

Don't Run Out! Matthew 25: 1-13

One of the foundations of our faith is our belief that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14) Because Jesus was fully human, He knew that one of the fundamental things we want to know is what the kingdom of heaven is like. The writer of Ecclesiastes puts it this way-God has placed eternity in our hearts. Each of us is born with the desire to know what lies ahead when we leave this world behind. Unless we are caught up in the secular humanism of the world, we want to know what heaven will be like and more importantly how to make certain that we will be there. We have questions. Is heaven really paved with streets of gold? Does it have giant pearls for a gate? Is St. Peter the gatekeeper? Will we be floating on the clouds and singing hymns for eternity? Will there be eating and drinking and other activities that bring us joy and happiness now?

A quick search on Google or Amazon will reveal that there is an abundance of opinions and no shortage of books written about heaven and the end times. The problem with those resources is that they are written by people, fallen people like you and I. Though they are worth considering, there is only one infallible resource we can really trust, and that is the Scriptures. When it comes to heaven and end times prophecy, the last book in the Bible known as the Revelation of Jesus Christ is a treasure of information. A more complete title is the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John. The word revelation means an uncovering, an unveiling or a disclosure of something previously hidden, in this case spiritual truths about eternity. No matter what title we may assign to it, Revelation is not an easy book to interpret and understand because of the rich symbolism and imagery involved. John Wesley once said that "the Revelation was not written without tears and neither without tears will it be understood".

2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us that Revelation, like the other 65 books in our Bibles, is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. However, it may not be the best place to start in our quest for understanding of heaven and eternity. Perhaps the reason it is found at the end of the Bible instead of at the front is that its truths about the kingdom of God are best understood after we have spent much time in the other 64 parts first! A good place to start is in Matthew's Gospel.

The phrase “the kingdom of heaven” is found at least 30 times in the book bearing his name and most often it was Jesus who was saying it. Matthew was writing primarily to a Jewish audience and historians tell us the early Jews expected Jesus as Messiah to destroy the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom. **A kingdom must have a king, and they believed Jesus would be their king.** But the kingdom Jesus consistently spoke of was of a different kind- one not only of this world but of the world to come.

Here are just a few of the things Jesus said to His followers about entering heaven:

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 5:20

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 7:21

Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said “to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven”. 13:11

And then we find these interesting words in 11:12 – “and from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force”.

That verse, understood in context with Matthews entire Gospel and the rest of the Scriptures, should lead us to this conclusion: the heavenly kingdom that Jesus continually referred to is not only a future destination for believers after they die, but one that began in Bethlehem at His birth. Jesus was telling His followers and those that would come after them that **the kingdom of heaven has already begun**. Why is that such an important concept for us to grasp? There are many reasons why, but perhaps the most important reason is this. What we do now will determine what we will do later.

Jesus used parables- a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning- to illustrate that truth. In chapter 13 alone there are 7 of them. The parable of the sower, the mustard seed, the weeds, the yeast, the treasure hidden in a field, the merchant in search of fine pearls and the net thrown into the sea. We don’t have time to look at them this morning, but all of them paint a vivid picture of what heaven *is* like.

But in our text we are looking at this morning, there is a slight but significant change in the words Jesus chose. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven *will be* like ten bridesmaids, a clue that He is teaching more about the future kingdom than the present one. I like to think of this as the story of the wise women. Like the wise men who sought out the toddler Jesus, it is only fair that wise women get their recognition as well. Jesus said heaven will be like 10 bridesmaids, 5 wise and 5 foolish- who took their lamps and prepared to meet the bridegroom. In this story the wise women thought ahead and brought extra oil for their lamps while the foolish women didn't. Today it would be like going on a journey and remembering to bring our cell phone but leaving the charger at home.

In those days when there was wedding it was customary for the groom and his friends to travel to the bride's house to join her and her bridesmaids for a pre-wedding celebration, kind of like a rehearsal dinner today. The bridesmaids eagerly watched for the groom and his party to approach, and when they arrived the bridesmaids would take their lamps or torches and go out singing and dancing to light the way for them. It was done to mark the joyous start of the celebration. But on this occasion the groom was delayed for some reason and all the women fell asleep.

Upon hearing that the groom had arrived they all arose to meet him and half of them discovered that their lamps had run out of fuel. Earlier in the evening they had to know they were running on empty, but they took a chance anyway, hoping the oil would last long enough. Now that the party was about to begin, they tried to borrow some from the others, but they were turned down. Sorry, there is not enough to share. You better go into town and buy some for yourselves.

They did just that, and while they were gone the party started and the door was locked. You might imagine their disappointment when they returned from town, knocked on the door and were turned away. Wesley's comment on the Book of Revelation also applies to Matthew's Gospel, especially to the words of Jesus in verse 12. Truly I tell you, I do not know you. Can you think of anything more painful than hearing Jesus say that to me or you? Unlike some of the other parables on heaven, the core truth of this parable is readily apparent. **The earthly kingdom is preparation for the heavenly kingdom.** Let me say it another way: what we do now will determine what we will hear Him say later.

Unlike the foolish driver of an automobile who likes to gamble and see how far they can drive with their low fuel warning light on, there will be no AAA in heaven to rescue us if we choose to ignore the warning signs. There will be no Good Samaritan to stop and help us if we are too lazy to stop and fill our tank when we have the chance. Is your warning light on? Are you running on empty? All the signs say that the bridegroom is on His way back. Midnight is rapidly approaching. Fill your lamp up now while there is still time. Fill it up with prayer, and Bible study, and worship, and confession, and Holy Communion, and stay in fellowship with other believers. Will our lamps be lit and ready when He gets here, or will we find ourselves locked out of the kingdom? I pray that we will be prepared, for what we do now will determine what we will do later. Amen.