

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 16

[THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE BUDDING FIG TREE and THE WATCHFUL SERVANTS

“The parable of the budding fig tree” in Matthew 24:32-35
and the parable of the watchful servants in Luke 12:35-40 are parables about
WATCHFULNESS IN GOD’S KINGDOM.

A. THE BUDDING FIG TREE

Read Matthew 24:32-35.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

This parable is actually an *illustrative comparison* more than a story-illustration.

Trees. What Jesus said about the fig tree might also have been spoken about other trees with the exception of the evergreen trees (Luke 21:29).

Leaves coming out. When a tree begins to sprout tender twigs and new leaves, then everybody knows that the summer is approaching.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Matthew 24:1-31.

Matthew 24 and 25 consists of Jesus’ teaching on the last things. The message of these two chapters is that Christians should be watchful in view of Christ’s return as the One who judges and rewards. The prophecies in these chapters have reference to both events in the near future and to events at the end time. The approaching judgement upon Jerusalem and the final judgement day of the whole world at the second coming are intertwined to form one great teaching on the last things. Jerusalem’s approaching catastrophe serves as a type, that is, as an example that illustrates the tribulation at the end time.

Matthew 24:1-3. The occasion. The occasion for this teaching is the two questions of the disciples: “When will the temple be destroyed?” And “what will be the sign of Christ’s coming and of the end of the age?”

Matthew 24:4-14. The beginning of birth pains. All kinds of tribulations, like wars, famines and earthquakes, will accompany the preaching of the gospel to all nations in the world. All this must happen before the end.

Matthew 24:15-28. The Great Tribulation foreshadowed by Jerusalem’s tribulations. Jesus said that the tribulations of Jerusalem would occur when “the abomination that causes desolation” is standing in the holy place. This was fulfilled when the armies of Rome with their soldiers carrying the idol images of their emperor upon their standards stood in the temple and destroyed the temple as well as the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Luke 21:20).

However, Jesus said that the destruction of Jerusalem would not yet be the end of the age. The period of the Great Tribulation will be a time of great distress, unequalled in the whole history of mankind. Genuine Christians should take care that false Messiahs or false prophets do not lead them astray by their false teachings and the performance of miracles.

Matthew 24:29-31. The appearance of Christ. The second coming of Christ will be sudden and completely unexpected. It will be visible everywhere, resembling a flash of lightning seen from horizon to horizon. It will be audible everywhere, due to the loud trumpet call. Christ’s angels will gather his elect (that is, all genuine Christians).

Matthew 24:32-35. The parable of the budding fig tree. When the disciples see the series of events climaxed by the appearance of “the abomination that causes desolation standing in the holy place”, they will know that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is near. But “this generation (this kind of people as the Jewish nation) will certainly not pass away until all these things (between the first and second coming of Christ) have happened.”

Matthew 24:36-44. The necessity of always being watchful and ready. The flood during Noah’s time was sudden and unexpected. The second coming of Christ will likewise be sudden and unexpected. It is completely unpredictable. Nobody knows the day or even the hour! At his return, Christ will definitely not welcome every person into his

everlasting fellowship. The Christians will be snatched away or caught up by angels into the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17) and to marvel at him at his second coming (2 Thessalonians 1:10). But the unbelievers will be left behind (abandoned) (Matthew 24:40-41). They will not have a part in this glorious and joyous welcome of Jesus Christ on the day of his second coming, but later on that same last day the angels will drive them in front of Christ's throne to be judged (doomed) (Matthew 25:31-33).

Matthew 24:45-51. The parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants (Luke 12:41-48). Watchfulness and readiness means faithful and diligent service in God's kingdom.

Matthew 25:1-13. The parable of the ten virgins. To be watchful and prepared every day is required of every Christian, because the time of the second coming of Christ is completely unknown.

Matthew 25:14-30. The parable of the talents. Faithfulness and diligence in using their God-given abilities and opportunities before the second coming of Christ and the final judgement day is required of every Christian.

Matthew 25:31-46. The parable of the sheep and the goats. This describes the final judgement of genuine Christians and non-Christians at the second coming of Christ.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 24:32.

The language of the parable of the budding fig tree is probably rooted in Isaiah 34:4, "All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig tree." The convulsions in the realm of nature (cf. Hebrews 12:26-27) are compared to leaves falling from the fig tree. Jesus had spoken about the momentous events before his second coming as the shaking of the powers of the heavens. This could be symbolised by a fig tree that is shaken by a gale. Now he draws a lesson from a parable about the same tree.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 24:33-35.

In Matthew 23:37 - 24:3, Jesus spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem including its temple. His disciples asked him two questions. The first question of Jesus' disciples was, "When will this happen?" And the second question was, "What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" The Greek word for "and" is "kai" and here has the meaning of "that is to say" (namely) (called: kai explicative). It does not imply a third question, but explains that "the coming of Jesus Christ" will be "the end of the world"! After the second coming of Christ there will not be more events on this present earth¹. The explanation of the parable of the budding fig tree is directly related to these two questions: The first part of the explanation (Matthew 24:33) is related to the first question and the second part of the explanation (Matthew 24:34-35) is related to the second question.

The first question of the disciples is, "When will this happen?" The answer of Jesus² to this question is, "When you see all these things, it is near, at the very gates" (Matthew 24:33). Jesus was speaking to his own disciples. The words "when you (plural, the disciples) see all these things" must therefore refer to the fulfilment of the various predictions Jesus spoke about in the context, in so far as his disciples could be eye-witnesses of these events! Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem including the temple. He predicted that not one stone of the temple buildings would be left on another; every stone would be thrown down. They would see with their own eyes: the rise of false christs (messiahs) and false prophets, wars and rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes, etc. Jesus called all these events "the beginning of birth pangs" (Matthew 24:4-8).

Such events already happened before and in connection with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Even the prediction of "the abomination that causes desolation standing in the holy place" (Matthew 24:15-20), was fulfilled in their own day. It referred to the Roman armies carrying the idol images of their emperor upon their standards, standing in the temple and destroying the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Luke 21:20). Therefore, it is natural to interpret Matthew 24:33 as meaning that when Christ's disciples see all these things happen, they must know that "the fall of Jerusalem and its temple", is very near!

The second question of the disciples is, "What will be the sign of your coming, that is to say (namely), the end of the age?"

The answer of Jesus to this question is, "This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened".

The word "sign" (Greek: sémaion) here refers to an event that takes place in the creation or in history, but which point away from itself to the redemption.³ The disciples asked which events in history point to the second coming of Christ and the final redemption of his people? The disciples had interpreted Jesus' words about the destruction of Jerusalem and in particular the destruction of the temple as meaning "the end of the world". Their opinion was partly mistaken:

¹ As for example the Millennial Kingdom (of dispensationalism)

² Jesus spoke these words in 30 A.D.

³ The signs in the Gospel of John: the changing of water into wine was a sign that Jesus is the Source of eternal life (John 2:11; 4:14). The healing of the sick was a sign that Jesus is the Servant of the LORD (John 6:2; Matthew 8:17). The miraculous feeding of the 5000 was a sign that Jesus is the Bread of life (John 6:14,26). The healing of the man born blind was a sign that Jesus is the Light of the world (John 9:16). The resurrection of Lazarus was a sign that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:47). The walking through closed doors was a sign that Jesus has "the key of David" and that he closes doors that no one can open and opens doors that no one can close" (Revelation 3:7-8) (cf. John 20:30-31).

Jesus said that a lengthy period of time would intervene between the fall of Jerusalem and its temple on the one hand and the end of the age at Christ's second coming on the other hand.

Jesus explained that throughout this long period between his first coming (that included the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple) and his second coming (that will be the end of this present world), Christians would be persecuted and killed, and hated by all nations because of their relationship to Christ. Many false prophets (even from Christianity and from the non-Christian religions and political movements) would arise and deceive many people. Many nominal Christians would fall away from the faith, leave the Church and even betray each other. Wickedness would increase and love would grow cold. But before the end comes, the gospel of the kingdom (that is, the kingship of Jesus Christ) would be preached to every nation in the world (Matthew 24:14)!

It is clear that these events that stretch all the way to the second coming could not have been seen by the small group of disciples of Christ. The words, "when you (the twelve disciples) see all these things" (Matthew 24:33) refer only to things that could be witnessed by the disciples of Jesus Christ. And the words, "until all these things have happened" refer to the things that would happen throughout the centuries until the second coming of Christ! They do not refer to the same things!

Matthew 24:35 points to the end of this present heaven and earth (the creation of Genesis 1). Matthew 24:36 - 25:46 also refers to the events around the second coming of Christ. Therefore, the context shows that the words "all these things" in Matthew 24:34 refer to the things that happen throughout the centuries between the first and second coming of Christ as well as at the second coming itself!

The word "this generation" does not necessarily have to be limited to a group of contemporaries, either in the time of Jesus or in our present twenty-first century! It can refer to a meaning that goes beyond this and means "this kind of people", for example, "the Jews, at any time or in any age" (Deuteronomy 32:5,20; Psalm 12:7; 78:8; Acts 2:40; Philippians 2:15; Hebrews 3:10). Therefore, the word "generation" in Matthew 24:34 can also have this meaning. Jesus declared that the Jewish nation would not pass away until all these things that stretch all the way to the second coming have taken place (Jeremiah 31:36)! Israel, in spite of all its privileges, had rejected and crucified their Messiah. Therefore it might have seemed natural that they would be wiped out as a nation. However, Jesus predicted that the Jews would continue to exist as a nation till the second coming.

Also the apostle Paul predicted that in every age an elect part (the remnant) of the nation Israel would be saved, just as an elect part from the Gentile nations would be saved (Romans 11:1-2,25-26). Although the disciples of Jesus would not see all these things, all these things would certainly take place! Even although the present heaven and earth is going to pass away, the words of Jesus would never pass away (Matthew 24:35)! The words of Jesus are the foundation on which the children of God build their faith!

Conclusion: Matthew 24:33 is Jesus' answer to his disciples' question in Matthew 24:3a. And Matthew 24:34 is his answer to his disciples' question in Matthew 24:3b.

There is a difference in the explanation or application of Matthew and Mark on the one hand and Luke on the other hand. While Matthew and Mark speak of the fall of Jerusalem as a type of the fall of the whole world in the end-time, Luke differentiates between the fall of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-24) and the fall of the world in the end-time (Luke 21:25-28). While in Matthew and Mark the words "the great tribulation" (Matthew 24:21,29; Mark 13:19,24) have a double reference, namely, to what would happen at the fall of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15-20; Mark 13:14-18) and to what would happen just before the second coming of Christ (Matthew 24:21-31; Mark 13:19-27), in Luke they refer only to what would happen at the fall of Jerusalem (Luke 21:23)!

Therefore, in Luke, the sentence "when you see all these things happening" (Luke 21:31) refers only to the events that would happen in connection with the second coming of Jesus as recorded in Luke 21:25-28 and which only people living at that time would be able to see. According to Luke, when all these things happen, Christians living in the end-time will know that "the kingdom of God is near", that is, that the kingdom of God in its final manifestation as the new heaven and new earth is at the point of becoming a reality. Nevertheless, all three Gospels say that "this generation", that is, "the Jewish people as a nation" would not cease to exist until all these things have happened.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Discuss. Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes. This parable is actually an *illustrative comparison* more than a story-illustration in which some details may be irrelevant.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. *A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make.* Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the budding fig tree in Matthew 24:32-35 teaches about “watchfulness in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of the parable is the following. “The prophecies of Christ concerning the things that will happen throughout the period between his first and second coming will certainly happen and should stimulate Christians to be watchful and prepared for the second coming of Jesus Christ!”

Watchfulness is one of the fundamental characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom believe Christ’s prophecies with respect to his second coming and are therefore watchful and prepared for his second coming.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

See lesson 45.

6. Summarise the main teachings of the parable.

See lesson 45.

B. THE WATCHFUL SERVANTS

Read Luke 12:35-40.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

Be ready for service. The original says literally, “Let your loins be girded”. People in general as well as servants wore long flowing garments. When they ran or worked, they tied them up with a belt, so that their clothes would not hinder them (Acts 7:58). Symbolically, this picture means, “To be ready for service”.

Keep your lamps burning. While their master was away attending a wedding service, the servants had no idea when he would return. Wedding feasts could take several days or even a full week (Judges 14:17). In this story, the servants expected him to return some time that night. Therefore, they stayed awake in order to be ready to serve their master when he returned. To keep their lamps burning also pointed to the necessity of being prepared.

The second or third watch of the night. The Jews divided the night into three watches (Judges 7:19). The Romans divided the night into four watches (Matthew 14:25; Mark 13:35). Luke probably followed the Roman division into four watches, because he generally follows the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (Luke 12:38).⁴

The master will wait on his servants. This is very unusual! In ordinary life, a master will not wait on his servants, but servants will always have to wait on their master. By saying, “It will be good for them” twice, the story calls such servants blessed twice (Luke 12:37-38)! Also this statement is remarkable!

The owner of the house and the thief. No house owner would allow a thief to break into his house if he knew a thief was coming. Only house owners, who are not prepared for thieves coming, will not make any preparations.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 12:13-34.

Jesus had told the parable of the rich fool. This was followed by his warning not to worry about the material needs of life, because God the Father cares for his people on earth and has been pleased to give his kingdom to them! Therefore Jesus urged them to use their material possessions to advance God’s kingdom on earth and to concentrate, not on earthly possessions, but on the heavenly treasures. Earthly treasures can be used up until nothing is left, or it can be stolen or destroyed by moth and rust, but the heavenly treasure can never be exhausted, stolen or destroyed! Jesus taught, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21)!

At this point, Jesus told the parable of the watchful servants. This parable is the exact opposite of the parable of the rich fool. The rich fool had set his heart and mind on the perishable treasures of the earth, but the watchful servants had set their hearts and minds on the eternal treasures of heaven!

⁴ The Gospel of Mark was written by Mark, the co-worker of the apostle Peter in Rome (1 Peter 5:13) and was directed to the Romans. Matthew (63-66 A.D.) and Luke (60-61 A.D.) based their Gospels on that of Mark (44-46 A.D.).

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 12:35-38.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 12:39-40.

Verse 39 is a parable in a parable or part of the explanation. Although the house owner does not know when the thief is coming, he must at all times be ready to protect his property. Likewise, the disciples of Jesus must always be ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ will come at a time that nobody⁵ will expect him!

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Discuss. Which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes. Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning.

Let your loins be girded and keep your lamps burning. This detail is relevant, because it points directly to the central point or main message of the parable, namely to be constantly ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The second or third watch of the night. Jesus does not give this detail any particular meaning. Because the wedding would still be going on during the first watch of the night, the servants expected him to return after that, but exactly when, nobody knew. This is relevant in so far that no one on earth knows the time when Jesus Christ will return to this earth to judge all people (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3)!

The master will wait on his servants. This is relevant! Although in ordinary life, a master would never wait on his servants, Jesus Christ not only did this during his first coming on earth (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27; John 13:1-15), but he will also do this during his second coming to earth! In a manner that harmonises with his glory and majesty, Jesus Christ will serve those who have been faithful. He will, for example, complete his work of salvation in every genuine Christian's life by transforming their human spirits to be like his own (1 John 3:2; cf. 2 Peter 1:4) and their lowly bodies to be like his glorious resurrected body (Philippians 3:21). And he will lead them into the new heaven and the new earth, where they will live in his presence for ever (Revelation 21:1-3)!

The owner will prepare for the coming of the thief. This is a relevant detail, because it points directly at the application of this parable.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the watchful servants in Luke 12:35-40 teaches about “watchfulness in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of the parable is the same as that of the parable of the ten virgins. “Christians must be constantly watchful, prepared and ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ.”

Watchfulness and preparedness are two of the fundamental characteristics of God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom will constantly be ready to receive and to serve their Master, Jesus Christ.

⁵ No so-called “prophet” can predict when Jesus Christ would return; no mass media or newspaper or TV can announce his second coming!