

Earthy Wisdom: Jesus' Parables of Creation
Part 5: Parable of the Budding Fig Tree

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Scripture: Matthew 24:1-36

On YouTube, there's a fun video made in a high school chemistry class where the teacher invites his class to gather around a beaker of clear liquid that had been sitting on top of a shelf since the beginning of the school year. Using tweezers to pick up a tiny crystal of a certain kind of salt, the teacher drops the crystal into the beaker. Immediately, hundreds, then thousands of tiny crystals form around the single crystal, shooting out delicate strands of crystals in every direction.

"Oh, snap!" someone shouts, "It's like a sea urchin!"

"It looks like a puff ball!" shouts another.

Several "Oh my God!" and "This is so cool!" exclamations later, the puff ball/urchin has expanded throughout the beaker, forming a single, solid, crystalline cylinder.

If you're familiar with chemistry – or candy-making – you know how this phenomenon works. You gradually heat up water while dissolving more and more of a certain salt or sugar into it. The hotter the solution, the more salt or sugar the solution can hold. Once the solution is very hot and completely saturated, you gradually cool it down.

As the solution cools, one might expect to see the dissolved crystals reappearing, since the solution can't theoretically contain the higher amount of solute at a lower temperature. Yet because crystals need other crystals – or "nucleation sites" – to form, the solution remains in a completely liquid state.

Such a solution is said to be "supersaturated." While "supersaturated solutions" can remain in this state for long periods of time, they are inherently unstable. They want to return to a state of equilibrium. All it takes is a single "seed" crystal to transform liquid crystals into solid ones.

I think major shifts in human history and culture often work like a supersaturated solution.

Historians often focus on a single individual who causes a major shift – like Jesus, or Gandhi, or Joan of Arc, or Martin Luther King, Jr.. Yet, as wise and talented as these individuals were, their outsized impact on the wider world cannot be attributed simply to the greatness of their particular personality, intellect, or wisdom. Rather, these individuals tend to act like seed crystals in a supersaturated solution.

While it is true that the changes these heroic people effected were directly related to the ways they were able to articulate or demonstrate a certain way of life that resonated with

others, it is equally true that, unless many others were already primed to hear and respond to their message, these solitary heroes would not likely be remembered by history.

It's like the fig tree in Jesus's parable. The branches don't start becoming tender, nor do the leaves and fruit appear until there has been enough sunlight, water, and consumption of nutrients in the soil to prime the tree to offer its fruit.

By time Jesus arrived on the scene in the 1st Century, the Holy Spirit had been priming Israelite society for centuries to receive his message. Israel was, effectively, a "supersaturated solution" by the time Jesus was born.

While Jesus did not die with the majority of Israel on his side, he had implanted a significant seed that would rapidly grow after his death and spread throughout the Mediterranean world. The growth of Christianity wouldn't be as rapid as those crystals in the beaker, yet by historical standards, Jesus marks a shear-point in human history. Christians suffered wave after wave of persecution by the Roman Empire, yet people were converting to Christianity so rapidly that the Romans literally could not kill enough Christians to outpace them.

Within three centuries after Jesus' death, Christianity's roots ran so deep and wide throughout the Roman Empire that Emperor Constantine not only ended the persecution of Christians but became a convert himself. And, by the end of the century, the Edict of Thessalonica (380 CE) made the religion the Romans had originally banned the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Now, I have attributed the cause of Jesus' astonishing success to the work of the Holy Spirit acting upon the Jewish people for centuries before his birth. In doing so, by no means do I mean to diminish Jesus's personal power or influence. In fact, this view of God's work in history makes Jesus and his work more impressive, not less. He was the culmination and fulfillment of centuries of Spirit-inspired hopes and dreams of the Israelite people. Naturally, I say this as a Christian, not a Jew.

Unfortunately, however, there is a basic principle in life that even God seemingly has to work within and around. That is, for every action, there is a reaction. I'm not so sure it is equal and opposite of the original, like Newtown's Third Law of Motion, but it at least acts contrary to the original action. The Holy Spirit may have been gradually supersaturating faith and culture of the Mediterranean world for many years, but alongside it we can trace a darker energy. An energy of domination and control that infected the Romans, and an energy of vengeance and righteous wrath among the Israelites.

This energy of domination had been tightening its grip on Israelite society for about sixty years before Jesus was born, squashing the hopes of many that Israel would ever live as free and independent nation.

The energy of vengeance and righteous wrath had been building in response to Roman domination among groups that eventually became known by such names as the Zealots and the Sicarii, among others. The Zealots looked to a day when Israel would openly revolt against the Roman Empire, and actively prepared for it. The Sicarii – who were named

after a form of dagger they wielded – were a sect more zealous than Zealots. They became widely feared for their cloak and dagger tactics, publicly assassinating both Romans and Jews who they felt had collaborated with the Romans.

This growing power of darkness is the backdrop of Jesus Matthew 24, where Jesus warns of a day when “not one stone [of the Temple and surrounding buildings] will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” He also warns, “when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place [that is, the Temple], as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel ... then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; someone on the housetop must not go down to take what is in the house; someone in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For at that time there will be great suffering.”

Many people think that Jesus was talking about some sort of distant, apocalyptic End Times, but Jesus clearly states, “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” If Jesus were predicting an Apocalypse, then why would he advise people to flee to the hills without returning home to collect their possessions, or pray that the events not take place in winter or on a sabbath?

The event Jesus was warning people about was the Destruction of Jerusalem and Judaism’s Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. Certainly, there were people alive in Jesus’s day who would live to see this one. And it would all happen so quickly that no one who survived had the luxury of retrieving their worldly possessions before they fled and the city was burned.

Leading up to that terrible day in 70 CE, the Roman government had become so tired of the regular insurrections led by the Zealots, Sicarii, and others that they decided to put an end to the mayhem once and for all. To this day, you can walk the base of the Western Wall in Jerusalem – also known as the Wailing Wall – and find massive stones lying in the very spot where they were thrown down in 70 CE when the Roman soldiers pulled down the Temple before setting it ablaze.

So, here before us in Matthew 24, we are witnessing the ripening of two different kinds of First Century fruit – or the crystalizing of two very different kinds of saturated solutions.

On the one hand was the Zealot movement, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and dispersal of the Jewish people to the corners of the earth for the next two thousand years. On the other hand, there was the Jesus movement, which led to the death of a number of Jesus’s followers, but eventually converted the Roman Empire itself.

Curiously, the Zealot movement and its message of vengeance against their enemies not only utterly failed leave more than a small scratch on the Roman Empire, but failed the Jewish people as a whole, forcing them into exile for nearly 20 centuries. Yet the Jesus movement, which taught people to love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, and pray for their persecutors – ultimately led to the conversion of the Roman Empire itself.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that many of Jesus's followers died while loving their enemies and praying for their persecutors as they were being burnt at the stake or thrown to lions. Jesus never promised that following him would be easy. Following Jesus simply held the promise of crystalizing God's intent for the world. For those early Christian martyrs, this was apparently enough.

Now, I must acknowledge one other thing besides the fact that loving your enemies in the name of Jesus may result in some of them killing you before the rest convert. What needs to be acknowledged is that Matthew 24 seems to be a collection of predictions made by Jesus about the coming destruction and fall of Jerusalem that were later confused with predictions that were circulating in the first century about an eventual apocalypse and end of human history. Whether these latter predictions were made by Jesus himself or his early community is unclear.

For instance, in our reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus also speaks of a time when "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

People often associate these words with Jesus's Second Coming. I have always considered the Second Coming as Pentecost Sunday, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples – which early Christians also believed was the Living Spirit of the Resurrected Christ. I have taken the scant references in the Gospels to more apocalyptic events to be the result of later Christian confusion over the meaning of Jesus's words.

Fueling my skepticism about a future, apocalyptic Second Coming, I have found that Christian history is littered with times when Christians have fervently believed that Jesus is coming back the day after tomorrow ... and this day never came. In the meantime, preachers who proclaimed Christ's immanent return managed to shake a lot of people up and get them to do things they would later regret (like giving away all their possessions). No small number these apocalyptic preachers and their churches also benefitted financially from such End Times certainty.

Having offered my skepticism and reasons for considering Jesus's words to be related simply to the Fall of Jerusalem – which many, indeed, were – I have also felt in the last 10 years or so that something major is afoot in our world. Something so big that, if put on a scale between Zero to Jesus-level magnitude, this is shaping up to be Jesus-level.

Really, we need Jesus-level intervention of some sort, don't we? In the last century, we have developed multiple means of effecting our own extinction. Nuclear holocaust could do it. Runaway climate change could do it, particularly when accompanied by the inevitable political and social unrest and potential for more frequent global pandemics. And, just a couple months ago, the leading AI researchers and CEOs of the world were so alarmed about the technologies that they themselves are racing to create that they issued the

following twenty-two-word statement: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.”

Given all this potential for widespread destruction, it is no wonder that the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists announced this year that we are at “90 seconds to midnight” on the Doomsday Clock they have been updating for the last 75 years!

What is striking to me is that the more ancient predictions of the End Times have been based on religious belief alone. Now, the warnings aren’t simply coming from the religious community, but the scientific and technological communities.

Could it be that various world religions have been right all along about some sort of End Times? Christianity is far from the only religion that has predicted such events. Islam is just as convinced that Jesus will come again to usher in the End Times. While Judaism is still waiting for a Messiah to arrive, many Jews associate the Messiah’s eventual coming with God’s final judgment.

In Buddhism there is a concept of decline and ultimate disappearance of Buddhist teachings, known as Mappō in Japanese Buddhism. There is also a belief in a coming Maitreya, a future Buddha who will achieve complete enlightenment, teaching the dharma and restoring the practice of Buddhism at a time when it has been forgotten.

In Hinduism, time is not linear but cyclical. Hindus believe in creation and destruction happening over and over again. We are currently believed to be in the Kali Yuga, the last of four ages or Yugas, which is characterized by strife, discord, and moral decline. It is believed that at the end of the Kali Yuga, a figure named Kalki will appear riding a white horse and carrying a fiery sword to destroy the wicked and restart a new cycle of existence.

It is way above my pay grade to know whether or not these world religions are seeing something ahead of us, or how far ahead of us it is, if it does come at all. Of course, it is also way above any scientist’s pay grade to know if any of their Doomsday predictions are correct.

What I can say with utter and complete confidence is two things:

First, Jesus himself said that not even he knew exactly when the end would come – whether the end he was talking about was the destruction of Jerusalem or the end of the world. So I’m not going to put any weight on anyone else’s predictions of an Apocalypse or Jesus’s Second Coming

Second, while I have no idea whether or not there will ever be an Apocalypse or Second Coming that human civilization experiences as a whole, I am 100% positive that all of us will experience these things as individuals. So far as I am aware, life is a fatal. So, all of us will experience our own, personal End Times. And if thousands of Near Death Experience (NDE) reports are to be believed, then many of us may very well see Jesus at that time, too.

Given that, at bare minimum, our own personal Apocalypse and Second Coming lies ahead of us, even though we don’t know the exact day or hour, it makes sense to me to prepare for it no matter when it comes.

The way I personally prepare for such events is that I ask myself the following questions:

- If I had absolute knowledge that Jesus really was returning sometime during my life and bringing the end of the world with him, would I live my life any differently than I am now?
- Would I pray more?
- Would I be more engaged with my faith community?
- Would I recalibrate my financial priorities?
- Would I adjust how I spend my time and talent in any way?
- Would I spend any more time feeding the hungry, freeing those in bondage, comforting the weary, or blessing the brokenhearted?

If I would make any changes at all to my lifestyle, I try to make these changes – if for no other reason than I want to be prepared for my own personal Apocalypse and Second Coming that could happen at any moment.

I don't seek to make these changes out of fear, though. As you know already, I do not believe in a God whose wrath would send me to hell for all of eternity if I don't measure up to God's expectations. Rather, when the end comes, I expect to see with clarity than ever before that you and I have always been deeply and completely loved by God – and always will be.

It may seem strange to a fire-and-brimstone preacher, but this positive expectation of experiencing the fullness of God's love and grace makes me more inclined to conform my life to the values of God's Realm in the here-and-now, not less. If I can be confident that love and grace lie ahead of me, then I want all the more to live a life that reflects God's love and grace for myself and others in the now. Why wait for such joy when this joy can be experienced, at least in part, right now?

Says Jesus, "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that [the Son of Man] is near, at the very gates."

At very least, Jesus stands at our personal gate. So we may as well let him in now rather than keeping him waiting.