

Matthew 24:15-20

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Jesus begins His answer to the disciples' second question about the sign of His coming. He refers them to the prophecy from the Book of Daniel called "the Abomination of Desolation."

This is not the sign of His return, but it is a precursor to it. He warns His disciples to flee Jerusalem as soon as they see the sign in order to escape the bloody danger that will instantly follow.

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Mark 13:14-18 and Luke 21:20-24.

The disciples asked Jesus three questions (Matthew 24:3) after He told them that not one stone of the temple buildings will be left upon another (Matthew 24:2). Their three questions were:

1. *When will these things happen?*
2. *What will be the sign of Your coming?*
3. *What will be the sign of the end of the age?*

Jesus answered these questions in inverse order.

His answer to the third question was that the sign at the end of the age will be when "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations" (Matthew 24:14). This would occur after many birth pangs such as wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6), natural disasters (Matthew 24:7), and a breakdown of society (Matthew 24:12). There will be false Messiahs, persecutions, and betrayals—with the result that many people's love will grow cold (Matthew 24:12).

Having answered the last question first, Jesus then began to answer the disciples' second question, which was "What will be the sign of your coming?" Ultimately His answer boils down to this: "Do pay attention to the things that must take place before I return so you will be ready, but when I do return—you won't need a sign. Everyone will know who I am!" (Matthew 24:27, 31).

Jesus identified three precursors or events that will signal the nearness of His return. These three events will be:

1. The Abomination of Desolation (Matthew 24:15)
2. The Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21)
3. The Darkening of the Sun, Moon, and Stars (Matthew 24:29)

The first event that will indicate that His return is near is the *Abomination of Desolation*.

The Abomination of Desolation is comprised of two Hebrew words. The first word is "Shikkoots" which is translated as *abomination*. It means "a detestable thing." "Shikkoots"

describes something that is grotesquely unacceptable to eat or worship. The second word is “Shawmame” which is translated as *desolation*. It can mean “to be devastated,” “appalled,” “outraged,” “horrifically offended,” “wasted,” or “ruined.” The two words together describe a disturbing and disgusting offense that spoils what is sacred.

The Abomination of Desolation was first foretold in the prophecies of *Daniel*, where it is mentioned three times (Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). It appears that during the time Jesus walked the earth in the first century that there was much interest among the Jews in the Book of *Daniel* and its prophecies. (Many of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls dating to Jesus’s era were copies of *Daniel*.) *Daniel* prophesied during Judah’s exile in Babylon. And in Jesus’s day, Judea was experiencing an exile-like situation under the occupation of Imperial Rome. But beyond this common theme, *Daniel* accurately predicted centuries in advance the rise and fall of kingdoms including Babylon, Persia, Greece, and now Rome.

Daniel’s prophecies have proven so accurate that the only argument that modern, atheistic scholars use as an excuse for disbelieving them is to claim that they were added at some point after they occurred. They make this bold assertion, without historic or linguistic evidence to base their claim, but rather on the supposition that God is not real.

One of these predictions was found in *Daniel 7* which depicted each of the empires, those that were (Babylon) and those which were to come (Persia, Greece and Rome) as four different beasts (Daniel 7:1-8; 7:15-28). At the end of this sequence was *Daniel’s* prophecy about a fifth empire, which is the reign of the “Ancient of Days” who gave glory and dominion to the Son of Man—the Messiah (Daniel 7:9-14).

The Jews of Jesus’s time had likely recognized how the empires of Babylon, Persia, and Greece had come and gone, and that they were now under the rule of Rome, the fourth beast. Rome had occupied Judea for the past ninety years by the time Jesus began His ministry. Most of these prophetic events had already occurred in the relatively quick time span of four hundred years. *Daniel* uttered this prophesy while he was praying for the restoration of Israel since Jeremiah had specifically cited 70 years in exile, and it has been 70 years. So it is likely that Daniel was prophesying in Daniel 9 around 516 B.C. Rome had successfully besieged Jerusalem in 63 B.C.. Now during the time of Jesus, roughly 90 years later, the Jews were expecting the final two events of *Daniel’s* prophetic sequence (the fall of Rome and the appearance of the Messiah) to occur at any moment.

Further, Daniel specifically predicts 483 years to transpire between a proclamation to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah ([see commentary on Daniel 9:24-25](#)). There are several such decrees; 483 years after any one of them lands within the time of Jesus’s first advent on the earth as a human. All these factors point to a high level of Messianic expectation.

Incidentally, had the Jews accepted and received Jesus as their Messiah, it appears that the Messianic kingdom would, in fact, have been inaugurated at that time. Jesus taught as though He was genuinely offering to the Jews to begin the promised kingdom now if they would receive Him as the Messiah, because that was in fact His offer. His message was “Repent for the

Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). The disciples assumed this to be the case right up until Jesus’s ascension (Act 1:6).

Indeed, even after Jesus ascended, Peter proclaimed to the Jews that if they would repent, then Jesus would return and begin His reign (Acts 4:19-21). Interestingly, like the children of Israel who tried to conquer the Promised Land without God’s blessing and failed miserably, so too did the Jews attempt to throw off the shackles of Rome with the “Jewish Wars” which began in 68 A.D. without the power and blessing of their Messiah. Their ambitions would result in complete catastrophe.

Things would have been very different had the Jews come together as a nation to accept Jesus, the Messiah, when He first came to them a few days earlier “humble, and mounted on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:6-10).

And moreover, Daniel included a count down until the appearing of the Messiah, numbering 483 years after the “issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince” (Daniel 9:24-25). It was generally known when such a decree was issued by King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1), and those who were counting knew the time was growing near. Interestingly, this prophecy also correctly predicted that the Messiah will be “cut off and have nothing” (Daniel 9:26). The prophecy of Messiah being “cut off” was about to be fulfilled and it happened when Jesus was crucified. But Jesus does not refer to that prophecy in His Olivet discourse.

Jesus’s reference to *the Abomination of Desolation* is an event still in the future for us, as of this writing in 2022 (recognizing that this might no longer be true for a reader in the future). It is likely that the disciples expected the sign of Jesus returning to be in the immediate future. But as we now know, there will be a considerable gap of time between Jesus’s first and second visitation to earth.

There appear to be four possible fulfillments of *Daniel’s* prophecies about *the Abomination of Desolation*. Three of these four have already occurred. The fourth is still to come. And it was this fourth and final fulfillment that Jesus was referring to when He warned His disciples here on the Mount of Olives.

The first fulfillment of *Daniel’s* prophecy about the *Abomination of Desolation* occurred around 167 B.C. At that time *Judea* was ruled by the Greek king Antiochus IV, who called himself Antiochus “Epiphanes” (“God Manifest”). Antiochus outlawed all Jewish practices and tried to force the Jews to assimilate into Greek culture and religion. *The Abomination of Desolation* occurred when he set up a statue of Zeus in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, then sacrificed unclean animals on its altar.

Instead of signaling the end of the Jewish faith, as Antiochus intended, this blasphemy sparked a rebellion that successfully overthrew Antiochus and established Jewish independence for a time. The Pharisees and Sadducees were both successors to those who fought the Greeks to preserve the Jewish faith, which was part of the reason they had esteem within Israel. *Daniel* predicted this event in Daniel 11:31. This *Abomination of Desolation* that *Daniel* foretold took place roughly four hundred years after *Daniel* predicted it and roughly two hundred years before Jesus

sat on the Mount of Olives answering the disciples' questions about His return. This fulfillment is a historical known.

A second possible fulfillment of *Daniel's* prophecy about the *Abomination of Desolation* occurred in 60 B.C. when the Roman general Pompey entered the temple upon conquering Jerusalem. But though Pompey defiled the temple with his bloody and pagan presence, he did not sacrifice unclean animals, erect a statute to pagan deities, or attempt to put a stop to its sacrifices, as the Greek king Antiochus had. This instance occurred roughly five hundred years after *Daniel's* prophecy and roughly ninety years before Jesus's crucifixion. This is a possible additional fulfillment.

The third possible fulfillment of *Daniel's* prophecy about the *Abomination of Desolation* took place in 70 A.D. when the Roman general (and future emperor), Titus, crushed the Jewish revolt and destroyed the temple. Not one stone was left on top of another thus fulfilling Jesus's prophecy (Matthew 24:2). The temple was looted of all its gold and treasures. (Spoils from the Jewish Temple helped fund the Roman Colosseum which was built shortly thereafter). The historian Josephus estimated that over 1 million Jews were killed during this slaughter. The destruction of the temple eliminated the possibility for Jewish sacrifices, and functionally ended the Sadducees as a religious party. Its destruction also threatened to extinguish Judaism, but the Jews proved resilient once again. This instance occurred over six and a quarter centuries after *Daniel's* prophecy and roughly forty years after Jesus's prediction. This is a possible additional fulfillment.

The fourth fulfillment of *Daniel's* prophecy about the *Abomination of Desolation* is still to come. And it is certain. And it will mark a clear precursor to Christ's return to earth. This future *abomination* might be expected to have similarities to the episodes that occurred earlier—especially in 167 B.C. But it also could have similarities to Jerusalem's destruction in 70 A.D. Luke recorded Jesus as saying, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near" (Luke 21:20).

There are two reasons that create a certainty that there will be a future-to-us *Abomination of Desolation*. The first reason is A.) Jesus said that this abominable event would take place immediately before the Great Tribulation, which has not yet transpired (Matthew 24:21) and B.) He said that this tribulation would be so terrible that it would be unlike anything that has happened in the history of the world (Matthew 24:21). Many horrific things have occurred in and around Jerusalem since Jesus described these events, but apparently nothing on the scale that could indisputably be described as the worst ever seen. Therefore, this event is still in the future. For example, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was horrific, but the Holocaust of World War II seems even more severe.

Jesus indicated that He would return soon after the Abomination of Desolation and the Great Tribulation happened (Matthew 24:29-31). The fact that Jesus has not come back yet also suggests that *the Abomination of Desolation* that Jesus was describing has not yet happened (as of 2022).

The previous three *Abomination of Desolations* are likely patterns that foreshadow the horror and defilement of this precursor to the Son of Man's return. What they have in common is a great abuse of power to crush worship of God and oppress or massacre the people of God.

Jesus indicated to His disciples that *the Abomination of Desolation* would occur *in the holy place*. By *holy place*, Jesus meant the temple, and most likely its inner sanctuary—*the Holy of Holies*. This could mean that a temple with a sacrificial system must be in place for the *Abomination of Desolation* to happen. We should be cautious to avoid placing restrictions upon how God must fulfill His own prophecies, but it does seem likely that a temple restoration will somehow come into play.

At the time this commentary is being written no such temple exists. Instead of a Jewish temple atop Mt. Moriah, two Islamic Mosques stand. One mosque is called the Dome of the Rock and it has been there in various forms since 690 A.D. It may be difficult to imagine that a Jewish temple will be constructed given current circumstances. But we also must consider how inconceivable it must have been for Jesus's disciples to picture the utter ruin of Herod the Great (Builder's) temple.

We also should consider that after the Roman Emperor Hadrian banished the Jews from their homeland and renamed *Judea* "Palestine" (i.e. Philistine Land) in 135 A.D. that the nation of Israel did not exist from then until 1948 A.D. (less than one hundred years from the time this commentary was written.) This sudden and recent restoration of a national Israel alongside the prosperity of this new Jewish nation in the face of hostile kingdoms makes this seemingly implausible prophecy much more plausible to the historical eye.

Of course, any prophecy of Jesus is certain to be fulfilled. It is for us to have eyes to see, so that we do not miss the fulfillment, as the Pharisees missed the fulfillment of Jesus as their Messiah.

There is an interesting interjection inserted in the middle of Jesus's warning: *when you see the Abomination of Desolation, which was spoken through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)....*

It is unclear if this interjection of *let the reader understand* was Matthew interjecting his own admonition in the middle of Jesus's teaching as a device to underscore a particular point for *the reader* of his gospel to *understand*, or if Jesus actually said this to His disciples encouraging them to *understand* what *Daniel* meant by his prophecy when they read his book. Mark's gospel includes the same interjection (Mark 13:14). In either case, it is a Biblical instruction to pause and thoughtfully consider something important that is not immediately apparent. (Which is what we are endeavoring to do right now.)

What *the readers are to understand* about *the Abomination of Desolation* which was spoken of through the prophet *Daniel* was most likely from Daniel 12:11-12:

"From the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days!" (Daniel 12:11-12)

Jesus was indicating to His disciples that *the Abomination of Desolation* marked the beginning of the second precursor to Christ's return: the "great tribulation" (Matthew 24:21). This would be a time of great peril for believers and it would last "1,290 days" or roughly, three and half years. There seems to be a special blessing for believers who faithfully endure through the end of the great tribulation. Believers should remain alert during this time (Matthew 24:42) for their Master is coming and He will reward those who are faithful to Him during this intense trial (Matthew 24:46-47).

Jesus warned, *when you see the Abomination of Desolation take place then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains*. It was a sign to flee the city, seemingly because a massive genocide was about to occur.

To this warning, Jesus added several more ominous instructions for *when they saw the Abomination of Desolation*.

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.

The reason they must *not turn back* to gather their belongings is because this slaughter will commence as soon as the defilement is done. There will be no time to gather one's belongings before it is too late. The need to flee is urgent.

Jesus added, *But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!* This likely indicates the extra difficulties and dangers *pregnant and nursing* women will have to endure as they try to escape. Jesus also told His disciples to *pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath*. It would be worse if it took place *in winter* because of the potential for exposure, given the urgency with which they will have to flee.

It would also be horrible if *your flight* needed to happen *on a Sabbath*, because it would make it easier for the authorities to hunt down Jews because they may be congregated together or have moral qualms about how far they are allowed to travel because of their tradition. It is interesting that Jesus indicates that while this event is certain, its timing might be affected by prayer.

According to Daniel, *the Abomination of Desolation* will be done under the supervision of a godless authority figure described as the little horn of the Beast (Daniel 7:7-8).

"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 11:31-32)

Later this figure will be identified as the antichrist (1 John 2:18) and the lawless one (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4) as well as the beast (Revelation 13:2). (See also Daniel 8:23-26; 11:36-39; Revelation 17:7-14).

When this *Abomination of Desolation* occurs it will be the first precursor event signaling the closeness of Christ's return. And this is part of Jesus's answer to the disciples' question about "What will be the sign of Your coming?" (Matthew 24:3). Jesus continues in the next section discussing the next precursor event of His return—the Great Tribulation.

Biblical Text

¹⁵ "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), ¹⁶ then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. ¹⁸ Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. ¹⁹ But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! ²⁰ But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.