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403 - The Abomination Of Desolation

1. Introduction

As Christ answers his disciples questions while on a visit to Jerusalem, he prophecies of things that will take place and have a profound effect on the nation. One of these prophecies details a catastrophic event frequently interpreted as a sign of the end times and imminent return of the Lord. Christ stated however that this would take place during the lifetime of those listening to him at that moment.

2. Setting the stage

In the last lesson I outlined and grouped passages from Christ's prophecy. The three groups described political, religious and social upheavals, a coming disaster to fall on Judea and Jerusalem and the second coming. I also clarified that the second, associated with the end of the world, would have no sign or warning. This implies that anything in Christ's prophecy that constitutes a sign referenced the first two groups, not the third group, the second coming. As a point of review I've prepared a chart that summarizes the groups. These are:

Group 1: Social, political & religious changes / upheavals: Matthew 24.4-5, 6-8, 9-14, 23-26

Group 2: Event - abomination of desolation: Matthew 24.15-22, 28, 29, 32-33, 34-35, 40-41

Group 3: Second coming / end of the world: Matthew 24.27, 30-31, 36-39, 42-44, 45-51

The social, political and religious changes, including the persecution of Christians, can be verified from the scriptures and secular history. The changing environment in some ways leads to specific occurrences that are noted by Christ as signs of the coming calamity on Judea and Jerusalem. As these things take place, tensions rise in the world and finally war and the wrath of Rome come to Palestine. In this lesson we'll discuss

- a. Tension, chaos & rebellion
- b. The gathering of eagles
- c. The abomination that makes desolate

Let's take a look at each of these

3. Tension, chaos & rebellion

Bible believers today use passages such as **Matthew 24** to identify a time when the world will be in a state of social and political unrest leading to suppression and persecution of believers. A close examination of **Matthew 24** however leads us to conclude that these

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conditions were already at work in the first century. Some of them would alert Christians of the time that catastrophe was coming and they could prepare for it. After these events took place tension and unrest remained in the world and we can see that this is typical of human history. There are however specific characteristics that believers could be aware of and use to prepare themselves for the time that was coming.

When the church was first established the Christians enjoyed a golden period if you will they had favor with all the people (**Acts 2.47**). That time of peace began to fade as the apostles are arrested and ordered not to teach in the name of Jesus any longer (**Acts 4.1-21**). The apostles were arrested again and once more threatened to stop preaching in the name of Jesus (**Acts 5.17-42**). Hatred for the Gospel continued to grow until a group hired false witnesses against Stephen accusing him of being a threat to the Law of Moses and their traditions (**Acts 6.9-15**). Following a scathing discourse on their history and a condemnation of their opposition to God, the murder of the prophets and failure to keep the Law, Stephen was stoned to death (**Acts 7.1-60**). This ignited a persecution against the church launched in part by Saul of Tarsus causing many of the Christians to flee Jerusalem (**Acts 8.1-2**).

The book of Acts records persecutions that arose and the involvement of political leaders who opposed the teachings of the church. Herod takes aim at the church and kills James the brother of John, an apostle (**Acts 12.1-2**). Based on the Jews reaction, Herod went on the arrest Peter as well with the intent of killing him. Peter was freed by an angel and Herod later was stricken by the Lord and died (**Acts 12.3-23**).

Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians meets Christ who appears to him and confronts him about his persecution. Saul prays for three days after which Ananias comes to him, being told that Saul was a chosen vessel to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles, and baptizes him (**Acts 9.3-18**). As Paul, as Saul was later known, carried the message to the Gentile world, he was followed by Jews who planned on destroying him for teaching against the Law and their traditions. At one point a group of forty men took a vow to not eat or drink until they had killed him while the apostle was in Roman custody (**Acts 23.12-22**). Paul is taken under cover of darkness from Jerusalem to Caesaria (**Acts 23.31-33**).

The teachings of Christ weren't just a threat to the Jews and their traditions. As time went on the Romans and others began to act against the new threat as well. Romans already had a dislike for the Jews and may have seen Christians as just another sect of Judaism, but in centers of emperor worship and pagan deities, Gentile populations began to react in the same way. Some of this is recorded in the book of Acts as well. We have an account of the uprising of the silversmiths in Ephesus when the craftsmen's livelihood related to Diana the goddess was perceived as threatened (**Acts 19.23-41**).

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In Rome a general dislike for the Jews was growing. Tiberius dies in 37 and is succeeded by Gaius, better known as Caligula. Gaius threatened to place a statue of himself in the temple in Jerusalem which infuriated the Jews. The statue was never placed there but tension remained. In A.D. 38-40 Alexandria was the site of conflict as full citizenship of the Jewish population was rejected and pagan gangs fought their way into synagogues to setup statues of the emperor. A delegation of Jews appeared before Gaius in A.D. 40 to explain why they wouldn't offer sacrifices to the emperor which Gaius regarded as lunacy on their part. Around the same time Jews in the city of Jamnia destroyed a pagan altar causing Gaius to issue a decree that Jewish places of worship should be converted to shrines of the imperial cult. Gaius was assassinated in 41 and succeeded by Claudius.

Claudius responded to the events in Alexandria demanding that both parties, Greeks and Jews, stop fighting or they would experience the indignation of the emperor. He had also issued a decree for Jews to leave Rome as recorded by Luke (**Acts 18.2**). Claudius died under questionable circumstances in 54 and is succeeded by his adopted son Nero.

In A.D. 64 the Great Fire of Rome caused problems in the capital resulting in Nero blaming the event on Christians who were viewed as dissident Jews. Christians were arrested and burned alive in spite of rumors that Nero had the fire started to seize the land affected for a planned construction of what he called his Golden House. Uprisings in Britannia and Parthia arose, Nero surrenders Armenia to the Parthians, and after A.D. 65 several plots against Nero rose while the emperor had army chiefs in Germany killed. In A.D. 66 a group of Zealots in Jerusalem declared war on the Roman soldiers stationed there tipping off more tension in the region. Nero participated in events in Corinth and other places while Rome experienced executions and food shortages until one of his servants went and called him back. In A.D. 68, after learning that the senate had condemned him to be flogged to death, Nero commits suicide in June. Prior to his death Nero had issued orders to his general Vespasian to take care of the Jewish revolt building in Palestine. The plan was to reduce the country piecemeal saving Jerusalem until the end.

The empire was in disarray. Conflict was everywhere. Political and social structures were collapsing and several generals now looked to seize power in Rome. In A.D. 68 - 69 three generals, Galba, Otho and Vitellius would take power for short periods of time. Meanwhile in Palestine the Jewish war was underway. The wars and rumors of wars Christ spoke of were taking place and clouds of destruction were gathering against the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

4. The gathering of eagles

Conditions described by Christ in **Matthew 24** were well under way by the middle of the first century. Fighting rose in Judea and reached the point of war during the governorship of

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Gessius Florus the governor from A.D. 64-66. The problem resulted in Cestius Gallus the governor of Syria being sent to Judea with Legion XII Fulminata to restore order and suppress the fighting. Josephus notes that Gallus approached Jerusalem but stopped then left the area. When the news of this reached Nero he decided to send a more capable commander into the area ordering Vespasian to invade Judea and destroy Jerusalem.

Vespasian assembled Legion V Macedonia and Legion X Fretensis under his command. He then sent for his son Titus who had been with Nero in Achaia who took command of Legion XV Apollonaris. Vespasian and Titus moved into Galilee subdued it and the surrounding areas then began to approach Jerusalem. Historians note that Vespasian wasn't quick to engage Jerusalem but was willing to wait for the people to weaken themselves through lack of supplies and the infighting that was taking place. In June of 69 Vespasian received the news that Nero was dead and determined to return to Rome. Preparations for his departure included orders to his son Titus to return to Jerusalem and destroy it.

These events can be harmonized with warnings from Christ. I've already summarized the social and political chaos in both Judea and Rome which met the conditions outlined by Christ. Another warning Christ gave is abundantly clear and would have been understood by Christians living in Jerusalem. Christ stated, "***For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.***" (Matt 24.28). Luke records this as well writing, "***Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.***" (Luke 17.37). As the Roman armies moved through the region and approached the city of Jerusalem, their standards, marked by the imperial eagle and other symbols of Rome would be visible and their purpose apparent. It was at this point that those who understood Jesus prophecy were to flee for their lives. Christ confirms this in the Gospel account of Luke. "***And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.***" (Luke 21.20-22).

5. The abomination that makes desolate

Daniel was a young man when taken captive in Jerusalem by the Babylonians around 606 B.C. Possibly rendered as a eunuch then schooled in the sciences of the Chaldeans, Daniel dedicated himself to remaining faithful to God. His captivity extended past the time of the Chaldean dynasty, through the Babylonian restoration by Nabonidus and the decadence of Belshazzar, Nabonidus son, into the victory of the Medes under the reign of Darius (Dan 9.1). He understood that the seventy years of exile were ending and prayed for the restoration of a remnant as promised by God (Dan 9.4-19).

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The angel Gabriel appears to Daniel and relays a series of prophetic visions that detail what was to happen in the latter times. One of these prophecies concerned the fate of Jerusalem. In a vision Daniel is told, ***“Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried; but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand. And from the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days. Blessed is he that waiteth, and cometh to the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days. But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.”*** (Dan 12.9-13).

Sometimes the fulfillment of prophecy isn't made clear but we can figure it out from details in the prophecy. We can also rely on statements made in the scriptures that declare the fulfillment when implemented. We see that in the life of Christ in the Gospel accounts. The prophecy given to Daniel is for the time of the end. Some interpret this to point to a time or event that hasn't taken place yet but the reality is that Christ gave a precise statement about it.

Christ told his disciples, ***“When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains...”*** (Matt 24.15-16). Christ also stated that the things for which signs were provided would take place during that generation's lifetime (Matt 24.34). The sign given specifically refers to the approach of the Roman army and their subsequent withdrawal which left time for the populace that knew the warning to flee.

In my series on Symbolism in the Bible I discussed the extent of the prophecies found in the Old Testament. It's tempting to find a passage in books like Daniel, Ezekiel or Isaiah and others and apply it's imagery to a time in the future in which evil holds sway and believers are persecuted. The point I made in that lesson, which you can review, is that the majority of prophecies ended with the coming of the Messiah, his death and resurrection followed by the establishment of the church. The exception to that, and I believe there's only one, is the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 recorded by Daniel. How do I know that? It's confirmed by Christ in **Matthew 24**, **Luke 17** and **Luke 21**. The events surrounding the destruction fit Christ's description exactly and therefore fulfills Daniel's prophecy.

There are some who like to extend prophecies like this. What I mean by that is in spite of evidence that a prophecy has been fulfilled, efforts are expended to create the idea that the prophecy also pertains to another event in the future. There are two aspects of fulfilled prophecy we need to keep in mind. First, once a prophecy has been fulfilled, we can't recycle it and apply it to something else. In order to do so we need to create scenarios that would fit the prophecy and then make the prophecy fit the created scenarios. The second thing about prophecy is that once there's a clear explanation of what the prophecy is referencing, God doesn't obscure it at a later

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date.

We'll discuss some of these difficulties and practices in future lessons, but for now we need to accept that the last Old Testament prophecy to be fulfilled was that of the destruction of Jerusalem. No other prophecies in the Old Testament extend beyond that time or deal with the second coming. In the New Testament there are a limited number of prophecies that we can identify which have been fulfilled with the exception of Christ's return. So let's take a look at the elements that Daniel and Christ identified.

Daniel describes the "*abomination that makes desolate*" while Christ refers to this as the "*abomination of desolation*". Modern interpreters of the scriptures view this as a single figure or action that will take place in the future. From the context of **Matthew 24** and **Luke 17** we can see that this refers to the Roman army. **Luke 21.20-22** clarifies this point detailing armies surrounding Jerusalem which would be a sign to flee the city. The gathering of eagles, or the place where the eagles gather, can simply be viewed as the accumulation of the standards of the Roman legions as they approached the city and later began their siege.

Another statement that may be confusing is that the "*abomination of desolation*" would be seen standing in the holy place. Some interpret this to mean the desecration of the temple and those who promote ideas about the end times see this as a future development involving a world power and a satanic image in Jerusalem. The identification of the abomination I believe is simpler and refers to the Roman army surrounding the city. The holy place refers to Jerusalem and the approach of the Roman army would be that which would be spiritually defiling as Jerusalem is still regarded as the center of Jewish worship. Prior to A.D. 70 Gaius, or Caligula, had threatened to place a statue of himself in the temple but he never did so. In other places synagogues were defiled and ordered to be turned into pagan shrines as I noted earlier. The Roman army, the abomination of desolation, was at once a sign to the faithful to run, and a warning to others of their coming doom.

Descriptions of the Romans during the siege are horrific at times but the worse things that took place happened inside the city as the population, already fighting amongst themselves, resorted to atrocities that would stagger the mind. Josephus records some of these and although some doubt the credibility of parts of his record the truth maybe far more terrible.

Dates for the siege vary from one account to the next. Some place the beginning in March, A.D. 70, others in April and some in May. I've used the dates from an early account that I found about twenty years ago which also listed the legions involved and their deployments. The dates given here are from that account. In spite of the discrepancies between these dates we know that in A.D. 70 Titus returned to Jerusalem, engaged the city, and eventually destroyed it.

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The final siege of Jerusalem, according to this account, began on May 4, 70 as Titus returned with his legions and began to survey the city. The siege formally begins on May 10th following a period of preparation. On May 25th a portion of the Northwest area of the third and outermost wall was razed allowing the Romans to access the new city. At the same time siege ramps were built to allow the attackers to scale the walls. One of these constructed a the Tower of Antonia was undermined and destroyed by the defenders on June 16th. On June 18th another ramp was destroyed by the defenders as well. On July 14th Titus renewed his assault on Antonia. Finally on July 24th the standard bearer and a trumpeter with Legion V gains a foothold on the wall and plants the Roman standard. The defenders then retreat to the temple itself. On August 29th the temple is breached, falls and is looted forcing the defenders to retreat to the upper city. Titus secures new timber from a site ten miles away and on September 8th constructs new platforms to access the city. On September 18th, A.D. 70 Jerusalem capitulates after 139 days. In the ensuing destruction it's clear that Christ's statement that no stone would be left on another has been fulfilled.

6. Next

Now that we've taken a close look at **Matthew 24** we'll move forward to our time and review the most prevalent ideas about the end times and last days. We'll prepare for a discussion of the prominent elements that believers hold to and believe are tied to future events that constitute **The Premillennial View**.