

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THIS GENERATION WILL NOT PASS AWAY

Matthew 24:34

The Lord Jesus taught that His second coming will be sudden and unexpected. But although it will be sudden and unexpected, there will be signs pointing to His coming. All sorts of events will take place leading up to His coming. We saw what these events will be in previous lessons. Then Jesus goes on to say this puzzling sentence in Matthew 24:34.

Matthew 24:34. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

'This generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.' This has been a very difficult verse for Christians to interpret. When you read commentaries, you see that the main difficulty lies in this word 'generation.' What does this 'generation' mean? *This generation will not pass away until all these things take place.* This will be the subject of our study.

Which generation?

The natural way to take this verse is to say that 'generation' means the contemporaries of Jesus, i.e. the people standing in front of Him when He made that statement. If that is the meaning of 'generation,' then Jesus was implying that He would reappear on earth not so long after His death, maybe at the fall of Jerusalem, to usher in the close of this age. This, of course, did not happen. Not all these things preceding Jesus' coming were fulfilled in His generation. So this interpretation of the word 'generation' does not work too well.

Another way of interpreting this verse is to give the verb 'take place,' *ginomai*, the meaning that something will begin to happen from a particular point of time onward. We could translate the sentence like this: 'This generation will not pass away until all these things begin to take place.' The events of Matthew 24:1-8 would occur initially within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries, and will continue, perhaps beyond that generation. It is a possible translation, but I do not see how we can support it exegetically or linguistically.

Here is my stand on this problem. I would like to suggest that the meaning of 'generation' in this verse is not chronological, but moral. The sentence becomes more understandable when 'generation' refers to a certain moral type of person rather than to a certain period of time. Let me explain why I say that.

The offspring

The word 'generation' translates the Greek word *genea* which basically means 'those descended from a common ancestor.' It is sometimes translated by the word 'offspring'. *Genea* derives from the root word *gen-* which has the meaning of birth, descendants, family, race, i.e., those bound together by a common origin.

Let's look at the previous chapter for an example of this. Matthew 23:33. Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and He says to these religious leaders, *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?* We have here the expression 'brood of vipers.' 'Brood' in Greek is *gennema*. *Gennema* and *genea* mean pretty much the same thing. They both express the idea of being descendants of someone or something. This sentence is also translated by the words, 'You generation of vipers,' or 'You offspring of snakes.' You, Pharisees, the descendants of vipers. The apostle John puts it in another way. In John 8:44, Jesus says to the Pharisees, *You are of your father the devil.* 'Your father is the devil, the serpent, and you are the offsprings of the serpent. Spiritually, you are born of the devil. He is your father.'

You see here that *gennema* has nothing to do with a length of time. It refers to the Pharisees as being offspring of vipers, as the sons of vipers.

Now in the Bible, we often find the expression 'son of something.' For example, in Luke 20:34, we read, *The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage.* 'Sons of this age' is very similar in meaning to 'sons of vipers.' They both refer to descendants of something. 'Son of' like 'generation' means 'offspring.' It has the same idea.

The Lord Jesus uses the expression 'sons of this or that' quite frequently. In Luke 20:36, we find 'the sons of the resurrection.' In Luke 10:6, He talks about the 'son of peace.' What does Jesus mean by 'sons of the resurrection'? It means 'a sort of people who will be able to inherit the resurrection.' A son of the resurrection is someone who has the resurrection life, and who will enter into the fullness of resurrection on that day when God will raise up the dead. And what is a 'son of peace'? A son of peace is a person who has a peaceful character, but also who will inherit God's peace, i.e. God's salvation. Peace and salvation are often exchangeable terms in the Bible.

We also read in the Bible about the 'son of hell'. Jesus uses that term in Matthew 23:15. *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees ... you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.* What is a son of hell? A son of hell is a person whose conduct, whose character is such that he will 'inherit' hell. Notice again that we are not talking about a period of time, but about a kind of people, people who are morally like the devil. This is very important to observe.

In the OT, the word 'generation' is used in that same sense quite a number of times. Take for example Psalm 14:5: *...for God is with the generation of the righteous.* What does 'generation of the righteous' mean? It means 'the kind of people who are righteous.'

In Proverbs 30:11-14, we find four successive verses with the word 'generation' used in reference to a certain kind of person.

*Proverbs 30:11. There is a generation that curses its father, and does not bless its mother.
12 There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness.
13 There is a generation-- oh, how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up.
14 There is a generation whose teeth are like swords, and whose fangs are like knives, to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men.*

'Generation' here means 'a type of people' or 'a kind of man' who has this particular behavior.

In Jeremiah 2:31, we read, *O generation, see the word of the Lord!* What does 'O generation' mean? It means, 'All you people, who conduct yourselves in the way that I have been talking about.'

Here is another passage from Jeremiah, Jeremiah 7:29. *Cut off your hair and cast it away, and take up a lamentation on the desolate heights; for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of His wrath.*

Notice the term 'generation of His wrath.' It means, the kind of people who come under His wrath. The cutting off of the hair was a sign of mourning. People were to mourn as though somebody had died because the Lord has forsaken His people. This kind of people will experience God's wrath.

You see that in these examples, the word 'generation' does not refer to a chronological succession of generations, but to types of character.

Crooked and perverse

The same observation can be made in the NT, in the writings of the apostle Paul for example. Let's read Philippians 2:15.

Philippians 2:15. That you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

'A crooked and perverse generation.' Here Paul was not talking about the generation in which he lived. That was not the only period in the history in which there were crooked and perverse people. He was not using the word generation in terms of a period of time. He was talking about the kind of people who lived in darkness, who lived under sin, who lived in alienation from God. These are the people that Paul described as 'a crooked and perverse generation.'

In the same way, when Jesus says that *an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign* (Matthew 12:39; 16:4), He is not just saying that the people He is talking to are the only people in the history of mankind who are wicked. He is saying that all people who live under the power of darkness are evil and adulterous. Again we see that 'generation' refers to the kind of people who are the sons of darkness, the offsprings of darkness, as opposed to the Christians who are the children of light.

Now that we have a better understanding of this word 'generation,' let's go back to Matthew 24:33 and see how we can apply it to our passage. When the Lord Jesus says that *this generation will not pass away until all these things take place*, He is referring to the kind of people who live in this present age. And the people who live in this present age are the offsprings, the sons of darkness. The Lord is saying that this kind of people, this generation, crooked and perverse, will be brought to an end. When? When all these things take place, i.e., when Christ comes. 'These things' are related to the circumstances of His second coming as He specifies in v. 37 when He says that *the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah*. This perverse generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled.

Generation and sons

There is a verse in the teaching of the Lord Jesus where the words 'generation' and 'sons' are used side by side. It is found in the Parable of the Shrewd Steward. Let's read Luke 16:8.

Luke 16:8. So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.

Notice the expression 'in their generation.' 'The sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.' What does 'in their generation' mean? Here again, the sentence is more understandable if 'generation' means 'a kind of people' rather than the contemporaries of Jesus. The sons of this world are wiser in their own way of thinking, given their character, given their logic, given the kind of people they are, they function far more wisely than the children of light. It also means that given another kind of situation, given another kind of generation, the generation of light, the sons of light, the way these people function is not wise.

This verse speaks of two kinds of people: the sons of this world and the sons of light. We can also call them the generation of this world and the generation of light. The word 'son' means 'kind of people,' just as the word 'generation' does. The 'sons of this world' are people who think and behave like the people of this world, i.e., in a worldly way. They are the unbelievers. The 'sons of light' is a common biblical term that refers to the children of God (John 12:36; Ephesians 5:8; 1Thessalonians 5:5). Jesus is saying that non-Christians are wiser than Christians. The people of the world are wiser than the people of God. How can this be? This is an important question and we want to examine it carefully.

The Parable of the Shrewd Steward is about a manager who was on the verge of being fired by his master. When he realized that he was going to lose his job, he thought that he must quickly make friends with the people who owed his master money. So he decided that instead of collecting money from them, he was going to be generous. He was going to let them have back some of the money they owed, quite a lot of money in fact. He thought that when he becomes unemployed, he could count on a few friends that he helped. If need be, perhaps they would do him a favor in return. We can say that he was making an investment in friends. Jesus said it in this way in v. 9, *And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness* (i.e. by means of your money); *that when it fails* (when the money fails), *they may receive you into the eternal dwellings*.

In terms of the parable, v. 9 is saying that Christians should follow the example of shrewdness set by the manager. How is that done? Let's take the different aspects of the verse one at a time:

- The disciples too are to use 'the mammon of unrighteousness.' 'Mammon' is an Aramaic term for wealth. It is called 'unrighteousness' probably because wealth, being so attached to the world, tends to produce worldly responses by keeping one's focus on self. Believers should be shrewd with possession by being generous. This generosity is not just about giving alms to the poor, but it is about the general use of money.
- Why should the believers do that? *So that when it fails...* Money ultimately fails. The time comes when money becomes useless. We all know that at death, all the wealth accumulated by a person is redundant. One had best to be prepared for when that happens.
- More specifically, believers are to use it so that *they may receive you into the eternal dwellings*. We could translate it, 'into the dwellings of the age to come.' Christians are not to live for this world and its riches, which will fail, but for the age to come, i.e. for the kingdom of God.
- How can that be done? They are to make friends by means of money. And the way to make friends from money is to be generous. God is pleased with disciples who love their neighbors with concrete actions, even down to the use of money. A concern to be received into one's eternal dwelling will influence how we look at and use money. We will use money with eternity in view. If we truly believe that God watches us, we will be sensitive to use our resources in ways that are pleasing to Him.

Jesus says that this manager was very wise. He had foresight. He looked into the future and he realized his predicament. He saw what is going to happen to him after being fired. He decided to

secure his future by making friends in the last days of his office. Perhaps these people will be willing to give him a hand if one day he becomes penniless.

Being shrewd: storing up treasures in heaven

It is in that context that Jesus says, 'The sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.' In pointing to the 'sons of this age,' there is a comparison with God's children as the 'sons of the age to come.' And the point is this. The Lord is saying that Christians, who have a heavenly future, should be as diligent in assessing the long-term effect of their actions as those who do not know God are in dealing with their earthly well-being. Christians should apply themselves to honor and serve God in their actions as much as secular people apply themselves to obtain benefits from money and the world.

But Jesus says more than that in Luke 16:8. He says that the non-Christian is more careful and exercises more foresight in how he prepares for his future in this world than the Christian in the things of God. There is an implicit question in that observation. He seems to say, 'The sons of this age understand how the world works and they use it to their benefit. Why do the sons of light not understand the ways of the kingdom of God?'

In Romans 8:5, Paul writes, *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.* There are people who want the best of two worlds: they want the Christian faith and they want to enjoy the things of the flesh. They want to be loved by God and at the same time be praised by men. Spiritually, they live a double life.

And it is in reference to these people that Jesus said, 'The people of this world are wiser in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.' The people of this world, given their kind of wisdom, who believe that this world is the only reality we have, are wise in storing up treasures on earth for themselves. The people of the light, given another kind of wisdom, a wisdom that is based on heavenly and eternal realities, show a total lack of wisdom when they (like the people of this world) store up treasures on earth for themselves. If they were giving more foresight to their future, they would be spending all their time storing up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20).