

Parable from the Fig Tree
Pastor John E. Dubler
Matthew 24: 32-42



Each spring we get unmistakable early indications when the trees are about to leaf-out. The branches change hue as the sap begins to flow once again and the leaf buds become swollen and tender. The change of seasons is upon us.

These outward, observable signs are similar to the signs of the times that Jesus tells us are indicative of His return. Those who are on the alert and watchful will notice the signs and get themselves ready for the great last-times events. What are those signs and how shall we know what they signify to us?

The Parable from the Fig Tree: Matthew 24: 32-42

32 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; 33 so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 34 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.

36 But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. 37 For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, 39 and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. 40 Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.¹

The central message is clear: The end times are coming. The signs He mentioned in the Olivet Discourse are certain to take place. Jesus will return to earth for His bride. Attitudes of people on earth will be similar to those during the days of Noah. Meanwhile, we will not be able to set dates or anticipate the day of His coming.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated Version produced by the Lockman Foundation.

The major figure in The Parable from the Fig Tree:

Does the fig tree represent Israel?

Of course the figure of the fig tree presents itself for interpretation. As a symbol, the fig tree is used again and again in scripture as an emblem of the prosperity of the nation of Israel, while the falling of ripe figs or the destruction of fig trees is illustrative of the Lord's judgment on Israel. Consider:

1 Kings 4:25-26

So Judah and Israel lived in safety, every man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.



Micah 4:4

Each of them will sit under his vine
And under his fig tree,
With no one to make them afraid,
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

Isaiah 34:4

4And all the host of heaven will wear away,
And 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.

Jeremiah 8:13

“I will surely snatch them away,” declares the LORD;
“There will be no grapes on the vine
And no figs on the fig tree,
And the leaf will wither;
And what I have given them will pass away.”

Hosea 2:12

“I will destroy her vines and fig trees,
Of which she said, ‘These are my wages
Which my lovers have given me.’
And I will make them a forest,
And the beasts of the field will devour them.”

Joel 1:7

It has made my vine a waste
And my fig tree splinters.
It has stripped them bare and cast them away;
Their branches have become white.

Therefore it is not uncommon to find that some equate the fig tree with the nation of Israel itself. In this view, the parable is about the generation which sees Israel re-emerging as a nation (the swelling of buds and branches). The end times will commence (as it is asserted in this view)



once Israel is re-established as a nation (1948). That particular generation would see the return of the Lord. I cannot quarrel with this view, although finding scriptural certainty for its precepts would be problematic.

The greening of the fig tree branch could also mean the return of temple worship and animal sacrifice instead of the political re-establishment of the nation. Or perhaps a view that the tender branch might represent the re-establishment of a theocracy or even a Davidic kind of monarchy in Israel as the sign of the end-times might be forwarded.

The fig tree as a natural fig tree only interpretation:

We will take the safer route and let the fig tree be itself—a natural fig tree. When you see a natural tree begin to swell and bud, you know that summer is near. So too, when you see “all these things,” recognize that “He is near, right at the door.” This “all these things” phrase is important, as Jesus had in this chapter, listed a number of signs of the end times.

“The fig tree is only a natural fig tree” view permits us to focus on “all these things” rather than on what the tree might mean, shifting the focus away from what is not in the parable at all, to what is clearly presented by the Lord.

All the signs Jesus speaks of in the Olivet Discourse: Matthew 24: 4-14

Early signs: Three birth pangs.

The signs spoken of in Matthew 24: 4-8 are referred to as “the beginning of birth pangs.” Specifically these signs are as follows:

1. Many false Christs will appear and will mislead many
2. Nation will rise against nation—there will be wars and rumors of wars
3. Earthquakes and famines will occur in various places



We should be careful to observe that these signs (false Christs, wars and earthquakes) are not signs that we have come to the end, but only the beginning of the end. They are not the end. They are not even the end of the beginning. They are like birth pangs—only the beginning of the birthing process that brings forth the end times if you will.

World War II provided us a striking example of how easily believers can mistake current events for the imminence of Jesus' return. During WWII it was easy to find preachers who asserted that Hitler was the antichrist and Mussolini the false prophet. More than one bookstore was left with obviously incorrect end-time books naming Hitler as the antichrist after VE and VJ Days.

Six signs that the end is near:

Following these “birth pang” signs Jesus advises of some signs conveying to us more imminence: Matthew 24:9-14 relates “Then they will . . .”

1. Deliver you to tribulation—some will be killed
2. You will be hated by all nations on account of Jesus' name
3. Many will fall away and will betray and hate one another
4. Many false prophets will appear and will deceive many
5. Lawlessness increases
6. Most people's love will grow cold

However, there will be those who endure to the end and they will be saved. Finally, one additional great sign, a positive one, will emerge during this period of greater urgency and immanency of the Lord's return:

This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come. Matthew 24:14

Perilous times:

Following these signs some truly perilous days will occur. So great is their peril that Matthew 24:22 reveals to us, “Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.” These days herald nothing less than the rise of the antichrist and the great tribulation, (Matthew 14: 15-28).

1. False Christs and false prophets will display great signs and wonders
2. We are instructed, “do not believe them,” v. 26. They are lying signs, lying wonders
3. The return of the Son of Man will be as obvious as lightening flashes.

Six signs that the Lord is actually returning—the Day of the Lord has come:

Finally, in this Olivet Discourse (as Matthew 24 is called) the Second Coming of Jesus is revealed, (see verses 29-31.) Again, the signs are unmistakable:

1. The powers of the heavens are shaken
 - a. Sun goes dark
 - b. Moon becomes dark
 - c. Stars fall from their positions
2. The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky
3. Every tribe on earth mourns
4. Jesus returns on the clouds in power and great glory
5. The angels sound a great trumpet
6. The elect are gathered together from one corner of the earth to another

The lesson from the fig tree follows immediately after the Lord reveals these end-time signs. Therefore when we see these signs we know that the return of the Lord is near, just like when we see a budding fig tree we know that summer is near.



The last gasp of a star photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope in December 2006. According to NASA, “the star is ending its life by casting off its outer layers of gas, which formed a cocoon around the star’s remaining core.”

The generation that will not pass away:

The signs listed above indicate to us that He is near: right at the door. The generation that will see the return of the Lord will not pass away. The unrighteous ones are destroyed at the Lord’s coming and the righteous believers meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

Jesus emphasizes the certainty of His words:

“Heaven and earth will pass away” He tells us, but Jesus’ words “will not pass away.” Though we see the present heavens and earth be replaced at the end of the millennial kingdom with new heavens and a new earth, the certainty of His words are absolute, (Revelation 21:1-2 “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.”). The message is clear: The end times are coming. The

signs He mentioned in the Olivet Discourse are certain to take place.

The exact time of Jesus’ return will not be revealed in advance:

His return is certain, but the hour of His return is unknown. The message He gives us is clear enough, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone,” Matthew 24:36. There is no space for quibbling here about knowing the month or year. We will not know until we see the signs mentioned and observe His actual return. All attempts to pinpoint the time of His return are futile and anyone who establishes such a date is treading on quicksand.

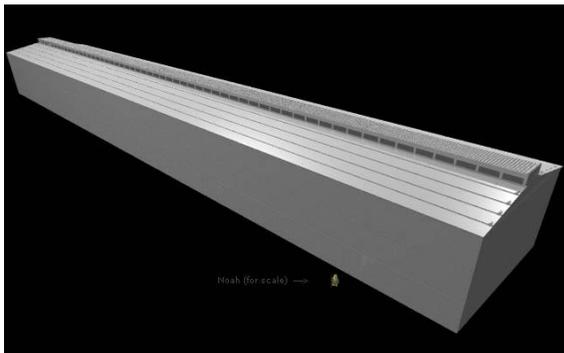


Edgar Whisenant, mistakenly thought Jesus would return in 1988, 1989, 1990, etc.

There is no shortage of date setters. All have been proven wrong. The most notorious of our time was Edgar Whisenant, who published *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988* and another volume: *On Borrowed Time*. His work asserted that there were 88 proofs that the Lord would return on Rosh Hashanah 1988 (the Jewish New Year). Though the title conveyed some uncertainty about the date, Whisenant did not. “. . . [if] I could gamble with my life, I would stake my life on Rosh Hashanah 88.”² When the date came and went Whisenant revised his estimates first by a few days, then a few weeks, and finally issuing a new report: due to some calendar miscalculations he had made, the return of the Lord would actually be on Rosh Hashanah 1989. He continued to revise the date annually for a few years until he disappeared from the prophetic view. Before it was all over, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988* sold 4.5 million copies in bookstores and another 300,000 were mailed out free of charge to pastors. Whisenant was a relatively unknown Bible student before he published *88 Reasons*.

Our responsibility: Be prepared for His return.

Obviously we are not to set the date but get ready for His coming, whenever that may be. This state of readiness will be in complete contrast to the world around us prior to Jesus’ return. To explain how it will be on earth when He returns, Jesus gives us an analogy and comparison to the days of Noah. Before the flood life was going on as usual. People were earning their livings,



Noah’s Ark 1/50 scale model (note Noah drawn to scale) available from a Lego model building website: www.ncgraphicarts.com/rvan/legos.htm

buying what they needed and did not need, eating, drinking, planning and attending marriages, and giving their sons and daughters away to be married, fully expecting that tomorrow and the next day would be exactly as today, only perhaps better. They never took stock of that the great sign of the times, a large ark being constructed in their sight, except to make it their laughing stock. Scripture does not reveal how long it took Noah to build the ark. He was 500 years old when he first

became a father. Shem, Ham and Japheth were born to him. But he was 600 years old when the heavens and earth opened up and the flood came.

We may safely assume that his sons were involved with him in the building of the ark; therefore the construction took not more than 84 years, allowing for Shem to have attained 16 years before work begins. Younger sons could certainly help, but not as much as adult sons. However long it took, the “sign of the ark” under construction was no small matter. Doubtless many people of that day would have considered it a

² *End Times Visions*, Richard Abanes (Four Walls Eight Windows Publications, 1998), p. 93

major attraction, giving Noah, the preacher of righteousness many days to speak the truth to those of his own day.

They did not understand until they were actually perishing in the flood.

Finally the end came upon the world with a rush. The rains fell, the floods came, but they did not understand “until the flood came and took them all away.” In other words, they missed the significance of the great sign under construction right in front of them, and only came to an understanding of the events of their day as they actually perished.

This is the way it will be at the end of the age. When Jesus returns, not before, mankind will finally understand. Thus, a wise man will be alert to the signs and be ready for Jesus’ return at any time.

One taken and one left.

The parable goes on to relate that there will be two men in the field, “one will be taken and one will be left.” Two women will be grinding at the mill—the same thing happens. What can this mean except that we who await the Lord’s return will likewise be going about our necessary business when the end comes? It will be that quick. Like a thief in the night. We will be expecting it and therefore it will not come as surprise. But we will not be informed in advance about the day or the hour. Life will be going on as usual and then, very suddenly, Jesus will return.

The conclusion.

The Lord gives a conclusion concerning all these signs mentioned in the Olivet Discourse and on this parable in these words: “Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.” There can be no better way to state the case, no better reason to be prepared than to tell us to be alert and watchful.

