

Parable of the Fig Tree
Matthew 24:32-35
ABC 7/19/20

According to 2013 Pew Research Center poll, just under ½ of American believe Jesus will return to Earth by 2050.¹ 79% of American “Christians” believe that Christ will return someday.² Among us, I’d guess that belief in Christ’s return is near 100%. Yet I wonder how much the knowledge of His return affected our lives this past week? Did it figure in how you spent your time? Did it fill you with hope as you faced a difficult time? Did it enable you to resist temptation? Did it determine how you spent your money as a steward who will give an account? Or did you even think about Christ’s return as you went about your week? The blessed hope of every Christian is the return of our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, **In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; & not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing** (2 Tim 4:8). God’s Word instructs believers not only to deny ungodliness & worldly desires & to live sensibly, righteously & godly in the present age, but also to be **looking for the blessed hope & the appearing of the glory of our great God & Savior, Christ Jesus** (Titus 2:12–13). Nothing in this world can compare **with the glory that is to be revealed to us** (Rom 8:18), **the redemption of our body** (23), & **the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ** (1 Cor 1:7). As believers, we anticipate that moment when we’ll **all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye** & our perishable & mortal bodies put on the imperishable & immortal (1 Cor 15:51–53) & **death is swallowed up in victory** (54). We look forward to the day when we’ll be **absent from the body & ... at home with the Lord** (2 Cor 5:8) & when the church will be presented to Christ as His pure bride (11:2). We look forward to the day when we’ll see Him as He is (1 Jn 3:2). Do you have that hope? The story is told of a pastor who was visiting a man who was very sick. As he was at the foot of the stairs getting ready to go up to his bedside, the wife of the sick man whispered apprehensively to him & said, *Say something hopeful to him won’t you? Not about heaven & all that!* Is there anything more hopeful for a believer than the truth of Christ’s return & of heaven?

¹ www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2010/07/14/jesus-christs-return-to-earth/

² www.livescience.com/16657-coming-christ-doomsday-infographic.html

Let me assure you, in the trials & stresses of life, it's this truth that strengthens & sustains you. The theme of Christ's return permeates the NT & is the great reality of Christian living. The Lord's return will be as real an event as His 1st coming. But His coming with power & glory is in contrast with His 1st Advent. True, there were manifestations of God's power & glory in that arrival, including the angel's announcements, Mary's miraculous conception, the star guiding the Magi, & Anna & Simeon giving prophecies about His future. But there were also many commonplace events that masked His divine glory. He was born to a working class couple, not to royalty. Common shepherds witnessed His arrival & He grew up in relative obscurity, working as a carpenter. There wasn't much divine power & glory manifested in His 1st coming. His return will be different. Does that bring you hope? As Christians, we look back to the moment of saving faith in Christ, when our souls were redeemed & we look forward to the return of Christ, when our bodies will be redeemed & we'll enter into the fullness of salvation. In that day Satan will be defeated, the curse lifted, creation restored, sin & death conquered, & the saints glorified. Are you looking forward to it? Among the many passages in Scripture that describe the Lord's coming again, Mt 24–25 is unequalled because it's from Jesus' Himself about His own return. This is also a notoriously hard passage to interpret. Many godly men, whom I respect greatly, disagree on this passage. I'm not an expert & am leaning on John MacArthur's sermon & commentary on this passage.³ **24:1-35**

Here Jesus answers the questions which had been raised by His disciples concerning the end of the age & His own coming into His kingdom. In vss 4-14 He dealt with general signs which would characterize the age as a whole. Then in vss 15-28 information was given of the signs of the great tribulation which would begin 3.5 years before His 2nd coming. The great tribulation is to be climaxed by the return of Christ, the glorious event when the heavens would break forth with the glory of God & Jesus returns in power & glory to the earth. It appears that when Jesus describes the cosmic chaos here He relies on passages like Isaiah 34 in which the same types of disturbances are predicted in the heavens. The interesting thing about the Isaiah passage is that in the remainder of the verse, the part not used in the description of His return, there's something Jesus

³ gty.org

seems to pick up on now. Is 34:4 says, **all the host of heaven will wear away, & the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; All their hosts will also wither away As a leaf withers from the vine, Or as one withers from the fig tree.** The text from which He described the events that are going to happen at His 2nd Advent contain a reference to a fig tree & the parable He tells, that we're looking at today, is one of a fig tree. After Jesus told His disciples the signs that will prepare the way for His return, they must have been wondering about the time when those things would begin, what their duration would be, & how long it would be from the sign in heaven of His appearing to His establishing His kingdom. They ask in vs 3, **Tell us, when will these things happen, & what *will be* the sign of Your coming, & of the end of the age?** In Mt 24:32–35 Jesus gives a simple parable of a fig tree. The parable summarizes & illustrates what He'd just said & acts as a transition to His answer to the disciples' question about when His coming would be.

1. The Parable 32

As we've seen, parables had a dual purpose in Jesus' ministry. When unexplained, they concealed truth; when explained, they revealed it. When Jesus gave a parable to the crowds or the unbelieving religious leaders without giving an explanation, it was a riddle to them. When He gave a parable to His disciples & explained it, it was an illustration that made a truth clear & understandable. In light of the fact that Jesus' parables were given to help the disciples understand His teaching, it's clear He told **the parable from the fig tree** to give them further light about His 2nd coming. Unfortunately, this simple parable has often been made more complex than it is.

For example, some say the fig tree represents Israel. A popular version of that view is the budding of the fig tree refers to Israel's becoming a nation in 1948. But because Jesus doesn't identify the fig tree as Israel, that meaning would've been unknowable to the disciples. In that view, Jesus wouldn't have been employing the parable to clarify His meaning but to conceal it. Some who hold to that interpretation suggest the budding of leaves on the fig tree represents a spiritual revival in the new state of Israel. But modern Israel, though alive physically, is a very secular nation. Since this parable is found in Mt, Mk, & Lk, a quick comparison makes it clear the fig tree isn't Israel. In Lk's account, Jesus says, **Behold the fig tree & all the trees...** (21:29). The fact that He's not talking

simply about the fig tree but about all trees, makes that a questionable interpretation. Don't complicate this simple parable. Jesus is just using an illustration from everyday knowledge to get across a simple truth. Again, this parable isn't complicated. In the context of what Jesus has been saying, its meaning isn't hard to understand. Israel had many fig trees, which weren't only grown commercially but were also found in many family yards, for their fruit & shade. & Jews were used to the fig tree's functioning as an illustration. Jotham used it in his story shouted to the inhabitants of Shechem from the top of Mount Gerizim (Judges 9:10–11); Jeremiah saw 2 baskets of figs in his vision after Nebuchadnezzar took captives from Judah to Babylon (Jer 24:1–10); Hosea used it as a figure in his prophecy about Israel (Hos 9:10); & Joel used a splintered fig tree to illustrate the devastation of Judah by a plague of locusts (Joel 1:4–7). Jesus Himself had used fig trees on numerous occasions as a teaching aid (Mt 7:16; 21:19; Lk 13:6–9). **32**

Learn means to genuinely understand & accept a teaching & to apply it in one's life. It was used of acquiring a life-long habit. Paul declared he'd **learned** (same word) **to be content in whatever circumstances he was in** (Phil 4:11). That sort of learning is much more than head knowledge; it involves genuine acceptance of a truth & determination to live a life consistent with it. Jesus wanted the disciples to **learn** what He was teaching, to understand, receive it, & live in light of it. He simply reminds them of a commonly known fact about a fig tree: **when its branch has already become tender, & puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near**. In other words, when the sap begins to flow into the branches, making them **tender**, & new **leaves** appear on the tree, **you know that summer is near**. Even children knew a budding fig tree meant it was spring & that **summer** would soon follow. Here in the Rogue Valley, when the pear trees blossom we know summer will soon be here, right? Simple enough. Maybe we should just stop here...

2. The Explanation 33-34

When the context is considered, Jesus' explanation is unmistakable. **All these things** can only refer to what He's been talking about just prior: The birth pains (4–14), the abomination of desolation (15), the need to flee because of the impending perils (16–28), & the catastrophic upheaval of the universe (29). Those **things** will indicate that **He is near**, just as the budding fig tree shows that

summer is near. When the events described in vs 4-28, including false messiahs, persecutions, wars, pestilences, the abomination of desolation, worldwide disturbances, & such, then know Jesus return is near at hand. In this parable, Jesus was simply illustrating to the disciples that, when the signs He'd just been describing begin to happen, the time of His return will be very near. **When you see all these things**, He says, you know **He is near, right at the door** (33). In the NASB, He translates the Greek verb which literally means *it is*, & is usually translated that way. In Luke's account Jesus says, **the kingdom of God is near** (21:31), which is consistent with the reading of **it** in the KJV vs 33. The supreme event of the last day, & the event about which the disciples had asked about in vs 3, was His personal coming to establish His kingdom. The idea is the same, whether it's translated **He** or *it* or whether it refers to the appearance of Christ, Christ Himself, or His kingdom. When Christ's appearing **is near**, He Himself will be near & His kingdom will be **near**. When those signs occur, He'll be **right at the door** ready to come in. Giving further explanation, Jesus said, **Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place**. Uh oh! Did Jesus make a mistake? He said 2,000 years ago **this generation won't pass away until all these things** happen. But the disciples' generation did pass away & all these things still haven't happened. So Jesus was wrong, right? That's the opinion of many liberal theologians; *Jesus wasn't God. He made mistakes*. Did Jesus make mistakes or is He perfectly sinless & inerrant in all He says & does? If Jesus is God, & He is, He can't make mistakes. So what does this mean? Is there another way to understand these words?

A. Pentecost Some have suggested the phrase, **all these things**, isn't a reference to the things that surround His 2nd coming but are the **things** that came into being when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost. It was then, they believe, that the kingdom of God came & the influence of the gospel going out from Jerusalem to the whole world is the arrival of the kingdom of God. If you believe this, then that generation did not pass away until the kingdom of God had come. But that's not what the kingdom of God that Matthew refers to is, because it's talked about as the reign & rule of our Lord upon the earth. So that interpretation, while preserving the inerrancy of Jesus, doesn't cut it.

B. Race Some have taken the expression to refer to the Jewish race & they read it this way, **Truly I say to you, this generation** or this nation or race **will not pass away until all these things take place.** In other words, the Jewish people will still be on earth when Jesus returns. Unfortunately, this view overlooks the meaning of the term **generation** in Matthew's gospel. It occurs about 10x & never means *nation* or *race*. It always means **generation**.

Those who hold that the fig tree is Israel usually affirm that **this generation** refers to the Jewish people & that they would **not pass away** as a race **until these things take place**. That idea is true, & the perpetuity of the Jews is clearly taught in Scripture, but it doesn't seem to fit this context. All Jews firmly believed in God's promise of an everlasting kingdom of David, & for Jesus to have meant that the Jews would survive until the Messiah ushered in His kingdom would have been unnecessary & redundant. & if Jesus had intended that meaning, He could've easily referred to the Jews as *My people, God's people*, or something like that. To allude to them as **this generation** would be confusing.

C. Disciples' Generation I don't see how **this generation** can refer to the disciples' generation, as many claim because they never saw Jesus return in glory as described in vs 30. Some who hold this view believe Jesus took a guess & was wrong. *After all, they argue, didn't Jesus say that of that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone?* (Mk 13:32). But that's a false argument. Jesus doesn't specify the historical time of His coming but instead He gives the events that will identify it. It's one thing to recognize it was in God's sovereign plan for the Son not to have certain knowledge during His incarnation, so He didn't know the exact timetable & knew He didn't know it. It's quite another thing to believe He was capable of bad guesses & liable to say something He had no idea was wrong or questionable. If Jesus was wrong about the time of His coming, He could've been wrong about any or every other thing He said. His temporary, divinely-imposed limitations during His time on earth in no way imply what He taught may have been less than perfectly true & right. Some of those who believe Jesus was speaking of the disciples' generation claim the terrible events He mentions here refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. But the events of Mt 24 are much too universal & cataclysmic

to represent the dreadful but geographically limited devastation of Jerusalem. That didn't involve **earthquakes** (Mt 24:7), believers' being **hated by all nations** (9), false Christs & false prophets (5, 11), the preaching of the gospel to the whole world (14), or the abomination of desolation (15). Nor was the sun darkened, the moon extinguished, or the stars dislodged from their places (29). Most important of all, Jesus didn't appear then. It's strange logic to argue that Jesus could accurately foretell the destruction of Jerusalem some 40 years in the future but be mistaken about His returning at that time. Or if, as some suggest, this teaching was merely symbolic & allegorical, with the destruction of Jerusalem representing the far greater destruction of the end time, what event in 70 AD could possibly have symbolized Jesus' return, which is the main subject of the discourse?

D. Unbelieving People of Jesus' Day Another interpretation is that **this generation** refers to the Christ-rejecting people of Jesus' day. In that case Jesus would've been saying that ungodly, rebellious mankind would survive until the Messiah's coming. But again, although that interpretation is possible, it doesn't fit the context & would've been meaningless, because no Jew doubted that many ungodly people would be alive to be judged when the Messiah came.

E. Future Generation I believe Jesus is saying **this generation**, that is, the generation that's upon the earth when these events begin to happen, that **generation** won't pass away until all these things are fulfilled. In other words, once the last days begins, it won't stretch on forever. The signs of Mt 24–25 will be experienced within one **generation**, the generation living when Christ returns. While I believe this is the right interpretation, I'm not dogmatic on it & love other Christians who have different views.

So, in partial answer to the disciples' question concerning the *when* of His coming, Jesus said it'll occur very soon after those signs are witnessed, before the **generation** who sees them has time to **pass away**. Just as the budding of fig leaves means it's not long until summer, so the **generation** alive when the signs occur won't have long to wait for Christ's appearance. Those who witness the birth pains will witness the birth. As the books of Dan & Rev make clear, the total time of the Tribulation is 7 years, & the Great Tribulation, in which these signs will appear, will only be 3½

years (Dan 12:7; Rev 11:2–3; 12:6). Jesus is saying the generation that sees the signs of the great tribulation, will also see the fulfillment of the 2nd coming of Christ. Among those who believe **this generation** refers to those who'll be alive during the end time, there are 2 basic views as to the makeup of that future people. 1) Post-tribulationists, who hold that the rapture will take place after the Tribulation, believe **this generation** could include the living redeemed if the Tribulation were to occur during their lifetimes. In other words, any believer alive at the beginning of the Tribulation would be subject to its calamities, including possible martyrdom. Only those who survive that time would be raptured, after enduring 7 years of hell on earth. Then they'd almost immediately come back to earth with the Lord when He appears with His saints to establish His millennial kingdom. 2) Pre-tribulationists believe the church, defined as believers of this present age, will be raptured before the Tribulation. **This generation** could not, in this view, include any of the redeemed alive now. For many reasons, the pretribulation view seems most faithful to NT teaching. MacArthur gives 7 reasons:⁴

1. Rev 2–3 speaks of the church on earth & chpts 4–5 speak of the church in heaven. But beginning with chapter 6, which introduces the Tribulation, there's no further mention of the church until chpt 18.

2. There's a total absence of NT instruction to the church as to how it should endure & conduct itself during the Tribulation.

3. If it's to occur at the end of the Tribulation, the rapture would seem to be pointless. The church not only wouldn't be spared the torments of the Tribulation but would almost immediately turn around & come back to earth with Jesus. Otherwise, who'd be left on earth during the Millennium? The unredeemed will have been destroyed & the returning saints from heaven will have spiritual bodies & won't be married or have families (Mt 22:30). Yet human life will carry on during the Millennium, with children being born just as before.

4. Jesus' promise to the church at Philadelphia is more than a promise to that local body of believers & more than a promise to keep them from ordinary testing. That **hour of testing will come upon the**

⁴ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. *Matthew*, Vol 4, pp 65-66

whole world, & it will test all those **who dwell upon the earth**. The Lord promises that the whole church, those who **have kept the word of My perseverance**, will be kept from the perils & agonies of the Tribulation (Rev 3:10).

5. Jesus promised those who believe in Him that He was going to prepare places for all of them in His Father's house & that He would come again & receive them to Himself (Jn 14:1-3). According to the post-tribulation view, He wouldn't be taking believers back to heaven to dwell with Him but simply meeting them quickly in the air & returning with them immediately to earth. Yet He said He was preparing a place for His people to dwell, not just to visit briefly.

6. The 1st 69 weeks of the 70-week period of Daniel's prophecy lasted from **the issuing of a decree to restore & rebuild Jerusalem**, the decree issued by King Artaxerxes in 445 BC (Neh 2:5-6), **until Messiah the Prince** (Dan 9:25), that is, the time of Christ. It's been calculated that exactly 483 years (69 weeks of years) elapsed from that decree of Artaxerxes until Jesus' entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when He was celebrated as Messiah & King by the crowds. That prophecy of Daniel was given to & about Israel, & it seems inappropriate to involve the church in the last week (the 7-year Tribulation) when it clearly wasn't involved in the 1st 69.

7. Finally, if the rapture won't occur until after the Tribulation, Paul's words of assurance to the Thessalonian church beg for relevance. Some of the Thessalonian Christians thought their believing loved ones who'd died would miss the rapture. Paul therefore encouraged them with the words:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died & rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive & remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of *the* archangel & with the trumpet of God, & the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive & remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, & so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thes 4:13-17).

Had the early church been expecting to endure the Tribulation rather than enjoy the rapture, they would've rejoiced that their loved ones had already died & thereby escaped that horrible trial. But they were obviously looking forward to something joyous, which they thought their departed loved ones & friends wouldn't experience. They weren't looking forward to the Antichrist but to Christ

Himself. They weren't looking for the ordeal of the Tribulation but for the glory of the rapture. They weren't looking for the terror of the Antichrist's appearing but for the blessed hope of Christ's appearing.

Because of all this, I believe **this generation** will be made up of Jews & Gentiles who're alive at the rapture but aren't taken up because they don't know Jesus as Savior. Among that **generation**, however, will be some who later come to salvation during the Tribulation through the witness of the divinely called & protected 144,000 Jewish believers (Rev 7:17) & the supernatural preaching of the angelic messenger (14:6-7). How sure is Jesus of all this?

3. The Certainty 35

Suppose I were to say to you this morning, *Heaven & earth will pass away, but the words of Nate Shinn will never pass away!* Hopefully, you'd fall out of your pew laughing. Or say, *He's a few fries short of a happy meal, has a few loose shingles, or isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer!* When Jesus made a statement like this, He was making the most outlandish statement a mere man could possibly make, if He were only a man. The very fact He makes a statement like this is evidence of the fact that He was making a claim of deity. What did He mean by this? Jesus says both **heaven & earth will pass away**. That expression 1st appears in Mt 5:18, where it's not primarily used as a prophecy but as an analogy to express the enduring quality of the Word of God. It's used similarly here. The universe will fail, but what Jesus has just said will not & cannot fail to happen. It is certain. His use of this phrase doesn't exclude a prophetic intent though. It's clearly predicted in the Old & NTs that the universe will be dramatically affected in the divine judgment of God. But that event will occur a 1,000 years after the return of Christ, when **heaven & earth** will cease to exist (2 Pt 3:10; Rev 21:1). On another occasion Jesus said, **It is easier for heaven & earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law**, that is, His Word, **to fail** (Lk 16:17). It's not possible for the Word of God to be broken (Jn 10:35), including what Jesus says about the end time. The psalmist established the same truth when he wrote that Scripture is **clean, enduring forever** (Ps 19:9). Whatever is touched by sin must pass away. The Word is untouched! It's like silver refined 7x in a furnace of fire, meaning it is utterly pure (Ps 12:6).

This is a simple parable. Don't make it hard or convoluted. Do you believe Him? Jesus said, **He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him** (Jn 3:36). May God speak to our hearts & may He, through the words of our Lord Jesus, impress upon us our sinfulness, our guilt, & our need of a redemption. If you're here this morning & have never put your faith in Christ, I urge you to do so today. Put your trust in Him whom we can rely upon, who promises & gives eternal life, who promises He'll care for us, & who meets all His obligations just as He's spoken them in His Word. If you've done this & your faith is in Jesus alone, does the promise of His return make a difference in how you live?

In July of 1959, Queen Elizabeth was scheduled to visit Chicago. Elaborate preparations were made for her visit. The waterfront was readied for docking her ship. Litter baskets were painted & a red carpet was ready to be rolled out for her to walk on. Many hotels were alerted to be ready. But when the upscale Drake Hotel was contacted, the manager said, *We are making no plans for the Queen. Our rooms are always ready for royalty.*⁵

That's how our lives should be in light of Christ's return. We shouldn't have to make any special or unusual preparations. We should live each day alert & ready, dependent on Him in prayer, & obedient to His Word. Jesus is saying to us today that His Words are more sure than the earth beneath our feet. He's asking us to live by them. Yes, it's been 2,000 years but His return is more certain than that the sun will rise tomorrow. Believe Him, He speaks the truth. When the world is gripped with fear because of frightening events, we should look up, filled with hope because our redemption draws near.

⁵ Quoted by Stephen Cole, <https://media-cloud.sermonaudio.com/text/9922616047590.pdf>