

Certainty and the Fig Tree, Part 1

Luke 21:29-33

Well, we have come to this final section, actually, of the Olivet Discourse this morning. It's toward the end of Luke 21. So you can turn there in your Bibles to Luke 21 and find your way to verse 29. In this section, the whole section is verses 29 to 36. But in this first section, Luke 21:29 to 33, Jesus is kind of rounding out his teaching on the end times. He's kind of circling back here to the questions that his disciples asked from the very start, and he's going to answer from their questions

He's going to answer "the when" question and secure the assurance of their hearts in the certainty of truth about the timing of the end. And then having done that, having assured them in certainty about the truth, Jesus wants to give them, in verses 34 to 36, a sense of urgency. The certainty leads to a sense of urgency about how they must live. There's a general understanding about the timing of his return that can be known, that he tells about. But as we find out from Matthew 24:36, no one knows the day or the hour.

So there's a general understanding of the timing, but the specifics, the exact time, no one knows; not any man, woman, no one on the Internet, by the way, and no Angel in heaven, not even the Son of Man in his humanity knows the day or the hour, only the father. So the general timing is known. No one knows the day or the hour. And that remains in the doctrine of imminency of Christ's return, which instills a sense of urgency every single day that we live about how we must live as Christians before God. So see if you can hear those two notes in this final section of the Olivet Discourse, the note of certainty about what Jesus has said and taught, what he's told these disciples, and then also the note of urgency about how they must live, and by extension, how we must live.

Let's start reading Luke 21, starting in verse 29. "Then he told them a parable," the then, refers back to what he just told them about the signs in the sun, moon, stars, the powers of the heavens shaken; all these signs, and then the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud with power and great glory. And after that, "then he told them a parable: 'Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, and you see it for yourselves, know that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.

"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away. But be on guard so that your hearts will not be overcome with dissipation, and drunkenness, and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will," come upon on all "come upon all those who inhabit the face of all the earth.

"But keep on the alert at all times, praying earnestly that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." And thus ends Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse. So much to consider in this section, isn't there? As we enter into this final section of the Olivet Discourse, it's really important for us, as a people living 2000 years later, Gentiles in a Gentile, predominantly Gentile church.

It's very important that we come to this text with the right mindset so that we're ready to see, and to learn, and to reflect on all that's here; it's so vital, so important. So let me ask a question as we begin. Do we really trust in the certainty of what Jesus is saying as he teaches about the end? Do we really believe him? It's hard to tell sometimes when we see how so many Christians live their lives. Not a lot of

urgency, not a lot of intentionality in how they speak, and what they do, how they act, the priorities that they said in their lives.

Think about this, just to make an analogy. Consider how many Christians share the gospel with people and you've heard different, and I'm going to say it this way, versions of the gospel. There's only really one version of the gospel; it's what the Bible teaches. But when you hear different people talk about the gospel, you would get the impression that they're different versions of it. There's the lighter version and there's a really heavy version. There's the fire and brimstone, and then there's the God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

If our gospel pitches something like God loves you unconditionally and has a wonderful plan for your life, what is it that prevents a sinner from responding something like this? Yes, I appreciate God's unconditional love. In fact, it's a good example that I try to follow in my own wonderful plan for my own life and I look forward to seeing God in heaven one day after I've lived my most wonderful life.

Many of us have come to understand that that is an insufficient gospel; it's sub-Christian. It is not faithful to what the Scripture teaches. We've come to understand that the

doctrine of hell really matters, that the punishment of eternal conscious torment for breaking God's law, for rejecting his gospel, for refusing to repent and to believe, for refusing to follow and obey the Lord Jesus Christ, for refusing to love God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. There is judgement waiting for those who refuse Christ, for those who refuse to line up under God's law. This is a vital aspect of the gospel that we must share with sinners. If we love God and we love people, we got to tell the truth, don't we?

We mentioned our doctor friend. What kind of a doctor would he be if he could see not just the symptoms, but could understand the causes leading to the symptoms and refused to talk about that with his patients because he didn't want to make them feel uncomfortable? So he medicates them, takes away the pain, and sends them on their way and they die a week later. That would be malpractice. As Christians, when we share the gospel, we cannot be guilty of malpractice.

As we think about analogy to what we've been preaching in this text in the Olivet Discourse, if hell is real, if we are certain about that element, doctrinal truth, then why are we not more intentional in rescuing sinners? If we know hell is hot and judgement is coming, why are we not more urgent and insistent in

our witness? Why is it not the daily preoccupation of our minds to tell others, to rescue them from their sins? And I hope you see the connection here to eschatology.

It's very clear, the Son of Man, the one who is coming, God has given all judgement to the Son, John 5:22. And in John 5:27, a few verses later, God gave him authority to execute judgement because he is the Son of Man. This is the one we're waiting for. This is the one we're praying will come, who will do justice on the earth. Jesus, the Son of Man, he tells these men, his disciples, these disciples who represent all believers, he tells them in Luke 21:34, "Be on guard so that your hearts will not be overcome with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life."

He tells them in verse 36, "Keep on the alert at all times, praying earnestly that you," not that those ungodly people, but "you may have strength to escape these things, and that you," not all those irreligious people, not the secularists, "but that you may have strength to stand before the Son of Man." He's warning them. He's warning believers, and he's warning believers, because it must be, as he sees it, that dissipation, which is another word for self-indulgence, that drunkenness which is representative, really, of coming under the

influence of other things that distract you, and take you away, and dull the mind, and then the worries and anxieties of daily living. All these things are threats to believers and believers who know the truth.

Do we really believe him in this? Is our faith manifest in the urgency of how we live? Consider these disciples, Jesus' closest men, they were men like you and I. Some of these men were married to women, who are much like you women who are here today. Women joined in and travelled around, at times, with the disciples and Jesus, as we read in Luke 8. Unlike you and me, these men, along with a few important women who travelled with them, they had followed Jesus around for three years.

Jesus, I understand that many of you have followed Jesus for decades, but it's different here, isn't it? Jesus was physically present with them. He shared meals, camping spots, time around the fire. They talked about everything. They attended to personal matters, they walked together, they talked and had conversations that went to depths that you and I rarely come to, if ever, in our lifetime. More than that, all these men and some of the women, they all heard Jesus' teaching to the crowds. They had the privilege of intimate access, almost daily

opportunity, to follow up with him about things he had taught in public. They could follow up in private.

They watched as Jesus performed powerful miracles, healing people, restoring, giving sight to blind eyes, letting paralytics walk again, raising the dead. He casts out demons with a word. He commanded nature itself. He produced food on command. So, yeah, they were men and women like you and me, but they enjoyed a level of access to our lord that was quite unique, wasn't it? And very intimate.

This captivated them, held their full attention. And so when he told them in Luke 21:6, Do you see all these great buildings, the days will come when they will not be here, left one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down. And in other words, he's saying, listen, folks, your stable world, the jobs that you have relied on, the families you've supported and enjoyed and taken vacations with, the reality that you've counted on as an unchanging reality, listen, none of that is permanent. None of that is going to stay the same and you had better get ready. You'd better get your minds around that.

What would you do if you had heard for yourself, what they had heard? Make any changes? Would you shift your priorities? Would you reorder your life at all? Of course, the disciples ask



him in Luke 21:7, "Teacher, when will these things be?" I mean, when's this happening? "What will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" We know also from Matthew 24:3, they also asked him, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" They understand Jesus to be speaking eschatologically. He's Speaking of end times.

So since, ever since knowing Jesus, ever since meeting him, man, their lives had changed, everything had changed for them. Yeah. But now they start to apprehend what Jesus is telling them about the future. It's starting to dawn on them the implications of the life to come. They're starting to think about their city, about the temple, about their religion, about their people, the Jews, the whole world for them is going to be turned upside down.

They understand with increasing clarity, that all that seems solid in their lives, all that seems stable, reliable, secure, it's all an illusion. Everything that they thought mattered so much up until this point, it really doesn't matter. What matters is what this man Jesus is telling them right now.

It's probably easy for us from our vantage point as we read the black and white print in our Bibles, it's probably easier for us to see and appreciate what these men are going

through at some level. I mean, we're at a kind of a dispassionate, cool distance from the actual events, but I wonder though, do we see the same reality as clearly in our own time, in our own world? Do we perceive the implications of future events, that are settled fact in God's mind, for our own lives, for our families, for our job pursuits, for ambitions, for our hobbies, for our pastimes?

Because listen, if we did, if we do have that sense of gravity, if the weight of what is coming to the world in the future really settles on our minds, well, we're right where these disciples are in their minds. On this cool evening around a campfire on Mount Olivet, we're able to have our mind set aligned with theirs for this moment as they listen intently to the Lord, as they are hanging on every word, eager to hear these words of certainty as their world is basically dissolving and everything, they thought was stable and solid is, is coming to pieces, atomized, drifting into nothingness.

They're looking for certainty in his words. They're looking for assurance in their understanding and the certainty of his words are going to settle their hearts in assurance about the future, assurance about his coming, assurance about the kingdom coming down to earth.

So I've got just two points, number one: The assurance of the kingdom's coming. Assurance of the kingdom's coming. If you look again at verse 29, follow along. I'm going to follow, basically follow the LSB translation with, with slight changes in a way that I believe makes it just a bit clearer, but follow along from verse 29 again. "Then he told them a parable. Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they put forth leaves, you see and know from yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the Kingdom of God is near."

Some say the fig tree represents Israel filled with sap, ready to flourish again and the rest, that's the rest of the trees, in which is unique to Luke, they represent the nations. After all, Luke is writing Gospel to the Gentiles. The summer represents fruitfulness. So what this means, this parable, is that Israel's restored and with Israel, the nations and the whole world becomes fruitful. And that's what some believe this is teaching.

I think that's very creative, but I do not think that is correct. I understand, though, why some want to see each element here as a metaphor, as a symbol that represents something else. After all, Luke's introduction translated it, in our versions,

calls this a parable, doesn't it? But the word *parabolē*, it can mean illustration. You can talk about a parable, which is a short little story of common truth, wide, widely recognized, that has analogy to something spiritual, or it can just simply mean an illustration. That's what is the meaning here.

Jesus is giving an illustration and in verse 30, Jesus is very clear about the point of connection and in verse 31, he's very clear about what the fig tree is meant to illustrate. The fig tree represents a fig tree, that's it. Very common on the Mount of Olives. They were probably surrounded by them. Fig trees on the Mount of Olives; a fig tree, along with all the other trees, they share common traits as seasons change.

After a winter of barrenness and fig trees in particular are completely leafless in the winter, totally barren. But in the springtime, the branches of the fig tree or all other trees, they swell the sap, they become soft, leaves shoot forth from the branches, sprouting from the branches. And to those who live in Palestine, the budding of the leaves on the fig tree, or to those who live in any location, any tree, it's a clear indication winter's over, spring is here, and summer is coming.

That's the illustration, that's it, as clear to them as the fall leaves changing are to us. When we see fall leaves

changing, what do we say? Football season, right? But that's the illustration. It's nothing more than that. Some insist, though, on going even deeper in the symbolism, finding symbolism here, but not in the fig tree or in the trees. Instead, they focus their creative efforts on finding symbolism in summer. As one commentator says, quote, "The summer is a time of fertility, growth, and fruit and was figurative of the Kingdom of God with the removal of old forms of Judaism." He's referring to the destruction of the Temple.

"The Messiah's Kingdom was to find fertile soil not only in Palestine, but throughout the world. It was to grow into the uttermost parts of the earth. It was to bring forth abundant fruit to the glory of God. The destruction of Jerusalem in the events," preceding, "preceding it were not terrible signs, but harbingers of a summer that would spread its blessings throughout the earth. All the distressing events predicted by Christ, instead of discouraging the disciples, they should encourage them, for by them they would know it was the beginning not of winter time for this world, but of summer. They indicated the beginning of a worldwide harvest of souls." End quote.

Now, apart from sounding Pollyannish and biblically naive, that view fails to appreciate how terrible the destruction of

Jerusalem was to these disciples. It's utterly tone deaf to imagine Jesus, who has himself mourned for this city of Jerusalem, that he should tell the disciples to just look back, on past, all these horrific judgments that are going to come upon the city and tear down the temple and destroy its people and see in that nothing to discourage them, but everything to encourage them.

A harbinger of summer, a worldwide harvest of souls, is that what Jesus is saying here? Is that the sense that you get reading the text? More to the point, that view fails to represent accurately what Jesus actually says in the Olivet Discourse. It fails to depict how grim and terrifying that situation really is for the disciples. It really was, as we read back in church history. Matthew 24:30, "Jesus says when the Son of Man," peers, "appears, all the tribes of the earth will mourn."

Same thing he said in Luke 21:25 about the distress of the Gentiles, and in verse 26, about people fainting with fear and foreboding. Why is that? Because in verse 35, at Christ's return a trap is going to snap shut on all those who inhabit the face of all the earth. That is, all the unbelievers are going to be

caught in a trap of suddenness of Christ's return because they have not been looking for it.

Jesus is not portraying the joy of harvest here, the worldwide success of the gospel, the joyful reaping of souls. At the end of the age, the Tribulation, and Israel's distress are going to come to an end, that is joy for the repentant nation then, but it is the beginning of Christ's judgement on all the nations. And before he judges all the nations, when you back up in the 2000 years since the destruction of Jerusalem, it's been hard for the Jews. Would you admit that? There is pain, and sorrow, and sadness all through this text? The joy that comes is that Christ returns to put everything right. For those who are on the wrong side of his grace, those who've rejected it, utter desolation, utter destruction, horrific judgement.

Because of the parallelism in Jesus' illustration in verses 30 and 31, he's made his meaning here impossible to miss. He says to his disciples, look at the fig tree. You can't find one. Well, any tree will do. Look, notice how the trees are starting to send forth shoots from their branches; you see, that stem's producing leaves, leaves produce buds, buds produce fruit. Winter is, winter is over, isn't it, men? Spring's here, Summer's coming. An obvious point, yeah.

But the point of comparison in this illustration comes in verse 31, and the parallelism involves three keywords. And by those three keywords, Jesus creates parallels between verse 30 and verse 31. Just as trees signaled the coming of summer, celestial signs and the return of Christ signal the coming of God's kingdom. Notice first, in each verse, Jesus tells them to pay attention to what they can see with their eyes. Just as they can see the fig tree budding in verse 30, they can also see things happening in verse 31, which points back to the things of verses 25 and 26.

In the context, it's no mystery. It's, he's talking about the signs and the sun, moon, and the stars. He's talking about the, the roaring of the seas. He's talking about the changes on the Earth. Just as you can see what's happening on a fig tree and know the changing of seasons, so you can see when you look up and see all this stuff happening, something's happening, something's changing; we're entering into a new season.

Even the Amillennial commentator, William Hendrickson agrees with this. He writes, "In Luke 21:21 to 24, the destruction of Jerusalem is foretold. At the close of verse 24, the evangelist quotes Jesus prediction that Jerusalem would be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times the Gentiles are



fulfilled. And that brings us to the end of the age, that is to the second coming, including the signs accompanying the second coming. So there really is not any great difficulty in explaining the word these things in verse 31. They naturally refer to the things mentioned in verses 25 and 26. End quote.

So the first point of parallel between verse 30 and 31: What your eyes can see for themselves. The second point of parallel between those two verses is that the main verb in each verse, *ginōskō*, the verb, to know, it refers to the immediate knowledge that they possess due to what their eyes can see. There's no need for them to reflect, no need of them to think deeply, to interpret, to determine meaning here. It's the perception of sight that leads to instant knowledge. Immediately actionable intel is what they have when they see it. That's a second point of connection, second parallel between verse 30 and 31.

And then the third point of parallel is there, that that little word, near, which is at the end of each verse. It's the word, *engys*. It's used in a temporal sense here. So it means close in time, temporal, meaning time, close in time, or an even better word, imminent. So in verse 30, you see the trees budding you know summer is near, summer is imminent, it's coming.

Likewise, verse 31, you see the signs in the sky you know the Kingdom of God is near, it too is imminent. It's that simple.

Again, William Hendrickson explains, "When this happens to a fig tree, disciples realize that the summer is near. Similarly, when the things mentioned in the present context verses 25-26, signs in sun, moon, stars, etcetera, when the things mentioned in the present context take place, believers then living must recognize that the Kingdom of God in its final manifestation is at the very door." End quote.

Not hard to figure that out. It's simple and plain. Jesus offered the kingdom of God to the people of Israel at his first advent. When Israel rejected him as its Messiah, the establishment of God's kingdom on earth had to be postponed. He's not going to establish his kingdom with God's people who reject him as their king, because there is no other way. He is the king, and his citizens must bow the knee willingly from the heart, loving God, loving him. When they failed to do that, this kingdom of God on earth is postponed.

God judged Israel for its sin in AD 70. That's a judgement that continues to this day. It's a judgement that will continue, as Jesus says in verse 24, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. And once they are fulfilled at the midpoint of the

tribulation, at Christ's second advent, which happens after that, the kingdom of God will come and Jesus will take his seat on the throne of his father David. It's what we've been praying for, two millennia, taught by Christ himself, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth just as it is in heaven."

In that day, our prayer is answered in full when Christ, who is the king of kings and the Lord of Lords, when he rules on this earth as he rules from heaven now, at his Father's side; so he will do in that day, but visibly, physically present, literally in Israel, in Jerusalem, on the throne of David his father. So that's the assurance of the kingdom coming.

Everyone on earth will see the signs preceding Christ's return, and everyone will see Christ return. Quite a contrast, isn't it, between Jesus first advent and Jesus second advent? I mean the hinge point of the entirety of human history, which is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That resurrection, you know who saw him in his resurrected form? None but believers. No one on this earth saw him visibly physically resurrected in his resurrection glory, except believers. I mean, as I read, the Gospel accounts, maybe it's just your experience, too. I'm like, couldn't he march right into the Sanhedrin, say, hey guys, that little stone with the seal on it, the guards you

put there and stuff; I left them sleeping. They're okay. I'm here.

It's a good thing I'm not writing the Gospels. Don't you want to see that vindication? When every eye will see him, all the tribes of the earth will mourn because they got it wrong. Justice will be served. The mocking will stop. The injustice being done on this earth and the unrighteousness, it's rejoiced in, and celebrated, and paraded, will come to an end. When they all see these things, they will know that God's kingdom is imminent.

The promises of restoration that he's given to Israel, all his promises are going to commence their fulfilment at that time, and there will be 1000 years of his reign on earth for him to execute and fulfil every promise. Talk about an eschatology of hope, right? Talk about an eschatology that gives us joy, and assurance, and comfort. Talk about truth that is powerful enough to grab hold of your heart and mind and set you off on a new course with your shoulders back and your chin up and strength in every stride because God is empowering you by his truth. That's what this teaching does.