

[THE END OF THE JEWISH KINGDOM, THE ABOMINATION DESOLATION, AND THE END OF THE WORLD.]

Sermon for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Trinity; Matthew 24:15-28

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil. It was first published in 1525.

1. In this chapter there is a description of the end of two kingdoms; of the kingdom of the Jews, and also of the kingdom of the world. But the two Evangelists, Matthew and Mark, unite the two--and do not follow the order as Luke did, for they have nothing more in view than to relate and give the words of Christ, and are not concerned about what was said either before or after. But Luke takes special pains to write clearly and in the true order, and relates this discourse twice; first briefly in the 19th chapter, where he speaks of the destruction of the Jews at Jerusalem; afterwards in the 21st chapter he speaks of both, one following the other.

2. Notice therefore that Matthew unites the two and at the same time conceives the end, both of the Jewish nation and of the world. He therefore cooks both into one soup. But if you want to understand it, you must separate and put each by itself, that which really treats of the Jews, and that which relates to the whole world. This we wish to do now.

3. Notice, first, how Christ prophecies in this chapter concerning the final destruction of the Jewish nation, which the Jews did not at all believe, even though they had been clearly told through great signs and words, the promises of God which he made to the fathers, like unto which had happened to no other people upon the earth. For this reason they strongly insisted and depended upon it, thought it will continue forever, as they think even at the present time; that their kingdom is not destroyed but has only disbanded a little and shall be reestablished. They cannot get it out of their minds that they are not completely ruined.

4. For this reason God announced besides his miracles with clear and plain prophecies that their kingdom shall have an end and that God had abolished the external reign of the law, meats, offerings, etc., and would establish another which shall endure forever, as the angel announced to the virgin concerning Christ, as recorded in Luke 1, 33. "And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

5. Among the various passages which treat of the end of Judaism there is especially one that is introduced by Christ, namely: the prophet Daniel, 9, 25f., speaks of the terrible abomination, standing where he ought not, when he says concerning the Jewish nation, "Know therefore and discern, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the anointed one the Prince, shall be seven weeks, and three-score and two weeks," that makes together seventy weeks or 490 years, "And after the three-score and two weeks, shall the anointed one be cut off, and shall have nothing; and the people of the Prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof

shall be with a flood, and even unto the end shall be war; desolations are determined. And he shall make a firm covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease; and upon the wing of abominations shall come one that maketh desolate; and even unto the full end, and that determined, shall wrath be poured out upon the desolate."

6. The Prophet Daniel desired to know the definite time when this should come to pass, but he could not learn it, and although the angel pointed out a definite time, it was nevertheless too dark for the prophet to understand, hence he said before: But at last, at the last time, you shall see everything, that is, your prophecy, that is to be revealed to you, shall transpire at the end of time. For when Christ sent out the Gospel through the ministry of himself and of the Apostles, it lasted three or three and a half years, that it almost amounts to the calculation of Daniel, namely the 490 years. Hence he also says, Christ shall take a half a week, in which the daily offerings shall cease; that is, the priesthood and reign of the Jews shall have an end; which all took place in the three and a half years in which Christ preached, and was almost completed in four years after Christ, in which the Gospel prospered the most, especially in Palestine through the Apostles (that when they opened their mouth, the Holy Ghost fell as it were, from heaven, as we see in the Acts of the Apostles), so that a whole week, or seven years, established the covenant, as Daniel says; that is, the Gospel was preached to the Jews, of which we spoke before. Now, when the time came that a new message or sermon began, there must also begin a new kingdom, that is, where Christ rules spiritually in our hearts through the Word and faith. If this is now to continue, then the other must be set aside and has no more authority and must cease. This is the part of the prophecy of the prophets, which Christ is explaining.

7. The other treats of the abomination of desolation. Here Christ now says, When ye shall see this one standing in the temple, then take heed (he wants to say) for that is a sure sign from Daniel's prophecy that his kingdom is now at an end; and do not let yourselves be deceived because the Jews and weak Christians think that it shall never be destroyed.

8. But the abomination of which Daniel writes is that the Emperor Cajus, as history tells, had put his image in the temple at Jerusalem as an idol, for the people to worship, after everything there had been destroyed. For the Scriptures call idolatry really an abomination, because God abhors and abominates it, inasmuch as he is the enemy of no sin so much as of this. The others he does truly punish, but he does not cast the people away if they repent, as he says in Psalm 89, 31- 34: "If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. But my loving kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips." But this sin, called idolatry, which is really unbelief and denial of God, which he cannot at all endure, condemns man completely. For where this remains in the heart of man, so that he teaches and believes correctly, indicates that our works are nothing, and that we shall be acceptable to God and serve him aright alone through faith, then there will be a truly godly character; there light and truth abide. Although along side of faith there runs a sense of the weakness of the flesh. It is not an abomination before God, but only a daily sin that God will punish unto repentance; yet he keeps the people, spares them and forgives them, when the people turn to him and learn to acknowledge his goodness. On the other hand, where this faith and doctrine do not exist, everything is lost; for it is impossible for man not to establish for himself a false worship and choose his own opinion and work, and worship it, so that he really denies God and his Word, and God is entirely turned aside; so that his grace cannot operate. Such abomination is generally the most beautiful

and the greatest holiness in the eyes of the world, which outwardly appears in beautiful works and customs; but inwardly is full of filthiness, as we can see at the present day in our orders and church services where they are at their best. However there are again some Christians who are not like these in their works and ways; but are truly holy before God.

9, Now Christ says, when the abomination, that is, this idol, shall stand in the temple, the kingdom shall finally be made desolate and destroyed, so that it can never be rebuilt again, as Luke expresses it clearly in these words, 21, 20f: "But when ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that our desolation is at hand. Then let them that are in Judea flee unto the mountains; and let them that are in the midst of her depart out; and let not them that are in the country enter therein. For these are days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled." And further, "Woe unto them that are with child and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight may be not in the winter, neither on a Sabbath: for then shall be great tribulation, such as had not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever shall be."

10. All this pertains still to the Jewish nation. For if this should come upon us at the end of the world, then would we, according to the text, have to be in the land of Judea, because he really points to that country. It is also true, when he says that no greater calamity has been or can be upon the earth than was at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem; as we see in history, how unmercifully they were slaughtered and even killed one another, cast themselves into the fire, and permitted themselves to kill one another. Yea, the famine was so great that they ate the strings of cross-bows and even their own children. It was so shameful and abominable that like pity and distress shall never be heard again.

11. But they themselves wanted it, hence God permitted them to be thus blighted and destroyed. He would gladly have had mercy upon them and preserved them, but they brought themselves to such distress with their stiff-neckedness, that they killed and consumed one another; that as they began it, all such murder and bloodshed had to increase. Thus the death of Christ and of all the prophets is most abominably avenged on them, and that without ceasing, they raged against the Word of God, and persecuted and drove away the Apostles, as St. Paul says in 1 Thess. 2, 15-16, that the wrath of God finally came upon them.

12. When such fearful wrath and abominable plagues are at hand, says Christ, then flee wherever ye are able to flee; for these words, "Then flee unto the mountains, he that is in Judea, and he that is upon the housetop," etc.; then, "He who is in the field," etc., are all written or spoken symbolically, as if to say, hasten quickly away; the sooner the better, and let no one find or overtake you. This also came to pass. After the Jews had been sufficiently warned by many signs, that they should submit themselves to the Romans, and they would not; then the disciples and apostles fled away and followed this saying of Christ, they left everything behind that was in Judea and never returned to take anything.

13. "And pray ye," he says further, "that your flight be not in the winter, neither on a Sabbath;" that is, see to it that you flee at the right time, that you be not overtaken. For he did not want to perform a miracle and keep them safely in the midst of the enemy, although he could have done so; for he had determined that everything that was there should be completely destroyed together; therefore all as one mass were only fit for destruction. If there were indeed a great multitude at Jerusalem according to the record, a million and a hundred thousand men were melted together, as many as were in the city.

Therefore Jesus admonishes the disciples that they should not postpone their flight to the Sabbath, when they did not dare to journey; no to the winter, when it would be cold; but that they should depart, the sooner the better; that if they hesitate, an inconvenient time to flee would come.

14. Thus far Jesus speaks concerning the Jews. Now I have said before that Matthew and Mark unite these two ends together. Therefore it is difficult to discriminate, and yet we must discriminate between the two. Therefore notice that what had been said up to the present, all referred to the Jews; but now he weaves both together, breaks off abruptly, does not concern himself about the order in which the passages were spoken by Christ, and how they are connected with and follow one another; but leaves it to the Evangelist Luke, yet he wants to say that it shall be thus at the last day, and says: "And except those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved; but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened."

15. This refers to both parts and the meaning is, that the distress shall not endure long, for the sake of the godly; for the war against the Jews did not last quite two years, when peace was declared. But since all this has reference also to the end of the world, we wish to apply these passages concerning the Jews also to ourselves, so that we do justice to the Evangelist.

16. That a war shall come again as came upon the Jews, I do not expect, because the text says: There shall be such tribulation as shall never be again, as we also read and see; but another punishment shall come upon us; as that was a temporal war, so at the end of the world will a spiritual war come over the ungodly, who will be in the same condition as the Jews. Thus they will agree with one another: as that calamity came upon Jerusalem according to God's ordering and everything was ground to powder; so abominable, and even worse, shall it be before the last day, when he shall come and make an end of the whole world.

17. For when Christ ascended into heaven, he established his kingdom not only in Judea, but extended it into all the world by means of the Gospel, which is being preached and heard everywhere. But we are doing just like the Jews, we deny and persecute the Word of God, kill the Christians who confess and preach this Gospel, as at the first the Romans, and afterwards to the present day, the Pope, bishops, princes, monks and priests do. This has now been done, for more than five hundred years, and no one was allowed to preach the Word of God, unless they repeated from the pulpit the text of the Gospel for a mere show, and afterwards brought out of it or put into it the mere doctrines of men. If anyone opposed it, they rose against him with fire and sword and suppressed it. And it avails nothing, how they are warned and frightened by words and signs; they still stand in their pride, storm and rage against it as lunatics, so that God will ever have sufficient reason to destroy them finally and eternally at the last day.

18. Therefore this passage in Daniel concerning the abomination applies also to us. For we also have indeed a real abomination or desolation sitting in a holy place, namely: in Christendom and in the consciences of men, where God alone should sit and reign, of which Daniel speaks in very clear words in the 8th and 9th chapters. For this is the real pure doctrine, if we preach that we are redeemed by Christ from sin, death, Satan and all misfortune, and are planted in the kingdom of God through the Word and faith and thereby are made free from all law, and that no man, whoever he be, can enter into the kingdom of God through the works of the law nor be made free from sin. Where this is preached and believed, there Christ reigns spiritually in the heart without a medium; there is the Holy Spirit with all

the treasures and fullness of the riches of God.

19. But what is the Pope doing? He is sitting not in the natural temple or God's house, but in the spiritual, in the new and living temple of which Paul says: "If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are," I Cor. 3, 16-17. In all times many devils and heretics have tried to sit here, and all who are preaching against the true doctrine: If you want to be saved, then simply join this or that society and order, and do this or that work. They draw away the people from faith to works, although they are using the words, Christ is the Lord, but in truth deny him, for they do not say a single word that he forgives sins alone through grace, and redeems from death and hell, but they say: Through this order, through these works, we must do penance for sin, and atone for it in order to obtain grace, which is as much as to say: Christ did not accomplish it, he is not the Savior; his suffering and death cannot help, for if your works can accomplish it, then Christ cannot accomplish it only through his blood and death, or the other must be in vain. If you insist upon your works, then you drive out Christ; you deny and put to shame his precious blood and him with it; then he cannot reign in your heart through his Word, work and spirit, but my work is my idol whom I let sit in my heart and reign.

20. Thus you see whether the Pope is not the greatest arch-abomination of all abominations, to whom Christ and Daniel refer; and the true Antichrist, of whom it is written that he sitteth in the temple of God, among the people, where Christ is named and where his kingdom, spirit, baptism, Word and faith should be: because he interferes with the office and kingdom of Christ by his fanaticism of the spiritual rites of Christ, wants to rule over the consciences and govern with his propositions and works. And he can in truth be called an "abomination of desolation," who is only destroying and laying waste everything, for as has been said: Christ and my works cannot abide together; if the one stands, the other must go down and be destroyed; wherefore the Pope has made desolate the kingdom of Christ, as far as his diocese reaches, and all who join him have denied Christ.

21. St. Paul prophesied all this, when in 2 Thess. 2, 3-4, he calls him: "The man of sin and the son of perdition, he that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped; so that he sitteth in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God." But that the Papists want to turn this passage from themselves and say: Christ and Paul are speaking of the temple of Jerusalem, that Antichrist shall sit and rule there, amounts to nothing. For Christ says here, that Jerusalem together with the temple shall have an end, and after its destruction it shall never be rebuilt. Therefore since Paul is pointing to the time after the Jewish kingdom, and the destruction of the material temple, it cannot be understood otherwise than of the new spiritual temple, which as he says himself, we are. There, Paul says, the Pope shall sit and be honoured, not above God, but above everything that is called God, for the name of God does indeed remain the highest honour, therefore he cannot exalt himself above the true God, but above that which is called God and is worshipped; that is, he is exalted against his preaching and honour, higher than the true God, as is apparent in that so many princes and the world are clinging to him and regard his command higher and greater than the command of God, If any man eats meat contrary to his command or goes out of the impure calling of the priest, monk, or nun, into married life, as God has commanded, or according to the institution of Christ takes the sacrament in both forms; that is the greatest sin. They regarded it much less than stealing, adultery and all open vice against the command of God, and no one is even allowed to punish them for it. Yea, that they themselves defame the Word of God, persecute and kill the Christians, they esteem as the highest service of God, as it is also the highest service they can do for their god, the Pope. Is not this exalting and honouring Antichrist

against God, so that if anyone speaks or does anything against this, if he gets into their hands, he must immediately die I I think now that enough has been pictured forth and explained concerning this abomination.

22. Now it is high time for him to run and flee, who is able to flee; let everything he has behind and depart; the sooner the better; not with his feet but with his heart, in such a way that he will be rid of the abomination and enter the kingdom of Christ through faith. But to do this reason and a keen insight are needed rightly to discern the abomination. It cannot be seen in any way better than when we compare it to Christ who teaches, as stated above, that we are reconciled to God, and are saved through his blood. But the Pope ascribes this power to our works. Thus you ever see that to be saved through works and not to be saved through works (to believe on Christ as our justification before God) are contrary to each other. If you then want to remain with Christ, you must flee from the Pope and let him go.

23. This is now the abomination of desolation that has reigned until our time; but is now revealed through the grace of God, but will never be destroyed by emperor or worldly power. It must all be higher than that material destruction, since that was such a great tribulation, that there never can be a greater physically. Therefore did God reserve the destruction of this abomination for himself, as Paul says in 2 Thess, 2, 8: "Whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the breath of his mouth, and bring to nought by the manifestation of his coming." Although they themselves fear evil from worldly power and insurrection, yet this shall not be so well with them. For they are not worthy of such mild punishment, and God will not grant unto them that they be destroyed through man, but will do it himself without means, through his Word. Inasmuch as it has now made a beginning and the kingdom is destroyed even to the extent that it avails nothing, nor can take captive the conscience of those who know the Gospel. However hostile the Pope rages against the Gospel; he must nevertheless fall at the feet of princes and seek help from them. Hence his power is weakened and broken by means of the Gospel; but his final destruction is reserved unto the last day. Therefore it must continue in part until Christ at his coming shall destroy and grind to powder all together from heaven.

24. But as at that time among the Jews, the days were shortened, as Christ said, so must now also the days be shortened for the elect's sake; for we see that the government of the Pope has had opposition and has declined during the last hundred years, without, at the Council of Constance where Huss was burned at the stake, having frightened everybody that he was held as God; but the truth came finally to light, so that now it is very much despised and can endure but a little longer; hence we notice, as I said before, that our text refers not only to the Jews but also to our abomination, the Pope's kingdom. Now Christ says further: "Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is the Christ, or, Here; believe it not."

25. From this passage we should indeed know and understand how to conquer the Pope and his rebel horde, who abolish the kingdom of Christ, and bind the Christian life to external and visible things, as they also publicly declare: Where the Pope is, there is the Christian church. They want to lead us to the point that we should find, feel and touch it in person or state, or in a manner that is wholly external. Thus they do in all their cloisters and institutions. Therefore they say: If you enter this calling, eat, clothe yourself, pray and fast so and so, then you will atone for your sins and be saved. Heretofore Christ pictured this beautifully to us, and pointed to all these cloisters, callings and works, by which they wish to help the soul, and warns us to be careful of them, and not to permit ourselves to be drawn from the foundation upon which we stand; that we cannot become Christians through any such thing; but are redeemed from all evil alone through his blood and are planted into his kingdom, if we believe.

He thus takes from our eyes all temporal and external things, casts to the ground with one word all doctrines that do not proclaim faith in its purity, and all life that is not regulated according to the right doctrine of faith. In short, he adds: "If anyone says, here or there is Christ," believe it not. which means: Beware of everything that leads you to works, for it surely deceives and separates you from me. "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

26. These are admirable, earnest and fearful words, that these preachers of works must force this truth into the people with such a show and emphasis that even the saints who stand in faith cannot protect themselves against it, but are led astray thereby, as has been the case. For the dear fathers, Augustine, I think Jerome also, likewise St. Bernard, Gregory, Francis, Dominicus and many others, although they were godly men, have all erred here, as I have often remarked in other places. For this error, that the Christian life was bound to external things, was early introduced and they with others were swept into it, and it went so far that they were led into it by their outward conduct, as we see in the books of St. Bernard, how poorly he writes when he answered anyone on the questions, of their monastic life; but when he writes freely out of his own soul, he preaches so elegantly that it is a pleasure for him, as Augustine, Jerome, Cyprian, the great and noble martyr, and many others experienced. But when any question was laid before them concerning the law and external regulations, whether we should understand it so, or so, then they immediately stumbled and fell, so that little was needed to mislead them. Still the followers of the Pope use this as the greatest argument against us. They say, should so many holy people and teachers have erred, and should God have forsaken the world so completely? They do not see that this becomes to them a stumbling-block to cause their fall.

27. What shall we now answer them? The passage lies clearly before us. This we must believe and let it stand; we cannot get away from it, even though the holy angels in heaven were against it, for should not Christ be holier and his Word amount to more than their word? For he never at any time says: Lord of the many or of the great multitude, but of the small number, of the elect, that they should stumble, so that they would almost be led astray, and he warns us that we should not cling to this, when we see that they cling to external things. Had they then not erred, Christ could not have been right when he proclaimed it. Now if all the saints should come and bid me believe in the Pope, I would not do it, but say: Even though you are of the elect, Christ nevertheless has said that there should be abominable and dangerous times: that you also must err. Therefore we must cling alone to the Scriptures and to the Word of God, which say he is not here nor there. Where he is, there I shall be. He will not be there where my work or calling is. Now whoever teaches me otherwise deceives me; therefore I still insist that nothing avails that they propose, as for example: The holy fathers and teachers thought so, lived so, hence we also must think and live in like manner; but this avails: Christ taught and thought so, therefore we must also think the same, for he is authority, above all the saints. "Behold, I have told you beforehand. If therefore they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the wilderness; go not forth: Behold, he is in the inner chambers, believe it not."

28. At the time of the holy fathers, Anthony and others, shortly after the Apostles, the fallacy already arose, of which Christ is speaking here, although Anthony strove against it, that everybody was running to the wilderness by the thousands, and it gained such favour that later Jerome and Augustine almost worshipped custom, and did not know how sufficiently to praise it. Now when we look at it in the right light, this text powerfully opposes that movement, and there were also among them many heretics and many condemned persons, and although there were godly people among them who escaped the

deception, nevertheless the example was dangerous and cannot be commended. Also St. Francis was a holy man, but his example and the order he established we are not to follow. But this no one, not even the saints, has recognized; so deeply and with such great display has it taken root. The Christian life is not confined to the wilderness, but moves freely in public society as Christ and the Apostles lived, that we come before and among the world, preach and admonish openly, to bring the people to Christ; but the people who run to the wilderness, do not want to remain in the world where they must suffer so much. They choose for themselves their own strict life, want thereby to be better Christians than others, as also the cloisters do, which are designated by Christ as the "chambers." Christ closes now and says: "For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west; so shall be the coming of the Son of man."

29. By this Christ wishes to say: Only do not believe them, when they want to bind Christ to this or that, and try to lead you from faith to works. I warn you not to fall from the pure faith, for you know not it what hour I will come. When anyone neglects his looking for me, then I will come as suddenly as the lightning flashes from heaven. When anyone clings not to him by faith, he is lost. Therefore see to it, that that day does not come upon you unawares. Remain steadfast in the faith, so that if you be indolent and sleep, Satan may not tare you from your faith. But these words here follow each other in disorder. For as I said, Matthew gives these passages all in a heap and not in order. Therefore it does not agree exactly with the words which follow here:

"Where soever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together."

30. That is, you need not ask where the place is, where Christ shall come. I am where I wish to be, hence we will meet each other, as we say: "Where soever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together." For as the eagle does not paint for himself the place to which it will fly, but wherever the carcass is, there they will be gathered together; thus mine own will also find me. Where I am, there shall my elect also be. This is the text concerning the end of the Jews and of the world: to which Matthew now unites the passages concerning the signs of the last day, all which Luke separates clearly. This will belong to another occasion and is elsewhere fully discussed. Note. Some on the last Sunday of the year preach on the Gospel of John 6, where Christ feeds the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes. which is explained in the Winter Postil during Lent.--God be praised forever.

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