

The Parable of the Virgins

***“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.”
—Matthew 25:1***

THE PARABLE OF THE

virgins begins with the words of our opening text. It closes with the words, “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.” (Matt. 25:13) The parable is part of

Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ questions, “When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming [Greek: presence], and of the end of the world [Greek: age]?”—chap. 24:3

This parable emphasizes that Jesus’ disciples would not know the time of his return and subsequent presence in advance of its occurrence, hence the need of their being alert and continuing to watch. The faithful watchers could expect to know of the Master’s return once it had occurred, because they would be alert to the various signs given in the Scriptures which would begin to have fulfillment at that time. Thus they would rejoice in the evidences of his presence.

The parable of the virgins is not just a set of circumstances which Jesus put together in story form. Rather, it is a true reflection of the marriage custom of his day. Furthermore, in it we find a clear illustration of the essential point of the lesson Jesus desired to teach—that is, the importance of watching.

According to ancient Jewish custom, during the period between a betrothal and the wedding, the bride-to-be lived with her friends, and was not permitted to see her future husband, or have any communication with him. When the day and time arrived for the wedding ceremonial activities to begin, which was usually late in the evening, the bridegroom left his house, attended by his groomsmen. A band of musicians preceded them as they made their way to the home where the bride was waiting.

The bride and her companions anxiously awaited the coming of the bridegroom. When he arrived with his groomsmen, he led the combined group, including his bride-to-be, to his own or his father's house, accompanied by many demonstrations of happiness. On their way to his home they would be joined by a party of maidens who were friends of the bride and the bridegroom. These had been waiting to join the procession as it passed by, and would now become a part of the entire group. Upon arrival at the bridegroom's house, all would be invited to participate in the joys of the wedding, including the feast.

These maidens are, symbolically speaking, the "ten virgins" referred to by Jesus. In the parable, the virgins went out to meet the bridegroom too early—in their estimation he had "tarried." As they waited for him, "they all slumbered and slept." At

“midnight” they heard the announcement, “Behold, the bridegroom . . . go ye out to meet him.” The virgins all arose and “trimmed” the wicks of their lamps.—Matt. 25:5-7

Five of these virgins are described as “wise” because of having a full supply of oil in their vessels—several translations say “flasks.” These flasks—full of oil—would be used to continuously replenish the lamps, so that they would keep shining at all times. The other five virgins are said to be “foolish” because they failed to provide the necessary supply of oil in their flasks. Although they had trimmed their wicks, as had the wise virgins, the lamps of the foolish virgins had “gone out,” because they ran out of oil. They asked the five wise virgins if they could have some of their oil, but the wise said, “Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you.” Thus the foolish virgins were not prepared to go into the wedding with the bridegroom.—vss. 2-4,8-10

WATCH

The admonition to “watch” has doubtless been a blessing to the Lord’s people in every part of the Gospel Age. They have all been encouraged by the belief that the return of Christ was near. Indeed, so far as individual experience is concerned, the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom have never been any farther away than the end of each one’s faithful walk in the narrow way of sacrifice. So far as consciousness of passing time is concerned, it is the next moment after death in which the faithful follower of Jesus is ushered into his reward on the other side of the veil.

While the parable of the virgins assuredly served to stimulate the “virgins” throughout the age to greater watchfulness, it has a special application at the end of the age. It teaches that no one would know in advance the specific time of the Lord’s return, but reveals that as the time of the Second Advent drew near, there would be some who thought they knew ahead of time. These would go out to “meet” him, but not having a sufficiency of oil, the light of truth they bore would begin to dim and go out as a result of their disappointment.

It is interesting to note that just such a thing did occur. Many who had become interested in the Second Advent, through the movement begun by William Miller during the first half of the nineteenth century, actually expected in advance the Lord’s return to occur at a certain time. The parable states that the bridegroom “tarried.” This seemingly expresses the viewpoint of the virgins. To them it seemed that he had tarried, but actually they had gone out too early to meet him. We know that every feature of God’s plan is carried out at exactly the proper time. Nothing in God’s plan ever tarries.

A SIGN

In addition to being an admonition to watchfulness, we may well consider this parable as calling attention to one of the “signs” of the Lord’s return and Second Presence. In answering his disciples’ questions pertaining to the signs of his presence, Jesus drew somewhat from the prophecies of the Old Testament. For example, he quoted from Daniel 12:1, which speaks of a “time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation” and,

referring to it as a time of “great tribulation,” offered it as one of the indications of his presence and of the end of the age.—Matt. 24:21,22

It seems reasonable that Jesus employed the parable of the virgins to illustrate the principle set forth in another prophecy relating to the time of his return found in Habakkuk 2:3. This text reads, “The vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.”

The Apostle Paul quotes from this prophecy and applies it to the time of Christ’s return. (Heb. 10:35-38) Paul indicates that our “need of patience” is one of the important lessons of this prophecy. “For yet a little while,” he continues, “and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” As we have seen, it is only from the human viewpoint that the Lord would seem to tarry.

James also stressed the need of patience in connection with the return of Christ. He states: “Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming [presence] of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming [presence] of the Lord draweth nigh.”—James 5:7,8

The thought of patience in these passages is “to endure.” It was lack of endurance on the part of the apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane that was responsible for their inability to remain awake and watch with their Master. Likewise at the end of the age, those who lack patient endurance cannot be alert and faithful watchers. They become spiritually drowsy and often fall “asleep.”

During the middle of the nineteenth century many of the Lord's people became convinced that the return of Christ was imminent, and their enthusiasm was great. However, when it seemed that the Bridegroom had tarried, their zeal and interest was tested. For some, their faith waned and faded completely. Later, however, when the announcement went forth, "Behold the Bridegroom," the interest of many was aroused and rekindled. They began to rejoice in the presence of their returned Lord, and with renewed zeal prepared themselves so as to be ready to join the Bridegroom when the time of the wedding would arrive.

According to the Jewish custom, when the maidens, or virgins, met the bridegroom and his party, who were traveling toward his home, they simply journeyed along with them. The length of time required for this journey would depend on how far distant the bridegroom's home might be. While Jesus did not mention this point, we think that this background of the parable warrants us in extending its lesson of watchfulness throughout the entire harvest period of the Master's presence.

In every part of the harvest it has been important for the virgin class to be alert and watchful. This is especially true due to the fact that the length of the harvest period has been significantly longer than was at first expected. Thus the quality of patient endurance has been greatly needed in order that the virgins not become spiritually lethargic or discouraged.

On the other hand, the fact that this seeming tarrying was foretold, should in itself be a great stimulus to our faith and zeal while we continue to watch and serve. As the harvest period has continued, the

reassurance of the Lord's presence has served in a similar manner. The announcement, "Behold the Bridegroom," has been made continuously throughout the period since his return. While it is true that the seeming delay in the establishment of the kingdom is a test upon our faith and patience, we should rejoice in the fact that the fulfillment of the "vision" does not, and cannot, actually tarry.

THE BRIDE CLASS

It is seldom possible to make a specific application of all the details of any of our Lord's parables, and this is true of the parable of the virgins. The wise virgins of the parable seem clearly to picture the members of the bride class living at the end of the age who continue faithful, even unto death. The foolish virgins, being less alert and watchful, would well represent those less faithful to their vows of consecration.

The parable was not given for the primary purpose of identifying the bride of Christ, but, as we have seen, to emphasize the need to watch. It so happens that the role of the maidens, or virgins, in the ancient Jewish wedding custom lent itself well to teach this lesson. Faithfulness on their part was revealed by their possession not only of oil in their lamps, but also an extra supply in their vessels.

OIL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The oil would represent what we need in order to be faithful watchers who are spiritually alert and prepared to go with our heavenly Bridegroom and to enter the wedding. In various instances in the Bible, oil is used as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It would seem that also in the lesson of this parable

the possession and use of a large measure of the Holy Spirit is vital to be a faithful watcher.

The possession of the Holy Spirit implies the need of faithfulness along all lines of Christian endeavor. First, it calls for a full surrender of our hearts to the Lord, a complete denial of self, and a dedication of all that we have and are to the knowing and doing of our Heavenly Father's will. We cannot expect to go our own way, or do our own will in life, and also be filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

The possession of the Holy Spirit by the consecrated also requires the study of the truths of God's Word, and their application in the daily affairs of life. We need to accept and be exercised by the guidance of the Scriptures regardless of the difficulties of the way that is pointed out as the one pleasing to the Lord.

Possession of the Holy Spirit impels us to faithful activity in the Lord's service. By so doing, we, in turn, receive God's Spirit in an ever increasing measure. Jesus said that our Father was more willing to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him than an earthly father is to give good gifts to his children. (Luke 11:13) Prayer, then, is another means of obtaining and of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Knowing the great importance of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it is not surprising that the wise virgins of the parable could not give their oil to the foolish virgins. They told them to go into the market place to obtain their own supply. (Matt. 25:9) Since the market place of experience involves time to live the consecrated life, time to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, time to study, to serve and to

pray, there is the danger of waiting until it is too late to do our “purchasing” of the oil of the Holy Spirit.

LET US BE WISE

The parable is not designed to illustrate what the rewards of the faithful followers of the Master will be. It simply emphasizes that the wise virgins are invited in to the wedding, and that the door of this opportunity is closed to the foolish virgins. The bridegroom addresses and treats these as strangers, and they are greatly disappointed. The two classes of virgins does not suggest the difference between the righteous and the wicked. After all, they were all virgins who, together, went out to meet the bridegroom and accompany him to his home. However, five of them were “wise” and the others were not.

The manner in which the wise virgins displayed their faithfulness, in contrast to the general lack of faithfulness on the part of the foolish virgins, is the vital lesson of the parable, and underlines its great importance to us. We are to be alert watchers in every aspect of our Christian walk. This is just as essential now as it was before our Lord returned, for while we are walking with the Bridegroom, we do not know when our individual journey will end.

A little spiritual drowsiness on our part might give us the impression that we have plenty of time for preparation when, as far as our walk is concerned, the time may indeed be “short.” If, as alert watchers, however, we are daily faithful in the use of all the means by which our “vessels” are kept filled with the Spirit, we will be ready at any time to hear the Bridegroom extend his invitation, “Enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”—Matt. 25:21 ■