

The Abomination of Desolations

Matthew 24:15-28

Mark Vroegop

15 "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. 17 Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, 18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. 19 And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! 20 Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. 21 For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. 22 And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. 23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. 25 See, I have told you beforehand. 26 So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27 For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather (Matt 24:15-28).

Last week we began a five-week series called "The End is Near," and my hope is to walk us through the teaching of Matthew 24-25 such that we will really hear Jesus's heart and his message. This section is an important aspect of Jesus's teaching not just because it talks about events connected with the End Times; it is critical because it helps us know how we are to live in the absence of Jesus. Hopefully you will remember this statement: "the disciples are concerned about when he will renew his presence with them, and Jesus is concerned about how they will live in his absence."¹

We need to keep in mind that the over-arching theme of this section of Scripture is about spiritual watchfulness and endurance. Throughout these two chapters, Jesus urges his followers to be on guard and persevere:

- "See that no one leads you astray" (Matt 24:4)
- "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt 24:4)
- "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matt 24:42)
- "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matt 25:13)

¹ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 570.

Having this mindset of watchfulness will help us avoid two ditches that I talked about last week: 1) lackadaisical – living as if Jesus really isn't coming back, 2) chronological – using this text merely as a time for future events. Understanding the over-arching theme helps us stay on target when navigating the numerous questions of this passage.

How to Read the Olivet Discourse

There is another key to understanding this passage beyond its main message. It is important to know how to read the Olivet Discourse in terms of its fulfillment. The question is fairly straightforward: Did Jesus mean that all, none or part of the Olivet Discourse would be fulfilled during the lifetime of the disciples?

The answer, however, is very complicated and challenging. In fact, I must admit to you that each argument has weaknesses, and I've come to my own conclusion based on the view with what I perceive to be the least amount of weaknesses. That said, we can still be right and even confident; however, we may have to be bit less dogmatic and a bit more humble because, in the end, each view makes particular decisions on what difficult passages say.

There are three basic views of on this passage:

Past Fulfillment – Some view that most or all of the events are fulfilled during the lifetime of the disciples. They see verses 24:1-35 as describing the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and verses 24:36-25:46 as referring to the Second Coming of Jesus. My problem with this view is that it has to force the cosmic signs (e.g. sun will be darkened, stars will fall from heaven – v 29) into an allegorical interpretation for something else other than what Jesus says.

Future Fulfillment – Others view that all of the events are future events, specifically events that happen just before Jesus returns. My problem with this view is 1) Jesus is clearly speaking to the disciples and 2) 24:34 clearly says that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

Past-Future Fulfillment – Another option (and this is mine) is to see the passage as potentially fulfilled in the past but with implications for future fulfillment. In this way you see the passage with a double or a typological fulfillment. Therefore, Jesus could be talking to the disciples about real events that may be fulfilled in their lifetime but these events foreshadow something yet to come. Taken this way the passage is divided like this:

- 24:1-2 – The disciples comment on the temple and Jesus shocks them
- 24:3-14 – The disciples ask end times questions and Jesus tells them about the environment which will characterize life when he is gone

- 24:15-28 – A specific prediction about localized and intensified suffering which happened in 66-70 A.D. and is a model / prediction of what will happen in the Great Tribulation
- 24:29-31 – A description of the Second Coming of Jesus
- 24:32-35 – Further explanation of the environment of life in Jesus's absence²

All of this intricate, interpretive detail is important because it directly impacts how you handle the passage, but let me remind you again that the over-arching tone here is one of watchfulness and spiritual endurance. Don't lose that key idea or you'll miss the real point.

The Abomination of Desolation

Jesus moves from a general description about the nature disciples' experience (and ours) in his absence in 24:4-14 into a rather specific description regarding a season of intensified suffering and hardship. Central to this season of suffering is an event which is called the abomination of desolation. Jesus says that this event or one like it is a telling signal that the end is near: "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)..." (v 15).

The term "abomination of desolation" is used in other places in the Bible to describe an event in which the temple is desecrated and forebodes destruction. The first reference to this kind of event is found in Daniel 9:26-27.

The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing [of the temple] he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him." (NIV)

The implication of Daniel's prophecy is that a foreign invader comes, stops the sacrifice and the offering in Jerusalem, and desecrates the temple with some act of defilement. Throughout the history of Israel there were numerous events that could fit this description. Therefore, I think it is best to view the abomination of desolations as a continuum of fulfillment:

- Antiochus Epiphanes IV, a ruler of the Seleucid Empire invaded Jerusalem in 167 BC, killed 80,000 Jews, outlawed Judaism, dedicated the temple to Zeus, and brought forbidden items and sacrifices (including sacrificing a pig) into the temple
- The Roman conquest of the Hasmonean Kingdom in 63 B.C. when Pompey entered the Holy of Holies

² Here lies the clearest weakness of this view. Taken as past-future, verse 34 cannot mean that everything that Jesus talked about is fulfilled in their lifetime, despite what the passage seems to say. I'll explain how I solve that problem in the next message.

- The Zealots misuse of the temple, the murder of the High Priest, and the installation of a false high priest during the Roman siege of Jerusalem from 66-70 A.D.
- The Roman destruction of the temple by the Titus in 70 A.D.
- The ultimate and future sacrilege of the antichrist as described in 2 Thessalonians 2:4³

It is very challenging to locate the meaning of Jesus's words to just one event. Rather, it seems that the defilement and destruction of the temple were often connected with the coming judgment of God, and Jesus is telling his disciples to look for a historically familiar symbol. This would seem to fit well with the parenthetical statement "let the reader understand." To limit the meaning to just the fall of Jerusalem or to future events are both problematic to me.⁴

Therefore, the point of the reference to the Abomination of Desolations is for the disciples to understand that similar events that have happened in the past will happen again as the temple is defiled and widespread suffering and persecution comes. Certainly the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. would have fit the sense of this prophecy, but there seems to be good evidence to suggest that there is additional fulfillment in the future since Scripture talks about a coming Antichrist and a future temple:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? 6 And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, 10 and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (2 Thess 2:1-10).

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, 2 but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months (Rev 11:1-2).

³ Turner, 579

⁴ The problem with the former is 1) vs 21 – a statement that seems too far-reaching for the Fall of Jerusalem, bad as it was, 2) vs 29 – "immediately" is difficult to understand any other way, 3) 2 Thess 2:4 would be very confusing if 15-28 was already fulfilled. The problem with the latter view is 1) the tone of Matt 24 is clearly toward the disciples and their immediate lives, 2) v 34 – it seems that Jesus intends for much of this to be fulfilled in the lifetime of the disciples

Therefore, it seems to me that this passage and the description of the abomination of desolations should be seen as an event predicted in Matthew which could have multiple fulfillments, including a fulfillment in the future.

More Warnings and Promises

Jesus spends the rest of our section giving the disciples a series of warnings and promises. Last week we saw him do this when we studied verses 4-14. He picks up that same theme again here because the main point (again!) is to call the disciples to a mentality of spiritual watchfulness and anticipation of what is to come. He describes the environment of the last days with the intent of waking them up. There are five descriptions:

1. There will be a sense of urgency (vv 16-18)

Jesus pictures a level of hardship signaled by the abomination of desolations that will produce a need to flee. As so often happens in our contemporary culture, a natural disaster or international conflict create a group of refugees who are trying to escape the impending danger. A parallel account in Luke 21 provides helpful color on this event:

20 "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.
21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, 22 for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written (Luke 21:20-22)

2. The suffering will be very great (vv 19-21)

Next we see Jesus make three statements about the depth of the difficulty during these days. Life during this season is exceedingly difficult:

How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! 20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath (Matt 24:19-20 – NIV)

To be pregnant, taking care of small children, traveling in the winter or on the Sabbath (when it would be difficult to obtain provisions or to be unseen) would make this flight even more difficult. Therefore, Jesus says to pray that these things aren't happening when suffering comes.

In verse 21, Jesus provides a summary of the depth of the hardship which I think is ultimately fulfilled in the Great or Unique Tribulation, a season of unparalleled suffering.

For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be (Matt 24:21)

This raises the question about whether a rapture of the church takes place before the Tribulation or whether the rapture could be seen as coinciding with the Second Coming of Christ, thus happening at the end of the Tribulation. This issue is beyond the teaching of this text. It seems to me that either is plausible.⁵

3. God will protect his own (v 22)

The suffering will be very severe, but it will not be without limits. Verse 22 says that it will be so difficult that no human being would be saved unless it was cut short. In other words, the context of the hardship is so bad that complete extinction of the human race is actually within the realm of possibility. This is hardship beyond any other.

Yet God sets limits on the scope of this hardship. In his control (albeit mysterious), God sets the boundary of the difficulty on the earth. "But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short." Matthew uses the word "elect," a word pointing to God's sovereignty which undergirds everything including salvation, to describe the followers of Jesus. And during seasons of great hardship and suffering, God's sovereignty and control is so important because if the endurance were left to the strength of the sufferers or to chance circumstances, there would be no hope. God's sovereignty in setting the boundaries of hardship and preserving the faith of his children is incredibly comforting.

How beautiful to consider that even in the darkest of all human experiences, God is protecting his own. Just because God's control over all events – even hardship – is mysterious doesn't negate its reality or its comfort.

4. Don't be naïve (vv 23-26)

The next thing that Jesus says is somewhat similar to what he has said previously about false teachers and phony Messiahs (see 24:10-11). Obviously it is an important point because he reinforces it again here. Verse 25 says, "See I have told you beforehand." So he is warning them in advance not to be naïve. He warns them about a number of possibilities:

⁵ While both are plausible, I have found the historic arguments for a pre-tribulational rapture to be weaker than what I remembered. With only one reference (1 Thess 4:13-18) that *could* speak of a rapture and with narrowly defining the immanent return of Jesus as "at any second," the case feels a bit forced. Additionally, one has to deal with the fact that the church didn't hold to a pre-trib rapture position until the 19th Century. Additionally and even more convincing is the fact that pre-trib position forces Matthew 24 and 25 into a future fulfillment paradigm when the tone seems clearly to be directed toward the disciples and what they will experience in some fashion.

- People who will claim to have found Jesus (v 23) often in remote locations (e.g., “wilderness” and “inner rooms”)(v 26)
- False christs and false prophets who perform great signs and wonders (v 24)
- Many people will be led astray (v 24)
- The deceivers will try to lead astray believers (“if possible, even the elect”⁶) (v 24)

Deceptive practices, secret knowledge, amazing events, and large crowds will characterize the false leaders, and Jesus is calling for his disciples to be discerning and spiritually ready. Spiritual naivety has and will lead many astray.

5. His coming will be very clear (vv 27-28)

Finally, Jesus helps his disciples understand what his coming will be like. To combat the false prophets and those who would claim to be the private possessors of spiritual information, Jesus tells them about the grand scale of his return.

27 For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather (Matt 24:27-28).

What is he saying here? He is identifying that his coming will be very obvious. He compares it to the way in which lightening can light up the sky even though it is far away. A bolt of lightening is hard to miss even when it is far away. The flash can be seen as far as 100 miles away if the conditions are right.

But Jesus says something more here. He quotes a proverb about vultures and a corpse (v 28). Now we don’t really have many vultures in the city of Indianapolis, but in Jesus day a flock of vultures circling in the distance would certainly indicate that something bad has happened. Think of it like sirens or a large group of emergency vehicles with news helicopters hovering overhead. The point is the same. It is obvious that something is going on.

The point is rather apparent: his second coming will not be missed.

Listen to how Revelation 19:11-16 describes it:

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth

⁶ The phrase “if possible” no more calls into question the security of the elect than it calls in question the inevitability of Jesus’s cup (26:39 – “if possible, let this cup pass from me”) (Carson).

comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:11-16)

His coming will be very, very clear.

Now What?

In light of this text, there are many things that I could say about spiritual watchfulness, but I feel like I want to focus specifically on one aspect this morning. On my heart are those of you who know that if Jesus came back today, you would be in serious trouble. The evidence of your life, the hardness of your heart, the secret sins that you use to satisfy your heart, and your continual refusal to give up control of your life do more than just create guilt. Feeling bad is an early warning sign that there is holy God who establishes what is right and wrong. It tells you: there is a God and you messed up.

However, the message of the Bible, the Gospel, is that God has made a way for human beings to be forgiven of their sin through God's application of Jesus's death to sinful people like you and me. It requires that you repent of your sins and receive Christ. Being out of fellowship with your creator creates guilt.

Here me! In this way, guilt is a gift! It is a wake-up call for you to realize that there is something worse than guilt. Do you know what it is? Worse than guilt is being guilty before a holy, righteous God at judgment day with no advocate, no mediator, no atonement, no defense and no forgiveness. Guilt is a gift until Christ returns. After that, guilt is the basis of your eternal damnation.

So the question is this: Have you taken care of your guilt?

If Jesus returned today, would you be ready?

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