

The Abomination of Desolation: By Gary Gibbs

Matthew 24: 3

"When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains. . . . For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24: 15, 16, 21).

What is this prophecy all about, and does it really affect Christians in today's world?

One of the most interesting prophecies in the Bible concerns the abomination of desolation. The element that makes this prophecy especially intriguing is that Jesus identifies it as a specific sign that the end is near.

It was in answer to the disciples' question, "When shall these things be and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" that Jesus spoke of the abomination of desolation. He said, "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (Whoso readeth, let him understand:) then let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains... for then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Matthew 24: 3, 15-21).

Christians of many persuasions recognize this text as a definite and peculiar sign concerning the last days. Yet even though the majority of them can agree that the abomination of desolation is an important sign, they can't seem to agree on its specific nature. Even preachers are thrown into a quagmire of confusion-looking for something that no one is very sure about. It is a perfect example of the blind leading the blind.

Of course, some believe they know the identity of the abomination of desolation. Some teach that this prophecy was fulfilled when Antiochus Epiphanes interrupted the temple sacrifices between 168 and 165 B.C. The abomination they point to is the pig Antiochus had offered on the altar in the temple complex. Others believe the abomination of desolation refers to a future time when an atheistic antichrist will overthrow the temple in Jerusalem and use it as his throne. Then there are those who believe the abomination of desolation is the Roman standards which were worshipped in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. at the time of its destruction by Titus.

Just what exactly is the abomination of desolation? Is it any one of these alternatives? Is it all of them at the same time? Or could it be possible that not any of these interpretations are correct? The answer to these questions is vitally important. Jesus clearly implies that our very lives could be at stake

over this matter.

Jesus tells us that our study of the abomination of desolation should focus on the book of Daniel (Matthew 24: 15). When one makes a careful study of this book he discovers that the abomination of desolation can be divided into three parts. These parts are: the abomination of desolation in Daniel's day (involving the first temple); the abomination of desolation in Jesus' day (involving the second temple); and finally the abomination of desolation in the time of the end (involving the whole Christian church). The issues that come into play in the abomination of desolation as treated in the book of Daniel remain consistent in each of its three phases. Therefore they are types, or examples, of each other.

The First Abomination

The key that unlocks the mystery of this prophetic event is found in the first two verses of Daniel. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god" (Daniel 1: 1,2). In these two short sentences Daniel provides a concise historical background to the remainder of the book which follows.

Further study of Daniel's prologue reveals the abomination of desolation was existent in his time and led to Jerusalem's captivity. The Chronicler reveals the reason the Jewish kings fell to Babylon. "Jehoiakim was twenty and five years old when he began to reign... and he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God." It was because of Jehoiakim's iniquitous life that God allowed him to be taken captive.

The significant feature of this is that Jehoiakim's evil deeds are described this way: "Now the rest of the acts of Jehoiakim, and his abominations which he did, and that which was found in him, behold, they are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah: and Jehoiachin his son reigned in his stead" (2 Chronicles 36: 5-8). It was specifically the abominations of Jehoiakim that led him and his city to forfeit God's protection and thus fall to Nebuchadnezzar.

Unfortunately Jehoiachin, his son, didn't do much better. Scripture tells us he also did "that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." Consequently he too was taken captive to Babylon, and "Zedekiah his brother" was placed as king over Judah and Jerusalem (v. 9-11).

The Bible goes on to record that not only did Zedekiah turn out to be just as evil as his two predecessors, but "moreover all the chief of the priests, and

the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen" (v. 12-14). God's political and religious leaders, as well as the people, adopted heathen ways as their own. They did this at the expense of God's revealed truth. Notice where these abominations were committed: the people "transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord which he had hallowed in Jerusalem" (v. 14). These abominations were standing in God's consecrated holy place, the "house of the Lord."

The religious leaders of the day had purposefully led the people to adopt heathen worship practices and incorporated them into their worship of God. In substituting for God's commandments the vain notions of men, the leaders of God's heritage provoked his wrath. The people rejected God's calls to repentance and reformation and were left to reap the consequences. "Therefore, he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary" (v. 17).

This judgment was felt not only in the spilling of the blood, but in the complete destruction of the city and sanctuary (v. 19). This all was done "To fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath to fulfill threescore and ten years" (v. 21). The result of God's people practicing the religious abominations of the heathen was the desolation of their land, city and sanctuary.

Breaking The Sabbath Brought Desolation

Just what were these abominations that resulted in such desolation? Since this was all done "To fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah," then Jeremiah should be able to tell us what substitutions in worship had been made. In Jeremiah 17 the prophet is told to stand in the gate of the people and prophesy. Under a divine mandate, Jeremiah told the people that if they would honor God's seventh-day Sabbath their city would remain forever, and that this faithful obedience would lead them into such a relationship with Himself that they would be used to convert the surrounding heathen nations (ch. 17:19-26).

On the other hand, if they would not keep the Sabbath day holy God would allow their city to be desolated. "But if ye will not hearken unto me to hallow the Sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; then I will kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched" (v. 27).

Sadly, the Jews chose to continue breaking God's Sabbath and thus inaugurated their own destruction and captivity. The abomination that led to

their desolation was breaking the Sabbath. Thus we see the significance of 2 Chronicles 36:21: "To fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath."

Ezekiel, who lived during the same time, also tells us about the abominations God's people were practicing in the holy place. In Ezekiel 8, the prophet was brought by vision to the door of the inner gate. God proceeded to show his servant the progressively greater outrages His people were committing. In verses 5 and 6 He speaks of an image that provoked Him to jealousy. In an escalation of outrage, unclean beasts had been brought into the house of God, women were weeping for Tammuz and the greatest abomination of all was twenty-five men standing in God's holy place "with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east" (Ezekiel 8:16).

God had instructed the Jews to erect the temple in a manner that would discourage the imitation of their heathen neighbors in sun worship. The ark of the covenant, the very focal point of the Jews' worship, was placed at the western end of the tabernacle. Thus the children of Israel would face the west, their backs to the rising sun, when they worshipped the true God. Yet the entrance of paganism among God's people had grown to such proportions that Judah's leading men were actually turning their backs on the temple of God. This was a significant act of apostasy.

Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah list the heathen practices that had been incorporated into the worship of God. Whether it was breaking the second commandment by idol worship, adoring unclean beasts, worshipping Tammuz, the mythological god of the pagans, or breaking God's holy Sabbath and worshiping the sun on the day consecrated to it, these practices all were classed by God as abominations. It was because the Jews persisted in justifying their own course and continued in these heathen customs that God permitted the desolation of their city.

Daniel himself agrees that it was the sins committed by God's people that caused their desolation. "O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain: because for our sins, and the iniquities of our fathers.... cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate.... open thy eyes, and behold our desolations..." (Daniel 9:16-18).

It is important to note that the abominations were done by the apostate people of God. This in turn resulted in their forfeiture of God's protection and called down His judgments and chastisement in their desolation. This scenario of the abomination of desolation in Daniel's day, involving the first Jewish temple period, prefigures the two other abominations of desolation prophesied in Daniel. The next one we shall consider is the one that concerns the second Jewish temple period.

The Second Temple Desolated

After their release from Babylonian captivity and rebuilding the city and temple, the Jewish leaders erected a mountain of rules and regulations designed to protect them from repeating the sins that had led to their bondage. The fourth commandment's seventh-day Sabbath became a special object of amendment. The Jews reasoned that since it was transgression of the Sabbath that led to their captivity, they needed to define in minute detail how the Sabbath should be kept.

Over 500 rules concerning Sabbathkeeping eventually resulted. Some of these Sabbath laws were as ridiculous as this: one could not leave an egg in the sun on the Sabbath because the sun might cook it, and cooking on the Sabbath was a violation of the fourth commandment. Of course, this only resulted in a system of pure legalism. At last the people began to believe that favor with God depended on how well they obeyed the traditions of their elders.

Ultimately the people were led full circle to disobedience again. Jesus comments that in spite of their apparent religiosity they were still breaking God's law even as their forefathers had during Isaiah's and Daniel's day. "Well hath Isaiah prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men... full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition... making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered" (Mark 7:6-13). Once again the people found themselves immersed in vain and rebellious worship.

Even though their apostasy expressed itself in legalism instead of laxness, it was still based on the same principle upon which all pagan religions are based-that man can save himself by his own works. Jesus, like Jeremiah of old, rebuked this religious system and called it an abomination. "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15).

Jesus expressed His displeasure for their abominations on numerous occasions. Most notable were the two times He cleansed the temple. On these times He expressed His anger at the desecration of His holy place. The controversy between Jesus and the Jews steamed, boiled and spewed over religion. The religious leaders hated Him because He didn't look like the Messiah, He didn't respect their traditions and most notably He didn't keep the Sabbath in the manner they thought it should be kept. This latter issue

infuriated the Jews and led them to seek Jesus' death (See John 5:10-16; Matthew 12:1-4; Mark 3:1-6).

In spite of the religious leaders' resistance, Jesus sought time and again to bring them to repentance and reformation. Often He reproved them for their erroneous ways and pointed the way to true and undefiled religion that is of great price in the sight of God. Yet they hardened their hearts and beat back the waves of God's mercy.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time, His prophetic eye saw the consequences of their constant rebellion. With a grief-stricken heart and tears coursing down His cheeks, He prophesied the coming doom of the city: "For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Luke 19:41-44).

After teaching in the temple for several days, Jesus left its precincts for the last time. Again He was choked with anguish as He saw the ultimate result of His people's apostasy. He exclaimed, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings and ye would not! Behold your house is left unto you desolate" (Matthew 23:37,38).

On both these occasions Jesus placed the guilt upon the people by stating, "they knew not the time of their visitation" and "ye would not." As a result of not responding to God's call to turn from their abominations, their temple was to be desolated. This prophecy was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Roman armies of Titus burned the temple to the ground. This second desolation of the temple perfectly paralleled its first destruction. On both occasions the abominations were done by the apostate people of God and the desolation was an act of judgment performed by a heathen army.

This desolation of Jerusalem was prophesied by Daniel to come as a result of the people rejecting Messiah the prince. A careful study of Daniel 9:25-27 will show this to be the case. In verse 25 Messiah is promised to Israel, and the city's restoration is also predicted. But then ominously all is prophesied for doom again. Verse 26 speaks of Messiah being killed by His own people and of how this act would cause their city and sanctuary to be desolated once again.

As Daniel heard Gabriel relay this prophecy, it was to his mind a replay of what he had seen happen to the Jerusalem of his day. The prophecy indicated that history would repeat itself, and this is exactly what happened. The abominations that God's people committed resulted, in both 586 B.C. and 70 A.D., in the destruction of their sanctuary and city—first by

Nebuchadnezzar, then by Titus.

Because Israel rejected the Messiah they lost their place as God's favored people. Jesus predicted this would take place by saying, "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). Israel forfeited their franchise of the gospel by their own obstinate sin.

Who would be the new nation to receive the kingdom of God and bring forth the fruits thereof? The Bible provides a clear and concise answer in the apostle Peter's letter to the Gentile converts who "In time past were not a people, but are now the people of God." Of the converts to Christianity, the new people of God, he further says, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9,10).

In the new dispensation God bestows upon the converted Christians all the privileges and promises that had been made to the literal seed of Abraham (see Galatians 3:26-29). Now converted Christians assume the role of Israel, and the Christian church absorbs the status of the temple or sanctuary of God. The Scriptures make this abundantly clear in such texts as Romans 2:28,29; Ephesians 2:11-13; 19-22; and 1 Peter 2:5.

The Final Desolation

It is in the light of this New Testament principle of spiritual Israel that Daniel speaks of the abomination of desolation the third and final time. These references can be found in Daniel 8:13; 11:31; and 12:11. Discerning students of prophetic history realize that these verses predict the formation and ascension of power by the Papacy. It is an indisputable fact of history that the Papacy brought into the Christian church the very same practices of paganism for which ancient Jerusalem was destroyed. One has to do only a little study to see how image worship, Tammuz worship, and sun worship were introduced to Christianity during the Dark Ages. Many of these abominations are still with us in the form of statues, candles for the saints, rosary beads, Easter sunrise services and Sunday worship. [For more information on this subject, see Amazing Facts' booklet Baptized Paganism.]

By no means does the papal apostasy exonerate Protestantism. Most Protestant churches accede to the apostasy by continuing the practice of abominations that have their roots firmly fixed in ancient pagan religions, which were established to destroy God's truth. Both Catholicism and Protestantism have fostered abominations in God's holy place, His church. The Christian church is mirroring literal Israel. We are repeating many of the same sins and will consequently reap the same punishment of desolation,

unless we are willing to read the handwriting on the wall and flee from Babylon.

It is clear that the three occasions of abomination of desolation found in Daniel result from apostasy on the part of God's people, but what is the sign that will tell us when the desolation is nigh?

In Luke 21:20 Jesus told His disciples what would be the last sign of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. He said, "And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh." This text does not indicate that the armies are the abomination, but rather that the armies were the instrument to cause desolation. Through the Roman armies God would execute "the days of vengeance" for Israel's abominations.

When the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem, it was a sign that most of the city's leaders and inhabitants had passed the boundaries of grace and had filled their cup of iniquity. To the Christians living in the city, this was to be a sign that Jerusalem would soon suffer God's judgment. As soon as the first opportunity arose, these Christians were to "flee to the mountains" (v. 21). In 66 A.D. when Cestius, the Roman general, surrounded the city the Christians knew the promised sign had arrived and the time had come to flee. At their first opportunity to escape they did so, and not one Christian died in the horrible destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Just as God gave the early Christians a sign of when to flee Jerusalem, so He has given us a sign. He has made it possible for every Christian to know when this world's probationary hour is nearing its close.

In Revelation 13 and 14 John records a list of omens that will tell us just how close we are to the end. The sign that will show this nation has filled its cup of iniquity will be when it makes an image to the Papacy by uniting church and state. How much more neatly could this be effected than by the passage of a national Sunday law commanding everyone to honor a pagan day of worship? Such an event will be a direct fulfillment of Revelation 13:15-17, and provide assurance that the end of this earth's time is quickly approaching.

One author describes coming events this way: "As the approach of Roman armies was a sign to the disciples of the impending destruction of Jerusalem, so may this apostasy be a sign to us that the limit of God's forbearance is reached, that the measure of our nation's iniquity is full, and that the angel of mercy is about to take her flight." When the churches have apostasized in their abominations to such a degree that they enact legislation of a religious law which displaces God's holy Sabbath with a pagan holiday, we may leave our cities, knowing that a time of trouble will be forthcoming.

The abomination of desolation is an important subject in these last days. If

we study this prophecy carefully, we will find that in each of its three fulfillments refers to a national apostasy by God's people that ends in their tragic destruction. We are now living in the time of the Christian church's final apostasy, which makes of none effect the commandments of God. We need to see that we are in the midst of fulfilling prophecy and keep our eyes open for the culmination of all things.

Our only sure protection against the abomination of desolation is to give our lives unreservedly to Jesus, loving others as He loves them and worshiping Him in the way that His word teaches. The greatest commandment is simply to love God with all our heart and soul and strength. If we have such love, it will be natural for us to do all things to please and honor Him. In return, He will see us safely through the desolation that will close this earth's history just before He comes again.