

# The World's Last Night

Carolyn Wilson

 *Matthew 25:1-13*

Our Scripture text today is Matthew 25:1-13, The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.

*“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this: Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom (and the bride). Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

## Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray. Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear and accept your Word. Silence in us any voices but your own, so that we may hear your Word and also do it; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Introduction

I became a Christian in the early 70's and soon after was invited to participate in a small group. Our first Bible study was using the book The Late Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsey, in which Lindsey related current events and nations of the world to biblical prophecies. While he made no predictions about timing, Lindsey's book gave you the feeling that Jesus would be coming back any second. It was so exciting, I can't begin to tell you. I imagine that is how the first Christians felt because it's clear from Scripture that early on, they thought Jesus was coming again soon.

Well, one night a newlywed couple visited our Bible study. They had just returned from their honeymoon and talked about their plans to fix up their new little house. I will never forget my reaction when they began talking about the new cupboards they were going to hang in their kitchen. Now to really get this, you need to know that one of my favorite things is home design and decorating. It's one of those things that I can work on from sunrise to past my bedtime and lose all track of time. But in that moment at that time when I was immersed in the imminent rapture of the church, my only thought was, “Jesus is coming back any minute! How can you even THINK about new cupboards?”

Well, some time passed, and I no longer made the error of being obsessed by Jesus' return. Instead, for many years I made the opposite error and didn't give a thought to Jesus' coming again. In describing that kind of thing where we go from one error to its opposite, Martin Luther compared humanity to a drunkard who, after falling off his horse on the right, falls off it next time on the left.

Jesus is coming again. C. S. Lewis, in his essay entitled, *The World's Last Night*, (from which I got this sermon title), says that Jesus' teaching on the subject of his second coming “quite clearly consisted of three propositions: 1) that he will certainly return; 2) That we cannot possibly find out when; and 3) that therefore we must always be ready for him.”

That is precisely what our text today is about, so let's take a closer look at what Jesus is telling us in this parable.

## The Parable Explained

First of all, some context. There are five discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. This parable takes place in his last one, the Olivet Discourse, only three days before his crucifixion. Here's how it unfolds:

Jesus had gone into the temple and while he was teaching, the religious leaders came along and tried to pick a fight with him. They would ask him questions attempting to trip him up. He would answer wisely and tell parables that were obviously against them.

After asking the Pharisees a question they couldn't answer without getting themselves into trouble with the people, Jesus told his disciples, “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.” Remember that he said that, because it is close to the heart of this parable.

The next thing that happens is that Jesus leaves the temple with his disciples. As they are leaving, his disciples point out the temple buildings and wow aren't they great? Jesus'

response to them was that the buildings would all be destroyed, that not one stone would be left on another. And in fact that happened in 70 AD.

Then Jesus told his disciples the signs of the end of the age and his coming again.

Of course they wanted to know when all these things were going to happen...who wouldn't? He told them explicitly that no one except the Father knows the day or the hour – not even him. He said it will be like the days before the flood – life will be going on as usual so we would need to watch for the signs because he will come at an unexpected time.

In the last part of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus told them four parables in a row about being ready for his coming. You've heard all these. The parable of the faithful and unfaithful slaves, the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids that we're talking about today, the parable of the Talents with the wise and foolish stewards, and finally, the sheep and the goats.

Let's zoom in on the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.

This parable is about a wedding and Jesus is the bridegroom. In the Old Testament, God was portrayed as the husband of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as the bridegroom of the church.

Ancient Jewish wedding customs will help us understand this parable and also help us appreciate the rich imagery of the church as the bride of Christ and the parallels with these wedding customs, including the waiting period for his return.

There are two main stages to the ancient Jewish wedding tradition. The first part is the Betrothal or marriage arrangement and corresponds to the first advent of Jesus. The second stage is the consummation and celebration, and corresponds to his second coming. And there is this gap, this waiting period in between.

In the betrothal stage, the first step is the Shiddukhin, or the match. It is Initiated by the father of the groom who

## Ancient Jewish Marriage Tradition

**BETROTHAL**  
*Shiddukhin* = Bride is chosen

**Gifts**  
*Mohar* = Bride Price  
*Mattan* = Love Gifts  
*Shiluhim* = Dowry

*Ketubah* = Covenant

Cup of Acceptance

**WAITING PERIOD**

Groom prepares a place for his bride

Bride – devotion & anticipation

**NUPTIALS & CELEBRATION**

Father of Groom: day & time

Groom returns to fetch his bride

Wedding party processes to groom's father's home

Marriage Feast

New life together begins



chooses the bride for his son. An agent may or may not be used, for example, Abraham sent his slave as his agent to find a wife for his son, Isaac. A special note, given the time in history, is that the consent of the bride was required. You may remember that Rebekah had to agree.

The parallel to the church is that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.” Jesus said, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit.” And we must agree to follow Jesus.

Then gifts are given. The most important is the Mohar, The Bride Price. It was required by law; paid by the father of the groom to the father of the bride and reflects the value of the bride.

The parallel to the church is clear. Our heavenly Father gave his Son for us. Jesus paid for his bride, the church, with his own blood. As Paul tells us, we were bought with a price.

Another gift was the Mattan, or Love Gifts, given by the groom to the bride. Not required, but a voluntary expression of love. Believers are given love gifts also: eternal life and peace, just to name two.

A third gift was the Shiluhim, or Dowry, given to the bride by her father to equip her for her new life. It was part of her inheritance. We believers are given gifts to equip us for our new life in Christ: the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts.

And then there was the marriage contract, the Ketubah. It was a written document stating the mohar or bride price, the rights of the bride, and the promises of the groom. Our Ketubah is the New Testament. It tells us of the price Jesus paid for our sins and as well as God's love and mercy and grace, and his exceedingly great and wonderful promises to us.

The Betrothal, the Kiddushin, is sealed with the ‘cup of acceptance’. For the church also, there was a cup to seal the covenantal relationship: At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood”. The betrothal is legally binding at this point – it could not be broken except by a formal certificate of divorce, but the bride and groom do not live together as husband and wife yet.

As the waiting period of the betrothal begins, the groom returns to his father’s house to prepare the dwelling place for he and his bride, usually a room added on to his father’s house (symbolized by the Chuppah). Jesus ascended to the Father and while we are waiting for him to return to us, he is preparing a place for us. “In my father’s house are many rooms,” he says. “I go there to prepare a place for you that where I am, you may be also”. The bride waited for the groom with devotion in anticipation of his return, the exact time of which was unknown. The church waits for Jesus with devotion and in anticipation of his return, the exact time of which is unknown.

The betrothal period was usually around one year, but could be longer. Tradition dictates that only the father of the groom may decide on the time for the groom’s return to carry the bride to the wedding feast.

Nissuin: The Nuptials & Celebration - finally, when the father of the groom gave the go-ahead, it was time for the nuptials and the celebration. The groom would return with a procession of family and friends from his father’s household with torches burning, shouts and the shofar (the ram’s horn) sounding to herald his coming. Then the groom, the bride, and their wedding party would process to the groom’s father’s house where they would celebrate the marriage feast and they would begin their new life together.

The parallel to the church is that only the Father knows when Jesus will return. When he does, we will take part in the marriage feast of the Lamb, and we will dwell forever with Jesus in the greatest joy we have ever known.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids takes place during the betrothal period. The ten maidens are part of the bride’s wedding party. All of the women fell asleep because of the groom’s delay. Sleeping wasn’t the problem. It was what the foolish bridesmaids neglected to do to prepare for the groom’s coming before they fell asleep that was the problem. They neglected to bring oil for their lamps. The oil is key to the meaning of this parable.

We can understand what the oil signifies by comparing our wise and foolish maidens to the wise and foolish builders of an earlier parable. Jesus said that those who hear and actually do what he teaches are like wise builders who built their houses on a rock. People that hear his teachings and

choose to ignore them (or keep putting it off) are like foolish builders who built their houses on sand. When the storms of life come along, as they always do sooner or later, the houses built on a shifting foundation collapse.

Jesus also said that the ones who keep his commandments are the ones who truly love him. Doing what he says indicates that we believe and trust him. The wise maidens brought oil for their lamps. The foolish maidens did not.

The oil signifies a genuine relationship of the heart with Jesus that results in obeying his teachings. And, following Jesus manifests itself in acts of love and mercy and service for others. That is what Jesus means when he tells us to be ready.

Jesus is not saying that we must earn our salvation by doing good works. If that were even possible, he would not have had to die for us.

Good works do not and cannot cause our salvation. They are the evidence of it, the evidence of our faith and the grateful response to a loving Savior.

Dallas Willard says, “The enemy in our time is...the idea that God has done everything and you are essentially left to be a consumer of the grace of God... it is crucial,” he says, “to realize that grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning.”

Jesus is also saying that there can come a time when it is too late. On the one hand, it is never too late to repent, e.g. the thief on the cross. On the other hand, we never know which moment will be our last. While the bridesmaids were gone, the groom arrived and the door was locked, a rabbinic expression that means “lost opportunity.”

### The Parable Applied

So what are we to do? Are we to always live in fear that we haven’t done enough? No. That is our tendency, of course, yours and mine. But that’s not what God wants for us. That is not what it means to be ready.

What it does mean to be ready is that we give priority to our relationship with Jesus and hold to his teaching while it is **today** because tomorrow may be too late. And we do this faithfully, day after day.

Let us remind ourselves that we are the bride of Jesus Christ, King of Glory who is right this moment preparing a place for us. We can look forward to his coming for us as a bride looks forward to her wedding day.

Each time we share the Lord’s Supper, when Steve ends the words of institution, as he always does, with the words “... and he will come again,” let’s remember that it’s true and it could be any moment. That’s also a really great time for some prayerful self-examination.

**Ask God and myself how I am doing in my relationship with him:** is he a priority in my life or does he get the leftovers? Am I using my gifts and resources to serve him? Am I growing in the knowledge of God and fruit of the Spirit? Am I doing too much, leaving no time to be refilled myself?

**Ask God and myself how I am doing in my relationships with others:** is there anyone I haven’t forgiven? Is there a relationship that I could take the first step in mending? Am I faithful in honoring God in my work? In my relationship with my spouse? My children? Am I doing anything for anyone to show the love and mercy of God to the poor, the sick, widows or orphans or homeless, someone in prison?

These are the things Jesus asks us to do. In doing them, we are ready.

Martha Snell Nicholson was a bedridden invalid who suffered from four incurable diseases. She struggled with pain for over 35 years. Through all her pain and suffering came some of the finest Christian poetry ever written. I leave you with a poem she wrote that demonstrates the heart of a wise maiden with extra oil.

*When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ  
And He shows me His plan for me,  
The Plan of my life as it might have been  
Had He had His way, and I see*

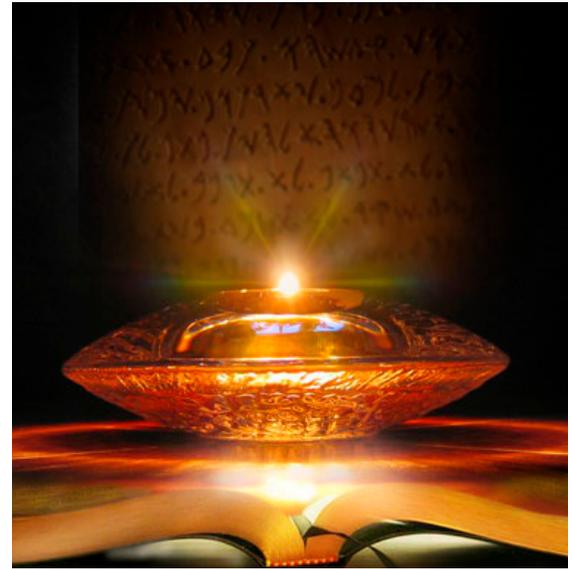
*How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him there,  
And I would not yield my will --  
Will there be grief in my Savior’s eyes,  
Grief, though He loves me still?*

*He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,  
Stripped of all but His grace,  
While memory runs like a hunted thing  
Down the paths I cannot retrace.*

*Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break  
With the tears that I cannot shed;  
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,  
I shall bow my uncrowned head.*

*Lord of the years that are left to me,  
I give them to Thy hand;  
Take me and break me, mould me to  
The pattern Thou hast planned!*

What would you do today if you knew that tonight was the world’s last night?



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Church of the Palms

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