

## What is the Meaning of a Generation in the Bible?

In a book I used for my Prophecy Bible study, **Living on Borrowed Time**, Dr. David Reagan queries a panel of 20 prophecy experts for answers to ten end-times prophecy questions. The fourth question is this: 4) **How do you interpret Matthew 24:32-35**. The two key questions associated with this passage are: 1) What does the fig tree symbolize? 2) What generation was Jesus talking about?

In reviewing the prophecy experts' answers to the second question about the generation Jesus was referring to in the passage, I was intrigued by Tim LeHaye's answer to the question. This is because while doing the research for the Christmas Star, in order to estimate how many generations of wise men would be required from the time of Daniel to the birth of Jesus to fulfill bible prophecy, I finally had to do some serious research on the issue of a "generation" in the Bible. The following is Tim LeHaye's answer to Dr. Reagan's question:

*The most surprising response came from Tim LeHaye: "Perhaps the greatest mistake I have made interpreting prophecy through the years was to follow my friend Hal Lindsey in assuming the generation that saw Israel back in the land as they were recognized by the UN in 1948, would not pass until the Rapture, or in that a generation was "40 years," meaning 1988. Obviously that has not happened."*

Dr. Reagan goes on to note: *This is a reference to the fact that Hal Lindsey, in his book, **The Late Great Planet Earth (1970)** took the position that the re-blossoming of the fig tree was fulfilled in the re-establishment of Israel and that the generation that witnessed the event would live to see the Lord's return. In all fairness, I think I should point out that Hal Lindsey never set a date for the Lord's return. What he said in his book was this: "A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place" (page 54 of the 1970 edition). Notice, he said they "could" take place, not that they would.*

After thoroughly reviewing the answers of the fifteen prophecy experts who responded to Dr. Reagan's question and his concluding remarks, I realized that the answer I had come up with was not revealed by any of Dr. Reagan's prophecy experts. My research on the Christmas Star and development of *A Bible-based Chronology from the Creation to the Second Advent of Jesus Christ* led to what I believe to be the discovery of what God tells us in Scripture about the length and composition of a generation as revealed by Jesus' own words in the Olivet Discourse and from the Exodus story.

### **When Will This Time Be?**

By His own words, Jesus is coming soon! After Jesus departed the temple and went to the Mount of Olives with His disciples, two days before the feast of Passover, they approached Him privately and asked the three most important questions for all time: (1) When will all this happen? (2) What will be the signs of Your coming? (3) What will be the signs for the end of the world?

And as he (Jesus) sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when shall these things be? And, what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3).

## The Generation That Will See All These Things

The third part of Jesus's answer to the disciple's question about when these things will be relates to the period of a generation.

I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.  
(Matthew 24:34 NIV)

In context, Jesus told the disciples that there is a specific generation that will see all the signs He described in His answer to their question, and that the generation will not pass away until everything prophesied by the signs, including His return, is fulfilled. Two questions that arise are (1) How long is a generation, and (2) What specific generation is Jesus talking about?

There has been much speculation about the length of a generation even to this day, with the most recent length being postulated in *The Coming Convergence* (2017) as being 80–120 years.<sup>4</sup> But there is only one verse in the Bible that defines the length of a generation: Psalm 90:10.

The days of our years are threescore and ten (70); and if by reason of strength they be fourscore [80] years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow, for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

This is a psalm of Moses, a prayer of the man of God, titled "Teach Us to Number Our Days." Although Moses lived longer, the passage was not written in reference to himself. Dr. Morris has this to say about the verse: "Moses contrasts the normal span of 70 years in his day (even though he himself lived 120 years) with the thousand-year life-span of men before the flood (90:4). It is remarkable that, after 3,000 years of human history after Moses, including the great medical advances of recent centuries, 70–80 years is still the normal lifespan."<sup>5</sup>

We learn much about how God defined a generation from the Exodus story. A major reason why Moses led the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years was to ensure that none of those who departed Egypt in the Exodus, over the age of twenty years, would remain alive to enter the Promised Land as punishment for being a "stiff necked" people (Numbers 14:28–29). Thus with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb, all who entered the Promised Land after forty years in the wilderness were sixty years or younger in age. After the death of Moses, there are only three references in the Bible to people older than eighty years of age. Joshua 14:7–10 reveals that Caleb was eighty-five years old when he was given his inheritance. In 1 Samuel 4:15, the priest, Eli, was ninety-eight years old when he died. In Luke 2:36–38, the eighty-four-year-old temple prophetess Anna is described as "a woman of a great age" when she praised and gave thanks to the Lord at the dedication of the baby, Jesus. Daniel, who went into the Babylonian captivity as a teenager and lived through the entire period, probably died between the ages of eighty-five and ninety. Kings David and Solomon lived to seventy years, and Uzziah and Manassah, the longest reigning kings in Judah, lived to seventy-seven and seventy-eight years, respectively. These examples span a period of nearly 1,500 years of Old Testament history, and they clearly support the length of a generation as revealed in Psalm 90:10 to be a period of seventy to eighty years.

The Psalm 90:10 prophecy also supports our life expectancy in the modern era (time of the latter days). The most recent US census age demographic data (2016)<sup>6</sup> reveals that today, only about 2 percent of Americans live to see their eighty-first birthday. This means that fewer than three out of every one hundred people born in 1937 remain alive today. Thus the Scriptures and current US census data jointly confirm the length of a generation to be seventy to eighty years, as defined by Moses in Scripture 3,500 years ago.

In the Exodus story, God divided the eighty-year life span of a generation into four segments or age groups. Each segment was twenty years in length based on that generation’s ability to reproduce the next generation.

Age	Definition
0–20 years	Pre-productive years
21–40 years	Productive years (reproduction years)
41–60 years	Productive years
61–80 years	Post-productive years

At the time of the Exodus, four generations (twenty years in each generation) departed Egypt, but only three generations were allowed to enter the Promised Land. This is because those over twenty years old when they left Egypt died in the wilderness. Only those under twenty at the time of the Exodus and the two generations born during the forty-year period of wandering were allowed to enter the land. From the census taken by Moses at the end of the forty years in the wilderness and before entering the Promised Land, there were 603,550 men of war aged twenty-one to sixty (Numbers 1:45–46). If we assume an equal population of adult women (600,000) and an equal population distribution among the three age groups (pre-productive population = 600,000), the total population of the Jews at the time they entered Canaan would have been about 1.8 million people.

We also know that God revealed exactly who the Exodus generation was. Only one group of Jews who lived during a specific twenty-year period experienced all that happened in the Exodus—the plagues, the Exodus, forty years in the wilderness, and entering, conquering, and settling the Promised Land. It was the pre-productive group, aged one to twenty years, who were alive at the time of the Exodus. We know from Table 5 in chapter 3 of **A Bible-Based Chronology...** that the Exodus was in 1446 BC. Therefore the Exodus generation that experienced “all those things” was born during the twenty-year period between 1466 and 1446 BC.

My conclusions are that based on Psalm 90:10, the length of a generation is 80 years. Every generation is divided into two 20 year segments, the pre-productive years, the post-productive years, and one 40 year segment – the productive years. There are always four generations alive at any given time, two of which are in the productive years (ages 20-60) of their lives. A generation is considered to have passed away when those in the last year of their specific 20 year generation reach their eightieth year. Those who live beyond their eighty first birthday become a part of the succeeding generation until they finally pass away. God’s primary focus on a generation in the Bible appears to be those living in their productive years (ages 20-60).

Jim Dodge, Nov 2014 –updated July 2018