

# Sermons on Matthew

## The Abomination of Desolation

*Matthew 24:15-20*

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano  
Branch of Hope Church  
2370 W. Carson Street, #100  
Torrance, CA 90501  
(310) 212-6999  
pastorpaul@integrity.com  
[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)  
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# The Abomination of Desolation

*Matthew 24:15-20*

**Therefore when you see the *'abomination of desolation,'* spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand),<sup>16</sup> then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.<sup>17</sup> Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house.<sup>18</sup> And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.<sup>19</sup> But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!<sup>20</sup> And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. (Matthew 24:15-20).**

## **Introduction – Three Approaches**

### **1. Unique History**

I would like to continue to demonstrate that the Olivet Discourse is addressing a unique historical event and should not be viewed as the necessary future of humanity. It is unbiblical and unhealthy for the church to view their efforts as culminating in a worldwide spiritual and cultural failure.

### **2. Tribulation in General**

Although it is not the necessary future of humanity, Jesus does address the kinds of tribulations and difficulties which are common to Christians, at some level, in every generation throughout the world. It would be foolish for Christians to think that the redemption of the world is without conflict. We will briefly examine nature of tribulation.

### **3. Counsel of Christ**

Finally, to the extent that we are confronted with these types of events, the counsel of Christ is our food. We should to know it, and be committed to heed it.

**Therefore when you see the ‘\_abomination of desolation,\_' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place”\_(whoever reads, let him understand)... (Matthew 24:15)**

## 1. Unique History

### The Abomination of Desolation – A Sign of Coming Judgment

Thus far Jesus had prophesied of trials and tribulations that would happen prior to His coming in judgment of the temple and Jerusalem. The events we studied last time were the **“beginning of sorrows” (vs 8)**. **“The end is not yet,”** Jesus would say of these events **(vs 6)**. False prophets (vs 11), false Christs (vs 5) and lawlessness (vs 12) would happen within the religious community. But something far more devastating was coming from without. God would judge Israel by using an army (clearly the Roman army) that would all but annihilate them as a people (Luke 21:20).

The event that would signal the beginning of that judgment was a thing called the ‘abomination of desolation’. What is the abomination of desolation? It almost appears as if it is left purposefully unclear with Matthew’s parenthetical (whoever reads, let him understand).

One would have to be familiar with the Old Testament where this phrase originates (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11) in order for Jesus’ warning to be beneficial. Roman soldiers and other pagans would be left in the dark if they intercepted Matthew’s gospel, which would be beneficial only to those who did understand – since Jesus is seeking to protect the faithful from the Roman armies.

What is the ‘abomination of desolation’? Let’s define the words:

An abomination (*bdelygma*) is something detestable or loathsome (Latin, *ab homine* "away from man"). The word carries the idea of feeling “nausea because of stench.”<sup>1</sup> In the Bible it often carries the idea of things that are highly esteemed among men but abhorrent (detestable) to God.

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, A. (1997). *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Mt 24:15). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

**And He said to them, “\_ You are those who \_\_justify yourselves \_\_before men, but \_\_God knows your hearts. For \_\_what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” (Luke 16:15; see also Titus 1:16, Deuteronomy 29:17).**

An abomination is something which arouses the wrath of God (Isaiah 1:13).

Desolation (*eremoseos*) means devastation, destruction, depopulation or abandonment (Galatians 4:27). Think of a desolate ghost-town that the wind is about to blow into dust. The temple of the Old Covenant had reached this fullness of desolation, not because there were no people there, but because Jesus had departed (Matthew 24:1).

Clearly God knew the temple had become desolate and its sacrifices had become an abomination to Him (Proverbs 15:8). But Jesus speaks of an observable event which would enlighten His listeners to what God already knew. Again, what was it? Some may object to that form of the question since the popular view is that this is yet future to us.

That this event was near future to them but the past for is shown for many reasons. Just a few:

- All along Jesus is prophesying of the destruction of the temple (vs 1-3) which would happen in that generation (Matthew 23:36; 24:34).
- The ‘abomination of desolation’ would likely happen in the temple (vs 15 – “the holy place” cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4) which was destroyed (and there is no mention anywhere in the New Testament of the temple being rebuilt – except for the body of Christ [John 2:21]).
- Jesus is giving his listeners instructions on what they should do when they see the abomination of desolation taking place, e.g. head for the hills of Judea (which they did) indicating both chronological (time) and geographical (place) nearness.

More reasons can be given but enough for now.

I still haven’t answered what the ‘abomination of desolation’ was. I haven’t answered because I don’t know☺. But clearly, as we shall see, the listeners of Jesus did. But here is what I do know:

- Jesus taught that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies that its desolation was near (Luke 21:20). Even their presence in the holy land could be viewed as an abomination (Isaiah 1:7).
- It likely had to do with someone desecrating the temple. The term ‘abomination of desolation’ was used in 1 Maccabees 1:54<sup>2</sup> when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple in 167 BC by placing a statue of Jupiter Olympius on the altar. This would have been common knowledge among the Jews.
- First century historian Josephus wrote of zealots desecrating the temple in the winter of AD 67 or the arrival of Roman standards desecrating the temple in AD 70.
- Apparently there would be a known individual whom Paul called “the man of sin” who would somehow seek to take God’s place in the temple (2 Thessalonians 2:3-6).

The ‘abomination of desolation’ was a unique historical event. We don’t know for sure what it was, but, as we shall see, the audience of Jesus did. And they understood Him well enough to respond.

## 2. Tribulation in General

### An Apostate Church

How does this speak to Christians in general? At very least we learn that it is possible for institutions designed for the glory of God to descend into that which is an abomination – a stench in God’s nostrils (Amos 4:10). Although I find myself frustrated that our culture’s current popular trend is to blame Christians and to accuse them of manifold evils, it’s easy to understand given the abominable state of much of the western church.

People tend to ridicule the ridiculous. God says of His apostate people:

**Israel will then become a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples (1 Kings 9:7b NIV).**

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<sup>2</sup> Although Maccabees is not Scripture, it does contain history (though not infallible history).

The Apostle Paul indicates that same fate awaits a faithless church (Romans 11:21).

### 3. Counsel of Christ

Since verse 15 is primarily information regarding a unique historical event, I will leave the counsel of Christ portion for the imperatives we see in the remaining verses.

**“...\_then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. <sup>-17-</sup> Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. <sup>-18-</sup> And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. <sup>-19-</sup> But \_\_woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! <sup>-20-</sup> And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath (Matthew 24:16b-20).**

#### 1. Unique History

##### Running from the Temple

I have friends who, because they viewed the Olivet Discourse as our future, periodically moved to the top of some mountain because they believed the Tribulation was about to commence. For the same reasons given above, these events should be understood as something to which the original audience of Jesus would respond. Which they did!

History records<sup>3</sup> that when Christians in Jerusalem saw what Jesus was talking about begin, they all fled to a town across the Jordan called Pella for safety, and not one of them was harmed by an event that killed over a million people.

And here is the sad thing. In order to be saved, they had to do just the opposite of what they would have intuitively done – run to the temple. I think the saddest thing imaginable is an abused child seeking to be comforted from the very parent abusing him or her. Sometimes the child has to run away. To be saved they had to run from the temple rather than to it.

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<sup>3</sup> Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* lib. 3, cap. 5.

## He Who Hesitates

And when Jesus gave this counsel, they were not to hesitate in their obedience. Don't go back into your house, don't go back to get your clothes. In Luke's account of this event, he records Jesus saying **"Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32)**.

In the story of Lot's exit to the mountains from Sodom and Gomorrah to escape the judgment of those cities, the angels urged and directed him, even taking them by the hands when they lingered (Genesis 19:15-17); all that didn't help Lot's wife who looked back and became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). Looking back would be unwise (not looking or turning back, incidentally, is the theme of Hebrews – indicating that Jesus is addressing something Hebrew Christians might be tempted to do).

This event was a sure thing. It was going to happen. Jesus is seeking to prepare and comfort the faithful. He had compassion on the nursing mothers because He was aware of the biblical accounts of what happened to them in fierce battles – where they were **"ripped open" (cf. 2 Kings 15:16, Hosea 13:16)** – which Josephus indicates happened at the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Jesus urged them to pray that their flight might not be in the Sabbath where some might be conflicted regarding allowable behavior. As a side note here, Jesus was never concerned about God's people observing the Jewish ordinances, which were vanishing away (Hebrews 8:13). But He does assume that the Sabbath would still be observed, even forty years after His death and resurrection.

## 2. Tribulation in General

### Determining Future Calamities

In terms of these types of events in general in history, we do not have prophets informing us of future tribulations and how to escape them. There are times, however, when the writing is on the wall. There are times when it can be determined, via the examination of the natural course of events, that a disaster (of some sort) is coming.

It may be a natural disaster, such as hurricane Katrina or the tsunami in India, or political disaster, or religious persecution, or personal iniquity. Even though this was a unique historical event, these types of things occur

and can be anticipated. And when it is possible to anticipate – when God, by His providence reveals a future disaster or calamity – what is the counsel of Christ?

### 3. Counsel of Christ

#### Flee

The counsel of Christ is to flee and not look back. Like Noah, you get in the ark (Genesis 7:1); you follow the counsel of the angels to Lot and hurry (Genesis 19:15); like Joseph, you leave your garment and run outside (Genesis 39:12); like the servants of Pharaoh who heard the warning of Moses made their servants and livestock flee to the houses (Exodus 9:20). Whether it's an army, a plague, a persecutor or a seducer...

**A prudent *man* foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are \_\_punished (Proverbs 22:3).**

#### Conclusion

The abomination of desolation was a unique historical event and not a future worldwide disaster. We do learn from this that institutions, even ones ordained by God Himself, can become places to run from rather than run to. Jesus gave specific instructions on what His followers were to do when they saw the abomination of desolation occur. His faithful followers did not hesitate, but heeded His counsel and were saved from a massacre. When God, by His grace and by His word and providence gives us counsel, there is nothing more foolish than to “pass” on it.

And most important, those who fled to Pella and escaped the armies of Rome no doubt rejoiced in what their faith and obedience to Christ brought about. Just imagine when they heard the reports of what happened to Jerusalem – the bloodbath they and their children escaped!

But that political salvation would be a mere dot – a particle – in the volumes of Shakespeare when compared to the true and eternal deliverance that comes by faith in Christ. Rome and its terror is a “**drop in a bucket...small dust on the scales**” (cf. Isaiah 40:15) when compared to the consuming fire of God's bench of judgment. Of all those who fled to Pella, none continue to walk the earth; every person Jesus healed

eventually died. Over and above the wise counsel of Christ or the healing power of Christ is the saving blood of Christ. And friends, if we miss that message, we have missed the message.

## Questions for Study

1. What is the difference between the events leading up to the abomination of desolation and the events after (page 3)?
2. Of what did the abomination of desolation inform Jesus' listeners (page 3)?
3. Why do you think Matthew records the words: "whoever reads, let him understand" (page 3)?
4. Define abomination and desolation (pages 3, 4)?
5. Approximately when was/is the abomination of desolation? Explain your answer (page 4).
6. What was the abomination of desolation (pages 4, 5)?
7. What does the abomination of desolation teach Christians regarding religious institutions (pages 5, 6)?
8. How did Jesus' listeners respond to His counsel to flee Jerusalem (pages 6, 7)?
9. How should we respond when God graciously reveals future troubles (pages 7, 8)?
10. What is the most important thing we learn about those who trusted Christ's counsel (pages 8, 9)?