



# GOSPEL FOR THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

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*Matthew 24:15-28*

*So when you see the abomination of desolation 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 the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants 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 cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "There He is!" do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, "Look, He is in the wilderness," do not go out. If they say, "Look, He is in the inner rooms," do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.*

1. This chapter describes the termination and end of the two kingdoms: the kingdom of Judaism and the kingdom of the whole world. However, both the evangelists Matthew and Mark [chapter 13] combine the two kingdoms and do not follow the order which Luke has. They do not look further than giving and relating the words of Christ; they are unconcerned about what was said before or after. Luke, however, described it more clearly and with attention to order. He relates this discourse twice: first, briefly, in chapter 19 [:41-44], where he speaks about the destruction of the Jews at Jerusalem; then in chapter 21 [:5-28] he speaks about both these kingdoms successively.

2. We should know that Matthew rolls these into each other, and at the same time includes the end of both the Jewish nation and of the world, and cooks them into one porridge. If you want to understand this, however, then you must separate the two from each other and apply to each its end, whether



it is spoken about the Jews proper or about the whole world. This is what we will look at.

3. First, Christ begins in this chapter to prophesy about the final destruction of the Jewish kingdom, which the Jews did not at all believe or expect. The nation had been set up with excellent, great signs and the promise of God, which He had shown and made to the dear fathers. No other nation on earth experienced anything like it. Accordingly, they stood inflexibly on it, relied on it, and thought it would remain forever—as they still think today that their kingdom has not been destroyed, but only fallen down a little and will be raised up again. They cannot get it out of their minds that it is completely over for them.

4. This is why, in addition to the miracles, God had the prophets proclaim in plain and clear words that their kingdom would have an end and that God would abolish the external governance of the law about food, sacrifices, etc., and would set up a different one which would last forever. This is what the angel told the Virgin about Christ: “He will be a King over the house of Jacob, and there will be no end of His kingdom” (Luke 1 [:33]).

5. Among the passages about Judaism’s end, there is one which Christ particularly cites, that of the prophet Daniel [9:25–27] about the desolate abomination which stands where it should not stand. He is talking precisely about the Jewish nation. He says there: “Know and learn that from the time the word goes out to rebuild Jerusalem, there are seven weeks and sixty-two weeks, and after the sixty-two weeks, people who are not His shall uproot the Messiah. However, the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary, and it will meet a violent end; when the fight ends, a certain desolation will remain. He, however, will establish a covenant with many in one week, and in half of the week sacrifice and food offering will cease. The abomination of desolation will stand by the wings. It is determined that it will continue to the end of the desolation.”

6. The prophet Daniel would have liked to know when this would happen, but he could not learn it. Although the angel pointed to a definite time, it was so obscure that the prophet could not understand it. This is why he said before: “At the last, or at the last time, you will see everything,” that is, “the prophecy revealed to you begins at the end of the world” [Dan. 8:17].

When Christ caused the [preaching of the] Gospel to begin through Himself and the apostles, it continued for three or three-and-a-half years, so that it approaches very closely to the calculation of Daniel (namely, 490 years). Therefore, he also says that Christ will take half a week, in which the daily sacrifice will cease; that is, the Jewish priesthood and governance will have an end. All of this happened during the three-and-a-half years in which Christ was preaching and was almost completed in the four years after



Christ, when the Gospel spread most vigorously, especially in Judea through the apostles. Thus in a whole week—that is, seven years—the covenant was established (as Daniel says [9:27]); that is, the Gospel was preached to the Jews, which is written about elsewhere. Now, when the time came and a new preaching began, a new kingdom also had to begin, that is, one in which Christ rules spiritually in our hearts through the Word and faith. Now, if this was to proceed, then the former had to end, have no more value, and cease. This is one part of the prophet's prophecy to which Christ points.

7. The other part is about the "desolate abomination" [Dan. 9:27], since Christ now says, "When you see this standing in the temple," then pay attention (He means to say), for this is a sure sign out of the prophecy of Daniel that this kingdom is now at an end. Do not be confused because the Jews or even weak Christians think that it will not be destroyed.

8. The "abomination" about which Daniel writes, however, is that the Emperor Gaius<sup>1</sup> (as the histories point out) put up his image in the temple at Jerusalem as an idol so that it would be worshiped, after which everything that was there was destroyed. Scripture calls idols properly an abomination, because God loathes and abhors them, for He hates this more than any other sin. He certainly punishes the other sins, but He does not cast the people away, if they repent, as He says in Psalm [89:30–33] about the kingdom of Christ: "If his children forsake My Law, if they desecrate My statutes and do not keep My Commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their sin with affliction. But I will not take My goodness away from him, nor let him lack My faithfulness."

This sin, however, which is called idolatry, which really is unbelief and denial of God and which He cannot at all tolerate, completely condemns people. Wherever this remains in the heart, so that someone teaches and believes it correctly, he knows that our merit and worthiness are nothing and that only through faith are we acceptable to God and serve Him correctly, then there is a truly godly life, and light and truth remain there. Even though along with faith there is also weakness of the flesh, this is still not an abomination before God; even though God punishes the sin for repentance, yet He remembers the people, spares them, and forgives them, because the people are learning to acknowledge His goodness. On the other hand, if faith and true teaching are not present, then everything is lost, for it is impossible that man will avoid establishing for himself a false worship and adoring his own opinions and the works chosen by him. In this way he really will deny God and His Word, and by this God will be completely turned away, so that no grace can be present. This abomination is common in the lives of those who are the best and greatest saints before the world; outwardly, they go about

<sup>1</sup> I.e., Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, commonly called Caligula (r. 37–41).



in beautiful works and appearances, but inwardly they are full of filth, as we can see to the present day in our [monastic] orders and services to God, even when they are at their best. Nevertheless, on the other hand, there are some Christians whose works and life are not equal to those [saints] but who are holy before God.

9. Now, as was said, Christ says that when the abomination—that is, this idol—is standing in the temple, then the kingdom will finally be devastated and destroyed, so that afterward there will never again be any building. Luke [21:20] expresses this clearly in these words: “But when you see Jerusalem besieged by an army, then know that its desolation has come.” Right after this, He also says, “Then let everyone in Judea flee to the mountains,” etc. Likewise: “But woe to those who are pregnant and nursing at that time” [Luke 21:21, 23]. And: “But pray that your flight does not take place in the winter or on the Sabbath. This will be a great distress, which has never been before or will be again” [Matt. 24:20–21].

10. All of this applies to the Jewish nation. If this were to happen to us at the end of the world, then, according to the text, we would really have to be in Judea, because this is what He is pointing to specifically. So it is also true when He says that there has not been nor will be any greater affliction on earth than there was in that destruction. We can see in the histories how miserably they were killed and even killed one another, themselves jumped into the fire, and one let another slay him. Yes, the famine was so great that they even devoured the strings of crossbows and even their own children. This happened so shamefully and abominably that no greater misery has ever been heard of.<sup>2</sup>

11. Since they themselves wanted this, God let them be so deluded and destroyed. He certainly would have had mercy on them and gladly lifted them up, if they had not brought themselves into such misery with their own hard heads, so that they had to slaughter and consume themselves; once it began, all such murder and bloodshed had to increase.

So the death of Christ and of all the prophets was avenged on them quite horribly, because they raged without ceasing against God’s Word and besides persecuted and expelled the apostles. Paul says that the wrath of God has come on them at last [1 Thess. 2:16].

12. Now, “when this frightful wrath and abominable affliction is present,” says Christ, “then flee to wherever you can flee.” These words are all proverbial: “Then whoever is in Judea and on the roof should flee to the mountains”; likewise: “Whoever is in the field,” etc. [Matt. 24:16–18], which is the same as

<sup>2</sup> Josephus (ca. 47–ca. 101) describes the destruction of Jerusalem in *Jewish Wars* 6.5.249–7.1.4 (Loeb 210 [1990], pp. 447–505). See also the sermon for Trinity 10 on Luke 19:41–48, paragraphs 9–10.



saying, "Hurry away, the sooner the better, and do not let yourself be found." This is also what happened. After the Jews had been sufficiently warned by many signs that they should submit to the Romans, but they did not want to, the disciples and apostles left there and followed these words of Christ. They left behind everything which was in Judea and did not return to get anything.

13. "See to it," He says further, "that your flight does not occur in the winter or on the Sabbath" [Matt. 24:20]; that is, see to it that you flee at the right time, so that you are not captured. He did not want to do a miracle to preserve them in the midst of the enemy, even though He certainly could have. He had resolved to bake everything that was there together. Therefore, everything there had to be completely lost. It is written that there was a great multitude of people at Jerusalem, one million one hundred thousand people; they were all melted together, there were so many of them there. This is why Christ warns His disciples not to delay their flight until the Sabbath when they were not supposed to walk, nor until the winter when it is too cold, but to get going, the sooner the better. If they put it off, they might have to flee at an unsuitable time.

14. So far, Christ has been speaking about the Jews. Now, I said previously that Matthew and Mark combine these two ends, so that it is difficult to separate them, and yet they must be separated. Therefore, note that everything which has so far been said refers to the Jews. Here, however, he weaves the two of them together, breaks off abruptly, and does not care much about the order in which Christ spoke these words, one after another. Rather, he entrusts all of that to the evangelist Luke; he only wants to say that the following will happen before the Last Day. He says,

*"And if these days were not shortened, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect the days are shortened."* [Matt. 24:22]

15. This applies to both parts. The meaning is that for the sake of the righteous the misery will not last for long. Even the war against the Jews did not last two full years before there was again peace. However, because all of this also refers to the end of the world, we will try to apply the previous words about the Jews to ourselves, so that we do justice to the evangelist.

16. I do not expect that there will be another battle like the one which came on the Jews, because the text says, "There will be such distress as there never will be again" [Matt. 24:21], as we also read and see. However, a different punishment will happen to us; just as that one was bodily, so at the end especially a spiritual one will come on the unchristians, who are just like the Jews. Thus they will be similar to each other: just as the affliction came on Jerusalem through God's arrangement, and everything was ground to



powder, so horrible, and even more horrible, will it be before the Last Day, when He will come and put an end to the whole world.

17. When Christ ascended into heaven, His kingdom stretched not only over Judea but also spread over the whole world through the Gospel, which was preached and heard everywhere. We, however, act just like the Jews: we deny and persecute God's Word and kill Christians who confess and preach it, as the Romans did at first and as the pope, bishops, princes, monks, and priests do afterward to the present day. This is the way it has been for more than five hundred years now: no one dared to preach God's Word, unless in the pulpit someone made a show of reading the text of the Gospel, and then sucked out or inserted human teachings. If anyone spoke up against this, they were there with sword and fire to suppress it. When they were warned and frightened with words and signs, it did not help. They held their heads high and cried out and raged against it like crazy people. God certainly has reason enough to destroy them finally and eternally on the Last Day.

18. Therefore, the words of Daniel about the abomination also apply to us. We also have a truly desolate abomination sitting in a holy place, namely, in Christendom and in the human conscience, where God alone was supposed to sit and rule. Daniel writes much about this in clear, explicit words in chapters 8 and 11. The truly pure teaching which we preach is that we are redeemed through Christ from sin, death, devil, and all distress; put into God's kingdom through the Word and faith; and thus set free from all laws—and that no one can come into God's kingdom or be freed from sin through the works of the Law, whatever these might be called. Where this is preached and believed, there Christ dwells and rules in hearts spiritually without means; there is the Holy Spirit with all the benefits and fullness of the riches of God.

19. But what is the pope doing? He is sitting not in the physical temple or God's house but in the spiritual, new, and living temple of which Paul says, "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will defile him, for the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple" [1 Cor. 3:17]. Many devils and heretics have always presumed to sit in this temple, along with all who preach against the true teaching: "If you want to be saved, then take up this or that estate and order, and do this or that work." In this way they drag people away from faith to works. Moreover, even though they use the words "Christ is the Lord," they really are denying Him, for they say not one word about the fact that He forgives sins and redeems from death and hell only through grace. Rather, they say: "Through these orders and through these works we must make amends for sin, make satisfaction, and obtain grace." This is the same as if you said: "Christ did not do it; He is not the Savior; His suffering and death cannot help at all." If your work is to do it, then He cannot do it through His



blood and death. One of the two must be in vain. If you remain with works, then you drive Christ away, and deny and revile His precious blood and Him with it. Then He cannot sit and rule in your heart through His Word, work, and Spirit; rather, my work becomes my idol whom I let sit and rule there.

20. So now, see whether the pope is not the greatest archabomination of all abominations, the one whom Christ and Daniel mean, the true Antichrist, about whom it is written that he sits in the temple of God [2 Thess. 2:4], among the people where Christ is named and where His kingdom, Spirit, Baptism, Word, and faith are supposed to be. Because he intrudes upon Christ's office and kingdom through his nonsense of canon law, and tries to prevail over consciences and rule them with his precepts and works, he is rightly called a "desolate abomination" [Matt. 24:15], that is, one who only destroys and ruins everything. As was said, Christ and my work cannot remain together. If one stands, the other must perish and be destroyed. Therefore, as far as the boundaries of his diocese reaches, the pope has completely desolated Christ's kingdom, and all who hold with him have denied Christ.

21. St. Paul prophesied all of this about him when he called him the "man of sin and the child of destruction, who is an opposer and exalts himself over all that is called God or worship, so that he sits in the temple of God as a god and pretends to be God" (2 Thessalonians 2 [:3-4]).

It is invalid, however, when the Papists try to turn these words away from themselves and say that Christ and Paul were speaking about the temple of Jerusalem and that the Antichrist would sit and rule there. Christ says here that Jerusalem together with the temple will have an end and after its destruction will never be rebuilt. Therefore, because Paul is pointing to the time after the destruction of the Jewish kingdom and of the physical temple, it cannot be understood other than about the new spiritual temple, which (as he himself says) is we.

There the pope will sit and be honored, not above God, but above everything which is called God (he says [2 Thess. 2:4]). Since God's name naturally remains the highest honor, he cannot sit above the true, natural God, but only above what is called God and worship; that is, he is exalted above his preaching and honor, higher than the genuine God. It is obvious that so many princes and the world cling to him and regard his laws higher and greater than God's commands. It is supposed to be the greatest sin if anyone eats meat against his command; or leaves the impure estate of priest, monk, or nun for the married life as God has commanded; or takes both kinds in the Sacrament according to Christ's institution. Among them, stealing, adultery, and all public vices against God's Commandments are much less, and no one is punished for them. Yes, when they themselves slander God's Word, and persecute and kill Christians, they regard this as the highest worship, even



the highest service they can do for their god, the pope. Is this not truly the Antichrist seating himself and being honored above God? Thus if anyone who speaks or acts against him falls into their hands, he must immediately die. I think the abomination has been sufficiently depicted and explained.

22. Whoever can flee, it is now high time to run and flee, leave behind what he has, and get away, the sooner the better—not with his feet but with his heart, so that he is free from the abomination and enters Christ's kingdom through faith. So that we can correctly identify the abomination, however, we need understanding and keen eyesight. However, we cannot see it better than if we compare it to Christ, who teaches, as said above, that through His blood we are reconciled with God and saved. The pope, however, ascribes this power to our works. You can easily see that being saved through works is contradictory to wanting to be saved not through works, but by believing on Christ as our righteousness before God. Now then, if you want to remain with Christ, you must flee from the pope and abandon him.

23. Now, this "desolate abomination," which has ruled at our time but has now been revealed by God's grace, will not be destroyed by the emperor or secular authority. It must be higher than that bodily destruction, even though that was such a great distress that none can be greater bodily [Matt. 24:21]. This is why God has reserved for Himself alone to annihilate this abomination, as Paul says, "Whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and put an end to him by the appearance of His coming" [2 Thess. 2:8]. Although they fear evil from secular authority and insurrection, they will not get off that easily. They are unworthy of such gentle punishment, and God will not allow them to be destroyed through people but will do it Himself without means, through His Word. This has now begun, and his kingdom has been destroyed enough that it can no longer ensnare the consciences of those who know the Gospel. No matter how much the pope strives against the Gospel, he must now fall at the feet of the secular princes and seek help from them. In this way his power has been weakened and broken through the Gospel; his final destruction, however, is being reserved for the Last Day. Therefore, it must still remain in part until Christ comes down from heaven, completely destroys everything, and turns it into powder.

24. However, just as at that time among the Jews the days were shortened, as Christ said [Matt. 24:22], so they must also now be shortened for the sake of the elect. We see that the pope's governance has faced opposition and been decreasing for a hundred years now, with the exception that at the Council of Constance, where John Hus was burned, the pope so frightened everyone that people regarded him as God. The truth, however, soon came out, so that now he is despised and cannot last much longer. As was said, this now applies



not only to the Jews but also to our abomination, the kingdom of the papacy. Now Christ says further:

*"If, then, anyone says to you: 'Look, here is Christ, or there,' do not believe it." [Matt. 24:23]*

25. We should know and grasp these words well, in order to hit the pope and his sect on the forehead; they lead out the kingdom of Christ and tie the Christian life to external, visible things. They openly say, "Wherever the pope is, there is the Christian Church." They try to lead us into finding, perceiving, and grasping persons, places, or customs which are all external. All monasteries and chapters do this. "If you," they say, "take up this estate, eat this way, wear these clothes, pray in this way, and fast in this way, then you will atone for your sins and be saved." Christ has already depicted this very clearly for us. Referring to all these monasteries, estates, and works by which they try to help souls, He warns us to be on our guard against them and not to let ourselves be dragged from the ground on which we stand. We become Christians through none of these things, but are redeemed from all evil and brought into His kingdom only through His blood, if we believe. His blood drags all temporal, external things out of our sight, knocks down with a word all teachings which do not preach faith purely and all life which is not governed according to the genuine teaching of faith. In short, when He says, "If anyone says, 'Here or there is Christ,' do not believe it," this is the same as saying, "Be on your guard against everything which leads you to works, for it is surely deceiving you and dragging you away from Me."

*"For false christs and prophets will arise and do great signs and wonders, so that (if it were possible) even the elect would be led astray into error." [Matt. 24:24]*

26. These are significant, serious, and frightening words, namely, that these preachers of works will drive this into the people with such brilliance and force that even the saints who stand in faith cannot avoid it but must also be led astray; and that is what happened. The dear fathers, Augustine, Jerome (I hope)—likewise, St. Bernard, Gregory, Francis, Dominic, and many more—even though they were holy, nevertheless have all been led astray on this point, as I have often demonstrated elsewhere. This error—of binding Christianity to external things—began early, and they with others fell into it; they were led so far into it that they took up this external way of life themselves. We can see in St. Bernard's books that he writes in a bad way when he answers anyone on questions about their monasticism. When, however, he writes away candidly out of his own spirit, then it is a pleasure to see how well he preaches. The



same thing is true of Augustine, Cyprian (the very great martyr), and many more. If someone put before them a question about how they should regard laws and external regulations, about whether they should be kept in this way or that, they stumbled forward and stepped into it in such a way that they did not need much to be led astray. The Papists still cite this as their strongest argument against us: "Did so many holy people and teachers supposedly err," they say, "and did God supposedly forsake the world in this way?" They do not see that these words hit them on the forehead so that they are staggering!

27. Now, what should we answer them? The words are plain and clear; we must believe them and let them stand; we cannot get around them, even if the holy angels in heaven were against them [cf. Gal. 1:6–9]. Or should not Christ be holy and His Word count more than their words? He is not talking about the big crowd, Mr. Everyone, but about the smallest group, the elect. He says that they will stumble so far that they would almost be led astray. He warns us not to cling to them, when we see that they have fallen into external things. Now, if they did not go astray, then Christ who foretold this would not be truthful. Even if all the saints would now step up and tell me to believe in the pope, I still would not do it, but would say, "Even though you are elect, Christ has nevertheless said that there will be times so horrible and dangerous that even you must go astray." This is why we must cling only to Scripture and God's Word, which says: "He is neither here nor there. Where He is, there I will be. He will not be where my work or estate is. Whoever now teaches me differently is trying to deceive me." For this reason, I still say that what they claim is invalid. They say, "The holy fathers and teachers have held this and lived in this way; therefore, we also must hold it and live in this way." Rather, what is valid is this: "Christ taught and held this; therefore, we must also hold it." He counts for more than all the saints.

*"See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore, if they say to you: 'Look, He is in the wilderness!' do not go out there. [If they say:] 'Look, He is in the inner room!' do not believe it." [Matt. 24:25–26]*

28. At the time of the holy fathers Anthony and others, shortly after the apostles, the error Christ is speaking about already began (though Anthony greatly restrained it).<sup>3</sup> Then everyone was running into the wilderness, many thousands of them; this gained such glory that later Jerome and Augustine almost worshiped it and did not know how to praise it enough. When we look at this in the light, this text is powerfully against this practice; there were also among them many heretics and many who had been condemned. And,

<sup>3</sup> Anthony of Egypt (ca. 251–356) is considered the founder of Christian monastic life because many followed his example of holy living.



even though there were holy people among them who escaped being led astray, nevertheless the example is dangerous and not to be recommended. For example, St. Francis may have been a holy man, but the example and order he set up are not to be followed. However, no one, not even among the saints, knew this, since it had spread so far and with such great fame. The Christian life is not limited to the wilderness, but should go about freely, as Christ and the apostles lived, so that we step out into the world, publicly preach and admonish, in order to bring the people to Christ. They run away from people into the wilderness, do not want to remain in the world where they must suffer much, choose their own strict life, and in so doing want to be higher Christians than others. This is what the monasteries do, which is what Christ means by the "inner room."

Christ now concludes and says,

*"For just as the lightning comes from the rising [of the sun] and shines to the setting, so also will be the coming of the Son of Man." [Matt. 24:27]*

29. He means to say: "Do not believe it if someone ties Christ down to this or that place and leads you away from faith to works. I warn you not to fall away from the pure faith, for you do not know at what hour I will come. When no one is expecting, I will strike as quickly as lightning flashes from heaven." Whoever then is not clinging<sup>4</sup> to faith will be lost. Therefore, see to it that the day does not overtake you, and remain awake in faith, so that, if you are lazy and fall asleep, the devil may not snatch you away [cf. 1 Pet. 5:8]. However, these words are not in the right order. Matthew (as was said) only piles up the words, but not in order. This is why they do not really agree with the words which follow:

*"However, where a carcass is, the eagles gather." [Matt. 24:28]*

30. That is, you need not be concerned about the place where Christ will come. "No matter where I am, we will certainly come together, as people say, 'Where a carcass is, the eagles gather.' Just as the eagles do not define some place to which they want to flee, but find their way to the place where the carcass is, so My people will find their way to Me. Where I am My elect will also be."

That is the text about the end of the Jews and of the world. Matthew mixes in the words about the signs of the Last Day, all of which Luke writes more clearly; but this belongs to another time and has been sufficiently treated elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In place of these three words, the 1525 edition has: "has not clung."

<sup>5</sup> See sermon for Second Sunday in Advent on Luke 21:25–33; cf. *Sermons on Matthew* 18–24 (1537–40/1796–1847), LW 68:277–341.