

It Is Near

End Times (Part 7)

Mark 13:28-31 (Mt.24:32-35, Lk.21:29-33) 11/6/2021

Summary: When you see all the things in the Olivet Discourse happening (beginning of pains, the abomination, and great tribulation), instead of fretting, *know* something. Know with certainty that ripe figs mean summer (harvest) is coming. No one gets away with anything. Be encouraged. The evil generation won't escape. And you can take those words to the bank.

What good is it to know that his coming is near? Would you live differently if you knew for sure it would be in your lifetime? Shouldn't you live that way all the time? And if we can't know when it will happen, what does "near" even mean?

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Harmony

Matthew 24:32 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 33 Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. 34 I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

36 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; 39 and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two women will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. 42 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. 45 "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? 46 It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. 47 I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. 48 But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' 49 and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 50 The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. 51 He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Mark 13:28 "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. 30 I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

32 "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. 34 It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. 35 "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back-- whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. 36 If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!' "

Luke 21:29 He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree **and all the trees.** 30 When they sprout leaves, you can **see for yourselves** and know that summer is near. 31 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that **the kingdom of God** is near. 32 "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

:34 "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. 35 For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

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Introduction

You Can Know but Can't Know?

We have two paragraphs left in the Olivet Discourse, and they seem to say opposite things. The final paragraph (starting in v.32) is all about how no one knows the day or hour. But the paragraph right before that (that we're going to look at tonight) is about how to know when the end is near. If you underline the word, "know" in each paragraph, you'll see the tension.

Mark 13:28 Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. **29** Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.

32 "No one knows about that day or hour ... **33** You do not know when that time will come. **35** ... you do not know when the owner of the house will come back.

In the second paragraph, knowing the time is so impossible, not even the angels or even Jesus himself could know. And in the first paragraph, it's so easy, it's like figuring out what season it is. I'm pretty clueless—I never know what date it is, I never have any clue how long before the next holiday is, but even in the fog I live in, even I know when it's summer. I go outside, it's 98 degrees, "Yep, that aint winter."

So which is it—any idiot can figure it out, or no one will ever figure it out? Some have said, "You can't know the day or hour, but maybe you can figure out the general time period—the week or month." But Jesus is clear

The only way to be ready when it happens is to remain ready all the time. That's the whole point of vv.32-35. And listen to what Jesus said right before his ascension.

Acts 1:6 ... Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Other translations say, "times or periods" or "times or seasons." You can't know the hour, the day, the time, the season, the period, the epoch. It's not something you'll be able to forecast. You don't know when the master will return, so you have to just stay ready continually.

What's the Point?

And even if you could figure out the time, what would be the point? Suppose you figure out that Jesus will return in your lifetime--would that change the way you live? Whatever it is you want to be doing

when Jesus returns, or a month before he returns, don't you want to live that way all the time anyway, even if his return isn't until after you die?

So what's the purpose? What does Jesus want us to get from this paragraph? How does it impact how we live? It must be important. Each of the gospel writers include selective parts of the Olivet Discourse and leave other parts out, but none of them leave this paragraph out. But why? I read it and think, "What am I missing? Because it doesn't seem to me like it's saying much of anything."

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Someone might say, "Darrell, you're overthinking this. It's just saying when you see the signs, then you know it's about to happen—simple as that." But if it's that simplistic and straightforward, just stating the obvious, why would we need an illustration? And why would Jesus say it's a lesson we need to learn?

Mark 13:28 Now learn this lesson from the fig tree.

Literally it's, "**Learn from the parable of the fig tree.**" Jesus explained back in ch.4 why he used parables. It was to hide the truth from people who don't have eyes to see it. They aren't simplistic, obvious illustrations. To get the point of a parable requires eager searching, careful thought, and spiritual insight. Jesus is signaling to us that there's more to this than meets the eye.

A Parable about Judgment

So let's see if we can obey Jesus' command and learn the lesson of this parable. One thing we can say at the outset is it's going to have something to do with judgment. Fig trees have come up twice before in this same context, and both had to do with judgment. The first one was when Jesus killed a fruitless fig tree right before he ransacked the Temple. That was a clear illustration of judgment.

The Other Two Fig Tree Illustrations

The other one is even closer in the context—it's in the paragraph immediately before this one—the passage we looked at last time. I didn't mention it because of time restraints, but in v.25 when Jesus said the stars will fall from the sky—that's an allusion to Isaiah 34.¹ It's a passage about God's final, end-times judgment on the nations.

Isaiah 34:3 The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them ... **4** All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.

So when Jesus says, "Learn from the parable of the fig tree," those are the images that would immediately come to the disciples' minds. The fruitless tree Jesus killed to show judgment on Israel, and the powers of the heavens falling like withered, overripe figs to show the judgment on the nations.

Summertime = Harvest

That's clue #1 that it's a parable about judgment. Clue #2 is when Jesus mentions summertime. When you're talking about figs, the words "summer" and "harvest" are used interchangeably in the Bible.² Summertime is harvest time. And that's significant because judgment day is also commonly depicted in terms of a harvest.

¹ Isaiah 34:3-4 is the only place in the OT that speaks of stars falling from the sky.

² Some examples of "harvest" and "summer" used in parallel lines: Pr.6:8, 26:1, Jer.8:20.

Joel 3:13 Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow so great is their wickedness!"

Revelation 14:14 ... seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a ... sharp sickle in his hand. 15 Then another angel ... called ... "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." 16 So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

Jesus told a whole parable about that, and he said, **"The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels"** (Matthew 13:39). So here's the point of this paragraph: Jesus is saying, "Just as the leaves on the fig trees tell you the harvest is near, so when you see all these things I've been talking about, you know judgment day is near."

Nearness

Be Careful

But what does "near" mean? Be careful with this. Remember, Jesus' #1 concern about the end times is, "Don't be deceived." And one way the false teachers deceive people is by talking about the nearness of Jesus' coming.

Luke 13:8 "... Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them."

There's a wrong way to interpret the word, "near" that can lead people astray. So what's the right interpretation?

Near in Time?

Most people take the word to mean near in time—a short time as opposed to a long time. But how short? Short is a relative term. How long is a short time? A month? Is a month a short time or a long time? Well, if you're talking about how long you've been in bed with the flu, it's a long time because it's longer than normal. But if you're talking about how long your career lasted, I'd say it's a pretty short time because it's way shorter than normal. But with the Second Coming, there's no "normal" to compare it to. So what would "a short time" even mean—how short?

Those who believe this is only about 70 A.D. would say, "That's easy—it's near in the sense that it's within a generation." But if that's what it means, then it was already a short time when Jesus was speaking. If it was already near, why would he say, "When you see all these things happening, then it will be near?" Those who take it to refer only to 70 A.D. say that "all these things" refers to the signs leading up to the war, starting in 66 A.D. So then why would James say Jesus' coming was already near when he wrote his book way back around 40 A.D.?

James 5:8 ... the Lord's coming is near ... the Judge is standing at the door.

Literally it's, "the Lord's coming *has drawn* near." It's the perfect tense, which refers to a past action that has continuing results. It had already drawn near prior to James writing—that can't refer to 70 A.D. because none of the signs of the Jewish war had happened yet.

Not only that, but 70 A.D. only affected unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem. James is writing specifically to believing Jews outside of Israel—to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations (James 1:1).

If when Jesus said, "It is near" he was talking about nearness in time, there are two possibilities. Either he meant us to be able to figure out the time, which would contradict the next paragraph which says no one can figure out the time, or he meant it to be so vague that we can't figure out the time, which makes it meaningless if it's a statement about time.

When the NT writers talk about Jesus' coming, they use this same word, "near," but when they talk about it, they don't say, "When this or that happens, then it will be near." They all say it's already near—no matter when they're writing. James, the earliest book around 40 A.D.) "**The Lord's coming is near.**" Revelation, the last book (probably in the 90's A.D.)

Revelation 22:10 ... the time is near.

1 Peter 4:7 The end of all things is near.

Romans 13:12 ... The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

James, John, Peter, Paul—they all say it's near, but did any of those writers know when the Second Coming would be? No. No one knows, not even the angels. So if they don't know when it would be, how could they say for sure that it was near in time? Someone tells you something is happening really soon.

"When will it happen?"

"I have no idea."

"Then how could you possibly know whether it's soon?"

Nearness of Proximity

So all that to say, I don't think Jesus is talking about nearness of time. So what other kind of nearness is there? Does Jesus give any clue what kind of nearness he has in mind? Yes, he does. Right after he says, "You know it is near," he gives a word-picture to give us an idea of what kind of nearness. And it's not a word-picture that has to do with time. It's a picture that has to do with location—near in the sense of close by.

29 ... you know that it is near, *right at the door.*

It's near in the sense that it's looming. We use the word, "near" or "close" this way all the time. A parent might say to a child, "You're this close to being grounded for a week." The point isn't about time, it's about a looming threat. Your accountant might look at your books and say, "You're just inches from triggering an audit." Or, "Our country is very near a full-blown recession." It's looming, it's at the door, it wouldn't take much for it to be triggered and burst through that door.

If you want a biblical example, how about this:

Hebrews 6:8 If the land bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near (same word) to being cursed.

That's not about time; it's about whether or not that land keeps producing thorns or makes a change.

If you look at all the places that the nearness of his coming is discussed in the NT, that use of the word "near" makes a lot more sense than a temporal use. They don't know when it will be, but they know the threat of it is looming, it's on the verge of happening, it may very well spring on you, and it wouldn't take much to trigger it.

Impact on How We Live

And that explains why it matters for the way we live. Go back to the James passage, because that's the closest to Jesus' wording here, because he mentions nearness and Jesus being at the door. And he connects it directly to our behavior.

James 5:8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9 Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

So the nearness of Christ's coming should keep us from grumbling against one another. When something is looming close by—that affects your decision making. When you're in kindergarten, graduation from high school is so remote, it has zero impact on what you do, how you feel, decisions you

make—it's not near enough to be any kind of a factor in your life. Avoiding cancer when you're 5—not a factor, not something you give any thought to. The Second Coming is never like that. We don't know when it's going to happen, but it's always looming, always breathing down our neck, always a factor. It's a driving factor in how we live, the decisions we make, how we think, how we interpret things, and how we feel.

Let It Remind You

But if that's the case—if it's *always* near (near for James in 40 A.D., near for John in 90 A.D., and near for us), then why does Jesus say it's only near “when you see these things happening”? Isn't it near whether you see them or not? Yes, it is. Jesus doesn't say it's not near until you see these things. It's always near. What he says is, when you see these things then you *know* that it is near. There's a big emphasis in this passage on the concept of knowing—the word “know” appears 5 times. It's all about knowing, being aware, having certainty.

The Certainty of Christ's Words

The point isn't, “When you see the abomination and all the rest, then get ready.” The point is, “When you see those things, don't be disheartened—know that judgment day is on a hair trigger.” He's not saying, “When you see the signs, then try to calculate the timing.” He's saying, “When you see the signs, let them remind you that I'm standing right at the door, and harvest time is coming.”

And that fits the context of the paragraph as a whole, which isn't about timing; it's about knowing and being reassured. Look at the concluding statement in the paragraph.

31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

You can absolutely take these words to the bank.

Judgment day is always looming, but you can't be thinking about it every second of every day. You have to think about all kinds of other things. But there is a time when it's really important to Jesus that you do think about it. When is that? When you see all these things happening—the beginning of pains, wars, disasters, betrayal, persecution, abomination of desolation, the great tribulation—when you see all that, when you notice those things, when those things barge their way into your life and you're distressed by them—Jesus says, “it's in those moments that I want you to know something.” In fact, the word, “know” could be translated as an imperative. Jesus is commanding us: “In those moments, you must know this.” Know what? You must know that all those things you're seeing—those are ripe figs. And you know what ripe figs mean—harvest coming. Judgment day is looming just outside the door. This is what we do instead of getting flustered about all the insanity in our world. We remind ourselves anew that Jesus is near and his coming is a hair's breadth from being triggered.

What does this verse add to the Olivet Discourse? It adds something very important. It teaches us that whenever we see things that deserve judgment—we are to see them as ripe figs which redoubles our confidence that judgment day is looming. When you see human trafficking at the Mexico border, does that help you pinpoint when Jesus will come back? No, but it should remind you that Jesus is indeed coming back and he's coming with a sharp sickle.

Always Applicable

That's an encouragement when we see the world coming apart at the seams, and it's also a check on our own behavior. Because not only is the final day of judgment looming at all times, but smaller, short term samples of judgment day are also looming. That's why James says to Christians, “Don't grumble or slander one another because the judge is at the door.” He could come in a little mini-judgment—a little miniature Second Coming to judge you at any moment. That's what happened to the Corinthians who were dishonoring communion.

1 Corinthians 11:29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

He specifically calls it a judgment—not that they will go to hell, but they did get sick and die. It's not the final judgment, but it is a small-scale sample of the final judgment. When you see “all these things” happening—you see persecution and evil and chaos and all the various ripe figs—Jesus wants you to know that his coming is near. It's near in the sense that the Second Coming is looming, and it's near in the sense that a scale model of judgment day could spring on those people at any moment.

Watching the Day Approach

Hebrews 10:25 ... let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Can you see it getting closer in time? No, because you don't know when it will happen. But you can watch the figs get riper and riper. And what he's saying there is the more you see the figs ripening for judgment all around you, the more you step up your efforts to encourage the brothers. Interpreting the things around us as ripe figs isn't easy. We forget, and so we need to remind each other.

All those rioters last year that did such horrible things—they seem to have paid no price. All these corrupt politicians, corrupt officials in the FBI—they commit so many crimes and carry out so many injustices and nothing ever happens to them. People in the mainstream press lie and destroy people's lives, and they just get rich and famous from it. It's so easy to start to fret about that. But Jesus says, “When you see that stuff, instead of getting all worked up, getting into a bad mood, becoming fearful (“Oh no—what is the world coming to?”), getting depressed or exasperated or hopeless —instead of all that, just keep reminding yourself, “Man those figs are getting ripe. That fig tree is just screaming for harvest day to come, and the harvester is just outside that door sharpening his sickle.”

This Generation Won't Escape

Well, what about v.30? How does that fit in with all this?

30 I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

What does that have to do with this motif of knowing and being confident and reassured? It's the proof that assures us Jesus is a true prophet. If this verse sounds familiar, it's because Jesus just said something really similar back in ch.9.

Mark 9:1 And he said to them, "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power."

How could they know that all this amazing, glorious, future kingdom stuff Jesus has been talking about will all really happen? Jesus says, “I'm going to give you a sample here and now.” And in the very next verse he takes a few of them up on a mountain and reveals his glory in the Transfiguration. Was the Transfiguration all there is to the glory of Christ's eternal kingdom? No. It was just a sample to give them confidence to reassure them that they could count on all the grandiose claims he was making. It's the same here. Jesus said not one stone of the temple building would be left on another, and within 40 years, that's exactly what happened. That was a near fulfillment that proved he was a true prophet and his message could be trusted—both the near term aspects and the long term aspects. One shoe dropped in 70 A.D., and that's proof the other shoe will drop on the rest of mankind.

But there's more to it than just that. Notice that word, “generation.” In chapter 9, Jesus said, “Some who are standing here” will see it. But here he doesn't say “some who are standing here.” Nor does he say, “you will see it” or “they will see it,” which are the two words he's being using all through the sermon. He's used the second person (you) an unusually large number of times in this sermon.

⁵ **"Watch out that no one deceives you.**

⁷ **When you hear of wars and rumors of wars**

⁹ **"You must be on your guard. You will be ... flogged in the synagogues. ... you will stand before governors and kings**

¹¹ **Whenever you are arrested**

¹³ **All men will hate you because of me**

¹⁴ **"When you see 'the abomination**

Really heavy focus on the disciples in those first 14 verses. Then there's a noticeable shift from the second person (you) to the third person (they). It's especially noticeable in v.26.

²⁶ **"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds.**

That switching back and forth makes sense if it's a prophecy with a near fulfillment and a more distant fulfillment. But here, Jesus doesn't say, "you" or "they." He says, "this generation."

That's striking if you pay attention to the way Jesus uses the word, "generation." He's uses it in some kind of odd ways.

Mark 8:12 And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."

Why doesn't he just say, "Why do *you* seek a sign?"

Mark 8:38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Again, why specify that generation? Isn't what he's saying true of everyone at all times?

Mark 9:19 "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me."

The one common theme you'll see in every instance where Jesus uses the word, "generation" is that he's really unhappy with whomever he's talking about. He never uses the word in a positive context. You know how people have certain words they use when they're really angry? When you were a kid, maybe with your parents it was your middle name, right? For me, if mom said my middle name, it was bad—if she followed it with the words, "so help me," it was *really* bad. "Darrell Richard, so help me ..."—she didn't even have to finish the sentence. That's how it was with Jesus with the word, "generation."³ Whenever he said that word, you can picture a deep scowl on his face and an angry tone.

Here's the meaning of v.29: Jesus is sitting there on the Mount of Olives talking to his disciples about the coming judgment points toward the Temple across the valley from where they're sitting, and says, "Those guys—the ones getting fat and rich by scamming money from poor widows—that ... *generation*, I promise you, they won't escape." And the disciples say, "Ooh, he called them a generation. He's mad."

Can you see how that fits with the last two verses? He's saying, "When you see all this chaos—the wars, the betrayal, the persecution, make sure you know those are just ripe figs that prove the harvest is near. And those skunks in the Temple right now, I tell you the truth, they will not escape the sickle. That ... generation—the scribes, the chief priests, the leaders who were devouring widows' households, so help me ..."

Does that mean every one of those members of the Sanhedrin lived until 70 A.D.? No, I'm sure most of them didn't. The point is, whether they suffered through that preview of God's wrath or not, none of them would ultimately escape God's wrath.

All Evil Generations

³ The word, "generation" tends to be used in very negative contexts in the OT prophets as well.

So again, the point isn't to pinpoint timing; the point is to solidify our certainty and confidence in the coming judgment. And it applies to all evil generations.⁴ Listen to how Jesus used the word, "generation" right before this when he was rebuking the temple authorities.

Matthew 23:34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues ... 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

So there, "this generation" includes the people who killed Zechariah 500 years earlier. Either those are the oldest Pharisees ever, or Jesus is saying they are part of the generation of prophet-killers that had been going for over 500 years.

So the idea is that not only would that generation of Jesus' day not escape, but the whole line of rebellious people from the beginning all the way to the Second coming—none of them will escape judgment.

Eternal Words

31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

From the perspective of human beings, the earth and sun are the most permanent, stable, long-lasting realities in our existence. Countries and kingdoms come and go. So many civilizations that seemed like they could never be defeated have disappeared into the pages of history. Most of us, if we imagine the future—we imagine Jesus coming back—we think of him coming back to a world that has a United States of America. That's understandable, because from the perspective of my lifetime, even if I get my full 70+ years, compared to that, the United States is incredibly stable. But even if it lasts another 500 years, still, that's nothing compared to the earth. If you could watch human history on a video and fast forward so you could watch the entire span of human history in 5 minutes, you would see huge kingdoms rise, dominate the world, and fall in less than a second. Generations would be living and dying, coming and going, moving here and there, and in the background the earth would just be sitting there staying the same. This planet is almost exactly the same as it was thousands of years ago. When Noah looked up and saw the moon, he saw exactly the same thing we see when we look today. Compared to everything else we know, nothing has anything close to the stability of the heavens and earth.

⁴ I believe the same can be said of v.29. This may explain the non-specific language in that verse.

29 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door.

Every word in the sentence has an element of ambiguity. When you see these things? Which things? You know "it" is near—what is near? And how near is near? And who is the "you"? Is that the Apostles, first Century believers, all believers, all people?

I think all that general language allows us to take this almost like a proverb, and we can apply it in small contexts and big contexts.

I've tried to make a case in these studies for the fact that parts of the Olivet Discourse apply to 70 A.D. and parts apply to the Second Coming. I think the parable of the fig tree applies to both. The people back then could see "these things" happening—they could see the Roman army coming and the Jewish rebellion and say, "Yep. Harvest time is about to hit Jerusalem." And at the end of the age people will be able to see "these things" happening—the abomination of desolation, the great apostasy, the great tribulation, and say, "The final harvest is right around the corner."

And that helps us understand how to interpret the other NT writers' use of Jesus' words about nearness. Because prior to 70 A.D., they didn't have any way of knowing that there would be a near fulfillment and a distant fulfillment. Remember, when the disciples first asked their question, they conflated the destruction of the Temple and the end of the age. They assumed both would happen at the same time. They didn't realize they were asking about two separate things, and no one else knew either until after 70 A.D. 70 A.D. happened, and it became clear that Jerusalem was judged, but the nations weren't judged, and the final, uncontested direct rule of Christ over all people hadn't been set up yet. The final Judgment didn't happen. So then it became clear that there was still a future element.

But how much separation would there be between the near fulfillment and the ultimate fulfillment? They didn't know.

And so they are what we base our stability on. We define “up” in relationship to the ground. The earth is our foundation. If you’re up on some shaky, unstable perch, or you’re on a flight with really bad turbulence or engine trouble, you long to get your feet on solid ground. If you want to make sure a building doesn’t topple, you drive the footings where? Deep into the earth. It’s our stability.

Time is measured by the movements of the creation. When our calendars get off by a day on leap year, we adjust them to match what the earth is doing because that’s the baseline.

So when Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away; my words will never pass away,” he’s saying, “Compared to my words, the most stable, permanent thing you know is transient.” The heavens and earth are mankind’s baseline stability, and Jesus says, “For you, my words are the foundation of stability.” His words are the standard by which we measure which way is up and which way is down. His words are the ultimate, final bedrock foundation upon which all stability must be built or fall. His words are our security when the earth itself quakes and the mountains slide into the sea. His words alone point us to true north. When our ideas and beliefs drift from reality, we correct them by syncing up to Jesus’ words. When the storms of life hit, those whose foundation is the words of Christ can stand firm. And when the final storm of judgment day comes and the heavens roll up like a scroll and basic, core elements of the earth are destroyed with fire, even those who have footings deep into bedrock will fall. Only those whose lives are built on the words of Christ will stand. Only those people who are relying on those words, taking their direction from those words, looking at reality through the lens of those words will avoid being shattered along with the old heavens and earth.

So Jesus says, “When you turn on the news and things are worse than you ever imagined they could get, what should you do? Freak out? No. Ignore it and bury your head in the sand? No. Take some anti-anxiety meds? No. When you see all these things happening, just know that his words won’t fail. He said ripe figs bring judgment; ripe figs will bring judgment. He is near, close by, and his return is looming. Judgment day will happen, and not one single sinner will escape it, every evil will be punished and all wrongs will be made right. And he will come with his angels and gather his elect.