

May 1, 2005 by Steve Brandon



Lessons to Learn for the Second Coming

Matthew 24:32-44

1. Learn from the Fig Tree (verses 32-34).
2. Learn from Jesus (verses 35-36).
3. Learn from Noah (verses 37-41).

Suppose you received a phone call from someone you didn't know who told you, "Hello! You don't know me, but I know you. I've been watching you. I have seen you come and go. Sometimes I have followed you to know where you are going. I know all about your family. I know all about your house. There are some things in your house that I want to have. I am going to come and take them from you. This isn't a joke. These aren't empty words. I'm coming to get those things from your house!" What would you do? I believe that you would take some precautions to prepare for that day. Perhaps you would do some of the following:

- notify the police and ask for protection.
- install a home security system.
- purchase a dog.
- purchase two dogs.
- put up some security lights.
- start a neighborhood watch program.
- install bars on your windows.
- purchase another, bigger dog.
- put up warning signs that say, "beware of dog."
- install better locks on your doors.
- purchase a gun, which you would keep by your bed.
- ask you neighbors to keep watch when you went away for any length of time.
- arrange for a house-sitter in your absence.

You may well do many of these things to prevent your house from being broken into. The phone call of warning that you received changed everything.

In our text today, we hear Jesus applying this very illustration to prepare His disciples for the second coming. Jesus said, ...

Matthew 24:42-43

Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

Jesus has given you a phone call. He has said, "You may not know me. I certainly know you! I've watched you come and go. I know all about you and your family! I'm returning again. You don't know when. But it's soon. It is certain. When I come, it will be sudden. This is no joke. You will have to deal with Me someday!" How will you respond? Before Jesus gave us these words, He first taught some lessons, which we need to learn.

1. Learn from the Fig Tree (verses 32-34)

Jesus said, ...

Matthew 24:32-34

"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; even 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."

The parable is really quite simple. Jesus is simply talking about the change in season, using the fig tree as an example. During the days of Jesus, the fig tree was a very common tree in Israel, much as it is today. In those regions of the world, fig trees put forth their fruit for nine months of the year. They are dormant during a few winter months, but coming out in blossoms during the early spring. It was one of the first plants to put forth its buds. When it does, you know full well that summer is near. In our climate, you might well say, "When you see the snow melt, you know that summer is near. Or, when the tulips come up, you know that summer is near. Or, when you need to mow your lawn for

the first time, you know that summer is near."

This is the extent of the illustration. The explanation comes in verse 33, "Even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door." Just as you can look upon the change in seasons and can tell when summer is near, so also can you look upon the situation in the world and realize when the Lord is near. It's that simple. Some have tried to say that the fig tree in this parable represents Israel. So that the budding of the nation of Israel in the last fifty years represents the coming of the end of the age. I believe that such an interpretation goes far beyond the intentions of Jesus, who was simply talking about the change in seasons. "You are able to discern the change in seasons. You ought to be able to discern a thing or two regarding the season in which the Lord will return."

The illustration is easy. The explanation is easy, but its application is difficult. What exactly are the changes that Jesus is referring to? Jesus said that when you look at "these things," you should be able to know that the time is near. What are these things?

Jesus has spent much of His discourse describing the things that will take place before He comes. In verse 5 (of this chapter), Jesus said that many deceivers will come and mislead many people, claiming to be the Christ. In verses 6-7, Jesus said that there would be wars -- kingdom against kingdom and nation against nation. In the last half of verse 7, Jesus said that there would be disasters, like earthquakes and famines. (But this is just the beginning -- as verse 8 says). In verse 9, He said that His followers would face persecution, ... some even to the point of death. In verse 10, there would be defection from the faith before He came. Verse 11 reiterates how false prophets would arise and seduce many to follow after them. Verse 12 speaks about the many who will grow cold to the things of God. Verse 14 describes the continues proliferation of the gospel message throughout the world. Verse 15 talks about the abomination of desolation that would come, just as Daniel has prophesied! Upon witnessing that event, those in Judea are to flee and get out of town. Jesus would identify a time in verse 21 of "great tribulation" that would come. In verses 23-24, Jesus would warn of the additional false Christs that would arise.

These are the things that must take place **before** Jesus comes! In verse 25 Jesus made this clear, "Behold, I have told you in advance." These are the things that Jesus would equate to the branch becoming tender, and the leaves coming forth. These things are preliminary to the second coming. So, when you see all of "these things" take place, then you ought to learn that "He is near, right at the door" (verse 33). When you see all of "these things" take place, then you ought to know that His coming is soon to come upon us. You ought to know that Jesus will soon come as the lightening that flashes across the sky (verse 27). You ought to know that the day will soon come when the sun and moon will be darkened and the stars fall from the sky (verse 29). You ought to know that the sign of the Son of Man will soon appear in the sky (verse 30). You ought to know that the angels will soon be sent forth to gather together His elect (verse 31).

Have "these things" taken place. Has the branch of the fig tree become tender? Has the fig tree begun to put forth its leaves? If they have, then summer is near! I believe that "these things" that Jesus described have taken place. I stand on the authority of verse 34 to say that they have taken place. Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

Many people stumble at verse 34, because they think that "these things" refers to everything that Jesus spoke about (from verse 4 through verse 31). But, I don't think that Jesus is speaking about everything in these verses when he speaks about "these things." The illustration that Jesus uses in verse 33 connects the "these things" with all of the indications leading up to the coming of summer (i.e. the tender branches and the coming forth of the leaves ...). In verse 33, Jesus doesn't talk about the actual coming of summer as referring to "these things." Rather, he is talking about the events that indicate that the coming of summer is near. And so, likewise, I believe that in verse 34, Jesus is referring to everything that is leading up to, but not including, the coming of the Son of Man. In other words, I believe that Jesus was referring to verses 4-26 when He spoke about "these things." He is talking about the things that were leading up to His coming.

And I believe that they have all been fulfilled! Over the past few weeks, I have taken much time to attempt to demonstrate to you how these things have taken place. In fact, the thrust of much of what I have said is that many of these things have continued to take place since the day of Jesus. Since the days of Jesus, ...

- ... there have always been deceivers (verses 4-5, 11).
- ... there have always been wars (verses 6-7a).
- ... there have always been disasters -- famines and earthquakes (verse 7b).
- ... there have always been persecutions (verse 9).
- ... there have always been defections (verses 10, 12-13).
- ... the gospel has continued to spread (verse 14).
- ... the abomination of desolation took place when the temple was defiled by the Romans (verse 15).
- ... great tribulation took place when Jerusalem was sacked (verse 21).
- ... false Christs and false prophets have always been around (verses 23-24).

"These things" took place in the days just after Jesus. Jesus said that they would, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (verse 34). They did. Many of "these things" have continued to take place since the generation who was alive in the days of Jesus. Since the ascension of Jesus (as recorded in Acts 1), I believe that the days have been primed for Jesus to return again.

The lesson of the fig tree is this: "know that summer is near!" The lesson for us today is this: "know that the Lord is near!" This is the language of the New Testament writers. In Philippians 4:5, Paul wrote, "Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near!" Peter wrote, "The end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7). James said, "Be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ... behold, the Judge is standing right at the door" (James 5:8-9).

James uses almost the exact same terminology as did his divine brother. Jesus said, "the Lord is near, right at the door" (verse 33). We need to learn this lesson. When we think of the coming of Jesus, we ought not to think that it is a long way off. We ought to think of the coming of Jesus as soon and near.

From the fig tree, learn that the coming of Jesus is soon!

1. Learn from Jesus (verses 35-36)

Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

These are two very curious verses, which happen to be placed side by side. On the one hand, you see Jesus being very certain of these things. And yet, on the other hand, you see Jesus being a bit uncertain of these things. Verse 35 indicates a certainty in the words of Jesus. He said them, and they will be accomplished! There is no doubt in the mind of Jesus that everything that Jesus spoke will indeed come true. And that His words will endure throughout all time. On the other hand, verse 36 indicates an uncertainty in the words of Jesus. He is uncertain regarding the timing of these things. He said that He didn't know when they would take place. He said that the angels didn't even know these things. From these two verses, I want to pull out two lessons for us to learn. One lesson from each verse.

From verse 35, we are to learn that these things are certain. Admittedly, one of the things about the words of Jesus in this chapter is that they are difficult to believe. I think especially regarding the parable of the fig tree. Jesus said that when you see these things happen, you know that His coming is near. You know that His return is soon! And yet, it has been some two thousand years! This very observation has led many to renounce the faith. Bertrand Russell once wrote a little pamphlet entitled, "Why I Am Not a Christian." ¹ It was originally a lecture that was transcribed and slightly edited to make it acceptable for print form. In this lecture, he made many points against Christianity. One of points was that he saw "Defects in Christ's Teaching." The main defect that he pointed out was that Jesus was mistaken about His own return. Russell said, "he certainly thought that His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time. ... In that respect, clearly He was not so wise as some other people have been, and He was certainly not superlatively wise." Thus, Russell refused to believe in Jesus.

I feel the tension that Russell expressed in His writings. You read the words of Jesus. You see the things that have happened in the first century. And you easily think that Jesus was coming back in the first century. But two thousand years have elapsed and He still hasn't come back.

Peter anticipated this very objection to Christianity in 2 Peter. He wrote, ...

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."

It is almost as if Peter was addressing Bertrand Russell's complaint! "Where is the promise of His coming?" they say. Where is it? He said that the Son of Man was "right at the door." Why hasn't He opened the door? Surely He was wrong. He's not coming back. The whole thing is a sham!

Peter went on to say that it wasn't a sham. He said that everything hasn't been the same from the beginning. It was once destroyed with a flood! "But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Pet. 3:7). It was by the word of God that created the world (2 Pet. 3:5). It was by the word of God that flooded the world (2 Pet. 3:6). It is by the word of God that the present world is being kept as it is (2 Pet. 3:7). It will be by the word of God that the present world will be destroyed someday by fire (2 Pet. 3:7).

This is exactly what Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). He is coming back! This is certain! So, how do you deal with the long delay? **Our concept of soon isn't God's concept of soon.** In 2 Peter 3, Peter continued His writing, "Do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). When we think of "soon," we think that it will be the next thing that we do. In some circumstances, "soon," could be next week, or possibly next month. But certainly in our minds, "soon" doesn't mean two thousand years!

That is where God is different than we are. For us, eternity is 70 years! And so, soon is this year, this month, tomorrow, or even right now! But, for God, eternity is eternity! And so, for Him, soon can be ten thousand years. All eternity will make any delay (however long it is) seem as if it were but a day. "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8).

So, how long has the Lord delayed in coming? Two days!

The days of delay have a purpose! They are for repentance! "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). The return of Jesus has been delayed to give opportunity for repentance. This is so kind and so gracious of Him. The teacher that pushed back the deadline is kind and gracious. The business man that allows the shipping date to slip without penalty is kind and gracious. The judge that delays the trial to give the defense more time to gather the evidence is kind and gracious. And, the Sovereign One of the universe who delays His coming is kind and gracious. It's the "kindness and forbearance and patience ... of God [that] leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

Any delay in His coming is an expression of His kindness toward the unrepentant. As the Lord has chosen not to judge the world with finality for two thousand years is a declaration to all of His great kindness. It's another day given for them to repent! Perhaps the Lord is being kind to you! Perhaps today is a day when you need to repent of your sin and bow to the Savior!

Jesus is coming back. Of this, there is no doubt. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). He will return, because He said that He would return. From verse 35 we need to learn that these things are certain. But, from verse 36 we need to

learn that the time of these things is unknowable. Jesus said, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (verse 36). The exact day in which Jesus will return to earth is unknown.

There is no problem here to believing in the deity of Christ. His ignorance at this point was wrapped up in the mysteries of the incarnation. When God became a man, certain limitations must have been placed upon Him. Jesus wasn't omni-present. He was located in one place. Jesus wasn't Spirit (1 John 4:24). He had a body. Jesus wasn't immortal. Like every other man, He was capable of dying. Jesus was tempted in the flesh (Matt. 4:1-11; James 1:13). And, as this verse shows, Jesus wasn't omniscient. He didn't know all things.

Jesus didn't know the day of His return. Nor do any of the angels in heaven right now know the day of His return. Nor do any of the saints in heaven right now know the day of His return. God, the Father, alone knows the day of the return of the Son of Man. That Jesus will return someday is certain (verse 35). When Jesus will return is uncertain! (verses 36).

It's not that it is impossible to know. It's not that it is extremely difficult to know. It's that God the Father, has chosen to keep the day a secret, until He comes. I can think of many human parallels. Parents may be planning some special surprise for their children. They simply don't let them know about it. It's not that they couldn't know or understand. But, the parents don't want them to know. Or, a teacher tells his class that something special is being planned for the end of the year. However, the teacher wants it to be a surprise. It's not that the student's are incapable of such knowledge. The teacher simply wants it to be a surprise!

Such is the situation with the return of the Son of Man. Jesus knew that He would return. He simply didn't know when it would be. He knew of some of the indicators (verses 4-26) before the end. But, He didn't know the exact time of His return.

Here is where it comes down to apply for us. If God, the Father, has chosen to keep this knowledge hidden from His only begotten Son, we ought to be content in not knowing as well. We ought not to be like the child, who badgers his parents, begging to know when the surprise will be. We ought not to be like the student, who constantly asks the teacher about the end of the year special event. We ought not to be like Delilah, who constantly bothered Samson in trying to figure out what exactly was the source of His strength.

If God has chosen to keep such knowledge hidden from us, we ought to be well-content that it is for our good. If people would learn this fact alone, there would be far fewer eschatological preachers leading others astray. But there is something in us that always wants to know. The teachers of prophecy often seek to satisfy this itch to know when Jesus will return. Often, they will attempt to show us through the current events of the day how the return of Christ is near. They say that we ought to expect it soon, because everything is lining up! But Jesus has already told us this same thing! We are to learn from the fig tree. Jesus is coming soon.

Exactly when Jesus will return has not been revealed. God has revealed to us exactly what we are to know, nothing more and nothing less. The exact time when He returns is not part of the program. So don't seek for it. Certainly don't follow anyone who claims to know when the Lord is coming back. Such people come around.

Every person who has ever set a date for the return of Christ has always been wrong! In fact, you must realize that if anyone sets a day for the return of Christ, you can most certainly be assured that He will not return on that day. For, should He do so, it would prove that one person knew the day or the hour.

From the fig tree, learn that the coming of Jesus is soon! From Jesus, learn that the return of Christ is certain!

3. Learn from Noah (verses 37-41).

Jesus said, ...

Matthew 24:37-41

"For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.

Jesus goes back into the very first book of the Bible to illustrate His coming. He told the story of Noah. I trust that you remember that Noah was a man who lived on the face of the earth when the corruption of men had spread far and deep. When the LORD looked down upon the sons of men, He "saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of the heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). "The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth" (Gen. 6:6) and resolved to destroy the entire earth (Gen. 6:7). For some reason (and we don't know that reason), "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (Gen. 6:8). And so, the LORD came to Noah and told him that He was about to destroy the whole earth with a flood. But, Noah was to build an ark, that would preserve his family and a bunch of animals alive (Gen. 6:13-22).

Putting all of the Biblical evidence together, the best we can figure is that it took Noah some 120 years to build this ark (Gen. 6:3). There weren't any power tools around to help build it. There weren't any Lowes or Home Depots around from which to purchase the needed building material. It all had to be done by hand with manual tools. While he was building, he was certainly preaching. Peter identifies Noah as a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). I can only envision the attention that Noah would have received as he was building such an unusual object. Such a spectacle would have given Noah many opportunities to speak to others of the displeasure of God with their sin, and their need to turn from their sin to serve the living God. Yet, none turned from their wicked ways. The LORD told Noah that "you alone I have seen to be righteous before Me" (Gen. 7:1).

While Noah was building his ark, life was going on just as normal. Jesus said that before the flood, "they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage" (Matt. 24:38). Jesus describes typical life. None of the things mentioned by Jesus were particularly sinful. Their sin was to ignore the words of Noah. They simply describe the regularities of life. Eating and drinking sustain our bodies. Marrying and giving in marriage propagate the human race, ... "until the day that Noah entered the ark."

The floodgates of heaven were opened and it began to rain (Gen. 7:13). For forty days and forty nights it rained! Those eight people who were in the ark were the only ones saved from the flood. Those who weren't in the ark all perished. The point of the story is clear. They didn't understand that a flood was coming (Matt. 24:39). They made no preparations for that day. They heard the warnings from the mouth of Noah, but they certainly didn't believe that the flood was coming. Jesus said (verse 39), "so shall the coming of the Son of Man be."

I believe the point of Jesus here is how sudden His return will be! Life was going on as normal. Though the warning was sounded, the people had ignored it. The day came quickly when the LORD destroyed the world with a flood. When Jesus returns to this earth, it will be just as sudden. In verses 40 and 41, Jesus pictures life as normal. Men will be out working out in the field. Women will be grinding grain at the mill. But when Jesus returns, one will be saved and the other will be destroyed, "Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left" (Matt. 24:40-41).

Regarding these verses, there is a bit of discussion as to whether the one "taken" will be "taken in judgment" or whether that one will be "taken to safety." I can make a good argument either way. But it doesn't matter and such discussions obscure the point. The point is that people will be going on with their daily lives when the Son of Man returns to this earth. The lightning will flash across the sky. All will look up and recognize that Jesus has returned. There will be a division among the sons of men. Some will be taken away by the angels to be with God. Others will be destroyed!

When the Lord comes back, there isn't going to be any time to repent. The game will be over. It will all be decided! You will be with God or you will be on the path to destruction! Those in Noah's day drowned. Those in the future will burn.

From the fig tree, learn that the coming of Jesus is soon! From Jesus, learn that the return of Christ is certain! From Noah, learn that the return of Christ will be sudden. All of these lessons are different variations of the same point: **be ready**, which is where we began this morning. Jesus said, "you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will" (verse 44).

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 1, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] This essay is all over the internet. You can find it easily by searching for "Why I Am Not a Christian Bertrand Russell" on any search engine.