

MISTAKES 16, 17 AND 18

THREE COMMON MISTAKES CLEARED UP FROM THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE IN MATTHEW 24:32-35

There are three common mistakes that are widely made when the parable of the fig tree in Matthew 24 is examined, namely the fig tree does not represent Israel in Matthew 24:32, the budding of the leaves in the parable is not symbolic of their return to their national homeland in the last days, and the term “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 is not meant for us to calculate the end of the church age, when the rapture and then the Second Coming of Christ take place.

We can make the following observations:

THE BACKGROUND

The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 24 and 25 is known as the “Olivet Discourse.” The name derives from the location where He delivered it to His disciples, on the Mount of Olives. This occurred a few days before His death. In it, He is answering a couple of questions that the disciples asked:

Now as Jesus was going out of the temple courts and walking away, his disciples came to show him the temple buildings. And he said to them, “Do you see all these things? I tell you the truth, not one stone will be left on another. All will be torn down! As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples came to him privately and said, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:1-3 NET).

His disciples wanted to know the signs of His coming which would mark the end of this present age. In other words, what signs do we look for that indicate Your kingdom will be established upon the earth?

In giving the answer, as recorded in Matthew 24:4-14, the Lord gave eleven different signs of the end. After listing these signs, Jesus then gave the parable of fig tree:

Learn this parable from the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things, know that he is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matthew 24:32-35 NET).

What did our Lord mean by this? What does the “fig tree” represent? Was it used as a symbol of Israel, and its budding leaves was a fulfillment of the prediction of their “last days” return to their ancient homeland? Was this what this particular sign meant?

Many Bible students believe this is precisely what Jesus meant. The parable was meant to inform them that when Israel returns to their ancient homeland in the last days the prophetic clock then starts. Indeed, the generation that is alive at the time of the return of the nation will not all pass away until He returns to the earth and sets up His kingdom.

Therefore, it is a monumental sign of His soon coming. Indeed, it is “the” sign that believers are to look for that inform us that He will return soon.

THE ARGUMENT THAT THE FIG TREE PREDICTS ISRAEL'S RETURN AT THE END OF THE AGE

If this is the case, then there are a couple of important questions that need answering. First, when does this prophetic clock start? Is it with the re-establishment of the modern state of Israel in their land in 1948, or is it at the time of the re-unification of Jerusalem in 1967?

The second question is “how long is a generation?” Is it forty years, fifty years, or is it longer?

When Israel became a modern state in 1948 a number of believers thought the prophetic clock started at that time and that a generation was a forty year period.

This is why some people were predicting the Second Coming of Christ would occur in 1988 and the rapture of the church some seven years earlier in 1981.

The seven-year difference refers to the period known as the 70th week of Daniel, the time of Jacob's trouble, or more the popular, but not the precise term, the Great Tribulation.

Well, obviously, that was not the correct interpretation of the parable! Indeed, neither of these events happened in those years.

This caused some to put the starting date to 1967 with the reunification of Jerusalem. Hence, the Second Coming would take place in 2007 with the rapture occurring seven years earlier in 2000.

Of course, that did not work either.

Some of those who continue to cling onto this view now contend that the “generation” lasts longer than forty years. In fact, it has been argued that it could be as many as one hundred years! Therefore, the prediction remains to be fulfilled in the future.

Is this the way we should attempt to understand what Jesus was telling us?

THREE COMMON MISTAKES ARE MADE

The answer is, “No.” As we mentioned at the outset, there are three common mistakes that those holding this view make, namely that the fig tree represents the nation of Israel, that its leaves that bud represent then nation's rebirth in the last days, and that the generation that sees their return to their ancient homeland, or the reunification of Jerusalem, is promised to see the Second Coming of Christ.

We can list these common mistakes as follows.

FIRST PROBLEM JESUS' WORDS, “WHEN YOU SEE ALL THESE THINGS”

The parable of the fig tree is given in Matthew 24:32-35 *after* Jesus gives eleven specific signs that will take place in the future. He makes it clear that the fig tree analogy only fits when *all* of these signs have taken place!

In the same way, when you see all these things, recognize that he is near — at the door (Matthew 24:33 CSB)

One of these eleven signs, the Abomination of Desolation, occurs mid-way through the last seven year period. This causes an insurmountable problem for those who argue that the rebirth of Israel is predicted in the parable of the fig tree.

Three Common Mistakes Cleared Up From The Parable Of The Fig Tree (Matthew 24)

Why? Simply put, Israel has to become a modern state first *before* this last seven year period can begin! Their rebirth cannot come about after the abomination of desolation takes place. Indeed, it must come before.

Accordingly, the parable of the fig tree cannot be referring to the rebirth of the modern state of Israel.

SECOND PROBLEM NOTHING IN THE CONTEXT SIGNIFIES ISRAEL'S RETURN FROM EXILE IN THE LAST DAYS

There is an even a bigger problem. The context of Matthew 24-25 says nothing about Israel's removal from their homeland and then their return in the last days. In fact, the "last days" return of Israel to their homeland is not predicted anywhere in Matthew's gospel! Furthermore, Israel was still in the land when our Lord gave the parable.

THIRD PROBLEM IF ISRAEL IS THE "FIG TREE" THEN WHO ARE "ALL THE OTHER TREES?"

In the parallel account in Luke's gospel we read Jesus saying the following:

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the other trees. When they sprout leaves, you see for yourselves and know that summer is now near (Luke 21:29,30 NET).

Hence, there is not just one tree in view, but many trees. So if the fig tree is Israel, then who are these other trees?

THE ANSWER: THE FIG TREE IS AN ANALOGY FROM NATURE

So, if the fig tree in Jesus parable is not a symbol of Israel, the budding leaves are not indicative of His return, and the number of years in a generation cannot be logically determined, then what does this parable mean in the context of Matthew 24?

Simply put, the fig tree is an analogy from nature. When a fig tree begins to bud in the spring, and put forth its leaves, it indicates that summer is near. In the same manner, when "all of these signs" occur, the generation that sees all of them will see His return.

Since the abomination of desolation occurs in the midst of the final seven year period, three and one half years before Jesus' Second Coming, those who are living at the time will not all die until they experience His return.

Therefore, the budding of the fig tree represents the culmination of the eleven signs that Jesus indicates in Matthew 24:4-14. When all of them occur, then the world will know that His coming is near.

This is the idea behind the parable.

In sum, in Jesus' parable, the fig tree does not represent Israel, it has nothing to do with the people of Israel returning to their ancient homeland in the last days, neither is it meant for believers to calculate the time of Christ's return for His church, the rapture.

It is a mistake to claim that Jesus' words in this context mean any of these three things.