

December 11, 2011

Therefore Stay Awake Till the End

Mark 13:28-37

INTRODUCTION

Why does Jesus bring back in the lesson of the fig tree here? He has already explained it. Something is going on here in the mind of the Spirit, and therefore the mind of Mark, in recalling Jesus' teaching. Something of this back and forth, back and forth, between the judgment of the first century and the judgment of the last day, is being compared, and linked, for our instruction.

- THE AXE IS ALREADY LAID TO THE ROOT OF THE FIG TREE
- BUT OF THAT DAY OR HOUR, DON'T MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE!

The Big Idea is that those who do not stay awake until the end are just like the generation of the cursed fig tree.

DOCTRINE

I. THE AXE IS ALREADY LAID TO THE ROOT OF THE FIG TREE

A) The Lesson of the Fig Tree is for the Church Age! {28-29}

1. Just as a reminder, Jesus' encounter with the fig tree is what happens on the way into the city and the temple, and this Olivet Discourse is what occurs directly after. And remember that the lesson of the cursing of the fig tree was that God judges his earthly city that does not produce what it should. He removes his presence from that church, or city, and leaves it desolate, an outer shell. And finally you will remember that the process of the leaves withering away, producing no more real fruit, because of how it falls away from the DNA of the word which originally produced it, is what the Scriptures call **apostasy**. Well now, Jesus gives us a more general metaphor using the fig tree. *From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near (28)*. Here the

emphasis is not on the fruit of the fig tree, but only its leaves. When you see the tree in full leaf, that's a good sign that it's summer time.

2. *So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates (29).* This is a much simpler picture than the previous lesson of the fig tree. The fullness of the leaves simply means the fullness of the times. Each leaf is just another one of the things that Jesus tells us will characterize this time. The more of them we see, the fuller our expectations. But why a full, healthy looking fig tree right after He had just symbolized this whole visit into Jerusalem by a withering, cursed fig tree? Well, remember that the second coming is a judgment before it is anything else. As the earthly city empties itself of fruit to God, so they fill themselves up with the fruits of his wrath: "you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" [Rom. 2:5]. Notice that it says that when you see these things taking place, it is a sign that **He is near**. The avenging Son of God, no longer in lowliness, but in full glory, is near; and as Revelation says, "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations" [19:15].

3. So this is a tale of two fig trees. This one is filling up with what looks like the prime of life to an unbeliever; but to a believer, signs of the coming harvest of judgment. As their true condition—apostasy—empties their branches toward God, the tree we can see fills up with the signs of things Christ will judge. And wouldn't you know it—there is a great apostasy foretold of the period toward the very end of the church age! Listen to the Apostle Paul on this point:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons [1 Tim. 4:1].

while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived [2 Tim. 3:13].

For that day will not come, unless the **apostasia** comes first [2 Thess. 2:3].

B) The Meaning of "This Generation" {30-31}

1. *Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place (30).* This is one of those controversial verses of Scripture that people take sides on what it has to mean by **this generation**. Some say that "generation" (*genea*) means exactly what it says: so that all that is in view is that this immediate audience of Jesus would live to see the destruction of Jerusalem. Others agree that, yes, *genea* means that, but that the language refers to **all these things** that include the final judgment, so it is the specific generation at the end of

time. Still others say, no, *genea* can mean the descendants or line or people group generated from a particular head. This is its meaning in Luke 16:8 (and possibly in Matthew 23:36). In this way “this generation” comes to mean either the whole people of the last days or else the Jewish people who will survive the tribulation.

2. *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (31)*. This is a passing away generation. The language is taken from Isaiah 40:7-8 and the Lord specifically refers to human beings as blades of grass and their beauty to flowers in the field, concluding that, “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.” This is a very relevant truth when it is the Lord Jesus Christ who will blow on the grass of humanity on that day with the fires of his judgment, his word—“he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” [Is. 11:4].

3. If we connect verse 30 and 31—which we should, since the Holy Spirit connected these two truths in the mind of Mark as he recalled the words of Jesus—we see that it is the **words** of Jesus that stand eternally and the generations (whichever they mean!) which always **pass away**. When we see things from the perspective of Christ’s words, all of heaven and earth and generations get real small real fast. The details become unimpressive when the decree of God gives perspective of the whole. And how true this when we stack the words of Christ side by side with all of the plans and ideas of the greatest men throughout the ages! There is no contest. Their armies and inventions and books have fallen like burning grass in every generation, but “every word of God proves true” [Prov. 30:5]. Christ’s word divides—in our imagery, it divides—the withered fig tree from the tree of life. It is already decreed and then He comes to execute it, as John the Baptist told those leaders of the cursed fig tree: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” [Mat. 3:10].

II. BUT OF THAT DAY OR HOUR, DON’T MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE!

A) The Christian Way of Living in the Last Days {32-33}

1. *But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father (32)*. Now the purpose of Jesus’ words from verses 32 through 36 is eschatology, not Christology. In other words, Jesus is not being as specific as He could be, and as He is in other places, on the unity of his nature with the Father. Without such a big

picture, naturally, we could have a difficulty here. How does the Son of God not know the day or hour, when Jesus said elsewhere that “the Father shows him *all* that he himself is doing” [Jn. 5:20]? Now one solution that people have proposed is that Jesus really did know but was relating to the disciples on a “need to know” basis. But the trouble with that solution is that it makes Jesus intentionally lie (or else commit an unwitting error), when He could have said the same thing another way. That would compromise the deity of Christ. The right solution throughout church history is to see these words of Jesus as literally true, but regarding his human nature and not his divine nature. We have already seen this to be the case with the centurion’s faith and his unawareness of who touched Him in the crowd. Many other divine attributes being restrained, or inapplicable to the human nature of Jesus, don’t trouble us: omnipresence is analytically not a human nature, and omnipotence, while available, was not always availed. No one has any problem with these. But here we have either a double standard, or at least a failure to be consistent in our logic. We did a class on Christology last summer that dealt with this in great detail. Please refer to that class. Jesus’ whole point here is to say to the disciple’s, in effect, “Don’t go there—go here!” Don’t obsess over the timing; obsess over the thing that has its own timing. You do your job and let God be God. And what is *our* job?

2. He commands us: *Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come* (33). Notice that the earthly city and the temple had a guard. We have already seen that in the parable of the tenants [cf. Mk. 12:1-12]. These imposters in the temple were not on guard; they were in a spiritual sleep. And sleeping religious authorities don’t like to be awakened and don’t like to have it suggested that they’re a bunch of slackers, so they will always teach that there is nothing but peace. But Paul tells the Thessalonians, “that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape” [1 Thess. 5:2-3]. And so here Jesus is turning from his earthly city to his eternal city—to all Christians at all times—and putting us on guard by saying that *those who do not stay awake until the end are just like the generation of the cursed fig tree*. He makes it even clearer in what is a simile more than a parable in the next words.

B) The Master, the Servants and the Doorkeeper {34-37}

1. *It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake* (34). The **doorkeeper** has often been compared to the watchman of the prophets: “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for

the house of Israel” [Ezk. 3:17]. It makes sense because it is watchman who are in danger of falling asleep, not typically the kind of “doormen” that we think of today. In other words, there are the servants in general, but also the leaders of the house who incur a stricter judgment. This is further supported by the following imagery of the night-watches.

2. *Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep (35-36a).* There are stewards of God’s things, then there are the overseers of the whole house. And if they doze off or pretend that “seeing over,” or seeing the whole, scouting out for intruders or other internal problems doesn’t matter, then they have fallen asleep on duty. And all the more in the time period that Jesus said would be characterized by a great falling away.

Think of another parable: the parable of the ten virgins. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus tells this parable in exactly this spot.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour [25:1-13].

Notice that these were not five virgins and five not-so-virgins. All ten were in one people group to the visible eye; and as was the custom in first century weddings, the bridesmaids and friends of the bridegroom would leave early to the groom’s house for the celebration banquet. Five were ready, five were not. I look forward, Lord willing, to preaching that parable one day. But for now, just understand what Jesus is saying about readiness.

3. *And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake (36b).* There isn’t any way to pretend that Jesus isn’t talking directly to you. He says this **to all**. He gives us one last hint that this judgment will visit both their generation and the generation of the last days. Everyone, from that point on, is on warning. And here is the thing that resolves all difficulties. If the dead in Christ and

in Adam are all raised on the same day, well then “generation” in specific already means “generation” in particular since everyone who has ever been generated from somebody else is going to witness that day for better or for worse!

APPLICATION

1. To the Church in the Last Days – We have seen what can only be regarded as a great apostasy in the modern era. In the past two and a half centuries in Europe and America, the Evangelical house that left the Roman Catholic Church has itself embraced views of Scripture, God and salvation that no longer resemble the Christian faith that was believed in for the first two millennia of the church. This falling away from the core of the faith is what the Bible means by apostasy.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn![2 Pet. 3:11-12].

2. To the Sleeping Sinner – If you’re in the ground on that day, you’ll be woken up when the trumpet sounds. If you’re above ground on that day, you’ll also be awake once the trumpet sounds. But don’t be caught walking around asleep. Now is the time to wake up. Hear his merciful voice today so you don’t hear his vengeful voice that awakens you from your sleep on that day. There is great news. Jesus said, “The time is coming and is now here where... [Jn. 5]; so “Today, if you hear his voice...” [Heb. 4]. Today if you hear his voice and the good news that He brings is irresistible, is obviously true, is truly the best news ever, then the good news is that He has awakened you and what you need to do, now that you can hear his voice, is turn from your sins—the Bible calls that “repentance”—and claim nothing before God but his own mercy. Thank Him for his free gift and see your sins, from this day forward, punished on the cross instead of the hell you would have had to pay. This glorifies Him. Trusting Him for this pleases Him. God takes delight in you and me, sinners, simply saying to our sins and guilt, “NO—He has promised to forgive! He loves me unconditionally!” If you can say that, if you will believe Him for that, then you have been born again. Praise Him for it.