

Awake, Alert, Ready
Matthew 24:36-44; 25:1-13
John Breon

Once when I was in high school, someone in Sunday School mentioned dying. I said, "I'm ready to go." Someone else asked, "You mean if a person came at you with a gun, you wouldn't try to get away?" I hadn't thought of it in such specific terms.

Admittedly, I didn't know all that I was saying. In some ways, I may be less "ready" now than I thought I was then. At the same time, though, there's something to being able to say we're ready. Jesus tells us that we can, we must, be ready—not only for dying, but for living; not just prepared for judgment, but ready for joy.

All through chapter 24 of Matthew, Jesus responds to questions his disciples asked about the future. He talks about what was still future for them but is now past for us—the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. He also talks about what is still future for us—his return in glory, final judgment, and new creation.

He mentions "the coming of the Son of Man" and "the day your Lord will come." He emphasizes that no one (except God the Father) knows when that day will be. The flood came suddenly and took away people who weren't expecting it. In the same way, the day of the Lord will come suddenly and take people away in judgment, leaving others to live in God's kingdom. Therefore, Jesus says again and again, "Keep watch, be alert, stay awake, be prepared"

The same themes carry on into chapter 25. There the teaching is in parables that illustrate what Jesus said in chapter 24. The first parable here is one about ten bridesmaids and a wedding procession.

Usually Jesus introduces parables with, "The kingdom of heaven *is* like..." But here he says, "The kingdom of heaven *will be* like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom."

The disciples understood wedding ceremonies with bridesmaids and midnight processions. In that culture, a wedding took a week of festivities, celebration, and ceremony. One of the customs and the high point of the

week was when the groom came to the bride's home to take her to their new home. The bride would ask ten friends to be bridesmaids. Their special task was to be part of the processional from her house to the groom's house, her new marriage home. This usually happened at night, so the bridesmaids carried lamps (probably torches wrapped with oil-soaked rags) to light the wedding party's way. When the groom would arrive was kept a secret. It was a surprise and the bride and bridesmaids were to wait expectantly. Even when the groom's arrival was announced, it was sometimes delayed.

The bridesmaids in Jesus' story waited patiently. But they were tired. The long wait made them drowsy and they fell asleep. The groom hoped to catch the bridal party napping.

Custom required that the groom send ahead a messenger shouting, "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" The bridesmaids were to be alert and out in the street, ready to meet him. Because the time of his arrival was a surprise, the groom's appearing involved humor and fun.

But this story's conclusion isn't funny. The ten bridesmaids had all fallen asleep, their torches burning brightly. But by the time the groom's crier awoke them, five of the torches were beginning to flicker and burn out. Five bridesmaids hadn't prepared for the long wait and weren't prepared to meet the groom. They were about to miss the one thing they had planned and hoped for so long.

Five bridesmaids were wise because they were ready for the groom's arrival. Five were foolish because they were unprepared—they hadn't brought extra oil. They tried to borrow oil from those who were prepared. But they refused. This wasn't selfish. They were thinking of the bride and groom. They didn't want to ruin the procession and the festivities. There was just enough oil for each of them. If they shared with those who were unprepared, all the torches might go out and the procession would be a disaster.

So the five who lacked oil ran off to buy some. They missed the wedding procession. And by the time they got to the couple's house, the door was shut. They couldn't enter the joy of the wedding celebration. Again, custom dictated closing the door of a wedding banquet and not

reopening to someone trying to get in for a free meal. No frantic rapping at the door would gain these bridesmaids entrance. They had insulted the bride and groom and all their relatives. They had missed the joy.

Jesus repeats, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

Watch. Get ready. Be prepared.

Crises, illnesses, loss, challenges and opportunities can catch us unprepared. Death or the Lord's return can catch us sleeping and unprepared.

For a long time, when I was driving a long distance, I would pray, "Lord, help me stay awake and alert." I still pray that sometimes. The summer after my freshman year in college, I worked for a group of churches in southeast Kansas. One weekend, we had a youth retreat in one of the towns. Saturday night, we stayed up late. Then we did worship on Sunday morning. We ate a big lunch at the pastor's house. That afternoon, I was to speak at a nursing home in another town. As I drove the thirty miles or so between towns, I started getting sleepy. I remember thinking, "I should stop for a little bit." The next thing I knew, I was waking up as the car was off the road, crashing through some brush and going into a field. My reaction was, "Aaaaaaa!" I wondered why the car wouldn't stop. Then I realized I need to use the brakes. Wanting to avoid something like that again, I try to be more rested and pray to stay awake and alert.

"Awake and alert" is my prayer at other times as well—conversations, sermons, challenges, opportunities. I want to be aware of what God's saying and doing in those situations so I can cooperate with God. I also want to be sensitive to what people are saying, to what their real needs are so I can minister effectively.

My personality is such that I seem to do better when I'm prepared, when I know what's expected, and I'm ready to do it. Unexpected questions, challenges, or opportunities can catch me off guard. Over the years, I've grown more confident, maybe more spontaneous and able to adjust more quickly.

God gives us what we need to be ready for life, for death, and for life beyond death. God prepares us for what God has prepared for us. God gives some resources in advance, stacking in what we'll need like firewood.

That's part of why we read and study and even memorize the Scriptures and become familiar with them. We can draw on their resources. It's why we join in fellowship and learn to bear each other's burdens. It's why we make a habit of prayer and keep up to date in our relationship with God. In the middle of a crisis is not the time to start getting ready for the crisis.

There's a story about D. L. Moody, the famous 19th Century American evangelist, traveling by ship to England. Somewhere in the Atlantic, the ship was caught in a furious storm. Passengers were panicking. Someone realized that Moody was on board, so a group went to his cabin, knocked on the door and woke him up. They said, "Brother Moody, we're afraid the ship's going to sink. Would you pray?" Moody said, "You folks go on to bed. I'm already prayed up."

Are you prayed up? Are you up to date with God? Are we ready for whatever comes because we're in a lively, growing relationship with God where we experience his grace giving us what we need now and forever?

God may prepare us for grief. I remember at some point in my mid-20s being struck with the realization of my grandparents' age and illness. I started crying. I was experiencing grief I'd only read or heard about. In a way, that was a more emotional time than when my grandparents actually died. But at that earlier time and at the times of their deaths, I also experienced God's comfort that I'd only read or heard about or even preached about.

It's interesting to preach about something and then later to experience it. A man named Peter Böhler once told John Wesley, "Preach faith till you have it and then you will preach it because you have it." What's God done for you, what's he brought you through or given you that helps prepare you to minister to others?

God's always going before us. God's always working in us and with us, getting us ready for life now and the life to come. What does it mean to be awake and alert? How do we get ready?

We recognize our need to be prepared and ask God to help us. The parable of the bridesmaids is a picture of judgment for the unprepared. And it's a picture of great joy for those who are ready. Opening ourselves to God in each crisis now prepares us for that final crisis (the Greek word for judgment is *krisis*). Living in God's joy now prepares us for eternal joy in God's presence.

Some people live in fear of being caught unprepared. They worry about Jesus coming back and catching them with an unconfessed sin in their life. Sort of like having a dirty sock under the bed. Now, confessing sin and repenting is part of staying up to date with God. But if our trust is in him, we don't have to keep poking around in our hearts looking for sins to confess. We trust that God's grace can deal with all our sin.

A few years ago, thinking about confession, I had an email exchange with one of my college chaplains, Bob Stamps. He said:

I also think we should not harp on sin too much. Salvation isn't by the 'ice pick' digging around in the human heart for undiscovered sins. We never get to the end of it! ...I just pray the prayers of the church every day. I don't worry about digging up all my sins, lest I become discouraged or overwhelmed. I pray a general confession every day from *The Book of Common Prayer* and that's it. When there is a particular sin that is hurting me especially, I know how to confess that and implore God to defeat it in me.

There's a balance to strike here. Sometimes we need to be jolted awake because sin has put us to sleep or hardened our hearts so that we're insensitive to it. We may deny and cover up some sin for so long we can hardly admit it's there. Other times we need gentleness and compassion because we're oversensitive. We can become so intent on singling out every sin that we stay focused on ourselves and we're always trying to identify something to confess. We may even make up stuff to confess. Let's trust God's grace and goodness, kindness and patience.

Let's keep getting to know the Lord because being awake, alert, and ready means being the kind of people who can welcome the Lord, who

long to meet him face to face. People talk about “meeting your Maker.” We’re given countless chances all through life to meet the Lord. God comes to us again and again. Opening ourselves to God in those times prepares us for the ultimate and final meeting with him.

We can’t borrow readiness, like the unprepared bridesmaids couldn’t borrow oil. We each have to be prepared. By God’s grace, through our faith and commitment, we can be the kind of people who are ready, who can welcome the Day of the Lord. We become “ripe for glory” through a relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Living in fellowship with God now prepares us for eternal fellowship with God.

We’re watchful, awake, alert, prepared as we live this life anticipating the new creation, the new heavens and new earth God promises. We do that by being faithful with the tasks we have now. N. T. Wright says, “Jesus Is Coming—Plant a Tree!” (*Surprised by Scripture*, ch. 5). What we do now prepares us for the new creation. By God’s grace, it may also contribute something to the new creation. What we do as God’s people, in the name of Jesus, can be taken up and made part of the new world God will make.

We become ready as we continue growing in love, in righteousness, in servanthood. In the new creation, heaven and earth will be one. It’ll be all God’s glory, all love, all righteousness, eternal self-giving. We need to become the kind of people who can live in that environment.

A man dreamed that he was given a vision of hell. There was a sumptuous banquet spread in front of people. But despite the rich food available, the people were starving. They couldn’t bend their elbows, so they couldn’t feed themselves. Then the dream changed to a vision of heaven. There was the same banquet and the same condition of everyone’s elbows being locked. But there the people were well-fed and healthy. The difference was that in heaven they were feeding each other.

From what Jesus says here in Matthew 24, 25, we see that there will come a time when the door will be closed. Will we have entered into the joy or will we have shut ourselves out? Will we welcome God’s glory or be consumed by it? It’s never too late to get ready, as long as we live and listen to Jesus’ warning. Entering fully into this life in Christ prepares us for entering into that next stage of eternal life with him.

We're invited to the wedding party. We're invited to celebrate the bridegroom's arrival and to share in eternal joy like at a wedding feast. We're invited to be people who can live and rejoice in God's kingdom.

Someday, the Bridegroom, Jesus the Messiah, will appear in all his glory. Until then, if we're willing, God is getting us ready to welcome him with joy and to enter into his eternal joy.