

The Parable of the Fig Tree
Matthew 24:32-35
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Matthew 24-25 addresses events related to the sign of His coming and the end of the age. Jesus listed several signs in Matthew 24:4-14 that will signal the initial stage of the end of the age before He returns, including people falsely claiming to be the Messiah, wars, famines, earthquakes, increasing unlawfulness, and persecution upon all true disciples of Christ. The hatred of the world because of Christ's name will be assisted by these apostate religious traitors. The events of the end of the age involve the final seven-year period prophesied by Daniel 9:24-27. According to Daniel 12:10-13, Matthew 24:15-28 will occur in the middle of this seven-year period, called the great tribulation in 24:21, which will be a time *"such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will."*

These days of tribulation will conclude with the second coming of Christ, and with His kingdom (Matthew 24:29-31). When He returns, He will gather the elect from the whole world to enter His kingdom. This will also include the church, which will return to reign with Christ (cf. 2 Timothy 2:12), having already been raptured according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

The remainder of Matthew 24 illustrates the importance of what Jesus has reviewed in His discourse to the disciples. He will provide a series of parables, which serve to teach the need to be vigilant and alert in the light of His coming. His return is certain and should be anticipated.

The assessment of Jesus' return (24:32-33)

The parable of the fig tree is straightforward. Whenever we can see a fruit tree in springtime begin to put forth leaves, we know that there will soon be summer and its fruit will appear and the time for harvest will be near. This fact is true of all trees, as we see from Luke 21:29-30, *"Then He told them a parable: "Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near."*

Just as the appearance of tender leaves on a tree indicates this nearness of the harvest of fruit, so the signs that Jesus had described earlier in this chapter will indicate that His coming is near. These signs are not the blessings of the kingdom of God, but they point to its approaching.

However, while the illustration would hold for any tree, Jesus spoke not just of any tree but of the fig tree in particular and commanded His disciples to *“learn the parable of the fig tree.”* What is the parable of the fig tree?

Remember, Jesus used the object lesson of a fig tree in Matthew 21:18-22, when He cursed the fig tree. While the cursing of the fig tree may seem a distant three chapters earlier, the chronology of the fig tree was not. The initial cursing of the fig tree occurred on Tuesday, on Jesus’ way from Bethany to Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, and the observation of the withered fig tree occurred on Wednesday as Jesus approached the city, the morning of the day of the Olivet Discourse. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the fig tree that Jesus referenced was the one that they had just discussed earlier that day.

As was seen in Matthew 21:18-22, this fig tree represented the nation of Israel, which had become fruitless in the work of the Lord. This is fitting with Jesus’ point in Matthew 24:32-33, where the fig tree symbolizes the evidence of the nearness of the Lord’s return. As Jesus explained by His use of Daniel’s prophecy (cf. 25:15), the events preceding His return involved the final seven-year period of God’s work through Israel in the tribulation. The fig tree was used as a parable to show that His exhortation of *“when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door”* involves Israel specifically. These events will surround God’s final work through Israel in these years prior to His return.

While the symbolism of the fig tree as used in the Old Testament and by Jesus refers to the people of Israel, we must not conclude that this imagery of the tender branch that puts forth leaves has anything to do with the modern state of Israel. Israel’s establishment in 1948 is not necessarily related to any end-time event whatsoever. It could cease to exist without having any bearing upon these words of Jesus. That these words of Jesus relate to God’s work through Israel does not mean the present nation of Israel is in any way involved.

As the decades have gone by, less emphasis has been given to the modern state of Israel in the popular teaching of end-times theology. We ought to learn from the past how foolish it can be to assert any analysis of modern events that fail to explicitly correspond to actual prophetic passages. Such speculation is silly, and when we look back at what has been written in the past about alleged possible fulfillments of biblical prophecy by modern authors from years ago, these ideas look even more foolish when nations no longer even exist anymore. We ought to *“refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels”* (2 Timothy 2:23; cf. 1 Timothy 1:4).

The adversaries of Jesus' return (24:34)

There exists some degree of confusion regarding Matthew 24:34, "*Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.*" The issue surrounds who the generation is that Jesus spoke about.

At first glance, it may appear that Jesus was wrong to say that the events of the second coming would occur during the lifetime of his hearers. Indeed, earlier in Matthew, Jesus spoke of "generation" as being the people living during that present time (cf. Matthew 11:16; 12:41-42, 45; 17:17; 23:36). While some might consider this to be a case where Jesus was in error, many who considered the generation to be those alive while Jesus spoke disagree. Some will view Jesus as speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem, while others will consider Jesus' words of His coming to be metaphorical and not literal. This becomes a basis for Amillennialism, which views the kingdom of God as only spiritual in nature, not an actual return of Christ to rule upon the earth. However, there is no reason to consider this prophecy to be anything other than literal in its meaning.

Because all prophecy of Scripture that has been fulfilled to this point has been fulfilled literally, we should not believe that Jesus meant something different than the plain words of what He said about His return. Therefore, we recognize that the events of Matthew 24 did not occur during the lifetime of Christ's hearers, and we evaluate the possibility that Jesus referred to a more distant time-frame when He spoke of "*this generation.*"

There are two reasonable possibilities that exist. First, the word "*generation*" in Greek could mean "race." This could refer to the Jewish race which would not pass away until all is fulfilled. Matthew 16:4, Philippians 2:15 and 1 Peter 2:9 all use the Greek word *GENEA* as referring to a people beyond a single generation. Many editions of the New International Version have the optional translation of "race" included in their footnotes. If we consider this understanding, then Jesus meant that the Jewish race would not end until all the signs that He described would have been accomplished. This harmonizes with Romans 11 which teaches the future restoration of Israel to God's promised blessings. Indeed, many promises to Israel are yet to be fulfilled, including the eternal inheritance of the land of Palestine (Genesis 12, 14, 15, 17) and the Davidic kingdom (2 Samuel 7).

A small alternation of this view is that the race is not only the people of Israel, but is all of humanity that will be judged. Yet this neglects the evidence that Matthew 24 is centered around the prophetic words of the prophet Daniel.

The biggest issue with viewing Jesus as speaking about a race of people in general and not to a specific time frame is that this is not the normal, common meaning of the Greek word *GENEA*, or “*generation*.” Furthermore, inherent in the judgment of God in the second coming includes people to be judged, so to say there will be a people remaining at this judgment appears unnecessary.

Because the word “*generation*” normally refers to the people born during a certain time span, then it is better to consider what time period is being referred to by Jesus in verse 34. In this case, “*generation*” would refer to the people who will be alive at the time these things begin — the abomination of desolation (24:15), the great tribulation (24:21), the sign of the Son of Man in heaven (24:30), etc. Since the tribulation period will be seven years long (Daniel 9:27; cf. Revelation 11:2), then Jesus would be saying that the generation alive at the beginning of the period will be alive at the end of it also.

This view is the simplest understanding that factors in the context and that all these signs preceding His coming have yet to occur. There is no need to spiritualize the return of Christ or the prophecies of the coming kingdom of God to earth. And there is certainly no reason to assert that Jesus was mistaken in saying the world would end within the lifetime of His contemporaries and no error can be attributed to Him.

Jesus is then teaching His disciples that soon after the signs that He described previously occur, then the generation that sees them “*will not pass away until all these things take place*.” The point then is not that they will be around for His coming, but that His coming is “*immediately after the tribulation*” (Matthew 24:29). This generation that experiences the tribulation period will also experience God’s judgment. The righteous and the wicked will exist together until these things take place.

Repeatedly in Matthew, Jesus uses the word “*generation*” in the context of condemnation. “*An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign*” (Matthew 12:39; cf. 12:45; 16:4). “*You unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you?*” (17:17). “*Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation*” (Matthew 23:36; cf. 11:16). The generation that will see these signs will only “*pass away*” in judgment when the Lord returns. This fits well with the following context as well, when this judgment is compared to the days of Noah. Just as in the days of Noah, “*one will be taken and one will be left*” (Matthew 24:40-41). The evil and adulterous generation that has caused the great tribulation and delivered God’s people into it (cf. 24:9) will be judged.

The assurance of Jesus' return (24:35)

The point of Jesus' statement in verse 35, "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away,*" is the certainty of His words. When Jesus spoke, He spoke the complete truth that endures forever. His words are so reliable, that they are more stable than heaven and earth itself. Therefore, when He told the disciples of His return in judgment, this will absolutely occur without a shadow of a doubt. What He had prophesied would most certainly occur with the utmost reliability.

Jesus had earlier told them that heaven and earth would pass away in Matthew 5:18, "*For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*" So the knowledge that heaven and earth are not eternal was not new.

The Scripture refers to heaven in three basic ways, and the most common meaning found in the Old Testament—the sky above, where birds fly and clouds form. This is what we could consider to be earth's atmosphere, although the knowledge of earth in the time of the Scripture writings was more limited. There is also a second, somewhat related, meaning of heaven in the Old Testament that refers to the universe beyond the sky. This includes the sun and the moon and the stars.

We find both of these meanings in God's creation, where in Genesis 1:9 "*God said, 'Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear'; and it was so.*" And also in Genesis 1:14, "*God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years.'*"

In the New Testament, the vast majority of the usages of the word "*heaven*" refer to the abode of God. This is what Paul called "*the third heaven*" (2 Corinthians 12:2). It is also where angels are (Matthew 24:36) and where believers go to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23) when they die, for He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:11; cf. Hebrews 8:1-2).

In the context of Matthew 24:35, we find the word "*heaven*" used to refer to the physical creation (Matthew 24:29) and to the dwelling place of God (Matthew 24:36). Since both usages exist in the context we must consider that the heaven that will pass away to be the physical creation, rather than God's dwelling place of heaven.

Understanding of the physical creation passing away fits well with the other revelation in the New Testament. *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up”* (2 Peter 3:10). This truth is also revealed in the Old Testament, *“Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure”* (Psalm 102:25-26). From the book of Revelation, we learn that this will occur after the thousand-year millennial kingdom, *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea”* (Revelation 21:1).

So then, the creation as we know it will not last forever. What mankind considers to be billions of years old and has no end, will indeed be done away with and replaced by a new heavens and a new earth. This is one of the many results of God’s judgment that is coming to the unsuspecting. Just as we know that all that exists has been created by the Lord, *“and in Him all things hold together”* (Colossians 1:17), we also know the present creation is temporary.

Our attitude toward this coming destruction should be one of hopeful expectation. *“But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells”* (2 Peter 3:13). While heaven and earth will pass away, the word of the Lord endures. *“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever”* (Isaiah 40:8; cf. 1 Peter 1:24-25). We ought to have greater confidence in what the Lord has said than in any confidence that the sun will come up tomorrow.

Conclusion

Matthew 24:32-35 teaches that those living in the time of the seven-year tribulation period have the revelation of God regarding what will transpire. While they will not know the day or the hour of the Lord’s return (Matthew 24:36), the nearness of the Lord’s return will be able to be anticipated. That *“He is near, right at the door”* is important for them to endure to the end of the tribulation (Matthew 24:13).

For believers today, even the coming of the new heavens and new earth (which is after the rapture of the church, second coming of Christ, and millennial kingdom) moves us toward great expectation and toward holy living. This is Peter’s application of this knowledge in his second epistle – *“Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless”* (2 Peter 3:14).