

THE END IS IN SIGHT!

I have friend in Britain with whom I exchange emails quite frequently. And in a recent email, he commented on the terrible decline in the spiritual state of affairs there in the United Kingdom, as well as what he could observe across the Atlantic here in the U.S. This is what he said: ***“What a mess both of our countries are in! The few Christians who remain over here are urgently praying for Christ’s return NOW. Most of us are elderly (I’m one of the few exceptions), and when the older generation dies off, the real persecution will start. What is the situation on your side of the Atlantic?”*** I received this email a couple of weeks ago about the same time that I conducted a wedding for a young man who is a friend of mine. And when I attended the rehearsal dinner, I had a chance to speak to the groom’s maternal grandmother and his paternal grandmother—both of whom were well into their 80’s. One is a Presbyterian and the other a Methodist—and with me being an Independent Baptist, well we pretty much had a sizable portion of the Protestant denominations represented in our little conference on the state of affairs of the Church here in America. Both of these older ladies indicated that the churches that they attend are populated almost exclusively by those with an abundance of gray hair or no hair at all. I found their assessments to be in line with what I have observed to be true across the board here in Virginia—and it seems to be the case throughout the rest of this nation as well.

Now all of this concerned these two grandmothers greatly. And without question, my younger Christian friend in Britain was equally disturbed by this woeful state of affairs—one in which the Church in Britain and in the U. S. appear to be in a state of decline with both young people and many older ones as well, refusing to accept the offer of grace from Jesus Christ. Hence, you rarely, if ever, see them in Church. And the problem is even deeper than a shrinking attendance level among Christians at our Sunday services. It seems that there are far more false preachers and teachers today within the Church than has been witnessed in quite some time. Franklin Graham, in the most recent edition of Decision magazine pointed out that many Churches have taken up false doctrines with some even denying the deity of Christ or the historical truth of the Resurrection.

So, will the Church simply fizzle out in a cloud of apathy and false teachings? Are we coming to the end of the Christian Church? Or, is another more profound end coming in sight? As is always the case when it comes to things of faith, God’s Word has the answer. And this answer happens to come out of a parable that Jesus taught. And what was the topic of this particular parable?—Well, what else could it be but a wedding ceremony! But, as we will see, the wedding festivities in this particular parable are very different from those of the wedding that I or my friend or those two grandmothers

participated in. So let's take a look at the wedding that Jesus described in the 25th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel. The parable goes like this: ¹ "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶ At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' ⁷ Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' ⁹ 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' ¹⁰ But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' ¹² But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' ¹³ Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." Matthew 25:1-13 (NIV)

Now why should this parable be encouraging to those in the Church today? Or maybe I should rephrase that question and make it a two-part one: Why should that parable be encouraging to some, and a sign of great alarm for others? Well, let's analyze this parable and try to un-package what Jesus is trying to tell us—all of us, both old folks with gray hair or no hair, as well as those younger ones with blue, pink or purple hair and everybody in between. We really can't understand this parable without knowing how a Jewish wedding would play out during the 1st century A.D. Keep in mind that these ancient wedding proceedings would last for well over the course of an entire week. And as they moved toward the end of the celebration, the groom and his grooms men would wait until late at night and then mosey on over to the house of the bride's father where the groom would take the bride back to the groom's house. Once there, all invited to the wedding would enter into the house where the climax of the celebration would occur—and oh what a party it would be! You need to understand that the reference to the "virgins" points to those unmarried young women who were supposed to be ready at any time to escort the bride in her procession from her father's house to the residence of the groom. And since it would be late at night when all of this would occur, these virgins needed to always be ready with the oil-filled lamps to light the way through the darkness. If you were a faithful bridesmaid, your lamp would be filled with oil. But the foolish, unfaithful bridesmaids couldn't care less about attending to their lamps or having plenty of olive oil—their plan was to just coast along until the time came to shine their lamps and then borrow oil as needed from the faithful virgins.¹ And that's what happened in this parable.

You see, the “Bride” in this parable represents the Church, and the “Groom” is Jesus Himself. The parable compares what happened during those wedding celebrations to the Second Coming of Christ when God’s Heavenly Kingdom will be established here on earth. We are all those “virgins” with the lamps.² The question, of course, is which group of “virgins” will you chose to be in? The lamps filled with oil represents those whose hearts are filled with true faith—i.e., those who have been born-again and truly believe in Jesus as their Savior and live their lives accordingly. But the lamps of the foolish virgins are empty and have no oil at all. The point is this: A Christian with a heart empty of faith is about as useless as a lamp without oil. The parable teaches that those who think that they can wait until the very end to run and get a little oil—i.e. make themselves right with God—well, they will be in for a big surprise because when they try to get into the wedding party, they will find that the doors are shut and they’ll be barred from entering. For them, the gates of Heaven will be forever closed.

This parable is so very appropriate for the times in which we live where so many “*pretend-Christians*” are walking around like foolish bridesmaids without any oil in their lamps whatsoever. God’s Kingdom is coming in the twinkling of an eye.³ And for those who are not ready, it will be too late to run around scrambling for faith. Now, before it’s too late, those holding empty lamps better take heed of this parable because the time is almost here. Now why do I say that? How do we know that the time is almost at hand for Jesus’ return? Well, the answer is pretty simple—because the Bible tells us so. When you have two of the most modern and highly advanced nations in the world today—in the form of the United States and Great Britain—whose histories have been stamped with strong Christian traditions, but in which the millions of people are now steadily turning away from God, well it causes some people to worry that the end of Christianity is at hand. But, if that is a concern to you, as it was to those two grandmothers I spoke with at the rehearsal dinner, then let me tell you this: Stop fretting because there is absolutely nothing to worry about. Why?—because God’s Word is absolutely true, it is never wrong—and the Bible promises us: “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the Word of our God shall stand forever.” Isaiah 40:8 (TLB) You see, it is not the end of Christianity that people need to be concerned about. Rather, what they really need to be concerned about is the ***END OF TIME***, because Jesus is coming again very soon and if he finds their lamps empty then they’ll have a lot to worry about for the rest of eternity. And, believe me there won’t be any storage of oil to fuel the flames that they’ll be living in.

Well then, how close are we to the end-times? Well, no one can know the exact day or hour⁴, but according to the Scripture—the time is real close! My friend in Britain says that those who have remained faithful to God are sometimes discouraged because they see the immorality all around them.

They witness the masses of people who so openly reject God’s Word. And because of these terrible circumstances, my British friend says that there are many Christians there in his country who are praying for Jesus to return right now. And I can tell them that they need not remain discouraged about all of this. In fact, this awful, ungodly state of affairs should actually encourage those who long for Jesus’ Second Coming because the Scriptures are decidedly in their favor. The Bible tells us: “The time is surely coming,” says the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread or water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.” Amos 8:11 (TLB) At this time of world history, we are living in that famine. And we should not be surprised when God’s predictions come true (as they always do). Listen to these words of the Apostle Paul and tell me who can fail to see their applicability to the world in which we live today. Paul predicts: ³ “For there is going to come a time when people won’t listen to the truth but will go around looking for teachers who will tell them just what they want to hear.” ⁴ They won’t listen to what the Bible says but will blithely follow their own misguided ideas.” 2 Timothy 4:3-4 (TLB) Or listen to the words of the Apostle Peter who says: ³ Most importantly, I want to remind you that in the last days scoffers will come, mocking the truth and following their own desires. ⁴ They will say, “What happened to the promise that Jesus is coming again? From before the times of our ancestors, everything has remained the same since the world was first created.” ⁵ They deliberately forget that God made the heavens by the word of his command, and he brought the earth out from the water and surrounded it with water. ⁶ Then he used the water to destroy the ancient world with a mighty flood. ⁷ And by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been stored up for fire. They are being kept for the day of judgment, when ungodly people will be destroyed. 2 Peter 3:3-7 (NLT2) But, you don’t have to be a part of that doomed crowd. You don’t have to suffer a famine of God’s Word.

So what are we to do in this world of ungodly lamp-bearers who deliberately stroll about without any oil? The Bible, as always, gives the answer. We are called to: “Stand steady, and don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Bring others to Christ. Leave nothing undone that you ought to do.” 2 Timothy 4:5 (TLB) That was the problem with those foolish bridesmaids—they felt undone the most important thing that anyone can do: They failed to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior while there was still time available to do so. The bridegroom came and found them searching for something that they should have already gotten—but, they waited too long and it was too late. Now is the time to fill your lamp with oil and be ready to shine for Christ. My best advice is this: **DON’T WAIT ANOTHER MINUTE—GET READY AND STAY READY**—for the end is plainly in sight.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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¹ Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *Matthew-Mark*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), *WORDsearch* CROSS e-book, 576.

² Larry Chouinard, *Matthew*, ed. Jack Cottrell, Ph.D. and Tony Ash, Ph.D., (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1997), *WORDsearch* CROSS e-book, 437.

³ 1 Corinthians 15:52 (TLB) It will all happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For there will be a trumpet blast from the sky, and all the Christians who have died will suddenly become alive, with new bodies that will never, never die; and then we who are still alive shall suddenly have new bodies too.

⁴ Matthew 24:36 (NASB) [Referring to the end of time, Jesus said:]³⁶ “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”