



## JUST THE FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions on the Bible and Theology

---

NO. 22 • THE MOST EMBARRASSING VERSE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (MATT. 24:34)  
30 SEPTEMBER 2018 • CORNERSTONE BIBLE CHURCH • DR. DOUG MCINTOSH, PASTOR EMERITUS

---

It was in March of 2008 that I introduced a series here entitled *Just the FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions on the Bible and Theology*. It is probably inaccurate to describe it as a series, actually; it is really a collection of individual studies that focus on texts that cause people to scratch their heads in confusion or even to get angry or despondent. And that is serious business. It was an ancient philosopher who observed that it is impossible for the heart to rejoice in what the mind rejects, and God certainly intends for us to rejoice in the truths of his word. Along the same lines, God has declared that we are to worship him with all of our minds as well as our heart, soul, and strength. So these questions that we have studied in the past are intended to address that problem, that our minds might be excited to embrace scriptural teaching, so that in turn our spirits might rejoice in them. Today, and next week, God willing, it is my plan to add two more frequently asked questions to the 21 that are already done from years past. If you are interested you can find these online on the church web site.

(And by the way: it isn't exactly necessary to have full answers for every difficult question that we find in Scripture. I certainly still have some open questions. We base our confidence in Scripture largely on what Jesus said about Scripture. We will always have to hold certain questions in abeyance until more information becomes available. Believing what we do know to be true, we have plenty to go on, and all we need to know and please the God of heaven. All the same, it is always worth the effort to wrestle with these things, because we learn to depend on God in the process.) Which brings us to Matthew 24:34.

A lot of people are confused by Matthew 24:34. I have heard verse 34 called "the most notorious verse in the New Testament" as well as "the most difficult verse." No less a figure than C.S.

Lewis called it “the most embarrassing verse in the New Testament.” Verse 34 is certainly a problem for virtually all interpreters. Nobody finds it easy to deal with.

I don't subscribe to the view, however, that it is hopeless to arrive at a reasonable and accurate understanding of the verse. My material for today is going to be a little technical so fasten your seat belts and let's begin by looking at our text together. Jesus is speaking to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. In my reading I'm going to omit certain verses in the interests of time and so that we can focus on what is relevant, which will help as I move through the material.

## scripture: matthew 24:4-14, 29-35

*4 And Jesus answered and said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. 6 And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. 7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. 8 All these are the beginning of sorrows.*

*9 “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. 10 And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. 11 Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. 12 And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But he who endures to the end shall be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. . .*

*29 “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30 Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*

*32 “Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors! 34 Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”*

## the question stated

I think you can see the problem here in verse 34 fairly easily. If you read chapter 24 to this point you find a long list of events that Jesus has just been giving to the disciples, events that culminate in his return. He brings the list to a climax by saying that “*this generation*” will by

no means pass away till all these things take place. Now it is pretty obvious, too, that the disciples, those standing there on the Mount of Olives who heard these words of Jesus, have long since died. They probably all died off within forty or fifty years or so of his statement, and clearly not everything in Matthew 24 has taken place. And that is the problem: How do we reconcile the solemn truthfulness of Jesus with a verse like Matthew 24:34?

## what is at stake

The stakes in the solution of this problem are extremely high. Two points hang in the balance. First is the issue of..

### *The truthfulness of Jesus*

If Jesus can be shown to be speaking falsehood with regard to his predictions as a prophet, he is discredited as a prophet. That means that anything he asserted concerning spiritual things might or might not be true. If Jesus can't be trusted to tell us the truth about what will happen within the lifetime of his listeners, how can we trust him when he speaks of eternal issues like salvation and the nature and kingdom of God?

Jesus raises the stakes by prefacing these words in verse 34 with a solemn introduction: "Assuredly I say to you..." This is a phrase that emphasizes the absolute truthfulness of what Jesus is about to say in verse 34. In other words, verse 34 is most emphatically a true statement, and Jesus is insisting that it be regarded as such.

If his words are false where we can test them, why should we believe him in places where we can't test them? We should just sleep in on Sunday mornings and enjoy the comics.

Now I don't want to overstate the case. In reality, the credentials of Jesus are established for us by more than Matthew 24:34. Jesus' prophetic credentials are established by many things, and especially by his resurrection. Even if we can't come up with a solution to this difficulty, it's just a difficulty. The resurrection, in the end, is the answer to all difficulties. How can you not believe the teaching of the Son of God who rose from the dead? We are dealing with fine points here; but they are fine points that confuse people and need to be resolved.

So the starting point for the mature believer on this problem is that the words of Jesus are true. That is a given. The good news is that Jesus is alive, and that is why we gather this morning, to see what he taught and what he meant by it. The free gift of life will still be free if I fail miserably in trying to answer this particular question.

The other point at stake here is whether we can use a sound...

### *Interpretive method*

That is, if we have to resort to twisting language or making words mean anything we want, then the cure is worse than the disease. We need to remain constant in using the ordinary laws of human speech, grammar, and communication when solving this problem. So with knowledge of the stakes now in our possession, let's turn our attention to some...

### inadequate attempts at solutions

Now there have been lots of attempts at solving this problem, but I am giving you just two because they are heard most often, and because a list of prominent scholars can be tacked up next to each one of these. I begin with what I will call...

#### *The Jewish race card*

You will see this in a lot of conservative commentaries and popular treatments of prophecy. This is the view I was taught at Dallas Seminary. You see it, for example, in the old standard commentary by Adam Clarke, who writes, “‘*This generation*’ [Gk. *genea*] means ‘*this race*’; *i. e., the Jews shall not cease from being a distinct people, till all the counsels of God relative to them and the Gentiles be fulfilled.*” But *genea* certainly does not ordinarily mean *race*. Clarke’s statement is true enough on its own merits, but is that what Jesus intended to say here? I am not at all convinced that this proposal is even a possibility. Still, you will find this view in the footnotes of many study Bibles, put forth as the definite meaning of the text. You have to be careful in your evaluation of footnotes. They don’t always get it right.

#### *The human race card*

A second attempt at solving the problem is to make the word *genea* mean “the human race.” Jesus would then be saying, “The human race will not pass away until all these things happen.” I’m not sure that such a statement coming from Jesus would be very meaningful. He would then be saying, “These things will all happen someday before the planet cools down.” Why bother even to say that?

All in all, there simply is very little evidence for making “this generation” in verse 34 mean anything other than “the people who are contemporaries of mine.” And that means that the things that Jesus predicted must ostensibly take place, if our translation is correct, within fifty years or so of his statement in verse 34; that is, before the last apostle died. We know that in the actual case that didn’t happen. Therefore, there must be, I think you’ll agree with me...

### a better solution

And there is. To cut to the chase, here is the answer: this verse is only a problem because we are working from translations that need improvement. That is, our standard English transla-

tions have overlooked a fine point of Greek grammar that, had they employed it, solves the issue completely. The truth is, as our translations stand now, what Jesus says in verse 34 simply is not true, but only because of the poor translation. If we clean up the translation, the statement will be seen to be exactly accurate. We have to start by recognizing that translation is not an exact science. There are no perfect translations and there never will be. Translation work is exceptionally challenging. That's why pastors study Greek and Hebrew, so that they don't have to depend on someone else's translation work.

At the same time, the English translations that we have are extremely good, in my judgment. One of the reasons I can say that is because we have so many of them. We can compare one with another and the differences between them will shed light on the fine points of the text. The problem is that here virtually all of them go awry. That almost never happens.

And how do we explain that? How can competent Greek scholars err at such a crucial place? Take it from someone who has done a lot of translation work: our English translations all suffer from a common disease. They were all done by committees. You may remember the old saw that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. A group of scholars sits around a table and makes decisions about what word to put in the text of a given translation. This is done by a majority vote most of the time. People vote very often not on the basis of whether a proposed rendering is right, but on the basis of (it grieves me to say it) potential Bible sales and (it grieves me again) whether they are willing to endure the criticisms of colleagues and reviewers if they get it wrong. This process has a leveling-down effect. Anything even slightly out of the ordinary, anything that hasn't been used in ten or fifteen previous translations, usually goes into the trash. And that is where Matthew 24:34 comes in. It is just a little out of the ordinary.

### *The Greek grammatical phenomenon*

I believe that what we have in Matthew 24:34 is an example of translators overlooking or ignoring a fairly common Greek grammatical construction connected with the words “*take place*” (two words in English, but one word in the Greek text, the word *genetai*). Please stay with me here for a few minutes. This is not at all hard to understand, but it is foreign to our own language. We have no parallel in English for this construction. Our verbs are not as flexible as Greek verbs are.

### What the phenomenon is called

The construction is called an *ingressive aorist*. The aorist tense is one of four past tenses that exist in New Testament Greek. The word *aorist* means “without boundaries,” and that is a clue to the flexibility of this tense. The aorist can express many different flavors of action.

It can express, for example, the simplest form of past action: “something happened.” It can express a timeless activity: “something happens (routinely).” In the case of Matthew 24:34 and many other places, it can express how something *began* to happen. The standard intermediate Greek grammar defines the ingressive aorist this way: “*The aorist tense may be used to stress the beginning of an action or the entrance into a state. . . The ingressive aorist is quite common.*”<sup>1</sup>

If we take that last word of verse 34 as an ingressive aorist, we would translate it, “*This generation will not pass away until all these things begin to take place.*” Problem solved.

False Christs arising. . . the martyrdom of believers. . . famines, pestilences, and earthquakes. . . they’ve all happened. They had begun to happen long before the apostles died off.

But the sun has not been darkened, and the Son of Man hasn’t appeared. So by the time the apostolic generation died off, the things Jesus spoke of had begun to take place, but they hadn’t all taken place. So the statement is precisely accurate.

### Its characteristics

What are the characteristics of the ingressive aorist?

Well, if you want to describe something as starting to happen in English, you have to bring in a helping verb: “begin” is typical. In Greek, you don’t need a helping verb. The aorist tense can bear that meaning all by itself.

The ingressive aorist also requires a stative verb, such as “take place,” which is what we have. So, that fits. There are dozens of examples of the ingressive aorist in the New Testament, and there is one in particular that is. . .

### *An exact parallel in Luke 1:13-20*

In Luke 1 we find an ingressive aorist that follows the exact pattern that we have in Matthew 24:34. Let’s look, to begin with, at verses 13-17. Luke is describing how the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, John the Baptist’s father, to predict John’s birth and work: “*The angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,” and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*”

I want you to notice that these predictions have not only to do with the birth of John the Baptist, but also with his ministry as an adult. Gabriel is making predictions that will be fulfilled only when John has reached adulthood.

Follow me carefully here. Zacharias doubts Gabriel's word, and as a penalty for his unbelief is struck speechless for a short time. Gabriel says to Zacharias, "*I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time*" (Luke 1:19-20). This is the rendering of the *New King James Version*, and the translators have just made a liar out of the angel Gabriel! There are going to be some embarrassed people when they meet Gabriel for the first time.

How is that, you ask? The prediction of Gabriel had to do with the time when Zacharias would regain his voice. If you remember the story, you know that Zacharias regained his voice when John was exactly eight days old. But John would only be able to speak when *all these things that have been mentioned have happened*, according to the NKJV. Wrong again, unfortunately.

Look at what Luke writes: "*You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.*" That happened before Zacharias regained his voice. No problem there. "*For he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*" That was true. "*And shall drink neither wine nor strong drink.*" Well, okay; that happened; I mean, he was just eight days old. "*He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.*" That had certainly happened.

But... had John at the time Zacharias regained his voice made ready a people prepared for the Lord? No. Had John turned the hearts of the fathers to the children? No. Had John turned the disobedient to the wisdom of the just? No.

*All these things* had not been fulfilled by the time Zacharias regained his voice. They were not fulfilled for three decades, in fact. But—notice carefully—all these things had *begun* taking place by then. The *New King James Version* translators missed the ingressive aorist here just as they did in Matthew 24:34. (Now I don't want to be hard on them. Most translations miss this. I like the NKJV. A friend of mine was its general editor.) But as the standard first-year Greek grammar says, verse 20 should be translated, "*You will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things begin to take place.*" So the angel Gabriel was telling the truth after all!

The word that is used here in Luke 1:20 is precisely the same word in the same form that is used in Matthew 24:34, "*take place*" (Gk. *genetai*).

How do we know that Luke 1:20 contains an ingressive aorist? Because all the things that Gabriel prophesied had not yet taken place before Zacharias regained his voice, and Gabriel is not a false prophet. He's an angel. He doesn't make false predictions. Obviously, Luke 1:20 is

an example of an ingressive aorist, because translating it that way makes it true, and translating the standard way, the way it shows up in most translations, makes it false. In other words, the context forces us to translate it, “until these things have begun to take place.”

How do we know that Matthew 24:34 contains an ingressive aorist? Because all the things that Jesus prophesied had not taken place when that generation passed away, and Jesus is not a false prophet. It’s merely a matter of recognizing the possibilities of the Greek text and not translating the verse in a way that creates problems. If you have one translation that makes verse 34 a lie and another translation that doesn’t, why would you even consider using the one that makes it a lie? I’ve never heard an adequate explanation of that one. The context forces our hand here.

The solution that I’m offering today is confirmed by two other considerations.

## CONFIRMATION OF THE ANSWER

### *The nature of the preceding parable*

One is the parable that Jesus tells that leads into verse 34. He points out the likeness that exists between the unfolding of the events of chapter 24 and the coming of summer. It’s a gradual process. The fig tree’s leaves come open gradually. The branch first becomes tender. That lasts a number of days. Then the leaf slowly emerges. That takes a while. Then the leaf is partially visible. Then the leaf is fully displayed. The early signs take place, and they are harbingers that the later ones are coming, too. The picture is a slow unfolding of events that lead to the end. Things begin to take place, and then eventually the whole is complete. That fits perfectly with an ingressive aorist. Then there is also...

### *The necessity of the work of missions*

If you try to force *all these things* mentioned in Matthew 24 into some sort of first-century fulfillment, you run very quickly up against verse 14, which is so crucial: “*This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations; and then the end will come.*” By no stretch of the imagination was the preaching of the gospel finished by the time the apostles died. It hasn’t been finished yet. However, the work was certainly well started by the time the disciples died off. They did much of the work themselves.

And so we see that by respecting the norms of grammar there is a reasonable understanding of this verse that is not embarrassing at all. A great many of the things that Jesus foretold were well under way by the time the apostolic generation died off. And once again the Scripture is vindicated and the prophetic integrity of the Lord Jesus remains intact, and we again discover the word of God to be as true in its details as it is in its main points.

Let me close by saying that I hope you won't give me too much credit for finding a solution to this question. I certainly wasn't the first to notice it. Interestingly enough, I found it in a Greek grammar<sup>2</sup> that was written in the 1990s, and I suspect that it is was seen much earlier than that. So it has been out there for a long time, just lying there on the page undisturbed. Until I read it, I was as confused as anybody else. I am hopeful that one day some courageous translator will vote for my preferred rendering in committee, but... probably not.

Copyright © 2018 P. Douglas McIntosh. This data file/manuscript is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file/manuscript must contain the above copyright notice. This data file/manuscript may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale, or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays, or other products offered for sale without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Dr. Doug McIntosh, 5753 Levelland Trail, Lilburn, GA 30047.

#### Notes:

- 
1. Wallace, Daniel B., *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: an Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.
  2. Mounce, William D., *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*. 2nd edition; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.