

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 14 September 2025. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## Watching for Christ's Return

### Matthew 24:32-42

In the early 1800's in America, many revival preachers were travelling by horseback all over the country (especially in New England); and many people were being saved, and churches planted. The growth of Baptist churches in the late 1700's and early 1800's was particularly explosive. Young believers were devouring God's Word; and as they studied the Scriptures, many became fascinated by the promise of Christ's return. In fact, one young Baptist convert named **William Miller** became convinced, as he studied **Daniel**, that the date for Christ's coming could be determined. In 1818, he came to the conclusion that the Rapture would be in 1843 or 1844; and he began to preach this from behind the pulpit. News of his prediction spread far and wide; and soon people were flocking to hear him preach. In time, he pinned down the date of Christ's return to **October 22, 1844**. During the big financial panic of 1839, the prospect of end times became even more believable for many people—so believable, in fact, that many newspapers printed Miller's prophetic charts “alongside stock market listings and current events.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, the morning of October 22, 1844, finally arrived. There was a sense of great excitement for the Millerites, and fear for those who weren't sure what to believe. Many people gathered in churches, or on mountaintops, with the firm belief that they would be caught up into the clouds to meet the Lord. Businesses and regular activities came to a halt on that day, as people awaited the end. But, of course, the Lord did not return. Soon, this non-event came to be called “**The Great Disappointment.**” Many Christians were disillusioned; and lost people were emboldened in their mockery. Miller himself genuinely repented of his error; but the damage was done. Many of Miller's followers, refusing to admit Miller's error, claimed that Christ *really had* come back on October 22, 1844, but that it had been an *invisible, spiritual* coming (a “cleansing of the heavenly temple”). These folks eventually formed a cult called “The Seventh-Day Adventists,” which still teaches a false gospel of salvation by Law-keeping. Years later, a one-time student of the Seventh-Day Adventists started yet another cult, which eventually came to be called the Jehovah's Witnesses; and they, just like the Millerites, “spiritualized” the date of Christ's return after Christ failed to return in 1914. As far as we know, Miller himself was a believer; but his failure to believe **Matthew 24:36** caused Christ's name to be blasphemed.

Brethren, when Jesus said that no man knows the day or hour of His return, He meant just what he said. Anyone who attempts to predict the day of His return will end up with egg on his face. I still remember, when I was growing up, when a man named **Edgar Whisenant** wrote a book called **88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988**; and a few of my relatives bought into it. I remember a family reunion, in 1987,

when the subject came up. My parents gently tried to remind a couple of my aunts that no one can know the day or hour of Christ's return; but they refused to hear it (until January 1, 1989, that is).

False predictions of Christ's return have caused many Christians to be disillusioned (or even cynical) about Christ's return. Many Christians, because they got "burnt" by a false expectation, have even turned to "spiritualised" and "allegorised" interpretations of prophecy, such as amillennialism. But Christian, don't let this be you! Jesus said, "***In patience possess ye your souls.***" There will always be false prophets misinterpreting the Scriptures, and making Christians look loopy; but it doesn't change the fact that Jesus *will* come back at a day unknown to us—and that we must patiently wait for Him. That is what we will be talking about this morning. The title of this message is ***Watching for Christ's Return.***

**Read Matthew 24:32-42.**

### **I. The parable of the fig tree (vv. 32-34)**

In last week's message, we focused on **verses 27-31**; and in those verses, we saw Christ's description of what it will be like when He returns to earth. As Christ is descending to the Mount of Olives with all His saints and angels, He will send out His angels to every corner of the earth, to gather *all the elect* (all the saved people on earth, who have survived the Tribulation). The angels will transport these believers to the land of Israel, so that they can witness, and participate in, the showdown of the ages—the **Battle of Armageddon**. Christ will also see to it that all those who *rejected* Him during the Tribulation will *see* Him coming in His glory. He may give these rebels a **real-time vision** of what is happening in Israel: or, He may send the angels to **gather them physically** to the land of Israel, so that they can see His return in-person. What we know for sure is that one way or another, *every soul on earth* will see Christ's return, and His destruction of the Antichrist at Armageddon. Shortly after this awesome battle, *every soul on earth* will be gathered to stand before Christ, to be judged. Those who rejected Christ during the Tribulation will be slain and cast into hell, where they will remain until the final Great White Throne Judgment at the end of the world; and those who believed on Christ will enter the Kingdom.

With this in mind, we now come to **verses 32-34**. Christ has just finished describing what His return to earth will be like; and now, He tells a parable to illustrate the nearness of His return. He says that when you see a fig tree put forth its leaves, then you know that summer is near; and likewise, when you see all these "signs," you may know that His coming is right at the door. In fact, He says that "***This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.***"

Now, what did Jesus mean when He said, “***This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled***”? Well, in 1948, when Israel became a modern nation-state, many Christians like ourselves, who believe in a pre-Tribulation Rapture, said, “Aha! The fig tree is a symbol of Israel! This must mean that when Israel ‘blossoms’ and become a nation again, then the Rapture will happen within a generation.” It was this thinking that led Whisenant to write his book *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Of course, the Rapture didn’t happen in 1988; and so, some people stretched the definition of a “generation” to 70 years (to 2018). However, it has now been 77 years since Israel’s re-birth; and Christ still hasn’t returned.

What does this verse *really* mean, then? Well, first of all, let me state, very clearly, what it does *not* mean. It does *not* mean that “the generation that sees the re-birth of the nation-state of Israel will be sure to see the Rapture.” Don’t get me wrong: I’m not saying that the Rapture *couldn’t* happen at any time. It can! I’m just saying that the *political re-birth* of Israel is *not* a sure-fire sign that the Rapture is near. Why do I not believe this?

First of all, **in this passage, Jesus isn’t talking about the Rapture at all.** Remember, the doctrine of the Rapture had not yet been revealed. (Jesus gave a little hint of the Rapture to the disciples during the Last Supper, when He said, “***I will come again, and receive you unto myself***”; but the doctrine of the Rapture wasn’t clearly revealed until some 20 years later, to the Apostle Paul.) In this entire discourse, Jesus has not said anything about the Rapture at all. What He *has* been talking about are the events that will be happening *during the Tribulation*; and He has been giving instruction and warning to the Jewish believers who will be living at that time. Now, perhaps you’re thinking, “But, Pastor, didn’t Jesus just say that ‘Two men will be in the field, and one will be taken, and the other left’? Wasn’t Jesus walking about the Rapture there?” Actually...no. (I myself used to believe that this passage was a description of the Rapture, until I looked at it more closely.) Those who are “taken” are not *Christians* who will be taken *out of* the world in the Rapture: they are the lost people who will be *taken away in judgment*, at the Battle of Armageddon. (Just hang on! I will explain this shortly.)

Now, why else does the budding of the fig tree *not* represent the re-birth of Israel? Because spiritually, Israel is still *dead*. Remember, Jesus had just *curse*d the fig tree because it did not bear fruit: and it withered away. In this parable, the fig tree *was* a symbol of Israel; and its withering away was a symbol of Israel’s spiritual deadness, and unfruitfulness, because they had rejected their Messiah. So, if, here in **Matthew 24**, the fig tree were a symbol of Israel, what would the “budding” of the fig tree have to represent? It would have to represent Israel’s *spiritual re-birth*. The problem is: Israel’s spiritual re-birth has not happened yet. Most Jewish people are still rejecting Jesus as their Messiah, and are not alive to God; and as a nation, they will *not* be spiritually alive until the time of Christ’s return to earth. After the Judgment of the Nations, *every Jew on earth* will be a saved Jew: but until then, Israel, as a nation, will remain spiritually dead. Let’s look at *another* parable (this one from the Old Testament), and see what God said about Israel’s spiritual condition in the last days.

### Read Ezekiel 37:1-14.

In this parable, the bones of the children of Israel were put back together, and the flesh and sinews were put onto the bones, and their bodies were all put into a standing position, like an army; yet, they still weren't alive! What had to happen for them to live? Their *breath* had to come into them. Just as God breathed Adam's human spirit into him, and he became a *living soul*, so, in this parable, this army of physically re-assembled bodies had to have the spirit of life breathed into them in order to come alive. All of this is a picture of Israel's *spiritual* rebirth in the last days. You see, when Israel began to come back to their land in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then became a political state in 1948, it was as though their "bones" were coming together, and "flesh" were being put back onto their bodies; yet, as a nation, they are still spiritually dead. They have no spiritual life, because the Spirit of God does not dwell in them. Now, thank God, there *are* more and more Jews who are believing on Jesus, and being saved; but as a *whole*, the nation of Israel is still spiritually dead. However, all that will change when Christ returns! After the Judgment of the Nations, *every Jew on earth* will be saved!

So, then, if the budding of the fig tree do not represent Israel's re-birth in 1948, what *does* it represent? And what does the word "**generation**" mean? Well, the Greek word for "generation" (the word *genea*) can sometimes mean "race, stock, or lineage." If this be Jesus' meaning, then He is simply saying that the people of Israel will never be annihilated. They will continue to exist through the fires of the Tribulation, and will enter into the Kingdom age. This *could* be one possible meaning. However, I believe there is a better way to understand this verse. I believe that this word *genea* does mean "the people living within a certain number of years." However, Jesus wasn't talking about the generation of people living in *His* day: He was talking about the generation that will be living during the Tribulation. The generation that is living when the Tribulation judgments *begin* will also see Christ's *return* seven years later. Just as it is a short time from the budding of a fig tree in early spring until the beginning of summer, so it will be a short time from the beginning of the Tribulation judgments until the day when Christ returns to earth.

The "signs" that Jesus lists in **Matthew 24** are *not* things that will happen during this church age: rather, they are all things that will happen during the Tribulation. Yes, we may see increasing earthquakes in our day, and we may see the formation of a one-world government; but none of these things are "signs" to New Testament saints that the Rapture is near. All the signs of **Matthew 24** (the earthquakes, distress of nations, etc.) are signs that God has given to *Jewish believers living during the Tribulation*: and they are signs pointing to the fact that Christ's *Second Coming* to earth is very, very near.

## II. The permanence of God's Word (v. 35)

**(Read Matthew 24:35 again.)** For the second time in the book of **Matthew**, we find Jesus making the claim that until Heaven and earth pass away, His words will not pass away. Let's go back to **Matthew 5**, and refresh our memory of the *first* time that Jesus made this claim.

**Read Matthew 5:17-18.**

Brethren, there are countless churches today who, in their statement of faith, say something like this: "We believe that the words of Scripture, *as contained in the original autographs*, are the complete, verbally-inspired words of God." Now, what does that mean? Particularly, what does that little phrase, "as contained in the original autographs," mean? What it means is that this church believes that God gave His words perfectly, and completely, to the human authors, on the original parchments: **but they *don't* believe** that God has *perfectly preserved* all His words since then. Now, why would any Bible-preaching church *not* believe that God has perfectly preserved His words? Because they have bought into the claims of unbelieving, unregenerate scholars who say otherwise.

You see, most churches today use versions of the Bible that are based on a corrupt, ever-changing Greek text called "The Eclectic Text," or "The Critical Text." The Critical Text is based upon a small body of ancient Greek texts (about 40 in all, but mainly the Sinaiticus and the Alexandrian texts); and these texts are very corrupted. The Sinaiticus and Alexandrian texts, and others like them, don't even agree with each other! Our King James Version, on the other hand, is based on a *huge* body of *thousands* of ancient Greek texts, called the **Textus Receptus** (the "Received Text"); and they *do* agree between themselves. But here's the real clincher: the Received Text has **7% more content** than the Critical Text has (about the equivalent of the books of **1 and 2 Peter**). Why is the Received Text so much longer than the Critical Text? Because the Critical Text leaves out hundreds of words and phrases, and oftentimes whole verses. The ancient scribes who deleted these words had a theological agenda. They deleted these words to make Scripture more compatible with their heretical beliefs. Some of these deleted verses contain crucial doctrines—such as **Acts 8:37**, where Philip told the Ethiopian Eunuch that "***If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest***" be baptized. This verse clearly teaches that baptism is only for believers, and not for infants; yet, it is left out of almost all modern versions, because these versions are based on the Critical Text. Also, **1 John 5:7** is left out of the Critical Text. This is the verse that says, "***For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.***" This verse is the most crystal-clear declaration of the Triune Godhead in the entire Bible; yet, it is left out of most modern versions. Folks, there is a reason why we stick to the KJV, brethren! The men who translated it believed that God has preserved all His words; and they rejected the Greek texts that *left out* God's words.

Jesus said that until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or tittle of His word will pass away. By the way, what do the words “jot” and “tittle” mean? Well, the word “**jot**” comes from the Hebrew word *yod*; and *yod* is the name of the smallest consonant of the Hebrew alphabet. And what about “**tittle**”? This word is translated from the Greek word *charia*, which comes from the Hebrew word *chireq*; and *chireq* is the smallest *vowel* in the Hebrew alphabet. (It’s a single dot, representing the sound “i.”) So, what Jesus is saying is that until the end of the world, not even the smallest vowel or consonant of Scripture will be lost.

Now, this is an astonishing promise—so astonishing, in fact, that even many Christians cannot bring themselves to believe it. One well-known Christian apologist named Randall Price once wrote, “Can it be imagined that [God] would...so control...(the) hands of every scribe...so as to produce inerrant copies exactly matching the originals?...God could not do this because He *would* not do this.”<sup>2</sup> Folks, are we *really* going to agree with Dr. Price? Are we really going to go down the road that most neo-evangelical scholars have gone, and say that that God is unable, or unwilling, to preserve His every word? King David said, “***The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever.***” God expects us to keep and obey His every word; and He will *judge* men according to His every word. Yet, if God have not preserved His every word for us, how could we be completely sure of what He expects of us? And how could God judge us fairly? No, my friends: God is not unjust. He *will* preserve His every word to the end of time; and He will judge us accordingly.

**Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17.**

**Read John 12:48.**

Now, can we get any personal application from this verse? You bet we can! You see, Jesus is linking His promise in **verse 34** to His promise in **verse 35**. Just as the *generation of Tribulation believers* will not pass away until everything Christ has foretold comes to pass, so *Christ’s words* will not pass away until everything He has foretold about human history comes to pass (including the destruction of this present heaven and earth). Every promise that God has given us is sure to come to pass, because God’s words will never pass away: and that includes the promise of the *Rapture*, for us New Testament saints. As surely as the Tribulation saints will have the promise of the Second Coming, we have the promise of the “catching up” of the saints to Heaven, seven years *before* Christ’s return to earth. Keep looking for the Lord from heaven, Christian! He is coming back!

### **III. The plea to be watchful (vv. 36-42)**

**(Read Matthew 24:36 again.)** Brethren, this verse is the key to the rest of **Matthew 24**, and for most of **chapter 25**. Every exhortation and warning that Jesus gives from this point is based on the premise that *we do not know the day or hour* of His return. No man, no matter how wise he may be, can figure it out; and even the *angels* (who are way smarter than we are) know the date. Even *Christ Himself, in His humanity*, didn't know the time of His return. This is explicitly stated in the book of **Mark**.

### **Read Mark 13:32.**

This verse has been used by many cults to question the deity of Christ. The question they ask is, "How could Jesus be God if He doesn't know the hour of His own return? He *can't* be God, because He admitted that He isn't omniscient." Christian, could you answer that charge? You'd better be able to give a biblical answer, because you are bound to be asked this question sooner or later—whether it be by a Muslim, or a Jehovah's Witness. What is the answer? Simply this: Before Christ took on flesh, He had only one nature—His divine nature as God. However, when He became a man, He also took on a *human* nature. He is fully God, and fully Man; yet, He is *one Person*. He is not "half God" and "half man"; nor is He two persons in one body; nor is He a phantom who simply appeared to have a body. Rather, He has two complete natures, which are distinct from each other, yet inseparable.

What this means is that Jesus often used His divine omniscience; yet, at other times, He limited Himself to His *human* knowledge. Now, Jesus' omniscience is very easy to spot throughout the Gospels. For example, John said that Jesus didn't need ***"that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man."*** More than once, the disciples acknowledged that Jesus knew ***"all things"***; and Jesus never contradicted that statement. Instead, He *confirmed* it. Jesus knew exactly who Nathaniel was, and *where* he was from, before he met him for the first time. He knew exactly where the swarm of fish was. He knew exactly which fish had a coin in its mouth. He knew exactly when and where the disciples would meet the man with a pitcher of water. Time and time again, Jesus claimed that He knows the Father in the exact same way that the Father knows Him. This could be true only if Jesus' knowledge were identical to His Father's knowledge! Jesus *is* God; and as God, He knows all things.

Yet, *as a Man*, Jesus ***"increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."*** Jesus had to be potty trained, and taught how to talk, and walk, and read and write, and study Scripture. Yet, even in His infancy, He was Almighty God. (He simply chose not to *use* His power as God to make life easier for Himself.) As a Man, Jesus was finite, having to be in one place at one time; yet, as God, He never ceased to be infinite and omnipresent. As a Man, He needed water, food, and rest; yet, as God, He was omnipotent. And though, as a Man, He was finite in knowledge, yet as God, He was omniscient.

When the Son of God came into this world, He emptied Himself of His glory; yet, He never ceased to be God. At certain times, He chose not to use His omniscience; and at other times, He used it. **Mark 13:32** is an example of a time when Jesus chose *not* to use His omniscience. If He had been using His divine omniscience at that particular moment, He would *not* have said "***neither the Son***"; but because He was *not* using His divine attributes at that moment, He acknowledged that even He did not know the day or the hour of His return.

With that in mind, let's look closely at what Jesus said about His return. We will then look at one more parallel passage of Scripture, in **Luke 17**. (Read **Matthew 24:37-42**.)

**Read Luke 17:26-37.**

This section of **Matthew 24**, as well as **Luke 17**, are often used as proof-texts to show that the Rapture will come before the Tribulation. Many well-meaning believers, who, like ourselves, believe in the pre-Tribulation Rapture, look at this passage and say, "See? We believers will be 'taken' to Heaven in the Rapture, and the lost will be 'left' down here on earth, to go through the Tribulation." However, if you look closely at those last couple verses in **Luke 17**, you'll notice that the disciples asked, "***Where, Lord?***" (In other words, "*Where* will they be taken?") Jesus' answer was, "***Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.***" In other words, those who are "taken" will be taken to the place where they will be eaten by eagles! That's not a good place to be "taken," is it? Obviously, Jesus was referring to the **Battle of Armageddon**, where the followers of the Antichrist will be eaten by the eagles.

According to this verse, then, it is the *unbelievers* who will be "taken," and the *believers* who will be "left." It was the same way in the destruction of Sodom. The wicked people of Sodom were "taken" away in the fiery judgment, while righteous Lot was "left" alive. Likewise, in the Flood, the despisers of God were "taken" away in the Flood waters, while Noah's family was "left" alive in the Ark. And so it will be at the time of Christ's return. Unbelievers will be taken away in *judgment*, at the Battle of Armageddon; and believers will be "left" here on earth, to enter into the glorious 1,000-year Kingdom.

Now, by the end of the Tribulation, there will, apparently, still be some semblance of normal, everyday life. Despite the horrific judgments, life will have to go on. People will still be married; and everyday tasks, such as making bread, will still have to be performed. Not only that, but there will even be interaction between believers and unbelievers. Evidently, there will still be some who have not yet decided to take the mark of the Beast (perhaps because they are being influenced by Christian family members, with whom they are sharing food and shelter); yet, they haven't decided to *believe on Christ* yet, either: and they will be trying to decide which way to go. We know there *will* still be such interaction between believers and



unbelievers, because Jesus said that two women will be grinding together at the mill; that two will be in one bed; and that two will be walking together in the field; yet, in each of these pairs, one will be a saved person, and the other a lost person, who will be taken away in judgment. Both the saved *and* the unsaved person will be snatched away by the angels, to attend the Battle of Armageddon, and the Judgment of the Nations; but when the judgment is over, only the one who believed on Christ will be left to enter the Kingdom.

**Conclusion:** Folks, it's much the same way today. To this very hour, many people are "on the fence" about Christ; and although they do "Christian" things, and enjoy the company of born-again Christians, they sense, deep in their hearts, that they themselves are not truly born again. Perhaps *you* are not sure whether you are with Christ, or against Him. If so, I'll say it plainly: you must be born again! You must personally repent of your sin, and place your complete trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save you. No believer will be able to "vouch" for you when you stand before God: *you* must personally put your trust in Christ. If you have never been saved, I urge you to believe on Christ today! And if you are saved, I urge you to watch and wait for Jesus' return! We aren't watching for Christ's *Second* Coming, as the Tribulation saints will do; but we *are* watching for the *Rapture*, which could be at any moment. Don't be caught sleeping, spiritually speaking, when Christ appears. Don't be saying something, or looking at something, or doing something, that would grieve the Lord. Don't be caught *failing* to do something that you *should* be doing. Be *watching and waiting*, and serving the Lord faithfully until He comes.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Morgan, *Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), p. 688.

<sup>2</sup> Randall Price, *The Original Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), p. 253.