A Study of Matthew 24

by Wayne Jackson

In this era of change, from one millennium to another, there may be no context that has become the focus of more controversy than the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel record. This marvelous depository of prophetic literature has been victimized by considerable theological speculation. Several theories, spawned by a misunderstanding of this chapter, have generated confusion in the religious community.

There are two extremes relative to Matthew 24 which must be addressed.

First, there is the notion, advocated by the proponents of “realized eschatology,” that **all** Bible prophecy, including everything within Matthew 24 (e.g., the second coming of Christ, the judgment day, and the end of the world), was fulfilled in the event of Jerusalem’s destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70 (see King 1986, 342-78). For a refutation of the major components of the A.D. 70 dogma, see the author’s book, *The A.D. 70 Theory—A Review of the Max King Doctrine*.

On the other hand, those who subscribe to the doctrine of “dispensational premillennialism” tend to view the whole of Matthew 24 as a sort of end-time manual which allows one to determine the characteristic events, and therefore the general time, at which the Lord will return to initiate his “millennial reign.”

For example, in his popular book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, first published in 1970, Hal Lindsey argued that Matthew 24 contains the prophetical information which indicates that the “generation” witnessing the “rebirth of Israel” is the same generation that will observe the fulfillment of the “signs” of Matthew 24:1-33, consummated by the second coming of Christ. Inasmuch as the “rebirth of Israel” took place in 1948, and since Lindsey viewed a “generation,” as “something like forty years,” he felt confident in contending that the Lord’s return would be in the neighborhood of 1988 (1970, 43).

Later, as the 80s approached, Lindsey vacillated, and stretched his forty-year timetable to as long as one hundred years. He also confessed that he really did not know whether or not the terminal “generation” commenced with the rebirth of Israel (1977, 77). Billy Graham frequently has preached that “Matthew 24 is knocking at the door.” Neither of these views is correct.

The “Key” that Unlocks the Chapter

Occasionally, in a context characterized by some difficulty, there will be a “key” passage that unlocks the meaning of the material (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:26). Such is the case with reference to Matthew 24. The significant verse is thirty-four, wherein the Lord states:

Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished (ASV).

Before giving consideration to some of the details of this verse, let us make a general observation. When there are several passages that deal with a topic, some of which are clearer than others, or some of which are framed in language more literal than others, the less ambiguous, or more literal, are to be employed as the guiding force in the interpretation. This is fundamental exegetical procedure.

Now here is the point: Matthew 24:34 is a **clear, literal statement** from the Lord relative to the events previously discussed. This text, therefore, **must** be a prevailing guideline in the interpretation of this inspired narrative.

Crucial to understanding this verse, and the context overall, is the term “generation.” The Lord clearly indicated that “this” generation, i.e., **his** generation, would not “pass away,” until the events depicted in verses 4-33 were “accomplished,” i.e., fulfilled.

It has been common for dispensationalists to identify “generation” (Greek genea) with the Jewish race, hence to contend that “the family of Israel” will be preserved until all “these things” are fulfilled (Scofield 1945, 1034). Since the Jewish people are still extant, this concept allows dispensationalists to stretch the circumstances of Matthew 24 all the way to the present time. This view of the passage is seriously flawed.

While millennialists argue that genea means “race” in rare instances, some of them acknowledge that this is not the “more common and usual meaning of the word” (Archer 1982, 339). Certainly there is no indication that genea is ever employed in the sense of “race” in the Gospel of Matthew—perhaps in the entire New Testament.

Genea is found forty-three times in the New Testament. In seventeen of these cases, the expression is “this generation.” In Matthew’s record, for example, “this generation” is found in 11:16; 12:41,42,45; 23:36, and 24:34. A careful consideration of these passages provides a clear sense of the significance of the expression.

For instance, Jesus, surveying the Jewish wickedness of his day, warned of an impending punishment. He said:

All these things [the consequences of the Jews’s rebellion] shall come upon **this generation** (Matthew 23:36).

Why is it millennialists contend that “this generation” in 23:36 is the generation devastated by the Romans in A.D. 70, but allege that “this generation” in 24:34 refers to a far-away “future day” (Barbieri 1983, 75,78)?

Arndt and Gingrich suggest that genea denotes “basically, the sum total of those born at the same time, expanded to include all those living at a given time generation, contemporaries” (1967, 153).

McClintock and Strong state that the phrase “this generation” in Matthew 24:34 denotes “the generation of persons then living contemporary with Christ” (1969, 776).

Herodotus, the Greek historian, said that “three generations” fill up a “century” (*The Histories* II.142). To him, a “generation” was a period of some thirty-three years.

It should be obvious that the events of Matthew 24:4-34 have to do with the generation that was contemporary with the Lord. The Christians could look for certain tell-tale indicators, detailed by the Savior, and “know” that the Lord’s judgment upon Jerusalem was near (v. 33).

But of “that [the] day” of the Son’s final coming, “knoweth no one” except the Father (v. 36). There is thus a **clear contrast** between Christ’s temporal activity, chronicled prior to verse thirty-four, and that of the Lord’s judgment at the end of time.

Jerusalem’s Destruction

As Jesus left the environs of the sacred area, his disciples directed attention to the temple. The Lord declared that this edifice would be “thrown down” so that not one stone would be left upon another (24:2). There is no doubt but that Jesus was uttering an oracle concerning the destruction of the city by the Romans (cf. Matthew 22:7; Luke 21:20).

Later, on the Mount of Olives, the disciples asked: “When shall these things [the demolition of the temple] be?” They also wanted to know what would be the “sign” of his “coming, and of the end of the world” (24:3).

R.C. Foster has well observed:

Much of the confusion in interpreting the predictions of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24 and the parallel passages arises from the failure to see that the disciples asked and Jesus answered two questions: one, concerning the fall of Jerusalem; the other, concerning His second coming (1971, 1187).

The disciples likely assumed that the destruction of the temple, and the end of the world, would occur at the same time. The Master sought to correct that impression, first, by discussing the Roman invasion (vv. 4-34), and then by commenting regarding his final coming to render universal judgment (vv. 35-51).

Jesus gave a series of clues which could be used by first-century saints to determine when Judaism’s fall would occur. A brief survey of these is as follows (see vv. 5-14):

1. False “messiahs” would arise.
2. There would be numerous military encounters.
3. Famines and earthquakes would occur.
4. Disciples would be persecuted.
5. Some would “stumble,” i.e., depart from the faith.
6. False prophets would be prevalent.
7. Decreasing spirituality on the part of some saints would be evident.
8. Those who endured would be delivered.
9. The gospel would be published far and wide during these four decades.

As unlikely as some of these prophetic declarations may seem to the skeptic, each of them was fulfilled by the time Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70. A more thorough discussion of these matters may be found in J. Marcellus Kik’s volume, *Matthew 24*.

Continuing, Christ declared that the impending invasion had been foretold in the book of Daniel (chapter fifteen). The Savior thus urged the disciples to be ready to flee the city, praying that God would providentially accommodate their departure (Matthew 24:16-19).

He described the intensity of the Roman assault and promised that God would intervene for “the elect’s” sake (vv. 21-22). The disciples were not to be swayed by false claims that Jesus had personally arrived, because, when that event actually occurred, it would be globally evident (vv. 23-27).

The Jewish nation was described as a rotting carcass where birds of prey would gather (v. 28). The fall of the Hebrew system is set forth in the sort of apocalyptic nomenclature that is characteristic of Old Testament literature, e.g., when the prophets pictorially portray the overthrow of Jehovah’s enemies (cf. Isaiah 13:10-11; 34:2ff; Ezekiel 32:7-8).

All of this would be a “sign” of the fact that “the Son of man in heaven” was orchestrating these events (vv. 29-30). It is important to observe that the Lord would be accomplishing “these things” **from heaven**, not from some position upon the earth. The result of Judaism’s demise would be a great gospel harvest, reminiscent of the Jubilee celebration of Old Testament fame (v. 31; cf. Luke 4:17-21).

Finally, just as the ancient citizen of Palestine could determine the coming of summer by the budding of the fig tree, even so, by reflecting upon the signals given by Christ, the disciples would be able to discern the approach of the promised calamity (vv. 32-33).

The “Signs” of Matthew Twenty-four

Our major thrust now will be to argue the case that the “signs” of Matthew 24:4ff **do not** find their fulfillment in the final return of Christ.

First, whereas dispensationalists argue for a twentieth-century fulfillment of these signs, accompanied by a nuclear holocaust (Lindsey 1970, 135-57), contextual indicators clearly reflect the fact that Jesus had reference to an **ancient and local situation**. Consider the following factors.

1. The impending destruction would involve the Jewish temple—“the holy place” (24:15), and the city of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20)—not New York, Paris, etc., as alleged by Lindsey and others. The temple has lain in ruins for more than nineteen centuries, and there is no evidence that it will ever be rebuilt.
2. The Jerusalem disciples were warned to flee unto the mountains (v. 16)—hardly efficacious advice if a nuclear attack were envisioned. However, according to Eusebius, the early Christians understood this admonition, and fled to Pella, beyond the Jordan, when the Romans advanced toward the city (*Ecclesiastical History* III.5).
3. Christ warned: “Let him that is on the housetop not go down to take out the things that are in his house” (v. 17). Again, such instruction hardly would be appropriate under the conditions of a nuclear assault. “On the house top” is the last place one would want to be! But the admonition made perfect sense in view of the fact that the houses of old Jerusalem were flat-roofed and situated close to one another. Accordingly, Christians might proceed, by way of “the road of roofs,” to the edge of the city, thus escaping the invading soldiers (Edersheim 1957, 93).
4. Jesus urged: “Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter” nor “on a sabbath” (v. 20). This anticipates primitive conditions when winter travel could be rigorous; moreover, the gates of Jerusalem would be closed on the sabbath (Nehemiah 13:19), which would make escape more difficult.

Second, though the destruction of Jerusalem was seen as a sort of “coming” of Christ (cf. Matthew 10:23; 24:30,33; Luke 21:27)—i.e., in **judgment** upon the Hebrew nation—such was emphatically distinguished from the event known as the “second” coming (cf. Hebrews 9:28). The Lord cautioned that if any false teacher should attempt to proclaim his visible coming in connection with Jerusalem’s fall, the bogus prophet was to be ignored, because the second coming would be apparent **universally** (vv. 23-27), whereas the destruction of Jerusalem was but a **local event**. Jerusalem’s fall would only reflect a sign of Christ’s providential coming in destructive judgment upon the holy city (vv. 29-31), not the Savior’s visible, final coming. More on this momentarily.

Third, it is very significant that the Lord, in connection with his discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem, introduced the remarkable prophecy that had been given five centuries earlier to the prophet Daniel. Jesus said:

When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judea flee (24:15,16).

The dispensational theory argues that the “abomination of desolation” is, from our vantage point, yet in the future. Supposedly, the prophetic focus is upon “the Antichrist,” alleged to be “a world dictator” who will “make the temple abominable” in the so-called “Tribulation” period just prior to the Lord’s second coming (Barbieri 1983, 77). The problem with this view is this: Daniel connects the appearance of the “abomination that makes desolate” with the **first** coming of Christ, not the Lord’s **second** coming (9:24-27)!

The Prophecy of Daniel’s Seventy Weeks

Let us, in this connection, briefly examine this fascinating prophecy. There is a three-fold thrust to the narrative.

First, it foretells the “Anointed” One’s advent, and what would be accomplished thereby. The Messiah would: finish transgression, bring an end to sins, make reconciliation for iniquity, usher in everlasting righteousness, seal up vision and prophecy, be anointed as the most holy one, make firm a new covenant, and terminate sacrifices.

**These things are associated with Christ’s redemptive work at Calvary—not his second coming**. To suggest that Daniel’s prophecy contains a “long parenthesis,” the “church age” (between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks), which was wholly unknown to the Old Testament prophets, is without any rational basis.

Second, the prophecy sets forth a chronological time-frame in which the messianic events would take place. From the time of Judah’s commission to leave Babylonian captivity (in 457 B.C.), some 486-1/2 years (set forth in three increments—with “days” signifying “years”) would pass, thus terminating in the very year of Jesus’ death (see the author’s article on [**Daniel’s Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks**](https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/read/daniels_prophecy_of_the_seventy_weeks)).

Finally, the terrible price for the Jews’ rejection of Jesus is graphically portrayed.

As a result or consequence of the death of the Messiah one making desolate (i.e. the Roman prince Titus) appears “upon the wing of abominations” (i.e. the pinnacle of the temple). By this language the complete destruction of the temple is signified (Young, 679).

It is not without significance that the Jews themselves recognized that the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. Josephus, the Jewish historian, stated that “Daniel also wrote concerning the Roman government, and that our country should be made desolate by them” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 10.11.7). This view of “Daniel’s seventy weeks,” commonly called the “traditional” view, “has been held with slight variation by most Biblical scholars until recent years” (Scott 1975, 364).

Jesus’ Discussion of His Second Coming

Beginning in verse thirty-five, the Lord turns his attention to the final day of history, the day of his ultimate “coming.” Heaven and earth will pass away, but the Savior’s words will remain inviolate.

Jesus shows that there had been a broad range of indicators—“all these things”—which, when observed, would allow the Christians to escape the horrible Roman invasion (v. 33). Nevertheless, at the time of the second coming, no such signs would be provided; rather, the end of the world will occur in a dramatically unannounced fashion. Let us study some of the Lord’s arguments.

The Savior affirmed:

But of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only (v. 36).

First, observe the use of “but,” an adversative particle, which stresses a contrast between the previous material and that which follows. Professor Kik comments that this verse “gives immediate evidence of a change in subject matter” (1948, 101). In verses four through thirty-four the Lord had spoke of the “days” (plural) of tribulation associated with Jerusalem’s peril (vv. 19,22,29), but now it is “the day” (singular)—an expression commonly used of the final day of history (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:4; 2 Timothy 1:12).

Second, observe that even Jesus himself did not know when “the day” of his coming (cf. v. 36) would be. Yet, he had given signs whereby others might “know” (v. 33) that he was providentially “nigh” in the destruction of Jerusalem. Obviously the two events were not the same.

Is it not rather ironic that Christ, who gave these “signs,” did not know (while on earth) when his return would take place, but modern dispensationalists can read Matthew 24 and virtually pinpoint the time of the second coming! In 1992 Harold Camping, a syndicated television preacher, wrote:

The results of this study indicate that the month of September of the year 1994 is to be the time for the end of history (1992, 531).

Third, Christ cited an historical example which demonstrated that those of the pre-flood world were unaware of their impending doom “until the flood came, and took them all away.” The point being, “so shall be the coming of the Son of man” (v. 39). There will be no specific, chronological warning!

Fourth, Jesus appealed to certain cultural circumstances to depict the sudden, unanticipated nature of his return. Two men would be working in the field; one would be taken, the other left (v. 40). Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken, one is left (v. 41). Then, in a parallel reference, two men are in bed; one is taken, the other is left" (Luke 17:34).

One scholar has observed that these references contemplate different times of the day—early morning (grinding at the mill), mid-day (working in the field), and night (in bed)—thus suggesting that when Christ returns, it will be day in some places, but night in others, day and night at the same time (Collett n.d., 277). This could not have reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, but must represent a “coming” of the Lord that will affect men globally.

Additionally, during Jerusalem’s calamity, it was not a matter of some taken and some left—**all were taken!** More than a million Jews were slaughtered and thousands of others were taken into foreign slavery (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 6.9). Geldenhuys states that “not a single Jew was left alive in the city or its vicinity” (1960, 141).

Fifth, the Lord refers to a societal situation. The final day will be like the coming of a thief, who never warns or gives clues as to the time of his encroachment (vv. 42,43). The Christian thus is cautioned to “watch,” for in an hour “that ye think not the Son of man cometh” (v. 44).

Again, the point is: the time of Jesus’ return cannot be anticipated. This clearly divorces the Lord’s second coming from those “signs” associated with the fall of Jerusalem.

Conclusion

As we conclude, we feel compelled to emphasize again:

1. Those who view Matthew 24 as a thematic unit, pertaining only to end-of-time things, are wrong in their view of this context. This is the error of dispensational premillennialism.
2. Those who would merge 24:4-34 with 24:35-51, asserting that the entire chapter refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, are also mistaken in their concept of this chapter.