

THE WORSHIP OF MAN

Chapter Three. Matthew 24:15-22

by Ray C. Stedman

"Then shall the end come?" With these dramatic words, Jesus begins to answer the question of the disciples, "What will be the sign of...the close of the age?" He has prefaced these words with a powerful telescopic view which sweeps through all the intervening centuries and describes their character as one of deception and confusion. Now he focuses upon the (to the disciples) far-distant period, which he calls "the end of the age." Without further delay he describes, in Matthew 24:15-22, the sign of the close of the age:

"So when you see the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened."

The Lord's language here is the most somber he could employ. He is speaking of a time of trouble that is coming, the like of which has never been seen before in all human history. It will be a time of superlative distress, of unprecedented peril to human life, a time of shattering, staggering suffering, such as has never been seen before. There have been many black moments in history, but never one like this. For those who will be living in Judea (in and around Jerusalem), it will be a time to act promptly and quickly to get out of the city. It will be a time for emergency action. There will be no time left for the usual occupations of life.

These words are so fantastically suggestive that we must not hurry over them. In the words appearing in parentheses, "let the reader understand," the apostle Matthew is warning us that there are things hidden here which are not apparent on the surface. He is urging us to think, investigate, examine, and thus understand all that may be involved. We must be careful, then, to relate these words to other Scriptures, and especially to those in the Book of Daniel which Jesus specifically mentions.

Daniel's Prophecy

For the present let us seek to understand this sign of the close of the age. It will be, says Jesus, "the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel." No book of the Old Testament has been so unfavorably dealt with by the critics as the Book of Daniel. The validity of its authorship by Daniel has been scorned and it has been ascribed to some unknown writer who lived no more than a 100 to 160 years before Christ; its prophetic content has been flatly denied; and in many ways it has been more violently attacked than any other book in the Bible. Yet it is sheer presumptive arrogance for any alleged disciple of Jesus Christ to take a view of Scripture that contradicts the view of the Master. The Lord Jesus here clearly regards the Book of Daniel as a valid prophecy, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and accurate in detail.

The sign our Lord refers to is mentioned in Daniel at least three times. It is the sign of a man, a man who offers himself to the Jews to be worshipped as God. The disciples clearly understood that he was referring to the predictions in Daniel of the coming of a man who would take away the continual burnt-offering of the Jews

and instead offer himself as "the abomination which makes desolate" or the desolating sacrilege. That man is described in Daniel 8:23-26:

"And at the latter end of their rule, [that is, the rule of certain kings who will come upon the world's scene in the Middle East], when the transgressors have reached their full measure, [that marks the time when evil has come to its full expression], a king of bold countenance, one who understands riddles, shall arise. His power shall be great, and he shall cause fearful destruction, and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people of the saints. By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall magnify himself. Without warning he shall destroy many; and he shall even rise up against the Prince of Princes; but, by no human hand, he shall be broken. The vision of the evenings and the mornings which has been told is true; but seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence."

A Double Fulfillment

Note that Daniel was told that the vision was not concerning his own days but "pertains to many days hence." The critics insist that this was fulfilled in the turbulent days of the Maccabees in 168-165 B.C., when a Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, did indeed desecrate the Temple in Jerusalem, offer a sow upon the altar, and erect a statue of Jupiter to be worshipped. But though that was undoubtedly an historic foreview of the final "abomination of desolation" it could not have been the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, for otherwise Jesus would not have said, more than 165 years after Antiochus, that men could yet expect to see "the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place."

Another reference in Daniel to this sacrilege is found in chapter 9. It is in the midst of the tremendous prophecy that is called the "the vision of the seventy weeks." This was an announcement to Daniel by the angel Gabriel that God had marked off a period of 490 years (seventy weeks of years), which would begin when the Persian king, Artaxerxes, issued a commandment to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (fulfilled in 445 B.C.)* It would terminate with a period of terrible trouble during which a coming prince would cause the Jewish sacrifice and offering to cease and would thus establish the abomination which makes desolate.

The angel said that first seven, and then sixty-two of those weeks (a total of 483 years) would end just before the Messiah would be "cut off." A period of indeterminate length would then intervene before the 70th or final week (seven years) would. The angel said that first seven, and then sixty-two begin. During that indeterminate period the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed and the Jews would endure wars and desolations until the end. The actual words are these in Daniel 9:26, 27:

"And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one [literally, Messiah] shall be cut off, and shall have nothing; [that is clearly the crucifixion] and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. [This was fulfilled under Titus forty years after the crucifixion]. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war; desolations are decreed. And he [the prince who is to come] shall make a strong covenant with many for one week; and for half of the week he shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease; and upon the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, [the abomination of desolation], until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."

One further glimpse of this remarkable "prince who is to come" is given in Daniel 11:36-39. There he is called simply "the king."

"And the king shall do according to his will; he shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation [the great Tribulation] is accomplished; for what is determined shall be done. He shall give no heed to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women; he shall not give heed to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all. He shall honor the god of

fortresses instead of these; a god whom his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. He shall deal with the strongest fortresses by the help of a foreign god; those who acknowledge him he shall magnify with honor. He shall make rulers over many and shall divide the land for a price."

All of these passages in Daniel agree concerning the coming of a man who shall be the fulfillment of our Lord's prediction and shall be the sign of the end of the age. There are also other references in Scripture to this man. Paul is unmistakably describing the same man in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4:

"Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God."

Once again, we have a clear description of him in the Book of Revelation, where John describes him in 13:5-8:

"And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."

Before he uttered these words on the Mount of Olives, Jesus himself had referred to this coming man when he said to the rulers of the nation on one occasion, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive." (John 5:43). This is that Antichrist which has been predicted in all the Scriptures, and who shall symbolize in his person all that stands against God. There are many other references to him in the Old Testament prophets but we do not have the space to consider them all.

Will the Temple Be Rebuilt?

Perhaps you are asking, "If the temple was destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70, what is this 'holy place' in which the Antichrist will appear?" The obvious answer is, the temple must be rebuilt in Jerusalem. The Lord is clearly indicating that there will come a time when the Jews will repossess the temple area. In view of that expectation perhaps the most important event since the first century was the capture of Old Jerusalem by the Jew in the Six Day War of 1967. For the first time since 1897 years (since A.D. 70) Jews were once again in possession of the temple site. It is now occupied by the Moslem mosque called the Dome of the Rock and the existence of that shrine raises a tremendous obstacle to the rebuilding of a Jewish temple. But there is no other place it can be built, for God decreed in the Old Testament that Jewish sacrifices can be offered there and nowhere else on earth.

No one knows whether the present possession of Jerusalem by the Jews can be maintained. And how they will surmount the problem of rebuilding a temple on the place now occupied by an Arab holy place is anyone's guess. But rebuild it they shall, for as Jesus said in another connection the "scripture cannot be broken." Rumors appear from time to time that plans for such rebuilding have already been completed, and even that the building itself has been partly prefabricated and is ready for assembly at almost a moment's notice. But all these reports must be taken with a grain of salt for prophetic interest is now running high and the wish is often father of the thought.

A Literal Event---A Specific Place

"When you see," said Jesus, "the man who fulfills the qualifications described in the Book of Daniel, sitting in the temple and claiming to be God, then you will know that the end of the age has arrived." It will be a literal event to occur in a specific spot on earth at a definite moment in time. The prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel, already referred to, clearly indicates that there yet remains a seven-year period to be inaugurated before the prophecy is fulfilled. It also declares that it is in the middle of these seven years that the Antichrist will desecrate the Jewish Temple by his claim to be God. It is evident, therefore, that it is only the last three and one half years of this seven year period which can be properly called "the end of the age." This is also designated in other places as lasting for forty-two months (Revelation 13); a time, two times, and half a time, (Daniel 7); and one thousand two hundred and sixty days, (Revelation 12). These all add up to three and one half years. Daniel also calls this the "time of the end."

But the sign of the desolating sacrilege does more than mark the beginning of this end time. It also describes it. The signs of Scripture are never intended merely to be milestones by which we can mark off the progress of time. They are, instead, intended to reveal the hidden principles of the time in which they appear. For instance, the Jews were continually demanding of Jesus that he give them a sign that he was the Messiah. He said to them, "No sign shall be given...except the sign of the prophet Jonah." He went on to explain: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:39,40). His own burial and resurrection, then, was to be the sign. When that sign occurred they would understand the meaning of his coming.

The sign of the resurrection did not come at the beginning of his ministry but rather at the end. But it dramatized the meaning of his coming. It stands forever as a symbol of the new life he came to give, the new principle by which men are intended to live, a wholly new creation. The sign here is also of that nature. It is not intended to mark the beginning of the end of the age, and also to indicate its character. It is a literal sign, but also symbolic.

Seeing the Invisible

If we could learn to read life rightly, almost everything is a sign. God is forever visualizing-materializing the invisible forces at work in human affairs into visible events. As we observe the events we can gain insight into what is going on behind the scenes. This is the secret behind all matter. We see visible objects around us—a table, a chair. We say we understand what is made of—wood, plastic, or other substance. But every one who is acquainted with modern science knows that this is not the whole story. What we are seeing is the visible manifestation of invisible forces. Electromagnetic forces join together the atoms and make up the object we see, so that what we call wood, plastic, or metal is really an invisible force making itself known in terms of a visible object. Something like this occurs in the realm of events as well as objects. When the event takes place that Jesus describes, and the Lawless One sits in the Temple of God it will be because, throughout the world, humanity has already enthroned itself as the only god man needs. The event in the Temple will be the visible representation of that world-wide fact. The day is coming, Jesus says, when the triumph of the scientific method, as we know it today, will bring man to confirm himself in the deadly delusion that he is his own god, and does not need any other. In that day the words of Psalm 2:1-3 will be fulfilled:

"Why do the nations rage, and the peoples imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and His anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us.'"

But that is the day when God will laugh, says the same Psalm, and he will say, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. Kiss [the Son], lest he be angry, and you perish" (vv. 6, 12). God will have the last word, though man for the moment seems to triumph.

This is a "holy place" in the human spirit. It is the place that was intended by God to be the royal residence for His Holy Spirit. Thus man can become what God intended him to be: the human expression of the divine life, the means by which the invisible God is made visible in human affairs. But in that place man enthrones himself and renounces and rejects all other forms of authority, and declares there is nothing greater than man.

The triumph of the philosophy of humanism will not come suddenly into world affairs in the last day. The apostle Paul wrote in his own day, "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work." (2 Thessalonians 2:7). It had begun even in the first century. The apostle John wrote, already "many [antiChrists] have" (2 John 1:7). No, it will not be a case of a sudden intrusion into the routine of daily human events. This idolatry of man has been building up throughout the centuries and is rapidly approaching the crisis when it will manifest itself, as the Lord describes, in a clear symbol of the times.

In our own day this lie of humanism grows gradually more powerful and persuasive. You can hear it on every side, in a thousand and one subtle variations. Recently a prominent scientist demanded that the scientific methods of observation, experiment, and logic be applied to the solution of the terrible moral and social problems of our day. Now there is nothing wrong with that idea in itself; what is wrong is the confidence expressed in his conclusion which indicated that nothing else is needed to solve men's problems. He said, "If it would [be applied] it would lead to a psychozoic kingdom [whatever that is] on earth for the ever-evolving human species." There is the empty dream, the web of illusion that man can be his own god, that he can live full and complete life without recognition of the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ.

You can hear this lie when someone says, "I'm not going to worry about someone else; I've got to think of myself first." It is evident in business when young men are told, "Look, if you want to get ahead in this company you've got to forget about all these old-fashioned ideas of cheating and lying. There really are no such things, you know. It's only thinking that makes them so." It is flung at us daily on television and radio, and every magazine paints it in living color. We are all subjected to a constant din beating away at our ears, telling us that we can live complete and healthy lives without the need for God through Jesus Christ.

It is not that the world does not acknowledge a certain place for God, but that it is usually a very small place. It's nice to have God around once in a while, especially if you're inclined to be religious. Certainly it's all right to set aside one morning a week to go to church and tip your hat to him, but you can live a perfectly wonderful life without that. If that helps, fine, but if it doesn't, forget it. How widespread this philosophy is today! Man makes all the rules and can handle all the problems. Man exists for his own glory; down with anyone who thinks otherwise. That idea is dominant equally in the communist East and the capitalist West. Soon this widespread attitude will demand a figure, a leader, in whom all the excellencies that man sees are personified. It will find its ultimate expression in a man who shall appear, to satisfy the hunger for hero worship in the world.

The Bitter End

When this man appears the world will be ready to follow him to the end. But what is that end? Listen again to the Son of God: "the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel." Literally it means that abominable thing which creates a desolation. How do you depict desolation? Most would think of a desert, a howling wilderness, a lifeless, dreary waste with the eternal wind moaning in torment across scorching barren sand. Already there are many lives like that today. Increasingly we hear pitiful reports of men and women, and even boys and girls, who experience nothing but futility and live lives of barren desolation. Why? Because of the abomination that makes desolate. Because of the abysmal lie that man can be his own god, that we have somehow in ourselves the adequate resources to satisfy, that we can find in some busy round of activity or pleasure that which meets the deepest need of our heart.

When men give themselves to that lie it is the abomination that makes desolate, and the desolation is in abundant evidence all about. Psychologists tell us the major problem today is meaninglessness, desolation, futility. Life is all surface and no depth. For this reason the suicide rate is rocketing to new heights. Jesus saw all this as he looked ahead across the centuries. It was little wonder, therefore, that the tears rolled down his face as he looked out over the rebellious city below him, where already the abomination which makes desolate had begun its evil work. He wept over the stubborn city as he weeps over the stubborn hearts of men today.

Against this background of increasing desolation the gospel come as glorious good news. When Jesus sensed

the emptiness in the lives of many in his own day, he said, "If any one thirst, [Where do you thirst? In a wilderness!] let him come to me and drink...'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" The solution for thirst in a desert is to drink, endlessly and continuously, of this foundation. There is an old hymn by Horatio Bonar that puts it very nicely.

"I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one.
Stoop down, and drink, and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him."

He's the answer. But notice what stands in the way. It is man's pride. He does not want to stoop down, to drink. We do not like to acknowledge the fact that we are dependent, even helpless. Man resists that, and because he does he will not stoop, and if he will not stoop he cannot drink. But if he does stoop and drink, he will, as the hymn declares, live! It will not be but one drink but a continual drinking, and therefore, a continual living. This is God's answer to the terrible emptiness and futility of our day.

We can be sure that as the age goes on to its close, things are going to get worse. The sense of futility will deepen, the suicide rate will increase, the pressures will become more intense. Yet through all those darkening days the gospel will offer its glorious invitation, "Thirsty one! Stoop down, and drink, and live"

No one ever needs to learn to drink. Every baby is born with the ability to drink. The one thing the human heart can do without instruction is receive. Receive Jesus Christ, drink of him, ask him to come in to be in you a fountain of living water, Master of every moment of life. In your response to that invitation, the glorious promise will begin to be fulfilled.

Prayer

Father, what amazing words were these that fell from the lips of the Lord Jesus on that day so long ago in history, so close in meaning. We ask forgiveness for the many times we have turned from his voice and heeded the lie around us. Teach us to commit ourselves alone to him, who can supply the need of our lives and meet the cry of our hearts. Let us find in him the glorious refreshment of living water. In his name, Amen.

*In counting 483 years from this date, allowance must be made of a 4 year error in the date of Christ's birth (4 B.C., not A.D. 1) and the use of a 360 day year by the ancients.

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