

No One Knows the Hour (Mat. 24:32-36)

© 2011 Tony Garland^a

Working our way through Matthew 24

- The overall context: Jesus is responding to questions posed by the disciples in verse 3 concerning three events yet future to their day
 1. The destruction of the Jewish temple.
 2. The sign of his coming.
 3. And of the end of the age.
- Jesus responded in verses 4-8 by describing general characteristics of the inter-advent age, and emphasized that these were **not reliable indicators of His coming or the end of the age**. Jesus calls this period, “the beginning of sorrows.”
- In verses 9-11, Jesus describes what general conditions will be like at the end of the age.
- In verses 15-22, Jesus tells us the first sure sign of the end of the age: *the Abomination of Desolation*, which has relevance for all Jews and Christians, especially those living in Israel at that time.
 - It is this event which marks the arrival of the end of the age and triggers a historically unique period of global persecution and danger.
- In verses 23-31, Jesus addressed the question, “what will be the sign of your coming?” by describing cataclysmic events immediately preceding His coming along with the unmistakable “sign of the Son of Man” which will appear in heaven causing a global mourning by those who have rejected Him.

Today’s passage (Mathew 24:32-36)

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.¹

A simple passage?

1. **Three common errors which have been made in association with this passage.**
 1. Misreading the parable such that the fig tree “itself” is taken as a sign
 2. Forcing 'this generation' to denote those alive then
 3. Ignoring or reinterpreting Jesus' warning that “no man knows the day or hour.”
2. **Highlight these errors as we move through the text.**

A parable of a fig tree

“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” (Matthew 24:32).

1. Learn this *parable*

The English word *parable* is almost a direct transliteration of the term found here in the Greek: **παραβολή** [*parabolē*]

- A compound word made up of two underlying Greek terms
 - **παρα** [*para*] = alongside, next to
 - **βάλλω** [*ballō*] = to throw
 - *para ballo*, to throw alongside: something familiar is used to illustrate something unfamiliar.

2. The challenge posed by parables

- Helpful as illustrations, teaching aids.
- Relevance of details varies with context.
- Failure to appreciate details in some cases can lead to an incomplete understanding.
- Placing too much stock on the details can force the parable to carry a payload it was never intended to bear.
- Pushing a parable to its extreme will always lead to a departure from its intended meaning because a parable is always an *approximation* of that which it represents.
- Parables are almost always abused by false or sensational teachers.

3. Safely interpreting parables

- Pay attention to the context, especially the motivation for the parable.
- Remain constantly aware of the wider safety net of the rest of Scripture.
- Avoiding placing undo emphasis on subtle aspects, always remember that a parable is an approximation of that which it represents.

Interpreting the parable

“So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near--at the doors!” (Matthew 24:33)

1. Correlation

- How does the parable correlate to what is being taught?
- Identify the main elements and what they are intended to represent.
- This parable spans verses 32-33
- “So you also” is the fulcrum or hinge which joins the familiar illustration to the unfamiliar concept which is the subject of the parable. This is where the two parts of the parable or “thrown alongside”.
- Could also be thought of as saying, “in the same way.”

Condition	Connection	Result
when branch becomes tender and puts forth leaves	you know that	summer is near
when you see all these things	know that	it is near--at the doors!

2. What is the parable of the fig tree teaching?

- How does the parable shed light upon what the teacher intends to convey?

- *In the same way* that development of leaves on a fig tree are a reliable indicator of the soon arrival of summer, so will seeing “these things” be a reliable indicator of His coming and the end of the age.
 - Never has a fig tree put out leaves as winter approaches!
 - As long as winter continues, the fig tree remains dormant: no leaves are seen.
- *In the same way* that God as Creator programs the timing of the fig tree’s response to the approach of summer, so too He controls when the signs come forth indicating the end of the age.

3. Common error #1: making the fig tree “itself a sign”

- Taking the fig tree to be Israel
 - Matthew [21:19](#), Mark [11:13](#)
 - Jesus comes to a fig tree having leaves which appeared to promise fruit.
 - Finding the tree had no actual fruit, He cursed it.
 - The tree was not serving the purpose for which it had been raised up.
 - It had an external appearance of fruitfulness, but was barren.
 - This parable may apply to the religious establishment within Israel, but it is not definite.² Moreover it is a different parable in a different context. {N At most, the cursing of the fig tree parallels the cursing of that generation in Israel, but cannot represent the permanent rejection of the nation (Rom. [11:1,26](#)).
 - Luke [13:6](#)
 - Jesus teaches a parable concerning a fruitless fig tree which some have taken to represent Israel (e.g., the man’s cultivation of it). “Israel, as the visible witness of God in the world . . .”³
 - But this identification is uncertain. The context of the parable would seem have in mind God’s expectation and forbearance in dealing with *individual* lack of repentance and fruitlessness. “In this case, however, the parable’s lesson about fruitlessness applies equally to the whole nation, and to each individual soul.”⁴
- Hal Lindsey in *The Late Great Planet Earth*^b, published in 1970
 - The best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s.
 - Understood the fig tree as representing Israel.
 - Putting forth leaves was equated with the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948.
 - One generation as 40 years.
 - Strongly implied the return of Christ should not be later than about 1948 + 40 years, or 1988.⁵
- Like pointing out something to a cat: focusing on the wrong aspect of the parable.
 - The structure of the parable clearly emphasizes a different truth.
 - “Look at the fig tree, *and all the trees*” (Luke [21:29](#)).

4. Two questions to resolve

1. What are “these things” which are seen?
2. What is the “it” which inexorably follows?
 - Luke [21](#)
 - “Now when these things *begin to happen* [events], look up and lift up your heads,

- because *your redemption draws near*" (Luke 21:28).
- "So you also, when you see these things *happening* [events], know that the *kingdom of God* is near" (Luke 21:31).
 - these things
 - NOT the signs which characterize the beginning of sorrows and which mark the interadvent age in general.
 - "These things" *happen* - objective visible events which Jesus has just described.⁶
 - it
 - "your redemption", ἀπολύτρωσις [*apolytrōsis*] which could be translated "release", "deliverance" or "freedom"
 - Rescue from what?
 - The context tells us:
 - Rescue of Jewish believers from the time of persecution triggered by the "Abomination of Desolation" which Jesus mentioned in verse 15.
 - Rescue of believers in general from the unique time of global Christian persecution which Jesus mentioned in verse 22 and elaborated on in the book of Revelation (e.g., Rev. 13).
 - Rescue is associated with "the kingdom of God" - the arrival of the king followed by the establishment of the thousand year millennial kingdom on earth.
 - This matches the overall context of Matthew 24 which concerns the Second Coming, not the catching away of believers at the Rapture of the Church.

This generation

"Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34).

1. Common error #2: forcing 'this generation' to mean people alive at the time when Jesus spoke this parable in the first century A.D.

- Requires that all the signs spoken of by Jesus in the preceding passages occurred within one generation of when He spoke of them.
- Places all the signs of the end of the age--including those which serve as a precursor to His Second Coming -- as having already transpired historically.
 - But the abomination of desolation, which Jesus referred to as a unambiguous sign when the Jews should flee, and which other passages seem to indicate involve a man literally sitting in the temple of God and showing himself to be God (2Th. 2:4) have never occurred.
 - Nor have the cataclysmic signs mentioned in this passage.
 - Nor has the visible sign of the son of Man appeared in heaven.
 - Nor have the tribes of the earth mourned over the return of Jesus -- not even the Jews did so in 70 A.D. at the fall of Jerusalem.
- Clearly, to force "this generation" to mean exclusively those living at the time of Jesus requires either an interpretation of the passage as complete symbolism (extreme literary hyperbole) or a denial of reality: neither of which are sensible.
- As one commentator observes, "How could Jesus on the one hand assert that his own contemporary generation would see the fulfillment of all his prophecy and on the other hand assert just two verses later that no man, not even himself, could know the time of fulfillment?"⁷

- This is the flawed interpretation of Preterists who posit fulfillment in an invisible "cloud coming" of Jesus in judgment corresponding to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

2. What could “this generation” mean?

- “Generation” is γενεά [*genea*], a word whose meaning is determined by the context.⁸
 1. People living in the same time (Luke 11:51).
 2. People of the same kind or ethnic group, descendants of a common ancestor, a race (Luke 16:8).
 3. A nation (possibly in Mat. 23:36).⁹
 4. An indefinite time period about the length of a generation (Acts 14:16).
- “will no means pass away (παρέλθῃ [*parelthē*]) until all these things take place ”
 - The clear inference of this verse is that whatever “this generation” represents will be present when all these things take place, *but thereafter would end or perish*.¹⁰
 - This makes it unlikely that “this generation” refers to an ethnic group, as in the Jewish race or Israel.
 - Moreover, Jesus consistently uses the phrase “this generation” throughout the gospels to describe those who refuse to respond to what God has revealed. The term does not include those who respond in faith (i.e., believing Jews).
- Reference to a God-rejecting group of people living at a time of great revelation concerning the reality of God, but remain unrepentant triggering a time of judgment.¹¹
 1. The generation at the time of Noah who were subsequently destroyed by the flood. “Then the LORD said to Noah, ‘Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in *this generation*’” (Ge 7:1).
 2. The generation of the Exodus and wilderness wandering who were barred from entering the promised land and died in the wilderness (Deu. 32:5,20).
 3. The generation living at the time of Christ’s presentation to Israel at the first coming (who suffer the overthrow of Jerusalem at the hand of Titus).
 4. The generation living at the time of the end who perish at Jesus’ Second Coming.¹²
- “Hence “a perverse generation” is essentially an epithet for “unfaithful sons” (Deu. 20:20). . . . a class of people who in this world stand over against the children of light.”¹³
- It seems best to understand “this generation” to either refer to
 1. A timeless reference to the godless who will continue in their opposition to God throughout the entire age (Rev. 22:11) until they are dispatched at the return of Jesus (Rev. 22:11). These then, represent the family group who are “genealogical offspring” of the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15; Mat. 23:31-32).¹⁴
 2. The faithless unbelieving rejectors of God who are alive at the time of the signs which usher in the time of the end.¹⁵ If this is the meaning, then this verse may also indicate that the sequence of events which unambiguously indicate the end of the age will culminate in Jesus’ return in a relatively short span of time (those who see the beginning of the signs marking the end of the age will also witness the end).

Heaven and earth will pass away

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Matthew [24:35](#)).

- The only sure thing for believers to cling to is God’s Word.
- It is more fundamental and enduring than physical reality because it represents God’s immutable will.
- Indeed, Biblical teaching and prophecy indicate that heaven and earth *will* pass away as the course of history progresses.¹⁶
- During the time of awful cataclysms which Jesus Has described, when the very heavens and earth are shaken, the only enduring thing will be His Word.
- When it looks as if the world is coming apart at the seams, believers can rest assured knowing that the dawn of world redemption is just over the horizon.

No one knows

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only” (Matthew [24:36](#)).

1. No one knows the day or hour

- Variation in the Greek texts evident by reading the NASB, “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](#)).
- Also unknown to the son in the Greek text followed by the NKJV in Mark [13:32](#).
- In His incarnation, Jesus emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes (Php. [2:5-8](#)).
 - Here we are faced with one of puzzles of Jesus as the God-man
 - Luke informs us of the boyhood development of Jesus, that “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke [2:52](#)).
 - The author of Hebrews writes that, “though He was a Son, yet He *learned obedience* by the things which He suffered” (Hebrews [5:8](#)).
 - This, it appears that in His humanity, even Jesus did not know at the exact timing of the end of the age. This must remain a mystery.
- More importantly, *why* does Jesus inform us of these things?
 1. To indicate that an attitude of continued watchfulness should characterize those who remain faithful: whether believers in our time who watching for His return for the church or believers at the time Jesus describes in this context who are watching for His Second Coming.
 2. To underscore just how unpredictable the close of the age will be: if the Son of God didn’t know and the angels don’t know, then forget trying to predict it! To do so is either the very height of pride and a clear sign of deception!

2. Common error #3: ignoring or interpreting this verse so as to predict either the Rapture or the Second Coming

As clear as this verse would appear to be concerning the fruitlessness of trying to predict the arrival of Christ, it still has not prevented a multitude of *Christian* interpreters from attempting to do just that. Although one could no doubt find predictions of the Second Coming all through the interadvent age, a few of the more recent should serve to illustrate the foolishness of the practice.

1. Charles Taze Russell - founder of what became to be know as the Jehova's Witnesses
 - 1874, 1914 Predicted Christ's invisible return in 1874, with His Second Coming to be in 1914.
2. William Miller
 - March 21, 1843 - March 21, 1844
 - In the 1840s he began to preach about the world's end, saying Jesus Christ would return for the long-awaited Second Coming and that Earth would be engulfed in fire sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844.
 - October 1844
 - When that end didn't come, Miller changed the date to Oct. 22. When Oct. 23 rolled around, his loyal followers explained it away yet again and went on to form the Seventh-day Adventist movement.
3. William Branham
 - 1977
 - Just before sunset on Feb. 28, 1963, residents of northwestern Arizona watched what the Arizona Republic called a "strikingly beautiful and mysterious cloud" glide across the desert. That same day, Pentecostal pastor William Branham "who founded the post-World War II faith-healing movement" climbed Sunset Mountain and claimed he met with seven angels who revealed to him the meaning of the seven seals from the Book of Revelation. Days later, Branham returned to his congregation at the Branham Tabernacle in Jeffersonville, Ind. He preached seven sermons in seven nights, explaining the meaning of the seals and the seven visions he had received, leading him to predict that Jesus would return to Earth in 1977. He did not live to see the day. In December 1965, as Branham was driving with his family in Texas, a drunk driver smashed into his car. Branham died six days later, on Christmas Eve.
4. Hal Lindsey
 - As mentioned earlier, his book titled *The Late Great Planet Earth*^c strongly inferred that Christ would return before the end of 1988.
5. Edgar Wisenant
 - September 13, then 15, then October 3, 1988
 - Edgar Whisenant published a book in 1988 called *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*, which sold some 4.5 million copies.
 - 1989, 1993, 1994
 - When 1989 rolled around, he published another book, saying the Rapture would occur that year instead. It did not sell as well, nor did later titles that predicted the world would end in 1993 and again in 1994.
 - Pride is frequently a characteristic of false teachers:¹⁷
 - "Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town."
 - "[I]f there were a king in this country and I could gamble with my life, I would stake my life on Rosh Hashana [the Jewish New Year] 88."
6. Harold Camping
 - May 1988
 - September 1994
 - In 1992, the evangelist published a book called 1994, which proclaimed that sometime in mid-September 1994, Christ would return and the world would end.

- September 27, 29, then October 2, 1994
- March 1995
 - When September 1994 passed without incident, Camping moved his prediction for the return of Christ to March 31, 1995.
- May 21, 2011
 - May 21, 2011 Jesus Christ would return to Earth, the righteous would fly up to heaven, and that there would follow five months of fire, brimstone and plagues on Earth, with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21, 2011 with the end of the world
- Oct 21, 2011
 - After May 21 passed without the predicted incidents, Camping said he believed that a "spiritual" judgment had occurred on that date, and that the physical Rapture would occur on October 21, 2011, simultaneously with the destruction of the universe by God.

Summary

1. Jesus has provided unambiguous and unmistakable signs which reliably indicate the end of the age and His pending arrival in the Second Coming.
2. Once these signs come forth, history will move relatively rapidly to the climax of His Second Coming in judgment.
3. Evil rejectors of God will continue until they are purged at His Second Coming.
4. Those living at the time of the end will have nothing to hold onto except God's Word for even the heavens and earth will be shaken.
5. Whenever a teacher or ministry attempts to set dates, either for the Rapture or the Second Coming, it is a clear sign you are drinking at the wrong watering hole.

Endnotes:

1. [NKJV, Mat. 24:32-36](#)
2. "Neither the reference in Matthew [21:18-20](#) nor that in Mark [11:12-14](#) with its interpretation in [11:20-26](#), gives any indication that it is referring to Israel, any more than the mountain referred to in the passage. Accordingly, while this interpretation is held by many, there is no clear Scriptural warrant." [Ref-1268](#), p. 192
3. [Ref-0187](#), Luke [13:6](#)
4. [Ref-0089](#), Luke [13:6](#)
5. Although Lindsey did not claim to know the dates of future events with any certainty, he suggested that Matthew [24:32-34](#) indicated that Jesus' return might be within "one generation" of the rebirth of the state of Israel, and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple, and Lindsey asserted that "in the Bible" one generation is forty years. Some readers took this as an indication that the Tribulation or the Rapture would occur no later than 1988. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Late_Great_Planet_Earth]
6. "... *panta tauta* in Mat. [24:33](#) refers rather to all the events of Mat. [24:4-26](#) including the abomination that causes desolation (Mat. [24:15](#)) and the great tribulation that proceeds from it (Mat. [24:21-26](#))." [NEIL](#), p. 379
7. [NEIL](#), p. 381
8. [Ref-0617](#)
9. [Ref-0227](#)
10. "'This generation will not pass away till all these things take place.' But when Christ comes in judgment they are destroyed." [NEIL](#), p. 375
11. "Narrative criticism will be employed in this paper to show that "this generation" in Matt [24:34](#) refers to a kind of people characterized by Matthew as unbelieving and headed toward eschatological judgment. In the context of the discourse it refers to that type of consummately evil and unbelieving people who deceive and persecute the disciples of Christ until the time of the

parousia, when the true followers of Jesus are vindicated and “this generation” passes away in judgment.” NEIL, p. 367

12. “The pejorative adjectives given to “this generation” (evil, adulterous, faithless, perverse; cf. Mat. 12:39, 45; 16:4; 17:17) throughout the gospel are qualities that distinguish those who are subjects of the kingdom from those who are not.” NEIL, p. 375
13. RIESKE, pp. 219, 223
14. “Therefore rather than defining *γενεά* as a *kind* of people, it should be defined with its clear genealogical sense, except that the family connection is not natural descent but spiritual descent.” RIESKE, p. 225
15. “. . . several factors work against this interpretation. First, the solidarity that Jesus asserted between the scribes and Pharisees and those who murdered God’s messengers in the past is certainly well established in verses 34–35. Thus it seems best, as suggested, to understand the epithet “this generation” in verse 36 as referring to the entire corporate entity composed of people from the past and present, not just the Jews of that time period. As Gundry writes, Jesus’ “involving them in the bygone murder of an OT prophet (v 35) shows that he does not take ‘this generation’ in a sense chronologically limited to Jesus’ contemporaries. . . . In other words, if the ‘you’ who constitute ‘this generation’ includes those who murdered Zechariah in OT times, ‘this generation’ can hardly bear the chronological limitation usually imposed on it.” Second, the nature of the charge (that of all the bloodguilt for present and past martyrdom) that is brought against this *γενεά* seems to be too weighty a charge to be laid on just one group of Jews living at a certain time period. As has been asserted, the charge was not based simply on the specific act of killing the Messiah but on the killing of all those whom God sends who carry His message of salvation.” RIESKE, p. 222
16. Concerning the passing of heaven and earth: Ps. 102:26; Isa. 34:4; 51:6; 65:17; 1Cor. 7:31; 2Pe. 3:7-12; Rev. 20:11; Rev. 21:1.
17. <http://www.isitso.org/guide/whise.html>

Sources:

- NEIL** Neil D. Nelson, Jr., “‘This Generation’ In Matt 24:34: A Literary Critical Perspective”, vol. 38, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Volume 38, 3, (Lynchburg, VA: The Evangelical Theological Society, 1995).
- NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- RIESKE** Susan M. Rieske, “What Is the Meaning of “This Generation” in Matthew 23:36?”, vol. 165, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 165, 658, (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2008)
- Ref-0089** John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997).
- Ref-0187** Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).
- Ref-0227** Arndt, William, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, c1979. ISBN:0-226-03932-3^d.
- Ref-0617** Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.
- Ref-1268** John Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1974). ISBN:08024-5189-6^e.

Links Mentioned Above

- a** - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- b** - See <http://www.bestbookdeal.com/book/compare/978-0310277712>.
- c** - See <http://www.bestbookdeal.com/book/compare/978-0310277712>.
- d** - See <http://www.bestbookdeal.com/book/compare/0-226-03932-3>.
- e** - See <http://www.bestbookdeal.com/book/compare/08024-5189-6>.