

Miracles of Jesus 12-12-02b

If you'll turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 21, the next miracle of the Lord Jesus that we are going to study together is the cursing of the fig tree, the withered fig tree. We have this recorded in two Gospels, both Matthew and Mark. Matthew, it's chapter 21, verses 18 and 19.

This is the account that we have from the first Gospel. Now in the morning as he returned to the city, he was hungry. Well, returned from where? If you look at the beginning of chapter 21, this is probably labeled in your Bible the triumphant entry.

This is the waving of palms and the casting of garments and the Lord Jesus riding on a donkey and colt. Some of the other accounts just mentioned the foal of the donkey, but Matthew with his penchant for recording both elements of a pair, whether it is the demoniacs or the blind men in the Bartimaeus story, or here with the animal that carries the Lord Jesus, he mentions both the mother and the colt. Laid their clothes on him in verse 7, and a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road.

Others cut down branches, spread them. A multitude went before him. Hosanna to the Son of David.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. When he had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? Well, this isn't the right answer.

When the Lord Jesus appears, it would be great if He were recognized. They ought to be saying, He's here, He's here, not, Who is this? Here's a triumphal procession, and the city doesn't recognize the guest of honor. The multitude said, This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.

That's also not the right answer. He's not Jesus the prophet. He is Christ, the Son of God.

What is the great confession that Peter makes? Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. You are the Messiah. You are divine and human.

The crowd doesn't understand. The people in Jerusalem do not understand. So Jesus goes to the temple and drives out those who buy and sell.

He says, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves. Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. This is one of those times of healing that we haven't studied as a formal miracle.

You have other accounts, other times and places where it says that Jesus healed all who came to Him. And the final time that that happens is here. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out of the temple

and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David, they were indignant and said to Him, Do you hear what these are saying? And Jesus quotes the prophecy to them, Out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants you have ordained praise, or perfected praise.

Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. Bethany is of course the town of Mary, Martha and Lazarus that we have just been studying. Now, in verse 18, In the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.

And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, Let no fruit grow on you ever again. Immediately the fig tree withered away. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How did the fig tree wither away so soon? So Jesus answered and said to them, Let me give you the symbolic meaning of the fig tree.

Let me tell you why I withered it. He doesn't address any of that, does He? That's what we always try to figure out. That's not His point.

What does Jesus say? I say to you, If you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this entire mountain, Be removed and be cast into the sea, it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive. Now, you get refrigerator magnets and coffee cups and air fresheners and things that say, whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.

And they leave out the if clause. This is very common in our claiming. I've got a whole book of Bible promises, promises for every occasion.

It's organized topically, a little tall, skinny book. In fact, we've got two different editions of it from two different sources. And it's a Bible promise book.

And you think, well, somebody's bereaved. I'm going to send them the Bible promise book. The problem with the Bible promise book, and God bless you, I have them, I love them, I've sent them, it's great, don't get me wrong.

I'm just saying the caution, there ought to be a cautionary note in the front. Maybe I'll do this next time I give one as a gift. Just put a little note in the front.

Caution, these verses are ripped out of context. Go look them up. This is a starter.

Don't stop with this book. Get the promise, but go find the context. Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.

Well, great. I saw a guitar down there that I really, really like. I'll just ask in faith.

No, if you have faith and do not doubt. Now, what does it mean to have faith? We think have faith means just really, really trust. Oh, Lord, I really, really trust.

I believe, I believe, I believe. Kathryn Kuhlman, a lot of you don't even know who Kathryn Kuhlman is, you're younger ones. She used to have a TV program.

I believe in miracles. Wasn't she in California? Wasn't she one of our fellow fruits and nuts out there? Another prune picker. Kathryn Kuhlman.

I believe in miracles. Well, it isn't, this would be us if you just believe hard enough it will happen. You can get this out of any Disney movie, and it's false.

It's the lie of the devil. You will not die, eat the fruit, and you'll be like God. Well, it's a lie.

When it says, if you have faith, what is faith? Let's break faith down. What is faith? It's not squinching up really hard and saying, I just really, you know, I believe I'm going to get an A on this test. I believe I'm going to get this project done.

I believe I'm going to persevere. I believe, I believe. No, faith in the biblical sense is composed of three parts.

A, you have a truth of the word of God. Now, that in itself, this is like burrowing down with a microscope. You think, ah, life is made of cells.

Then you zero in on the cell. You know, a promise is a statement of truth in the word of God. You say, oh, great.

Well, that thing didn't just evolve, it was designed, right? And so you've got to go look at that. What does it mean that there is a truth? Well, what is that truth? God loves us. God wants the best for us.

Does this mean anything? He's my heavenly Father. I'm his child. I ask, and like any doting father, he will give.

Break down that truth. We have to understand that proposition, that statement of fact or statement of truth, because almost anything can be true sometimes and not true all the time. I can tell the kids, look, it's summertime, it's hot outside, we've got the air conditioner running, keep the door shut.

Keep the windows shut. Well, that doesn't mean never open the door. We couldn't get out of the house, right? I mean, keep the door shut, generally speaking.

You can open the, do I have, you know, this is why our law code is so huge. Well, if you have a need to go out, well, how big of a need? Well, I mean, should I just go in and out and in and out because I just feel like going through the door? Well, no. And you know, trying to be legalistic about a thing is difficult.

We want to understand the intent. We want to understand the purpose of this promise. What is its purpose? What is my purpose in saying keep the doors and windows shut? Is

it my purpose that they should never be open? Why don't I just put some screws in them and make sure they never open? No, it is in general I would like to keep my energy bill as low as possible.

That's my purpose. If I understand the purpose behind the command or the statement, if I make a promise and say I will be there to pick you up at the end of your class or at the end of your flight or at the end of your expedition to wherever you have gone and you're stuck somewhere, I will be there to pick you up, I've made a promise. Well, what's the purpose of that promise? What if something comes up and I can't make it and so I call and send somebody else? Did I break my promise? What was the purpose of the promise? The purpose was to ensure that you have transportation, that someone is there to meet you.

And I might have to be inventive. I might have to be creative in keeping my word. And I may not necessarily, it may not necessarily be me.

Think of the promise, Elijah will come as the forerunner of the Christ. Well, someone did come and Jesus said to you, he is Elijah, if you believe. If you understand what's going on, then John the Baptist is Elijah.

He's not the real Elijah. The real Elijah is going to be up there with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration. But is it a fulfillment of promise or not? When Peter says in Acts, this is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel.

Well, is it everything that Joel was talking about? We have to understand the purpose. And this requires experience. It requires time in the word.

It requires meditation and contemplation and thinking through what is our expectation. I've told you before about the big ugly mulberry tree we had in our backyard at our last house. Well, if I had faith as a grain of mustard seed, I could have uprooted that thing and sent it into the ocean.

Right? What was Jesus' purpose? Is he just really an opponent of mulberry trees? Is that his purpose? What's his purpose here? Do we don't need bulldozers and road graders and backhoes and heavy equipment when we need a mountain moved? If you're a road crew, what a great promise. Well, this highway we're trying to build through Arkansas, I'll just pray the prayer of faith and we can finish this thing in a year. Just as fast as we can get the asphalt in.

We don't have to worry about cutting through these ridges. Not at all. What is the purpose? So if you have faith, this is a pretty pregnant statement.

If you have faith. Now, this is in the context of the fig tree. This is in the context of the fig tree.

If you have faith and do not doubt. Now, this means that you have confidence in your understanding of the Word of God. How can we have that much confidence that we can really take this principle or this promise or this expression of truth in God's Word to God in prayer? And from a human point of view, this is going to be like having a mountain moved.

This just doesn't happen. The Caterpillar Company didn't exist in Jesus' day with all of their heavy equipment. They can literally move mountains with equipment.

Well, they didn't have that. You can take all the slaves you want with all the picks and shovels you want. They're not going to move a mountain.

They might be able to build a mountain, like the pyramids, if you have enough slaves and enough power. But if you have faith, this is a confidence in the Word of God like the Lord Jesus had. Father, I know that you hear me.

And I am saying this out loud for the benefit of those around me so that they will know that you sent me. And Jesus knows that that is God's intention that the people, the hearers in John 11, know that He is sent from God. He is the Messiah, the Anointed One.

He is the God-Man. He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And in order that people will know that, Jesus understands God's purpose.

And He can pray this prayer, and He can raise Lazarus. He can uproot trees and mountains and move them wherever He wants. He can still a storm.

He can cure disease. He can raise the dead. Why? Because He's God? Well, that's one view.

I would argue that Jesus, with the very same tools that He has given us, with the very same, they like to say, resources in this day and age, you know, send us \$35 and we'll send you a resource. We've got a resource. We've got the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

Those are our resources. Lots of good things you can get, by the way, good teaching. If you find it, get it.

But metabolize it, internalize it, digest it, break it down, see what it means, and look for God's purpose. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, things I hope for or things that I expect because I know God's purpose. What would you think? The evidence of things not seen.

What not seen? My hopes and dreams or the invisible world of God's plan and purpose. Faith is the substance of the things of God that are hoped for, the evidence of things of God not seen, right? That's faith. And understand, if we know God's purpose, when

somebody is ill, when someone is down, when someone is challenged in some way and we're praying for them, we can say, Oh God, please heal Uncle Joe.

Or we can pray, Lord, I know your purpose in putting difficulties in the lives of your people is to reflect your glory. Sustain and comfort and encourage Uncle Joe and bring to his mind the things that he knows so that he can claim them by faith that God the Holy Spirit can speak to him and comfort and strengthen him and make him a shining light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation so that those around him will be edified and blessed. Lord, help those of us who are in Uncle Joe's periphery to do the same, to accomplish your purpose, which is that we reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and bear the fruit of faith and qualify ourselves for service both now and in the ages to come.

Now, how likely am I to have that prayer answered compared to, Oh Lord, please heal Uncle Joe? It may not be God's will for Uncle Joe to be healed, but I know it's God's will for all of those other things to take place. If you have faith and do not doubt, is there any doubt in my mind that God the Father wants the glory of the Lord Jesus to be reflected in the lives of his people? Is there any shade of doubt in your mind about that? Pray it. Pray it.

Many times God withholds just waiting for us to acknowledge what we know he's going to do. My God shall supply all your needs. Well, I know he's going to do that.

Well, maybe he's not dispensing them because he's waiting for me to remember and express and claim and apply that in my life and in my prayers and in my conversations with others. And that's when that promise will be fulfilled, when I have faith and do not doubt. So it's amazing to me because there's a lot you can say about the fig tree, and we're going to here shortly.

But this is Jesus' point. Why did the fig tree wither? Because Jesus knew God's purpose. Now, why does it happen? By the way, whatever things, verse 22, you ask in prayer, believing you will receive.

Believing, having faith, what kind of faith? Knowledgeable faith, intelligent faith, communion with God, fellowship with God, harmony with God in the thoughts and intents of our heart. I'm not going to sit and pray for something silly, something for prosperity or for entertainment for myself. Why? Because that's not God's purpose.

I'm not here to be entertained and carried to the end of my life on a bed of flowery ease. Am I a soldier of the cross or not? That's God's purpose. Beds of flowery ease are coming later.

That's by and by. This is the time of war. This is the kingship of David, not the kingship of Solomon.

This is the time to conflict, to oppose, to drive out, slay Philistines, slay Amalekites, get

the enemies out. We wrestle against principalities and powers and rulers of the darkness of this age. This is God's purpose for us.

We get strong. We get experienced. We are qualified for further service in this opposition.

That's God's purpose. So I pray in that light. And if I pray believing and not doubting, it's limitless in the sphere of God's plan and purpose, what we can be useful for, what we can serve in and do and be a blessing and be blessed.

That's just Jesus' point. That's His application. But it's so fascinating because what is the context of this fig tree episode? Jesus has come to Jerusalem and they say, who is he? The religious leaders want to kill him.

So he left them and went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. And in the morning as he returned to the city, he was hungry. What is hunger? It is a desire.

It is something that you hope will be fulfilled. When you're hungry, you want to be filled. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for what? They shall be filled.

Jesus comes to the tree looking for something that will satisfy His desire, His expectation from the tree. Seeing a fig tree by the road, a fig tree. This is a lone fig tree, a single fig tree.

This fig tree is not in a grove of figs. It's not in an orchard. It's alone.

And it seems to be uniquely favored because even though it's not the season for figs, this tree is in full leaf. This tree standing alone is an extraordinary tree. It's not time for there to be figs.

Now here's the unique thing about figs, and this is what really solves the puzzle of this miracle. Fig trees are backwards. Fig trees are backward.

Their fruit comes first, then their leaves. Read any book on fig trees, that's what they do. The figs pop out before the leaves.

And the figs will hang on the tree for weeks. So the figs appear, then the leaves come out. It's not the season for figs, but this tree has already gone through the phase of popping out the figs and then putting out the leaves.

This tree is ahead of its time. It's unique. It's special.

It's favored by its location. It's alone in its provenance here. And when Jesus comes to it and He sees the leaves, well, this is the time, if it has leaves, it should already have produced figs.

And they should be amongst the leaves. Well, you can't tell until you go up to it, because of course the leaves obscure everything. So He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves.

Now, what would you call these leaves? What's a two-word description of what's hanging on this tree? Say it out loud. Fig leaves. These are fig leaves, right? Can you think of a time when a fig leaf came into any prominence at all? It's in the front.

The first major narrative story in the Bible, isn't it? With Adam and Eve. When they fall and the Lord is appearing in the presence of the Lord, the fig leaves are used for what? To hide an absence of something. To hide their nakedness.

This fig tree is hiding its barrenness with its leaves. It's putting on a show of being a healthy fig tree, but it is actually barren. Look at me, I'm a healthy fig tree.

Look at my leaves. Just don't look underneath, because there's no fruit. I don't think I have to elaborate the application of this.

Look at the nation of Israel. They have a form of godliness, but deny its power. They have righteousness of their own making, but not the righteousness of God.

Read Romans 9 and 10 and 11. It is not enough to look like a healthy tree. If it's just fig leaves hiding nakedness, hiding barrenness, hiding sinfulness, hiding being out of the will of God, not understanding the purposes of God, what does Jesus say? Let no fruit grow on you ever again.

Now, here's what's interesting. If you turn back to the Gospel of Luke, or forward, actually, to the Gospel of Luke chapter 13, we have some light shed on this story. Look at 13.6. Jesus spoke this parable.

A certain man had what? Say it out loud. A fig tree. A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

Does this sound familiar? Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, Look, for how long? Three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down. Destroy it.

Why does it use up the ground? But he, the vineyard keeper, 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. Give it one more chance. Jesus has been ministering in Israel for three years.

He gives them one more chance. There is the raising of Lazarus. There is the healing of all who come to him.

On the day of the tragic entry, when they don't know who he is, when there are thieves

in the temple of God, when he goes to the temple and looks around and leaves, he doesn't find what he's looking for. The nation doesn't have the fruit of faith, the fruit of righteousness. And Jesus has been the vineyard manager, the vineyard tender, who has dug around and fertilized and encouraged, sent his disciples all through the land, has done healings north, south, east and west, teaching, teaching by the sea, teaching on the plain, teaching on the mountain, every different environment from the surface of the Sea of Galilee to the plain to the mountain.

He has fed them with bread, 5,000 and then 4,000. He has raised the dead. He has calmed storms.

He has demonstrated the power of God. He says, if you don't believe my words, believe the works. He's done works in every part of the country.

He has dug and fertilized, and it still does not bear fruit. So guess what? It is going to be cut down, and that's what the withering signifies. Now, what is the point of application for us? Obviously, you don't want to be a tree that's all leaves and no fruit.

But what happens to a tree that is all leaves and no fruit? There's a common belief in Christianity, it's ubiquitous, it's everywhere, that, well, I'm saved and it's all of grace, and I may not be the spiritual giant, I'm not an apostle or anybody. I'm just in the mix. I go to a good church, and I have fellowship with good people, and I'm a good person.

So Jesus is going to come back, and all of this will fall away and be forgotten, and it will all be great. We're going to heaven, streets of gold, angelic choirs. It will all be great.

Everybody will be happy over there. What happens to Israel when the kingdom comes, when the Lord Jesus comes, and they do not recognize Him, they do not acknowledge Him, they do not love Him, they do not embrace Him, and they do not follow Him in faith? What happens to them? It isn't like, well, when I come back, it will all be great for you. You missed it when I came, but when I come the second time, I'll raise you all out of the dust, and we're going to have the peaceable kingdom, the millennium, it will all be great.

What's the millennium going to be like? How many people are going to be in the land enjoying all of those kingdom blessings? Only the faithful. Those others, when they pass under the rod, are not going in. There's going to be, what did Jesus tell the Pharisees? How many times have we quoted this? They come and knock on the door.

Lord, Lord, in Your name, did we not do? Why are they even there to knock on the door? This is the resurrection. They're sitting down. Jesus is sitting down at the table.

This is the kingdom age. There are people, it isn't that they're not raised, they're not believers. They're believers, they're raised, they're up, but they're knocking at the door of fellowship, and Jesus says, look, when I knocked on your door, like Revelation 3.20,

you didn't accept me.

Now, you're knocking on my door, and I'm not accepting you. You do not acknowledge me before men. I will not acknowledge you before my Father.

You're here, but you're in the darkness, which is outside. You pass under the rod, and some of them don't. You get knocked in the head.

Not you, not you, not you. Told the Pharisees, you will see many coming from the north, east, south, and west, and sitting down. How can they, if the Pharisees were unbelievers, how can they be there to see many sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom, and you yourselves thrust out? He says, you will see this.

He doesn't say you'll find out about it when you're raised at the great white throne just before you go to the lake of fire. They're believers. They believe in God, but not according, they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, Paul says.

And they've got the wrong kind of righteousness. And look at what happens to them. There is a consequence.

We saw in the first session this morning, Jesus has come. Jesus is here for you and me. And if we do not embrace him in faith, if we do not seek God's purpose and understand what God is doing, we will be on that same plane.

We will be in that vast, unwashed multitude on the outside looking in, in this life and unfortunately in the next. How many times did Jesus say there is inequality in the kingdom? The last shall be first and the first shall be last. There will be those who are outside.

Cut him in two and apportion him his inheritance with the hypocrites. If cutting in two was loss of life, or loss of salvation, or loss of eternity, why would you be apportioned anything? Cut him in two. End of story.

He's cut in two. He's gone. And apportion him his inheritance.

Lot is inheritance. It's not his fate. It's his stuff, his reward.

He gets the reward of a hypocrite. He's there. But this is why there are overcomers in Revelation chapter 2 and chapter 3. To him that overcomes I will grant, by extension, to him that does not overcome I will not grant, that he will not be hurt by the second death.

What does it mean to be hurt by the second death? Well, that's loss of blessing and reward in the eternal future. Loss of opportunity to serve. Loss of proximity.

Loss of an access card into the New Jerusalem, the multidimensional city built four square. Not everybody lives in a city. A lot of people live on the outside.

And leaves are taken to the people who are outside. All of this to say, don't be the fig tree. Looks healthy.

Given a special place. It's ahead of all of the other trees because of its location. It must have been well watered.

Got plenty of sun. Had good soil. Had every advantage to be ahead of all.

It wasn't even the season for figs. This tree had already been through the time to pop them out and was fully covered in leaves. And Jesus says, wow, this extraordinary tree, it will have fruit.

And he goes to it and it doesn't have any. And he says, if after all of this that you have been given, you're not bearing fruit, you'll never bear fruit. He doesn't say, well, I know I digged around you and fertilized you, but I'll just keep trying.

You'll eventually have fruit. There is a time of opportunity and there is a time of no more opportunity. It's like the door on the ark.

It is like the time before the tragic entry. Israel had a chance to receive Jesus. Now they don't.

We have that same opportunity. Jesus has come. Jesus is here for us.

It's not pie in the sky by and by. He's here. What are we doing with his presence? Do we understand the purpose of God? Do we pray in that light? Do we contemplate and invest in the truth of the word of God and grasp its import and lay hold of righteousness by faith? Just a little faith would do so much.

That's the message from the Lord Jesus to his disciples, to his generation, and down through the ages it is his message to us. So there is a lot, a lot going on with this withered tree. Let's close here in a word of prayer.

We'll continue our study in the miracles of Jesus Christ next week with the healing of Malchus' ear. That's a corker. You don't want to not hear the ear story.

That's closing prayer. Father, thank you for the truth of your word. Thank you for how lovingly and graciously you have communicated these truths and illustrated them for us and emphasized and underscored and brought light to bear on these truths that are so essential for us to live a successful life in your presence both now and in the ages to come.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will minister these things to our hearts. In humility and in faith we can grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus and reflect the light of his glory now and forevermore. We pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.