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MATTHEW 24 AND “THIS GENERATION”

by Thomas Ice

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

The last few months have been a time in which I have been involved in a couple of debates with preterists. Preterism teaches that most, if not all, of the Book of Revelation and the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25; Mark 13; Luke 21) were fulfilled in conjunction with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. If this notion is granted, then almost all of Bible prophecy is not to be anticipated in the future, but is past history. Their false scheme springs forth from a misinterpretation of Matthew 24:34 (see also Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32), by which they launch an upside-down view of eschatology, which does not look to the future but instead gazes at the past.

PRETERIST VIEW

Preterist Gary DeMar says, “the generation that was in existence when Jesus addressed His disciples would not pass away until all the events that preceded verse 34 came to pass.”¹ In contrast with fellow preterist, Dr. Kenneth Gentry, DeMar believes that this passage requires that all of Matthew 24 and 25 must have been fulfilled in some way by A.D. 70 through the Roman invasion and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.² DeMar says, “Every time ‘this generation’ is used in the New Testament, it means, without exception, the generation to whom Jesus was speaking.”³ DeMar’s assertion is simply not true! “This generation” in Hebrews 3:10 clearly refers to the generation of Israelites that wandered in the wilderness for 40 years during the Exodus.

HOW TO FIND THE CORRECT VIEW

But how do we know that almost all of the other New Testament uses of “this generation” refer to Christ’s contemporaries? We learn this by going and examining how each is used in their context. For example, Mark 8:12 says, “And sighing deeply in His spirit [Jesus is speaking], He said, ‘Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.’” Why do we conclude that “this generation,” in this passage refers to Christ’s contemporaries? We know this because the referent in this passage is to Christ’s contemporaries, who were seeking for a sign from Jesus. Thus, it refers to Christ’s contemporaries, because of the controlling factor of the immediate context.

When interpreting the Bible you cannot just say, as DeMar and many preterists do, that because something means X . . . Y . . . Z in other passages that it has to mean that in a given verse.⁴ NO! You must make your determination from the passage under discussion and how it is used in that particular context. Context is the most important factor in determining the exact meaning or referent under discussion.⁵ That is how one is able to realize that most the other uses of “this generation” refer to Christ’s contemporaries.

Matthew 23:36 says, “Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation.” To whom does “this generation” refer? In this context, “this generation” refers to Christ’s contemporaries because of contextual support. “This generation” is governed or controlled grammatically by the phrase “all these things.” All these things refer to the judgments that Christ pronounces in Matthew 22—23. So we should be seeing that in each instance of “this generation,” the use is determined by what it modifies in its immediate context. The scope of use of every occurrence of this generation is determined in the same way.

The same is true for Hebrews 3:10, which says, “Therefore I was angry with this generation.” “This generation” is governed or controlled grammatically by the contextual reference to those who wandered in the wilderness for forty years during the Exodus.

THE CORRECT VIEW

Now why does “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 (see also Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32), not refer to Christ’s contemporaries? Because the governing referent to “this generation” is “all these things.” Since Jesus is giving an extended prophetic discourse of future events, one must first determine the nature of “all these things” prophesied in verses 4 through 31 to know what generation Christ is referencing. Since “all these things” did not take place in the first century then the generation that Christ speaks of must be future. Christ is saying that the generation that sees “all these things” occur will not cease to exist until all the events of the future tribulation are literally fulfilled. Frankly, this is both a literal interpretation and one that was not fulfilled in the first century. Christ is not ultimately speaking to His contemporaries, but to the generation to whom the signs of Matthew 24 will become evident. Dr. Darrell Bock, in commenting on the parallel passage to Matthew 24 in Luke’s Gospel concurs:

What Jesus is saying is that the generation that sees the beginning of the end, also sees its end. When the signs come, they will proceed quickly; they will not drag on for many generations. It will happen within a generation. . . . The tradition reflected in Revelation shows that the consummation comes very quickly once it comes. . . . Nonetheless, in the discourse’s prophetic context, the remark comes after making comments about the nearness of the end *to certain signs*. As such it is the issue of the signs that controls the passage’s force, making this view likely. If this view is correct, Jesus says that when the signs of the beginning of the end come, then the end will come relatively quickly, within a generation.⁶

The whole preterist argument goes up in smoke since they have reversed the interpretative process by declaring first that “this generation” has to refer to Christ’s contemporaries, thus all these things had to be fulfilled in the first century. When one points out that various passages in Matthew 24 were not fulfilled, preterists merely repeat their mantra of “this generation,” so that all these things had to be fulfilled in the first century.

I do not think that any of the events in Matthew 24:4-31 occurred in the first century. I will now look at the most significant event in the passage—the Second Coming of Christ in verses 27 through 31.

DID JESUS RETURN IN A.D. 70?

Once again, preterists argue that it had to happen in the first century because of “this generation.” So preterists use their very active imaginations, with a little help from Josephus, to try to explain why these passages do not speak about Christ’s second coming.

Verse 29 says, “But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Dr. Gentry says, “I will argue that this passage speaks of the a.d. 70 collapse of geo-political Israel. Let us note that there is biblical warrant for speaking of national catastrophe in terms of cosmic destruction.”⁷

If these are literal signs in the heaven then they have not happened in the past. Are they literal? YES! First, this was one of the reasons why the sun, moon and stars were created. Genesis 1:14 says that, on the fourth day, God created the sun, moon and stars “for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years.” What bigger event than the second coming of Christ would demand a global sign? In this passage Jesus is reporting what will actually happen in history. It will be a supernatural event, yet Dr. Gentry and other preterists want to dumb down this event with their naturalistic view that this has already happened.

Second, just as the sun was literally darkened at the crucifixion of Jesus as a sign, so will it be at His return. Third, the burden of proof is on preterists who do not take this literally as

to why they don't. They need to come up with something more convincing than the mantra of "this generation" requires it, because I have shown that it does not. The point of the passage is that only God can control His creation and use it as a global sign that He is being announced as the returning, glorious Lord of all creation, into an environment of unbelief.

Matthew 24:30 says, "and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." Dr. Gentry says, "This verse, along with all other verses leading up to it from Matthew 24:1, applies to the A.D. 70 destruction of the Temple."⁸ If this prophecy has something to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, then Dr. Gentry has not been able to tell us exactly what it is.

I agree with Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson, that the sign is the coming of the Son of Man Himself.⁹ The first sentence would be rendered as follows: "and then will appear the sign, *which is* the Son of Man in heaven." This is called in Greek grammar the appositional use of the genitive case. The coming of the Lord Himself is the sign, which was the very point he made to the high priest in Matthew 26:64 when He told them that they would see Him "coming on the clouds of heaven." This is what the angel told Christ's disciples in Acts 1:11 after watching Jesus being taken up to heaven in a cloud, that "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." This is why the next time Jesus comes, it will not be some "signless sign" that did not actually exist in the form of the Roman army, but instead the visible, bodily, physical return of Christ that mirrors His ascension.

The next part of verse 30 says, "then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." Why will they mourn, because they will see the undeniable sign of the returning Christ. Dr. Gentry says, that this merely refers to the Jewish tribes of Israel in A.D. 70.¹⁰ NO! This is a universal term used of global unbelievers. Every time this plural phrase is used in the parallel Book of Revelation it clearly refers to Gentiles. For example in Revelation 13:7 it speaks of "every tribe and people and tongue and nation." Every use in the Old Testament of "all the tribes of the earth" has a universal meaning in the Septuagint. The Old Testament uses the term "all the tribes of Israel" (about 25 times) when it wants to refer to the Jewish tribes.

Most importantly, the verse goes on to say, "they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory." It says, "they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky." The text says, "they will see the Son of Man." This has to be a reference to the visible, bodily, physical return of Jesus Christ to planet earth! This did not happen in A.D. 70? Josephus does not record it. This cannot refer to a symbolic, naturalistic interpretation that somehow Jesus returned in conjunction with the Roman army in the first century. Jesus said, "they will see the Son of Man."

Further, Jesus returns on the clouds, just like Acts 1 said He would. He will return with power and great glory. The glory refers to His visible, Shechinah Glory cloud that has been God's trademark throughout history.

CONCLUSION

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. Maranatha!

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- ¹ Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), pp. 67-68.
- ² Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 198-201.
- ³ DeMar, *End Times Fiction*, p. 68.
- ⁴ See D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 65.
- ⁵ See Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), pp. 106-09.
- ⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51—24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 1691-92.
- ⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Perilous Times: A Study in Eschatological Evil* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Press, 1999), p. 77.
- ⁸ Gentry, *Perilous Times*, p. 79.
- ⁹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, VI vols, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), vol. I, p. 183.
- ¹⁰ Gentry, *Perilous Times*, p. 83.