

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXX

by Thomas Ice

“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; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.”

—Matthew 24:32–35

Upon completion of His discourse about the tribulation and second coming, Jesus now provides five parables that illustrate and drive home the point of what He had just taught. Since these parables are connected to Christ’s preceding Discourse, then they provide important parabolic focus upon the eschatology lesson just given. All five of these parables form a group. In other words, all the parables must refer to the same event, in this case, verses 4 through 31. This means that it would not make sense to have the first parable refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and then have the final four relate to a still future return of Christ.

THE UNITY OF THE PARABLES

Partial preterist Kenneth Gentry believes that the first of these five parables relates to verses 4 through 31, which he thinks was fulfilled in A.D. 70. However, he then takes the last four parables to refer to a still future second advent. “Following his prophecy of the Temple’s demise the Lord turns to consider his glorious Second Advent (24:36ff),” Gentry declares. “He specifically says there will be no such signs of that distant event.”¹ However, fellow preterist, Gary DeMar believes that the entire Olivet Discourse (all of Matthew 24 and 25) has already been fulfilled through the A.D. 70 event. DeMar notes:

Similarly, there is little evidence that the “coming of the Son of Man” in Matthew 24:27, 30, 39, and 42 is different from the “coming of the Son of Man” in 25:31. Compare 25:31 with 16:27, a certain reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.²

I have already shown throughout this exposition why none of Matthew 24:4–31 was fulfilled in the first century, however, I agree with DeMar that the entire Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and 25 refer to the same time period. Even though DeMar is wrong to see all of Christ’s Discourse as past, he, nevertheless, has a more stable position than that of fellow preterist Gentry who wants to break the narrative between 24:35 (past) and 24:36 (future).

All of these parables relate to Christ’s teaching in the previous section of Matthew 24:4–31 and do not introduce a new theme in His teaching. The purpose of these parables is to drive home major lessons in light of the previous teaching. It would not make literary sense for Christ to teach something, as He did in verses 4–31, and then give parables or illustration of that teaching, as He does in verses 32–51, but shift topics in the second parable to another event that He has, according to Gentry, not yet

introduced. It makes no literary sense. No! All five parables serve as illustrations for Christ's single teaching in verses 4–31. Why would Christ, the master teacher, confuse His students by introducing a whole new item during His parabolic session that He had not previously touched on during His teaching session?

It appears that Gentry's schizophrenic interpretation can be explained by the fact that, even as a preterist, he cannot bring himself to take certain clear phrases that link the second coming and judgment as something that occurred in the first century. DeMar has no such sensitivity. With all of the "coming" passages in 24:36–51, it is too difficult for even Gentry to shoehorn them into an A.D. 70 fulfillment. Especially difficult is ram, cramming, and jamming Matthew 25:31–46, which links judgment with Christ's coming. This coming and judgment must refer to a future event since those judged "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (25:46).

FIVE PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS

These parables or illustrations of Jesus are as follows: First, the fig tree illustration (24:32–35); second, the days of Noah illustration (24:36–39); third, a comparison of two men and women illustration (24:40–41); fourth, the faithful house holder illustration (24:42–44); and fifth, the wise servant illustration (24:45–51).

These five parables are important lessons that relate to Israel. In fact, I would go so far as to say that all the parables in the New Testament relate directly to Israel. Often they relate to Israel's rejection of Jesus as their Messiah and speak of consequences that will flow from such an act. Christ told His disciples in Matthew 13:10–17 that He would speak to "this people" (Israel) in order to blind them to the truth because of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. However, believers could come to understand the meaning of His parables because we are receptive of the revelation offered by Christ. Therefore, they all relate to Israel in some way, shape, or form and usually tell us something about God's plan for the future.

The parables within the Olivet Discourse, when they speak of a coming, all relate to the second coming and not the rapture of the church. This is true because the entire Olivet Discourse was given to Israel and relates to her tribulation and Christ's return at the end of that period. Truths relating to the rapture of the church are revealed exclusively in the New Testament Epistles, which were written specifically for the purpose of explaining the intent and nature of the Church age. The only exception to this is Christ's initial unveiling of the church's hope in the Upper Room Discourse (John 14:1–3) shortly before His death.

THE FIG TREE ILLUSTRATION

The first of these parables, the lesson of the fig tree illustration, is a widely noted passage. For example, my good friend Hal Lindsey teaches that the fig tree represents Israel, which it might, and that this means that within a generation of the founding of the modern state of Israel, Christ will return. Hal said in his famous book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which was my first significant exposure to prophecy in 1970, said the following:

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.³

I agree with so much of what Hal teaches in the area of Bible prophecy, but on this particular passage I have to disagree with him, even though I used to hold this view myself in the early 70s. I held the view then because the most influential book upon me at the time concerning Bible prophecy was Hal’s *Late Great Planet Earth*. (I still believe that *Late Great* is an excellent book to introduce people to Bible prophecy and recommend it.) I tend to agree that the fig tree is some times used as a symbol for national Israel (see Judges 9:10–11; Jer. 8:13; Hosea 9:10; Hab. 3:17; Hag. 2:19; Matt. 21:19; Mark 11:13, 20–21; Luke 13:6–7). However, whether or not the “fig tree” is a symbol for Israel is not what a proper understanding of this passage turns upon. I think that is a non-issue when it comes to interpreting this passage. I also agree with Hal that the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 is prophetically significant and indicates that we are likely near the beginning of the tribulation, but I don’t think that the parable of the fig tree is support for such a view.

The basic problem with Hal’s view is that he takes the parable of Jesus and turns this illustration into a prophecy. Christ is simply illustrating that when one sees a fig tree (In Luke’s version of the same parables Christ says in 21:29, “Behold the fig tree and all the trees.”) begin to put on leaves (in the spring), then you know that the next season is approaching (summer). Christ then concludes, “even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.” Thus, in the context, our Lord does not put an emphasis upon Israel as a symbol. He is saying that when you see the events of the seven-year tribulation take place then you know that His second advent is near.

Hal and other who hold that view have taken Christ’s illustration, which was meant to demonstrate a point about verses 4 through 31, and created a prophecy out of thin air, which does not even exist. The prophecy that Hal has created is that Christ’s coming will occur 40 years after the founding of the modern state of Israel. Christ’s illustration was not intended to be a prophecy about anything; it is an illustration about the preceding context. It should be clear by now that such a view is wrong, especially since we are over 15 years beyond his 40-year prediction. Therefore, it does not matter how long a generation is, since the events of 4 through 31 will take place within a seven-year period. That generation that sees the events of the seven-year tribulation will not pass away (in other words, it will not take hundreds of years or a long time) until Christ’s second coming (see 24:33). This first parable drives home the point through illustration what Christ said in 24:29–30: “But immediately after the tribulation of those days . . . they will see the Son of Man coming.”

CONCLUSION

What is the lesson to be learned from the parable of the fig tree? That lesson is that when a fig tree reaches a certain stage in the seasonal cycle (in this case puts on leaves) then one knows that they have reached a certain time of the year (in this case, that summer is near). A parable is a lesson of comparisons, moving from the known in order to explain the unknown. In this instance the leaves before summer would refer to the events of the tribulation as outlined by Christ in verses 4–31. Thus, when one sees these events then they are to know that Christ's return is near, "right at the door" (24:33). How is it that they know that Christ's advent is near? They will know because "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (24:34). In other words, that time period of events culminating in Christ's return will not exceed seven years. One day "heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (24:35). Christ's words will be fulfilled; they will not just pass away and not be fulfilled. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 89.

² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 200.

³ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 53–54.