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Matthew 24:32 - 24:34



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 24:32-34 and the Olivet Discourse. He clarifies that while the identification of Israel as the fig tree is not established in the Old Testament, the "door" being referred to in the passage is likely the judgment of Jerusalem, rather than the second coming of Christ. Gregg argues that the phrase "that generation will not pass" does not refer to a specific race of people, but rather those alive at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Transcript

We have been studying the Olivet Discourse, which is in Matthew chapter 24. It's probable that if you've been following this teaching for the last couple of weeks, that you have heard some things that were different from what you had been taught, maybe different from what you believe. I hope that you will consider these things and do your own research and see whether or not they jibe with Scripture.

The important thing is not whether they agree with what we've been taught. The important thing is whether they agree with Scripture. We turn now to this same chapter, Matthew 24, and continue our study in verse 32.

Jesus said, Now learn this parable from the fig tree. When its branch has already become tender and it 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 very doors.

Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled. Now, this finally answers the question the disciples asked originally. Although the question is worded a little differently in Matthew's Gospel, both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke, in presenting the same discourse, represent the disciples' question this way.

Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed and not one stone would be left standing on another. Now, having done so, he went on the hillside with his disciples and four of them came to him and said, Lord, when shall these things be and what sign will there be that these things are about to take place? And Jesus answers both questions in

due time. As far as when shall these things be, that is, when will the temple be destroyed, his answer is, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled.

As far as the issue of what sign will there be that these things are about to take place, Jesus said in Luke's version of this discourse in Luke 21, verse 20, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. So is there a sign that these things are about to take place? Yes, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, and they did, and the believers fled from Jerusalem and safely escaped. Now, he is winding this part of the discourse down, and he says, learn this parable from the fig tree.

Now, it's possible that you have heard somewhere or another, some teachers say, that we are living in the last generation, and that the Bible teaches that there will be only one generation that will transpire after Israel in the last days becomes a nation again. Those who say that usually point to the fact that Israel did become a nation again in 1948, on May 14th, when the United Nations granted Israel sovereign nation status. And this was seen by many as the marking out of the beginning of the last generation.

Based on this assumption, there were many before the 80s of this century, who thought that Jesus must return before the end of the 1980s, because they said a generation is perhaps 40 years, and Israel became a nation in 1948, and therefore 40 years from that would be 1988. And their belief was that Jesus would therefore come by 1988. And there were many authors who actually suggested this quite plainly.

They were wrong, of course, and since that time other dates have been set by certain people, but setting dates is clearly not a good idea. But one might ask, where did these people get the impression in the first place, that from the founding of the nation Israel in the last days, there would be only one generation more? Well, they get it from this passage, though I must confess, I think they really understand this passage incorrectly. When Jesus said, now learn this parable of the fig tree, the argument goes like this.

The fig tree in Scripture is a symbol of Israel. Now, many prophecy teachers actually say the fig tree is an established symbol of the nation of Israel in Scripture. That is simply not true.

There is no precedent in the Old Testament for identifying the fig tree as Israel. It is sometimes referred to as a vine or a vineyard. Israel is sometimes referred to as an olive tree, both in the Old and the New Testament.

Jeremiah uses that image and so does Paul. But as far as identifying Israel as a fig tree, you will not find the Old Testament establishing any norms for that identification. It is simply not true.

There is no place in the Old Testament where we can find the fig tree as an established symbol of the nation Israel. But if it were so, some have thought that this would mean that Jesus is referring to the nation Israel when he says, consider this parable of the fig tree. Now, what they say is, when its branch has already become tender and it puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near.

Now, they understand this to mean that when the nation of Israel, long desolate because of being driven out of their land in 70 A.D., when in the last days Israel becomes a nation again, this is like the re-budding of the fig tree. Israel is the fig tree and the putting forth of tender shoots and new leaves and so forth, as the fig tree does in the springtime. That this is a picture of the nation Israel revitalizing, coming back into its own identity and so forth at the end of time.

And, of course, they identify 1948 as that time because Israel became a nation again then. And then they go on to say that when Jesus said, this generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled, they understand Jesus to mean that the generation that sees Israel become a nation again or that sees the budding of the fig tree, that generation will not pass until the second coming of Christ occurs. Now, if you have followed our exposition of this chapter over the past couple of weeks on our program here, then you know that I do not believe that the second coming of Christ is even spoken of here.

That the passage up to this point that we have studied is actually an answer to the disciples' question about when Jerusalem would be destroyed and it came to pass, everything in this chapter up to this point has come to pass before 70 AD. And, therefore, there is not even a reference here to the second coming of Christ. But there are a different set of assumptions that many bring to this passage.

They assume that everything in this chapter that we have studied so far is about the last days and that verses 29 through 31 in particular talk about the second coming of Christ. And, therefore, they argue that this fig tree illustration must apply to the second coming of Christ. There are many reasons to doubt this, most of which I have given in the course of our earlier exposition.

But there is even another one given in this very passage. You see, he said, so also when you see all these things, this is verse 33, know that it, that is the thing that Jesus predicted, is near at the very doors. Now, that expression is picked up by James in his book, in James chapter 5 and verse 9. James said this, do not grumble against one another brethren, lest you be condemned.

Behold, the judge is standing at the door. Now, it is interesting, where did James get this imagery of the judge coming in judgment and standing at the door? Well, he got it from Jesus in this very discourse. Jesus said, when you see these things begin to come to pass, know that it, by the way, some manuscripts say, know that he is near even at the

door.

Well, James, who wrote his book before 70 A.D., recognized that the judgment of Jerusalem was coming soon. He saw these things beginning to come to pass. And therefore, taking his cue from what Jesus said, when you see these things begin to come to pass, you know that he is at the door.

James said, hey, the judge is at the door. And therefore, James understood that the thing that Jesus was predicting here was not the second coming of Christ, but the judgment of Jerusalem. By the way, James lived in Jerusalem and he died in Jerusalem shortly before 70 A.D. And therefore, before he died, he predicted that the judgment of that city was at the door.

The judge was standing nearby, ready to pounce. And this he got from the Olivet Discourse, which we're studying. So here we have a New Testament writer making application of this passage in Matthew 24 and applying it not to the end of the world, not to the second coming of Christ, but to the imminent judgment that came on Jerusalem in 70 A.D. And that would agree with the approach we've been taking all along.

Now, let's talk about this a bit. What about this business of the parable of the fig tree being about Israel in the last days? Well, as I said earlier, there is no case in the Old Testament that you could point to that establishes some precedent for Israel to be regarded as a fig tree or for a fig tree to be a symbol of Israel. This is mere speculation, 100 percent.

Now, it's not really very honest, it seems to me, for Bible teachers to tell you that the fig tree is an established symbol of Israel when it isn't. Although, lest we think these are dishonest men, we have to assume that these, like many Christians, are passing along something they heard from somebody else who got it from somebody that they heard, who got it from someone they heard, and none of these people have cared to do the homework to find out if it's true. The fact is, as soon as one does that homework, they find there is no such thing in the Old Testament as the Old Testament using a fig tree as an image of Israel.

It just doesn't happen there. And therefore, there's no reason to think that Jesus is speaking about Israel on this occasion. In fact, there's a very good reason to believe he is not, because in Luke's parallel to this, in Luke 21, you'll find that in verses 29 through 31, we have the same passage, only in Luke's version, and where Jesus here in Matthew is recorded as saying, now learn this parable from the fig tree.

In Luke's parallel, Jesus says, look at the fig tree and all the trees, how that when their branches are putting forth new shoots, you know summer is near. In other words, Jesus is not making reference to the fig tree as some cryptic allusion to the nation of Israel. He's just talking about trees in general.

He's probably standing next to a fig tree when he was speaking and said, consider this fig tree here. It was springtime even as he spoke, by the way. It was near Passover, and there was probably some new shoots on it.

He probably motioned to a tree nearby and said, look at this fig tree, and for that matter, all the trees. You see these new shoots here appearing on their branches? That means that summer is not far behind, and you know how to recognize that. And he says, so also, when you see these other things that I've been describing beginning to come to pass, know that it, or he, is at the door, is near, even at the door.

So the disciples again said, well, how do we know, what sign is there that these things are about to come to pass? He says, well, when you see these things I've been talking about come to pass, you know it's near. It's at the door. Now, all the way through this discourse, Jesus has been talking to four men.

According to Mark chapter 13, the four men that came to Jesus privately with their question were James and John and Peter and Peter's brother Andrew. These men came privately to Jesus with their question, and this discourse was given to them privately. So when Jesus says, when you see this and when you see that, we should remember that he's talking to some actual people.

He's not writing to us. He didn't even write this down. He just spoke it orally to these disciples.

And in verse 23, he said, then if anyone says to you, in verse 15, he says, when you see the abomination of desolation. When in verse 25, he says, I've told you beforehand. Verse 26, he says, therefore, when they say to you, look, he is in the desert.

And now in verse 33, he says, so you also, when you see all these things. He's not talking to 20th century believers or 21st century believers. He's talking to four men who were his contemporaries.

And he says, you will see this. And when you see it, don't react this way, but react that way. People will say this to you.

When you see this, know that this is coming soon. Certainly, James understood it that way and recognized that he did live to see the time of which Jesus spoke when he said, it is at the doors. It's at the very doors.

And, of course, it did come, although James did not live to see it because James was killed shortly before 70 A.D., according to the writings of Josephus and Eusebius. Now, what we mean by this is Jesus is not talking about the end times. He's not talking about the second coming of Christ.

He's not talking about Israel as the fig tree. All he is saying is, look, there are ways that

you know certain things are coming before they arrive, like summer, for example. If you wonder if summer is near, you'll look around and see, oh, there's some new leaves here, some new shoots on these trees.

I guess summer is not far behind. Right. Smart.

Now, realize that you will know when this destruction of Jerusalem is near as well because you will see these new shoots, these leaves, these evidences that I've been telling you about, appearing. And know that it is near when that happens, even at the doors. So, Jesus is not using the fig tree as an image of Israel.

He is not even predicting that Israel will become a nation again. As a matter of fact, he doesn't make any predictions about Israel in the last days, nor does Paul, nor does any other New Testament writer. Israel is not, simply is not spoken of as a last days phenomenon in the New Testament.

And I realize some people may think Romans 11 is an exception. However, if one wishes to know what I think about that, you can either wait till we get to Romans in this study, order my tapes on the subject, or call my live program and ask me what I think about Romans 11. Anyway, the point here is that this has nothing to do with predicting when the last generation will begin.

Now, by the way, this statement about the generation, Jesus said, Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled. What generation is Jesus referring to? Now, of course, as I said, the popular teaching is that he's referring to a future generation, a generation that would come up 2,000 years after his own time, a generation that would live in the last days, that would see the nation Israel become a nation again. However, if Jesus was talking about that, then we might think Jesus would say, That generation will not pass before all these things are fulfilled.

You see, some people think, well, once Israel becomes a nation, that that generation would not pass. Well, Jesus didn't say that generation will not pass. He said this generation will not pass.

In fact, Jesus makes many comments about what he calls this generation in his teachings. And Matthew contains at least five or six references to what Jesus said about his generation. Now, a lot of people think that the word generation here means race.

This race will not pass away. Now, it's not at all clear. I mean, if it did mean that, it's not clear which race he has in mind.

There are some who would say the Jewish race will not pass away before these things are fulfilled. In others, it would not be saying anything about timing. It would simply say the Jewish race, this generation.

And they understand the word genea in the Greek to mean a race of people, a family. But then, of course, he'd say nothing about timing. He'd just be saying that the race of the Jews, if that's which race he's talking about, would continue to exist until the end of these things.

Some have felt that the race he has in mind is the race of Christians. That is where a holy generation, a special chosen generation, Peter said. And that would be like a chosen race, it would seem.

Now, if that is true, then he's either saying that the Christians or the Jews, one or the other, will not pass away before all these things are fulfilled. However, in saying that, he's not really communicating anything the disciples were asking about. The disciples asked, when will these things be? And to simply say the Jewish race or the race of Christians won't pass away until it's all done wouldn't answer that question in any way.

However, if he said this generation will not pass, which is what he did say, and if by that he meant you people and your contemporaries, your generation, will be not yet expired when these things all take place, then he is telling them what they need to know. I would encourage you to look at all the places in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus speaks of this generation. For example, in Matthew 11, verses 16-19, Jesus says, To what shall I liken this generation? They're like children playing in the marketplace, saying, We piped for you and you didn't dance, we played a dirge for you and you didn't mourn.

And Jesus said, Because John the Baptist came neither eating or drinking, and you say he is a demon, and the Son of Man comes and he eats and drinks, and you say he's a wine-bibber and a glutton and a friend of sinners. Now, what's interesting here is that Jesus says, To what shall I liken this generation? And he likens them to these children. Why? Because they've heard John the Baptist and they've heard Jesus and they haven't accepted either of them, even though they're very different from each other.

They've appealed to him in both ways, but they have not accepted him. But notice he's talking about the generation that saw John the Baptist and that saw Jesus. That's what he means by this generation.

Likewise, in Matthew 12, verses 54-56, Jesus talks about this generation. He says, The Queen of Sheba will rise up in judgment against this generation, because she came from a long distance to hear Solomon's wisdom, but lo, one greater than Solomon is here. In other words, Jesus is here.

The generation that heard Jesus had a privilege beyond that of the Queen of Sheba. However, she responded to the privilege she had and went to hear the wisdom of Solomon, but Jesus' own generation did not bother to listen to him. That's what he's saying.

This generation, in that passage, means the generation that heard Jesus preach, his own generation. In fact, you can do your own study on this. You'll find that whenever Jesus speaks about this generation, he's not talking about a race of people.

He's talking about the people of his day, his own generation. Likewise, there's no reason to doubt that that's what he means in this place. When he says, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled.

Now, some people might say, well, he can't mean that, because he has earlier spoken of the Son of Man coming with clouds of heaven and power and great glory. That didn't happen in that generation, did it? Well, I would remind you of a passage we've looked at a few times already, but you may not have been with us. It may help you to notice.

In Matthew chapter 16 and verse 28, Jesus said, Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Now, what's the difference between Jesus saying there are some of you standing here who will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, on the one hand, or saying they will see the Son of Man coming with the clouds and this generation will not pass before these things happen. Is it not equivalent to say some of you standing here will not taste death to saying this generation will not pass? Those two different ways of saying the same thing.

And in both places, what is said to take place within that time frame is they will see the Son of Man coming. So, obviously, he was not talking about the second coming. That's important to recognize.

But he was talking about something that would happen in that generation before some of them had died. And therefore, to understand this statement, this generation shall not pass, any other way than to apply it to his own generation is to ignore the fact that he's already said this same thing about his own generation earlier. And it simply is something that many people don't deal with very honestly or very consistently.

And so we see that we have a very different understanding of this discourse than what some would teach. Jesus is not teaching that Israel would become a nation in the last days. He is not teaching that those who see that would be the final generation.

He's not even talking about the last days as we usually think of that term. He is talking about the days he was living in, the people of his time. When Jesus said something about people needing to discern the signs of the times, he was talking to the Pharisees about not being able to discern the times they were living in.

Jesus lived at a pivotal age, and it was a pivotal generation. It was the generation that saw the fulfillment of what the prophets predicted, both in the coming of the Messiah and the establishing of his kingdom on the one hand, and also in the destruction of the

old order which the prophets predicted, which happened in 70 A.D. with the destruction of Jerusalem. And therefore, Jesus has answered the disciples' question exactly as they asked it.

And everything he's said thus far applies to the destruction in 70 A.D. Now there's more to this discourse, and in my judgment, he goes on to talk about something else, namely the end of the world. When he says heaven and earth will pass away, but then he tells about that as a separate subject, and we'll have to look at that next time when we get together again for our broadcast tomorrow. Thank you for joining us.