

**THE RETURN OF JESUS IS NEAR**  
*“Now learn the parable from the fig tree”*

Tom Finley

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**The Fig Tree**

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; 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 will not pass away. (Matt. 24:32-35)

What is the significance of the “fig tree” in this passage? Surely, the “fig tree” here cannot be taken simply as an illustration for the timing of the coming King and His Kingdom, with no reference to Israel. The reason is twofold: 1) a parable always holds a spiritual significance which can generally only be fully interpreted by believers (Matt. 13:13-16); and 2) the “fig tree” must mean Israel here based upon other Scriptural references (Hos. 9:10; Joel 1:7; Lk. 13:6) and based upon the context of this address by Jesus. An explanation of the context follows.

Mark 11 gives the full chronology of the incident involving a fig tree during this last week before the cross. Mk. 11:7-11 tells us that Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (Sunday) and then entered the temple, observed everything and left for Bethany with the twelve. Then, on the next day (Monday), as He traveled towards Jerusalem He saw a fig tree and tried to find fruit on it. Since it bore no fruit, only leaves, He cursed it. This is recorded in Mk. 11:12-14:

On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went *to see* if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening. (Mk. 11:12-14)

The fig tree without fruit represented the nation of Israel at that time, which was spiritually barren. A few months earlier He had spoken a parable portraying Israel as a barren fig tree:

And He *began* telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, *fine*; but if not, cut it down.'" (Lk. 13:6-9)

Both in the above parable in Luke, and on that Monday of Jesus' last week before the cross, God was looking for fruit from Israel, something of true righteousness and spiritual reality. It was early in Jesus' ministry when He came the first time to the holy grounds of the temple and found it being used for greedy gain, both by the money changers and animal sellers, as well as by the chief priests and the family of the high priest, who operated that marketplace for personal profit<sup>1</sup> (Jn. 2:13-17). His righteous anger flashed at the unrighteousness there.

Three years later, in His last public week, Jesus once again came to the temple. It was on Sunday night when He observed the profane and greedy activities in the temple (Mk. 11:11). He perceived that Israel was in the same condition of barrenness as

she had been from the beginning of His ministry. Even after Jesus, as the “vineyard-keeper,” had labored another six months after He spoke the parable quoted above from Luke, Israel remained fruitless. Therefore, on the next morning (Monday), He graphically illustrated His displeasure with Israel as He judged the fig tree on His journey from Bethany to Jerusalem. He then proceeded to the temple, where He once again cleansed it, but this time with even stronger denunciation: “‘Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’” But you have made it a robbers’ den.” (Mk. 11:17)

On Tuesday, the day following Jesus’ judgment upon the barren fig tree, He and His disciples saw the tree again:

As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots *up*. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be *granted* him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be *granted* you." (Mk. 11:20-24)

Jesus’ answer to Peter indicates that when Jesus cursed the fig tree He had done so with faith in God to respond to His prayer. His prayer was actually for the kingdom to be taken from barren Israel and transferred to the Gentiles. This is shown by the fact that the “mountain” in verse 23 represents a kingdom in Scripture (cf. Dan. 2:34, 35, 44), and “the sea” represents the Gentile nations (cf. Dan. 7:2-3; Rev. 17:1, 15). This transfer of the kingdom to the Gentiles is confirmed by another parable, one which Jesus spoke later on the same day, following His explanation to the disciples of the withered fig tree. After He arrived at the temple, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders challenged His authority.

Part of His response to them was the parable of the wicked vinedressers (Matt. 21:33-44). If you read this parable you will see that Jesus asks His antagonistic audience a question and then states what the significance of the parable portends:

"Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?" They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the *proper* seasons." Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER *stone*; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'?" Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." (Matt. 21:40-43)

So again we see the idea of the kingdom being transferred due to the unfruitfulness of the nation Israel before God.

It is later that same day, after leaving the temple, that Jesus utters His famous prophetic words of Matthew 24 and 25 on the Mount of Olives. Therefore we see that Jesus has given much immediate background regarding the fig tree and fruitfulness before He mentions another parable of the fig tree in Matt. 24. Note the parable both in Matt. 24 and in Luke 21:

“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; so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.” (Matt. 24:32-33)

“Then He told them a parable: ‘Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things

happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near.” (Lk. 21:29-31)

These passages indicate that at a future time, a time near the end of this age, the fig tree, signifying the nation of Israel, will come out of its withered condition and begin once again to show signs of national life. It is at that time we are told that we can recognize that the Lord’s coming and His millennial Kingdom are near.

Let us now consider how Jesus’ judgment upon the fig tree actually played out in the history of Israel. In 66 A. D. the Jews rebelled against the Roman occupation of their land. By the spring of 70 A. D. the Romans under Titus had laid an effective siege to Jerusalem. The siege and fall of Jerusalem was unbelievably cruel. Titus allowed perhaps hundreds of thousands of Passover pilgrims into the city, but never let anyone out. Starvation and disease ran rampant. Thousands who tried to escape the city were crucified. When the final assault on the city took place, the temple was destroyed, as Jesus prophesied in Matt. 24:2. The great temple was burned on the ninth of Av (early August), the same date that the first temple was burned in 586 A. D. The Romans slaughtered perhaps hundreds of thousands of Jews, and took thousands to die in amphitheaters, or to be sold into slavery.

The terrible onslaught against Jerusalem was under God’s hand, being His judgment upon the nation of Israel for their rejection of their Messiah. The Jews tried to rise again, mounting another rebellion against Rome in 134 A. D., but it failed. Perhaps 500,000 Jews died in the Roman assault to end that rebellion. Jews fled the land, and those remaining were enslaved or killed. Jerusalem became a Roman city populated with Gentiles and a temple to the Roman god Jupiter was built upon the temple site. The Romans renamed Judea as Syria-Palestina. Thus, by 136 A. D., a little over 100 years after Jesus judged the fig tree, the nation of Israel was fully “withered,” showing no signs of life. There was no Jewish nation, the temple and temple worship were gone, and the Jewish people had been removed from the promised land.

The miraculous establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 was the first indication of life coming back to the fig tree. In

1967 Jerusalem, the city of God's earthly people, was totally regained, signifying another growth of new life. Many Jews began to return to the land. Of particular note was a large wave of 700,000 Russian Jews who returned during the period 1989-1998. Also, the vast majority of Ethiopian Jews have returned, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. These returns to the land are more signs of life for the fig tree and probably are at least a partial fulfillment of prophecy (Is. 43:5-6). In addition, there is zeal in Israel today among some of the Jews to rebuild the temple. According to the Bible the temple will be rebuilt and the sacrifices reinstated (Dan. 9:27; 12:11; Matt. 24:15). Planning for the rebuilt temple began in 1973 and since then much has been accomplished. Special schools for temple priests have been training qualified men to serve in temple worship. Priestly garments, temple instruments, temple vessels and furniture have been reproduced. Even Biblical harps have been prepared for music. All of this activity is part of the putting forth of leaves by the fig tree.

Some may question why Lk. 21:29 says "Behold the fig tree and all the trees." Why did our Lord also mention "all the trees?" Firstly, let us be clear that if Jesus intended for "trees budding out" to act simply as an illustration, with no reference to Israel, then He would not have separately mentioned the fig tree here. We should note carefully that both the fig tree and all the trees are mentioned. Here the Lord is telling us, through Luke the Gentile writer, that not only will Israel, the "fig tree," emerge from dormancy, but also other "trees." These would be the nations which played a key role in relation to Israel in history, particularly four great Gentile empires which actually ruled over the land of Israel for many centuries. These Gentile nations are vividly seen in the prophetic statue in Daniel 2 (Babylon, the head of gold; Medo-Persia, the breast and arms of silver; Greece, the belly and thighs of bronze; a fourth unidentified kingdom of iron, pictured by the legs and toes). The first kingdom, Babylon, is specifically identified in Dan. 2:36-38. These four kingdoms are also specifically noted as "four great beasts . . . coming up from the sea" [arising from the Gentile world] (Dan. 7:3). The second great

empire is identified as Medo-Persia from Dan. 8:20, and that kingdom was overcome by Greece, the third empire (Dan. 8:1-8, 21).

The final “beast” kingdom, is not specifically named in Scripture, although many commentators have called it a revived Roman empire (the “ten toes” of the statue in Dan. 2 and the “ten horns” of the fourth beast in Dan. 7). This final beast is described in Rev.13:1-2. Besides having ten horns, this beast also has some characteristics of a leopard (Greece, Dan. 7:6), a bear (Medo-Persia, Dan. 7:5), and a lion (Babylon, Dan. 7:4). “And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, his feet were like those of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority” (Rev. 13:2). Thus this future beast includes the resurgence in some fashion of four great Gentile empires – “all the trees” which were especially related to Israel.

A more recent interpretation of the fourth beast makes a good case that the fourth empire is not a revived Roman empire, but a revived Islamic Empire, or Caliphate.<sup>2</sup> The Ottoman Empire dominated the Middle East, including the promised land, from 1512 until 1924 when the caliphate was officially ended. A resurgence of Islamic power into a modern caliphate would certainly be a budding forth of a dormant empire related to Israel, and a foe of the Jews in the last days. It could well incorporate the basic territory of the ancient Babylonia, Medo-Persian and Grecian empires, as a possible solution to the last beast embodying, in some fashion, the first three beasts (Rev. 13:2).

In summary then, the parable of the fig tree tells us that the signs of Israel’s revival as a nation indicate that Jesus’ return to establish His kingdom is near. Additionally, the Lord gave us another indicator of the nearness of His coming when He added in Matt. 24:33: “so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, *right* at the door.” “These things” would refer to the future events that Jesus had just been speaking of, particularly the “beginning of birth pangs” in Matt. 24:7-8 and other momentous events of the last few years of this age (Matt. 24:9-31).

## “This Generation”

Immediately after Matt. 24:32-33 on the fig tree and seeing “these things” Jesus says:

“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 will not pass away.” (Matt. 24:34-35).

The Greek word here for generation (*genea*, Strong’s #1074) can mean the span of time ordinarily covered by each generation (birth until death). It might also mean the group of people during one time period. Since the Lord stated that this generation would not pass away until all of the prophesied events occurred, it is impossible to assign the meaning to the people of His day as they died before all of these events occurred. Also, it has been said by some that the construction of the Greek here would not permit “this” to be interpreted as “that,” a future generation.

The more common meaning of this Greek word in the New Testament, however, is a race or class of people, usually described according to some moral characteristic. Jesus spoke in graphic terms of the Jews who rejected Him: “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign” (Matt. 12:39). When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he told the crowd: “Be saved from this perverse generation!” (Acts 2:40). He was telling the people to be delivered out of the class of those Jews around them who had rejected and crucified their Messiah!

The context of a word is always the best determinant of its meaning. The immediate context of “this generation” in Matt. 24:34 is the fig tree. The fig tree was judged on that Monday and the kingdom transferred to the Gentiles. The effect of Christ’s judgment upon the fig tree was its withering, the removal of life and evidence of life from the nation of Israel. That took place over some decades, as noted above, so that by 136 A. D. the Jewish temple and the Jewish nation no longer existed. Yet, Jesus actually prophesied in verse 34 that the fig tree would again come back to

life, putting forth leaves. It seems perfectly logical that “this generation” in Matt. 24:36 refers to the Jewish nation as a whole, as characterized by its rejection of the Messiah. In other words, it is equivalent to the fig tree in verse 34. Viewed this way we can see verse 36 as a marvelous promise. In this verse Jesus gives us the assurance that even though unfruitful Israel has been judged and will wither, this people will not utterly pass away until all the prophesied events take place, including the ultimate acceptance of Jesus by a remnant of the Jews when He comes again:

"For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'" (Matt. 23:39)

### **The house at Bethany**

During that last week of Jesus' life the Scripture presents a wonderful contrast to the barren fig tree, the Jewish nation which rejected her Messiah. This contrast is seen in the house at Bethany. It seems that this house was where Jesus often stayed when He visited Jerusalem. This was the house where Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived, whom Jesus loved (Jn. 11:5). During part of this last week, some faithful followers (Judas excepted) gathered together in the house at Bethany to be with Jesus and to pour out their love upon Him. The gospel of John gives us the best chronology here and shows us that Jesus arrived at Bethany on the Friday before He entered Jerusalem on a donkey (Jn. 12:1). On the next day, He partook of an intimate supper with His loving disciples, and this is when Mary, moved with devotion, anointed Jesus with a costly perfume for His burial (Jn. 12:3, 7). It seems that during this week He would travel into Jerusalem and see the degradation there of the Jewish worship, yet He would return at night to be with His loving seekers, either at Bethany or the Mount of Olives. Surely, the house at Bethany was where Jesus found His real satisfaction. It is spiritually fitting, then, that the probable meaning of “Bethany” is “house of figs” (per the Jewish Encyclopedia).

Today the Lord is still seeking fruit from His people to satisfy Him. Even before He returns, He longs for this fruit. This fruit speaks of the real fruit of His life, the fruit that comes from abiding in Him (Jn. 15:4-5). Busy religious activities will not satisfy Him, just as the temple worship of that day did not satisfy Him. He longs for the spiritual reality of intimacy among His loving seekers. May our Lord impress us that He desires a simple body life among His people, not great religious enterprises where ministry is mixed with business or worldly ways, or where activities and programs abound which are fueled by the energy of men, not by the Holy Spirit. He desires a “house at Bethany” where true devotion and service to Him are expressed out of the overflow of His life within us.

**“Therefore be on the alert [“watch”], for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42)**

**“You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will” (Matt. 24:44)**

By the parable of the fig tree we know that the return of the Lord Jesus to establish His kingdom upon the earth is near. We are in the “season” of Jesus’ return, and have been in that season since 1948 when the nation of Israel came back to life. Some may wonder how the return of the Lord could be considered “near” when it still has not happened in over 60 years. Remember that the “withering” of the fig tree (Israel) took place over about 100 years, so the process of it coming back to life may take yet another unknown number of years, or the process could conclude very soon. God is in charge of the exact timing and His word considers that from the time the fig tree comes back to life that Jesus’ return is indeed near. Although we are in the season of His return, we do not know the exact day or hour when the Lord will actually begin His coming, His return. In God’s eyes, the time could be ripe for Jesus’ return to begin even today.

It is important to note that there are two different Greek words commonly translated “coming” in the passages concerning

the return of the Lord. The Greek verb used for “coming” in Matt. 24:42, 44 is *erchomai* (Strong’s #2064), and is generally used of movement. In Matt. 24:30, 42, 44, 46, 48 it is used to describe the Lord’s movements during the final end time period, which will span some number of years. The other word used for “coming” is *parousia* (Strong’s #3952) and usually means presence, or sometimes arrival. It most often speaks of the presence of a person, denoting a period of time. This word is used in Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39. When *parousia* is used in Scripture in relation to the return of Christ, it generally describes a period of time of His presence, within which occur various end time events. The unknown “day or hour” when the Son of Man comes (*erchomai*) speaks of the beginning of His presence (*parousia*). At a day and hour known only to God the Father, the return of Jesus will begin (Matt. 24:36).

The coming again of our Lord Jesus is surely the “blessed hope” and will initiate the fulfillment of many wonderful promises for the children of God. Its prospect is one that stirs our hearts with anticipation. Yet, we should not be so uninformed about our Lord’s return that we think that all of our problems will be over when He comes. We must also remember that when the Lord comes it will definitely be a time of judgment, not only for unbelievers, but also for believers (Ps. 50:3-4; 96:13; Rom. 2:4-10, 16; 1 Cor. 4:4-5; Rev. 11:18; 22:12). All believers must appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ to receive “rewards” (or recompense), which may be positive or negative (Matt. 16:27; Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:25). We must always be careful to distinguish the matter of eternal salvation, which is a gift by God’s grace through faith, apart from works (Jn. 5:24; Eph. 2:8-9), from the matter of reward, which is determined by the believer’s works (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10).<sup>3</sup>

Because the Lord Jesus is coming in judgment, He gives His disciples warnings in the gospels about being spiritually prepared for His sudden coming at an unknown day and hour. The Lord Jesus tells us plainly that we need to “watch” (or be “on the alert”) and “be ready” for His return. Although believers may disagree on some details concerning the events of the coming again of Christ, we should all be sober-minded enough to agree that the

Lord warns believers to “watch” and “be ready.” We seriously err and we disregard the Lord’s words if we suppose that just being born again constitutes “readiness.” If all believers were automatically “ready” for His coming, there would be no need for Jesus to admonish His disciples to watch and to be ready. If we are not ready, the teachings of Jesus tell us that we will suffer some loss.

We need to “watch” (be “on the alert”) so that we are not caught off guard by His coming, but instead we are prepared, or ready. To be on the alert means that we are spiritually awake to spiritual realities. We should be watching our own spiritual life to be sure we are growing in the Lord, serving Him properly, and cooperating with God in all of our circumstances. We should be on watch against the subtle snares of the devil (1 Pet. 5:8). Watchfulness also includes an eager waiting for and looking for the coming of the Lord (Lk. 12:35-37).

Our readiness for the Lord’s coming may sometimes be viewed in two categories, which are certainly related. One category concerns our spiritual growth in His life, or our personal holiness. Some of the passages spoken by Jesus in this category would be Matt. 25:1-13 and Lk. 21:34-36. The other category concerns our service to the Lord Jesus, and some of the important passages here would be Matt. 24:44-51; 25:14-30; Lk. 12:41-48; 19:11-27. It is highly recommended that you read and consider these passages prayerfully. The positive rewards noted in them for the disciples who are ready may refer to rewards in the coming Kingdom age of 1,000 years, or in some cases may refer to other special rewards to faithful end time disciples. Alternatively, the negative consequences mentioned for lack of readiness may refer to the 1,000 year Kingdom era reward, or to other possible end time penalties. Let the Lord speak to your heart through the passages noted in this paragraph. Do not be foolish and think that all of these incentives to watchfulness and readiness apply to Jews or to false believers. Only genuine believers have the spiritual capacity to watch. Only genuine believers have been called to serve, have been given spiritual gifts to serve, and have the subsequent responsibility to serve.

As some consider this sober call to be ready for Jesus' coming, they may think that they need a fresh resolve to conquer a besetting sin, or they may think they need to make a fresh consecration to serve the Lord more in various activities. Although it is true that we need a mind to obey, we should always be reminded that we are setting ourselves up for failure if we attempt to please God by following a set of requirements (Rom. 7). This approach is in the principle of being "under law," where the believer uses his efforts to carry out a set of demands. In contrast is the way of living "under grace," which involves the living union of the believer with Christ. When a believer learns to "abide in Christ," he receives and experiences Christ as his life and his empowering supply by faith (Jn. 15:4-5; 1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 20-21; 3:2-5; 5:18). The use of the human will is extremely important, but it is not used to achieve something for God, but to continually seek God, and in full dependence and submission, to learn of Him and to receive His power through faith. Those who wish to learn more about the way of victory through the abiding life may consult the endnote here for helpful resources.<sup>4</sup>

If we have the spiritual insight, we can see that God's plan for this age is close to its end. He is calling believers to be sober and to realize how close we are to the end of this age and the return of Jesus. He is calling us to be serious concerning our readiness for that soon coming day. May we all be living in these days in the light of our coming King!

"Be dressed in readiness, and *keep* your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open *the door* to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself *to serve*, and have them recline *at the table*, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds *them so*, blessed are those *slaves*. But be sure of this, that if

the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect." (Lk. 12:35-40)

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the temple market obtained from Alfred Edersheim's *"The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah"*, Book III, pp. 370-373.

<sup>2</sup> A caliphate involves the reign of a caliph as the supreme ruler over the secular and religious world of Islam. The case for a revived Islamic Caliphate being the fourth beast is made in Joel Richardson's book, *"Mideast Beast: The Scriptural Case for an Islamic Antichrist."* This careful study has received favorable reviews, noted on the jacket of the book, by Chuck Missler and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., both eminent Old Testament and prophetic scholars.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on rewards, please visit the website [www.seekersofchrist.org](http://www.seekersofchrist.org) and look at the writings under the section entitled, "The Judgment Seat of Christ, Rewards and the Kingdom."

<sup>4</sup> *"The Victorious Christian Life,"* authored by Thomas W. Finley, is available at the website [www.seekersofchrist.org](http://www.seekersofchrist.org). It can either be read on-line, downloaded for free, or ordered via a link to amazon.com. Other writings on the life of victory are also on the website.