

# Watching for Jesus

M. W. Bassford, 1-8-12

During our Lord's Supper lesson, we looked at the sorrowful evening that our Lord spent in the garden of Gethsemane, and the way that even His closest disciples abandoned Him. We see His advice to them recorded in Mark 14:38. If they wanted to be faithful to their Master, it was their responsibility to watch with Him, pray with Him, and share His grief. However, despite His repeated exhortations, they proved unequal to the task and fell asleep.

Today, our position is different than that of those early followers of Christ. None of us will ever know whether we would have done better in that garden on the Mount of Olives than Peter and James and John did, but we do know for certain that we will never be called upon to try. Christ's ministry, with all its sufferings and glories, concluded 2000 years ago. Today, He reigns from His throne in heaven and does not intervene openly in the affairs of men.

However, this doesn't mean that we will never have anything to do with Jesus. Instead, God's word promises us that just as He ascended into the clouds on the fortieth day after His resurrection, in the same way, He will once again return in the clouds. Indeed, Jesus Himself frequently predicted His triumphal reappearance to mankind, even though such predictions must have confused His disciples greatly! The Bible doesn't tell us when, but it does tell us what.

The second coming of Jesus has fired the imaginations of self-described believers for thousands of years. Many people invest great effort in attempting to pin down when this is going to occur and force-interpreting the book of Revelation to match current events. However, we are far better served asking what the return of Jesus will mean for us individually. On that day, God will bring every act of every human being into judgment, and that certainly includes all of us. Will we be ready? Our discipleship doesn't call us to watch with Jesus, but He does expect us to watch for Him.

## The Parable of the Virgins

We learn how important it is for us to be vigilant from no lesser authority than the Son of God Himself. Jesus emphasizes this in several different places, but one of His main discussions of the topic appears in the first 13 verses of Matthew 25, which we commonly call the Parable of the Ten Virgins. These virgins are divided equally into **WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS**. Jesus makes this distinction in Matthew 25:1-4. As is clear from these first few verses, Jesus is describing a custom that is not familiar to us. Here's what was going on: Unlike our weddings today, in which all the ceremonies occur at one particular spot, Jewish weddings of the time of Christ had more of the character of a procession. On the day of the wedding, the bride would wait with her attendants in her parents' house for the appearance of the bridegroom. When he arrived with his attendants, the bride's attendants would come out to welcome him, and the whole combined party would proceed to the bridegroom's parents' house, where the wedding and the wedding feast would take place. Jesus often uses this familiar ritual for an illustration. Here, though, He focuses on the attendants of the bride.

The number of these bridesmaids—ten—is also dictated by Jewish custom. Five of them are wise, and five of them are foolish. All ten of them are expecting the bridegroom to arrive after dark, and all ten of them have come equipped with lamps that they intend to use to light the way for the bridal procession. However, only five of the virgins, the wise ones, have brought along containers with extra olive oil in case the oil in the lamps runs out. Jesus means for us to understand these wise and foolish virgins as two different kinds of Christians. Wise Christians prepare themselves to remain faithful until He returns, however long that might be. Foolish Christians do not make those extra preparations.

The difference between these two groups of bridesmaids was highlighted by the actions of **THE BRIDEGROOM**. Jesus describes what he does in Matthew 25:5-6. Here, we see another way in which the wise and the foolish virgins were similar. Both of them expected the bridegroom to arrive in a timely fashion. However, he didn't. Maybe he got stuck in traffic. I don't know. Regardless, though, the delay was so long that all of the virgins nodded off, leaving their lamps burning all the while. As a result, none of them were expecting the bridegroom when he finally did arrive, about the hour of midnight. They had to be awakened to come and meet him.

In this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom, and if the past 2000 years of failed predictions have proven anything, it is that He isn't going to come as promptly as we expect Him to either! However, that doesn't stop believers from making foolish decisions based on their predictions. I used to work with a girl who told me that her parents got married because they expected the Lord to come back in less than 10 years, and they figured that they could stand each other for that long. It doesn't make any more sense to obey the gospel in expectation of the imminent return of Jesus.

However, even if Jesus won't come when we think He will, we can be certain that He will come, and that when He does come, it will be at an hour when we least expect it. Nobody is going to be wise enough to look at the spiritual tea leaves and be sitting around in white waiting when the Lord shows up. He's going to catch us all as we really are.

After this, Jesus next describes **THE FOOLISH VIRGINS' DILEMMA**. Read with me from Matthew 25:7-9. Remember, all of those hours that the bridegroom was delayed, the virgins' lamps kept burning, to the point where they were going out as the bridegroom finally arrived. As a result, the virgins needed to trim their lamps. I always used to think that "trim" had something to do with snipping the wick with a pair of scissors, but it actually just means refilling the

lamp with oil. The wise virgins had the extra oil for the refill; the foolish virgins didn't. When they asked the wise virgins for help, they told them that they didn't have any to spare from their own needs, so the foolish virgins had to go and bang on the shopkeeper's door to see if he would sell them some oil at midnight. As a result, when the time came for the bridegroom's grand procession, the wise virgins were around to greet him, and the foolish virgins weren't.

Once again, the spiritual applications are plain. If we choose to be foolish Christians who don't put the extra preparations in, so that we are ready to receive Jesus when He returns, the result will be that He will find us unready. Also, we have to be ready ourselves and not rely on someone else to bail us out. I've known Christians like this. They don't have a strong faith of their own. Instead, they rely on other brethren to constantly reach out to them and stir them up, and without constant intervention from others, they fall away. If that's our attitude, if we're apathetic toward serving God except for the times when some other Christian wakes us up, Jesus is likely to find us unready when He comes.

In the parable, this lack of readiness led to some **SAD RESULTS** for the foolish virgins. Jesus concludes His story in Matthew 25:10-13. While they were off harassing merchants, the bridegroom came, collected the bride and her attendants, went to the location where the wedding feast would be held, went in, and shut the door behind him. Naturally, the foolish virgins wanted to be a part of the wedding feast too, despite not having been around for the procession. However, the bridegroom, perhaps because he was angry at their non-appearance, wouldn't admit them.

Jesus means for this passage to be a solemn warning to unprepared Christians. Just because we have obeyed the gospel doesn't mean that we are going to be ready for His return, any more than being part of the original wedding party meant that the foolish virgins were ready for the bridegroom. Instead, we need to have the means to spiritually refuel ourselves. If we don't, we won't be able to stick it out until His arrival. The consequences of that failure will be dramatic. The foolish virgins just got shut out of the wedding feast. Foolish Christians will get shut out of heaven, rejected forever by the Lord whom they did such an incomplete job of serving. Hell will be awful enough for ignorant sinners who awake on the Day of Judgment to a nasty surprise. How horrible will it be for people who knew what they had to do, but didn't have the endurance to do it! Each one of us must do whatever is necessary to avoid such a dreadful fate.

## How to Watch

Thankfully, the Scripture does an excellent job of defining what we must do to be ready and prepared like the wise virgins. First, we must **PRAY**. This doesn't make intuitive sense to us. After all, what does watching have to do with prayer? However, that's just what Paul prescribes in Colossians 4:2. The simple act of prayer, no matter what the prayer is about, takes our attention away from the physical plane and focuses it on the spiritual plane. When we ask God for anything, we emphasize our reliance on Him, and so remind ourselves that seeking His kingdom first is most important. Furthermore, the more we pray, the more we will find the refreshment in it that Jesus found. Where we might turn on the Bulls game or spend an hour or two on Pinterest to unwind, Jesus spent His down time in prayer. At times, He would pray through the night and on until morning. Jesus didn't do that out of some sense of obligation. He did it because prayer gave Him the strength He needed to keep going. None of us will ever attain the same level as a pray-er that Jesus did, but any of us can turn to prayer for the help that we need too.

Second, it helps us to keep watch when we **ASSEMBLE**. This is actually the point of a very familiar passage, Hebrews 10:24-25. We need to come together with God's people both to encourage and be encouraged, and we need to do that even more as we see the day of the Lord approaching. In some ways, this poses an interpretive problem. How can I see the day drawing near when Jesus has told me that I won't know the day or the hour? Friends, it's like this: I don't know when the Lord is coming back, but I do know that today is one day closer to it than yesterday was. I don't know when any of us are going to pass from this life, but I do know that all of us are one day closer than we used to be. For some of us, that day may not be far off at all. I have an old friend, a gospel preacher who's a little younger than me. He has a wife and two small sons, and he's dying. The status updates on Facebook that have been detailing the slow breaking down of his body have been both gruesome and heartbreaking. He didn't drink or smoke or abuse his body in any way. He was born with a genetic defect in his pancreas, and the doctors couldn't help him anymore. This year, it's this brother in Christ, a man barely thirty. Next year, it could be any of us. When life is so fragile, and the end is so uncertain, yet so close, how could any of us dare to be anywhere else than here, to prepare in the only way that we can?

Finally, we need to keep watch by remembering to **REDEEM THE TIME**. Paul points us to this idea in Ephesians 5:15-16. As we just got through saying, all of us only have a limited number of days in our lives. We need to make the best use that we can of all of them. Since my mother passed, I've gotten into the habit of reviewing the events of my day after I climb into bed, and of asking myself whether I used my day wisely. Did I devote my day to my God, and to my family, my brother, and my neighbor, or did I do something else with it? Did I fritter it away in meaningless leisure-time pursuits, or, worse yet, did I blacken it with the stain of my sin? Most of the time, I'm satisfied with the way I spent the day I was given. Sometimes, I'm not. It is certain, though, that I do much better than I would if I didn't pay attention, and I am convinced that only the self-aware, considered life will be a life that is pleasing to God.