

“Ready for the Long Wait”
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Matthew 25:1-13

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See the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

Remember when Jesus announced he was bringing good news to the poor? And when he pronounced blessing for the poor?¹ Why then, in this story, does he call “foolish” those who don’t have enough?

Remember those crowds that hadn’t planned ahead to bring food into the wilderness? Did Jesus scold them for being unprepared? No! He took what little they had, and made it an abundance to feed them.² Why then, in this story, does he call “wise” those who don’t share their oil?

Remember how Jesus welcomes those who seek him? He even goes to find them, like a shepherd scrambling to find one missing sheep. Why then, in this story, does he send away those who get to the party late?

Many people don’t like this story of Jesus.³

He told stories like this — we call them parables — to invite us into imagining a whole new world, the world he’s creating. I trust him to tell good stories. So let’s give this story a chance.

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It’s a wedding story. So we’ve got to know how weddings worked back then.⁴

It starts with the groom. He leaves his family and friends at their place, and goes to his bride’s family home. They are all there with her, waiting for him. When he arrives, they throw a feast. (Remember, his family and friends are waiting back at their place.) Whenever that party ends, the groom leads his bride in a joyous parade back to his family’s place, for another party. (Remember, his family and friends have been back there, waiting for it.)

¹ Luke 4.18 and 6.20. See also Matthew 5.3; 11.5; 19.21 and so on.

² Matthew 14.13-21 and 15.29-38.

³ One preacher I read suggested that, if Jesus had a chance, he would have thought better and re-told the parable. (Jesus offends us when he fails to conform to our comfortable expectations of him.)

⁴ See Klyne R. Snodgrass, Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 510. He notes that the information we have about 1st century Judean weddings is sparse, and traditions seem to have varied from place to place. So this description is a generalized reconstruction.

But in Jesus' story, the feast at the bride's home keeps going. Going. And going. Back at his place, everyone is still waiting for the groom to come back with her. Waiting. Waiting. And waiting. It gets late into the night. Some nod off.

Ten in particular. The Bible calls a Greek word⁵ that means "virgins." This isn't about their sexual history, though. The point is, they are young, brides-to-be-someday. The sort who immerse themselves in *Today's Ancient Bride* magazine (if such things existed back then). The sort who scramble to catch the bouquet (if they threw it back then). They are wedding crazy!

They are anticipating the groom getting back. When he does, the party will start. Only then. Not until then! They are waiting. Waiting. And waiting . . . snore.

III

That's the story so far. To hear what comes next, we need to realize something. With Jesus' stories, it's important to *not* be distracted by what they are *not* about.

Like in his "Good Samaritan" story. Yes, the hero uses oil and wine to treat wounds. But Jesus is not teaching first aid. Or in his "Prodigal Son" story. Yes, the father orders up a calf for his son's welcome-home feast. But Jesus is not lobbying for the veal farmers' association.⁶

Jesus shows us plenty about his favour for those who are poor. But this story is not about that. Besides, the attendants who ran short of oil could afford more. They went out to buy it.⁷ Poverty is not their problem.

Jesus shows us plenty about generosity. But this story is not about that. Besides, if the five with extra oil had split their supply with the others, none of their lamps would have lasted long enough for the party.⁸

Jesus shows us plenty about his welcome of undeserving people like us into his Kingdom. But that's not what this story is about either.

⁵ *Parthenoi*.

⁶ Responding to the ethical objections raised against this parable, Snodgrass writes: "*Parables are not direct pictures of reality and do not claim to portray life as it should be. They only partially map the realities they seek to reveal. . . . This parable is not about ethics but about wisdom and foolishness with regard to being prepared. . . . Such charges betray an insensitivity both to the situation depicted and to how stories function.*" Snodgrass, 517.

⁷ Implicit in them rushing out to buy more, and then returning, is the assumption that they had the means to purchase enough oil. They simply had not brought enough with them for the long wait that night.

⁸ "*If the oil the wise brought for their lamps was divided with the foolish, all the lamps would go out, and the celebration could not proceed in the dark.*" Snodgrass, 517.

This story is about keeping ready, while waiting a long, long time, for something we are anticipating.

IV

Waiting and anticipating.

Waiting for God to make things right, in this world that's too often so wrong. Are you waiting for it? Anticipating it?

Waiting for God to finally break you fully-free from temptations that dangle in front of you or desires that trap you? Free from your habits of injustice or indifference? Free from your patterns of resentment or fear? From your addictions to behaviours, or substances, or ways of thinking? Are you waiting for it? Anticipating it?

Waiting for when God turns to victims, vindicates and restores them. Waiting for when God turns to tyrants, overthrows *and* redeems them. For when God reconciles families. For when women never need fear men, and men never feel a need to dominate women. Are you waiting for it? Anticipating it?

Waiting for God's peace to break out — among nations, between religions, within communities, in homes. Are you waiting for it? Anticipating it?

Waiting for God to still storms. Waiting for God to burst desert lands with fertility. Waiting for God to make humanity flourish and creation rejoice. Are you waiting for it? Anticipating it?

Waiting for God's party. When everyone — past, present and future — gets to pull their chairs up to the feast, gets to join in the dance, and gets to laugh into the night. Are you waiting for it? Anticipating it?

Jesus wants us to imagine. So he tells this story about when he comes back, about when the Groom returns, about when God breaks Heaven's Kingdom out upon Earth.

If you are anticipating it, and waiting for it, and waiting and waiting . . . then you can imagine this story, with Jesus.

V

You know the cliché: crazy Christians proclaiming, "*The End is near! Jesus is coming back soon!*"

Know who is crazier? Jesus' people who believe "*The End is far! Jesus the Groom is coming back . . . we're pretty sure . . . eventually . . . we're anticipating it . . . God knows the world needs him . . . we need him . . . it's been a long, long time, though . . . the night is dragging along . . . we're tired . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . and waiting . . .*"

“But,” and here’s the craziest part, “we’re going to keep waiting . . . and while we’re waiting, we’re going to keep ready . . . stocked up on oil . . . because we have to keep our lamps burning.”⁹¹⁰

So we’re going to keep our hearts open to the next news there is a famine somewhere, the next beggar on the street, the next refugee crisis, the next person telling about being abused. Because when the Groom comes, the homeless will be home, the hungry will feast, refugees will be welcome, and victims will be vindicated! Yes, it’s been a long time. It might be a long time more. So we’re going to stay ready, and keep our lamps burning.

We’re going to battle with her through the next relapse, and persevere with him through the next round of treatments. Because when the Groom comes, they’ll be healed in the way that will last! Yes, it’s been a long time. It might be a long time more. So we’re going to stay ready, and keep our lamps burning.

We’re going to keep crying out “Peace! Peace!” while everyone seems to be finding new ways of “War! War.” Because when the Groom comes, he’ll beat those missiles into ploughshares and those assault rifles into pruning forks! Yes, it’s been a long time. It might be a long time more. So we’re going to stay ready, and keep our lamps burning.

We’re going to keep taking two steps forward, knowing that the next move might be three painful steps back. Because when the Groom comes, he’s going to teach us to dance! Yes, it’s been a long time. It might be a long time more. So we’re going to stay ready, and keep our lamps burning.

We’re going to keep weeping and defiantly hopeful in front of death’s ugly face. Because when the Groom comes, he’s bringing resurrection with him. Yes, it’s been a long time. It might be a long time more. So we’re going to stay ready, and keep our lamps burning.

Keep our lamps burning? Think that’s crazy?

Wait ‘til the Groom comes back! That party going to be nuts!

⁹ Reflection on this parable, Scott Hoezee said, *“Jesus is not trying to create stary-eyed disciples who do nothing but scan the horizon for clues as to history’s end, he’s trying to create focused disciples who keep their eyes on the chief things of the gospel. He’s not training short-distance sprinters who will perpetually dash for history’s finish line but long-distance marathon runners who are poised to stay faithful over the long haul.”* He also said, *“Wise believers will not necessarily think that the end is near. The wise won’t bother with predictions that might prod one into thinking that the end of everything is so imminent, we don’t need to bother with things like taking care of the environment, developing long-term strategies for peace among the nations, or nurturing a faith strong enough to deal with issues that may crop up many years from now. The wise, in other words, take the long look.”* Scott Hoezee, “Sermon Starters: Matthew 25:1-13” The Calvin Seminary Centre for Excellence in Preaching (November 6 2017)

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham said, *“The delay of the parousia is filled with the mission of the church.”* Parousia is the technical term theologians use for Jesus’ return. He’s quoted Snodgrass. 518.