

The Gospel According to Luke

“Go Fig-ure”

Chapter 21:20-36

*“Look at the fig tree...”
Luke 21:29*

Introduction

I can predict the exact date that Jesus will return in His Second Coming!

It's calculated from the Lord's illustration of the **fig tree** in our passage, and His use of the word **generation**.

1. The **fig tree** represents the nation of Israel. It budded when Israel became a nation again, on May 14, 1948.
2. A biblical **generation** is forty years.

You add forty years to 1948, and that tells you ***Jesus will return before the end of 1988!***

It sounds silly now; but it was all the rage among Christians in the late 1970's, right up until New Year's Day 1989. Even then, some people wouldn't throw in the towel. Some guy wrote a pamphlet called *88 Reasons for the Rapture in 1988*. Then he revised it and changed the title to *89 Reasons for the Rapture in 1989*.

Jesus didn't tell us to make predictions. He told us what was definitely going to happen in the future so that we might know how we should live in the present. Our study of prophecy ought to have a profound practical effect on our daily living.

Jesus mentioned two of those effects, and we want to look at them today. We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 Lift Your Head As The Lord Draws Near, and #2 Lighten Your Heart And Draw Near The Lord.

#1 Lift Your Head As The Lord Draws Near (v20-33)

Christians are not as interested in Bible prophecy as they once were. There are many reasons for their lack of interest; one is that they've been burned by believing erroneous predictions like the ones I mentioned.

Another is that we've grown weary waiting for the Lord to come and take us home to Heaven, to the place He's been preparing for us.

The embarrassing predictions and our own personal weariness are a lethal combination – a one-two-punch – that have us looking around at the world rather than looking up to Heaven and forward to going home. As we work through these verses, Jesus calls upon us **to lift up [our] heads** and regain our passion for His return.

Luke 21:20 **“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.**

Last week we explained that Jesus was looking forward, through history, and describing events that would happen in the lifetimes of His disciples as well as far future events that have yet to occur. In verses twenty through twenty-four, He described the siege and sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD. He was looking forward about forty years. We are looking back on it, knowing that His words were exactly fulfilled.

Luke 21:21 **Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her.**

In those days, if you were attacked by an invading army, you would run into the city to be protected by the city walls. Safe inside, you would outlast the besieging army. Jesus was letting them know that Jerusalem would fall; there would be no safety within her walls.

Luke 21:22 **For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.**

Vengeance is the translation of a word that means the *deserved penalty*. Israel had sinned. God had always warned the Jews that if

they did not repent, He must discipline them. On the heels of their rejecting Jesus as their Messiah, God's discipline would begin.

Luke 21:23 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people.

Why mention **pregnant** women and **nursing** mothers? It is to remind you that God is full of mercy and compassion. He did not want to discipline them; but the nation left Him no options. Still, He would warn the weak to flee.

The Jewish historian Josephus records that as many as 1.1million were slaughtered during the siege; another 97,000 were taken away as slaves – either to be sold in Egypt, or to be used as sport for the lions in the amphitheaters.

History records that most, if not all, of the Christians who were in Jerusalem by the time of the siege *did* indeed flee to safety. They took Jesus' prophecy literally and their lives were spared.

Luke 21:24 And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

This verse accurately predicted the history of Israel for the past two thousand years! The phrase, **the times of the Gentiles**, is understood differently by various Bible scholars. It seems to refer to the age in which we live, between the first and second comings of Jesus, when the Gospel message goes beyond the Jews into the whole world.

Beginning in verse twenty-five, Jesus looks much further in history – past our own day to the final time of God's judgment on the earth, a time we call the Great Tribulation.

Luke 21:25 "And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring;
Luke 21:26 men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Jesus had been speaking literally. He continued speaking literally. These are real events in the earth and around the earth, in its atmosphere. They have not yet occurred; but they will occur during the last seven years before the Lord returns in His Second Coming. They are described in specific detail in the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Luke 21:27 Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

This is the return of Jesus to take over the earth. He will return and establish the kingdom of God on the earth – a time period we are told elsewhere will last for one thousand years.

The Lord wasn't telling His disciples all these things just to satisfy their curiosity. His overview of prophecy had a practical purpose. Here it is:

Luke 21:28 Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."

Jesus' mission on earth in His first coming is often described in terms of **redemption**. *Redeem*, or **redemption**, refers to purchasing back something that was lost or sold. In this context, the earth and the human race were lost in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned. Our parents sold us all into slavery to Satan. Jesus, on the Cross, paid the price required for redemption. He now owns the earth and all that is in it; but He has not finalized the transaction.

It's like a landlord who has a tenant that needs evicting. Jesus is the Landlord; the devil needs evicting. The Lord will evict him during the Great Tribulation, then return to rule the earth He's purchased back with His blood.

While we are to not make predictions, we are told to understand the signs of the times in which we live. For example: Almost everyone is familiar with the prophecy, in the Book of the Revelation, that in the last days the world would be united in instant commerce, and that every person would have some kind of 'mark' on his or her hand or forehead by which to buy and sell goods. Scoffed at for centuries, we now live in a global economy. And you know the technology is here

to put a microchip under your skin by which you would be able to buy or sell. I'm not predicting that our current chip-technology is the 'mark,' but you cannot ignore it as a sign we are closer than ever to the end the Bible presents.

Luke 21:29 Then He spoke to them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees.

Luke 21:30 When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near.

Luke 21:31 So you also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near.

In the Bible, the **fig tree** often is a symbol for the nation of Israel – like the bald eagle is (for us) a symbol of the United States. A lot of Bible teachers assumed the **budding** of the **fig tree** meant the return of Israel to her land in 1948.

As remarkable a fulfillment of prophecy Israel's return was, that is not the **budding** of the **fig tree**. Notice Jesus said, **Look at the fig tree, and all the trees**. He was using the budding of trees as a general illustration, without any direct reference to the return of the nation of Israel. Simply put, He was saying that when leaves sprout on a tree, you know that something else is right around the corner – the fruit is going to appear.

In the context of our verses, when you see the signs Jesus mentioned in verses twenty-five and twenty-six, *then verse twenty-seven is right around the corner!* The Lord will return to establish the kingdom on earth.

Luke 21:32 Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place.

There are dozens and dozens – maybe even hundreds – of interpretations for the use of the word **generation**. There are two simple meanings that fit the context:

1. Number one is that **generation** refers to the people alive at the time these signs occur. It's a promise that, even though it will seem like the end of the world, and the extinction of humanity, the events unfolding for those seven years of the Great Tribulation are

under God's control and will lead to the glorious return of Jesus to make the earth both right and righteous.

2. The number two possible meaning of **generation** is that it refers to the nation of Israel as a particular ethnic group within the human race. If that is the case, it's a promise that, even though nations try to exterminate the Jews, God will keep them alive and fulfill His promises to them. Especially in the last 3½ years of the Great Tribulation, the devil will be making every effort to kill every last Jew. But God will miraculously preserve a remnant who will recognize Jesus as their Lord at His return.

Luke 21:33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

Why say this? As always, there are many possible reasons. One is this: Men have a sense that doomsday is approaching; that some terrible 'armageddon' is possible. But they also believe that we can avert it by establishing our own world peace. They don't believe we need to turn to God.

The world is *not* going to get better-and-better. We will *never* establish a global utopia of peace and prosperity. The current heavens and earth must **pass away** and give way to a new Heaven and a new earth. It will unfold exactly, **and literally**, as Jesus said it would.

Jesus told us to **lift up [our] heads because [our] redemption draws near**. Instead of growing discouraged because the Lord hasn't yet returned for us, we ought to be encouraged that, every minute, His coming is nearer! We do not want to fall into the trap of looking around at the world and making ourselves more comfortable in it – thinking the Lord has delayed His coming.

How can we **lift up [our] heads**? I'd suggest two ways:

1. First, by continuing to emphasize Bible prophecy, and the coming of the Lord, in our fellowship with one another – and certainly, in our teaching. It's OK to get practical, and talk about how to have a better marriage... Or how to manage our money... Or any number

of other life-issues. But all of them must be taught in the context of our hope that Jesus is coming for us any moment!

2. Second, we **lift up [our] heads** by remembering the reason Jesus has not yet returned. It's because God is longsuffering, not willing that sinners should perish in the Great Tribulation or for eternity. It's by praying for, then sharing with, unbelieving family, friends, neighbors, and strangers.

One more thing about lifting your head. The position of your head can illustrate your overall condition. A person with the head down, for example, is either discouraged, or sad, or embarrassed. In the Psalms the Lord is described as the **lifter of our heads** when they are down. But He doesn't just lift them so we can look around at the world, and figure out how to get ahead and be more comfortable. He lifts our heads to look up, at Him. We do that when we remember He is coming any time now. It is our great hope – the thing that inspires our walk with Him.

#2 Lighten Your Heart And Draw Near The Lord (v34-36)

In these next verses, the Lord described the lifestyle of a person who was looking up and forward to His return. He gave you an illustration – that of a Night Watchman.

Luke 21:34 “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly.

Luke 21:35 For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth.

We will work backwards through these verses. Jesus described His coming as a **snare**. A **snare** is a kind of trap you would use to catch a critter. Think of a mousetrap. When I set one, I put bait on and around the trap. The mouse eats the bait around the trap, and nothing happens. Finally it steps on the trap and in a split second it trips the trap and is destroyed.

Sin is like that. It baits us, and we can indulge ourselves for a time with no obvious consequences. But finally, and suddenly, we find

ourselves caught, and our lives shattered. We should think of the world as full of traps, and be on our guard.

Jesus mentioned two categories of sin: **Carousing** and **cares**.

Carousing:

Jesus mentioned **carousing** and **drunkenness** together. **Drunkenness** refers, of course, to being drunk, and we normally think of alcohol. But we use the word 'drunk' to describe our lust for other things. We talk about people who are drunk with power, for example. So the expanded idea here is that you be on guard that you are not over-indulging in *anything* that would hinder your walk with the Lord.

Carousing is a word that describes the after-effects of drunkenness. We'd use the word *hang-over*. Anything that gets you drunk will also cause you to be hung-over. If you are indulging yourself with anything, it will affect your spiritual senses.

A lot of believers are going around hung-over. Some from substances, like alcohol, or illegal drugs, or legal drugs that are being abused. Some are hung-over from their pursuit of career... Or a person... Or a habit... Or a hobby... Simply put, some believers are too involved with the things of the world. They need to be night watchmen of themselves!

Jesus mentioned **the cares of this life**. This is worry and anxiety about daily life. He put it on an equal par with **carousing**. Fear, stress, worry, and anxiety are just as damaging to your spiritual heart as carousings we normally consider sin.

How do you become a better night watchman over your heart?

Luke 21:36 Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Watch refers to your overall occupation, that of a watchman. Your training, and continued training, for the position is to **pray always**.

Two things I'd like to say about prayer:

1. Certainly, we need to take inventory of how often we pray. **All of us need to pray more!**
2. More importantly, we need to discover whether or not we want to pray. If I need to be manipulated into praying more, then I've grown cold in my love for the Lord. So I don't just recommit to times of prayer. I must remember my first love; repent of the things that have been influencing me and interfering with Jesus; *then* I return to times and places of prayer.

Privately, each of us needs to remember and, if necessary, repent for ourselves. Having done that, let me make some suggestions for us publicly:

1. We have an e-mail prayer list. Let's utilize it more. Even if you don't have access to e-mail, you can call a Deacon, or the office, and relay urgent prayer needs. Then follow-up; give us the disposition. What happened to the person? How did God resolve the situation?
2. We have times set aside for prayer before both morning services. **Come to them!** Come as a family, believing God wants to, and will, hear you and act.

Nothing much is going to happen until we pray – as individuals, and as a body of believers. But the desire must be genuine. We must pray alone because we desire it; we must pray together as an overflow of our love for the Lord – willingly, and not by compulsion.

Jesus ended His talk by saying,

Luke 21:36 ... that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

He wasn't suggesting that you could somehow lose your salvation and be counted unworthy. He was describing the scene on earth at His Second Coming. All the people who survive the Great Tribulation will be gathered before Him. Believers who have **escaped** being killed will **stand before** Jesus and be rewarded; they will be **counted worthy** to enter into the kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Unbelievers who survive will be killed and sent to Hades to await their final resurrection to eternal damnation.

Applying the Word...

If you are a Christian, the Lord has promised to return in the Rapture, to take us home before the events of the Great Tribulation. The world is still a dangerous place. One author wrote:

If believers in that difficult age will be tempted to yield to the world and the flesh, Christians in this present age of comfort and affluence must face even greater dangers.

If you are not a Christian... **Heaven and earth will pass away.** Where will you spend eternity?