

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS  
MATTHEW 25:1-13

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

William Miller was a farmer from upstate New York and a sincere Christian man. He had little formal education, but he had a passion for Bible study. After going through a period of doubt he became a regular preacher in Baptist churches. In 1831 he was studying the Book of Daniel and became convinced that Chapter 8 in that Old Testament book predicted that Jesus Christ would return to earth sometime between March 18, 1843 and March 18, 1844. In 1839 he began touring the country, speaking in a large tent. During the ensuing years he led a movement that grew to include 700 full time preachers and people numbering in perhaps the hundreds of thousands.

March 18, 1844, came along, and Jesus did not return. There was considerable disappointment. But then one of Miller's key followers did some recalculation and determined that the big day would actually be Oct. 22, 1844. With some hesitation Miller went along with that. Excitement grew again. Some farmers didn't bother to harvest crops that fall. Some businessmen just let their companies slide. When Oct. 22 finally arrived, crowds of people left several cities to go to the fields and hills to welcome the return of Christ. They were disappointed. And they were ridiculed.

William Miller was not the first Christian to make a wrong prediction about the time of the return of Christ, and he would certainly not be the last. All of these people would have done well to heed the warning of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24:36 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 24:36), **“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”**

What was different about Miller's wrong prediction about the time of Christ's return is that a significant number of people retained and developed the ideas that led to his prediction. Out of his followers a small denomination called the Advent Christian developed. Also the much larger Seventh Day Adventists originated from among his followers as did the Church of God denomination. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Another of William Miller's followers was a man by the name of Nelson Barbour. He began writing about something which he called the invisible return of Jesus. A guy by the name of Charles Taze Russell picked up on that and began a movement which we know as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

While these predictors and their followers have been wrong in their predictions about the exact time of the Lord's return, we can appreciate their interest in the return of Christ. Even today the majority of Americans indicate that they believe that Jesus will return to earth some day. The Pew Research Center completed a survey several years ago in which they found that 41% of American adults believe that Jesus will return to

earth by 2050. More importantly the Bible says that Jesus will return to earth at some unknown time. So we should have some interest in the subject.

One of the key passages that Miller and his followers used to support their theology was the one that is before us this morning. They argued from this parable that if people did not buy into their theology by a certain time, the door would be shut on them. They would be left out of God's salvation.

So we are going to conclude our study of the parables of Jesus by looking at this Parable of the Ten Virgins to see what relevance it might have to us. The first parables that we looked at came from earlier in Jesus' ministry and related to the kingdom of heaven. This is one of the last of the recorded parables of Jesus. It also relates to the kingdom of heaven.

(PROJECTOR ON--- KINGDOM OF HEAVEN) In our earlier studies I argued that the term "kingdom of God," or "kingdom of heaven," has at least four meanings in the Bible. Sometimes it refers to the universal rule of God over all the world. Sometimes it refers to God's leadership through the kings of Israel. Sometimes it refers to the coming thousand year reign of Christ upon the earth. Sometimes it refers to the spiritual rule of Christ through His followers prior to the Second Coming. The parable today describes the end of the spiritual kingdom and the beginning of Jesus' visible rule on earth. Let's see what it has to teach us.

I.

Let's consider first THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE: THE SECOND COMING. (I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE PARABLE...) (p. 829) Jesus was having a discussion with His disciples on the Mount of Olives just outside of Jerusalem. It was just a few days before Jesus would be crucified. In response to a question in Matthew #24 v. 3 about when Christ would return and what would mark the end of the age Jesus talked about future things. He laid out God's plan that would have special relevance to the Jewish people, especially just before His return.

In v. 21 Jesus says, "**For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.**" We who are pretribulationists believe that we who have trusted in Jesus will not be around for this "great tribulation. First Thessalonians #4 and other passages seem to teach that before this seven year tribulation period begins, Jesus will come and raise up all true Christians from off of the earth to meet Him in the air. During the seven year tribulation people will have an opportunity to still put their faith in Jesus. The people of Israel in particular will experience a great spiritual revival.

In v. 29 of #24 Jesus begins to describe the end of this tribulation period and the return of Christ. In v. 30 He says that He will come on the clouds of the sky. In v. 31 He says that angels will be with him. In v. 36 He says that no one knows exactly when that will be. But, according to vv. 37-39, it will be a surprise, similar to the situation involving Noah and his family when others were going about their normal routine. In v. 39 Jesus

says, **“...and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”**

Jesus then talks about people being at work when one is taken and another one is left. He is not talking about the rapture, but rather about the physical return of Christ. Following the pattern of how things happened in the day of Noah, those who are taken away are taken away to destruction. Those who are left will enter into Jesus' earthly kingdom. In v. 44 comes the point of application: **“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”** The important thing is to be ready for this event.

Jesus then proceeds to tell three parables. Each of them involves the return of an absent lord. We are going to consider the second parable in this series, the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

II.

To appreciate what is happening in this parable we have to understand THE CUSTOMS OF MARRIAGE in this culture, which involve PREPARATION FOR THE WEDDING FEAST. (II. THE CUSTOMS OF MARRIAGE...) Marriages were usually arranged by parents among the ancient Jews. The father of a potential groom had to come up with a financial offer to satisfy the father of a potential bride in order to seal the deal. The thinking was that the family of the groom is taking away the daughter of another family. So some kind of gift must be provided as a kind of compensation to the family of the bride.

Then there was a betrothal, or engagement, ceremony in which the bride and groom made a commitment to each other. This was followed by an engagement period of about a year, during which the engaged couple were regarded as legally bound to each other. That is why the issue of divorce comes up when Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant during their engagement time. Joseph was planning to divorce Mary until the angel Gabriel appeared to him.

As the wedding date approached for a Jewish wedding invitations were sent to family and friends. On the wedding date the groom was decked out in his finest attire and would go to the house of his bride to claim her. A ceremony would take place, and the bride's family would bestow their blessings on the new couple. Then there would be a procession that would go to the house of the groom. This would usually happen in the evening. Along the way friends would join the procession. There would be singing and dancing and playing of musical instruments along the way.

When they all arrived at the groom's house, the big wedding feast would begin. There were more benedictions and blessings that were bestowed on the newlyweds. Some time after the initial feast the couple would retire to a specially prepared room and consummate the marriage. The wedding festivities that followed might continue for a week.

III.

In #25 we come to THE PARABLE itself: THE WAITING TEN VIRGINS. (III. THE PARABLE: THE WAITING TEN VIRGINS) In vv. 1-4 we read, **“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.”**

A number of early manuscripts add the phrase at the end of v. 1 that they **“went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride.”** It isn’t clear why other manuscripts omitted it. There are different ways of understanding the omission or addition.

The other technical detail that is good for you to know about is that the word for “lamps” in our text is not the ordinary word for small lamps (PROJECTOR ON--- ANCIENT LAMPS) that people would have in their houses to give light. These are examples of the smaller kinds of lamps that were used in houses. The word in our text refers more often to a torch that would have a small receptacle in it to provide oil for the fire. (TORCHES) It is the word that is used in John # 18 when officials came at night to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane. They brought torches.

The small receptacle on the torch would frequently have to be refilled. So it was necessary to bring flasks of oil along. Five of the virgins in this parable took no oil with them. They were not prepared. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The ten virgins are going somewhere to meet the bridegroom, and perhaps the bride. If it is indeed the bride and bridegroom for whom they are waiting, then it is clearly after the marriage ceremony has happened at the home of the bride. They are waiting for the procession that will take the wedding party to the home of the groom. Then there will be a big celebration. I suspect that it is this waiting for the procession to the wedding feast which is in view here.

In vv. 5-9 we read, **“As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’”**

Ceremony and celebration at the home of the bride took longer than expected. The ten virgins dozed off while they were waiting for the wedding party to come by. They are not criticized for this. So the issue here seems not to be so much alertness as it is preparedness. Finally the celebrants did come. The young ladies prepared their torches to join the procession. They lit the torches. But five of them had not brought oil. So their torches quickly went out. The fire on the wick could not be sustained, because they had no oil in their lamps. So the five unwise virgins had to quickly see if they could buy some oil somewhere. We don’t understand all of the customs of this time. Perhaps it was

understood that to be part of the parade you just had to have your own torch. We don't know.

Anyway we read in vv. 10-12, **“And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. 11 Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’”**

It isn't obvious to us, perhaps, why the five virgins would not be allowed to join the wedding feast later. But again we don't have complete understanding of the customs from 2000 years ago. The fact remains that in the story the five foolish virgins are not allowed to join the party. This somehow indicates that they are not truly friends of the bridegroom. They did not make adequate preparations. So they miss out on the celebration.

IV.

We come then to THE INTERPRETATION: ISRAEL AND THE SECOND COMING. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE INTERPRETATION: ISRAEL...) Jesus does not provide an interpretation for this parable, as He does for some of the other parables about the kingdom of heaven. So we have to use the Biblical data that is available to us.

If my assumption is correct that the Lord was talking about the end of the seven year tribulation and the beginning of the earthly rule of Christ, and if the true church has already been raptured, then the ten virgins seem to represent the nation of Israel. Why does He specifically choose virgins? Certainly a distinguishing feature of virgins is their state of not being married. They are invited to attend the wedding feast. The bride at this feast is the church of Christ. Jews are invited to attend this feast. They have a special place in the plan of God, but it is only Jewish and Gentile Christians who are part of the church.

Why is it that the Jews are the focus of attention and not other people? For one thing, even the excluded virgins are looking forward to the coming of the bridegroom. Just as there are Jews today who are looking forward to the coming of the Messiah but do not believe that He is Jesus Christ, so there may be Jews in that day who are not followers of Jesus but who long for the Messiah. I doubt that the same thing will be said of unbelieving Gentiles during this tribulation.

Then also it may be helpful to keep in mind that the words of Jesus in #24 and #25 have special relevance to Jewish people. Jesus was speaking to Jewish disciples in the city of Jerusalem. At the end of #23 in vv. 37-39 Jesus declares, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”**

The Book of Revelation contains a detailed description of the coming seven year tribulation. The Jews then will be the object of persecution from the Antichrist. All of them may be hoping for rescue by the Messiah. But only some of them will have made adequate preparation for His coming.

Verse 5 in our parable says that the virgins fall asleep while they are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. This suggests that there is a delay in the arrival of the wedding party. In God's program that delay pictures the spiritual, or mystery, form of the kingdom. The Lord Jesus is dealing with His bride, the church. At the Second Coming Christ will return with His church.

Verse 6 says that it is at midnight when there is a shout. There was a Messianic belief among some of the Jews in the first century that the Messiah would come at midnight. This was probably related to the story of the Exodus, when the escape from Egypt began with the killing of all of the firstborn sons at midnight. (Exodus 11:4)

The groom also comes suddenly. The focus is upon Him, not upon the bride. The invitation is to **“come out to meet him.”** The verb here for “meet” was used in Greek of the **“civic welcome of an important visitor or the triumphal entry of a new ruler into the capital city and thus to begin his reign.”** (*Theological Wordbook of the New Testament*)

The oil in the torches corresponds to the necessary preparations. Some have suggested that it specifically symbolizes the Holy Spirit, or perhaps saving faith. The failure of the five foolish virgins to make preparations results in their exclusion from the wedding feast. So these are people, Jews in my thinking, who have not put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior.

There is a doctrine in the Catholic church called “supererogation.” The idea is that when Christians go beyond what is morally required in their Christian service, the merit from these good works goes into the treasury of merit. The church then can supposedly supply them to sinners to relieve them of some of the punishment due for their sins. Jesus' parable would tend to argue against that belief. The wise virgins cannot share their oil with the foolish virgins.

The wedding feast seems to symbolize the one thousand year reign of Christ. In the Old Testament in Isaiah #25 the prophet appeared to describe this coming rule of Jesus upon the earth in terms of a feast. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 25:6) He wrote, **“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples/ a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,/ of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.”**

In the New Testament in the Book of Revelation in #19 the return of Christ is described in terms of these first century marriage customs. The Apostle John hears a voice from the throne of God (REVELATION 19:7) tell him, **“Let us rejoice and exult/ and give him the glory,/ for the marriage of the Lamb has come,/ and his Bride has made herself ready;/ (REVELATION 19:8) it was granted her to clothe herself/ with fine**

**linen, bright and pure”—/ for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints./ (REVELATION 19:9) And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God.’”** The following verses go on to describe the physical return of Christ to earth.

The bride may or may not be mentioned in our passage. But the focus on the bridegroom clearly implies that there is a bride somehow involved in this parable. Several times in the New Testament the church is described as the bride of Christ. A passage in Ephesians #5 gives perhaps the best example of this. The picture that then results is that Christ returns at the end of the age, at the end of the tribulation, with his bride, the church--- comprised of all true followers of Jesus. Those Jews who have a right spiritual relationship with the Messiah will join the church in entering the millennial kingdom. Those who do not enter the kingdom will face the eternal judgment of God.

There are at least a couple of reasons why the bride does not take a prominent role in this parable. First, the parable is given by Jesus before the church has even come into existence. Second, it is primarily the bridegroom--- the Messiah--- for whom Israel will be waiting. It is the bridegroom who will inaugurate the wedding feast and serve as host.

V.

Consider then THE LESSON from the Parable of the Ten Virgins. As Jesus Himself describes it, the message is: WATCH THEREFORE (V. THE LESSON: WATCH THEREFORE) Jesus says in v, 13, **“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”**

If I am right in my analysis of this passage, the primary application is to Jews, especially Jews who will be living just before the second coming of Christ. According to my reading of the Book of Revelation all Jewish people will be subject to persecution in the tribulation preceding the return of Christ. They will all be looking for a deliverer. That deliverer will be Jesus Christ.

But as has often been true down through Biblical history, God’s chosen people think that simply being a descendant of Abraham, a child of promise, guarantees a right relationship with God. It means a place in heaven. That is not the case. At the beginning of John’s gospel (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 1:11) the Apostle declares, **“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”** It is only those who are connected to Him by faith in the Jesus of the cross and the resurrection who will be invited to participate in the celebration that follows His return and the establishment of His earthly kingdom. Those who are not connected to Jesus by faith will be shut out from this earthly kingdom and will face eternal judgment. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We can also make an application to our own situation in that there are many people today who are associated with a church or consider themselves to be Christians. They

have been baptized or have been confirmed. Perhaps they attend church occasionally or even regularly and have a positive view of Jesus. To outward appearances they may appear to be Christians like everyone else in the local church.

But none of this makes a person a genuine Christian. What is necessary is to put our trust in Jesus Christ. We must believe that we are sinners in need of a Savior. We must recognize that Jesus was God who became man and lived a sinless life. We must believe that He died on the cross and rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven. Then we must put our trust in this Jesus, welcoming Him into our lives.

Those of us who have trusted in Jesus and have been born again spiritually can look forward to the rapture of the church, when Jesus will return to earth and snatch living and deceased Christians from off of the earth to meet Him in the air. The prospect of that return should motivate us to live for Him. We have a responsibility to live as though Christ could return at any time.

When I was a child, I looked forward to the Christmas season with great anticipation. I looked forward to the coming of Santa Claus and the delivery of all kinds of exciting toys. This eager expectant attitude that I had toward Christmas motivated me to be especially good, because I didn't want to hurt my chances of missing out on anything--- presents or whatever--- because of bad behavior. I know that it pleased my parents to see the excitement that my brothers and I had as Christmas approached. The Lord God desires us to have a similar eager anticipation about the return of Jesus.

The British Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan said, **“To me the Second Coming is the perpetual light that makes the present bearable. I never lay my head on my pillow without thinking that maybe before the morning breaks, the final morn may have dawned. I never begin my work without thinking that perhaps He may interrupt my work and begin His work.”**

The Lord is pleased when we live in eager anticipation of His return. When He does come back to meet us in the air, will He find that we have made spiritual preparations for that great event? Are we living in anticipation of His return?