

The Abomination of Desolation
Matthew 24:15-28
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Matthew 24-25 records the Olivet Discourse, spoken by Jesus *“as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives”* (24:3). This discourse was precipitated when *“Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately”* (Mark 13:3), asking *“tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”* (Matthew 24:3). Jesus would not answer their first question about the timing of when the temple would be destroyed. Instead, He focused His words on the second question of His return and the end of the age, as all of Matthew 24-25 addresses events related to the sign of His coming and the end of the age.

He listed six signs that will signal the initial stage of the end of the age before He returns. The first was that people would come to lead many astray by claiming to be the Messiah (24:5). The second sign would be wars that would break out on the earth (24:6). The third sign continues that distress in the world, as famines and earthquakes occur in various places. Yet these things only signal the beginning of the signs of the end of the age, for these followers of Jesus will also suffer hateful betrayal by those who have been led astray from the faith. There will be no nation that will be safe for God’s faithful as the lack of love, combined with an increasing unlawfulness, will bring persecution upon all true disciples of Christ. The hatred of the world because of Christ’s name will be assisted by these apostate religious traitors.

Nevertheless, those who truly believe in Jesus Christ will, by the grace of God, continue in the faith until the end of the age. In spite of such persecution, God’s people will persevere throughout the time of the tribulation period. Not only will they endure, but they will abound in their service of the gospel of the kingdom. As a result of their faithfulness, the gospel will go forth to the whole world, leading to some people of every ethnic group belonging to Christ when He returns to establish His kingdom upon the earth.

Jesus did not address believers in the church era, for they will either have died or have been taken up by the Lord before this end of the age commences (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The events of the end of the age involve the final seven-year period prophesied by Daniel 9:24-27. According to Daniel 12:10-13, Matthew 24:15 will occur in the middle of this seven-year period, therefore Matthew 24:15-28 addresses this last half of the great tribulation.

Fleeing to the mountains (24:15-20)

After giving signs which describe the beginning of the tribulation period, Jesus then gives instructions to flee Judea to the mountains when one particular event occurs, *“when you see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place.”* This will bring about the last half of the seven-year tribulation period, *“a great tribulation, such as had not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will”* (Matthew 24:21).

In Matthew 24:15, Jesus’ reference to the abomination of desolation is to what appears in three different places in the Book of Daniel:

Daniel 9:27: *“And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate.”*

Daniel 11:31-32: *“Forces from him will arise, desecrate the sanctuary fortress, and do away with the regular sacrifice. And they will set up the abomination of desolation. By smooth words he will turn to godlessness those who act wickedly toward the covenant, but the people who know their God will display strength and take action.”*

Daniel 12:11: *“From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days.”*

Taken together, we learn that a future ruler will make a treaty with the people of Israel for seven years. Midway through this seven-year period, this ruler will gather his forces and put an end to the sacrifices and offerings in the temple. At that time, the ruler will set up some type of abomination to desecrate the temple. The desecration of the temple will continue until the Lord's judgment is delivered upon the ruler and his followers, 1,290 days, or 43 months later. Therefore, we know this abomination of desolation in Matthew 24:15 will occur one month beyond the middle of the seven-year tribulation period from Daniel 12:11.

The abomination of desolation should be understood as the abomination that causes desolation. This is some religiously repulsive event that will make the temple desolate of God’s glory. This obviously means the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt by this time, since *“the holy place”* refers to the temple itself (cf. Acts 21:28).

The passage in Daniel 11:31-32 gives us a perspective on what this abomination might be as Daniel 11 described the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes as an abomination that caused desolation. Antiochus erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burnt offering in 168 BC, sacrificing swine upon it. While Daniel 11 reflects the historical fulfillment in Antiochus Epiphanes, Jesus clearly stated that the fulfillment of Daniel 9 and 12 remained in the future.

Those who view Matthew 24 as speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem will view the abomination of desolation as being the Roman entrance into the temple as they destroyed it in 70 AD. However, the other statements of Daniel 9 do not apply because Rome did not make a covenant with Israel for seven years and there was no specific ruler as the antichrist. Significantly, Jesus' warning to flee to the mountains in verse 16 was meaningless in 70 AD because most of the Jews had left the city as it was under siege by a couple of years earlier. There is good evidence that the Christians had abandoned Jerusalem by this time as well. By the time the Romans entered the temple it was too late for anyone left to flee.

Whether the parenthetical "*let the reader understand*" was supplied by Matthew (and Mark in 13:14) through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (the most likely possibility), or was somehow inferred by Jesus in His discourse, is of little consequence. Either way, the revelation of God instructs the reader of these words to consider the prophecy from Daniel the prophet.

However, the inclusion of "*let the reader understand*" certainly tells us that the readers of Matthew's Gospel in the future would have a particular need to understand the prophecy in Daniel. Therefore, this warning of Jesus was not given primarily for the disciples themselves, but for those believers during this tribulation period who would read these words in the Scripture and recognize the abomination of desolation that Jesus prophesied of, and follow His direction to flee Judea for the mountains. This further supports the futurist view of Matthew 24.

It is interesting to note that only Matthew and Mark's Gospel record Jesus' words about the abomination of desolation. Mark 13:14 does not specifically mention him standing in the holy place, but more generally, "*standing where it should not be.*" But Luke's omission of these words is likely because he wrote his Gospel for a Gentile audience, who were much less familiar with Daniel's prophecy than the Jews would be. Many of them would not even have access to the Book of Daniel in the Roman world. Yet we have this knowledge of Daniel's prophecy and therefore have the ability to understand its meaning.

When the abomination of desolation stands in the holy place, Jesus says *“those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains.”* This is typically viewed as being Jews, but the text does not restrict it only to the Jews and the implication is that those caring to read these words of Jesus will be believers in Him. All in Judea should flee to the mountains but Jesus had already taught that believers at this time *“will be hated by all nations because of My name”* (Matthew 24:9). Luke adds that this will be worse in Jerusalem, *“and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city”* (Luke 21:21). This is understandable, since the holy place that would suffer the abomination of desolation is in Jerusalem of Judea and its residents would be in the most immediate danger.

There is also a great sense of urgency involved in fleeing, *“Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak.”* Even today, the people in Israel will use their roofs as leisure spaces. Time will be of the essence to flee, much like if a home is on fire. The issue with pregnant women and nursing mothers is their lack of mobility. To be unable to move quickly will be a great hindrance to those seeking to flee. As is often the case in times of distress, those who are the most vulnerable suffer.

Likewise, to flee during wintertime would make the travel more arduous. God did not give the season when the abomination of desolation would appear, and those in the tribulation period ought to *“pray that your flight will not be in the winter.”* The mention of the Sabbath further supports this occurring at the time when God’s plan returns to the nation of Israel after the rapture of the church. If this had occurred in 70 AD, the followers of Christ were no longer under the Sabbath (cf. Romans 14:5). This Sabbath was specifically a sign of the Mosaic covenant that God made with the people of Israel. *“But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you’”* (Exodus 31:13).

There is evidence in Zechariah 13:8-9 that two thirds of the Jews in Judea will not survive this event, *“That two parts in it will be cut off and perish; But the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested.”* Yet there is hope that God will provide deliverance through the second half of the tribulation period for His people, *“so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent”* (Revelation 12:14).

Fierce misery (24:21-22)

Matthew 24:21 speaks of the misery that the world will experience in order to explain the reason for the frantic fleeing. This verse refers to *“a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.”* This corresponds to the second half of the seven-year tribulation period that commences after the coming of the abomination of desolation and ends with the return of Jesus. This verse has led to the specific designation of “great tribulation” to refer to this last half of the tribulation era.

This time will be great because of the degree of suffering, *“Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved.”* Because the duration of the tribulation has been prophesied by Daniel, this reduction of time has been predetermined by God. It is not God responding to the circumstances, but rather it is God knowing of these circumstances from eternity past and choosing to put a stop to the total destruction.

The great tribulation will be worse than anything the world has ever seen. It will certainly be far worse than the destruction of Jerusalem, which was localized to the land of Israel. It will be worse than the world wars of the twentieth century. But this time will not last, *“But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”* The elect are the believers in Jesus, those who have come to their faith after the rapture of the church, and were chosen before the foundation of the world (cf. Ephesians 1:4-5). These days will be cut short by the return of Jesus, as described in 24:29-31.

False messiahs (24:23-28)

In Matthew 24:24 Jesus teaches that *“false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders.”* This will happen once the abomination of desolation appears. Jesus had earlier spoken of the coming of false Christs (24:5) and false prophets (24:11), so this is apparently an increase as evil abounds during the time of *“great tribulation.”*

Also, verse 24 says they *“will show great signs and wonders,”* indicating that there will be fraudulently deceptive miraculous events. While false Christs and false prophets have always plagued the world, they will be especially prominent at the end of the age. 2 Thessalonians 2:9 says, *“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders.”* So, the father of lies (John 8:44) will also send many others to further his deception.

The evil one's attempt to "mislead, if possible, even the elect" will not succeed, for God's true followers cannot be duped into truly following a false messiah (cf. John 10:27-29). By adding the phrase, "*if possible,*" Jesus communicates that it is not possible. Those who belong to Jesus will endure great distress in this troubled time, but they will not be overcome in their faith because the Lord will sovereignly protect and keep them. Because He has told them "*in advance,*" they must ignore the many false claims by the many false Christs and false prophets and "*not believe them.*"

The Lord promised to return to deliver them from this evil deception in a manner that will be obvious to all. "*For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.*" This stands in stark contrast to Satan, who "*disguises himself as an angel of light.*" These counterfeits will be exposed as such when this sudden, glorious coming of Christ is seen by all. As was told to the disciples at the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1:11, "*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.*"

The concluding proverb, "*Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather,*" has been interpreted in many different ways. By itself, the proverb is difficult but it does reflect the same sense of our modern proverb, "where there is smoke, there is fire." Many of the various views of this statement include:

1. The corpse is the decay of the world and the vulture is the coming of Jesus.
2. This proverb represents the moral corruption of the world.
3. This represents God's children feeding upon Christ.
4. This is representative of the death of the rebellious at the final battle.
5. The vultures are the Roman forces overtaking corrupt Jerusalem.
6. This represents the swiftness of Jesus' coming.
7. This is how obvious the return of Christ will be, as a carcass is to vultures.
8. The corpse is the decay of the world and the vulture is the false prophets.

The view that best fits the context of false messiahs and false prophets misleading many is the last view. The land of Israel, and the world as a whole, will suffer as never before, and the hope of mankind will grow dim. Revelation 4-18 describes the tribulation period as having unprecedented death and destruction. The world is attractive only for vultures. Jesus had just described the false prophets as coming to deceive the world (24:23-26). The world is in such a spiritual condition that the false prophets will use it to benefit themselves, much like vultures consume the flesh of a decaying body.

Conclusion

Matthew 24:15-28 describes the situation of the world during the second half of the seven-year tribulation period that precedes the return of Jesus. Jesus called this the time of *“great tribulation”* in verse 21, where things will be far worse on earth than any other time in history, past or future.

The nature of the tribulation period stands in great contrast to the glory of the coming kingdom of God. Jesus will return *“with great power and glory”* (24:30), which will overwhelm and judge all adversaries who have brought such deception and persecution to the world. His power is great and His glory will redeem the decaying earth.

Without the contrast of the result of the evil of the world, the glory of Jesus cannot be fully appreciated. It is much the same way as the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees provided a contrast with the teaching of Jesus. *“When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes”* (Matthew 7:28-29). In the same way, the recognition of our sin is necessary for us to appreciate the forgiveness of the Lord, *“For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”* (Luke 7:47).

One would think that the tremendous turmoil of the tribulation would move the world toward a realization of tremendous need. However, while some will respond to their need with faith in Jesus, many will remain destined for ultimate eternal destruction. *“For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left.”* (Matthew 24:37-41). Even though Jesus told us of the signs of the tribulation, the world will continue to act as if all will continue without interruption. The return of Christ will be a shocking occurrence for the worldly people of the tribulation.