

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 24:4-15, 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 the more 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 the 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 the following five problems with this view:

FIRST PROBLEM THE FIG TREE IS NEVER EQUATED WITH ISRAEL IN THE BIBLE

There is the problem of attempting to equate the fig tree with the nation of Israel. Consider the following:

Fig Tree

sykê is a term denoting a literal “fig tree” in each of the sixteen contexts in which it is found (cf. Matt. 21:19ff.; 24:32; Mark 11:13ff.; 13:28; Luke 13:6ff.; John 1:48ff.; Jas. 3:12; Rev. 6:13). (*Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*).

After examining the evidence, the conclusion is that the Greek word *sykê*, translated fig tree, is always used of a literal fig tree in each of its occurrences in the New Testament.

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

The following is a summary of the use of “figs” and “fig trees” in the Old Testament:

Figs and fig trees in the Old Testament symbolize both blessing and judgment. They indicate security and prosperity in the land of Canaan (cf. 2 Kgs. 18:31; Isa. 36:16; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10). In Joel 2:22; Hag. 2:19 they signify promised renewal, after the inflicting of divine judgment. In contrast, the deprivation of figs and fig trees is often a clear sign of Yahweh punishing his people for their covenant disobedience (cf. Jer. 5:17; 8:13; Hos. 2:12; Joel 1:12; Amos 4:9; Hab. 3:17). Rotten figs are also symbolic of divine judgment (cf. Jer. 24:1ff.; Hos. 9:10; also Nah. 3:12) (*Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*).

We should note what is not said, namely, that fig tree is ever used symbolically for the nation of Israel. It is not.

In sum, the evidence is that the fig tree is NEVER used symbolically for the nation of Israel in the entire Bible! See Appendix 1 for full documentation of this.

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

The parable of the fig tree is given in Matthew 24:32-35 *after* Jesus lists 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!

Learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things, recognize that he is near — at the door (Matthew 24:32,33 CSB).

One of these eleven signs, the Abomination of Desolation, occurs mid-way through the last seven year period, known as “the seventieth week of Daniel.” We read about this in Daniel 9:27:

The ruler will make a treaty with the people for a period of one set of seven, but after half this time, he will put an end to the sacrifices and offerings. And as a climax to all his terrible deeds, he will set up a sacrilegious object that causes desecration, until the fate decreed for this defiler is finally poured out on him (Daniel 9:27 NLT).

“Putting an end to sacrifices and offerings” is another way of saying the abomination that causes desolation. At the halfway point of this seven year period, the sacrifices are stopped and something abominable is placed in the Temple.

Jesus explained that this abominable act will set in motion the final three and one half year period, the Great Tribulation:

Therefore when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place-- let the reader understand-- then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get things out of his house. And whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those women who are pregnant, and to those who are nursing babies in those days! Moreover, pray that when you flee, it will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will again (Matthew 24:15-21 NASB 2020)

This causes an insurmountable problem for those who argue that the rebirth of Israel is predicted in the parable of the fig tree.

Why?

Among other things, for this particular event to take place Israel must have come back to their ancient homeland, formed a modern state, and eventually built a Third Temple where they instituted animal sacrifices. Indeed, you cannot put an end to the sacrifices unless they have already started!

Hence, for all this to happen, Israel has to become a modern state *before* this last seven year period can begin! Their rebirth cannot come about after the abomination of desolation takes place. Indeed, this event begins the Great Tribulation, which is the last three and one half years of the final seven year period before the return of Christ.

Accordingly, the parable of the fig tree cannot be referring to the rebirth of the modern state of Israel. Indeed, that has to happen before *any* of these eleven signs occur.

THIRD 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.

Merrill Unger makes another important point as to why the fig tree cannot speak of Israel's regathering in the last days:

There is a keen temptation to associate the illustration with the exciting truth of the end-time revitalized nation. But this interpretation here is indefensible ... historically. The establishment of the Israeli state (1948) took place in the church age and could scarcely be a "sign" of the nearness of Christ's advent in glory, when the rapture, which is pretribulational, had not yet taken place, not to mention the Tribulation itself (Merrill Unger, *Unger's Gospel Commentary*).

FOURTH 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 fact that they were told to consider "all the other trees" indicates that it is merely an illustration from nature, one in which they would all be aware of.

Furthermore, if the fig tree is used literally in all of its occurrences in the New Testament, then in Luke, when Jesus spoke of "all the trees," we should understand it literally there also, since it is in the same context.

FIFTH PROBLEM: THE LENGTH OF A BIBLICAL GENERATION IS ABOUT 40 YEARS

Another fatal problem is the assumed length of a biblical generation at the time the New Testament was written. It was around 40 years. We can provide four examples:

EXAMPLE 1 A GENERATION IS DEFINED AS FORTY YEARS

The writer to the Hebrews defines the length of a generation:

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

There your fathers tested me and tried me, and they saw my works for forty years. Therefore, I became provoked at that generation and said, "Their hearts are always wandering and they have not known my ways" (Hebrews 3:8,9 NET).

Note that the generation is defined as being 40 years.

EXAMPLE 2 JOB LIVED TO THE FOURTH GENERATION, 140 YEARS

We are told the following about the patriarch Job:

And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations (Job 42:16 ESV).

Job lived 140 more years after the tragic events in his life. He lived to see his children and their children to the fourth generation. Therefore, if we divide 140 years by 4 we get a generation being about 35 years in length.

EXAMPLE 3: THERE WERE FOURTEEN GENERATIONS FROM THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY UNTIL CHRIST

Matthew, the same writer who recorded Jesus giving the parable of the fig tree, gives an approximate time for one generation:

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to Christ, fourteen generations (Matthew 1:17 NET).

He stated that there were fourteen generations from the people being deported to Babylon until Christ was born.

If we calculate the time it took from the last group to be deported to Babylon, 587 B.C., until the time of Christ, the fourteen generations would average about 41 years.

EXAMPLE 4: THE DEFINITION OF THE WORD GENERATION FROM A GREEK DICTIONARY

The *Olive Tree Enhanced Strong's Dictionary* says the following about one of the definitions of the Greek word *genea*, generation:

The whole multitude of men living at the same time . . . an age (i.e. the time ordinarily occupied by each successive generation), a space of 30 - 33 years.

This is another indication that a biblical generation was considered to be anywhere from 30 to 40 years, nothing longer!

WHAT ABOUT PSALM 90?

Some may point to Psalm 90 to argue for a longer length of a generation, seventy to eighty years:

The days of our lives add up to seventy years, or eighty, if one is especially strong (Psalm 90:10 NET).

However, this Psalm of Moses was speaking of the possible length of a person's life, it is not to be confused with the biblical definition of a generation.

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Indeed, we should note how a biblical generation is calculated. The standard New Testament Greek Lexicon, or Dictionary, called BAGD, has this to say about the meaning of the Greek word *genea*, generation:

the time of a generation, age (as a rule of thumb, the time between birth of parents and the birth of their children (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*).

Therefore, it has nothing to do with the life span of a person.

In sum, the length of a biblical generation would contradict any attempt to use the rebirth of the modern state of Israel in 1948, or the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, as being the possible starting point for the budding of the fig tree. The timing just does not work.

THE LOGICAL RESULT OF MAKING THIS CLAIM

Therefore, for anyone claiming that Jesus' employment of the fig tree is representative of Israel, and its budding is a prediction of the return of the nation in the last days, or perhaps the reunification of Jerusalem, and then His return will occur before the generation that sees the fig tree budding passes away, is faced with a huge problem. The fact that a biblical generation is forty years makes it clear that this interpretation, not only will not work, it would make Jesus, in this case, giving a false prediction, something that He has never done.

In fact, Jesus made this prediction after giving the parable:

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 24:34,35 NET).

Let us pay close attention to what He stated.

First, Jesus prefaces His statement by the solemn words "I tell you the truth." Then He goes on to say that His words have an everlasting meaning. In other words, in the strongest of terms, the Lord is guaranteeing the truth of the meaning of the parable of the fig tree.

Yet, if one makes His illustration refer to Israel, and to the generation that sees their return to their ancient homeland, then His claim would NOT be true!

Therefore, those making such a claim, whether they realize it or not, are, in essence, making Jesus out to be a liar! Hopefully, this will begin to sink in, namely to those who continue to make such claims.

THE ANSWER: THE FIG TREE IS AN ANALOGY FROM NATURE

Accordingly, if the fig tree in Jesus parable is not a symbol of Israel, the budding leaves are not indicative of their return in the last days, and the precise number of years in a generation is limited to 40 years at its longest, then what does this parable mean in the context of Matthew 24?

Simply put, the fig tree is an analogy from nature. Unlike most trees in the Holy Land, fig trees lose their leaves in winter. 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 nearness of the Lord's return is at hand. Indeed, the generation that sees *all* of these signs will see His return.

In fact, in Matthew 24:33 the Greek text uses the adverb οὕτως (*who toes*) meaning "in this manner" or "in this way." In other words, as they were well aware, the budding of the fig tree meant that summer was near. In the same way, when you see all these signs you know that the end is near. This assumes that the fig tree is an analogy from nature. Otherwise, the connection would not make sense.

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

Since one of the signs, the Abomination of Desolation, occurs in the midst of the final seven year period, three and one half years before Jesus' Second Coming, there will be those who are living at the time that will not 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 24:4-15. 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 attempt to calculate the time of Christ's return for His church, the rapture, or His Second Coming.

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