

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WHEN YOU SEE THE ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION

Matthew 24:15

Matthew 24 contains a conversation between Jesus and His disciples about the future. Jesus said that one day, the temple will be destroyed. Startled, the disciples asked this question: *Tell us, when will these things be (the destruction of the temple), and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"* (v. 3). In the disciples' mind, these three events (the destruction of the temple, the Lord's return, and the end of the age) would happen at about the same time. Jesus, however, gave no timetable. He did not specify when the three events would occur. What He did was to give signs that will happen right before the end of Jerusalem and the end of the age. The ultimate event that would signal the end will be the desecration of the temple by the 'abomination of desolation.'

The signs

So Jesus gives at least ten signs of the last days. Let's review them quickly.

- Sign #1: false messiahs. *For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many* (v. 5).
- Sign #2: world violence. *And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end* (v. 6).
- Sign #3: natural disasters. *... in various places there will be famines and earthquakes* (v. 7).
- Sign #4: extreme religious persecution. *Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name* (v. 9).
- Sign #5: terrible apostasy. *And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another* (v.10).
- Sign #6: rising of false leaders offering false hope. *And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many* (v. 11).
- Sign #7: multiplication of evil. *And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold* (v. 12).
- Sign #8: standing to the end. *But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved* (v. 13).
- Sign #9: world evangelism. *And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come* (v. 14).

- Sign #10: the abomination of desolation. *Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) (v. 15).*

Our lesson will focus on v. 15, particularly on the words 'abomination of desolation.' The abomination of desolation. We will look at this verse through a series of questions.

Something repugnant

When we read v. 15, the first question we all have is this: what does the term 'abomination of desolation' mean? 'The abomination of desolation,' 'the abomination that causes desolation,' as we read in the NIV. This expression is very important to the understanding of our passage. It is in fact the key to the entire passage.

The term 'abomination of desolation' has not been coined by the Lord Jesus Himself. It is found three times in the OT, all in the book of Daniel: Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 12:11. Let's take a look at Daniel 11:31 to see how it is used.

*Daniel 11:31. "And 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**.*

Here we are told that the temple will be defiled by the setting up of the abomination of desolation.

This expression also occurs in the books of Maccabees. The books of Maccabees are part of the Catholic canon of Scripture. Among the Protestants however, they are not considered as canonical books but they are included in the Apocrypha. Nevertheless they are valuable books that allow us to know things which otherwise we would know nothing or very little about. The first book of the Maccabees is basically a historical book. It relates the history of the Maccabees from 175 BC to 134 BC. The Maccabees were a group of Jewish patriots who were active in the liberation of Judea from Syrian rule.

This is what we read in 1Maccabees 1:54: 'Now the fifteenth day of the month Casleu, in the hundred forty and fifth year, they set up **the abomination of desolation** upon the altar, and builded idol altars throughout the cities of Juda on every side.'

This abomination of desolation refers to the defiling of the temple in 167 BC when the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes conquered Jerusalem. On that occasion, he defiled the temple by setting up an altar of Zeus, one of the Greek gods, on top of the altar of Yahweh. He defiled it also by ordering pagan sacrifices on that altar, including the slaughter of pigs, just to offend and humiliate the Jews. This desecrating act of Antiochus was so horrific to the Jews that it was described by the term 'abomination of desolation' in 1Maccabees.

So the word 'abomination' refers to something that is disgusting, something repugnant, something loathsome. It is repulsive to the sense of morality and decency. When you look at it, you just want to throw up. That is what the word 'abomination' means.

Abomination in the OT

The word 'abomination' is used in the OT in Leviticus 18:22 where it refers to homosexual activity. *You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an **abomination**.* It is an abomination to God who regards homosexuality as revolting, sickening and disgusting. That might not be the opinion of some people, but that is the view of the Bible.

We find the same word 'abomination' in Ezekiel 7:20: *And they transformed the beauty of His ornaments into pride, and they made the images of their **abominations** and their detestable things with it; therefore I will make it an abhorrent thing to them.* Here the word 'abomination' is linked to idol worship. Idol worship was regarded as disgusting, sickening, partly because it was associated in the ancient days with perverted sexual behavior. We can think of the Canaanites for example. Archeology has uncovered for us some of the revolting, sickening activity of the Canaanites: child sacrifices, sexual orgies, homosexuality, even temple prostitution where prostitutes function as part of the religious worship. This whole immorality got out of hand and became so disgusting that God had to order the extermination of the Canaanites, lest they pollute the entire earth with their practices. We read in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, *But of the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the Lord your God has commanded you, **lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations** which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the Lord your God.*

It is interesting to see how the OT applies this nauseating feeling to abominations. Let's read Leviticus 18:25, 27-28: ²⁵ *For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and **the land vomits out** its inhabitants ...* ²⁷ *(for all these **abominations** the men of the land have done, who were before you, and thus the land is defiled),* ²⁸ *lest **the land vomit** you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you.* When people's behavior becomes so corrupt, there will come a time when the land where they live will begin to 'vomit' them out. Here the land represents a person with a proper sense of morality. When this person sees all the abominations, he is so deeply affected that he feels nauseous and he vomits.

And this sickening thing leads to desolation, or results in desolation, or has as its purpose desolation. What does 'desolation' mean? 'Desolation' basically means 'ruin,' 'destruction.'

When we put the two words together, the 'abomination of desolation,' we have an expression which refers to a disgusting or sickening entity that leads to destruction or which has as its purpose your ruin. A person who keeps doing this kind of disgusting thing, or behave in this sort of sickening way, will end up in desolation, i.e. in ruin, in destruction.

Now, let's return to Matthew 24. Verse 15 tells us where the abomination of desolation will be standing: in the holy place. *Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation ... standing in the holy place.* This means that evil has reached a level such that nothing is considered as sacred anymore. Evil now has no regard for anything. It is prepared to invade everything, everywhere. Not even the holy place of the temple is sacred anymore.

An object or a person?

This takes us to the second question. The first question was, What does the term 'abomination of desolation' mean? The second question is, What is it? Who or what is the abomination of desolation? Is it an object? Or is it a person?

The grammatical study of v. 15 is very interesting. The word 'standing,' *standing* (ἑστὸς) *in the holy place*, is a neuter participle and so denotes an object or an occurrence. But in Mark 13:14, the parallel passage, we find something different. Let's read this passage.

Mark 13:14. "So when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing (ἑστηκότα) where it ought not" (let the reader understand), "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."

Here the word 'standing' is a masculine participle, which indicates that the reference is to a person. So in Matthew 24, 'standing' refers to an object, and in Mark 13, it refers to a person.

We will come back to this observation later. For now, I would like to talk to you about 2Thessalonians 2 because it is very relevant to our lesson. In 2Thessalonians 2, Paul speaks about the end time on the basis of the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24, i.e., he uses the same symbol as Daniel when he refers to the one who must appear before the day of the Lord can come. Let us look at 2Thessalonians 2:3-4 and observe the striking parallel.

*2 Thessalonians 2:3. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day (the day of the Lord's coming) will not come unless the falling away comes first (the great apostasy), and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,
4 who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.*

Two things will precede the day of the Lord. One is a massive revolt against God - the falling away. The revolt will be so massive that it will necessitate the return of Christ in judgement. Most of the people in the world will have gone so far that they will be beyond ever repenting.

But now, notice the second element. A major feature of this rebellion will be the appearance of a very special man called the man of sin. This person will draw his power from Satan and will promote immorality and anarchy. He will be the embodiment of all that is contrary to God and to His law. His whole personality will be characterized by evil, by transgression, by lawlessness. This man of sin will attempt, and even will seem to be able to dethrone God, and then will demand worship and obedience to himself. He will sit in the temple of God and will show himself or claim that he is God. He will actually set himself up within the temple to be worshipped. This description of the man of sin is remarkably similar to the description of Antiochus Epiphanes, the abomination of desolation, who was predicted in the book of Daniel. And it is my belief that the abomination of desolation is the man of sin that Paul talks about in 2Thessalonians 2.

The book of Revelation identifies a person who is to arise in the last days and cause unparalleled havoc upon the world and God's people. He is called the 'beast' (Revelation 13). It is quite likely that the 'beast' in Revelation is the man of sin, the abomination of desolation. This man is under Satan's control and he will focus all the powers of evil against Christ and His followers, bringing destruction. We are told that not only he exalts himself as God, but he does in fact set up an image of himself in the temple. That image will appear to be alive. It will actually talk.

Revelation 13:15: He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.

So who or what is the abomination of desolation? Is it a person or an object? It is actually both. Remember the neutral participle of the word 'standing' in Matthew 24 and the masculine participle of the same word in Mark 13. The abomination of desolation refers not only to the man of sin, but also to the image that he sets up of himself in the temple for everyone to worship. In worshipping the image, the object, you are also worshipping the person, the man of sin. We cannot really separate the two.

When the abomination of desolation appears

Let's come to the third question. When does the abomination of desolation appear? The word 'So' at the beginning of Matthew 24:15 refers the reader to the preceding statement, *Then the end will come*. Here it is important to understand that we are dealing with the end of two events. Remember that the disciples had asked two questions: (1) when was Jerusalem to be destroyed; (2) what was to be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age. Thus our passage has a double meaning. It refers

both to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. and to the end time when Christ will return.

Jesus began to answer the two questions of the disciples. He gave the signs of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and of the end of the age. He said that the fall of Jerusalem is due to judgment upon sin and the end of the age is also due to judgment upon sin. For this reason, the signs that point to the end of both Jerusalem and of the world are bound to be similar, for both are ending and being judged because of sin. The main difference is that in the end time, the signs will be much more intense.

We mentioned the abomination of desolation in the end time. What about the end of Jerusalem? Is there an abomination of desolation for the destruction of Jerusalem?

Luke 21:20 has a simple description of the abomination of desolation. Instead of the mysterious style of the book of Daniel, we read, *But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.* This verse deals with the coming destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. When you will see the city surrounded by the Roman army, you will know that its desolation is very near, i.e., there would be no deliverance to be expected. So here we are told that this abomination is the Roman military investment of Jerusalem under Titus who ordered the destruction of the city.

Notice that Luke has only the word 'desolation,' not the abomination of desolation. In fact, Luke's account is different from the Synoptic gospels in many ways. For instance, it does not mention that the tribulation in this period is the most intense ever to fall on human beings. It does not mention that no human would have survived if the Lord had not cut short these days. It does not say that the time should not be in the winter. It is the only one that mentions 'the time of the Gentiles.' These differences indicate that the gospel of Luke emphasizes a different aspect in Jesus' teaching at this point. It emphasizes the nearer fulfillment in the judgment, the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, rather than the end time. Jerusalem's collapse could be seen as a preview, but with less intensity, of what the end will be like. When Jerusalem falls the first time, it is not yet the end. Nonetheless, the two falls are related and the presence of one pictures what the ultimate siege will be like.

What does all this mean for us? It means this. When Jesus used the expression 'abomination of desolation,' He used it with a double reference. He spoke about Daniel as referring to an abomination and desolation after Daniel's time. We mentioned Antiochus Epiphanes. And He is also referring to an abomination and desolation that will appear after His time on earth. We mentioned the Roman army and the fall of Jerusalem. We also mentioned the man of sin in the end time. So the Lord applied Daniel's prophecy to the future, to some future after His departure for heaven. He was saying, 'Something like the abomination of desolation in Daniel's time will recur with the fall of Jerusalem and at the end of time.'

Flee!

One last question. What are the believers to do when the man of lawlessness appears? Christ's answer is simple. The believers are to put as much distance between this person and themselves. They are to flee from him. Matthew 24:16: *Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.* This is a basic scriptural principle. Where there is evil, get away from it. Put as much distance between iniquity and yourself. The apostle Paul used the same word 'flee' (*pheugo*) when he gave this advice to Timothy, *Flee from youthful lusts* (2Timothy 2:22). 'Don't be foolish. Don't think you cannot fall into temptation. Flee from it.' The same applies to persecution. 'When persecution comes,' the Lord Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 10:23, 'flee to the next city.' The disciple is not afraid to die, but he must not invite trouble or put his life in danger. We see the same principle applied to idolatry. *Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry,* Paul wrote in 1Corinthians 10:14.

What does the man of sin intend to accomplish? What is his goal? It is explained clearly in v. 24. *For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.* His ultimate goal is to lead us astray. He wants us to depart from God. He wants us to abandon our faith.

You see, in v. 21, we are told that *there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now.* This will cause Christians to long intensely for the Lord's return. 'Oh Jesus, come. Please, come. Save us from this situation.' And there will be imposters who will come to fill our longings. False Christs. False prophets. There will be many of them, all claiming to have a divine answer to our sufferings. And among them, the man of sin. Most people will not recognize him. There is a high chance that he will come to the praise and applause of the world. You see how dangerous the situation will be at that time.

May God help His people to endure to the end.