

Look at the Fig Tree

Luke 21:29-33 | September 20, 2020 | Bryce Beale

In the year 1522, the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli published a pamphlet entitled, “On the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God.”

In Zwingli’s day, the Roman Catholic church claimed that it alone, its teaching ministry known as the Magisterium, could properly and rightly interpret the Bible. But Zwingli objected.

He argued instead that anyone can understand the Bible because God stands behind his word. He, by his Spirit, guides believers unto all truth, leads us to understand the word that he has spoken. To use a theological term, the Spirit illumines for us the text of the Bible so that we can understand it.

It is important in a season like the one in which we find ourselves now that we remember and reassert the fact that, however confusing our world may be, we can rest in the certain knowledge we glean from the infallible and inerrant word of God. All that you need to know in order to be saved and to live a life pleasing to God you can discover in this book, as you study it humbly dependent upon its author.

God does not want you to be confused by his word, but to be built up and comforted by it, to be emboldened by it for life and for death.

So, we reassert the clarity and the certainty of the word of God.

And lest the devil should worm his way into your mind in this odd and confusing season and undermine your confidence in the Scriptures, we must address an objection to Scripture’s clarity, one you may yourself have thought or heard.

“If Scripture is clear, then why do Christians sometimes disagree about what it teaches? Or why are there some verses that are difficult to understand?”

Scripture itself answers this objection for us, at the end of 2 Peter where that apostle writes about Paul’s letters, which make up much of the New Testament:

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.¹

Here is what the Bible sees when it looks at itself—some things hard to understand! Notice, only some things are hard to understand, for all the main and major teachings of the Bible are quite easy to understand, easy enough for any child to grasp.

But some things are hard for us to understand. Yet we make these things even harder to understand than they are by our own deceitful hearts, for see how he says that “the ignorant and unstable” twist these hard things to their own destruction.

God kindly grants us “some things...hard to understand” in the Scriptures to keep us humble, to teach us to seek wisdom from above and not to trust in our own feeble minds and perceptions. The wicked, and even we ourselves when we are being wicked, instead twist these already difficult passages into mangled messes and confuse ourselves even further when we do not see them first as an opportunity to humbly seek God’s wisdom and guidance.

You see then that some difficult passages and some disputed texts here and there in Scripture are no argument against the certainty and clarity of the word of God, for the Lord himself wishes to reveal his will to us through his word. When on every major point Scripture is clear, we honor God by submitting to what we read or hear; and when in those few places Scripture is difficult, we honor God by trusting him over our own bare reason and seeking wisdom from above.

These two manners of honoring God will both guide us in our passage for today, as we continue to listen to our Savior in his Olivet Discourse of Luke 21.

LUKE 21:29-33

Few passages are such a mixture of certainty and of difficulty, of bold confidence in obvious facts and of straining to comprehend what God means by his word. Even here, the majority of the

¹ 2 Pet. 3:16-17 (ESV).

passage is clarity and certainty about the end times, and so that is where we will begin in our consideration of it. But afterward we must turn to one verse in our passage which is admittedly very difficult, and which God will no doubt use to keep us humble and dependent upon him for our understanding.

Certainty

Let us begin then with the larger part of our passage, which is preoccupied with our certainty about the end times.

See again the parable of verses 29 to 31:

And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Jesus has for this entire chapter been speaking both of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and of that greater event which the fall foreshadowed, the end of the world when Christ returns. Immediately before our present text, in verses 25 to 28, Jesus had in view not Jerusalem's fall but his own final return, the end of this present age.

And having concluded then his predictions of the period of time between his two comings, he turns to advise and exhort his disciples concerning the end, which he will do in our text for this week and in our concluding text next week.

Here he speaks of the end with a parable, or perhaps better said, with a lesson from nature.

"Look at the fig tree," he says—but of course you need not worry if you live somewhere like here, where fig trees are not common, because you can learn the same lesson, he says, from "all the trees."

And what are you to observe about trees? "As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near."

Jesus is just about to tell us something about the end of history, but note first how he communicates what he is about to say. He communicates in a way that assumes we will understand.

“Look at the fig tree”—that is a simple thing, and we who are simple can look at it and learn from it. And, to be even simpler, he says we can look at any tree and learn the lesson.

Who can look at trees? Professors and scholars and the academic elite? Yes. But also children. Children look at trees. Children can quite easily observe that when it is cold, trees lose their leaves and fruit; and when it begins to get hot again, the leaves come back and the fruit gets ready to regrow.

So when a little child sees a tree beginning to get its leaves back, she can probably reason for herself, if she’s had at least a few years on earth, that it’s going to stop being so cold and it’s going to warm up. Summer is on its way.

Now you who hear this, you know this, don’t you? It is hard to live on this planet no matter what your mental powers and not know something about the seasons. They repeat themselves every single year, and everyone sees them and is affected by them.

So put now in your mind a tree which is just beginning to regrow its leaves—you, no matter who you are, know that summer is coming. And you know it, Jesus says, not by reading some intricate book on arboriculture, but “you see for yourselves.” It is simple and clear. Keep that clear picture in your mind. What does it teach you about the end of this age?

“So also, when you see these things [that Jesus has been talking about in this chapter] taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

You know if natural and political disasters are intensifying, the end and the ushering in of God’s eternal kingdom is close. And you know if the events of the tribulation are taking place, and you are one of those converted at that time, that the kingdom is very, very near.

Certainly there are some details about the end of this age that we do not know, or that we must wrestle with, but those details mustn’t take away the certainty and clarity of this simple image: as summer is predicted by leaves, so the end of this age will be predicted by clear and major events which Jesus describes in this chapter.

This is the very attitude conveyed by Jesus at our passage's end, in verse 33: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

At the end of this age when Christ returns, as he certainly and clearly will, heaven and earth will pass away, to be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth. According to Peter, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."² Or possibly, "will be burned up."

At that time, the million opinions of mankind preserved in a billion books and blogs will all, quite possibly, dissolve in the heat. Whatever words may be spoken in that hour by people, whatever commands given, whatever promises made, will mean nothing at all when the heavens and the earth themselves pass away.

Yet at that moment one set of words will survive and persist and feel none of the flame of that hour: "my words," Jesus says. "My words will not pass away."

His predictions about the end, along with every other syllable he uttered, will survive. And every person who has wisely built his house upon the rock of that enduring word will also survive the judgement of the end.

This is why we rest our weary souls nowhere but in the words of our Savior. All else is confusion and uncertainty—but this word cannot fail, even when our whole globe does.

We affirm happily with the prophet Isaiah,

All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.³

² 2 Pet. 3:10.

³ Is. 40:6-8.

Uncertainty

With this firmly in mind, with our souls convinced of the clarity and certainty of the word of God in all its major parts, we must move finally to the harder part of our text. In the major clear parts of Scripture, we find a check to our fears and doubts; in the few difficult passages we find a check to our pride.

The difficult verse of this passage is the one we have yet to address, verse 32: “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.”

What Jesus means by this verse is as unalterable and firm—no, more unalterable and more firm—than the very earth we walk upon. He begins the phrase with a reminder of its veracity: “Truly, I say to you.” He follows it with the fact that his words cannot fail.

What remains to us in this text is to understand what Jesus meant by what he said. We have no doubt whatsoever that it is true—but just what is it that is true?

And here there are two possible meanings we must wrestle with.

Jesus says, “This generation will not pass away until all has taken place.”

The first possible meaning of this verse is that Jesus has his sights fixed on the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as a type or shadow of the world’s end, and of course that fall would occur about 40 years, or one generation, after Jesus spoke these words. So, “this generation” to whom Jesus spoke would not have passed away until all the shadows he has mentioned come to pass, though of course they would have passed away long before those shadows were fulfilled in the actual end of the age.

This would be similar to the way we understood an earlier statement in Luke, in chapter 9 verse 27, where Jesus declared: “I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” That passage is not so difficult because just afterward some of those standing there accompanied Jesus up a mountain, where he was transfigured in glory before their eyes. On that mountain they saw the kingdom of God, but only in type or shadow of greater things to come.

So here the same idea may be at play—this generation will see the fall of Jerusalem, so they will see the world’s end prefigured.

But one word keeps me from embracing this understanding of our text: “all.” “This generation will not pass away until *all* has taken place.”

That generation did pass away, and though some of Luke 21 was fulfilled, all was not fulfilled. I mentioned last week the three major views of the end times: premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism. There is actually another view, but it is not major and it cannot be true. The other view is called Preterism—there is a partial Preterism that is not heresy, but full or consistent Preterism, hyper-Preterism, is heresy. Hyper-Preterists believe in light of verses like the one before us that every prophecy of Scripture concerning the return of Jesus has already been fulfilled. A.D. 70 saw the end and the return of Jesus, and the establishment of his kingdom. There is no future return.

We know for certain Jesus does not mean *that*. He does not mean that all the events of Christ’s return took place before that first generation passed away.

But could Jesus mean by “all” only “all the shadows or types” of the end? He could, but it would be a bit of a stretch.

So what is the other way to take this verse?

Well, as we have said, some of what Jesus has stated in this chapter, though spoken to the disciples who stood before him, actually will apply to the final generation of Jesus’ disciples, those converted during the tribulation period.

They are the ones for example to whom Jesus offers the command of verse 28: “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” The disciples Jesus was speaking to did not see these things begin to take place, but that future generation of disciples who do see these things begin to take place, they must heed these words and stand up straight.

So it is possible that in our difficult verse Jesus is, once again, aiming his words at that future generation of disciples. He was just speaking of them, so he can call them “this generation.” They are “this generation” who will see the beginning of the end as the tribulation occurs, and that same generation will not pass away until the tribulation is complete and the kingdom finally appears.

If this is what Jesus means, then he is making the point that once the final tribulation appears, it will not last long. It will not outlast a single generation, but will escalate quickly and lead into the kingdom—hence the disciples, as Jesus has just said, should lift their heads in confidence because the end is very near at that point.

To me, this is more likely what Jesus meant. Yet I admit that I am slightly taken aback by that one word: “this.” “This generation will not pass away until all has taken place.” Certainly that future generation can be meant by “this,” but again we must stretch slightly to make that word work in that way. Because at first glance, “this” would seem to mean “this generation” right in front of Jesus, to whom he is speaking.

To some of us, it is quite frustrating to find a verse that we cannot pin down with perfect accuracy. We do not like to find those “difficult” verses Peter talked about. But we will find them—Peter said we would, and he was certainly clear. So what are we to do? Why would God give us a verse every now and then in the Scriptures that we must strain to understand?

To check our pride.

We have no doubt at all that Jesus spoke truly, and we are not at all of the opinion that the most important parts of Scripture are hard to understand. In fact, most of this book can be understood by an attentive child. Even the difficult passages are often resolvable to our satisfaction.

Yet at times we come to the end of our own reason and must get on our knees and beg God for insight. We must labor all we can, but then in perfect faith entrust our mind to God and plead that he, by his illuminating Spirit, would open to us the meaning of his word.

Skeptics will never know the meaning of God’s word, because they will find a hard text and, instead of turning to the author of this divine text for insight, will sink down deeper into their own blindness and hardness of heart, twisting these difficult passages to their own destruction, even using them to attack the authority of this book.

But we who believe are confident that our Father wishes us to know his word, to give it our attention, and to await eagerly his aid in understanding it.

This attitude of course is childlike, for we are forced to be like supplicating children fully dependent upon the goodwill of a parent.

In fact, Jesus is our example of such dependence in our own weakness. Amazingly, in both Matthew and Mark, our current passage is immediately followed by this admission of our Savior: "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."⁴

In his humanity, Jesus chose not to make full use of his omniscience and therefore not to know, as a man, all things. He did not as a man know the exact time of his return. Ah, you and I would never make that choice! We wish to know and are frustrated not to know something with complete certainty.

Yet Jesus was made like us in our weakness, so that he might teach us to depend upon the Father even in this. He pushed forward in obedience to the Father and, when there was something he did not know, even something concerning his return, he did not let this trouble him, but moved forward with those things God had given him to know, in perfect obedience.

And this pattern he passed on to us, his disciples, when just before his departure he declared:

It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

May that Spirit guide us into all truth, as we testify with complete confidence and power of the certain return of our Savior, which we await with desperate, child-like hearts. For he will come, as certainly as summer follows the first buds of a tree.

⁴ Mark 13:32; Matt. 24:36.