to follow their own counsel; they lost everything during a time of disfavor equal to the time when they previously enjoyed favor. Now we see favor returning to them.

In Revelation we see nominal spiritual Israel characterized as a vine. There it is called the “vine of the earth.”

Rev. 14:18,19 (NIV) Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe. The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath.

The great recurring lesson with figs, olives, and vines in the Scriptures is the need for fruit. Jesus consistently condemned words without acts. If the Master sees we have developed nothing at all, or are putting forth only shriveled or sour fruit, we will not be allowed to remain in the garden of the Lord. Paul put it quite explicitly in a text we read previously:

Rom. 11:19-21 (NIV) You will say, Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in. Granted, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid, for if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

But if you and I are faithful, the words Christ speaks to his loved one will be spoken to us:

Song of Solomon 2:10-13 (NIV) My lover spoke and said to me, Arise my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The **fig** tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming **vines** spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me.

Closing Hymn: #331 — “Christ for Me!”—just verses 3 and 4

*Though **vine** and **fig** tree blight assail, the labor of the **olive** fail, and death o'er flocks and herds prevail...*

[First given at Fresno, May 2004]

* AS OF 10 April 2004: Afghanistan | Albania | Algeria | Andorra | Angola | Antigua and Barbuda | Argentina | Armenia | Australia | Austria | Azerbaijan | Bahamas | Bahrain | Bangladesh | Barbados | Belarus | Belgium | Belize | Benin | Bhutan | Bolivia | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Botswana | Brazil | Brunei Darussalam | Bulgaria | Burkina Faso | Burundi | Cambodia | Cameroon | Canada | Cape Verde | Central African Republic | Chad | Chile | China | Colombia | Comoros | Congo | Costa Rica | Côte d'Ivoire | Croatia | Cuba | Cyprus | Czech Republic | Democratic People's Republic of Korea | Democratic Republic of the Congo | Denmark | Djibouti | Dominica | Dominican Republic | Ecuador | Egypt | El Salvador | Equatorial Guinea | Eritrea | Estonia | Ethiopia | Fiji | Finland | France | Gabon | Gambia | Georgia | Germany | Ghana | Greece | Grenada | Guatemala | Guinea | Guinea-Bissau | Guyana | Haiti | Honduras | Hungary | Iceland | India | Indonesia | Iran (Islamic Republic of) | Iraq | Ireland | Israel | Italy | Jamaica | Japan | Jordan | Kazakhstan | Kenya | Kiribati | Kuwait | Kyrgyzstan | Lao People's Democratic Republic | Latvia | Lebanon | Lesotho | Liberia | Libyan Arab Jamahiriya | Liechtenstein | Lithuania | Luxembourg | Madagascar | Malawi | Malaysia | Maldives | Mali | Malta | Marshall Islands | Mauritania | Mauritius | Mexico | Micronesia (Federated States of) | Monaco | Mongolia | Morocco | Mozambique | Myanmar | Namibia | Nauru | Nepal | Netherlands | New Zealand | Nicaragua | Niger | Nigeria | Norway | Oman | Pakistan | Palau | Panama | Papua New Guinea | Paraguay | Peru | Philippines | Poland | Portugal | Qatar | Republic of Korea | Republic of Moldova | Romania | Russian Federation | Rwanda | Saint Kitts and Nevis | Saint Lucia | Saint Vincent and the Grenadines | Samoa | San Marino | Sao Tome and Principe | Saudi Arabia | Senegal | Serbia and Montenegro | Seychelles | Sierra Leone | Singapore | Slovakia | Slovenia | Solomon Islands | Somalia | South Africa | Spain | Sri Lanka | Sudan | Suriname | Swaziland | Sweden | Switzerland | Syrian Arab Republic | Tajikistan | Thailand | The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia | Timor-Leste | Togo | Tonga | Trinidad and Tobago | Tunisia | Turkey | Turkmenistan | Tuvalu | Uganda | Ukraine | United Arab Emirates | United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland | United Republic of Tanzania | United States of America | Uruguay | Uzbekistan | Vanuatu | Venezuela | Viet Nam | Yemen | Zambia | Zimbabwe |