

6. The Parable of the Fig Tree

Luke 21:25-36

The Parables of Jesus

Warm-up Question: When you read verses about the end of the age, what feelings do you have? Is this a negative or a positive concept? What are your concerns?

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” ²⁹He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near (Luke 21:25-31).

The Signs of the Times

As they were leaving the Temple Mount, one of the disciples remarked about how beautiful the buildings were with the rich adornments from gifts given. Jesus replied that not one stone would be left on another (Luke 21:6). This answer staggered them to the core. They thought that He was talking about His return at the Second Coming, so they asked Him as to what sign would be given them to recognize the timing of His coming. Jesus was referring to the destruction of the temple that happened in 70 A.D., but in His reply to their question as to what sign will precede His Second Coming, He prophesied not just about the destruction of the temple, but also about His return as the King.

In Luke 21, Jesus shared prophetically with His disciples about things that will happen in the future, a talk that has become known as the Olivet Discourse. This talk by Jesus is also in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. Matthew writes that the conversation took place on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:3), hence the name Olivet Discourse.

For us to understand the verses in this passage concerning the Parable of the Fig Tree (vv. 29-36), it will be helpful to have some context. The preceding verses of this chapter in Luke have given us a dark picture of the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish people for the last 1,900 years. Interspersed in the chapter are various prophetic verses about the last days at the end of the age culminating in the return of Christ (Luke 21:8-11 and also verses 25 to 36). There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and on the earth whole nations will be in anguish. The people of the nations will be perplexed because of the problems and situations that leave the human race with no answers to the stressful situations with which they are confronted (v. 25). Jesus said that their anguish and perplexity was due to the “roaring and tossing of the sea.” This phraseology is often a picture of unrest and riots among people: **“Woe to the many nations that rage—they rage like the raging sea! Woe to the peoples who roar—they roar like the roaring of great waters!”** (Isaiah 17:12). Whatever is happening on earth will cause men to “faint from terror” (Luke 21:26). The English New International Version uses the word *faint* to

translate the Greek word *Apopsychō*. This Greek word means:

To depart life. To expire, die, breathe out one's life; to faint, swoon, and pass out. This word could refer to the heart losing courage and dying to fear (Luke 21:26), or it could mean literal fainting in the face of awesome and terrible events. The Scriptures describe a time so devastating that people will be overwhelmed with terror and acutely distressed by the dreadful spectacles around them. They will suffer emotional and psychological devastation in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth because they are unprepared to face the coming of God.¹

Many will give up on life and commit suicide because of what the world is enduring. For others, there will be great stress and fear that will cause their hearts to fail literally. Hope will seem far away. When the world is at its darkest hour, the Lord Jesus will come. "*At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory*" ²⁸When these things begin to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:27-28).

What does the phrase *these things* mean in verse 28?

I believe the phrase *these things* refer to the various signs that will precede Christ's coming, the different signs of the times mentioned in verses 8-11 and, again, in verses 25-26. We are not to be focused on and concerned with what is happening on earth, but we are to lift up our heads looking for our Lord Jesus to come and set things right and receive us to Himself.

The coming of Christ will bring great terror for those who have not received God's gracious gift of salvation and mercy:

They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! (Revelation 6:16).

Many will be deceived by the Antichrist, the world leader that will require all those living to receive a mark on their hands or foreheads, thus enabling them to buy or sell (Revelation 13:16-17). Those who accept this mark will be those that will hide in terror at the coming of the Lord. The Scriptures warn of eternal punishment for those carried along by Antichrist's deception:

⁹A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, ¹⁰he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." ¹²This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus (Revelation 14:9-12).

¹ Key Word Study Bible. AMG Publishers, Lexical Aids, Page 1952.

It is in the context of the things that are happening on earth that we will now look at Luke 21:29-36 and try to understand what Jesus is saying with the Parable of the Fig Tree.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

We cannot determine the exact time of Christ's return, for no man knows the day or the hour. Even Jesus, while He walked in human form on earth, was dependent on the Father for knowledge (John 8:38) and was not able to determine when this time would be:

³²"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come (Mark 13:32-33).

We are not to be concerned as to the day or the hour, but we are explicitly told that those who are living with a heavenly perspective should know the seasons and be aware of the things happening on earth that point to the soon-coming of our Lord. When we see the signs of the times happening, we should not be hanging our heads low, but instead, we are to look up to the heavens in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. Paul, the apostle, wrote:

¹Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ²for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴*But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.* ⁵You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶So then, *let us not be like others, who are asleep*, but let us be alert and self-controlled. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸But *since we belong to the day*, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).

What is meant by the comparison of the Lord's coming as "a thief in the night?" Does verses 4-6, the analogy of a "thief in the night," apply to both groups of people Paul mentions?

In my opinion, this phrase, "thief in the night," has been used in the wrong context many times. I have often heard people say that we, as Christians, are not to know the time of the Lord's coming because He will come as a thief in the night. He will come when we least expect Him. This thought has been taken even further to suggest that it is non-productive to even talk about this subject since we cannot possibly know when it will be. Nothing could be further from the truth when we take this passage as a whole. God's people need to be watching, waiting, and encouraging one another, and they need to be aware of the signs. It is also helpful to consider the context and why this passage was written. Some people in that day were concerned that the Lord had already returned. Paul was answering a specific false rumor, which had been going around in the Church of that time. He was setting the record straight. That is why he referred to the "times

and dates.” Paul's response to the question was that three things would happen before the Lord's coming.

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come **until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed**, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that **he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God** (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

The three things are as follows: 1) A falling away, apostasy or rebellion of many who have never given their lives to Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:3); 2) The man of lawlessness, elsewhere called Antichrist, will be revealed; 3) He will sit in the temple of God proclaiming himself as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4), a desecration of the temple which the Lord Jesus called “the Abomination of Desolation” (Matthew 24:15). These are signs that a believer in Christ should be looking for. When we see these things, He tells us to lift up our heads for our redemption draws near.

There have always been false prophets setting dates for the coming of the Lord. Many cults have had their prophetic dates disproven only to arrange another time. We should not let this error blind us to the fact that Scripture tells us what the warning signs are that will signal Christ's return. We are to watch, wait, comfort, and encourage one another while we wait for the coming of the Lord. Instead, we find that exploring the prophetic Scriptures has become a topic that is unpopular and considered too controversial to study. After all, people reason, isn't it better to focus on what we can do today to be ready? There is a reason for everything in Scripture. God wanted to forewarn His people and reveal to them the signs of His coming.

Perhaps it is the enemy who wants us to think of this topic as something only “certain types of people” talk about. One immediately calls to mind a person with a placard, which reads; “The End is Near.” We all know that people will walk past that person, dismissing him or her as psychologically ill. The enemy of our souls does not want the Church to be looking ahead to this awesome event, he would rather us be fearful and easily manipulated by our fear. We are to be aware of the seasons and aware of Christ's coming. Jesus said: **“Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?”** (Luke 12:56).

The coming of the Lord is an event that is real. It can encourage us to know that He is coming and cause us to live our lives with eternal principles in mind. We are not to be asleep, but instead, we are to be awake! We do not know the day or the hour of the Lord's coming, and if someone comes to you and says, “The return of Christ is to be on such and such a day,” we are to be wary of that person's teaching. However, a season is noted by what we see around us. Usually, if someone is predicting a date, you can bet that he or she will have a very select group of followers that consider themselves to be elite and elect, and want us to join their ranks! This kind of thing happened recently with a group led by a man in Florida, USA. This man took out billboards all across America claiming that he knew the date that Jesus was coming. He was

wrong. So, beware of anyone who sets specific dates. However, do not let that discourage you from learning about and being mindful of the Lord's coming, because the signs are something which we, as Christians, are to look for.

Two Interpretations of the Parable

The Parable of the Fig Tree is an encouragement for us to watch the signs of the times. There are two popular interpretations of the Fig Tree Parable.

The first interpretation concerns the nation of Israel. In this view, the fig tree is a symbol of the land of Israel. There is not much Scriptural evidence to support this theory. I have found only one verse concerning fig trees that are used to describe the nation of Israel:

When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree (Hosea 9:10).

For those who hold to this interpretation, they believe that the nation of Israel being established in 1948 and growing in territory through five successive wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982), is like the leaves sprouting before summer, i.e., summer being the picture of the Second Coming of Christ. In that view, the Israeli need for defensive borders because of the many enemies around her, has led her to secure the Golan Heights from Syria in the North East of the country, the West Bank of the Jordan, Southern Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Desert from Egypt. In the present state of affairs (June 2018), much of this territory has been given back to Egypt. If this interpretation is correct, why then did Jesus mention the phrase, "and all the trees?" (Luke 21:29).

The second interpretation, which is the one I believe, is that just as new leaves and new growth on a deciduous ("all the trees") tree is a sign that spring is here and summer is close at hand. In the same way, when you see the signs of the times taking place (Verses 8-11, and 25-26), you will know that the coming of Christ is soon to take place. Jesus verifies this thought using the phrase "these things" twice in verses 31-32. This parable is an encouragement to God's people who are enduring some of the difficult times mentioned. We'll know that, when we see these things happening, the Kingdom of God, the full manifestation of the righteous rule and reign of the Lord Jesus Christ over the earth, will soon be complete and evil judged.

Do you believe that we are living in the season when we will see these things come to pass? What events have you witnessed in the news that could be described as signs of the "leaves sprouting?"

What is the Generation Jesus Spoke About?

Verse 32 is a difficult verse to unpack. How do we interpret what the words *this generation* means?

³²“Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Luke 21:32-33).

Some say that the words *this generation* mean the Jewish nation and that Jesus is saying that even though Israel will go through difficult times as a people group, they will survive and not “pass away.” Others say that those who were listening to His words as He was sitting there on the Mount of Olives would not pass away until He came again. However, history shows us that could not be true. Although it seems clear that the early disciples were anticipating seeing the Lord’s return in their lifetime, I can’t go along with the thought that the kingdom of God is here in its full manifestation. Another interpretation is that a “generation” is a period lasting forty years. This view does have some credibility in that we know that the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years and that Moses, who wrote the book of Numbers, called them a generation:

The LORD's anger burned against Israel and he made them wander in the desert *forty years*, until the whole *generation* of those who had done evil in his sight was gone (Numbers 32:13).

Those who hold to that view believe that the generation that witness the recapture of the city of Jerusalem (which happened in 1967) will also see the coming of Christ. Many say that the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled and that we are that generation:

Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).

I do not see the Times of the Gentiles fulfilled because the Temple Mount is still under the domination of the Gentiles. In 1967, when Moshe Dayan, the Jewish general, recaptured the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, from Muslim hands, the Temple Mount was allowed to stay under Gentile Muslim dominion.

My view is that Jesus is merely saying that the generation of people who see the signs of the times will also be the same generation that will see the fulfillment of all these things. He wants us to have eyes that are open to what is going on in the world, and as we look at the things written about in the Scriptures being fulfilled, we are to focus on that which has real value: Christ, and the people He loves. The end times will usher the Church into greater intimacy with Christ, which will push back the darkness that exists around them. Isaiah the prophet wrote of a time that was future to him, a time, which I believe, is just around the corner and, to a degree, is already here. He talks about darkness, i.e., a thick spiritual darkness that will pervade the earth, but in the midst of this terrible darkness will be the light of the Messiah (Christ) shining in His people. He said:

¹"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
²See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you (Isaiah 60:1-2).

Warnings to Watch (Luke 21:34-36)

³⁴“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

The warning is to be careful. The King James Version says, “Take heed to yourselves.” Here we are encouraged to take care of the central core of our lives, for instance, our hearts. The dark world in which we live has a way of shaping our inner character away from intimacy with our Lord Jesus. We can be “weighed down with dissipation” (Greek word *Kraipalē* which means to suffer a headache due to alcoholic drinks, and it also carries the meaning of dizziness and staggering). It speaks of one feeling like the only way to cope with life's pressures is to try and forget our present circumstances and focus on activities that will desensitize us. We also see a reference to drunkenness and the anxieties of life. Notice that anxiety is likened to dissipation and drunkenness.

Where do you turn when under pressure and anxiety? What type of activities help you cope when you are under stress?

The anxieties of daily living can quickly dull the spirit of a man or woman. There are different ways that people choose to handle pressure. For some, the demands of living in this dark world will lead to greater devotion and dependency on the Lord and on the truth and comfort we find in His Word. Others will be like the ostrich that hides its head in the sand, seeking escape. When this world weighs you down, let it be something that drives you to Christ! **“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).**

The second part of verse 34 has some words of warning concerning the time of watching and waiting that Jesus knew His followers would experience. The Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25 is similar. In that parable, five missed the call to enter the wedding with the bridegroom. The reason they missed the call was that they were not ready and waiting expectantly! (Matthew 25:12). The passage finishes with the warning to **“keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matthew 25:13).**

We are told in Luke 21, verse 34, that the day of the Lord will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth and that it will close on many unexpectedly like a trap. Many will hear the message of God's love and mercy and will put off the decision to turn to Christ for His forgiveness. The word picture used is of an unexpected trap sprung over an animal or a bird. Many people do not realize that there is a closing time to this period of God's grace. The day of God's grace will close unexpectedly, and they will be left outside, thus having to pay the penalty for their sin themselves. It will be a tragic scene. Matthew's gospel records Jesus as saying something further about this time:

²¹“Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²²Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons

and perform many miracles?' ²³Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7:21-23).

These will be good people who have attended church and even helped in ministry, but the door will be shut like a trap sprung unexpectedly with Christ's words echoing in their hearts, "I never knew you!"

The enemy of our souls wants to lull us into the deception that we can always wait, that time is on our side. He would like us to believe that we will still have tomorrow to make our peace with God, or put things right with our brother, or make necessary changes in our lives that will help us draw closer to God. The enemy seeks to keep us bound by our senses to the things that are of this world. The truth is, we do not know how long we have. We are not guaranteed any amount of time. The promise of salvation is only for today: "For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Those of us who have accepted and acted on God's free offer of salvation should always be on watch (Luke 21:36).

What does it mean to watch and wait? What practical things can we do to watch and wait?

The Greek verb, *agrupneo*, translated "watch," literally means to keep oneself awake, to be on the alert as to threatening danger, to be on guard. The word picture is of a soldier standing guard to ward off an attack and to alert the rest of the troops. Those who are awake to the things going on in the world should awaken their fellow soldiers, and those that are, as yet, civilians, are to become soldiers of Christ. Our God is not willing that any should perish but that all may come to turn their lives over to Him (2 Peter 3:9). How full of joy we will be when in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51). Paul tells us that the Lord will come down from heaven with a loud command (how the enemies of our God will tremble), and we who are still alive will be caught up together with those in Christ who have already gone to heaven. We will meet the Lord in the air with those who have departed in Christ, and so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Imagine the joy of seeing Christ come and set everything right. The suffering of this world will be gone. God wants each one of us to be able to look forward to this day and welcome His coming. He has paid the price for each of us to be delivered from judgment through His death on the cross.

If you have never invited the Lord Jesus to rule over your life, there is no better time than the present. With a heart of sincerity and honesty before God, tell Him:

Prayer: Father, I need you. I have lived my life in my way, and I now want you to be my Lord and guide. I believe that Your Son, Jesus Christ, died for my sin and took my place by dying on the cross. Please forgive my sin. Forgive me also for the times that I have sinned against others. I turn around now and give You ownership of my life and ask You to lead and guide me. Amen.

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