

(3) Matthew 24.15-31

Desolation of Idolatry [v.15]

v.15: This verse signifies the *midpoint* of the tribulation. The first 3.5 years are described as “the beginning of sorrows” (v.8) followed by 3.5 years of “great tribulation” (v.21). This is followed by the return of Christ “immediately after the tribulation” (v.29). The word “abomination” (*bdelugma*) occurs six times in the NT and describes an object of disgust. The verb literally means to feel *nausea* because of a foul smell, or to *detest* something morally abhorrent. The OT Hebrew equivalent word is often used in association with *idolatry* and *pagan* religion (1 Kings 11.5, 7). The Greek word is used to describe the false religious system of Babylon in Revelation 17.4-5. This “abomination” causes “desolation” in the Jerusalem temple (spiritual *desecration* or *defilement* of a holy place).

According to the Lord Jesus the “abomination of desolation” was spoken of by “Daniel the prophet”. There are **three** scriptures in Daniel that speak of “abomination” and “desolation” in the same verse: Daniel 9.27; 11.31 and 12.11. Of these, Daniel 11.31 has already been fulfilled during the reign of *Antiochus Epiphanes*. See Bible Class notes on Daniel: “The temple was ‘polluted’ (defiled) by the sacrifice of a pig on the brazen altar, and its blood sprinkled around the temple. It was December 16, 167BC. In addition, he (Antiochus) ‘stopped the daily sacrifice’ (burnt offering) by polluting the temple and declaring all Mosaic ceremonies illegal. An image to Zeus was installed in the temple, and a pagan altar erected on the brazen altar. This was the ‘abomination that caused desolation’ – a detestable thing that makes desolate – since it polluted the altar and made sacrifices impossible (8.23-25), cf. 1 Maccabees 1.45-54, 59; 4.44.” This was, no doubt, a foreshadowing of tribulation days. The Lord Jesus was drawing attention to the other **two** references in Daniel which await fulfilment in tribulation days. According to Daniel 9.27, the “prince that shall come” (Antichrist) will break his covenant with the many in Israel in the “midst of the week”, i.e. the last of the 70 weeks (the tribulation). He shall claim exclusive worship as God, which the apostate nation will accept (Revelation 13.11-17, John 5.43), and thus cause the re-instated sacrificial system of the temple in Jerusalem to cease. Daniel 9 further suggests an idol will be erected on the wing (pinnacle) of the temple (cf. Revelation 13.15). The temple of God will therefore become saturated with the filth of idolatry and, essentially, devil worship. The last reference in Daniel (12.11) describes the same events though referring to a period of 1,290 days beginning from the taking away of the “daily sacrifice” and the “abomination of desolation”. Being 30 days longer than 3.5 years, it could be that the abomination of desolation is set-up 30 days *before* the mid-point of the tribulation *or* the additional days could be associated with a period of cleansing after Christ comes. With such a depth of meaning in Daniel’s prophecy, it is little wonder the Lord Jesus encourages the careful reading and subsequent “understanding” of the prophet’s words.

The introduction (by the false prophet) of a living, speaking idol of the man of sin (cf. Revelation 13.14-15) will take place in the “holy place” of the rebuilt Jerusalem temple and inaugurates the worship of a mere man as God (2 Thessalonians 2.4). This will coincide with the destruction of every existing religious system as he will not allow competing worship to exist (cf. Revelation 17). It is interesting that the Roman emperor *Caligula*, against the advice of Herod Agrippa I, tried to build an image of himself within the temple walls of Jerusalem (AD40). He died in AD41 before his orders could be carried out. It was not God’s sanctioned timing!

Decree to Flee [vv.16-20]

v.16: Whenever the faithful of Israel see the events of v.15 unfold, they must immediately “flee” into the “mountains”. The word “flee” (*pheugo*) is related to the English word *fugitive* – a person taking flight to avoid danger (cf. Matthew 2.13). The “abomination” will signal the commencement of a fearful persecution of the Jews, thus those in “Judaea”, i.e. the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem must flee for their lives – such will be the swift and violent persecution of all who will not bow the knee to the image of Antichrist. Revelation 12.6 is a parallel passage: “And the woman (Israel) fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.” This coincides with “war in heaven” between Michael and his angels and the “great dragon” (the Devil). In his wrath he will persecute the faithful remnant of the woman’s seed, who will be miraculously preserved by God (cf. Revelation 12.14-17). The “two wings of the great eagle” is a figure of



speech to describe Divine assistance to flee, as when God brought His people out of Egypt (cf. Exodus 19.4; Deuteronomy 32.10-12). The place of Israel's protection is **Bozrah**, a desert mountain region in southwest Jordan (80 miles south of Jerusalem) where the ancient city of Petra is located (cf. Isaiah 63.1-3; Micah 2.12). It is in the vicinity of these mountains David hid from Saul (1 Samuel 23.29). Some OT passages describe God's provision for His people during this time (cf. Isaiah 41.17-20; cp. Daniel 11.41; Isaiah 26.20-21).

v.17: Most "housetops" were flat and afforded an area to relax and cool off during the *evening* hours. Anyone sitting on the housetop must not take the time to run downstairs to collect any valuables, but, rather, run from roof to roof ("the road of the roofs") to escape. No material possession will be worth the risk of the slightest delay. **v.18:** During the *day*, when many would be labouring in the "field", there must be no return to the entrance of the field or home to collect one's "clothes" (outer cloak). **v.19:** In addition, it will be painful and unpleasant to flee and navigate desert and mountainous terrain for those who are "with child" (pregnant) or nursing a new-born. **v.20:** The godly remnant must "pray" (note the compassion of the Lord for His people in trial) their flight is not in "winter" which would make travelling conditions more arduous, especially without a cloak. The relatively mild but rainy season would potentially increase the hazards of streams and rivers flowing through mountain valleys. In addition, no public transport operated on the "Sabbath" and any legalistic Jews might hinder those they believed were profaning the Sabbath by fleeing from their homes (Exodus 16.29).

Danger of the Great Tribulation [vv.21-22]

v.21: The need for such urgent escape is due to the arrival of "great tribulation" (*thlipsis*, translated "afflicted" in v.9). The word "tribulation" is used in *several* different ways in Scripture. **1.** It is used in a non-technical, non-eschatological sense of any time of suffering or testing (John 16.33; 2 Corinthians 1.4). **2.** It is used in its technical and eschatological sense to refer to the whole tribulation period of seven years (v.29; Revelation 2.22), or, more specifically, as here, to the last 3.5 years. The Lord Jesus is using the language of Daniel 12.1 (cf. Jeremiah 30.7; Joel 2.2) to describe a period of great distress (spiritual *and* physical pressure) which will ultimately result in national repentance and salvation. The casting of the devil down to earth, his energising of the Antichrist and false prophet and escalating intensity of God's wrath poured from heaven in trumpets and vials all result in a time of unparalleled suffering and destruction. In respect of Israel, the purpose of such tribulation is to *purge* the nation and *prepare* the faithful remnant for her final redemption (Zechariah 13.8-9). **v.22:** Such will be the awful death toll of those days (i.e. the great tribulation), except the period was "shortened" no human being would survive. The word "shortened" means to 'cut off', i.e. *amputate* in a medical context, or 'cut short' when applied to time. There is no question of the literal days being shortened from 24 hours, or the period of 1,260 days being reduced. The verb is *aorist* in tense (prophetic past) meaning that God has *already* decreed, and indeed shortened, the specific length of the tribulation – He has fixed it at 3.5 years, rather than allowing it to continue for an indefinite period of time. Else "all flesh", i.e. all humanity would be extinguished (cp. Genesis 9.11). Even the two judgments of the *fourth* seal (Revelation 6.7-8) and *sixth* trumpet alone (Revelation 9.13-21) could account for a combined reduction of the world's population by 50%. The final great world war will no doubt account for millions more (Revelation 16.12-16).

For the "elect's sake" the period has been delimited at 3.5 years. In the **gospels**, the word "elect" refers to God's earthly people, i.e. the Jewish remnant during the tribulation, and, more widely, to all the people of God on earth in the end times. In the **epistles**, the word "elect" refers to the saved of the church period. *Feinberg: "There is a chosen people for earth, Israel, just as there is a chosen people for heaven, the church. Here Christ speaks of His earthly, chosen people."*

Discerning of False Christs [vv.23-28]

v.23: The appearance of individuals claiming to be Christ (v.5) and "false prophets" (v.11) are nothing new during the tribulation but there will be an increase in such activity during the last days prior to the return of Christ. "Then" meaning "at that time", namely the period of the Great Tribulation. Towards the end of the period there will no doubt be those who will claim the true Messiah has appeared – perhaps in a calculated ploy to extract the faithful remnant from hiding. After all, they are looking for Christ to return to the earth, unlike believers of today who expect His soon return to the air. They must not "believe" the deliberate deception, but sadly apostate Israel will be deceived. A shepherd in Scotland was once asked whether sheep would ever follow the voice of a stranger, to which he replied, "Yes, when they are sick; but never when they are well. A sick sheep will follow anybody" (cf. John 5.43). **v.24:** Though "false Christs" (*pseudochristos*) and "false prophets" shall abound, there will be one prominent false Christ and one prominent false prophet during this time, namely the two beasts of Satan's evil trinity (Revelation 13.1-18). This "false Christ" is equivalent to the "Antichrist", the prefix *anti* signifying one who stands *against* or *instead* of Christ – he will oppose Christ by seeking to take His place (counterfeit). The "false prophet" will perform "great signs (*semeion*) and wonders (*teras*)", the exact terms used to describe the miracles of the Lord Jesus (cf. Acts 2.22; John 4.48). The word "wonder" is associated with a verb meaning 'to watch' suggesting an extraordinary and memorable event. A "sign" is a favourite

word of John and points beyond the miraculous event to some deeper meaning or significance. These will likely be genuine (though Satanically energised) miracles performed by the false prophet (read Revelation 13.13-15). The miracles are calculated to “deceive” men into thinking the Antichrist is God incarnate. No matter how convincing the deception, it will be impossible to deceive the true people of God (cf. John 10.4-5). **v.25:** In foretelling these events the Lord Jesus is seeking to strengthen the remnant’s faith and encourage them, that, despite their suffering, all is unfolding according to the purpose of God. Their soon deliverance is assured (cp. John 13.19; 14.29; 16.1).

v.26: In order to deceive, some will suggest the true Messiah has appeared in the “desert” (as John the Baptist, Matthew 3.1) or some “secret” room (the “closet” of Matthew 6.6). In any case, ‘backroom appearances’ are often associated with deceivers and deception. **v.27:** Such suggestions must not be believed, for when the true Christ does return, it will be of such a public nature there will be no doubt whatsoever that He has arrived! Just as “lightning” flashes across the sky, so shall the coming (*parousia*) of the Son of Man be – *sudden, public* (not secret) and *glorious*. Lightning announces its presence everywhere. So the return of Christ will be unmistakable and universal, even from “east” to “west” (v.30; Revelation 1.7). The Lord Jesus is here described as “the Son of man” for the first time in this discourse. The title “Son of man” emphasises the true and total identification of the eternal Son of God with mankind – both as their *Saviour* (Luke 19.10) and *Judge* (John 5.22). He is man as man should be. Christ referred to Himself as “Son of man” 77 times, often in reference to His second coming in judgment to earth (Matthew 16.27-28; 24.30) – and clearly drawing attention to Himself as the God-ordained Sovereign of Daniel 7.13: “*I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.*” It is a title particularly linked to Israel (cf. Revelation 1.13). **v.28:** Though the RV removes the word “for”, there is a clear link with the preceding verse. The statement is a simple proverb, that vultures (not “eagles”) gather wherever dead bodies are to be found. Its interpretation in this context is a little harder to discern! It is likely the nation of Israel is being viewed under *two* figures. The *restored* nation will yet be described as a “fig tree” (v.32), but here the *apostate* nation is like a “carcase”. They have taken the mark of the beast and assumed the moral corruption of the day. The vultures thus typify the agents of divine judgment picking over the carcase in the form of Gentile armies at Armageddon and surrounding Jerusalem. In a wider sense, it may also be a figure of judgment when Christ is revealed as Avenger “in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God” (2 Thessalonians 1.8; cf. Revelation 19.17-21). Carson notes, “*It will be as impossible for humanity not to see the coming of the Son of Man as it is for vultures to miss seeing carrion.*”

Descent of the Son of Man [vv.29-31]

v.29: The glorious, public return of Christ is described in vv.29-30 and heralded by signs in the “heavens”. In fact, the “powers of the heavens”, a way of describing the *forces* (energy) associated with heavenly bodies, will be “shaken”. The voice of God “shook the earth” at Sinai *locally*, after which God made a promise to shake “not the earth only, but also heaven” (cf. Isaiah 13.13; Haggai 2.6; Hebrews 12.26-27). Whilst this points to the *ultimate* removal of all created things at the end of the millennium, the context of Haggai is the removal of opposition to God at the end of the tribulation. Each series of judgments in Revelation ends with an earthquake (cf. Revelation 6.12-14; 11.13; 16.18). Such tectonic upheaval may cause huge volcanic eruptions resulting in the “darkening” of the sun and moon. Luke uses the same word of the “darkening” of the sun at Calvary (23.45) when the Lord Jesus suffered the judgment of God against sin. Now he returns in glory as Avenger to execute divine judgment. Since the sun is darkened, the moon “shall not give her light” as the moon reflects the light of the sun. In addition, “stars (*aster*) shall fall *from* heaven” (not necessarily *to* the earth), the Greek word referring to any luminous body in the sky other than the sun or moon. This could therefore describe a large meteor shower (as Revelation 6.13). Though not in view here, the word *aster* can also be used symbolically to refer to people and angels (Jude 13; Revelation 9.1).

These celestial signs are well documented in the OT (cf. Isaiah 13.9-13; 24.23; Joel 2.10, 31; 3.15). Isaiah 13 applies immediately to the destruction of Babylon in 539BC, but the language is such that it likely foreshadows universal events of the tribulation. The references in Joel furnish further time markers, being the time of the “return” of the exiles to Judah and Jerusalem (3.1) and the “gathering” of all nations in the *valley of Jehoshaphat* for judgment (3.2). Further references in Zechariah 14.6-7 are difficult to translate but describe the same cosmic disturbances. *NET: On that day there will be no light – the sources of light in the heavens will congeal.* The normal sources of light will ‘thicken’ to the point that they cannot shine. It won’t be *day*, neither will it be *night* (for the *sun* has been darkened, and the *moon* shall not give her light), but it will still be light for the resplendent glory of the Lord will shine forth as the sun (Isaiah 60.19).

Only Luke mentions the human response to these great events with “men fainting from fear” (Luke 21.25-26). The word to “fear” means to *expire* or *stop breathing*, indicating that people will literally die of fright. All this takes place “immediately after the tribulation of those days”, i.e. the end of the “great tribulation” (v.21). The same heavenly signs are described by Peter as occurring “*before that great and notable day of the Lord come*” (Acts 2.20) but this refers to the special point of the Lord’s manifestation in glory.

v.30: It is against the blackened background of earth's celestial sphere that the sign of the Son of man will burst forth with brilliant light. The "sign of the Son of man" could be Christ himself – the Greek is ambiguous and may mean "the sign which is the Son of man" or "the sign **belonging** (referring) to the Son of man". However, the word "appear" primarily means to 'shine' or 'produce light' (cf. Revelation 1.16; 21.23) suggesting the "sign" is His visible, personal glory (cf. Matthew 26.64). Alternatively, the word "sign" (*semeion*) commonly means "ensign" or "standard" and may refer to the *banner* of the Son of man unfurled in the heavens (cf. Isaiah 11.12). The appearing of Christ will cause "all the tribes of the earth to mourn" (Revelation 1.7) with great *grief* and *lament*. At this time, Israel will mourn in repentance over their sins, chief of which being the crucifixion of the Saviour (Zechariah 12.10-14; cf. Isaiah 53.5). This deep, intense and bitter sorrow is as for an 'only son' (John 1.18) or 'firstborn' (Colossians 1.15). **But** the "mourning" here concerns "all the tribes (kindreds) of the earth". This is not repentance, but rather the wailing of bitter remorse (despair) at the impending judgment which is their due for *rejecting* Christ and *exalting* the Antichrist. They shall "see" the Son of man "coming (*erchomai*) **on** (not "in") the clouds". The "Coming One" was a name for the expected Messiah, as John the Baptist asked, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Matthew 11.3). The visible presence of literal clouds is often associated with the coming of Christ. It was a literal cloud which received the Lord out of the sight of the disciples when he left earth for heaven (Acts 1.9), and literal clouds that will part to reveal him on His return. The preposition here is *upon* (*epi*) the clouds, perhaps using them as His chariot (Psalm 104.3; Isaiah 19.1). He will also come *enveloped* (*en*) in the clouds (Mark 13.26; Luke 21.27) and *with* (*meta*) the clouds (Mark 14.62). Christ will come with "power" to deliver His people, destroy His enemies and establish His kingdom. And "great (or much, exceeding) glory". Glimpses of the glory of God were seen in the first coming of Christ, but such glory will be fully unveiled in this day. This is the majestic appearance of a glorious King, a far cry from the babe of Bethlehem!

v.31: Upon His return, Christ will "send His angels" to "gather together His elect" (faithful, believing Israel). The Lord's desire to gather His earthly people will now be realised (cf. 23.37). At His first coming they "would not"; at His second coming they will say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" (23.39)! That this is not the pre-tribulation rapture is evident in that here the *angels* gather the elect, whereas it is the "Lord himself" who will take and gather every believer in the air (1 Thessalonians 4.16). Earlier in this gospel the Lord has indicated the separating ministry of angelic beings at the end of the age. They will gather out of His kingdom "all things that offend" and "sever the wicked from among the just" (13.41-42, 49), i.e. unbelievers for judgment and punishment and believers for reward and glory. In the OT, the *shofar* (curved ram's horn) was used to announce the presence of God (Exodus 19.16), proclaim the feast days (Leviticus 25.9) and gather the people for warfare (Joshua 6.4-5). At the end of the tribulation, the *shofar* will be sounded by the Lord to announce His coming and going forth in war to deliver His people (Zechariah 9.14). The only mention of a "great trumpet" in the OT is found in Isaiah 27.12-13, "And ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye children of Israel. And it shall come to pass in that day, That the great trumpet (*shofar*) shall be blown, And they shall come which were ready to perish in the land of Assyria, And the outcasts in the land of Egypt, And shall worship the LORD in the holy mount at Jerusalem." This is the fulfilment of the feast of trumpets and other glorious OT prophecies such as Deuteronomy 30.1-6. Though gathered by angelic power, it is possible Gentiles will be the vehicle through which it will be accomplished (cf. Isaiah 49.22-23). As the Lord had scattered His people to the four corners of the earth (cf. Ezekiel 5.10, 12; 17.21; Zechariah 2.6), so now He gathers them "from the four winds" (i.e. four compass directions) and "from one end of heaven to the other", a Hebraism signifying one extremity of the world to another (Isaiah 11.11-12).