

A wedding party was one of the greatest of all festivals in a Palestinian village. In William Barclay's commentary on this passage of Scripture, he tells us that a wedding was such an important event in the town, that scholars were even excused from the study of Scripture in order to attend a wedding. In this parable, Jesus shares with us a little slice of middle class Palestinian life, where even today, families celebrate weddings much as Jesus described them 2000 years ago. ALEXANDER FINDLEY gives us some insight as he describes, in part, a wedding festival he observed on a trip to the Holy Land:

*"When we were approaching the gates of a town, I caught sight of ten maidens brightly dressed and playing some kind of musical instrument, as they danced along the road in front of our car. When I asked what they were doing, my guide told me that they were going to keep the bride company until the bridegroom arrived. I asked him if there was any chance of seeing the wedding, but he shook his head, saying in effect, 'It might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a week's time; nobody ever knows for certain.' Then he went on to explain that the bridegroom takes the bride from her father's house unexpectedly. One of the great things to do, if you could, was to catch the bridal party by surprise. So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, sometimes in the middle of the night."*

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel some 30 to 40 years after the death of Christ, but this parable had circulated in oral form from the time Jesus first told it. As a teaching on the coming of the kingdom of Heaven, this parable was apparently one of the favorite stories of the early church. We know from many of Paul's writings that the second coming of Jesus in the flesh, was eagerly awaited. Paul expected it in his lifetime, but it didn't happen. The bridegroom was delayed. There have been many who have tried to predict the date and time for the wedding when Christ will come to us again and we will be invited to the marriage supper described in Rev. 19:9. During the Gulf War of 10 years ago, there

were many books and articles written predicting that our attack on Iraq was the beginning of the end. With the popularity of the “Left Behind” series of books written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, many are continuing to speculate that the marriage supper will take place very soon. But the truth of it is stated in this parable, that we *“know neither the day nor the hour.”* And in Mark 13:32, Jesus said about the end times, *“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* It may sell a lot of books and make for interesting sermon material and Bible studies, but the truth is, we will likely have our homecoming with Jesus in heaven, rather than on earth.

So like others across the centuries, we wait for Jesus’ earthly return — sometimes patiently, sometimes impatiently. As we wait then, what is the message that Jesus would have us to understand from this parable about the coming of the Kingdom of God? For me, the parable needs no other truth than the simple truth — WE MUST BE PREPARED FOR HIS COMING! Who knows what tomorrow might bring? Who knows if we will even have a tomorrow? The parable tells us that the bridegroom comes unexpectedly. The call of this parable is to be prepared.

So it begs the question: ARE YOU PREPARED? Do you have oil for your lamp? Call the oil FAITH IN CHRIST — a faith fed by prayer, confirmed by an obedient life. In our story, all the maidens anticipated the coming of the bridegroom, all were Christian in outlook, in anticipation. For some, however, their oil was low, their faith had become lazy, while with others, their faith remained eager and alert. The five wise maidens had already made a trip to the oil dealer, they had tapped the resources of God's power, and through the living of a faithful life, they had trimmed their wick. THEY LIVED, NOT ONLY FOR THE MOMENT, BUT IN ANTICIPATION OF WHAT TOMORROW MIGHT BRING. They

were prepared for both the joys and the emergencies of life.

And notice this. Each maiden made, or failed to make, her own preparations. And so must we. Each person must respond to Christ on an individual basis. The wise maidens were not fooled by the apparent delay of the bridegroom. They knew that life must be lived IN ANTICIPATION OF GOD'S JOYFUL SURPRISES.

It is interesting for us to notice as we read VERSE SIX, that the bridegroom came at midnight. The delays of Christ's kingdom are hard to explain. We long for, WE PRAY FOR, that time when the full blessings of Christ will be poured out over us. We are currently engaged in a war on terrorism. Thousands died in the events of September 11, and hundreds, perhaps thousands have died in Afghanistan. And I add my voice of thanks for each person who serves in the Armed Forces. But I also long for the day when there will not have to be any more Veterans, when there will be peace on earth — not just a cease fire — but a Godly peace, a peace that Isaiah envisioned when *“nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”* The vision of Christmas is the vision of the prophet Isaiah when *“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”* Of a day when *“They will neither harm nor destroy, on all my holy mountain.”* But obviously, as we look at world events, that time has been delayed. The maidens slumbered and slept, there was no crime in that. But the FOOLISH just fell asleep, while the WISE slept ONLY AFTER THEY HAD PREPARED. For the WISE, it DID NOT MATTER WHEN THE BRIDEGROOM CAME. They were ready!

And the bridegroom came at midnight. This passage tells us that there is joy at midnight. It seems almost like a contradiction of terms. Do you like for the phone to ring in

the middle of the night? I don't! How often is it good news? Or when you are sick, isn't it in the middle of the night when your fever goes up the highest, and you feel the worst. But in our parable, that is precisely the moment when Christ came — at our midnight.

Has that been your experience? It has been mine? There are times when my spiritual strength is at a low point. But it is times like that when God will often send a person to me to offer a WORD OF HOPE AND ENCOURAGEMENT. Or as I read the Bible or pray or meditate, I'll feel the presence of God strengthening me. When my spirit is asleep and my strength is the weakest, Christ comes. How like God to remind us that there is no moment apart from Him. No moment unknown to Him, no moment when God may not be known by us. The midnights of our life ARE NOT JUST THE SIGNS OF DOOM AND GLOOM. They are also times when heaven comes to offer heaven's joy — strength for our weakness.

But there is another side to this parable. When the cry sounds, "*Behold, the Bridegroom !!*" there will be no more time for preparations. The torches must be lit, because the wedding party is moving out through the trees and across the hillside toward the house where the banquet will be held. Those without sufficient oil for their lamps will be left in darkness. When they finally reach the banquet hall, the door will be shut. Midnight can be a time of JOY, but it can also be a time of JUDGMENT.

VERSE 9 of this parable has troubled me. It seemed so unchristian, or worse it, seemed heartless in its selfishness. THOSE WITH OIL WOULD NOT SHARE with those whose lamps were going out. But we must keep in mind the central theme of this parable and that is the WISDOM OF READINESS. And the fact is that spiritual preparedness cannot be instantly shared with another. If we think of our own experiences, we will

understand why the maidens couldn't share their oil. The fact is that each of us is an individual. Our faith in Christ is, in the final analysis, an individual faith, an individual choice. Christ offers grace and faith to all persons, but we must respond as individuals. One by one, we must accept Christ's grace and faith. Faith is a process of growth over time. Can a saint who has grown close to the Lord through long years of prayer and Bible study, instantaneously and on demand, give that relationship with Christ to someone who has always been CARELESS TOWARD GOD? Coming from a Godly home and living next door to Christian neighbors, even attending First Methodist Church every Sunday, does not AUTOMATICALLY make you a friend of the Bridegroom. It is important that we gather together to celebrate our faith and worship God. But none of us will ride into heaven on the coattails of another Christian. *"Buy for yourselves,"* the wise say to the foolish. ESTABLISH YOUR OWN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST. That is a truth that remains as long as there is any meaning to individuality.

And the GOOD NEWS is that the oil of faith is offered to each of us as God's free gift. We need only go to the "OIL DEALER", to God, with our lack of faith, with our empty flasks, and our longing to have our flasks filled. But nobody can go for us. We do not know when Christ will come, but He will come. That fact is real, and with it comes the reality of the closed door. *"Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."*

Do you know the motto of the Boy Scouts? "BE PREPARED." That is good advice. We don't know what tomorrow might bring. All we can do is "be prepared."