

## **Bear Fruit or Be Chopped**

‘A parishioner offered the preacher a quarter of his home-made brandy provided the pastor acknowledged the gift in the church bulletin.. The pastor accepted. He wrote: “My hearty thanks to Brother Beavers for his gift of fruit, and the spirit in which it was given”.’

Talk about a sly pastor!! What a masterful choice of words! Everything is perfectly true, but because of the double meanings, few, if anyone, would suspect what was really being spoken of!

In our gospel lesson this morning, our Lord told a parable about a man who had planted a fig tree in his orchard. But every time he went looking for fruit on it, there was none. It was barren. So he told his gardener to cut it down, but the gardener said to wait one more year, during which he would give it special care. If it then bore fruit, great, but if not even then, then chop it down.

We know here that the Lord was referring to Israel. The fig tree represents Israel. And the vineyard is the world. The man, the owner of the orchard, is Father God. And the gardener is Lord Jesus. The gardener said he would give special care to the fig tree for one more year, with the expectation that it would then bear fruit. But if not, then it would be chopped down once and for all. For God’s patience has its limits. But the fig tree doesn’t just

represent Israel. It also represents the Church, the grafted in branches. So the same consequences apply equally to us as they did/do to Israel. We are born to be fruitful for God's kingdom, His orchard. We are to be the fruit which displays to the world God's goodness, love, and long-suffering patience. For three years He has waited patiently for the tree to bear some fruit. Note that in the Holy Land, fig trees normally bear fruit for ten months every year. For this particular tree to have, so far, never borne any fruit is a glaring anomaly. Indeed, as the fig tree first represents Israel, the Chosen People of God, they had been, up to this point when Lord Jesus is living among them and ministering to them, giving them special care and attention, they had scarce had any real, lasting, positive influence on the garden, the world. On the contrary, instead of positively displaying God's love and character to the world, Israel and Judah, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, had not only not influenced the surrounding kingdoms to the knowledge of God, they had allowed themselves to be so influenced by the world around them that in many ways, they had become indistinguishable from the world. Total failures.

Also note that Lord Jesus specifically adds time details. The vineyard owner had waited three years for fruit to appear. But nothing. The gardener, extending mercy to the tree, now advises the man to wait one more year. If, after one more year, still no fruit appears, then judgement will fall and the tree will be chopped down. Some think that the three years represent three eras in Is-

rael's history, namely the era of the patriarchs, then the era of following the law of Moses, and the third year is the era of the prophets. The fourth year would then be the age of grace, which began with Christ Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the giving of Holy Spirit to all the believers. Still others think that the first three years the man waited represent the three years of Christ Jesus' earthly ministry, and then the fourth, again, the age of grace ushered in by Lord Jesus' finished work on the cross. It's possible that both interpretations can be true simultaneously.

I would suggest another plausible meaning here. Each year can represent roughly one thousand years. Since the man, Father God, had gone to look for fruit in His vineyard, this could have only begun after Israel had become a nation, perhaps even coinciding with the establishment of the kingdom itself, with King Saul as its inaugural monarch. From then on, three thousand years have passed. With nothing to show for it. Rather than revealing God to the nations, Israel and Judah had become objects of scorn and mocking among the nations. All because of their repeated rebellion and disobedience of God's rules for living. His rules, if obeyed, would have ensured that Israel and Judah would have been prosperous, stable, peaceful, happy, truly blessed nations, and become the envy of the world, such that the world would come knocking to inquire as to the reason for their blessedness. But no, the opposite occurred. As even Moses had prophesied. Sounds too similar to the church, doesn't it?

Three thousand painful years crawled by. Then in God's fullness of time, Christ Jesus was born, grew up, and began a special, unique ministry to make possible the redemption and restoration of all things. The age of grace. The Church age. The fourth day, the fourth thousand year period began. In the Hebrew calendar, we're now in the year 5785. Which means that we're currently in the fifth thousand year period, the fifth millennium. And during this period, near its end, judgement will come. The Book of Revelation details it. For the unfruitful people, judgement will come upon them and they will be cut down. It will not be a pleasant time, but it has to happen for the righteousness and justice of God to be satisfied.

The stubbornly unrepentant Jews, the Christians-in-name-only joining them, will all undergo this final judgement. The true, faithful Church will have been raptured into Heaven by Lord Jesus before this final wrath of God is poured out. The remaining Jews will finally understand who the Church is, Who their Messiah really is, and they will all be saved. When the wrath concludes, and Lord Jesus returns to set all things right again, with all the armies of Heaven, of whom we each will be a part, the sixth day, the sixth millennium, the sixth thousand year period begins. Called the Millennial Kingdom when Christ rules and reigns directly on the earth, it is the final age of this earth and universe until all is remade new again. Following the Millennial Kingdom, the seventh day, the seventh millennium commences, which never ends. It

lasts forever. It will be the unending age when the New Earth and the New Jerusalem are light and life to all, when God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, live forever right among us, in our time and space, in all times and spaces, simultaneously, forever and ever. Amen.

As Ezekiel 33 relates the words of God, we see that he is commissioned to be the watchman over Judah, to deliver the continuing warnings from God that unless they repent, they will die eternally in their sins. But if they repent, they will gain eternal life. It is clear here that each and every individual person bears the responsibility for their own eternal destiny. Each and every person must genuinely and thoroughly repent of their sins. And strive, with Holy Spirit's constant help, to live pleasing to God, bearing the fruits of righteousness. This gives us a picture of what being fruitful actually means. For if we do not bear fruit, we're rebelling and will be cut down. If we abide in the Vine of Christ Jesus, we will bear fruit. And He will prune us from time to time so that we may bear even more fruit, bringing Him ever more glory.

Perhaps overly stressed as the only real fruit is to bring others to repentance, that they then accept Lord Jesus as their Savior and Lord, and receive eternal life. Their souls are saved and will then live forever in Heaven. But think. To get people to this point requires more than just the anointed skills of great evangelists. For every evangelist in history and always, will tell us that they can accomplish nothing without the prayers and giving of countless others. In fact, for every evangelist who can count

crowds of people coming to know the Lord in their meetings, there are thousands of behind the scenes Christians in support roles on site and in prayer closets and living rooms all around the world praying for and financially giving for these ministries to operate and bring forth great fruit, harvests, for the Kingdom of God. We each and every one of us have our part to play. Doing our part is our service to the Lord. Doing our part is our fruit. For fruit can truly take any of a myriad of forms. God sees all, and knows if we are carrying our load of service for Him. Are we doing good works, works of righteousness? Or are we not paying any attention at all? Are we passing all our time being entertained, with nary a thought or word of prayer to our Creator and Father God?

As Ezekiel was warned to share with the people, if anyone ever ceases to do righteous works, and turns to apathy and disobedience to God's ways of life, then they will perish in their sins. They will be chopped down, never to rise again. Conversely, if any wicked, no matter what they have done before, if they repent and genuinely, whole-heartedly turn to the Lord, all their past offenses will be covered by Christ Jesus' blood and they will be gloriously inducted into eternal life in Heaven. In other words, we who consider ourselves believers can never rest on our laurels. For our works of righteousness, our fruit, must be produced at least "ten months out of every year". It's not hard. With Holy Spirit, it's simply a breeze. A pleasure. And a glorious blessing. The time is growing short. Show forth and walk in God's love.

