

Matthew Chapter 24-25 – The Olivet Discourse – Part 13
The Parables of the Olivet Discourse – Matthew 24:32-35 – Fig Tree

Introduction

We have come to the portion of the Olivet Discourse where Jesus teaches in parables. There are three parables in this section: the parable of the fig tree, the ten virgins, and the talents. The final section in this discourse (Matthew 25:31-46) informs the disciples about the judgment of the nations after His return.

Jesus is done with the revelatory section, answering the questions from Matthew 24:3: “Tell us when will these things happen, and what is the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?”

The answer to the latter question, the sign, is not answered directly, but Jesus takes that question and walks the disciples through the timeline of events. Jesus expands on what Daniel details in Daniel 9-12 about the final seven-year period of Israel we call the Time of Jacob’s Trouble (the seven-year tribulation).

Let’s say this again: Matthew 24:4-31 details the Time of Jacob’s Trouble and is the greater sign of Jesus’ coming.

The answer to the first question is being answered in Matthew 24:32-25:30. But as He did in the first section, He answers the question but focuses on the real lesson, “Be on the alert” (be watchful, guard, stay awake) and be ready.

The only imperatives in Matthew 24:32-25:30 to the disciples are to be ready and to be on alert (Matthew 24:42, 44, 25:13)

We will see that the parables in this section all revolve around this concept because no one knows the time.

Before we examine our text, let’s review the understanding of parables.

Parables

What is a *parable*? “παραβολή parabolē” – BDAG

1. Something that serves as a model or an example pointing beyond itself for later realization.
2. It’s a narrative or saying of varying length designed to illustrate a truth, especially through comparison or simile.

Parables are not types.

1. Types involve historical persons or events.
2. They serve as an example of what the anti-type is.

Parables are not fables.

1. Usually, fables involve animals, legendary creatures, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature that are anthropomorphized.
2. Many fables are supernatural, fictitious stories – they do not represent reality.
3. Fables have a moral or useful lesson.

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Parables are not illustrations.

1. An illustration is a picture of a truth.
2. It compares one thing that is a reality to something else to make a statement more understandable and easily remembered (Jesus is the door).

Parables are recognizable stories thrown alongside a doctrine to bring out a point. Normally that point is singular in nature and is meant to be understood by the disciples in the text. We do not go to parables to learn something new; the parables are there to illustrate or help the lesson that is in the text. When we observe a parable, we're to look in the context for the main point.

Interpretation Guidelines:

1. Singular referent – The parables are often grouped, indicating many stories with one main point.
2. Simplest is best.
3. The interpretation given in Scripture is final.
4. A parable explains doctrine. It does not reveal a previously unknown doctrine.

We must not make all aspects of a parable mean something. Do not try to have everything match as an analogy to something else.

Parable of the Fig Tree

In these parables, Jesus is discussing the “coming of the Son of Man.” We must remember that this event is not simply about Jesus coming from the sky to the ground but is the entire greater context of the seven-year period preceding His return; we refer to this time as the day of the Lord.

During the season of the day of the Lord, believers and readers of the Bible will be given clues as to the fact that the actual return of Jesus is in the very near future.

Matthew 24:32-35

In this parable, Jesus takes a well-known agricultural understanding and uses it to make a point concerning His return. There is a sure way to know the changing of the seasons. In our culture, we may say something like, “When you see the leaves fall to the ground, you know autumn is near.” In nature, there are timing indicators to inform the observer of what is about to happen. We see this in Matthew 16:2-3, where Jesus tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that they can easily read the obvious signs in nature, but they have missed the obvious signs that Jesus is the Messiah and that the kingdom is near.

The parable is in verse 32 only; the explanation of the parable is in verses 33-34.

In the parable, the timing of summer is tied to observing the branches of the fig tree, whereas the timing of the coming of Jesus is tied to the events previously discussed. In this parable, Jesus is giving the timing of His return.

When you see these things, you recognize (*know*, *ginosko* – to understand through observation and learning) that (He) is near, at the door.

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Jesus then adds in verse 34, “Amen, I say to you that this generation will not pass until all these have taken place.”

Verse 35 is a summary verse assuring the disciples that, regardless of what happens on Earth and in the sky, His words are true, and He will return.

Questions About Matthew 24:32-35

Does the fig tree represent anything?

Many have attempted to make the parable about Israel. This position has become popularized by Hal Lindsay and Edgar Whisenant.

Hal Lindsay wrote the Book “*The Late Great Planet Earth*” in 1970. He wrote:

“But the most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. Even the figure of speech “fig tree” has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948, the “fig tree” put forth its first leaves.

Jesus said that this would indicate that He was “at the door,” ready to return. Then He said, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34 NASB).

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs—chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.”

Edgar Whisenant wrote the book “*88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988.*” He wrote:

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree; as soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near... I tell you the truth. This generation will certainly not pass until all things have happened.” (Matt. 24:32-34). The fig tree represents Israel (Jer. 24:4-6). The last wicked generation, who would not repent of their sins and accept Jesus as their Messiah, started May 14, 1948, the day Israel became a nation. It will end 40 years later on the Day of Atonement, Sept. 21, 1988, Yom Kippur, 1988.”

Both make the assertion that Jesus uses the fig tree in this text to represent Israel, and when you see that Israel’s branches are tender, then Jesus will come.

What mistake do they make? They take a parable and try to match the words to things or events. At times, Israel is compared to a fig tree, a grapevine, or a field, but that does not mean that any time we see a “fig tree” it means Israel (John 1:50; James 3:12; Revelation 6:13).

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In this parable, the explanation of what the fig tree represents is told in the text. There is no reason to try to have verse 32 mean anything other than “a fig tree,” “tender branches,” “actual leaves,” and “summer is near.” Verse 33 is the lesson to be learned from this parable.

Who is “this generation?”

We know who *this generation* is because it is explained by the phrase “all these things.” *All these things* refers to the events that Jesus reveals in Matthew 24:4-31.

In Greek, the phrase “the generation of this” is understood by an examination of the context.

Hebrews 3:10 – “Therefore I was angry with this generation.” *This generation* is understood in the context as a reference to the first-generation Israelites coming out of Egypt.

Jesus is saying that the generation that sees the events happen in the time of Jacob’s Trouble will also see the return of the Son of Man in the clouds. When the signs come, they will proceed quickly; they will not drag on for many generations. When the day of the Lord starts, the culmination will come about quickly.

Why is this statement here? I believe it is a clarification of timing. The prophecies of the Messiah often have an unseen gap. I think Jesus is assuring that generation that there are no unseen gaps during the time of Jacob’s Trouble.