
The Mysterious Cursing of the Fig Tree

BY MICHAEL CARD

Jesus left a naked, withered tree in His wake that day as He made His way toward the fruitless Temple. In a story that defies definition, that refuses to be squeezed dry, as untranslatable as a heartbeat.

He was hungry, we are told, when the leaves that disguised the barrenness of the tree caused Him to hope for just a bite of fruit. It was fruitfulness for which He always hungered.

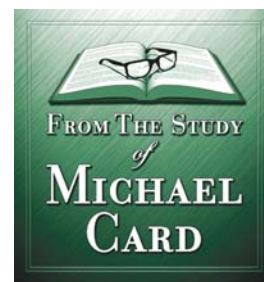
But it was not the season for fruit, Mark reminds us. “The time,” he might have said “had not yet come.” Perhaps it was the frustrating burden of all that laid before Him that day, the conflict, the unbearable barrenness of the place He was going, that caused Him to speak the word that withered the tree to its roots and left us to forever wonder why.

It was so unlike the tame and domesticated Jesus we think we know, with only saccharin words dripping honey-sweet from His pale lips. But the living and inscrutable Rabbi, who defies explanation, had he himself not said, “bless and do not curse?” We sometimes forget that the wise and patient Rabbi was also the fiery Prophet who was burdened to speak the Words of God, whose heart beat forever in time with the Father and even that very moment quickened at the frustration of the appearance of fruitfulness without fruit. It was in truth the prospect of going to the Temple that day, that place so willfully fruitless, so full of religiosity, empty works and words that had lit the fuse for His smoldering fury. For God, His Father, will always curse fruitlessness; theirs and ours.

The cursing of tree that day was the action of a prophet, symbolically representing by the tree the tragic truth of what had already occurred in the Temple. But because it was from His lips that those words fell even the curse was a blessing, His every lament is a lesson. And while He will always curse the counterfeit green and barren tree of our hypocrisy, he will never crush the bruised reed

of our broken lives. The barren branches He leaves along the pathway of our lives are the result of His care-filled pruning of our old sterile selves.

It is time for us to hear the call to come and listen to His heartbeat, to lean in close to the warm reality of His Incarnation. The heart that quickened that day on the way to the Temple still beats, if the Resurrection is true. Pray that what was true of the Temple and tree will never again be true of your life. Listen then, at the level of your own sanctified imagination and pace you breathing so that your heartbeat will fall into place with His. Listen and learn the sound of a heart that, though beating, was broken. And understand once and for all that is was broken by you and for you and that above all else He is hungry for fruit.



Reader's Note: The subject matter of this column was initially requested for use as a forward to Brennan Manning's book The Rabbi's Heartbeat. However, because of space and time limitations, the publisher was unable to use the forward provided by Michael Card, so Michael decided he would "flesh it out" a little further and use it for his monthly column. Michael still recommends the above-referenced book by Brennan Manning, even without Michael's forward!