

The Last Generation

Matthew 24:32-41

Pastor John Miller

It's interesting that the Gospel of Matthew places between the public ministry of Jesus first the Sermon on the Mount, which is practical, and the Olivet Discourse, which is prophetic. In the Sermon on the Mount, we have the rules of the kingdom, and in the Olivet Discourse, we have the return of the King.

The Olivet Discourse was called that because Jesus was on the Mount of Olives, a mountain east of Jerusalem. His disciples came to Him and asked Him these questions: "When will these things be?...What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" The Greek word for "age" is "aión," the Jewish age or the age of the people of Israel. Jesus answers these questions in Matthew 24 and 25, in Mark 13 and in Luke 21. You have to harmonize all these chapters to get the whole Olivet Discourse. We are focusing on Matthew 24, but you should draw from these other chapters as well.

The basic message of this Olivet Discourse is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the signs that will precede it. Titus 2:13 says that we're "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is answering the question, "What will be the sign of Your coming..."—that's "the Second Coming"; not the rapture—"...and of the end of the age?" Jesus gives the disciples the answer to this question in verses 4-31.

Now in verse 32, we come to the practical application of Christ's teaching. This teaching will involve living faithfully and in anticipation and expectancy. It's about watchfulness and readiness. Next time we'll go into the parable of the ten virgins, about readiness. So our text moves from the doctrinal section in answering the question, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" to the practical section; are you ready, watching and looking for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ? Jesus is answering what our attitudes and actions should be.

Our text has two divisions: the parable of the fig tree, verses 32-36, and the picture of the days of Noah, verses 37-41.

In verses 32-36, Jesus said, "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only."

You may have heard of a lot of different ways to interpret this passage. We'll take it in context

and unpack it.

There are three sections to the passage. The first is the analogy or parable of the fig tree, in verse 32. "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near." When you see a budding fig tree, it tells you that it's almost summertime. When you hear the birds singing and the bees buzzing and see the flowers blooming, you know that summer is almost here.

What is a "parable"? It is an earthy story with a heavenly meaning. The Greek word is "parabole." It means to "lay alongside." So Jesus takes an earthly story and lays it alongside a spiritual reality or truth.

A key word in verse 32 is "learn." "Learn" means to "genuinely understand." It was used by Paul in Philippians 4:11: "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content." It's something you learn deep in your soul. You learn by experience. So Jesus is not hiding or concealing something here; He's revealing something. He wants us to learn something. Jesus uses a fig tree to say that when it buds, summer is almost here.

In verses 33-34, Jesus gives the explanation. He starts by saying, "So." Whenever you read your Bible, read it in context. If you just read verse 32 and didn't read verses 33-35, you would never understand verse 32. One of the most important rules of reading your Bible is to read it in context. No one likes to be taken out of context. So the application of verse 32, "Learn this parable from the fig tree" is found in verse 33. "So you also, when you see all these things, know that it..."—that is, His Second Coming—"...is near—at the doors!" Verse 34, "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place."

There are a lot of different ways to interpret what Jesus is saying here. One view—I don't believe it is right—is called the "preterist view." It means that the generation that Jesus is referring to that will not "pass away" until the Lord comes again is the very generation that Jesus was talking to. Preterists believe that everything in Matthew 24 happened in 70 AD, when Titus, the Roman general, came and destroyed Jerusalem.

The problem with this view is that so much of what Jesus describes in the Olivet Discourse didn't happen in 70 AD. Not only that, but it is the same description in Revelation 6-19, where the tribulation is described. When John wrote Revelation in 91 AD, it was still a future occurrence. So it couldn't have happened in 70 AD. So the only way you can reconcile this view is if you spiritualize the text; that it's allegory or spiritual and you don't take it literally. But I reject this view.

Another very popular, common view, held by many pretribulation and premillennial Christians is that the fig tree is a picture of Israel. The people who hold this view believe that Israel, or the tree, budded in 1948 when Israel became a nation. But nowhere in the Bible does it clearly spell out that Israel is a fig tree. More so the nation is likened unto a vineyard.

But here Jesus is not telling us that Israel is a budding fig tree. That's the problem with this

view; they say Israel budded in 1948. Jesus said, "This generation will by no means pass away." So you have to ask, "What's a generation?" Forty years? So that would make it 1988.

There was a book published in 1987 titled *Eighty-Eight Reasons Why Jesus Will Come in 1988*. The guy who wrote it made a million bucks. But his prediction never happened. Any interpretation of the parable of the fig tree that allows you to set a date is wrong.

So then the people who hold this view say, "Well, it's not 1948 when Israel became a nation. The budding of Israel as a fig tree, as a nation, was 1967 when Jerusalem was taken." So now they come up with another date, or they say that a generation is 70 years—all to try to accommodate their view.

It's true that the word "generation" could be translated "race" or "people group." So some say that Jesus is not talking about a time period in verse 34, but about the Jewish people. They interpret this verse as saying that the Jewish people will not depart before the Second Coming of Jesus. That's a possible interpretation, but I don't think that's what Jesus was teaching.

So I don't believe that Israel is the fig tree in this parable, that they budded in 1948 and you add 40 years to know that Jesus would come again in 1988, or any other date. That's not what Jesus was telling us.

So you ask, "Then what do you think the fig tree was?"

"A fig tree."

Another good principle in interpreting the Bible is that the plain sense makes good sense; seek no other sense.

In Luke 21:29, in the parallel account of the fig tree, Jesus said, "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees." So He included all the trees in this analogy—it's an analogy, not an allegory.

What then was Jesus basically saying? He says, "When you see all these things...." What are "these things"? In context, they refer to the "abomination of desolation," verse 15, when the Antichrist erects a statue of himself in the rebuilt temple and desecrates the temple. In verse 21, they refer to the "great tribulation." Christ says that "There will be great tribulation," such has never been before. In verse 24 we see "false christs" or false messiahs and "false prophets." Verse 29 tells us that "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." So "these things" in verse 33 is not the budding of the nation of Israel in 1948. They refer to the things that will happen during the tribulation.

I believe the rapture happens before the tribulation. I don't believe that anywhere in the Olivet Discourse is the rapture talked about, taught or pictured. Even in this chapter where Jesus says, "Two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left," I don't think He's referring to the

rapture. I think that those “taken” are taken in judgment, just like the flood swept away the wicked in the days of Noah.

So the disciples were not asking about the rapture; they were asking about the Second Coming. All these signs precede the Second Coming. No signs precede the rapture. The rapture is the imminent return of Christ for the church. He could come at any moment. The sun won't be darkened or the moon turned to blood. We don't look for the “abomination of desolation.” We're expecting Christ to take us in the rapture at any moment. But Jesus said that “these things” of the tribulation will happen.

In verse 34, Jesus says, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation...”—that's the question; what generation?—“...will by no means pass away till all these things take place.” Jesus is talking about the generation that sees these signs during the tribulation. Many of the Jews—and there will be 144,000 sealed during this time—will come to Christ. The Jews who will be living during this period and see the “abomination of desolation,” the “great tribulation,” when “the sun will be darkened” and the moon turns to blood, stars falling from heaven, false christs, false messiahs, their generation “will by no means pass away till all these things...”—the same things mentioned in verse 33—“...take place.”

So Jesus has just explained, in verses 33-34, the parable of the fig tree. The explanation is right there in the context.

We have the analogy, the explanation, and now notice the authority with which Jesus speaks of the parable of the fig tree. Verses 35-36 say, “Heaven and earth will pass away...”—that's pretty radical—“...but My words will by no means pass away.” His words are indestructible and inerrant. In Revelation 21:1, John said, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” Jesus is trying to comfort and encourage His followers. He continues, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.”

Isn't it interesting that in the very passage in which Jesus said, “No one knows” the day or the hour, that people interpret it in a way that they can come up with a date? Jesus said, “No one knows” the day or the hour, so why are we trying to come with a date for the Second Coming?

Notice in verse 35 He says, “Heaven and earth will pass away.” This is consistent in the Bible. In 2 Peter 3:10, 12, Peter says, “The day of the Lord...”—that refers to the tribulation period—“... will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up...looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat.” Everything that we see is going to be gone. The only thing that will remain is the Word of God. That's why we need to be built on the Word of God.

But in Revelation 21:1, John said, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” What a glorious thing

that will be. There will be a new world coming.

Notice in our text, in verse 35, it says, “My words will by no means pass away.” 1 Peter 1:25 says, “But the Word of the Lord endures forever.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said in Matthew 5:18, “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” So God’s Word will not pass away.

In verse 36, Jesus said that “Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.” In the parallel Gospels it adds, “nor even the Son of Man.” Not even Christ knew at this time the day of His return.

Some people get confused here; how could Jesus be God and not know when He is coming back? It is because of His incarnation, His humanity that He does not know. In Philippians 2, we have the “gnosis” passage, where He emptied Himself and laid aside His divine prerogatives. He didn’t lay aside His deity, but He temporarily and voluntarily laid aside His divine attributes. Jesus decided not to use his divine attributes when He was in a state of humanity.

But I believe that now that Jesus has been crucified, buried and risen from the dead—and especially now that He is exalted at the right hand of the Father—He knows when He is coming back. And He will come back.

The time when Jesus is coming back we don’t know. But the fact that He is coming back we do know. We don’t know when He is coming, but we know He is coming. That’s why Jesus is moving into the section where He says, “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming,” verse 42. Be ready and faithful, because you don’t know when the Son of Man will come.

I love the fact that Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” God’s Word is inerrant, indestructible and enduring. I love that. It’s so important; you can build your life around that.

Now we move to the second section, verses 37-41. Here we have a picture of what was happening in the days of Noah. So we go from the parable of the fig tree—it shows you summer is coming, so likewise, these signs in the tribulation show that generation that His Second Coming is nigh, “even at the doors”—to the days of Noah, to encourage us to be watching and ready.

Starting in verse 37, “But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark.” I want you to note that Jesus is pointing out that in the days of Noah, life was going on as though the end would never come. Continuing, “...and did not know until the flood came and took them...”—that is, the wicked, ungodly people of Noah’s day—“...all away, so also...”—here’s the application—“...will the coming of the Son of Man be.”

In other words, when Christ returns in His Second Coming—not in the rapture—the wicked and ungodly, who are called “goats” in Matthew 25, and are separated from the sheep, will be taken away in judgment.

Jesus continues, in verses 40-41, “Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.”

Jesus believed in the historical Old Testament and in its reliability and authenticity. This is not what the passage is about, but I want to point that out to you. Jesus believed there was a Noah, who really built a big boat, there really was a flood and God used it to judge the world. But people mock this. “You really believe in the story of Noah?!”

Isn't it funny that we use Noah and the ark to decorate our children's nursery rooms when it is a picture of God's judgment and wrath upon wicked, sinful humanity? “Sweet dreams, sweetheart, as you go to bed and meditate on how God judged the world.” But we like the animals on the ark and the rainbow in the sky. It's not a sweet, little-kid's story! This will freak them out! This is like reading about the ravens picking out the eyeballs in the Old Testament.

But what I want to point out is that Jesus actually believed the story of Noah. Why do I say that? Because there are a lot of modern, liberal preachers who don't believe that the Old Testament can be taken literally. They say, “Oh, there really wasn't a guy who built a boat! God is love; God wouldn't judge sinners. He wouldn't flood the whole world. That would never happen!” No; Jesus believed in Noah and the flood.

In Matthew 19:4, Jesus believed that there actually was an Adam and Eve. He says, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female?” Luke 17:32 says, “Remember Lot's wife.” Jesus believed there was a Lot, and God rained down judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. When Lot's wife was coming out of the city, she turned around when she shouldn't have, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Jesus believed this story. In Matthew 12:40, we see the story of Jonah and the whale. Jesus believed this story, because He said, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” There was a real guy named Jonah, who got swallowed by a whale, and he was spit up on the beach. As Jonah was in the belly of the whale, so Jesus would be in the belly of the earth for three days and three nights and then be resurrected from the dead. So Jesus believed in Adam and Eve, in Lot and in Noah.

Now here is where I believe a lot of people misinterpret this picture: They read verse 37—“But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be”—and they stop there instead of reading on. Then they turn to Genesis to see what was going on in the days of Noah. What was going on was a population explosion. They see that like in Noah's day, today the population is increasing. They see wickedness increased in Noah's day, and it's happening today. Genesis says in Noah's day, it was a time of sexual immorality, as it is today. So they say that we're in the end times because of the current, similar happenings to Noah's day.

This is not necessarily untrue, but it's not what Jesus is referring to in verse 37. Where Jesus said, "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be," He explains what those days were like in verse 38. You have to read the next verse. "For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage."

You ask, "Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing."

"Well, what's the problem?"

The problem is that they were doing those things but not really expecting judgment to come. The problem wasn't that they were eating, drinking, getting married and giving in marriage; those things are good. Praise God for food. But the problem was that they weren't expecting judgment to come; they were living as though the end would never come. They went to work, went to soccer games, paid the bills, went on vacation, bought new cars, got married, went to parties and social events. Everything was hunky dory. No, it wasn't and no, it's not.

"See the dude building the boat?" You talk about a living illustration! There was no rain yet, they were away from the water and this guy's building a boat the size of a football field!

"Hey, Noah! What are you doing?"

"Building a boat."

"Why are you building a boat?"

"Because it's going to rain."

"Ha, ha! It's never rained before! Why is it going to rain?"

"Because God's going to judge the world; God's going to destroy all flesh off planet earth."

"Ah, you're crazy! You've been in the sun too long!"

It's my conviction that before he built the boat, Noah built a pulpit. When the crowd gathered around him and mocked and ridiculed him, every day he preached to the people. It took from 70-100 years to build that boat, and every day he warned the people of what was to come. He said that God was going to judge the world, so he warned them to repent, to turn back to God and believe in God. But they laughed and mocked and ridiculed him. But Noah was right; God sent the flood and they were all taken away.

In 2 Peter 3:3, Peter says, "Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts..."—just like they laughed at Noah, they'll laugh at us—"...and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things

continue as they were from the beginning of creation.” Nothing’s changed; God’s never intervened and judged the world. “For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which...”—here’s the flood in Noah’s day—“...the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water.”

It’s pretty sobering that there was a time in history when God actually came and destroyed life on planet earth. He saved Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives and wiped out everyone else. He only saved those animals that were in the ark.

Verse 7 continues, “But the heavens and the earth which are now...”—this is the world we live in —“...preserved by the same word...”—the same word of God that destroyed the world in the flood—“...are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.” God gave a rainbow as a sign or pledge that He would not destroy the earth in another flood, but He didn’t say that He wouldn’t use fire. God destroyed life on earth once, He can do it again. It’s a chilling thought, when the reality hits you, to think that there’s coming another day when God will destroy this earth, and “the elements will melt with fervent heat.”

So basically He is saying that people weren’t ready when Noah built the boat, and before His Second Coming, even though all these signs will occur, they will be deluded and deceived and going on with life as normal. They won’t be ready for Christ’s return.

That’s the application, the third section, in verses 40-41. When Christ comes in His Second Coming, “Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.” This is a little, hand, stone mill, a little grinding stone they used to grind the grain for their bread.

I believe the rapture happens before the tribulation. And it is a different event from the Second Coming. But I don’t believe that Jesus is describing the rapture in this passage. When Jesus says, “One will be taken and the other left,” He’s actually saying that one will be taken away in judgment. We’ll get an explanation of it when Jesus comes back in His Second Coming in Matthew 25. He will separate the nation as the “sheep from the goats”; the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left hand. He says to the sheep, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

So the ones that were not taken were left to go into the millennium, the kingdom age. The ones who are taken aren’t raptured to heaven; they’re taken away in judgment, just as the wicked were in Noah’s day. They were beating on the ark then. “Let me in! Let me in!” But when the waters rose, they were all swept away in the flood. So when Christ returns, there will be people who will be taken away in judgment.

In closing, there are four things that we need to remember. Number one, don’t be deceived. Verse 4 says, “Take heed that no one deceives you.” Don’t be led astray. Don’t follow the date and time setters. Follow the words of Jesus and be wise.

Number two, don’t be discouraged. Verse 6 says, “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars.

See that you are not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.”

Number three, don't be doubtful. Verses 34-35 say, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” Don't doubt; what Jesus has spoken cannot be broken. What we are reading about will indeed take place.

Number four, don't be distracted. Verse 42 says, “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.”