

This Generation

Olivet Discourse Sermon #8 of 14, February 8, 1998

By David Curtis

Matthew 24:32-34

We are studying Jesus' sermon on the mount of Olives, commonly known as the Olivet Discourse. In this discourse, Jesus is answering the questions that the disciples asked Him on the mount of Olives. After pronouncing judgment upon the nation of Israel in the end of chapter 23, Jesus and His disciples leave the temple. As they are leaving the temple, Jesus tells the disciples that the temple shall be completely destroyed; *"Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."* In response to this, the disciples ask, *"Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"* As we have [previously demonstrated](#), the disciple's viewed the destruction of the temple, the parousia of Christ, and the end of the age as synchronous events. The disciples question was basically two fold; **when** will these things happen, and **what signs** will indicate that they are about to happen? In verses 4-51, Jesus answers their questions. Please keep this in mind as you read Matthew 24, the Lord is answering His disciple's questions. Jesus told them a number of things that would happen before the end came; the gospel would be preached to all the world, they would see the "abomination of desolation" that Daniel had spoken of (Luke tells us that this refers to the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem). There would come a time of great tribulation. Then immediately after the tribulation, they would see the Son of man come in the clouds of heaven.

To summarize and illustrate what He had been teaching, he further says:

Matthew 24:32-34 (NKJV) "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 "So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near; at the doors! 34 "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.

James Stuart Russell said, "Words have no meaning if this language, uttered on so solemn an occasion, and so precise and express in its import, does not affirm the near approach of the great event which occupies the whole discourse of our Lord." I agree, if this language doesn't mean that the things he spoke of are near, it doesn't mean anything.

"Now learn this parable from the fig tree:"

A popular interpretation of this passage considers the fig tree as a type, or illustration of Israel. According to this view, the fact that Israel became a nation on September 12, 1948 constitutes the budding of the fig tree, and may be taken as proof that the Lord's return is "near" in our day. We'll discuss this further a little later.

I think that the Lord is simply giving us a universal illustration here which the parallel account in Luke makes clear.

Luke 21:29-30 (NKJV) Then He spoke to them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. 30 "When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near.

This is just a simple illustration. When you see the leaves on the tree begin to come out, you know that summer is near. You can understand that, can't you? Jesus said that, just like you know that summer is near when you see the leaves coming out on the trees, "so also" when you see the things come to pass that I have been talking about, (The gospel preached to all the world, the abomination of desolation, the great tribulation, and the Son of man come in the clouds of heaven) you know that the end is near. It is just like someone standing at the door about to enter.

James used this same illustration of "standing at the door" to speak of the nearness of the Lord's return.

James 5:7-9 (NKJV) Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. 8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

Verse 33 says, *"So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near; at the doors!"* There is question about what the "it" is that is near. This question is cleared up in the parallel passage in Luke.

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

Now, we know from other verses that the kingdom of God had come to them already:

Luke 11:20 (NKJV) "But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Luke 17:20-21 (NKJV) Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; 21 "nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

In our text in Matthew 24:33, He is referring to the full manifestation of the kingdom that would come in power and glory at 70 AD.

Matthew 24:34 (NKJV) "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.

Jesus here, very plainly and very clearly, tells His disciples that ALL of the things he had mentioned would come to pass in **THEIR GENERATION**. This includes the gospel being preached in all the world, the abomination of desolation, the great tribulation, and the coming of the Son of man. This is so clear that it greatly troubles those who hold to a futuristic eschatology. Listen to some comments made on this verse.

C.S. Lewis said, "The apocalyptic beliefs of the first Christians have been proved to be false. It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, they had a reason, and one which you will find very embarrassing. Their Master had told them so. He shared, and indeed created, their delusion. He said in so many words, 'this generation shall not pass till all these things be done.' And he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else. This is certainly the most embarrassing verse in the Bible." (Essay "The World's Last Night" (1960), found in The Essential C.S. Lewis, p. 385)

Because of his physical view of the nature of the Second coming, he felt that it hadn't happened yet, and therefore Jesus had been wrong. That would be, in fact, much more than embarrassing, it would be devastating to the credibility of Jesus. If Jesus was wrong, as Lewis says he was, what else might he have been wrong about? Will those who believe in Him truly have everlasting life? Jesus wasn't wrong, Lewis was the one who was wrong. We can count on the truthfulness of what Jesus tells us. Aren't you glad of that?

Others also had trouble with this verse. The New Jerome Commentary says "This is a troublesome verse." (p. 667) W. Robertson Nicholl said, "What is said therein is so perplexing as to tempt a modern expositor to wish it had not been there, or to have recourse to critical expedients to eliminate it from the text." (*The Expositor's Greek Testament*, p. 294)

This verse doesn't fit into their eschatology so they would like to eliminate it. This verse is devastating to a futuristic eschatology, so let's examine it carefully and make sure we understand exactly what Jesus is saying. Let's start by examining the meaning of the word generation. Generation, in our text, comes from the Greek word *genea*, which means, by implication an age. In Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the NT, we can see that the "*genea*." means, "The whole multitude of men living at the same time." William F. Arndt and Wilber Gingrich, (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*) define "*genea*" as, "basically, the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time - **Contemporaries.**"

If you look at the way Jesus used the word "generation," I think it will be abundantly clear that it always refers to His contemporaries, the Jewish people of His own period. Let's look at a few of the uses of "generation."

Matthew 23:35-36 (NKJV) "that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Jesus is in the temple speaking to the Jews, he says that all the judgment that he had spoken about would come upon them. I don't know of any commentator who understands this as referring to any other than the existing generation.

Luke 17:24-25 (NKJV) "For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day. 25 "But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

What generation did Christ suffer many things from, and what generation rejected Him? It is clear, He is speaking of His contemporaries. Look at how some of the translations deal with this verse.

New English Bible: "I tell you this: the present generation will live to see it all."

Today's English Version: "Remember this! All these things will happen before the people now living have all died."

Moffatt's Translation: "I tell you truly, the present generation will not pass away, till all this happens."

Weymouth's Translation: "I tell you in solemn truth that the present generation will certainly not pass away until all this has taken place."

These translations make it quite clear. The meaning of the word was that of the "present" generation in the time of Christ; not to a future generation thousands of years away.

So in etymology and usage, "generation" means those born at the same time, Contemporaries.

How long is a generation?

John Walvoord said, "A generation is normally from thirty to one hundred years." Now, he is the only one I know of who gives it that broad of a span. Most commentators see a generation as referring to a thirty to forty year time. More important than that, what does the Bible say about the time of a generation? Let's look and see.

Matthew 1:17 (NKJV) So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations.

In this genealogical table, we have data to estimate the length of a generation. It tells us that from the captivity in Babylon until Christ are fourteen generations. Now the date of the captivity, in the reign of Zedekiah, is said to be 586 BC. From 586 BC until the birth of Christ would be about 586 years which, divided by fourteen, makes the average length of a generation about 41 years.

Hebrews 3:8-10 (NKJV) Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, 'They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.'

Numbers 32:13 (NKJV) "So the Lord's anger was aroused against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone.

Forty years is a significant number in the Bible, the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years before entering the promise land. The New Testament saints also were in a transition period for forty years before entering the New Jerusalem, which is above. David reigned for forty years. I believe that Christ's reign from Pentecost to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, was also a forty year reign which Revelation 20 refers to as the millennial reign of Christ.

Some have tried to twist the etymology of the word "generation" in Matthew 24:34 to make it mean "race," and try to make Jesus say that all these things would happen before the "race" of Jews had passed away. By doing this, they think they can expand the time of the second coming by thousands of years. There is no biblical or linguistic justification for such a position. Generation does NOT mean race!

C.I. Scofield, in his Bible's reference to this verse (Matt. 24:34), recognized this, and actually SWITCHED the definition of the word from that of *genea* to that of *genos*, which is an entirely different word!

Scofield said, (p. 1034, old edition, Scofield Reference Bible): "Gr. *genea*, the primary definition of which is, 'race, kind, family, stock, breed.' (So all lexicons.) That the word is used in this sense here is sure because none of 'these things,' the world-wide preaching of the kingdom, the great tribulation, the return of the Lord in visible glory, and the regathering of the elect, occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, A.D. 70. The promise is, therefore, that the generation-- nation,

or family of Israel-- will be preserved unto 'these things'; a promise wonderfully fulfilled to this day."

Scofield used the wrong Greek word with his definition. He did so because of his view of the nature of the second coming. Since he felt that these things hadn't happened yet he had to change the meaning of the word *genea*. The definition he gives is for the Greek word, "genos." Genos is not the word used in Matthew 24:34. Peter uses the word "genos" in:

1 Peter 2:9 (NKJV) But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

Here it is evident that "*genos*" means, kind, nation, offspring. But this is not the word used in Matthew 24:34.

The following quote by David Chilton is very informative: "Some have sought to get around the force of this text by saying that the word **generation** here really means **race**, and that Jesus was simply saying that the Jewish race would not die out until all these things took place. Is that true? I challenge you: Get out your concordance and look up every New Testament occurrence of the word **generation** (in Greek, *genea*) and see if it **ever** means 'race' in any other context. Here are all the references for the Gospels: Matthew 1:17; 11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36; 24:34; Mark 8:12, 38; 9:19; 13:30; Luke 1:48, 50; 7:31; 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 18:8; 17:25; 21:32. **Not one** of these references is speaking of the entire Jewish race over thousands of years; **all** use the word in its normal sense of **the sum total of those living at the same time**. It always refers to **contemporaries**. In fact, those who say it means "race" tend to acknowledge this fact, but explain that the word suddenly **changes** its meaning when Jesus uses it in Matthew 24!"

What Jesus meant by all those things happening in that generation, including the parousia of Christ, was that they would all happen while some of those folks to whom He preached were still alive, just as he said they would be in:

Matthew 16:27-28 (NKJV) "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. 28 "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

He also told His disciples this in:

Matthew 10:23 (NKJV) "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

Dispensationalists, George Meisner tries to explain "this generation" this way, "Because Jesus speaks of Jews who see all the signs of the end times, it is best to understand 'generation' as those contemporaries living during the Tribulation. 'This' generation, then, is the Jewish contemporaries coexisting during Daniel's 70th Week; they see all eleven signs of Matthew 24:4-24. In other words, only those who see all the buds of the fig tree, or the signs, are the antecedent of "this generation."

The tribulational generation 'will by no means pass away,' emphasizing its existence throughout the seven year period; events do not annihilate them. Jesus does not mean that each and every Jew survives. Over half of them do not, yet that generation, as a whole, goes through the entire seven years 'till all these things are fulfilled.'" ("The Parable of the Fig Tree" (Matthew 24:32-36) by George E. Meisinger")

So, he is saying that it does not mean Jesus' contemporaries, but the generation that is alive when the tribulation starts, which he sees as some time in our future. Hal Lindsey calls this the "terminal generation."

Along the same line, some say that the "generation" Jesus mentioned would be the generation following the event of Israel becoming a nation in 1948. Then, taking a generation as forty years, they said that the second coming would happen in September of 1988. Do you remember the book, "88 reasons why the rapture will happen in 1988?"

Hal Lindsey said, "When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the 'fig tree' put forth its first leaves.

Jesus said that this would indicate that He was 'at the door,' ready to return. Then He said, 'Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matthew 24:34 NASB).

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs -- chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so." (The Late Great Planet Earth, pp. 53-54).

Hal says that the chief sign would be the rebirth of Israel. Where in Matthew 24 do you see anything remotely close to speaking about a rebirth of Israel? It is speaking about Israel's destruction, not its rebirth! He also says that within forty years of 1948, all these things could take place. Well, it has been fifty years and the temple has not even been rebuilt, so it will be a good while before it can be destroyed. It looks like Hal was way off.

Another Dispensationalist, Robert Deffinbaugh, deals with it this way, "In verse 32, Jesus said that 'this generation' would not pass away until all of 'these things' had come to pass. The difficulty with these words should be obvious. How can Jesus say that 'this generation' would not pass away until all these things come to pass when 'all these things' occur over what we can now see to be nearly 2,000 years? The events described in these verses encompass many generations, so that no one generation will see all of them fulfilled in their lifetime.

The difficulties with this verse have led some to attempt to redefine the term 'generation,' so that it may be taken more broadly, to mean either 'mankind' or 'Israel.' I do not think that the context of Luke (or the term 'generation' itself) will allow this broadening. I believe that that generation was specifically in view. That generation had a particular privilege and a particular responsibility, both related to being those who witnessed the coming of the Christ. That generation also had a particular judgment, due to its rejection of Messiah.

I understand, therefore, that when Jesus said 'that generation' would not pass away until 'all these things' had come to pass; He was referring to that generation of Israelites. How, then, do we square this with the fact that 'all these things' must come to pass, when we know that some will fall upon generations to come? My best answer is that 'all these things' really happen twice, not once. They will happen once, to that generation. And, they will happen a second time, in the last days, related to Christ's return. Thus, Jerusalem was sacked in 70 A.D., in fulfillment of our Lord's words. And so, too, Jerusalem will be trodden under the feet of the Gentiles again, during the tribulation (Revelation 11:2-3). There is also a sense in which much of what our Lord predicted would happen (e.g. persecution, betrayal by family, etc.) is something which saints have experienced throughout the intervening centuries.

Our Lord's words, then, have relevance to those who heard Him speak these words. They also have had relevance to the saints over the centuries. And they will be relevant to the saints of the last days as well. No one dares to take these words idly, as though they will relate to a future people at a future time. Jesus does not allow this mentality to prevail." ("Luke: The Gospel of the Gentiles" by Robert Deffinbaugh)

Now let me ask you, does Jesus say, "all these things will come upon **this** and **that** generation?" He said "**all these things**" would be fulfilled in His generation. So is the gospel preached to all the world twice? Are there two abomination of desolations? Are there two tribulations? Is the Son of man to return in clouds twice? Where is one verse of Scripture to indicate this double fulfillment? There is absolutely nothing in Matthew 24 to indicate a double fulfillment, nothing!

When Jesus said "all these things" would occur before that generation was over, He was talking about everything that He had been discussing from verse 4 through verse 33. This included the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory. The disciple's question had been when will your parousia be, and in verse 34, He tells them it will happen in their generation.

If the Lord's teaching on His second coming doesn't agree with our concept of it, what should we do? We need to change our concepts to line up with His teaching, not twist His words to make them fit our views. This is the Word of God, let's not twist it and distort it, let's simply submit to it.

Heinrich Meyer (1852) said, "That the second advent itself is intended to be included, is likewise evident from v. 36, in which the subject of the day and hour of the advent is introduced."

Before closing, I would like to expound a little on the idea of generation meaning race. We have already shown that this is not a legitimate translation of *genea*. But for those who attempt to translate it as "this race of Jews will not pass, till all these things are fulfilled," it must be understood that **THERE IS NO JEWISH RACE TODAY**.

Many people today still consider the Jewish people as a race. Numerous verses identify Israel, in New Testament prophecy, in terms of their tribal associations; however, these associations do not extend beyond the first century. One example of this is Matthew 24:30, which we looked at last week, where Christ declares that "the tribes of the (land) shall mourn."

After the destruction of Jerusalem, however, the nation of Israel, after the flesh, was scattered throughout the earth, and lost all tribal relations. This scattering was made immutable due to the fact that all tribal genealogical records were destroyed with the Temple in A.D. 70. The simple fact is that there is no existing Jewish race.

Consider the following quotations:

The Encyclopedia Britannica (1973)

"The Jews As A Race: The findings of physical anthropology show that, contrary to the popular view, there is no Jewish race. Anthropometric measurements of Jewish groups in many parts of the world indicate that they differ greatly from one another with respect to all the important physical characteristics." (vol. 12, page 1054)

Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem (1971)

"It is a common assumption, and one that sometimes seems ineradicable even in the face of evidence to the contrary, that the Jews of today constitute a race, a homogeneous entity easily recognizable. From the preceding discussion of the origin and early history of the Jews, it should be

clear that in the course of their formation as a people and a nation they had already assimilated a variety of racial strains from people moving into the general area they occupied. This had taken place by interbreeding and then by conversion to Judaism of a considerable number of communities. . . ."

"Thus, the diversity of the racial and genetic attributes of various Jewish colonies of today renders any unified racial classification of them a contradiction in terms. Despite this, many people readily accept the notion that they are a distinct race. This is probably reinforced by the fact that some Jews are recognizably different in appearance from the surrounding population. That many cannot be easily identified is overlooked and the stereotype for some is extended to all - a not uncommon phenomenon" (Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem, 1971, vol. 3, p. 50).

Encyclopedia Americana (1986)

"Racial and Ethnic Considerations. Some theorists have considered the Jews a distinct race, although this has no factual basis. In every country in which the Jews lived for a considerable time, their physical traits came to approximate those of the indigenous people. Hence the Jews belong to several distinct racial types, ranging, for example, from fair to dark. Among the reasons for this phenomenon are voluntary or involuntary miscegenation and the conversion of Gentiles to Judaism" (Encyclopedia Americana, 1986, vol. 16, p. 71).

Collier's Encyclopedia (1977)

"A common error and persistent modern myth is the designation of the Jews as a 'race! This is scientifically fallacious, from the standpoint of both physical and historical tradition. Investigations by anthropologists have shown that Jews are by no means uniform in physical character and that they nearly always reflect the physical and mental characteristics of the people among whom they live" (Collier's Encyclopedia, 1977, vol. 13, p. 573).

Today, being a Jew simply means that one is of the Judaistic religion or a convert to it, or else in a "brotherhood" of those who are. Therefore, being a Jew has nothing to do with race. We are familiar with a number of notable figures, such as Sammy Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Taylor, and Tom Arnold, in fact, who became Jews by conversion to the religion of Judaism.

John Bray said, "Many Christians do not know that the vast majority of so-called Jews in the world today are the Ashkenazim Jews, while the remainder of them are the Sephardim Jews. The Ashkenazim Jews have as their background not the nation of Israel but a country called Khazaria, which country at one time was the largest country in Europe. The settlers of Khazaria were Turks and Huns. In A.D. 740 King Bulan of Khazaria decided to adopt the Judaistic religion for his country. A number of Jews were already living there. So he converted to Judaism, along with all his officials, and whole nation ended up being known as a nation of Jews. In 970 Russia came in and dominated the situation, and the Khazars were scattered, many of them going down into Poland and Lithuania. Where at the dawn of our modern civilization the largest concentration of Jews were found. Today, the largest percentage of so-called Jews in the world have as their background this group of people." (This information is fully documented in detail in John Bray's book, *Israel in Bible Prophecy*)

Funk and Wagnall's New Encyclopedia (1970)

"In 1970 the Israeli Knesset adopted legislation defining a Jew as one born of a Jewish mother or a convert." (vol. 14, p. 214)

H.G. Wells

"There can be little doubt that the scattered Phoenicians in Spain and Africa and throughout the Mediterranean, speaking as they did a language closely akin to Hebrew and being deprived of their

authentic political rights, became proselytes to Judaism. For phases of vigorous proselytism alternated with phases of exclusive jealousy in Jewish history. On one occasion the Idumeans, being conquered, were all forcibly made Jews. There were Arab tribes who were Jews in the time of Muhammad, and a Turkish people who were mainly Jews in South Russia in the ninth century. Judaism is indeed the reconstructed political ideal of many shattered peoples - mainly Semitic.... The main part of Jewry never was in Judea and had never come out of Judea" (The Outline of History, p. 505).

Therefore, we can clearly and confidently assert that there is no such thing as a Jewish race, nor ever can there be.

These facts are devastating to Dispensationalism. Obviously, if the nation that they call the heir of Israel is shown to have no relationship to the pre-desolation nation, there is no credibility to that system. There are no twelve tribes today; there is no Jewish race today.

We know that there is no possibility that this passage of the Olivet Discourse has any relation to a future Jewish race, since there is no such thing. Since the fall of Jerusalem, and the scattering of the nation of Israel in the first century, the nation calling itself Israel has consisted of a collection of people from nearly every nation in the world, with no relation to the twelve tribes of the historical nation known as Israel. Any attempts to state that there is, or will ever again be, a race of Israelites are proven to be futile and of no force. There is no Jewish race. So, as you can see, to try to translate the word *genea* as race, does not fly.

Bishop Newton commenting on Matthew 24:34 said this, "It is to me a wonder how any man can refer part of the foregoing discourse to the destruction of Jerusalem, and part to the end of the world, or any other distant event, when it is here said, so positively, in the conclusion; All these things shall be fulfilled in this generation. It seemeth as if our Saviour was aware of some misapplication of his words, by adding yet greater force and emphasis to his affirmation, verse 35, 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.'"

Matthew 24 was a prophecy that has already been fulfilled, and therefore, has no future fulfillment at all today. It all happened in the generation that heard Jesus speak these words. Jesus said of the days of Jerusalem's fall in 70 AD:

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

All prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened in the life time of the generation to which Jesus spoke. Let's not twist and distort Jesus' words to make them fit our views, let's change our views to line up with His words.

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on February 8, 1998.