

# *Word in Life Ministries*

## *Biblical, Historical, and Philosophical Studies Institute*

### *Biblical Eschatology & Current Events*

#### *Definition*

One of the most important things to do in dealing with terms like *eschatology* is to properly define such a term. This is actually a combination of two Greek words: (1) ἔσχατος (*eschatos*), which basically means “last in time or place”; and (2) λόγιον (*logion*), which literally refers to a “saying or teaching” of the Word. Thus, *eschatology* is simply referring to the “teaching of the end times,” and biblical eschatology is focusing on the “end times” as described in the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments.

#### *Biblical References*

This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of biblical eschatology, but rather a brief overview of three passages in particular that will hopefully give some balance and perspective to the real issues facing us as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let me say first of all that in the forty-three plus years that I have been a Christian (I was born again on 10/1/1965 at eighteen years of age), I have read and heard a lot of prophetic interpretations regarding the soon return of Jesus at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, based on a dispensational, pre-tribulation, pre-millennial view of biblical eschatology. However, NOT ONE OF THOSE PREDICTIONS HAS BEEN CORRECT! What is unalterably correct is what Jesus said about His return, and that has proven true 100 % of the time for the past 2000 years! But what exactly did Jesus say about His return? That is what we are going to look at now.

The first passage I would like for us to investigate is found in Matthew 24:32-35:

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; <sup>33</sup> even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, *right* at the door. <sup>34</sup> "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. <sup>35</sup> "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away.

The first question that confronts us out of this passage is what are “these things” that are referred to in verse 33? When you read Matthew 24:1-31, you will see just what “these things” are referring to in verse 33, and I believe it is very important to read these verses in the light of history.

In Matthew 24:1-2, Jesus comments to His disciples about the Temple: “And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.’” The Temple had been torn down once before in 587 BC by the Babylonian forces under Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus was now saying that this was going to happen again. It is interesting to note that the Jews looked to the Temple and its adjacent buildings as a source of security for their people and country. That is, they viewed these structures as a sort of guaranty by God that the Jewish nation of their day would be protected and survive outside foes. However, Jesus debunks that idea by saying that, “not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

As a result of this prophetic statement by Jesus to His disciples, they wait for an opportune time to question Jesus about this prediction: “And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?’” Jesus then begins his explanation of just what He is talking about:

- 1) **Matthew 24:4-8** – In this section, Jesus is warning of false spirituality; many wars between nations; and natural catastrophes, but these are just the beginning of the trouble that is coming.
- 2) **Matthew 24:9-14** – This portion of Jesus’ prediction is quite difficult due to the harshness toward and persecution of believers that is forewarned; another allusion to false teachers; a coming apostasy and backsliding of believers; the rise of sexual perversion; the importance of perseverance; and the key to the coming again of Jesus

will be when the “gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

- 3) **Matthew 24:15-27** – This is a prophecy of the cataclysmic events that will overtake Jerusalem in particular and Judah as a whole. Verse 15 is especially important because it is both historical and prophetic. As was pointed out above, the Temple had been torn down in 587 BC, but in December, 167 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian ruler, took Jerusalem by military force, and he erected statues to Zeus and himself in the Temple, as well as conducted sacrifices with pigs, and this was termed by the Jews of that time as the “abominable idol of desolation upon the altar of God” (I Maccabees 1:54). Thus, Antiochus Epiphanes’ act of defiling the Temple became the proto-type of what will occur with the “end of the age.” In II Thessalonians 2:1-4, we read of the coming Anti-Christ and his self-deification in the Temple:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, <sup>2</sup> that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup> Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (II Thessalonians 2:1-4)

Thus, the final Anti-Christ will mimic what Antiochus Epiphanes did, but with far greater consequences for the entire world. Therefore, when this occurs in the future, that will be a clear sign that the doing it is the Anti-Christ.

Many have looked at this portion of scripture and tried to tie it to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD by Titus of Rome. However, Titus never erected any pagan idols or such in the Temple, but he simply burned it to the ground (Josephus, *JW*, 6.7.2). Those who pursue this interpretation have adopted an eschatology called Preterism, which believes that all of Matthew 24 was fulfilled in 70 AD. On the other hand, when you simply look at the verses in this section, you find that such an interpretation doesn’t fit, and this is seen most clearly in Matthew 24:21: “For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now,

nor ever will.” Now to be sure, there have been some very horrific slaughters of mankind throughout human history, but there has not been one as yet that would fit this category, and certainly not the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD by Titus.

One other important item within this section of Scripture is the prediction about the “false Christs and false prophets” who will be coming on the scene showing “great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.” Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, we don’t have any record in Josephus of any such self-proclaimers or wonder workers. However, Jesus makes it very clear that they will come prior to His return, but He warns us that His actual return will be “just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:27).

- 4) **Matthew 24:29-31** – Without any equivocation, these verses have in no way been fulfilled! Thus, this passage is unquestionably referring to the Return of Christ, which is yet to occur.
- 5) **Matthew 24:32-35** – This now brings us to the passage of our initial interest, which contains the word “generation.” Therefore, Jesus is saying that, “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place,” and we have just now see what “all these things” are in the previous verses.

There are several definitions for the word “generation” (γενεά - *genea*) in Greek: clan; race; contemporaries/generation; the time or age of a generation (i.e., from the birth of parents to the birth of their children); and an undefined period of time. Thus, when we look at these various definitions, and we realize that so much of what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 24:1-31 has yet to be fulfilled, we can then begin to deduce which of the above definitions best fits the context of this passage.

Some have taught that “generation” is referring to the time period of those living who actually see all of the things prophesied begin to be fulfilled in a period of time, such as 40 years. That is possible, but here too, there are things Jesus taught in this portion that have been occurring ever since He ascended into heaven 2000 years ago (e.g., Matthew 24:4-14). On the other hand, when the “Abomination of Desolation” occurs in the newly constructed Temple, that will be a clear and unequivocal sign of His soon return.

Another view, which I tend to embrace, is that the word “generation” in this context is likely referring to “clan or race” in a metaphorical sense. Twice in Matthew 24:1-31, Jesus makes reference to the “elect,” and as I look at the total context of this portion of Scripture, I conclude that the word “elect” is the “generation” that Jesus is referring to, and thus, it is the “clan or race” of believers in Christ, from the beginning of the Church up until His return, that “will not pass away until all these things take place.” The Church is integral to God’s final plan of redemption, and it will remain here until He fulfills all of His prophetic plans for the return of Christ. Once again, I have NEVER SEEN ANYONE who has made prophetic predictions about the return of Christ EVER BE RIGHT, and that is especially true for those who have interpreted “generation” as being those who are alive when all this begins to come to pass, and it occurs within a 40 year time period. This now brings us to the second passage of Scripture I would like to examine, and that is Matthew 24:36-41:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.<sup>37</sup> "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah.<sup>38</sup> "For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark,<sup>39</sup> and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be.<sup>40</sup> "Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left.<sup>41</sup> "Two women *will be* grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.

I take quite seriously Jesus’ words in verse 36, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” Jesus was both fully God and fully man, and thus, as God, He certainly knows when His return will be, but as a man, He is stating that He does not know. Thus, how much more so for us who are mere men, in whom the only divine life within us is by the Holy Spirit, but even His presence within us does not enable us as flawed, but redeemed men, to even begin to grasp when the return of Christ will be.

With regard to ‘off the wall’ teaching, I do remember in the late eighties that some people were saying that we may not be able to know the “day and hour,” but nothing is said about us not being able to know the second, minute, week, month, or year! Please

understand, these people were quite serious in their eschatological application of this passage. However, they were also quite wrong. The phrase “day and hour” is an idiom, which simply means that NO ONE CAN KNOW AT ANY TIME, EVER when Jesus is returning, and that includes pastors and teachers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries!

The third and final passage I would like to look at is Acts 1:6-8:

And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’<sup>7</sup> He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;<sup>8</sup> but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.’

This is an amazing passage in that Jesus goes to the crux of the matter with regard to trying to figure out end time events and discover just when Jesus is returning. Verse 7 is so explicit that there can be NO MISUNDERSTANDING as to what Jesus means: “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority,” except for very smart eschatologists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries who have special insight into end time events. This last phrase is mine, but it is obviously NOT IN THE TEXT! What that means is that NO ONE, AT ANY TIME, IN ANY PLACE, OR FROM ANY SEMINARY, CHURCH, OR ESCHATOLOGICAL EMPHASIS can even begin to think that he or she has a thorough grasp on just when and how end time events are going to take place! On the other hand, for example, are there some general outlines and prophetic guidelines in books such as Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation? Without question there are. But that which we DO NOT KNOW are the “times and epochs (i.e., crucial events that God will use)” to orchestrate His plan. Not some times, but EVERYTIME I see men try to determine God’s “times and epochs,” they are wrong EVERYTIME!

The sad thing about the fruitless pursuit of one thinking that he or she can figure out the “times and epochs” is that it is a waste of valuable time and energy that could be better focused on Acts 1:8, “but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” That which I believe we need to be fully engaged in is proclaiming the Gospel in all of its many facets to all aspects of

society, including social and political issues that need to be addressed from a biblical perspective, and in particular the Bill of Rights in our national Constitution, and that overall proclamation includes the Second Coming of Jesus Christ!

I pray that God will give us His perspective of His truth as we seek to serve and follow Him.