

The

Barren Fig Tree;

OR

The Doom and Downfall of the Fruitless Professor:

Showing, that the day of grace may be past with him long before his life is ended.
The signs also by which such miserable mortals may be known.

“Who being dead, yet speaks.” – Hebrews 11:4

By **JOHN BUNYAN.**

LONDON,
Printed for J. Robinson, at the Golden Lion,
in St. Paul’s Churchyard, 1688.

Updated Language, corrections, and additional footnotes (in blue)
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Footnotes that were written by the original editor, Geo. Offer, are in black followed by: “– Ed.”

Much of this treatise has an Arminian flavor, suggesting that salvation must be maintained by works, and may be lost without them. He further implies that non-elect may become elect by works, because their works are evidence of the necessary faith. That avoids the awkward determination of whether or not we have grace, or the Spirit (see bottom of p.6). Bunyan later embraced a more Calvinistic view of Justification. He accepted that the debt for *all* his sin was paid on the cross, and that nothing he did could add to or subtract from Christ’s atoning work (see fn 38 p. 7). That being said, Bunyan here sounds very much like John Owen, a thorough Calvinist. Owen said in *Justification by Faith*, that although our works may not be the *cause* of our salvation, they are the *condition* of it. Both men agreed that if fruit is not evident, it is cause for alarm, and that alarm should drive us to self-examination and repentance.

– WHG

ADVERTISEMENT BY THE EDITOR.

This solemn, searching, awful treatise, was published by Bunyan in 1682; but does not appear to have been reprinted until a very few months after his decease, which so unexpectedly took place in 1688. Although we have sought with all possible diligence, no copy of the first edition has been discovered. We have made use of a fine copy of the second edition, in possession of that thorough Bunyanite, my kind friend, R. B. Sherring, of Bristol. The third edition, 1692, is in the British Museum. Added to these posthumous publications, for the first time, was “An Exhortation to Peace and Unity,” which will be found at the end of our second volume. In the advertisement to that treatise, my reasons for concluding that it was not written by Bunyan are stated at some length, although the treatise is inserted in all the editions of his collected works. That opinion is now more fully confirmed by the discovery of Bunyan’s own list of his works, published just before his death, in 1688, and in which that exhortation is not inserted. I was also much pleased to find that the same conclusion was arrived at by that highly intelligent Baptist minister, Mr. Robert Robinson.

His reasons are given at some length, concluding with, “It is evident that Bunyan never wrote this piece.”¹ Why it was published after Bunyan’s death with his “Barren Fig-tree” is one of those hidden mysteries of darkness and of wickedness that I cannot discover. The beautiful parable from which Bunyan selected his text, represents an enclosed ground in which, among others, a fig-tree had been planted. It was not an enclosure similar to some of the vineyards of France or Germany, exclusively devoted to the growth of the vine, but a garden in which fruits were cultivated such as grapes, figs, or pomegranates. It was in such a vineyard, thus retired from the world, that Nathaniel poured out his heart in prayer when our Lord in spirit witnessed, unseen, these devotional exercises, and soon afterwards rewarded him with open approbation (John 1:48). In these secluded pleasant spots the Easterns spend much of their time under their own vines or fig-trees, sheltered from the world and from the oppressive heat of the sun – a fit emblem of a church of Christ. In this vineyard stood a fig-tree – by nature remarkable for fruitfulness – but it is barren. No inquiry is made as to how it came there, but the order is given, “Cut it down.” The dresser of the garden intercedes, and means are tried to make it fruitful, but in vain. At last it is cut down as a cumber-ground² and burnt. This vineyard or garden represents a gospel church; the fig-tree is a member of that church – a barren, fruitless professor. “It does not matter how he got there;” if he bears no fruit he must be cut down and cast away to the fire.

This treatise was written to illustrate so awful a subject, and it is intensely solemn. God, whose omniscience penetrates through every disguise, examines every tree in the garden himself, indeed, every bough. Wooden and earthy professor, your detection is sure; appearances that deceive the world and the church cannot deceive God. “He will be with you in your bed fruits – your midnight fruits – your closet fruits – your family fruits – your conversation³ fruits.” Professor, solemnly examine yourself: “your blessedness will be in proportion to your

¹ General Doctrine of Toleration, 8vo, 1781 – Ed.

² Whatever encumbers or litters the ground. It refers to dead trees, woody vines, and undergrowth that keep the vineyard from being productive. Cumber-ground blocks the light, entangles the roots, and depletes the soil without any purpose. And it’s ugly.

³ Our “conversation” is the way that we live and conduct ourselves in the world.

fruitfulness.” “Naked and open are all things to his eye.”⁴ Can it be imagined that those “who paint themselves ever repented of their pride?” “How seemingly self-denying are some of these creeping things.” “Is there no place that will serve to fit those for hell but the church, the vineyard of God?” “It is not the place where the worker of iniquity can hide himself or his sins from God.” May such people be detected before they go from here to the fire. While there is a disposition to seek grace, all are invited to come; but when salvation by Christ is abandoned, there is no other refuge, even though it is sought with tears. Reader, may the deeply impressive language of Bunyan sink profoundly into our hearts. We need no splendid angel nor hideous demon to reveal to us the realities of the world to come. “If we do not hear Moses and the prophets,” as set forth by Bunyan in this treatise, “nor should we be persuaded though one rose from the dead” to declare these solemn truths (Luke 16:31).

GEO. OFFOR.

⁴ Heb. 4:12,13

TO THE READER.

COURTEOUS READER,

I have written to you now about the Barren Fig-tree, or how it will fare with the fruitless professor⁵ who stands in the vineyard of God. I certainly cannot divine what complexion⁶ you are, but the parable tells you that the cumber-ground must be cut down. A cumber-ground professor is not only a provocation to God, a stumbling-block to the world, and a blemish to religion, but a snare to his own soul as well.

“Though his excellence mounts up to the heavens, and his head reaches to the clouds, yet he will perish forever, like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, Where is he?” (Job 20:6-7).

Now “they count it pleasure to riot in the daytime.” But what will they do when the axe is fetched? (2 Peter 2:13-14).⁷

The tree whose fruit withers is reckoned a tree without fruit, a tree twice dead, one that must be “plucked up by the roots” (Jude 12).

O you cumber-ground, God expects fruit; God will come seeking fruit shortly.

My exhortation, therefore, is to professors so that they *look to it*, so that they take heed. The barren fig-tree in the vineyard, and the bramble in the wood, are both prepared for the fire. Profession is not a covert to hide from the eye of God; nor will it palliate the revengeful threatening of his justice; he will command it to be cut down shortly.

The church, and a profession, are the best of places for the upright, but the worst in the world for the cumber-ground. He must be thrown out of the mount of God as profane. He must be cast, I say, over the wall of the vineyard to wither there; and from there to be gathered and burned. “It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:21). And yet if they had not, they would have been damned; but it is better to go to hell without *a profession*, than in or from under a profession. These “will receive greater damnation” (Luke 20:47).

If you are a professor, read and tremble: if you are profane, do likewise. For if the righteous are scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and sinners appear? Cumber-ground, take heed of the axe! Barren fig-tree, beware of the fire!

But I will keep you out of the book no longer. May Christ Jesus, the dresser of the vineyard, take care of you, dig around you, and fertilize you, so that you may bear fruit; so that when the Lord of the vineyard comes with his axe to seek fruit, or else to pronounce the sentence of damnation on the barren fig-tree, you may escape that judgment. The cumber-ground must go to the wood-pile, and from there to the fire. Farewell.

Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus in sincerity. Amen.

John Bunyan

⁵ Someone who professes faith in Christ (i.e. confesses, swears, or testifies to it).

⁶ What *condition* or *character*. We cannot determine whether someone is a true professor or false, whether saved or unsaved.

⁷ That is, the axe which is swung at (laid to) the root of the tree to cut it down (Matt. 3:10).

THE BARREN FIG-TREE, or The Doom And Downfall Of The Fruitless Professor.

A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit in it, but found none. Then he said to the vinedresser, “Look, three years I come seeking fruit in this fig-tree, but find none. Cut it down. Why does it burden¹ the ground?” Then answering, *the vinedresser* says to him, “Lord, let it alone this year also, until I might dig around it, and fertilize it.² And if it bears fruit, *well*; But if not, then after that, I will cut it down.”³ – Luke 13:6-9.

At the beginning of this chapter in Luke, we read how some of the Jews came to Jesus Christ, to tell him of the cruelty of Pontius Pilate in mingling the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices. This was a heathenish and prodigious act, for he showed by it not only his malice against the Jewish nation, but also against their worship, and consequently their God. An action, I say, that is not only heathenish, but prodigious also. For the Lord Jesus, paraphrasing upon this fact of his, teaches the Jews that without repentance “they should all likewise perish.” “Likewise,” that is, by the hand and rage of the Roman Empire. Nor would they be better able to avoid the stroke than were those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and slew them (Luke 13:1-5). The fulfilling of that prophecy, because of their hardness of heart and impenitence, was in the days of Titus, son of Vespasian, about forty years after the death of Christ. Then, I say, these Jews and their city, were both surrounded on every side, in which both they and the city were miserably overthrown, to their amazement. God gave them sword and famine, pestilence and blood, for their outrage against the Son of his love. So wrath “came upon them completely” (1 Thess 2:16).⁴

Now, to prevent their old and foolish salvo, which they always had in readiness against such prophecies and denunciations of judgment, the Lord Jesus presents them with this parable. In it, he emphatically shows them that their cry of being the temple of the Lord, and of their being the children of Abraham, and their being the church of God, etc., would not stand them in any stead. It is as if to say, “It may be you think to help yourselves against my prophecy of your utter and unavoidable overthrow by the interest you have in your outward privileges. But these will all fail you. For what do you think? “A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit in it, but found none.” This is your case! The Jewish land is God’s vineyard; I know it; and I also know that you are the fig-trees. But behold, the main thing is wanting: fruit. It was for the sake, and in expectation of this fruit, that he planted this vineyard with trees. Now, seeing the fruit is not found among you, the fruit, I say, for which he first planted this vineyard, what remains but that, in justice, he command that you be cut down as those who burden the ground, so that he may plant himself another vineyard? “Then he said to the vinedresser, Behold, three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, but find none; cut it down, why does it burden the

¹ “cumber the ground” KJV – to burden or hinder. See FN 2.

² Or “dung it” (KJV). It is the Greek verb *ballo*, meaning to toss or pour into, plus *kopria*, meaning dung or manure.

³ This is a re-translation of the original Greek into modern language. In the Greek, “And if it bears fruit...” is left hanging to simulate the shrugging of the shoulders. The KJV reads “if it bears fruit, *well*;” The word “well” is placed in italics to indicate that the word has been added to the Greek text. The phrase “after that” should probably be rendered “as you are intending;” and because it is the vinedresser speaking, it should probably read, “I will cut it down” instead of “you” – the Greek has no pronoun here.

⁴ This awful destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans is narrated by Josephus in his sixth book of the Jewish Wars, in language that makes nature shudder. Multitudes had assembled to celebrate the Passover when the invading army beleaguered the city; a frightful famine soon filled it with desolation: this, with fire and sword, miserably destroyed one million, three hundred and thirty-seven thousand, four hundred and ninety Jews, while the Christians fled before the siege, and escaped to the mountains. Well might the sun veil his face at that atrocious deed, which was so quickly followed by such awful punishment. – Ed.

ground?” Therefore, this must be your end, although you are planted in the garden of God. For the barrenness and unfruitfulness of your hearts and lives, you must be cut off, indeed, uprooted, and thrown out of the vineyard.”

In parables there are two things to notice and to inquire into for those who read them. First, the metaphors that are made use of. Second, the doctrine or mysteries couched under those metaphors.⁵

The metaphors in this parable are, 1. A certain man; 2. A vineyard; 3. A fig-tree, barren or fruitless; 4. A vinedresser; 5. Three years; 6. Digging and fertilizing, etc.

The doctrine, or mystery, couched under these words is to show us what it is like to become a fruitless or merely formal professor. For,

1. The man in the parable is meant to be God the Father (Luke 15:11).
2. The vineyard is his church (Isa. 5:7).
3. The fig-tree is a professor of Christ.
4. The vinedresser is the Lord Jesus.
5. The fig-tree’s barrenness is the professor’s fruitlessness.
6. The three years is the patience of God that he extends to barren professors for a time.
7. This calling to the vinedresser to cut it down shows the outcries of justice against fruitless professors.
8. The dresser’s intercession shows how the Lord Jesus steps in and takes hold of the head of his Father’s axe to stop, or at least to defer, the present execution of a barren fig-tree.
9. The dresser’s desire to try to make the fig-tree fruitful, is to show you how unwilling he is that even a barren fig-tree should still be barren, and perish.
10. His digging about it, and fertilizing it, is to show his willingness to apply gospel helps to this barren professor, so that perhaps he may be fruitful.
11. The supposition that the fig-tree may yet continue to be fruitless is to show, that when Christ Jesus has done all, there are some professors who will remain barren and fruitless.⁶
12. The determination at last to cut it down, supposing there is no fruit, is a certain prediction of such a professor’s unavoidable and eternal damnation.

Let us take this parable in parts, and discuss each part more specifically, though with all brevity.

“A certain MAN had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard.”

The MAN, I told you, is to present us with God the Father; by which similitude he is often set out in the New Testament.

⁵ Actually, a metaphor should be distinguished from a parable, and ought not to be taken the same way.

⁶ This conclusion is the reason why we don’t take parables metaphorically. It suggests that Christ and his Spirit are impotent to effect our salvation and sanctification. That’s not what he means at all. He is saying that non-believers are nurtured in the Body just like believers, but without effect. Parables normally have one main point, and the rest is window-dressing to drive it home. The main point of the parable is that, if we fail to produce fruit soon, the tree will be thrown into the fire. Fruit is produced in keeping with repentance (Mt. 3:8). If there is no fruit, there was no repentance. Without repentance, there can be no remission of sins (Lk. 24:47; Acts 19:4). In other words, if we don’t produce fruit, then our justification never took place. Fruit, in the form of good works, is evidentiary and symptomatic of justification. It doesn’t cause it, nor can it defeat it. It is an indicator, a litmus test. If we lack good fruit long-term, then our profession was false. We need to “look to it”, as Bunyan puts it: we need to produce fruit without wondering whether we have the grace or the Spirit to do that (see p. 10).

Observe then, that it is no new thing to find barren fig-trees in God's church, fruitless professors just as you see here as a tree: a fruitless tree; a fruitless fig-tree in the vineyard.⁷ Fruit is not as easily produced as a profession is made. It is easy for a man to clothe himself with a fair show in the flesh, and say, "Be warmed and filled with the best." It is no hard thing to do that with other things as well. But not every tree is fruitful, nor does it bring forth fruit to God, not even every fig-tree that stands in the vineyard of God. The words, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away," asserts the same thing (John 15:2).⁸ There are branches in Christ, in Christ's mystical body, which is his church, his vineyard, that do not bear fruit, which is why the hand of God will take them away: I looked for grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes, that is, no fruit at all that was acceptable to God (Isa 5:4). Again, "Israel is an empty vine; he brings forth fruit for himself," but none for God; he is without fruit for God (Hosea 10:1). All of these, with many more, show us the truth of the observation, and that God's church may be cumbered with fruitless fig-trees, with barren professors.⁹

Had a FIG-TREE.

Although there are those in God's church who are barren and fruitless, yet, as I said, when it comes to seeing to them, they are just like the rest of the trees: they are a fig-tree. It was not an oak, nor a willow, nor a thorn, nor a bramble; but a FIG-TREE. "They come to you as the people come" (Eze 33:31). "They delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask me for the ordinances of justice, they take delight in approaching to God," and yet they are only barren, fruitless, and unprofitable professors (Isa 58:2-4). Judas also was one of the twelve, a disciple, an apostle, a preacher, an officer, yes, and someone that none of the eleven mistrusted, but preferred before themselves, each one crying out, "Is it I? Is it I?" (Mark 14:19). None of them, as we read in John 6:70, mistrusted Judas. Yet in Christ's eye he was the barren fig-tree, a devil, a fruitless professor. The foolish virgins also went into the world with the others. They had lamps, and light, and were awakened with the others. Indeed, they had the boldness to go out when the midnight cry was made, along with the others. And they thought they could look Christ in the face when he sat upon the throne of judgment, along with the others. And yet they were but foolish, barren fig-trees, fruitless professors. "Many," says Christ, "will say to me in that day," this and that, and will also talk of many wonderful works; yet, behold, he finds nothing in them but the fruits of unrighteousness (Matt 7:22,23). They were altogether barren and fruitless professors.

Had a fig-tree PLANTED.

This word PLANTED also reaches far. It supposes there is a tree taken out of its natural soil, or removed from the place where it once grew. There is someone who seemed to be called, awakened; and not only that, but he was carried from the world to the church by a strong hand;

⁷ Reader, do not imagine that this was peculiar to Bunyan's days; look not upon your neighbors to find an example, but search your own heart—"Lord, is it I?" and strive and pray that you may bring forth more fruit. – Ed.

⁸ The Greek word *airo*, for takes away, also means to lift up, as a grape vine is lifted off the ground for inspection, and perhaps supported to ensure its fruitfulness; it is present active tense, not future: "he is lifting up." These are branches that do not abide in Christ, nor he in them; and so they are cut off and burned.

⁹ See the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:25ff).

from nature to grace; from sin to godliness.¹⁰ “You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you have thrown out the heathen, and planted it” (Psa 80:8). There were unfruitful professors on some of the branches of this vine.

It must be concluded, therefore, that this professor who remains fruitless despite all this, in the view and judgment of the church, is rightly brought into its midst by confession of faith and of sin, and a show of repentance and regeneration. Thus false brothers creep in unawares!¹¹ This word “planted” intimates all these things. Indeed, it intimates that the church is satisfied with them, consents that they should abide in the garden, and considers them as sound as the rest. But before God, in the sight of God, they are graceless professors, barren and fruitless fig-trees.

Therefore, it is one thing to be in the church, or in a profession of faith; and another to be of the church, and to belong to the kingdom that is prepared for the saints. Otherwise, “Being planted, will it prosper? Will it not completely wither when the east-wind touches it? It will wither in the furrows where it grew” (Eze 17:10).

Had a fig-tree planted in HIS vineyard.

In HIS vineyard. Hypocrites with rotten hearts are not afraid to come before God in Sion. These words therefore suggest to us a prodigious kind of boldness and hardened fearlessness. For what presumption could be higher, and what attempt more desperate, than for a man who wants grace and the true knowledge of God, to crowd himself into the house or church of God in that condition; or to make a profession of faith, and to desire to be called by the name of God?

For the man who makes a profession of the religion of Jesus Christ has put the name of God upon himself, as it were. No matter how fruitless he may be before God or men, he is now called and reckoned to be a man who has a relationship with God, a man that God owns, and whom God will stand for. By his profession, I say this man suggests these things to all who know him to be a professor of Christ. Men who are merely natural, I mean men who don't have the devilish art of hypocrisy, are afraid to think of doing this. “Even though the people highly regarded them, none of the remaining is bold enough to join them;” (Acts 5:13). And, indeed, it displeases God. “You have brought uncircumcised “men into my sanctuary” he says (Eze 44:7). And again, “When you come to appear before me, who has required this at your hand: to tread my courts?” says God (Isa 1:12). Therefore they have learned this boldness from no one in the visible world; they only took it from the devil. For only and these, his disciples, attempt to present themselves in the church before God. “The tares are the children of the wicked one,” the hypocrites who are Satan's brood, the generation of vipers who cannot escape the damnation of hell.

¹⁰ Here, *transplanting* only means that they have been uprooted from the world, and set down in the church, not that they have been eternally saved. Bunyan refers to them as “false brothers” in the next paragraph.

¹¹ The mode of admitting a member to church-fellowship, among the Baptists, was and now is by introducing the trembling convert to a private meeting of the whole church, that they may hear why the union is sought, how the soul became alarmed, and fled for refuge to Christ, with the grounds of hope; inquiries having been previously made into Christian character and godliness. If, with all these precautions, a barren professor gains admittance, the punishment is not upon the garden, but upon the barren tree. -- Ed.

HAD a fig-tree planted in his vineyard.

He does not say, He planted a fig-tree, but there was a fig-tree there; he HAD, or found a fig-tree planted in his vineyard.

The great God will not acknowledge the barren fig-tree, the barren professor, to be his workmanship, or a tree that he has brought in. The text only says that he had one there. This is much like Matthew 15:13 – “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.” Here again are plants in his vineyard which God will not acknowledge as his planting; and he seems to suggest that in his vineyard there are many such plants. Every plant, or all those plants or professors, who have gotten into the assembly of the saints, or into a profession of their religion, without God and his grace, “will be uprooted.”

“And when the King came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on the wedding-garment. And he says to him, Friend, how did you come in here, not having a wedding-garment?” (Matt 22:11-12). Here is one so cunning and crafty that he beguiled all the guests. He got in and stayed in the church even until the King himself came in to see the guests. But his subtlety got him nothing; it did not blind the eyes of the King; it did not pervert the judgment of the righteous. The challenge, “Friend, how did you come in here?” overtook him at last, in a public rejection. The King discovered him in the face of all those present. “How did you come in here?” My Father did not bring you here; I did not bring you here; my Spirit did not bring you here; you are not of the heavenly Father’s planting. “How did you come in here?” The one who “does not enter by the door, but climbs up some other way, that one is a thief and a robber” (John 10:1). This text is also full and plain for our purpose; for this man did not come in by the door, yet he got into the church. He got in by climbing. He broke in at the windows. He got something of the light and glory of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in his head;¹² and so, hardy wretch that he was, he presumed to crowd himself in among the children. But is this resented? What does the King say of him? Why, this is his sign: “this one is a thief and a robber.” See here if all of those who get into his church or profess his name are owned the same as the planting of God.

“Had a fig-tree.” Had one without a wedding-garment. He had a thief in his garden, at his wedding, in his house. These climbed up some other way. There are many ways to get into the church of God, and profess his name, besides (and without) entering by the door.

1. There is the way of lying and dissembling; by this gap, the Gibeonites got in (Josh 9 ff.).
2. There is sometimes falseness among some pastors for the sake of carnal relations or the like; at this hole, Tobiah, the enemy of God, got in (Neh 13:4-9).
3. There is sometimes negligence, and too little circumspection in the whole church; thus the uncircumcised got in (Eze 44:7-8).
4. Sometimes, again, though the church is ever so circumspect, yet these have so much help from the devil that they beguile them all, and so they get in. These are the sort of thieves that Paul complains of: “False brothers, who are brought in unawares” (Gal 2:4). Jude also cries out about

¹² Heb. 6:4

these sorts: “Certain men crept in unawares” (Jude 4). Crept in! What, were they so lowly? A voluntary humility, a neglecting of the body, not in any humor¹³ (Col. 2:23).¹⁴ O! how seemingly self-denying some of these “creeping things” are, that yet are to be held an abomination to Israel (as we will know them – Lev. 11:43-44).

In a great house, there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; some are for honorable uses, and some for dishonorable uses (2 Tim. 2:20). By these words, the apostle seems to take it for granted that there has been, and there will still be, these kinds of fig-trees, these barren professors in the house, even when all men have done what they can. In a great house there are always vessels to dishonor, just as there are those to honor and glorify; there are vessels of wood and of earth, as well as those of silver and of gold. So, then, there must be wooden professors in the garden of God. There must be earthy, earthen professors in his vineyard. But this, I think, is the biting word: “and some to dishonor” (Rom 9:21-22). To say such a thing to the Romans is dreadful; but this seems to go beyond it. That verse speaks only of the reprobate in general; but this speaks of false professors in particular; that speaks of their hardening only in the common way; but this says that they must be permitted to creep into the church; and there to fit themselves for their place, their own place, the place prepared for this sort alone (Acts 1:25). As the Lord Jesus once said of the Pharisees, these “will receive greater damnation” (Luke 20:47).

Barren fig-tree, fruitless professor, have you heard all these things? Have you considered that this fig-tree is not acknowledged by God to be his, but is denied to be of his planting, and of his bringing to his wedding? Do you not see that you are called a thief and a robber, that you have either climbed up, or crept in, at some place other than the door? Do you not hear that there will be wooden and earthly professors in God’s house, and that no place will serve to prepare those for hell but the house, the church, the vineyard of God? Barren fig-tree, fruitless Christian, do your ears not tingle?

And HE came seeking fruit in it.

When a man has gotten himself a profession, and he is crowded into the church and the house of God, the question is not, “Does he have life?” “Does he have the right principles?” Instead, the question is, “Does he have *fruit*?” HE came seeking *fruit* in it. It does not matter who brought you in here, whether God or the devil, or your own vain-glorious heart; but do you have fruit? Do you produce fruit for God? And, “Let everyone who names the name of” the Lord Jesus “Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim 2:19). He does not say, “And let everyone who has grace, or let those who have the Spirit of God,” but, “Let everyone who names the name of” the Lord Jesus “Christ depart from iniquity.”

What do men meddle with religion for? Why do they call themselves by the name of the Lord Jesus if they do not have the grace of God, if they do not have the Spirit of Christ? God, therefore, expects fruit. What do they do in the vineyard? Let them work, or get them out; the vineyard must have laborers in it. “Son, go WORK today in my vineyard” (Matt 21:28). For this

¹³ That is, not having any efficacious or meritorious value (Greek *time* NT:5092). It is only for the sake of appearance.

¹⁴ “Humor,” the temper or disposition of mind. Not out of love to humility, but these creeping things pretend to be humble, to gain some sinister end. – Ed.

reason, the lack of grace and the lack of the Spirit will not keep God from seeking fruit. “And he came seeking fruit in it” (Luke 13:6, 8:8). God requires what the professor seems to have. Every man in the vineyard and house of God promises himself, professes to others, and would have all men take for granted, that a heavenly principle is in him. Why then should God not seek fruit?

As for fruit, therefore, from those who will retain the name of “Christian”, fearing God, and yet having no conscience to produce fruit for him. He says to such false professors, Away! “As for you, Go! Serve your idols, every one of you, and hereafter as well, if you will not pay attention to me,” etc. (Eze 20:39). Barren fig-tree, do you hear? God expects fruit, God calls for fruit; indeed, God will shortly come seeking fruit on this barren fig-tree. Barren fig-tree, either bear fruit, or go out of the vineyard; but then your case will be unspeakably damnable. Indeed, let me add that, if you will neither bear fruit nor depart, God will take his name out of your mouth (Jer. 44:26). He will have fruit. And I say further, if you will do neither, yet God in justice and righteousness will still come for fruit. And it will be in vain for you to count this lack of adornment.¹⁵ He will reap where he has not sowed, and gather where he has not strewn (Matt. 25:24-26). Barren fig-tree, do you hear?

Quest. What, is this still true if a man has no grace?

Ans. Yes, seeing that he has a profession.

And he came seeking fruit IN IT.

A church, then, and a profession, are not places where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves and their sins from God. Some of old thought that because they could cry, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!” that therefore they were delivered, or had a dispensation to do the abominations which they committed (as some do in our day). For who, they say, have a right to the creature comforts¹⁶ if not Christians, if not professors, if not church members? And from this conclusion, they let go the reins of their inordinate affections toward pride, ambition, and gluttony, pampering themselves without fear (Jude 12), daubing themselves with the lust-provoking fashions of the times: to walk with stretched out necks, naked breasts, frizzled fore-tops, wanton gestures, in gorgeous apparel, mixed with gold, and pearl, and costly array.¹⁷ I will not inspect their lives here, nor how they conduct themselves at home, or in their corners and secret holes. But certainly, persons thus spirited, thus principled, and thus inclined, have only empty boughs, boughs which lack the fruit that God expects, and that God will come down to seek.

Barren fig-tree, you are not licensed by your profession of faith, nor by the Lord of the vineyard, to bear these clusters of Gomorrah. Being in the vineyard, crowded among the trees there, will not shelter you from the sight of the eye of God. Many make religion their cloak, and Christ their stalking-horse, and by that means cover themselves and hide their own wickedness from men.

¹⁵ Originally, “count this austerity”

¹⁶ Originally “creatures”, meaning the created luxuries of this world: the fancy life of fine food, clothing, shelter, and entertainment.

¹⁷ However strange it may appear, it is true that the Ranters, in Bunyan’s time, used these arguments, and those so graphically put into the mouth of Bye-ends, in the Pilgrim, to justify their nonconformity to Christ. The tom-fooleries and extravagancies of dress introduced by Charles II, are here justly and contemptuously described. The ladies’ head-dresses, called “frizzled fore-tops,” became so extravagant, that a barber used high steps to enable him to dress a lady’s head! – Ed.

But God sees their hearts, has his print upon the heels of their feet, and ponders all their goings. And at last, when their iniquity is found to be hateful, he will either strike them with hardness of heart and leave them so, or he will awaken them to bring forth fruit. Barren fig-tree, he looks for, seeks, and expects fruit!

But what! Come into the presence of God to sin? What! Come into the presence of God to *hide* your sin? Alas, man! The church is God's garden, and Christ Jesus is the great Apostle and High-priest of our profession. What! Come into the house that is called by my name? Into the place where my honor dwells? (Psa. 26:8). Where my eyes and heart are continually? (1 Kings 9:3). What! Come there to sin, to hide your sin, to cloak your sin? His plants are an orchard with pleasant fruits (Cant. 4:13). And every time he goes into his garden, it is to see the fruits of the valley, and to "see if the vine flourished, and the pomegranates budded" (Cant. 6:11).

Indeed, he says, he came seeking fruit on this fig-tree. The church is the place of God's delight, where he ever desires to be: there he is night and day. He is there to seek fruit, to seek fruit from all and every tree in the garden. Therefore, assure yourself, O fruitless one, that your ways must be open before the eyes of the Lord. One black sheep is soon spied, although in company with many other sheep. It is seen with the first cast of the eye; its different color still betrays it. I say, therefore, a church and a profession are not places where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves from God who seeks fruit. "My vineyard," says God, "which is mine, is before me" (Cant 8:12).

And he came seeking fruit in it, AND FOUND NONE.

Barren fig-tree, hearken; the continual non-bearing of fruit is a dreadful sign that you are to come to a dreadful end, as the winding up of this parable concludes.

"AND FOUND NONE." None at all, or none to God's liking; for when he says, "He came seeking fruit in it," he means "fruit fit for God," pleasant fruit, fruit that is good and sweet (Heb 6). Alas! It is not any fruit that will serve; bad fruit is counted as no fruit. "Every tree which does not produce good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Matt 3:10).

First. There is a fruit among professors that withers, and so it never comes to be ripe; it is a fruit that is afflicted in its growth, and does not come to maturity; and this is reckoned as no fruit. This is the fruit that those professors bear who have many fair beginnings, or blossoms, who make many fair offers of repentance and amendment, who begin to pray, to resolve, and to break off their sins by righteousness. But they stop at those beginnings, and do not produce mature fruit. This man's fruit is withered, wrinkled, afflicted fruit. In effect, it is no fruit at all.

Second. There is a hasty fruit, such as the "corn upon the house-top" (Psa 129:6), or what springs up on the dung-hill. It runs up suddenly, violently, with great stalks and a big show, and yet at last proves to have no kernel. This fruit is found in those professors who, all of a sudden, are so awakened, so convinced, and so affected with their condition that they shake the whole family, the endship,¹⁸ the whole town. For a while they cry hastily, vehemently, dolefully, mournfully;

¹⁸ A word not to be found in our dictionaries, being local and almost obsolete. It means a division, end, or border of a town or village. – Ed.

and yet it is all but a pang, an agony, a fit. They do not produce fruit with patience. These are called those hasty fruits that “will be a fading flower” (Isa 28:4).

Third. There is a fruit that is vile and bad-tasting, however long it is growing; the root is dried. It cannot convey sufficient sap to the branches to ripen the fruit (Jer 24). These are the fruits of professors whose hearts are estranged from communion with the Holy Ghost, whose fruit grows from themselves, from their parts, gifts, strength of wit, natural or moral principles. These, despite producing fruit, are called empty vines. They do not produce fruit for God. “Their root is dried up, they will bear no fruit; indeed, though they bear, yet will I slay even the beloved fruit of their womb” (Hosea 9:16).

Fourth. There is a fruit that is wild. “I looked for grapes and it brought forth wild grapes” (Isa 5:4). I observe that, just as there are trees and herbs that are wholly right and noble, fit indeed for the vineyard, so there are also those with their appearance, but wild. They are not right, but ignoble. There is the grape, and the wild grape; the vine, and the wild vine; the rose, and canker rose; flowers and wild flowers; the apple, and the wild apple which we call the crab. Now, however they may please the children to play with, those who are prudent and serious count fruit from these wild things of little or no value. In the world, there is also a generation of professors who, despite their profession, are wild by nature. Indeed, they were never cut out, or off, from the wild olive-tree, never planted into the good olive-tree. Now, these can produce nothing but wild olive berries; they cannot produce fruit for God. Such are all those who have lightly taken up a profession, and crept into the vineyard without a new birth, and the blessing of regeneration.

Fifth. There is also untimely fruit: “Even as a fig-tree casts her untimely figs” (Rev 6, 13). This is fruit that is out of season, and so it is not fruit to God’s liking. There are two sorts of professors subject to bearing untimely fruit: 1. Those who bear fruit too soon; 2. Those who bear fruit too late.

1. Those who bear too soon. These currently receive the Word with joy; and later, before they have any root downwards, they thrust forth upwards; but having no root, when the sun arises, they are stricken, and miserably die without fruit. These professors are those light and inconsiderate ones that think nothing but peace will attend the gospel; and so they shortly rejoice at the tidings without foreseeing the evil. Therefore, when the evil comes, being unarmed and thus unable to stand any longer, they die. They are withered and bear no fruit. “The one who received the seed in stony places is the one who hears the Word and shortly receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, and endures only for a while; for when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, by and by he is offended” (Matt 13:20,21). There is, in Isaiah 28:4, mention made of some “whose glorious beauty will be a fading flower,” because it is “fruit before the summer.” Both of these are untimely fruit.

2. They also bear untimely fruit when it stays until the season is over. God will have his fruit in his season. I say, he will receive fruit from men who will render them to him in their seasons (Matt 21:41). Missing the season is dangerous; staying till the door is shut is dangerous (Matt 25:10-11). There are many who do not come till the flood of God’s anger is raised, and the water is too deep for them to wade through; “Surely in the floods of great waters they will not come near to him” (Psa 32:6). Esau AFTERWARDS is fearful: “For you know how afterward, when

he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears” (Heb 12:17).

So too with the children of Israel: they brought to God the fruits of obedience too late. Their “Lo, we are here” came too late (Num 14:40-42). Their “We will go up” came too late (Num 14:40-44). The Lord had sworn before, “that they would not possess the land” (Matt 25:10, 27:5). All these are the types to bear untimely fruit (Heb 12:17; Luke 13:25-27). It is the hard fortune of the reprobate to do all things too late; to be sensible of his lack of grace too late; to be sorry for sin too late; to seek repentance too late; to ask for mercy, and to desire to go to glory too late.

Thus you see, 1. That fruit afflicted in its growth, fruit that withers and does not come to maturity, is no fruit. 2. That hasty fruit, such as “the grass upon the house-top,” also withers before it grows up, and is no fruit (Psa 129:6). 3. That fruit which is vile and bad-tasting is no fruit. 4. That wild fruit, such as wild grapes, is no fruit (Rev 6). 5. That untimely fruit which comes too soon, or comes too late, or does not come in its season, is no fruit.

And he came seeking FRUIT in it, and found none.

Nothing but fruit will do. He looked for *grapes*. “When the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedresser, that they might receive [the vineyard’s] fruits” (Matt 21:34).

Quest. But what fruit does God expect?

Ans. *Good fruit*. “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is hewn down” (Matt 7:19). Now, before the fruit can be good, the tree must be good; for good fruit does not make a good tree, but a “good tree bears good fruit. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” A man must be good, otherwise he cannot bear good fruit; he must have righteousness imputed so that he may stand good in God’s sight from the curse of his law; he must have a principle of righteousness in his soul. How else would he bear good fruits? And from this, a Christian’s fruits are called “the fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ” (Gal 5:22-23; Phil 1:11). If there are fruits of the Spirit, then the Spirit must be there. If there are fruits of righteousness, then righteousness must first be there. But to briefly specify a few things:

First. God expects fruit that will reflect and be worthy of the repentance which you feign to have. Every one in a profession, and who has crowded into the vineyard, claims repentance. Now of every such soul, God expects that the fruits of repentance will be found to attend them. “Therefore, produce fruits fit for repentance,” or in accord with your profession of the doctrine of repentance (Matt. 3:8). Barren fig-tree, seeing you are a professor, and have gotten into the vineyard, you stand before the Lord of the vineyard as one of the trees of the garden. Therefore, he looks for fruit from you, just as he does from the rest of the trees in the vineyard: *fruits*, I say, that may declare you in heart and life to be one who has made a sound profession of repentance. By your profession you have said, “I am sensible of the evil of sin.” Now then, live a life that declares you are sensible of the evil of sin. By your profession you have said, “I am sorry for my sin.” Well then, live a life that may declare this sorrow. By your profession you have said, “I am ashamed of my sin.” Indeed, but live a life such that men may see your shame for sin (Psa. 38:18; Jer. 31:19). By your profession you say, “I have turned from, left off, and become an

enemy to every appearance of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22). Ah! but does your life and conversation declare you to be that kind of person? Take heed, barren fig-tree, lest your life make your profession a lie. I say again, take heed, for God himself will come for fruit. “And he sought fruit in it.”

You have some professors who are only saints before men when they are abroad, but who are devils and vipers at home. They are saints by profession, but devils by practice; saints in word, but sinners in heart and life. These men may have the profession, but they lack the fruits befitting repentance.¹⁹

Barren fig-tree, can it be imagined that those who paint themselves ever repented of their pride? Or that those who pursue this world ever repented of their covetousness? Or that those who walk with wanton eyes ever repented of their fleshly lusts? Where, barren fig-tree, is the fruit of these people’s repentance? Do they not rather declare to the world that they have repented of their profession? Their fruits look as if they had. Their pride says they have repented of their humility. Their covetousness declares they are weary of depending on God. And do your wanton actions not declare that you abhor chastity? Where is your fruit, barren fig-tree? Repentance is not only sorrow and a shame for sin, but turning from sin to God. It is called “repentance from dead works” (Heb 6:1). Do you have that “godly sorrow” that “works repentance into salvation, not repented of”?²⁰ (2Cor 7:10-11). How do you show your carefulness, and clearing of yourself; your indignation against sin; your fear of offending; your vehement desire to walk with God; your zeal for his name and glory in the world? And what revenge do you have in your heart against every thought of disobedience?

But where is the fruit of this repentance? Where is your watching, your fasting, your praying against the remainders of corruption? Where is your self-abhorrence, your blushing before God for the sin remaining? Where is your tenderness for the name of God and his ways? Where is your self-denial and contentment? How do you show before men the truth of your turning to God? Have you “renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness?” Can you commend yourself “to every man’s conscience in the sight of God?” (2Cor 4:2).

Second. God expects fruits that will answer that faith of which you make a profession. The professor who has gotten into the vineyard of God feigns that he has the faith, the faith most holy, the faith of God’s elect. Ah! But where are your fruits, barren fig-tree? The faith of the Romans was “spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom 1:8). And the Thessalonians’ faith grew exceedingly (2Thess 1:3).

You profess to believe you have a share in another world: have you let go of THIS world, barren fig-tree? You profess that you believe in Christ: is he your joy, and the life of your soul? Indeed, in what way do you conform to him, to his sorrows and sufferings? What resemblance has his crying, and groaning, and bleeding, and dying, worked in you? Do you “bear about in your body the dying of the Lord Jesus?” and is the life of Jesus also “made manifest in your mortal body?” (2Cor 4:10-11). Barren fig-tree, “show me your faith by your works.” “Show out of a good

¹⁹ See the character of Talkative, in the Pilgrim’s Progress. “His house is as empty of religion as the white of an egg is of savor. There is in his house neither prayer, nor sign of repentance for sin. He is the very stain, reproach, and shame of religion. Thus say the common people that know him, A saint abroad and a devil at home.” – Ed.

²⁰ That is, repentance works its way toward salvation, and is not itself repented so as to return again to the ways of the world.

conversation your works with meekness of wisdom” (James 2:18, 3:13). What fruit is there, barren fig-tree, what degree of heart-holiness? For faith purifies the heart (Acts 15:9). What love is there for the Lord Jesus? For “faith works by love” (Gal 5:6).

Third. God expects fruits according to the seasons of grace you are under, according to the rain that comes upon you. Perhaps you are planted in good soil, by great waters, that you might bring forth branches, and bear fruit, that you might be a goodly vine or fig-tree. Therefore, will he not seek fruit, fruit answerable to the means? Barren fig-tree, God expects it, and he will find it too, if he is ever to bless you. “For the earth which drinks in the rain that comes often upon it, and brings forth herbs fit for those by whom it is dressed, receives blessing from God: but what bears thorns and briars is rejected, and is close to being cursed, whose end is to be burned” (Heb 6:7,8).

Barren soul, how many showers of grace, how many dews from heaven, how many times have the silver streams of the city of God run gliding by your roots, to cause you to bear fruit! These showers and streams, and the drops that hang upon your boughs, will all be accounted for; and will they not testify against you that you ought to, by right, be burned? Hear and tremble, O you barren professor! The God of heaven expects fruits that befit your profession of the gospel. The gospel has in it the forgiveness of sins, the kingdom of heaven, and eternal life; but what fruit has your profession of believing these things put into your heart and life? Have you given yourself to the Lord? And is his name everything that you venture for in this world? Do you walk like someone who is bought with a price, even with the price of precious blood?

Fourth. The fruit that God expects is fruit that it is fit for himself: fruit that may glorify God. God’s trees are trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, so that he may be glorified. They bear fruit that tastes of heaven, and there is an abundance of such fruit. For “in this,” says Christ, “my Father is glorified: that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8); fruits of all kinds, new and old; the fruits of the Spirit are in all goodness, righteousness, and truth: fruits before the world, fruits before the saints, fruits before God, fruits before angels.

O my brothers, “what manner of persons ought we to be,” who have subscribed to the Lord, and have called ourselves by the name of Israel? “One will say I am the Lord’s; and another will call himself by the name of Jacob; and another will subscribe with his hand to the Lord, and give himself the surname of Israel” (Isa 44:5). Barren fig-tree, have you subscribed, have you called yourself by the name of Jacob, and given yourself the surname of Israel? All of this is what you pretend to, you who have gotten into the vineyard, who are placed among the trees of the garden of God. God therefore looks for fruit that is worthy of his name, that is fit for him. As the apostle says, “we should walk worthy of God.” That is, we should walk so as to show in every place that the presence of God is with us, his fear is in us, and his majesty and authority are upon our actions. I should walk so as to show fruits that are fit for him, such a dependence on him, such trust in his word, such satisfaction in his presence, such a trusting of him with all my concerns, and such delight in the enjoyment of him, that I may demonstrate that his fear is in my heart, that my soul is wrapped up in his things, and that my body, and soul, and estate, and all, are in truth, through his grace, at his disposal: fruit fit for him. Hearty thanks, and blessing God for Jesus Christ, for his good word, for his free grace, for revealing himself in Christ to the soul, secret longing after another world: fruit fit for him. Liberality to the poor saints, to the poor world; a

life exemplary in word and deed; a patient and quiet enduring of all things, until I have done and suffered the whole will of God that he has appointed for me. “Those that fell on the good ground are those that, with an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bear fruit with endurance” (Luke 8:15). This is bearing fruit for God; having our “fruit leading to holiness, and in the end, everlasting life” (Rom 7:4, 6:22, 14:8).

Fifth. The Lord expects fruit befitting the vineyard of God. “The vineyard,” he says, “on a very fruitful hill” witnesses the fruit borne in all ages (Isa 5:1). The most barren trees that ever grew in the wood of this world, when planted in this vineyard by the God of heaven, what fruit they have borne toward God! “Abel offered the more excellent sacrifice” (Heb 11:4). Enoch walked with God three hundred years (Heb 11:5). Noah, by his life of faith, “condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith” (Heb 11:7). Abraham left his country, and went out after God, not knowing where he went (Heb 11:8). Moses left a kingdom, and ran the hazard of the wrath of the king, for the love he had toward God and Christ. What will I say of them who had trials, “not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection? They were stoned; they were sawn asunder; they were tempted; they were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (Heb 11:35-37). Peter left his father, ship, and nets (Matt 4:18-20). Paul turned off from the feet of Gamaliel. Men brought the price of their goods and possessions and cast it down at the apostle’s feet (Acts 19:18-20). And others brought their books together and burned them, though these were rare books, worth fifty thousand pieces of silver. I could add how many willingly offered themselves in all ages, and their all, for the worthy name of the Lord Jesus, to be racked, starved, hanged, burned, drowned, pulled in pieces, and a thousand calamities.²¹ Barren fig-tree, the vineyard of God has been a fruitful place. What do you do there? What do you bear? God expects fruit according to, or becoming the soil of the vineyard.

Sixth. The fruit which God expects is such as becomes God’s husbandry and labor. The vineyard is God’s husbandry, or tillage. “I am the true vine,” says Christ, “and my Father is the husbandman” (John 15:1). And again, “You are God’s husbandry, you are God’s building” (1Cor 3:9). The vineyard: God fences it; God gathers out the stones; God builds the tower, and the wine-press in the middle of it. Here is labor; here is protection; here is removing hindrances; here is appropriate purging; and all is done so that there might be fruit.

Barren fig-tree, what fruit do you have? Do you have fruit becoming the care of God, the protection of God, the wisdom of God, the patience and husbandry of God? The fruit of the vineyard is either the shame or the praise of the husbandman. “I went by the field of the slothful,” says Solomon, “and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and look, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered its surface” (Prov 24:30-32).

Barren fig-tree, if men were to make a judgment of the care, and pains, and labor of God in his church, by the fruit that you bear, what might they say? Is he not slothful, is not he careless, is he not without discretion? O! Your thorns, your nettles, your barren heart and barren life, are a continual provocation to the eyes of his glory, as likewise a dishonor to the glory of his grace.

²¹ How great is the mercy that those horrid barbarities, perpetrated upon peaceful Christians, are now only heard of in those distance parts of Satan’s empire, China and Madagascar! Has the enmity of the human heart by nature changed? No; but the number of Christians has so vastly increased with a civilizing influence, as to change the face of society. What a paradise will this earth become when Christ will reign in every heart! – Ed.

Barren fig-tree, have you heard all these things? I will add yet one more.

“And he came seeking fruit in it.”

The question now is not what you think of yourself, or what all the people of God think of you, but what you will be found to be in that day when God will search your boughs for fruit? When Sodom was to be searched for righteous men, God would not, in that matter, trust his faithful servant Abraham; but still, as Abraham interceded, God answered, “If I find fifty, or forty-five there, I will not destroy the city” (Gen 18:20-28). Barren fig-tree, what do you say? God will come down to see. God himself will search for fruit.

“And he came seeking fruit in it, and found none. Then said he to the dresser of the vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none; cut it down, why does it burden the ground?”

These words are the effects of God’s search into the boughs of a barren fig-tree. He sought fruit, and found none – none to his liking, none pleasant and good. Therefore, first, he complains of the lack of fruit to the dresser. He calls him to come and see, and to take notice of the tree. Then he indicates his desire: he will have it removed, taken away, cut down from cumbering the ground.

Observe: The barren fig-tree is the object of God’s displeasure; God cannot bear with a fruitless professor.

THEN he said...

THEN, after this provocation; *then*, after he had sought and found no fruit, then... This word, THEN, shows us a kind of an inward disquietude, just as he says in another place, upon similar provocation: “THEN the anger of the Lord, and his jealousy, will smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book will lie upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven” (Deut 29:18-20).

THEN; it intimates that he had now come to a point, to a resolution about what to do with this fig-tree. “Then he said to the vinedresser,” that is, to Jesus Christ, “Look,” as if to say, come here; here is a fig-tree in my vineyard: here is a professor in my church who is barren, who bears no fruit.

Observe: However the barren professor thinks of himself on earth, the Lord cries out against him in heaven. “And now go. I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be eaten up; and I will break down its wall, and it will be trodden down” (Isa 5:5).

“Behold, THREE YEARS I come seeking fruit.”

Observe: “THREE YEARS.” God cries out that this patience is abused, that his forbearance is abused. Behold, three years I have waited, held off; these three years I have deferred my anger.

“Therefore will I stretch out my hand against you, and destroy you; I am weary with repenting” (Jer 15:6). “Three years.” Observe that God stores up all the time. I say, it is a remembrance of all the time that a barren fig-tree, or a fruitless professor, misspends in this world. As he also says of Israel of old, “forty years long I was grieved with this generation” (Psa 95:10).

“Three years,” etc. These three seasons: Observe that God remembers how many seasons you have misspent: for these three years signify so many seasons. And when the time of fruit drew near, that is, about the season they begin to be ripe, or that according to the season might have been ripe. Barren fig-tree, you have had time, seasons, sermons, ministers, afflictions, judgments, mercies, and what not; and yet have not been fruitful. You have had awakenings, reproofs, threatenings, comforts, and yet have not been fruitful. You have had patterns, examples, citations, provocations, and yet have not been fruitful. Well, God has stored up your three years with himself. He remembers every time, every season, every sermon, every minister, affliction, judgment, mercy, awakening, pattern, example, citation, and provocation; he remembers them all. As he said of Israel of old, “They have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice” (Num. 14:22). And again, “I remember all their wickedness” (Hos. 7:2).

“Three years,” etc. He seeks the fruit of *every* season. He will not have any of his sermons, ministers, afflictions, judgments, or mercies, be lost, or stand for insignificant things; he will have fruit according to the benefit bestowed. (2Chron 32:24-25). He has not done all that he has done without a reason, and therefore he looks for fruit (Eze 14:23). Look to it, barren fig-tree.²²

I came “SEEKING” fruit.

Observe: This word “SEEKING” signifies a narrow search; for when a man seeks fruit on a tree, he goes round and round it; now looking into this bough, and then into that; he peeks into the inmost boughs, and the lowermost boughs, to see if perhaps fruit may be on it. Barren fig-tree, God will look into all your boughs, he will be with you in your bed-fruits, your midnight-fruits, your closet-fruits, your family-fruits, your conversation-fruits, to see if there is any fruit among all these that are fit for, or worthy of, the name of the God of heaven. He sees “what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark” (Eze 8:12). “All things are naked and opened to the eyes of him with whom we have to deal” (Heb 4:12-13).

Seeking fruit on “THIS” fig-tree.

I told you before, that he keeps in remembrance the times and seasons that the barren professor had wickedly misspent. Now, forasmuch as he also points out the fig- tree, THIS fig-tree, it shows that the barren professor, above all professors, is a continual odium²³ in the eyes of God. This fig-tree, “this man Coniah” (Jer 22:28). This people draw near to me with their mouth, but they have removed their hearts far from me.²⁴ God knows who among all the thousands of Israel are the barren and fruitless professors; his lot will fall upon the head of Achan, though he is

²² In the midst of these faithful admonitions, we venture to remark that, according to Lightfoot, so valuable was the fig-tree that it was never destroyed until means were carefully used to restore its fruitfulness, and that the use of these means occupied a period of three years. This illustrates the wisdom of our Lord in selecting the fig-tree as the principal object presented to view in his parable. It is a most valuable tree — capable of bearing much fruit; still, after every trial, if it remains barren, it must be cut down as a cumber-ground, and sent to the fire. — Ed.

²³ That is, a disgrace or offense; what results from abhorrent conduct.

²⁴ Isa. 29:13

hidden among six hundred thousand men. “And he brought his household, man by man, and Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zera, of the tribe of Judah, was taken” (Josh 7:17,18). This Achan is the fig-tree; this is the barren professor!

There is a man who has a hundred trees in his vineyard. And at the time of the season, he walks into his vineyard to see how the trees are flourishing. And as he goes, and views, and pries, and observes how they are hung with fruit, behold, he comes to one where he finds nothing but leaves. Now he makes himself a stand; he gets up on it and looks at the tree again and again; he looks here and there, above and below. And, if after all this seeking he finds nothing but leaves on it, then he begins to consider in his mind how he may know this tree next year. What stands next to it, or how far is it off the hedge? But if there is nothing there that may be used as a mark to know it by, then he takes his hook, and gives it a private mark – “And the Lord set a mark upon Cain” (Gen. 4:15), saying, “Go your way, fruitless fig-tree, you have spent this season in vain.” Yet he does not cut it down. I will check it one more year: maybe this was not a hitting²⁵ season. Therefore he comes again next year, to see if it now has fruit. But as he found it before, so he finds it now: barren, barren, every year barren. He looks again, but finds no fruit. Now he begins to have second thoughts how can this be! It neither hit last year nor this? Surely the barrenness is not in the season; surely the fault is in the tree; however, I will spare it this year also, but I will give it a second mark; and it may be that he touches it with a hot iron, because he begins to be angry.

Well, at the third season he comes again for fruit. But the third year is like the first and second; no fruit yet; it only burdens the ground. What now must be done with this fig-tree? Why, the Lord will cut its boughs with terror. Indeed, he will cut the thickets of those professors with iron. I have waited, says God, for three years; I have missed fruit for three years; it has been a cumber-ground for three years; cut it down. Precept has been upon precept, and line upon line,²⁶ one year after another, for three years, but no fruit can be seen. I find none, fetch the axe! I am sure THIS is the fig-tree, I know it from the first year; barrenness was its sign then; barrenness is its sign now; make it fit for the fire! Behold, “now the axe is laid to the root of the trees: therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire” (Matt 3:10).

Observe, my brothers, God’s heart cannot stand a barren fig-tree. You know it is the same way with yourselves. If you have a tree in your orchard or vineyard that only burdens the ground, you cannot look upon that tree with pleasure, contentment, and delight. No; if you simply go past it, if you only cast your eye upon it, indeed, if you only think of that tree, you threaten it in your heart, saying, “I will chop you down shortly; I will throw you in the fire shortly.” And it is in vain for anyone to think of persuading you to show favor to the barren fig-tree; and if they should persuade you, your answer is compelling: “It yields no profit for me; it takes up room, and it does no good; a better tree might grow in its place.

Cut it down.

Thus, when the godly among the Jews prayed that rebellious Israel might not be thrown out of the vineyard, what is God’s answer? (Jer. 14:17). “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me,

²⁵ A “hit,” in some parts of the country, is used to express a good crop. A “hitting season” means a fruitful season. – Ed.

²⁶ Isa. 28:10.

still my mind could not be favorable toward this people”: therefore “cast them out of my sight, and let them depart” (Jer. 15:1).

What resolve is here! Moses and Samuel could do almost anything with God in prayer. How many times by prayer did Moses turn away God’s judgments from even Pharaoh himself! Indeed, how many times by prayer did he preserve Israel in the wilderness from the anger and wrath of God! (Psa. 106:23). Samuel also is considered excellent in this way. Indeed, he is so excellent that when Israel had done that fearful thing in rejecting the Lord and choosing another king for themselves, he prayed: and the Lord spared and forgave them (1Sam. 12). Yet neither Moses nor Samuel can save a barren fig-tree. No, says God. Though Moses and Samuel stood before me pleading, arguing, interceding, supplicating, and beseeching, yet they could not incline my heart to this people.

Cut it down.

“Yes, but Lord, it is a fig-tree, a fig-tree!” If it was a thorn, or a bramble, or a thistle, it would not matter so much. But it is a fig-tree, or a vine. Very well, but mark the answer of God, “Son of man, What about is the vine-tree that is more than any other tree, or than a branch among the trees of the forest? Will wood be taken from it to do any work? Or will men take a pin of it to hang a vessel on?” (Eze 15:2-3). If trees that are set, or planted for fruit, do not bear that fruit, there is nothing better at all between them and the trees of the forest, unless what is better lies in the trees of the wood, for at least they are fit to build with. But a fig-tree, or a vine that does not bear fruit, indeed, good fruit, are fit for nothing at all except to be cut down and prepared for the fire. And so the prophet goes on, “Behold, it is thrown into the fire for fuel.” If it does not serve for fruit it will serve for fuel; and so “the fire devours both ends of it, and the middle of it is burnt.”

Yes, you might say, but these fig-trees and vines are church-members, inhabitants of Jerusalem. So was the fig-tree mentioned in the text. But what answer has God prepared for these objections? Why, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘As the vine-tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will set my face against them, they will go out from one fire, and another fire will devour them.’” (Eze. 15:6-7).

Cut it down.

The woman who delights in her garden, if she has a slip²⁷ there, assuming it was fruitful, would not take five pounds for it. Yet, if it bore no fruit, if it withers, dwindles, and dies, and turns into cumber-ground, it may not remain in her garden. Gardens and vineyards are places for fruit, for fruit according to the nature of the plant or flowers. Suppose such a slip as I mentioned was in your garden, and there it dies. Would you let it stay in your garden? No; away with it, away with it! The woman comes into her garden towards the spring, where first she gives it a glance, and then she sets to gathering out the weeds, nettles, and stones. She takes a whisk broom and sweeps the walks. This being done, she pries into her herbs and slips to see if they live, to see if they are likely to grow. Now, if she comes to one that is dead, that she is confident will not grow, she

²⁷ A slip is what is cut from a plant for grafting into another plant, or for planting separately.

pulls it up and takes it to the rubbish heap where she despisingly throws it down. She values it no more than a nettle, or a weed, or the dust she swept out of her walks. Indeed, if anyone seeing her do this should ask, "Why do you do this?" the answer is ready: "It is dead. It is dead at its root. If I had let it stay it would only have cumbered the ground. The foreign slips, and also the dead ones, must be "a heap in the day of grief, and of desperate sorrow" (Isa 17:10-11).

Cut it down.

There are two ways to cut it down. First, when a man is thrown out of the vineyard. Second. When a man is thrown out of the world.

First. When a man is thrown out of the vineyard. And this is done two ways; 1. By an immediate hand of God. 2. By the church's due execution of the laws and censures which Christ has left with his church for that purpose.

1. God cuts down the barren fig-tree by an immediate hand, striking his roots, blasting his branches. And so he takes him away from among his people. "Every branch," says Christ, "that does not bear fruit in me, my Father takes away" (John 15:2). He takes him out of the church; he takes him away from the godly. There are two things for which God takes the barren professor from among the children of God:

(1) *Strong delusions.* By strong delusion I mean things which beguile the soul with damnable doctrines that swerve away from faith and godliness, "They have chosen their own ways," says God, "and their soul delights in their abominations. I too will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them" (Isa. 66:3-4). I will strike them with blindness, and hardness of heart, and failing eyes; and I will also allow the tempter to tempt them and to effect his hellish designs upon them. "God will send them a strong delusion so that they will believe a lie, that all those who did not believe the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness might be damned" (2Thess 2:10-12).

(2.) *Open profaneness.* Sometimes God takes away a barren professor by open profaneness. Someone may have taken up a profession of that worthy name, the Lord Jesus Christ, but his profession is only a cloak. He secretly practices wickedness. He is a glutton, a drunkard, covetous, or unclean. Well, says God, I will loose the reins of this professor. I will give him up to his vile affections. I will loose the reins of his lusts before him and he will be entangled with his beastly lusts. He will be overcome by ungodly company. Thus, those who turn aside to their own crooked ways "the Lord will lead them away with the workers of iniquity" (Psa 125:5).

This is God's immediate hand. God is now dealing with this man himself. Barren fig-tree, listen! You have crowded into a profession; you have gotten among the godly, and there you are a scandal to the holy and glorious gospel. But you have done so with such cunning that, like the sons of Zeruiah, you are too hard for the church. She does not know how to deal with you. Well, says God, I will deal with that man myself, "I will answer that man by myself." One who sets up idols in his heart, and puts the stumbling-block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes and appears before me, "I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb:

and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and you will know that I am the Lord” (Eze. 14:7-8). But,

2. God sometimes cuts down the barren fig-tree by the church, by the church’s due execution of the laws and censures which Christ has left with his church for that purpose. This is the meaning of Matthew 18; 1 Corinthians 5: and that one in 1 Timothy 1:20 which I will not enlarge upon now.

But whichever way God deals with you, O you barren fig-tree, whether by himself immediately, or by his church, it amounts to the same thing. For if timely repentance does not prevent it, the end of that soul is damnation. These trees are blighted, and withered, and gathered by men; they are God’s enemies; and at last, being cast into the fire, burning must be their end. “What bears thorns and briars is nearly cursing, whose end is to be burned” (Heb 6:8).

Second. And, again, sometimes by “Cut it down” God means to cast it out of the world. Thus he cut down Nadab and Abihu, when he burned them up with fire from heaven. Thus he cut down Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, when he made the earth swallow them up (Num 3:4, 16:31-33). Thus he cut down Saul, when he gave him up to fall upon the edge of his own sword and died (1 Sam 31:4). Thus he cut down Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, when he struck them down dead in the midst of the congregation (Acts 5:5, 10). Here I might also discuss Absalom, Ahithophel, and Judas, who were all three hanged: the first by God’s revenging hand; the others were given up by God to be their own executioners. These were barren and unprofitable fig-trees, the kind God took no pleasure in. Therefore he commanded to cut them down. The Psalmist says, “He will take them away as with a whirlwind, both living and in his wrath” (Psa 58:9). Barren fig-tree, listen! God calls for the axe, his sword; he asks to bring it here; here is a barren professor. Cut him down, why does he burden the ground?

Why does it burden the ground?

By these words the Lord suggests the reason for his displeasure against the barren fig-tree; it burdens the ground. The Holy Ghost not only has an argument from its barrenness, but because it is a cumber-ground. Therefore cut it down: it is a provocation.

1. Because of its condition, it disappoints the design of God in planting his vineyard: “I looked for it to bear fruit.”
2. It has also abused his patience, his long-suffering, his three years’ patience.
3. It has also abused his labor, his pains, his care, and providence of protection and preservation: for he hedges his vineyard, and puts a wall around it.

Cumber-ground, all these things you abuse! He waters his vineyard, and looks to it night and day, but you have abused all these things.

Further, there are other reasons of God’s displeasure.

First. A cumber-ground is a mockery and reproach of religion, a mockery and reproach to the ways of God, to the people of God, to the Word of God, and to the name of religion. It is

expected of all hands, that all the trees in the garden of God should be fruitful. God expects fruit, the church expects fruit. The world, even the world, concludes that professors should be fruitful in good works. I say, the world expects that professors should be better than themselves. But, barren fig-tree, you disappoint them all. Worse, have you not taught the wicked ones your ways? Have you not taught them to be more wicked by your example? But that is by the by. Barren fig-tree, you have disappointed others, and must be disappointed yourself! “Cut it down, why does it burden the ground?”

Second. The barren fig-tree takes up the space where a better tree might stand. I say, it takes up the space. So long as it stands where it does, it keeps a fruitful tree out of that place; and therefore it must be cut down. Barren fig-tree, do you hear? Because the Jews stood fruitless in the vineyard, therefore, says God, “The kingdom of God will be taken from you,” and given to a nation that will render him their fruits in their season (Matt 21:33-41). The Jews for their barrenness were cut down, and more fruitful people put in their place. As Samuel also said to barren Saul, “The Lord has torn the kingdom from you, and has given it to a neighbor of yours who is better than you” (1 Sam 15:28). The unprofitable servant must be thrown out; he must be cut down (Matt 25:27).

Cumber-ground, how many hopeful, favorably disposed, eager people, have you by your fruitless and unprofitable life, kept out of the vineyard of God? Because of you, the people have stumbled at religion; by your life they have been kept from the love of their own salvation. You have also been a means of hardening others, and of quenching and killing weak beginnings. Well, barren fig-tree, look at yourself. You will not go to heaven yourself, and those who would, you hinder. You must not continue to burden the ground, nor continue to hinder the salvation of others. You will be cut down, and another will be planted in your place.

Third. The cumber-ground sucks the nutrients from the soil; he draws away the heart and nourishment from the other trees. If the cumber-ground were cut down, the others would be more fruitful; he draws away to himself the abundance of the ground that would make the others more hearty and fruitful. “One sinner destroys much good” (Eccl. 9:18).

The cumber-ground is a drone in the hive, which eats up the honey that should feed the laboring bee. He is a thief in the candle, who wastes the tallow, but gives no light; he is the unsavory salt that is fit for nothing but the dunghill. Look to it, barren fig-tree!

And answering, he said to him, ‘Lord, let it alone this year also, until I might dig around it, and fertilize it; and if it bears fruit, well; But if not, then I will cut it down (vs. 8-9).

These are the words of the vinedresser, who, I told you, is Jesus Christ, for he made intercession for the transgressors. And these words contain a petition presented to an offended judge, praying that a little more time and patience be exercised towards the barren cumber-ground fig-tree. In this petition there are six things to consider:

1. That justice might be deferred. O that justice might be deferred! “Lord, let it alone,” etc., a while longer.

2. Time is pre-fixed as a space to see if more means will cure a barren fig-tree. "Lord, let it alone this year also."
3. The means to help it are propounded: "until I lack of around it, and fertilize it."²⁸
4. There is also an insinuation that, by doing so, God's expectation may be answered; "and if it bears fruit, well;"
5. There is a supposition that the barren fig-tree may remain barren when Christ has done what he will to it; "and if it bears fruit, well;" otherwise, etc.
6. There is at last a resolution that, if you continue to be barren, the hewing days will come upon you; "and if it bears fruit, well; But if not, then I will cut it down."

But to return to my previous method of exposition:

Lord, let it alone this year also.

Here is astonishing grace indeed! Astonishing grace, I say, that the Lord Jesus would concern himself with a barren fig-tree; that he would step in to stop the blow upon a barren fig-tree! True, he stopped the blow only for a time, but why did he stop it at all? Why did he not fetch the axe? Why did he not perform the execution? Why did he not cut it down? Barren fig-tree, it is well for you that there is a Jesus at God's right hand, a Jesus with a heart so large as to have compassion for a barren fig-tree. Otherwise justice would never have let you alone to burden the ground as you have done! When Israel also had sinned against God, they would have gone down, except that Moses stood in the breach. "Let me alone," God said to him, "that I may consume them" in a moment, "and I will make a great nation out of you" (Exo 32:10). Barren fig-tree, do you hear? You do not know how often the hand of Divine justice has been ready to strike, and how many years since you would have been cut down, had Jesus not caught hold of his Father's axe. Let me alone, let me fetch my axe, or "Cut it down, why does it burden the ground?" Will you still not hear, barren fig-tree? Will you still provoke? You have wearied men, and provoked the justice of God! And "will you weary my God also?" (Isa 7:13).

Lord, let it alone this year.

Lord, a little longer! Let us not lose a soul for lack of means. I will try. I will see if I can make it fruitful. I will not beg for a long life, nor that it might continue to be barren, and so provoke you. I beg, for the sake of the soul, the immortal soul: Lord, spare it one year only, one year longer, this year also. If I do any good to it, it will be in little time. You will not be over-wearied with waiting; one year and then...

Barren fig-tree, do you hear what striving there is between the vinedresser and the husbandman for your life? "Cut it down," says one; "Lord, spare it," says the other. It is a cumber-ground, says the Father; one year longer, prays the Son. "Let it alone this year also."

Until I might dig around it, and fertilize it.

²⁸ This mode of infusing new vigor into plants and trees is thus described in the Gemara —"They lay manure in their gardens, to soften the earth. They dig around the roots of their trees, and sprinkle ashes, and pluck up suckers, and make a smoke beneath to kill vermin." — Ed.

The Lord Jesus by these words supposes two things to be the cause of the lack of fruit in a barren fig-tree; and there are two things he proposes as a remedy.

The things that cause of lack of fruit are, *first*, it is earth-bound. Lord, the fig-tree is earth-bound. *Second*, there is a lack of warmer means, of abundant means. Therefore, he proposes to loosen the earth, to dig around it, and then to supply it with manure.

“To dig around it, and fertilize it. Lord, let it alone this year also, until I might dig around it.” I doubt it is too much ground-bound.²⁹ The love of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches lie too close to the roots of the heart of this professor (Luke 8:14).³⁰ The love of riches, the love of honors, the love of pleasures, are the thorns that choke the word. “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father,” but enmity to God; how then, where these things bind up the heart, can there be fruit borne for God? (1 John 2:16). Barren fig-tree, see how the Lord Jesus, by these very words, suggests the cause of your soul’s fruitlessness! The things of this world lie too close to your heart. The earth with its things have bound up your roots. You are an earth-bound soul. You are wrapped up in thick clay. “If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”³¹ How then can he be fruitful in the vineyard? This love of the world kept Judas from the fruit of caring for the poor (John 12:6). This kept Demas from the fruit of self-denial (2 Tim 4:10). And this kept Ananias and his wife Sapphira from the good fruit of sincerity and truth (Acts 5:5, 10). What will I say? These are “foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and ruin; for the love of money is the root of all evil.” How then can good fruit grow from the root of all evil? “Some, longing after these, have been led away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many sorrows” (1 Tim 6:9-10). It is an evil root; no – it is the root of all evil. How then can the professor who has such a root, or a root wrapped up in earthly things such as the lusts, pleasures, and vanities of this world, bear fruit for God?

Until I might “DIG” around it.

Lord, I will free his roots. I will dig up this earth. I will lay his roots bare. My hand will be upon him by sickness, disappointments, and misfortune.³² I will dig around him until he stands shaking and tottering, until he is ready to fall. Then, if ever, he will seek to take better hold. This is how, I say, the Lord Jesus often times deals with the barren professor. He digs around him. He strikes one blow at his heart, another blow at his lusts, a third at his pleasures, a fourth at his comforts, another at his self-conceit. Thus he digs around him; this is the way to take bad earth from his roots, and to loosen his roots from the earth. Barren fig-tree, see the care, love, labor, and way which the Lord Jesus, the dresser of the vineyard, is willing to take with you, if by chance you may be made fruitful.³³

²⁹ Bunyan contrasts earth-bound with ground-bound – the ground represents the Word of God. That is not the problem here.

³⁰ And the seed which fell among the thorns are those who have heard; but as they go on their way, they are choked with cares and riches and the pleasures of life, which bring no fruit to maturity.

³¹ 1 Jn. 2:15

³² Bunyan uses the sovereign term “cross providences” for bad luck or misfortune.

³³ Among the superstitions of the ancients, Michaelis states that both the Greeks and Asiatics had a superstition that a tree might be rendered fruitful by striking it, at the intercession of a friend, three times with the back of an axe. – Ed.

Until I might dig around it, and “FERTILIZE” it.

Just as the earth may hinder the tree’s being fruitful by binding the roots too closely, so the lack of better means may cause it. And this is more than intimated by the vinedresser: “Until I might dig around it and fertilize it.” I will supply it with a more fruitful ministry, with a warmer word. I will give them pastors after my own heart. I will fertilize them. You know manure is a warmer, richer, heartier, and more succoring material than commonly in the place where trees are planted.

“I will dig around it, and fertilize it.” I will bring it under a heart-awakening ministry. The means of grace will be rich and good: I will also visit it with heart-awakening, heart-warming, heart-encouraging considerations. I will apply warm manure to his roots. I will strive with him by my Spirit, and give him some tastes of the heavenly gift, and the power of the world to come.³⁴ I am loathe to lose him for lack of digging. “Lord, let it alone this year also, until I might dig around it and fertilize it.”

And if it bears fruit, WELL.

The vinedresser is saying “if the fruits of all my labor make this fig-tree fruitful, then I will count my time, labor, and means, well-bestowed upon it. And you also, O my God, will be very delighted with it. For you are gracious, and merciful, and turn from the evil which you threaten to bring upon a people.” These words, therefore, inform us that if a barren fig-tree, a barren professor, will now at last bear fruit for God, then it will go well with that professor; it will go well with that poor soul. His former barrenness, his former tempting of God, his abuse of God’s patience and long-suffering, his mis-spending year after year, will now all be forgiven him. Indeed, God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, will not pass by and forget it all, and say, “Well done,” at the last. When I say to the wicked, “O wicked man, you will surely die”, then if he does what is lawful and right, if he walks in the statutes of life without committing iniquity, he will surely live; he will not die (Eze. 33).

Barren fig-tree, do you hear? The axe is laid to your roots. The Lord Jesus prays God to spare you. Has he been digging around you? Has he been fertilizing you? O barren fig-tree, now you have come to the point. If you will now become good, if you will, in a gracious way, absorb the gospel-manure, and if you will bear fruit for God, well. But if not, then the fire is the last! Fruit or the fire; fruit or the fire, barren fig-tree! “If it bears fruit, well.”³⁵

And IF not, THEN I will cut it down.

By this “if”, THE Lord Jesus gives us to understand that there is a generation of professors in the world that is incurable, that will not, that *cannot* repent, nor profit by the means of grace; a generation, I say, that will retain a profession, but will not bear fruit; a generation that will wear out the patience of God, time and tide, threatenings and intercessions, judgments and mercies, and after all of this, will still be unfruitful.

³⁴ Heb. 6:4,5

³⁵ However painfully unpleasant these terms may appear to eyes or ears polite, it is a homely but just representation, and calculated to make a lasting impression on every reader. Afflictions, trials, crosses, are used as a means of creating or reviving spiritual life, as manure is applied to vegetation. – Ed.

O the desperate wickedness that is in your heart! Barren professor, do you hear? The Lord Jesus still stands in doubt about you. There is an IF that still stands in the way. I say, the Lord Jesus still stands in doubt about you, whether or not, at last, you will be good; whether he may not labor in vain; whether his digging and fertilizing will come to anything more than lost labor; “I gave her space to repent, - and she did not repent” (Rev 2:21). I dug around it; I fertilized it; I gained time, and supplied it with means; but I labored in vain, and spent my strength for nothing, and in vain! Do you hear, barren fig-tree? There is still a question whether it may be well with your soul at last.

And if not, THEN I will cut it down.

There is nothing more exasperating to the mind of a man than to find all his kindness and favor slighted. Nor is the Lord Jesus so provoked with anything as when sinners abuse his means of grace. If it is barren and fruitless under my gospel, if it turns my grace into wantonness, if after digging and fertilizing, and waiting, it still remains unfruitful, God’s intent to cut it down will be fulfilled.

Gospel means, applied, is the last remedy for a barren professor. If the gospel will not do, if the grace of the gospel will not do, then nothing can be expected but to cut it down. “Then I will cut it down.” “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kills the prophets, and stones those who are sent to you, how often I would have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not have it!” Therefore “your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:37-38). Yet it can only be that this Lord Jesus, who at first put a stop to the execution of his Father’s justice because he desired to try more means with the fig-tree; I say, it can only be that a heart so full of compassion as his, should be touched to behold that this professor must now be cut down. “And when he had come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known, even you, at least in this your day, the things regarding your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes’” (Luke 19:41-42).

AFTER THAT I will cut it down.³⁶

When Christ gives you over, there is no intercessor, no mediator, no more sacrifice for sin. All is gone but judgment, but the axe, but a “certain fearful looking for judgment, and fiery indignation, which will devour the adversaries” (Heb 10:26-27).

Barren fig-tree, take heed that you do not come to these last words, for these words indicate giving up, tearing up, and throwing away; “After that I will cut it down.” They are as much as if Christ had said, ‘Father, I begged for more time for this barren professor; I begged to wait until I might dig around it, and fertilize it. But now, Father, the time has run out, the year is ended, the summer is ended, and no good has been done! I have also tried by my means with the gospel. I have dug around it; I have also laid the rich and hearty manure of the gospel to it, but it all comes to nothing. Father, I deliver up this professor to you again. I am done; I have done all; I have done praying and endeavoring; I will hold back the head of your axe no longer. Take him into the hands of justice; do justice; do the law; I will never beg more for him.’

³⁶ The KJV “After that I will cut it down” is ambiguous. It may also be rendered, “As you are intending, I will cut it down” or “it will be cut down.” In the KJV, either the vinedresser is ordering the owner to do it, or the voice has changed to the owner (?).

“After that I will cut it down.” “Woe also to them when I depart from them!” (Hosea 9:12). Now this professor is left naked indeed; naked to God, naked to Satan, naked to sin, naked to the law, naked to death, naked to hell, naked to judgment, and naked to the complaints of a guilty conscience, and to the torment of that worm that never dies, and to that fire that will never be quenched. “See that you do not refuse the one who speaks. For if those who refused the one who spoke on earth did not escape, far more will we not escape if we turn away from the one who speaks from heaven” (Heb 12:25).

From this brief pass through this parable, you have these two general observations:

First. That even then when the justice of God cries out, I cannot endure to wait on this barren professor any longer, then Jesus Christ intercedes for a little more patience, and a little more striving with this professor, to see if it is possible that he may make him a fruitful professor. “Lord, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it, and fertilize it; and if it bears fruit, well;”

Second. There are some professors whose day of grace will end with, “Cut it down,” with judgment; when Christ, by his means, has been used for their salvation. As to the first of these observations I will pass and not meddle with it at all. But I will briefly speak to the second.

This abandoning to judgment is shown by the apostle in the third chapter of his *Epistle to the Hebrews*. There he tells us about the people of the Jews who, because of their final incredulity after forty years of patience and endeavor to do them good, using the means appointed for that purpose, was to be cut down or excluded the land of promise. “So we see that they could not enter in, because of unbelief.” “Therefore,” God says, “I was grieved with that generation, and said, ‘They always err in their heart, and they have not known my ways; so I swore in my wrath, ‘*They will not enter into my rest.*’” It is as if he said, ‘I wanted them to enter in, and for that purpose I brought them out of Egypt, led them through the sea, and taught them in the wilderness. But they did not respond to my work or my designs in that matter. Therefore they will not enter; I swear they will not.’ “I swore in my wrath, they will not enter into my rest.” Here is what it means to cut down with judgment. So again, he says, “As I have sworn in my wrath, IF they will enter into my rest; even though the works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Heb 4:4-5). This word “if” is used the same as “they will not,” in the chapter before. And where he says, “even though the works were finished from the foundation of the world,” he gives us to understand that whatever preparations were made for the salvation of sinners, and however long those preparations continue, yet the God-tempting, God-provoking and fruitless professor is likely to go without a share in it all, “even though the works were finished from the foundation of the world.” “I will therefore remind you, though you once knew this, how the Lord having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels that did not keep their first estate, but left their own habitation, he has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, for the judgment of the great day” (Jude 5-6). Here is an instance fit to our purpose, an instance of men and angels: men who were saved out of the land of Egypt, and afterward were cut down on their way towards Canaan, the type of heaven; and angels that were created and placed in the heavens in great estate and principality. Yet both of these, because they were unfruitful to God in their places, were cut down – the men were destroyed by God, for the text says so, and the “angels he has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, for the judgment of the great day.”

Now, in my handling of this point, I will discuss the cutting down, or the judgment that is here announced, as it respects God's immediate hand, and as it respects his casting them out of the world; not as it respects an act of the church. And as to this cutting down, or judgment, it must be concluded that it cannot be before the day of grace is past with the fig-tree; but according to the observation, there are some professors whose day of grace will end with, "Cut it down;" and according to the words of the text, "Then," after that, "I will cut it down." "After that," that is, after all my attempts and endeavors to make it fruitful, after I have left it, given it over, done with it, and have resolved to bestow no more days of grace, opportunities of grace, and means of grace upon it, then, "after that," I will cut it down.

Besides this, the giving up of the fig-tree happens before the execution. Execution does not always immediately follow the sentence that is given; for it is thought about for a convenient amount of time, and then comes the cutting down. And so it is here in the text. The decree, that he will perish, is gathered from its continuing to be fruitless quite through the last year – from its continuing to be fruitless at the end of all endeavors. But cutting it down is not yet, for that comes afterward. "Then, after that, I will cut it down."

So that I may proceed orderly with the observation, I must lay down these two propositions:

FIRST PROPOSITION: That the day of grace ends with some men before God takes them out of this world. And, SECOND PROPOSITION: That the death, or cutting down of such men, will be dreadful. For this phrase "Cut it down," when it is understood in the largest sense, as here indeed it ought to be understood, shows not only the wrath of God against a man's life in this world, but his wrath against him in both body and soul. It is almost like saying, "Cut him off from all the privileges and benefits that come by grace, both in this world and in what is to come."

But to proceed:

FIRST PROPOSITION –

The day of grace ends with some men before God takes them out of the world. I will give you some instances of this, and then go on to the second proposition.

First, I will instance Cain. Cain was a professor, a sacrificer, a worshipper of God. Indeed, he is the first worshipper that we read of after the fall; but his grapes were wild ones. His works were evil; he did not do what he did from true gospel motives. Therefore, God disallowed his work (Gen 4:3-8). At this his countenance falls, from which he envies his brother, argues with him, takes his opportunity, and kills him. Now, on the day he did this act, the heavens closed up against him, and he sharply and fearfully felt it when God inquired about the blood of Abel. "And now you are cursed from the earth," said God, "which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand... And Cain said, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'" My iniquity is greater than may be forgiven. 'Behold you have driven me out this day from the face of the earth, and I will be hidden from your face'" (Gen 4:9-14). Now you are cursed, says God. You have driven me out this day, says Cain, and will I be hidden from your face. I will never more have hope in you, have a smile from you, nor expect mercy at your hand.

Thus, Cain's day of grace ended; and the heavens, with God's own heart, were shut up against him. Yet after this he lived long. Cutting down was not yet come; after this he lived to marry a wife, to bear a cursed brood, to build a city, and what else I do not know; all of which could not be quickly done. Therefore, Cain might have lived several hundred years after the day of grace was past for him (Gen 4:10-17).

Second, I will instance Ishmael. Ishmael was a professor, brought up in Abraham's family, and circumcised at thirteen years of age (Gen 16:12, 17:25-26). But he was the son of the bond-woman, he did not bear good fruit; he was a wild professor. For all his religion, he would scoff at those who were better than himself. Well, on the day his brother Isaac was weaned, his father made a feast and rejoiced before the Lord because he had given him the promised son; at this point Ishmael mocked them, their son, and godly rejoicing. Then the Spirit of God came upon Sarah, and she cried, Throw him out, "throw out this bond-woman and her son; for the son of this bond-woman will not be heir with my son, with Isaac" (Gen 21:9-11). Now Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, makes this casting out not only out of Abraham's family, but also out from a lot with the saints in heaven (Gal 4:29-31). Also, Moses gives us a notable proof of this in saying that when Ishmael died, he was gathered to his people – that is, his people on his mother's side; for he was reckoned from her, the son of Hagar, the son of the bond-woman (Gen 25:17). Now, she came from the Egyptians; so that when he died, and despite his profession, he was gathered to the place that Pharaoh and his host were gathered to, those who drowned in the Red Sea. These were his people and he was one of them, both by nature and by disposition, by persecuting as they did (Gen 21:9).³⁷ But now, when did the day of grace end for this man? Observe, and I will show you. Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised, and Abraham was ninety-nine years old then (Gen 17:24-26). The next year Isaac was born; so that Ishmael was now fourteen years of age. Now, suppose that Isaac had suckled for four years when he was weaned. By that account, the day of grace must have ended with Ishmael by the time he was eighteen years old (Gen 25:12, etc.). For that was the day he mocked; that was the day it was said, "Throw him out"; and that is the casting out that the apostle makes a casting out of grace, as I have said. Beware, you young barren professors! Now, Ishmael lived a hundred and nineteen years after this, in great tranquility and honor with men. After this he also bore twelve princes, even after his day of grace was past.

Third, I will instance Esau (Gen 25:27, etc.). Esau was also a professor. He was born to Isaac, and circumcised according to the custom. But Esau was a gamesome professor, a huntsman, a man of the field. Also, he was wedded to his lusts, which he also ventured to keep rather than the birthright. Well, one day when he came from hunting and was faint, he sold his birthright to Jacob, his brother. Now the birthright in those days had the promise and blessing annexed to it. Indeed, they were so entwined that the one could not go without the other; which is why the apostle's caution here carries weight. Take heed, he says, "lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, such as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For you know how that turned out: when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (Heb 12:16-17). Now, the ending of Esau's day of grace is reckoned from the selling of his birthright, for there is where the apostle points: lest there be any among you that, like Esau, sells his birthright, for there goes the blessing also.

³⁷ Mahomet professed descent from Ishmael, and that he came to revive the religion which God had revealed to Abraham, who taught it to Ishmael. Mahometanism is the religion of the outcast of God. – Ed.

But Esau sold his birthright long before his death. Twenty years after this, Jacob was with Laban; and when he returned home, his brother Esau met him (Gen 31:41, 32:4). Furthermore, after Jacob dwelt with his father again for a time, Jacob and Esau buried him. I suppose Esau might have lived forty, or for all I know, eighty more years after he sold his birthright. And so consequently, he had put himself out of the grace of God (Gen 35:28-29).³⁸

Three things I would further note about these three professors.

1. Cain was an angry professor; Ishmael, a mocking one; Esau, a lustful, gamesome one. These are three symptoms of a barren professor. For one who can be angry, or can mock, or can indulge his lusts, cannot bear fruit for God.

2. The day of grace ended for these professors at the time they committed some grievous sin. Cain's, when he killed his brother; Ishmael's, when he mocked Isaac; and Esau's, when he despised and sold his birthright out of love for his lusts. Beware, barren professor! You may do that in half or quarter of an hour, from the evil of which you may not be delivered for ever and ever.³⁹

3. Yet these three, after their day of grace was over, lived better lives, as to outward things, than they ever did before. Cain, after this, was lord of a city (Gen 4:17). Ishmael was, after this, father of twelve princes (Gen 25:16). And Esau told his brother after this, "I have enough, my brother, keep what you have for yourself" (Gen 33:8-9). Ease, peace, and a prosperous life in outward things, is no sign of God's favor to a barren and fruitless professor, but rather of God's wrath. Thereby he treasures up more wrath against the day of wrath, and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God. Let this much serve for the proof of the first proposition, that the day of grace ends with some men before God takes them out of the world.

SIGNS OF BEING PAST GRACE.

Now, then, let me show you some signs how you may know that the day of grace is ended, or near ending, for the barren professor; and after that it will be cut down. One who has withstood all those means that God has used to make him, if possible, a fruitful tree in his garden, is in danger of being cut down; and this indeed is the sum of the parable. The fig-tree mentioned here was blessed with the application of means, and was allowed the time to receive the nourishment; but it withstood all, all that the husbandman did, all that the vinedresser did.

But to be a little more distinct, let me specify four or five particulars.

The first sign. The day of grace is likely to be past when a professor has withstood, abused, and worn out God's patience: then he is in danger. This is a provocation; then God cries, "Cut it

³⁸ Bunyan had been haunted with the temptation "to sell and part with Christ," and, under a fear that he had fallen under that temptation, the case of Esau made a dreadful impression upon his soul; extreme horror and anguish seized upon his spirit; "he was like a man bereft of life and bound over to eternal punishment," for two years. At length, after an awful storm, he found peace in the promise, "his blood cleanses from ALL sins," and a proof that he had not sold Christ.—See *Grace Abounding*, No. 139-160. — Ed.

³⁹ How solemn a thought! What an appeal to perpetual watchfulness. Why have I not made shipwreck of faith? Most emphatically may we reply, Because God has sustained my soul. — Ed.

down.” There are some men who steal into a profession, nobody knows how, even as this fig-tree was brought into the vineyard by hands other than God’s; and there they abide lifeless, graceless, careless, and without any good conscience toward God at all.⁴⁰ Perhaps they came in for the loaves, for a trade, for credit, for a blind; or it may be to stifle and choke the checks and grinding pangs of an awakened and disquieted conscience. Now, having obtained their purpose like the sinners of Sion, they are at ease and secure saying, like Agag, “Surely the bitterness of death is past” (1 Sam 15:22). I am well; I will be saved and go to heaven. Thus in these vain conceits they spend a year, two, or three; not remembering that at every season of grace, and at every opportunity of the gospel, the Lord comes seeking fruit. Well, sinner, well, barren fig-tree, this profession, this entrance into the vineyard, is only a coarse beginning: God comes for fruit.

1. What have I here? asks God. What kind of fig-tree is this that has stood in my vineyard this year, and bears me no fruit? I will cry to him, ‘Professor, barren fig-tree, be fruitful! I look for fruit; I expect fruit; I must have fruit; therefore consider yourself!’ At these cries, the professor pauses; but these are words, not blows. Therefore this consideration departs from his heart. When God comes the next year, he finds him still as he was: a barren, fruitless, cumber-ground. And now again he complains that here are two years gone, and no fruit appears; well, I will defer my anger. “For my name sake will I defer my anger, and for my praise will I refrain for you, so that I do not cut you off,” as yet (Isa. 48:9). I will wait, I will still wait, to be gracious. But this does not help. This has not the least influence upon the barren fig-tree. Tosh, says the fig-tree, here is no threat: God is merciful; he will defer his anger; he waits to be gracious; I am not yet afraid (Isa 30:18). O! How ungodly men who, unawares, have crept into the vineyard. How they turn the grace of our God into lasciviousness!⁴¹ Well, God comes the third year for fruit, as he did before, but still he finds only a barren fig-tree; no fruit. Now, he cries out again, Vinedresser, come here; here is a fig-tree that has stood three years in my vineyard, and has at every season disappointed my expectation; for I have looked for fruit in vain; “Cut it down.” My patience is worn out. I will wait on this fig-tree no longer.

2. And now he begins to shake the fig-tree with his threats: Fetch out the axe! Now the axe is death; therefore death is what is called for. Death, come strike me this fig-tree. And with this, the Lord shakes this sinner, and whirls him upon a sick-bed, saying, ‘Take him, death; he has abused my patience and forbearance, not remembering that these should have led him to repentance, and to its fruits. Death, take this fig-tree away to the fire, fetch this barren professor to hell!’ At this, death comes with grim appearance into the chamber, and hell follows him to the bedside. Both stare this professor in the face. Indeed, they begin to lay hands upon him. One is striking him with pains in his body, with headache, heart-ache, back-ache, shortness of breath, fainting, qualms, trembling of joints, stopping at the chest, and almost all the symptoms of a man past all recovery. Now, while death is tormenting the body in this way, hell is dealing with the mind and the conscience. It is striking them with its pains, casting sparks of fire in there, wounding the spirit of this poor creature with sorrows and fears of everlasting damnation.⁴² And now this fig-tree begins to consider himself, and to cry to God for mercy:

⁴⁰ Acts 23:1; 1Tim. 1:29; 1Pet. 3:21

⁴¹ Jude 1:4

⁴² Bunyan’s tongue and pen are here fired by his vivid imagination of eternal realities. With such burning words, we need no messenger from the invisible world to alarm the consciences of sinners. What angel could arouse more powerfully, alarmingly, convincingly, the poor sinner, than the whole of this chain of reasoning. -- Ed.

Lord, spare me! Lord, spare me! No, says God, you have provoked me for three years.

How many times have you disappointed me? How many seasons have you spent in vain? How many sermons and other mercies did I afford you out of my patience? But to no purpose at all. Take him, death!

O! good Lord, says the sinner, spare me just this once; raise me just this once. Indeed I have been a barren professor, and I have served no purpose at all in your vineyard. But spare me! O spare me this one time, I beseech you, and I will be better!

Away, away! You will not. I have tried you for three years already. You are nothing. If I were to recover you again, you would be as bad as you were before.

And all this talk is while death stands by. The sinner cries again, Good Lord, try me this once. Let me get up again this once, and see if I do not mend. But will you promise me to mend? Yes, indeed, Lord, and I vow it too; I will never be so bad again; I will be better. Well, says God to Death, let this professor alone for this time. I will try him a while longer. He has promised, he has vowed, that he will amend his ways. May he will mind to keep his promises. Vows are solemn things. It may be that he will fear to break his vows. Arise from your sick-bed. And now God lays down his axe. At this, the poor creature is very thankful, praises God, and fawns upon him, shows as if he did it heartily, and calls to others to thank him too. He therefore rises, as one would think, to be a new creature indeed. But by the time he has put on his clothes, has come down from his bed, and ventured into the yard or shop, and there sees how everything has gone to sixes and sevens,⁴³ he begins to have second thoughts. He says to his folks, What have you all been doing? Why is everything out of order? I cannot tell which hand is up. One may see that if a man is laid up only a short while, that you have neither the wisdom or prudence to keep things in order.⁴⁴ And now, instead of seeking to spend the rest of his time toward pleasing God, he doubles his diligence in pursuit of this world. Alas! All must not be lost; we must have provident care.⁴⁵ And thus he quite forgets the sorrows of death, the pains of hell, the promises and vows which he made to God to be better, because judgment was not speedily executed. Therefore the heart of this poor creature is fully set to do evil.

3. These things proving ineffectual, God takes hold of his axe again. He sends death to a wife, to a child, to his cattle, “Your young men have I slain, - and taken away your horses” (Amos 4:9-10). I will blast him, cross him, disappoint him, and cast him down. I will set myself against him in all that he puts his hand to. At this, the poor barren professor cries out again, Lord, I have sinned; spare me once more, I beseech you. O do not take away the desire of my eyes; spare my children, bless me in my labors, and I will mend and be better. No, says God, you lied to me last time, I will trust you in this no longer; and with that he tumbles the wife, the child, and the estate into a grave. And then returns to his place, till this professor more sincerely acknowledges his offense (Hosea 5:14-15).

⁴³ The phrase “sixes and sevens” means a confused mess; it originally referred to a bad roll of the dice.

⁴⁴ This picture is drawn by a master hand: the master is laid by for a season; or, as Bunyan quaintly expresses it, “a little a to side”: when raised from affliction earthly affairs absorb his attention, and he forgets his good resolves. According to the old rhyme:—

*“The devil was sick, the devil a saint would be
The devil to well, the devil a saint was he.”*— Ed.

⁴⁵ Frugality; making wise provision for the future.

At this the poor creature is afflicted and distressed. He rends his clothes, and begins to call the breaking of his promise and vows to mind. He mourns and prays, and like Ahab, walks awhile softly at the remembrance of the justness of the hand of God upon him. And now he renews his promises: Lord, try me this one time more; take off your hand and see; they go far that never turn. Well, God spares him again, sets down his axe again. "Many times he delivered them, but they provoked him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity" (Psa 106:43). Now they seem to be thankful again. They seem to be resolved to be godly indeed. Now they read, they pray, they go to meetings, and seem to be serious a pretty long time; but at last they forget. Their lusts prick them; suitable temptations present themselves; for which they turn to their own crooked ways again. "When he slew them, then they sought him, and they returned and inquired early after God"; "nevertheless they flattered him with their mouth, and they lied to him with their tongue" (Psa 78:34-36).

4. Yet again, the Lord will not leave this professor, but will take up his axe again, and will put him under a more heart-searching ministry, a ministry that will search him, and turn him over and over; a ministry that will meet with him, as Elijah met with Ahab, in all his acts of wickedness; and now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees. Besides, this ministry not only searches the heart, but it presents the sinner with the golden rays of the glorious gospel. Now Christ Jesus is set forth evidently; now grace is displayed sweetly; now, now the promises are broken like boxes of ointment to perfume the whole room! But, alas! There is still no fruit on this fig-tree. While his heart is searching, he wrangles; while the glorious grace of the gospel is unveiling, this professor wags and is wanton. He gathers up some scraps of it; he "tastes the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come"; "drinks in the rain that comes oft upon him" (Heb 6:3-8; Jude 4). But he does not bear fruit fit for him whose gospel it is. He "takes no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart" (2 Kings 10:31). Instead, he thinks that the glory of the gospel consists in talk and show, and that our obedience to it is a matter of speculation. He believes that good works lie in good words, and if he can finely talk, then he finely pleases God. This professor thinks the kingdom of God consists only in word, not in power; and thus he proves ineffectual by this fourth means also.

5. Well, now the axe begins to be heaved higher, for now indeed God is ready to strike the sinner. Yet, before he will strike the blow, he will try one more way at the last, and if that misses, down goes the fig-tree! Now this last way is to tug and strive with this professor by his Spirit. Therefore the Spirit of the Lord has now come to him; but not always to strive with man (Gen 6:3). Yet for awhile he will strive with him: he will awaken, he will convince, he will call to remembrance his former sins, former judgments, the breach of his former vows and promises, the misspending of former days. He will also present persuasive arguments, encouraging promises, dreadful judgments, the shortness of time in which to repent; and he will remind him that there is hope if he comes. Further, he will show him the certainty of death and of the judgment to come; indeed, he will pull and strive with this sinner. But, behold, the mischief now lies in this: there is tugging and striving on both sides. The Spirit convinces, the man turns a deaf ear to God. The Spirit says, Receive my instruction and live, but the man pulls away his shoulder. The Spirit shows him where he is going, but the man closes his eyes against it. The Spirit offers violence, the man strives and resists. He has "insulted the Spirit of grace" (Heb 10:29). The Spirit parleys a second time, and urges reasons of a new nature; but the sinner

answers, No, I have loved strangers, and I will go after them (Amos 4:6-12). At this, God's fury comes up into his face: now he comes out of his holy place, and is terrible; now he swears in his wrath that they will never enter into his rest (Heb 3:11). I exercised my patience towards you, yet you have not turned to me, says the Lord. I struck you in your person, your relations, your estate, yet you have not returned to me, says the Lord. "In your filthiness is lewdness, because I have purged you, and you were not purged; you will not be purged from your filthiness any more, until I cause my fury to rest upon you" (Eze. 24:13). "Cut it down, why does it burden the ground?"

The second sign. Such a professor is almost, if not quite, past grace when God has given him over, or lets him alone. He allows him to do anything, and to do so without control. He helps him neither in works of holiness, nor in straits and difficulties. "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). Woe to them when I depart from them. I will laugh at their calamities, and I will mock when their fear comes (Prov. 1:24-29).

Barren fig-tree, you have previously been dug around, and fertilized; God's axe has previously been at your roots; gospel-manure has previously been applied to you; you have previously been strived with, convinced, awakened, made to taste and to see, and to cry, O the blessedness! You have previously been met with under the word; your heart has melted, your spirit has fallen, your soul has trembled, and you have felt something of the power of the gospel. But you have sinned, you have provoked the eyes of his glory, your iniquity is found to be hateful, and now perhaps God has left you, given you up, and lets you alone. Previously you were tender; your conscience startled at the temptation to wickedness, for you were taken off from "the pollutions of the world, through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 2:20-22). But that very vomit that once you were turned from, now you lap up again – with the dog in the proverb; and in that very mire that once you seemed to be washed from, you are now tumbling afresh. But to particularize, there are three signs of a man's being given over by God.

1. When he is let alone in sinning, when the reins of his lusts are loosed, and he is given up to them. "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not proper: being filled with all unrighteousness" (Rom 1:28-29). If you see a man who previously had the knowledge of God, and some awe of his Majesty, I say you see someone sporting himself in his own deception, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and walking after his own ungodly lusts. (Rom 1:30-31). His "judgment has not lingered for a long time, and his damnation does not slumber" (2 Peter 2:13). Do you hear, barren professor? It is astonishing to see how those who once seemed to be "sons of the morning," and were making preparations for eternal life, are now at last to be permitted by the just judgment of God to give "themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness" (Eph 4:18,19). This is because of the rottenness of their hearts; they are past feeling. A great number of such professors were in the first gospel-days. These were the ones against whom Peter, and Jude, and John, pronounce the heavy judgment of God. Peter and Jude couple them with the fallen angels, and John forbids that prayer be made for them. That is because what happened to them is what happened to the fallen angels. Because they have forsaken their first state and left "their own habitation," they are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, for the judgment of the great day" (Jude 5-6; 2Peter 2:3-8). Barren fig-tree, do you hear?

- (1.) These are beyond all mercy!
- (2.) These are beyond all promises!
- (3.) These are beyond all hopes of repentance!
- (4.) These have no intercessor, nor any more share in a sacrifice for sin!
- (5.) For these there remains nothing but a fearful looking toward judgment!
- (6.) Therefore, these are the true fugitives and vagabonds who, being left by God, by Christ, by grace, and by the promise, and being beyond all hope, wander and straggle back and forth, just as their associate, the devil, does until their time comes to die, or they descend in battle and perish!

2. Therefore they are let alone in hearing. If at any time these professors come under the word, there is no God for them, no savor of the means of grace, no stirrings of heart, no pity for themselves, no love for their own salvation. Let them look on this hand or that, and they will see such effects of the word in others, that it produces signs of repentance, and love toward God and his Christ. These men always have their backs bent (Rom. 11:10).⁴⁶ To this very day, these men have the spirit of slumber: eyes that they may not see, and ears that they may not hear. Therefore as they go to the Holy place, so they come from the Holy place, and soon are forgotten in the places where they came and went (Eccl. 8:10). Except that they reap this damage, “They treasure up wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Rom. 2:3-5). Look to it, barren professor!

3. If he is visited either with sickness, distress, or any kind of calamity, as is common to mankind, still no God appears, no sanctifying hand of God, no special mercy is mixed with the affliction. But he falls sick and grows well like the beast; or he is under distress like Saul who, when he was engaged by the Philistines, was forsaken and left by God, “And the Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem, and Saul gathered all Israel together, and they pitched in Gilboa. And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled. And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, not by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets” (1 Sam 28:4-6). The Lord answered him no more; he had done with him, cast him off, and rejected him, and left him to stand and fall with his sins, by himself. But more of this in the conclusion, therefore I forbear here.

4. These men may go where they will, do what they will. They may range from opinion to opinion, from notion to notion, from sect to sect, but nowhere are they steadfast. They are left to their own uncertainties. They have not grace to establish their hearts. And though some of them have boasted of this liberty themselves, yet Jude calls them “wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jude 13). They are left, as I told you before, to be fugitives and vagabonds in the earth, to wander everywhere, but to abide nowhere, until they descend to their own place, with Cain and Judas, men of the same fate as themselves (Acts 1:25).

The third sign. Such a professor is quite past grace when his heart has grown so hard, so stony and impenetrable, that nothing will pierce it. Barren fig-tree, do you consider? A hard and impenitent heart is the curse of God! A heart that cannot repent is rather afflicted by all plagues at once. And so it is that God said of Pharaoh, when he spoke of delivering him up in the greatness of his anger, “I will at this time send all my plagues upon your heart” (Exo. 9:14).

⁴⁶ That is, their backs are bent under the yoke of error and hardness of heart.

God gives this token of his displeasure to some men who have grievously sinned under a profession of the gospel. They are denied the power of repentance; their heart is bound; they cannot repent. It is impossible for them to ever repent, should they live a thousand years. It is impossible for those fall-aways to be renewed again to repentance, “seeing that they crucify themselves the Son of God anew, and put him to open shame” (Heb 6:4-6).

Now, to have the heart so hardened, so judicially hardened, is like a bar put in by the Lord God against the salvation of this sinner. This was the burden of Spira’s complaint, “I cannot do it! O! how I cannot do it!”⁴⁷

This man sees what he has done, what should help him, and what will become of him, and yet he cannot repent. He pulled away his shoulder before, he stopped his ears before, he shut up his eyes before, and in that very posture God left him; and so he stands to this very day. I imagined that Lot’s wife, when she was turned into a pillar of salt, stood yet looking over her shoulder, or else with her face towards Sodom. As the judgment caught her, so it bound her, and left her a monument of God’s anger to later generations (Gen 19:26).

We read of some who are seared with a hot iron and are past feeling, for that is how it is with seared parts. Their conscience is seared (1 Tim 4:2). The conscience is the thing that must be touched with feeling, fear, and remorse, if any good is ever to be done with the sinner. How then can any good be done to those whose conscience is worse than that, that is fast asleep in sin (Eph. 4:19)? For a conscience that is fast asleep may still be effectually awakened and saved; but a conscience that is seared, dried into a cinder as it were, can never have sense, feeling, or the least regret in this world. Barren fig-tree, hearken, judicial hardening is dreadful! There is a difference between the hardness of heart that is common to all men, and what comes upon some as a signal or special judgment of God. And although all kinds of hardness of heart may be called a judgment in some sense, yet to be hardened with this second kind, is a judgment peculiar only to those who perish. It is hardness that is sent as a punishment for the abuse of the light received, for a reward of apostasy. This judicial hardness is discovered from what is common to all men in these particulars:

⁴⁷ This is referred to in the Pilgrim, at the Interpreter’s house, by the representation of a man in an iron cage, who says, “I cannot get out, O now I cannot!” The awful account of Spira’s despair must have made a strong impression upon Bunyan’s mind. It commences with a poem.

*“Here see a soul that’s all despair;
A man All hell; a spirit all wounds;
who can a wounded spirit bear?
Reader, would’st see, what may you never feel
Despair, racks, torments, whips of burning steel!
Behold, the man’s the furnace, in whose heart
Sin hath created hell; O in each part
What flames appear:
His thoughts all stings; words, swords;
Brimstone his breath;
His eyes flames; wishes curses, life a death;
A thousand deaths live in him, he not dead;
A breathing corpse in living, scalding lead.”*

—Fearful Estate of Francis Spira. – Ed.

1. It is a hardness that comes after some great light has been received, because of some great sin committed against that light, and against the grace that gave it. It is such hardness as Pharaoh had after the Lord had worked wondrously before him. It is such hardness as the Gentiles had, a hardness which darkened the heart, a hardness which made their minds reprobate. This hardness is also the same as the Hebrews are cautioned to beware of, a hardness caused by unbelief and departing from the living God; it is a hardness completed through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:7, ff.). It is caused by the provocation of those whom God swore that they would not enter into his rest. It was this kind of hardness also that Cain, and Ishmael, and Esau, were hardened with after they had committed their great transgressions.

2. It is the greatest kind of hardness; and so they are said to be harder than a rock, or than an adamant, that is, harder than flint; so hard, that nothing can enter (Jer 5:3; Zech 7:12).

3. It is a hardness given in much anger, binding up the soul and making it impossible to repent.

4. It is a hardness, therefore, which is incurable, of which a man must die and be damned. Barren professor, hearken to this.

The fourth sign. Such a professor is quite past grace when he fortifies his hard heart against the tenor of God's word (Job 9:4, etc.) This is called hardening themselves against God, and turning the Spirit against them.⁴⁸ After a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, and of the doctrine that is according to godliness,⁴⁹ they embolden themselves in courses of sin by promising themselves that they will nonetheless have life and salvation. Barren professor, hearken to this! This man is called, "a root that bears gall and wormwood," or a poisonous herb. Such a person is abominated by God, indeed, abhorred by his soul. For this man says, "I will have peace, though I walk in the imagination" or stubbornness "of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst." This is an opinion that is flat against the whole Word of God, indeed, against the very nature of God himself (Deut. 29:18-19). Therefore he adds, "Then the anger of the Lord, and his jealousy, will smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in God's book will lie upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven" (Deut. 19:20).

Indeed, that man will not fail to be effectually destroyed, says the text: "The Lord will separate that man for evil, out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant" (Deut. 19:21). He will separate him for evil; he will give him up, he will leave him to his heart; he will separate him to that or those who will assuredly be too hard for him.⁵⁰

Now this judgment is largely effected when God has given a man up to Satan, and has given Satan leave to complete his destruction without fail. I repeat, when God has given Satan leave to effectually *complete his destruction*; for all who are delivered up to Satan do not come to this end. But this is the man whom God will separate to evil, and leave in the hands of Satan to complete his destruction without fail.

⁴⁸ In Job 15:13, it is said that we may turn our spirit against God, but Bunyan is referring to God turning his Spirit against us. The only supporting verse might be the unforgivable sin in Matt. 12:31. If Bunyan considers such hardening to be blaspheming the Holy Spirit, then that may be what he refers to. Otherwise, it may be assumed he speaks of God opposing willful unbelievers, practitioners of what we call "easy-believism" – all grace, no law (antinomianism). See Rom. 6:1.

⁴⁹ That is, he agrees that godliness is the hallmark of faith. Titus 1:1.

⁵⁰ Matt. 25:32 – he will separate the sheep from the goats, the barren professor going to the goats. See also Deut. 29:21.

This is how he served Ahab, a man who sold himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord. “And the Lord said, Who will persuade Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said, this way, and another said, that way. And a spirit came and stood before the Lord and said, I will persuade him. And the Lord asked him, How? And he said, I will go and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You will persuade him, and also prevail; go and do so” (1Kings 21:25, 22:20-22). You will persuade him, and prevail; do your will. I leave him in your hand, go and do so.

Therefore, the Lord greatly concerns himself with the management of these judgments, because of how they have provoked him. This is the man whose ruin is brought to pass by his own contrivance: “I also will choose their delusions” for them; “I will bring their fears upon them” (Isa. 66:4). I will choose their devices, or the wickedness of which their hearts contrive. I, even I, will cause these things to be accepted by them, and be delightful to them. But who are those who should fear this? Why, those professors who have chosen their own ways, whose soul delights in their abominations, because they did not receive the love of the truth so that they might be saved: for this reason God will send them strong delusions, so that they would believe a lie, so that all might be damned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

“God will send them.” It is a great word! Indeed, God will send them strong delusions; delusions that will make them believe a lie. Why? “That they all might be damned,” every one of them, “who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2Thess 2:10- 12).

There is nothing more provoking to the Lord than for a man to promise to change when God threatens him; for a man to delight in the conceit that he will be safe though he is more wicked than in his former days. This man’s soul abhors the truth of God. It is no marvel, therefore, that God’s soul abhors him. He has invented a way contrary to God to bring about his own salvation. It is no marvel, therefore, that God would invent a way to bring about this man’s damnation. And seeing that these rebels are at this point, we will have peace; God will see whose word will stand, his or theirs.

The fifth sign. A man is past grace when he scoffs at this, and inwardly grins and agitates against the Lord. He secretly purposes to continue his course, and put all to the venture, despising the messengers of the Lord. “He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy; how much greater do you suppose his punishment warrants, who has trodden under foot the Son of God?” (Heb. 10:28). Therefore, God has set himself against these despisers, and foretold that they will not believe but perish: “Behold, you despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I will do a work in your days, a work which you will in no way believe, though a man declares it to you” (Acts 13:41).

After that I will cut it down.

Thus far we have treated the barren fig-tree, or fruitless professor, with some signs by which to know him. To these are added some signs of one who neither will nor can, by any means, be fruitful, and who must miserably perish. Now, having come to the time of execution,⁵¹ I will speak a word to this as well: “After that I will cut it down.”

⁵¹ That is, the point at which the sentence must be executed: the barren fig-tree must be cut down.

SECOND PROPOSITION –

The death or cutting down of such men will be dreadful.

Christ, at last, turns the barren fig-tree over to the justice of God, shakes his hands of him, and gives him up to the fire for his unprofitableness. “After that I will cut it down.”

Two things are here to be considered:

First. The executioner: you, the great, the dreadful, the eternal God. These words, therefore, as I have already said, signify that Christ the Mediator, through whom alone salvation comes, and by whom alone execution has been deferred, now gives up the soul, forbears to speak one syllable more for him, or to do the least act of grace to further try for his recovery. Instead, he delivers him up to that fearful dispensation, “to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

Second. The second thing to be considered is the instrument by which this execution is done. And that is death, which is compared here to an axe. In as much as the tree is not felled at one blow, the strokes are continued until all the blows are struck that are needed to fell it. Cutting time, and cutting work, has now come. Cutting must be his portion until he is cut down. “After that I will cut it down.” Death, I say, is the axe which God often uses to take the barren fig-tree out of the vineyard, out of a profession, and also out of the world at once. But this axe is now freshly sharpened. It comes well-edged to the roots of this barren fig-tree. It has been whetted by sin, by the law, and by a formal profession; and therefore it must, and will make deep gashes, not only in the natural life, but also in the heart and conscience of this professor: “The wages of sin is death,” “the sting of death is sin” (Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:56). Therefore, Death does not come to this man as he does to the saints: muzzled, or without his sting.⁵² Instead, he comes with open mouth, in all his strength. Indeed, he sends his first-born, which is guilt, to devour this man’s strength, and to bring him to the King of Terrors (Job 18:13-14).

But to give you, in a few particulars, the manner of this man’s dying:

1. Now he has his fruitless fruits beleaguer him round his bed, together with all the bands and legions of his other wickedness. “His own iniquities will take the wicked himself, and he will be held with the cords of his sins” (Prov. 5:22).
2. Now some terrible discovery of God is made apparent to him, which perplexes and terrifies his guilty conscience. “God will hurl upon him without pity”; and he will be “afraid of the heights” (Job 27:22; Eccl. 12:5).
3. The dark entry he is to go through will be a painful shock to him; for “fears will be in the way” (Eccl 12:5). Indeed, terrors will take hold of him when he sees the yawning jaws of death gape upon him, and the doors of the shadow of death open to give him passage out of the world. Now, who will meet me in this dark entry? How will I pass through this dark entry into another world?

⁵² 1Cor. 15:55

4. For by reason of guilt, and a shaking conscience, his life will hang in continual doubt before him, and he will be afraid day and night, and will have no assurance of his life (Deut. 28:66,67).

5. Now his *lack* will also come up against him; he will come up like an armed man. This is a terrible army to one who is graceless in heart, and fruitless in life. This LACK will continually cry in your ears, Here a new birth is lacking, a new heart and a new spirit are lacking; faith is lacking; love and repentance are lacking; the fear of God is lacking, and a good conversation⁵³ is lacking: “You have been weighed in the balances, and are found wanting” (Dan. 5:27).

6. Standing nearby, together with these, are the companions of death: death and hell, death and evils, death and endless torment in the everlasting flames of devouring fire. “When God comes up to the people he will invade them with his troops” (Hab. 3:16).

But how will this man die? Can his heart now endure, or can his hands be strong? (Eze. 22:14).

(1.) God, and Christ, and pity, have left him. Sinning against light, against mercy, and the long-suffering of God, has come up against him; his hope and confidence now lie dying nearby him, and his conscience totters and shakes continually within him!

(2.) Death is at his work, cutting him down, hewing asunder both bark and heart, body and soul. The man groans, but death does not hear him. He looks terrified, distressed, crestfallen. He sighs, he sweats, he trembles, but to death, nothing matters.

(3.) Fearful deliberations haunt him, misgivings and dire apprehensions of God terrify him. Now he has time to think what the loss of heaven will be, and what the torments of hell will be. Now wherever he looks he is frightened.

(4.) Now he wants to live, but he may not; he would live, even if it is the life of a bed-ridden man, but he must not. The one who cuts him down sways him like the feller of wood sways the tottering tree: now this way, then that. At last a root breaks, a heart-string, an eye-string, and it sweeps apart.

(5.) And now, if the **soul** could be annihilated, or brought to nothing, how happy it would count itself; but it sees that this may not be. Therefore, it is put into a puzzling strait: it may not stay in the body, and it dares not go out of the body. Life is going, the blood settles in the flesh, and the lungs are no longer able to draw a breath through the nostrils. At last, out goes the weary trembling soul, which is immediately seized by devils, who lay lurking in every hole in the chamber for that very purpose. His friends take care of the body, wrap it up in the sheet or coffin, but the soul is out of their thought and reach, going down to the chambers of death.

I had thought to have enlarged on this, but I forbear. God, who teaches man to profit, bless this brief and plain discourse to your soul, who still stands a professor in the land of the living, among the trees of his garden. Amen.

⁵³ That is, a good life – our conversation is the way that we live, our character, behavior, and reputation.