

The Destruction of Jerusalem

Matthew 24:15-35

So far in the Olivet Discourse Jesus has mostly described what will precede the destruction of the temple when “not one stone will be left here upon another” (24:2). He says not to be troubled when they would hear about false Christs, wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes: these are just the beginning of sorrows (vv. 5-8). This instruction prepared the church to be ready at the right time for the worst, knowing it would be ultimately for the best. This whole passage is fulfilled in 70 AD, but Jesus tells His disciples not to be frightened by all the things that frighten those who are worried about the end times—wars, rumors of war, etc. Instead, He shapes the church to thrive and be more faithful and fruitful in hard times.

The Abomination of Desolation

Jesus gets very specific about when it's time to get out of Jerusalem: “So when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not” (let the reader understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains” (v. 14). Matthew's comment emphasizes how urgent this is to the original audience. An abomination is a form of idolatry God will not tolerate among His people. Solomon married pagan wives and “went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites” (1 Kgs. 11:5; cf. 2 Kgs. 23:13). King Josiah put away “the household gods and idols, all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem” (2 Kgs. 23:24). It's these abominations *that cause* desolation, that make God leave the sanctuary and bring it to ruin: “Therefore, as I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘surely, because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will also diminish you; My eye will not spare, nor will I have any pity” (Ezek. 5:11; cf. Jer. 4:1, 7:30). Jesus already said the house of Jerusalem will be left desolate (23:38), the same root word as desolation. Daniel prophesied a specific abomination that would cause desolation when a “king of the north” would favor “those who forsake the holy covenant...and they shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation” (Dan. 11:30, 31). The Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes offered a pig on the altar and installed an image of Zeus in the temple in 167 BC, which 1 Maccabees identifies as the abomination which causes desolation. But what led to this was Antiochus causing Jews to forsake the Lord and defile His temple with their corruption. In Matthew 24:9 Jesus identifies the tribulation occurring when Christians are delivered up to be killed. When the Romans start persecuting the Jews, they will look for a reason why God allows this to happen, and rather than conclude they have forsaken Yahweh and rejected His Messiah, they will turn on Christians. This is the time to get out of Dodge: “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near” (Lk. 21:20). Leave Judea, Jesus says. If you're on the roof don't go back inside for photo albums; if you're in a field working don't go get a change of clothes (vv. 16-18). Jesus tells them the equivalent of how to survive a sudden earthquake or fire. The siege of Jerusalem turned the city into a forest of crosses. Josephus says 97,000 Jews were taken as slaves and over a million were slaughtered (cf. v. 21). Jesus warns them not to be deceived by rumors of His appearing or coming from the desert or in a secretive way (vv. 23-26). His coming *in judgment* will be as obvious as lightning flashing from the east to the west, and where the bodies are piled up, there the vultures will gather (vv. 27-28).

Lights Out

When we look at what Jesus says about the temple, the abomination that causes desolation, the horrific slaughter that would fall in 70 AD, His prophecy is clear. But what about verses 29 and following? When

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we read about the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars, and the Son of Man appearing in heaven it sounds like the end of the universe as we know it. But Scripture explains this language. Describing the judgement that will fall on Babylon, Isaiah says “the day of the LORD comes” when He will “lay the land desolate”: “For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine” (Is. 13:9, 10). On the fourth day of creation God put stars in the firmament “for signs and seasons, and for days and years”; “the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night” (Gen. 1:14, 16). These celestial “rulers” became symbolic of earthly rulers. When the Lord says He will “shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place”, it’s not talking about the end the world but the end of Babylonian rule. Joseph dreams that the sun, moon, and stars will bow down to him, and they represent the tribes of Israel (Gen. 37:9). Ezekiel similarly describes judgment coming on Egypt in symbolic, apocalyptic terms (Ez. 32:6-8; cf. Joel 2:10; Amos 5:20, 8:9). Flags often have sun, moon, and stars, and if someone said the stars and bars will fall, we know that means America is in danger. The consistent imagery in Scripture teaches us how to interpret this, and Jesus isn’t changing the subject every few verses from Jerusalem to the end of the world. The lights in Israel are going out, and this changes everything.

The Coming of the Son of Man

Jesus quotes from Daniel 7 where in a vision Daniel sees “one like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 24:30). The Son of Man is not coming to earth but into the throne room of the Father in heaven where He receives dominion over all the earth. No one on earth can see this take place, but they can see a sign that reveals the Son of Man is reigning in heaven, which is likely what verse 30 means. Either way the judgement on Jerusalem is a sign that Jesus reigns at the right hand of the Father, which is why this entire prophecy came tragically true. Jesus quotes this passage again in front of the high priest who tears his robe at the blasphemy (Matt. 26:64-65). Daniel is troubled by the sign and it’s explained to him that the Son of Man is connected to His people, that “the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever” (Dan. 7:18). When Jesus ascended on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men (Eph. 4:8), equipping the church to disciple the nations. The “angels” are messengers, heralds who went out the declared the good news of what Jesus did for the world (v. 31). The entire world looked to Yahweh’s presence in the temple. But after it was destroyed, salvation went out in fullness to the Gentiles: “through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!” (Rom. 11:11-12). Fig trees leaf out late spring indicating to everyone that summer is around the corner (v. 32). Jesus warns them to watch for these things and know how quickly it will unfold, and all within a generation, which means 40 years (vv. 33-34). We reign with Christ in heaven, which means our labor here, including blood, sweat, and tears, is not in vain. Even as kingdoms rise and fall, the gospel goes out and increasingly fills the earth.