

Matthew 24:34 This generation ...

We want to do just a little review of last week's material and adjoin some additional thoughts. Recall we discussed the most controversial verse of the entire discourse in Matthew 24; the meaning 'this generation.' Many people interpret the entire Olivet Discourse in light of their understanding of this one verse. For example, those who espouse preterism read the text of Matthew 24:34 literally, and take 'this generation' as the one alive during the time of Christ. Why is this not the best interpretation?

The problem with interpreting 'this generation' as that generation alive during the time of Christ is that those who espouse this view are required to go back and reinterpret all of Matthew 24:1–33 with verse 34 as a guiding interpretive framework. If it all happened in 70 AD, then the fulfillment of all these things is now historical and we should be able to point to sources to document these events.

In looking for historical events that satisfy the predications of Christ in Matthew 24, preterists are forced to replace the eschatology framework from Daniel and the rest of the OT with an artificial construction from this one verse. Since none of the events happened in 70 AD literally, they are forced to switch to an allegorical or symbolic method that tries to shoehorn historical events around the time of 70 AD into the text as proof of fulfillment. One of their primary sources to do this is the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. If all of these things happened in the generation alive during the time of Christ, we can ask some serious questions that need answered. For example:

1. What was the abomination of desolation?
2. What cosmic signs happening in 70 AD?
3. Jesus mentions false prophets and Christs that displayed miracles? Who were they and what did they do?
4. What day was the Second Coming?

Let me give a few examples of how preterists go back and give fanciful meaning to the words of Christ. Recall our discussion of the abomination of desolation? Those who see first century fulfillment interpret the event as associated with the Roman army in the temple. Last week we discussed this view in detail and found it to be sorely lacking.

What about the cosmic signs? Consider what one preterist considers to be fulfillment of the 'cosmic signs' recorded in Josephus:

'there broke out a prodigious storm in the night, with the utmost violence, and very strong winds, with the largest showers of rain, with continual lightnings, terrible thunderings ...'

One may legitimately ask how a thunderstorm passes for a cosmic sign in the preterist camp. What about false prophets and false Christs? It is conclusive that the scholarly consensus maintains that there were no claims by false Messiahs or false Christs until around 130 AD. Preterists do not even attempt to find examples of false Christs before 70 AD nor do they cite any example of miracles performed by anyone they consider to be a false prophet.

What about the Second Coming? If Jesus returned in 70 AD, what day was it? Thomas Ice dissects the problem ...

If Jesus returned in A.D. 70, as preterists say, then, on what day did He return? Since this is a past event, we should be able to know the exact day our Lord supposedly returned and fulfilled this passage. I have never read in any preterist material, any of them who can tell me the day and exact manner or event that supposedly was Christ's return in A.D. 70. In fact, this was such a non-event in terms of church history, that it was not until the seventeenth century that we have an extant record of anyone suggesting anything like a preterist view that refers Matthew 24:27 and 30 to A.D. 70. Had Christ returned as described in that passage, surely Josephus would have observed it. But even the verbose Josephus does not record such an event, because it did not occur. When the second coming of Christ—as described prophetically in Matthew 24:27–31—occurs, we will all be able to note the day and the hour. The description of Christ's return in this passage is of a nature that it will be such a public event that will be observed by multitudes of people. The exact day and hour of this event will not be lost in human history.

Let's review the meaning of 'this generation.' There are at least 7 views on the meaning of 'this generation.'

1. Jesus misspoke or was mistaken in His understanding
2. Christ meant the entire human race in general
3. Christ was referring to the generation alive in His lifetime (preterism)
4. Christ was referring to faithful Christians in general
5. This generation refers to the Jewish race
6. This generation refers to a future evil generation
7. This generation refers to a future generation which will be alive during His second coming

Of these 7, only the last 3 have merit. While it is possible that, according to view 5, 'this generation' could refer to the Jewish race as a people, we will have the additional burden of explaining how 'this generation' is going to 'pass away.' Our problem here in seeing the entire Jewish race is that we know from the Abrahamic covenant that the existence of the Jewish race is eternal, forever; it is inconceivable that the Jewish race would pass away.

Let's consider view 6. Recall Jesus words at the end of Matthew 23, which acts as a continuing theme into Matthew 24. He mentions that judgment for the blood of the prophets will fall upon 'this generation.' Now when we discussed this verse, we noted that Jesus was viewing 'you' in 23:35 as a collective, representative 'you.' They did not actually kill the prophets, but they were a generation that was representative of an evil unbelieving generation that killed the prophets and would soon reject the Lord Jesus and put Him to death. This view understands 'generation' in 24:34 in that same sense of referring to the category of rebellious, sinful people who have rejected God's truth and righteousness in 23:36. Now we have no issue with 'this generation' passing away; they will be taken away in judgment at the second coming.

What about the 7th view; 'this generation' being those alive in the future during the time of His second coming? Again, if those alive during His second coming 'pass away,' what about those rescued as per Daniel 12:1? This is probably the majority view of dispensational theologians.

I want to now suggest an 8th view, which is a combination of views 6 and 7 that fully answer all the questions in the text.

The weakness of view 6 is that the future generation is characterized by its rebellion, but there is not a time frame associated with when this generation will occur. It will just be a future evil generation. The weakness of view 7 is that there must be survivors to be saved, so the generation alive at the time of Christ's return cannot ALL pass away.

I think the best view is a combination of view 6 and 7 in that 'this generation' will be those Jews alive during the events surrounding the Second Coming which represent rebellious evil Jews that will be destroyed. This handles all the details in the text and it specifies that time frame that this generation will live in. Jesus was referring to the future generation of rebellious Jews who will be alive at His second coming.

This interpretation will also fit with the next few verses concerning the days of Noah being like the days of the Son of Man.

Matthew 24:36

We come to another difficult passage in Matthew 24 (in hindsight, much more difficult than 'this generation') in verse 36. Why do I consider this a difficult passage to interpret; because there is no clear consensus on how it should be interpreted even among conservative evangelical writers. The passage is ...

³⁶ "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

How are we to understand this? We already know that the tribulation period is seven years. Should not believers in the tribulation know the exact day that Jesus will return? We already know that from the time of the abomination of desolation to the end of the tribulation there will be 1260 days. How can believers at the time not know the day and the hour in light of this knowledge? There is some serious tension in the text here with what we understand about the sequence and timing of the end-time events. What are some possible explanations for this verse?

Thomas Ice¹ would understand this statement of Jesus based upon Christ's willing subjection of His Deity during His earthly stay. In essence, Jesus did not know in His humanity what day His Second Coming would be on, but after His resurrection He did know. He summarizes as such ...

Jesus is saying that in essence He was not telling them at that time when He was returning. However, this does not mean that those at a future time would not be able to know when He was returning. Yeager says: "The thought of the context is that at the time that Jesus spoke this to His disciples, and even yet now, at the current writing, nobody knows the day and the hour." It is not until after the rapture, when one is in the tribulation that God's prophetic clock will resume ticking. For believers living during that time, they will be able to know at least the day when Christ will return to planet earth.

I don't like this explanation. It just seems to artificially seek to answer an important question by diverting the main point. MacArthur² gives a similar but slightly different explanation ...

The time period of the second coming will be known ... But the day and the hour will not be known. The period of the Tribulation, very clearly indicated, and we know the coming of the Son of Man, verse 29 says, is immediately after the Tribulation. But how immediately, we don't know. And once the sign comes, we don't know how long it'll be before He actually establishes the kingdom. So there's some latitude in that. There's a period of time in there - Daniel gives us a hint of it because in Daniel 12:11, Daniel speaks of a period of testing and tribulation of 1290 days, so he adds another 30 days on the end. And then in Daniel 12:12, he speaks of 1335 days - he adds another 45, making a total of 75 days. So Daniel sees a three-and-a-half-year period, 42 months, 1260 days, and then he sees another period, which is not described, as to its content of 75 days. So we don't know exactly the day and the hour. The time period, yes; the general period, yes. Now, we only know that once that period has begun ...

We don't know what generation they (*all these things*) will come upon. It could be this generation. It could happen any moment, the church removed and the Tribulation begins. So we don't know what generation it is. But the generation that it comes upon, even with all those signs, even with all that goes on, still won't know the exact day and the exact hour when Christ is coming.

I don't like this explanation either as it also shifts the main focus to 'we don't know what generation these things will fall on.' That's a different question.

In as much as I cannot be certain how to interpret this verse, I am content to let it simmer on the theological back burner for a later time. Perhaps the best approach to this verse is in its application; Christ is coming again, we don't know when, we should live like it could be today. Walvoord gives an encouraging summary ...

Though the passage is talking about the Second Coming of Christ and not the period preceding the Rapture, obviously, if those living in the period before the Second Coming, who are able to see signs of the Second Coming indicating its approach, should be watching, how much more should those waiting for the Rapture, which has no signs, live in constant expectation of the imminent return of Jesus for His church.

Matthew 24:37–41

³⁷ "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. ³⁸ "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. ⁴⁰ "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ "Two women *will be* grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left.

¹ Thomas Ice, An Interpretation of Matthew 24, Part 33, <https://pre-trib.org/pretribfiles/pdfs/Ice-Part33-AnInterpretationMatt.pdf>

² John MacArthur, sermon titled 'Ready or Not, Here I Come' ... <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2373>

One of the main interpretive issues in this section is whether this passage is talking about the rapture. I believe the details in the passage dictate that the rapture is not in view, though many who see Matthew 24 as yet future would disagree. One of the passages that must be considered is Jesus' statement previously in Matthew 13. Here Jesus explains the parable of the wheat and the tares to his disciples.

13³⁷ And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, ³⁸ and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, ⁴² and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ "Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Recall that in verse 43 Jesus is quoting from Daniel 12:3, which in the timeline occurs after the tribulation period. Notice it is stumbling blocks and the lawless (i.e., unbelievers) who are removed by angels at the end of the age. How does this compare to Jesus' use of the days of Noah illustration? Who was taken away in the days of Noah? Unbelievers. Where were they taken? To judgment. Though the main point is the similarity between the days surrounding the Second Coming and the days of Noah, the swiftness of the impending judgment is also in view. Notice the progression of the pronouns ... they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were given in marriage, they did not understand until the flood took them all away ... who was taken away in the days of Noah? Unbelievers. Just like in the days of Noah, unbelievers will be taken away in judgment at the coming of the Son of Man. This is not the rapture, where believers are taken away to be with the Lord, this is the judgment of unbelievers at the end of the age whereby they are removed from the earth. Where are they removed to? Seems like the weeping and gnashing of teeth depicts hell. This is an apt description of all who will be alive during the tribulation period who have not believed as a result of all the distress in the world and the proclamation of the gospel by the angel of Revelation 14.

This is why the rapture is not in view in this passage. During the Rapture of the church, who are taken away? Those who are saved. Who are left behind? Unbelievers are left to go through the Great Tribulation. Here in Matthew 24, we have the exact opposite situation. In Matthew 24, who are those who are taken away? Unbelievers ... they are taken away in judgment. Who are left behind? Believers are left behind to enter the millennial kingdom.

Remaining Schedule

May 12 – Matthew 24:42–51, be ready

May 19 – Matthew 25:1–30, parables of judgment, Ten Virgins, Talents

May 26 – Matthew 25:31–46, parable of judgment, Sheep and the Goats

June 2 – I will be preaching on the gathering of Matthew 24:31. Specifically, how are we to view the current nation of Israel as it pertains to prophetic fulfillment? Is it a fulfillment of the vision of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37?