

A Look At The Various Ways The Phrase “This Generation” In The
Parable Of The Fig Tree Has Been Interpreted

APPENDIX 2

**A LOOK AT THE VARIOUS WAYS THE PHRASE “THIS GENERATION” IN THE PARABLE
OF THE FIG TREE HAS BEEN INTERPRETED**

To many people, the interpretation of the phrase “this generation” in Jesus parable of the fig tree is obvious. Christ is telling His disciples that the generation that sees the budding of the fig tree will see His return to the earth. This has caused many people to attempt to calculate the length of a biblical generation so as to put a time frame for the return of the Lord.

However, it is not that simple. Indeed, there are other possible ways to understand Jesus’ words that godly commentators have suggested. We certainly need to be aware of them.

Before we look at these options, let us summarize what we have learned thus far.

First, there is no evidence whatsoever that the “fig tree” was ever a symbol of the nation of Israel (Appendix 1). Furthermore, if the phrase “this generation” is assumed to indicate a time frame, we have seen that at Jesus’ era it referred to a period of approximately forty years (Mistakes 16,17, 18 and Mistake 39).

With these things in mind, let us look at our options.

WAS JESUS REFERRING TO THE FALL OF JERUSALEM, THE TIME OF THE END, OR BOTH?

One of the difficult issues concerns the precise subject matter of the Olivet Discourse found in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13 and in Luke 21. Was Jesus answering questions about the soon destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple, or was He only speaking of the time of His Second Coming? Or was He referring to both? There are Bible scholars who argue for each of these three possibilities.

This is where the importance of understanding the phrase “this generation” comes into view. What specifically was Christ referring to when He used this particular phrase?

Generally speaking the answers fall into one of five options.

Option 1: They are the Jesus’ contemporaries. Option 2: He is referring to the Jewish people. Option 3: It is the sinful people of Israel who rejected Him. Option 4: The last generation of people before He returns. Option 5: Both options one and four, or perhaps options three and four.

OPTION 1 JESUS’ OWN GENERATION WILL SEE THESE PREDICTIONS FULFILLED

A popular view is that Jesus was speaking of His contemporaries when He stated, “this generation will not pass away.” In other words, the generation that was alive when He made these statements would see all of the things fulfilled that He predicted.

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

One line of evidence to support this is recorded in Luke’s gospel. We find that Jesus specifically predicts the destruction of Jerusalem:

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. Alas for

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women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:20-24 ESV).

Jerusalem did fall and the Temple was destroyed in a generation, some forty years, after Jesus’ prediction. Therefore, it is claimed the prediction “this generation shall not pass away” in Luke 21:32 was fulfilled in A.D. 70.

RESPONSE

While Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was indeed fulfilled, it is problematic to say that everything He predicted in the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24-25 took place at that time. It did not. In fact, most of what He prophesied would happen has not yet occurred.

Warren Wiersbe sums up the problem:

To what “generation” does Luke 21:32 apply? Some who doubt that Jesus will literally return say that this statement applies to the generation of the apostles, so that “the coming of the Lord” was either the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) or the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But none of the signs Jesus mentioned took place before or during those events. Nor did they climax with the deliverance of Israel and the establishing of the kingdom (Warren Wiersbe *BE Series, Luke*).

Thomas Constable explains Luke 21:20-24:

Jesus now returned to the subject of when the temple would suffer destruction (v. 7). The similar passages in Matthew and Mark are sufficiently different to alert the reader to the fact that they deal with a different incident from what Luke described (Matt. 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20). ..

The sign that Jerusalem’s destruction was imminent would be the presence of besieging “armies” (cf. v. 7). This happened when Titus encircled the city with troops and put it under siege beginning in A.D. 68.

... God’s “vengeance” on the city would descend shortly, in fulfillment of prophecy (Thomas Constable, Luke, *Constable’s Expository Notes*, 2014)

The point he makes is that these passages teach two different incidents, and we should not confuse the two.

The *Believers Bible Commentary* agrees in its discussion of these verses:

Jesus then returned to the disciples’ original question about when the temple would be destroyed. In these five verses He noted that Gentile domination included the destruction of Jerusalem which would come about when the city was surrounded by armies. Gentile domination would continue until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (v. 24). The times of the Gentiles’ domination over Jerusalem actually began when the Babylonians took the city and the nation into Captivity in 586 B.C. Jerusalem will again fall under Gentile domination in the Tribulation (Zech. 14:1-2) just before the Messiah returns to restore Jerusalem. It is that restoration of which Jesus spoke next (Luke 21:25-28). (*The Believers Bible Commentary* William MacDonald, Edited by Arthur Farstad Luke, Nashville, Thomas Nelson).

To sum up, Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem to those who were His contemporaries. This prediction was fulfilled forty years after He gave it.

However, other predictions that He has made have yet to be fulfilled. It will not do to say they were somehow fulfilled symbolically at either Pentecost or at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

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Therefore, the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple’s destruction did not fulfill His claim that “this generation will not pass until all these things be fulfilled.” All of the predicted events were NOT fulfilled in A.D. 70. They still await their fulfillment.

OPTION 2 THE JEWISH PEOPLE WILL NOT CEASE TO EXIST

A popular view is that “this generation” refers to the Jewish people. Therefore, the Greek word translated “generation” has the idea of “race.” In other words, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would continue to exist until the time of the end.

RESPONSE

We have already noted the problem with this view when we looked at the two Greek words *genea* and *genos*. Nowhere does the Greek word *genea*, generation, refer to the entire Jewish race (see Mistake 36). Therefore it does not seem remotely possible that the Lord had this in mind.

OPTION 3 THE SINFUL PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WHO REJECTED JESUS

In Matthew’s gospel, *before* Jesus gave the parable of the fig tree, He used the phrase “this generation” a number of times in describing the sinful people of Israel who had rejected Him as the Christ, the Messiah. We can list them as follows:

“To what should I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces who call out to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, yet you did not dance; we wailed in mourning, yet you did not weep.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matthew 11:16-19 NET).

In this instance, the Lord said that “this generation” found fault with both Him and John the Baptist. In other words, no matter what John preached about the coming kingdom, or what miraculous signs Jesus performed, it would not convince them that He was the Christ. In doing this they rejected both the forerunner of the Messiah as well as the Messiah Himself.

On another occasion the religious leaders came to Jesus asking Him for a sign:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:38-42 NKJV).

In this episode, the Lord called them “An evil and adulterous generation” for seeking after a “sign.” They had already witnessed Him heal the sick, open the eyes of the blind, and raise the dead back to life. Yet they still did not believe and requested a further “sign.” Jesus gave them this sign, namely His resurrection from the dead.

Following up on this, the Lord then compared the fate of the present generation to a person possessed with demons:.

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“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation” (Matthew 12:43-45 ESV).

We should not miss the statement that the “last state” of the demon possessed person would be worse than the former state. He then directly applied it to “this evil generation” who did indeed suffer a worse fate after rejecting Him as their Messiah.

Again, the Lord was asked for a sign and once again He gave them the sign of Jonah:

A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.” And He left them and departed (Matthew 16:4 NKJV).

We should note that He referred to them as a “wicked and adulterous generation.”

Finally, Matthew records Jesus calling His unbelieving contemporaries a “faithless and twisted” generation:

And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me” (Matthew 17:17 ESV).

To sum up, in these instances recorded by Matthew, Jesus described “this generation” as an “evil and adulterous generation” an “evil generation” a “wicked and adulterous generation” and “a faithless and twisted generation.”

The Baylor *Handbook of the Greek Text* sums up how this phrase is used in Matthew’s gospel by looking at its usage in Matthew 11:16:

“This generation” (ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆ) [*Hay genea howtay*] is granted a recurring role in Matthew’s narrative. In this context, it comprises Jesus’ and John’s contemporaries who stand on the receiving end of their missions and nevertheless reject them both (cf. 11:17-19). Here the phrase denotes one part of Israel (those who reject John, Jesus, and the dawning kingdom they announce) at one point in time—and not the nation in its entirety or throughout history (Wesley G. Olmstead, *A Handbook of The Greek Text, Matthew 1-14*, Matthew 11:16).

IT HAS THE SAME MEANING IN LUKE’S GOSPEL

We also find the same meaning of “this generation” in Luke’s gospel. Lutheran scholar Arthur A. Just Jr. writes:

This generation (ἡ γενεὰ αὐτῆ) occurs nine times in Luke, always denoting an unbelieving portion of humanity. They rejected John the Baptist, as well as Jesus for not dancing to their tune (7:31). They are the evil generation that seeks a sign but will be condemned because they did not repent at the signs provided them by Jesus (11:29-32 four occurrences). On them will be avenged the blood of all the slain prophets (11:50-51). The Son of Man will be rejected by “this generation” (17:25), which invites comparison to those who perished in the flood and or in the destruction of Sodom (cf. 17:26-29). Luke 21:32 is the final occurrence of the phrase in the gospel. It occurs in Acts where it has the same meaning: Peter urged the Pentecost crowds “Be saved from this perverted generation (Acts 2:40). (Arthur A. Just Jr, Luke 9:51-24:53, *Concordia Commentary*, St. Louis, Missouri, 1997, p. 804 note 24).

The Cornerstone Bible also argues for this interpretation by also citing the same phrase “this generation” in Luke’s gospel:

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Elsewhere in Luke, this expression is used to describe sinful humanity, unresponsive to God and oblivious to the possibility of immediately encountering him ... ‘This generation,’ which ignored the coming of the kingdom in Jesus’ ministry, continues in its rejection of the gospel message until the very end. Thus, ‘this generation’ of 21:32 stands in continuity and solidarity with ‘this generation’ of Jesus’ day” (*Cornerstone Bible Commentary*).

Bible scholar C.A. Coates agrees:

“This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled”. The word is often used in Scripture in a moral sense—not a generation in the sense of thirty or forty years. That character of generation which was present when the Lord was speaking will not pass away till all that the Lord said is fulfilled. The same generation is present now, for Peter says, “Be saved from this perverse generation”. It is still a perverse generation and people have to be saved from it.

Paul in Philippians 2 speaks of being blameless and harmless, “children of God in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation”. The world continues a “present evil world”. Some say the world is getting better, others say that it is getting worse, but they are both wrong. Scripture does say that evil men and seducers will wax worse and worse, but that is in the sphere of profession. The world is the same as it always was; it is made up of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; and it always will be that (C.A. Coates, *C.A. Coates Commentary And Articles Luke 21:1-22:1*).

Finally, Arthur A. Just Jr, whom we quoted above, makes this observation:

How is one to understand these words two thousand years later while still waiting for the parousia [the return of the Lord]? This commentary has advocated the view that “this generation” is the continuing line of all unbelievers. They are the group that rejected the prophets who came speaking the words of God. Their spiritual heirs will reject the Gospel proclaimed by the apostles and pastors down to the present day. Those who reject will be present at the time of the end (Arthur A. Just Jr, Luke 9:51-24:53, *Concordia Commentary*, St. Louis, Missouri, 1997, p. 804).

This particular view of understanding the words “this generation” in the parable of the fig tree, in the same way as the previous five instances in Matthew, and nine instances in Luke, has a lot going for it. Indeed, the strength of this contention is that it is harmonious with the way the phrase is consistently used in the gospels.

If this is the correct understanding of what Jesus meant by “this generation,” then there is no need to attempt to calculate the number of years in a generation to determine when Jesus would return a second time. Indeed, the phrase would have nothing to do with this idea.

OPTION 4 THE LAST GENERATION BEFORE HE RETURNS

This view is widely held. We will cite a few examples of solid Bible commentators holding this view:

The parable of the fig tree essentially warned the disciples that once the events Jesus has just described begin to unfold they will continue unabated to the conclusion—the second coming—He has just described. The note about this generation (21:32a) is best taken to refer to the generation that is alive when these events begin to unfold (not to the generation to whom Jesus was speaking; ... Jesus’ point is, “When the signs come, they will proceed quickly; they will not drag on for generations. It will happen within a generation” (Michael G. Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, Matthew, Chicago, Moody Press).

Respected Bible commentator Thomas Constable wrote:

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This parable illustrates the truth that the kingdom’s appearing will follow the signs that Jesus just identified (vv. 10-11, 25-26). It will follow as certainly as “summer” follows the budding of “trees” in the spring. Jesus here connected the beginning of “the kingdom” with His return to the earth (v. 27) (Thomas Constable, *Luke, Expository Notes*, 2014)

The Bible Knowledge Commentary concurs:

The clause, this generation (*genea*) will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened, has caused much controversy. Some think Jesus was telling His disciples that their generation would see the destruction of the temple. That interpretation stems primarily from verses 5-7 in which the discussion pertained to the temple’s destruction. However, because of verse 31 (in which Jesus spoke of the coming of the kingdom of God), and because of Matthew 24:34, it seems preferable to say His words refer to the generation living at the time of the cosmological events that will just precede His second coming. That generation will actually see the founding of the kingdom of God — something every generation of Jewish citizens has longed for throughout the nation’s history (John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Luke 21:29-33).

This view also has much biblical support.

OPTION 5 BOTH JESUS’ OWN GENERATION AS WELL AS THE LAST GENERATION

Some hold the view that the best answer is a combination of option one and option four. Luke is obviously recording Jesus’ predictions about the fall of Jerusalem which did indeed take place within a generation of His prophesying about it. However, this certainly does not exhaust everything that Jesus predicted. The unfulfilled predictions will take place immediately before He returns again.

The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary holds this view:

The parable of the fig tree (21:29–33) is easy to comprehend. Just as the appearance of leaves on a tree shows that summer is near, so too the signs previously described indicate that the coming of the Son of Man is near. The assertion that “this generation will certainly not pass away” (21:32) is difficult. It could refer to (1) the generation in which Jesus was living, (2) the Jewish race, (3) the human race, or (4) the end-time generation. It probably refers both to (1) and (4), for Jesus’s generation experienced the razing of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem’s destruction becomes a type of the end. In typical Jewish fashion Jesus combines in this discourse information about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. (*The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*).

It is an excellent way of looking at this question.

However, some feel that our options 3 and 4 are the best. In other words, the phrase is certainly directed to the last generation before His return, there is no doubt about this. However, it is also predicting that like the hostile people in Jesus’ generation, especially Jewish, these type of individuals will continue to exist until the time of the end.

The *Believers Bible Commentary* explains it in this manner:

Some feel He referred to the generation living at the time He spoke these words, and that all things were fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem. But this cannot be so because Christ did not return in a cloud with power and great glory. Others believe that “this generation” refers to the people living when these signs begin to take place, and that those who live to see the beginning of the signs would live to see the return of Christ. All the events predicted would happen within one generation. This is a possible explanation. Another possibility is that “this generation” refers to the Jewish people in their attitude of hostility to Christ.

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The Lord was saying that the Jewish race would survive, scattered yet indestructible, and that its attitude toward Him would not change through the centuries. Perhaps both numbers 2 and 3 are correct (*Believers Bible Commentary*, William MacDonald, Edited by Arthur Farstad Luke, Nashville, Thomas Nelson)

In sum, either of these combination options will work, perhaps even a combination of our options 1,3 and 4.

Whatever the case may be, as we again emphasize, the parable of the fig tree is not specifically referencing the Jews returning to their ancient homeland in the last days, and forming a modern state, which starts the countdown of a limited number of years before the Lord Jesus must return.