

# The Measure of All Days

## Readings

Amos 5:18-24

Ps 70

1 Thess 4:13-18

Matt 25:1-13

## Opening

Let me take you behind the scenes of my writing process. On a normal week I devote Monday and Tuesday to prayer, reading, making notes, and getting the Scriptures into my mind and soul. I usually begin writing on Wednesday and by Thursday I have a complete draft of my remarks for Sunday.

This week I purposely composed today's remarks on a different timeline. I began writing on Tuesday before any election results came in. I continued writing on Wednesday and Thursday with the election hanging in the balance. Preaching in 2020 is a year like no other.

Not only all of America, but the entire world watched and waited with anticipation this week to learn the outcome of the United States presidential election. November 3rd was a date circled on calendars throughout America and also around the world. As I watched and waited with the rest of the world, as November 3rd turned over to the 4th and 5th, a thought came to me. What if, while the world waited with bated breath for election news, we heard the sound of a shofar blasting across the nations?

Well, for one thing, some might think, “I knew the Lord had had enough!” That is, if we could even gather a thought at the sound of the trumpet, announcing the Day of the Lord and the return of Jesus Christ. Were we preparing; were we listening; were we looking for the Lord’s return on November 3, 4, 5, and 6th? Are we ready now?

Few, if any, would dispute the tremendous importance of this election in American history. Yet, few measured this moment in light of the **end** of history. However you feel about the result of the presidential election, whether you’re greatly pleased or greatly concerned, the Church directs us to Scriptures today, calling us to fix our attention and energy on the Day of the Lord’s Return.

In the past few years, I have noticed the formation of a new idol in our time, both on the right and on the left, which can be named as ‘the right side of history.’ The false god of pride is often near when this phrase is mentioned. Like seemingly everything in our time, ‘the right side of history’ is defined in partisan, ideological convictions, not *theological convictions*. Devotion to ‘the right side of history’ says much more about our desire to be right, our disease of pride, than it speaks of embracing the Christian future. Christians should not obsess over ‘the right side of history’ because today’s virtue can very quickly turn into tomorrow’s foolishness.

This kind of rhetoric was circulating one hundred years ago in a different guise. In 1914, World War I was promoted and defended as ‘the war to end all wars.’ By 1918, the Western world was shattered by new horrors of violence and inhumanity that we could inflict on one another. Our best notions of the ‘right side of history’ melt like wax in the presence of the Holy One. The ‘right side of history’ defined by human ideologies is not our aim; the Alpha and Omega of human history, the end of history, the Day of the Lord, the return of Jesus Christ to his Bride—that alone deserves our total devotion.

Fix your gaze on the Day of the Lord. That is the message of the prophets, psalmists, apostles, and our Lord Jesus. ‘Teach us, O Lord, to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.’ We number our days based on the present and coming Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a great paradox that his return is imminent, yet unknown; that he calls us to be ready for his return at any moment, yet we do not know how long the Lord will tarry. We do not

number our days according to elections. And that does not diminish the importance of national life and government. These are matters of great importance in heaven and on earth. But every nation, every ruler, every man, woman, and child will one day hear the voice of Jesus the Judge. Are we ready?

You might expect a preacher to say in a moment such as this, “If you died tonight, do you know where your soul would go?” I mean something more. Our salvation is a great mystery, much deeper than our first confession of faith. Faith in Christ begins with confessing Him as Lord and Savior in the sacrament of baptism, yet that’s the beginning of our salvation. St Paul said “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” and that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”

We are saved by grace, not by works, lest anyone boast in themselves. Yet not *we work with God’s grace* after our baptism. Working with God’s salvation means keeping watch over our souls, being ready to meet the Lord at any moment.

## Three Figures

The parable we hear from Matthew’s Gospel comes from another world, an entirely different culture and time in history. Yet this story is indispensable to be ready for the end of history. So let’s seek a deeper understanding of the world of this story.

We are familiar with the tradition of attendants at a wedding party, yet we do not recognize the esteem of an unmarried woman in Israel’s culture. A virgin, an unmarried woman, in Israel was not only an attendant at a wedding; she represented the honor and purity of her household. **She was the most politically significant woman in the Kingdom of Israel.**<sup>1</sup>She represented the future of her household. So, a company of unmarried women represents the future of their village.

Yet Jesus brings together a few more figures from Israel’s past in this story. When you read the Book of Proverbs, you find two feminine characters, who personify moral character: one

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<sup>1</sup>*Social World of Ancient Israel*, 179.

is Wisdom and the other Folly (foolishness). Wisdom in Israel has always been simple and clear. Acquiring wisdom comes down to following one of two ways: seeking wisdom or walking in foolishness.

Our Lord Jesus has joined these major figures from Israel's history—the virgin, Lady Wisdom, and Lady Folly into two distinct groups: wise virgins and foolish virgins. When you have that background, we hear this parable differently. The story presents this ultimate question: will this village act wisely or foolishly when history meets its end? Will each person be ready when they breathe their last?

## The Lamp of the Soul

Let's look more closely at this story, printed in your bulletin. It's important to note that all ten attendants carry lamps. All bear the same container, the same possibility, same capacity to be bearers of light.

We learn later in the story that all ten began the night with some measure of oil. Their lamps were burning when they heard the announcement of the bridegroom's arrival. All lamps were burning the midnight oil. It's kind of like another parable of the kingdom when a sower sowed seeds along the ground. Some seeds germinated, but they hadn't faced the thorns and heat yet. Five lamps were going strong at midnight, but the fuel had burned out by the 1 a.m. mark.

There's more than one faithful interpretation to this parable, but I'll offer this one today and hope it does good work for our souls. I see in the figure of the lamps a symbol of the soul. Every human being has the possibility, the capacity to bear the light of God in their souls. And yet every soul has a choice to make. God Himself cannot make that choice for us. Each person must choose the Lord Jesus, not just once, but again and again. That is the message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

"See I have set before you life and good, death and evil," the Lord said to Israel through Moses. "Choose this day whom you will serve," Joshua said to Israel. The Lord spoke to

Israel in crisis through Jeremiah, “Behold I set before you the way of life and the way of death.”

The Lord always warns us and makes clear the peril of turning away from him. He reveals his wisdom so we don’t suffer the pain and heartache that foolishness inevitably brings. We choose his wisdom or we choose our wisdom against his. As C.S. Lewis said, “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.”

The foolish soul looks at the future and says “I’ve got time.” The foolish soul places too much confidence in their future self. If your doctor says, “I believe there’s some plaque building up in your arteries. If you cut out the fried foods and begin exercising more, that can slow the plaque’s hardening process in your arteries. If you keep on this path, the plague will harden your heart and you’ll be at greater risk of a cardiac event.”

What’s true of the physical heart is true of the spiritual heart—foolish habits harden the heart in ways we don’t perceive. This is why it’s so difficult for people to change by their own willpower. Daily choices become ingrained in our souls, building up habits we can’t reverse in an instant. Don’t trust your future self to soften your heart in an instant and surrender to the Lord. The wise person humbles himself. He knows his will is rebellious. He knows it’s a daily battle. The Apostle Paul spoke wisdom when he said, “I die daily.”<sup>2</sup> The wise soul knows his willpower isn’t enough to overcome a lifetime of temptations, the long night of the soul. The wise soul places her trust, her confidence, and boasts, not in herself, but in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Depleting and Renewing Energy for the Soul

If the lamp represents the soul, I see the oil at the beginning of the night representing our willpower. It’s a source of fuel for the soul, but it runs out. Rely on your willpower to live rightly and soon you end up in darkness. This is where the personal aspect of the story comes into view. When the foolish virgins run out of oil, they scramble for more fuel and

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<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 15.31

ask the wise virgins for their supply. The wise virgins didn't trust in their personal stock in the lamps; they purchased reserves ahead of time. That oil ain't cheap; it was costly. It meant sacrifice, but the goal was simple: stay awake through the night until the bridegroom comes.

And here the Lord's wisdom teaches us not only that our own spiritual resources aren't sufficient, but we can't rely on my brother or sister's faith when the Day of the Lord comes. Each person has a lamp, a soul, meant to burn and shine until the Lord comes. But when the Lord comes, you cannot borrow from your wife's faithfulness and perseverance. You cannot latch on to your brother's humility and surrender. You cannot appeal to your mother's fear of the Lord. Sisters and brothers we are saved by grace through faith lest anyone should boast. We also work out this great salvation through fear and trembling. Are you ready to meet the Lord, or have you placed your trust in the repentance of another?

## **The Surest Way to Be Ready**

Working out our salvation with fear and trembling means training our will, but it also means purchasing spiritual fuel so we are ready for the coming of the Lord, regardless how long he may tarry.

There is one form of currency to purchase more spiritual fuel and that currency is repentance. Acts of repentance build up spiritual reserves to keep our lamps burning when our willpower fades and fails us.

Because the biblical way of wisdom is simple and clear, I'll offer you three acts of repentance that give spiritual fuel greater than willpower:

### **1. Guarding your thoughts**

The Enemy of God hardens our hearts through our thoughts. He stokes the embers of enmity, irritability, lust, restlessness, contempt and much more. We do not sin when the Enemy speaks this thought. That is temptation not sin. It is when we nurse these thoughts out of selfish desire that we yield to sin. The wise soul does not trust in her willpower to outsmart the Enemy's thoughts. She keeps watch over her thoughts,

seeks the Lord's refuge when thoughts turn dark, renews her mind with psalms and the words of holy Scripture.

## 2. **Confession**

The wise soul finds spiritual fuel in confession. Because our will is not strong enough, we fail and fall. King David had tremendous failures in his life, yet he kept his lamp burning through confession. He sacrificed and purchased this wisdom through hard-won repentance. He learned life *without* confession is painful:

“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah” (Psalm 32:3–5, ESV)

Sacramental confession to a priest is a vital ministry of our church, crucial as we work out our salvation. Anglicans emphasize this during Lent, but you'll see we're making that available in ordinary time. That's because we don't want the burden of failure, shame, and sin to be depleting energy in your soul. We want confession and forgiveness to *renew* your soul. Confession and forgiveness give the soul spiritual fuel for lifelong faithfulness.

## 3. **Remembering Our Eternal Hope**

If our thoughts are consumed with the affairs of life on earth, we will become cynical and exhausted. The Apostle Paul gave us wise counsel in this instruction “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”<sup>3</sup> Remembrance of heaven, the hope of New Creation, the beauty of eternal life—these too are acts of repentance, a turning away from the world, the flesh, and the Enemy; a turning toward the Kingdom of God. Remembering our eternal hope fuels the soul with light and life until the Lord's return

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<sup>3</sup>Colossians 3.1-2

# The Mystery of Joy and Happiness

I realize I have given you much to ponder. I want to bring these thoughts back into view with our current national events. Measure your response to our current events—whether that be inherently anxious or upset on the one hand; joyful and hopeful on the other—by the *end* of history, the return of our Lord. Let not our ultimate joy or lack thereof be determined by any electoral victory or defeat.

Christians do not find their joy in temporary things. We boast in the cross of Jesus Christ which is the wisdom of God in the foolishness of this age or any age.

And that is why we can be happy. It is nearly scandalous in our age to base your happiness on something else than electoral outcomes. Wise souls, waiting on their Lord, may be happy, even in their repentance.

One of the greatest spiritual treasures we have from the past 200 years is a collection of letters St Theophan of Russia wrote to his spiritual daughter, who sought his guidance when she was suddenly arrested by the superficiality, vanity, and futility of her culture. She glimpsed eternity and sought a spiritual guide. The whole collection of letters are precious, but I offer you St Theophan's guidance on happiness to a troubled soul. He writes:

I wish you always to consider yourself to be happy! Why do I wish this? People have so many different conceptions and tastes concerning this, that you cannot make anything of it. But I would say to you confidentially, that **as long as you are not living in the spirit, do not expect happiness...**The spirit, however, soars beyond the boundaries of all troubles and carries away the person who abides in the spirit, and, by allowing him to taste its blessings, which are ever present, makes him truly and completely happy. <sup>4</sup>

My brothers and sisters, keep watch, seek repentance, fix your heart on heavenly things. These things will not only make you wise, they will make you happy, no matter what history

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<sup>4</sup>St Theophan the Recluse, *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It*, 61-62.



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brings or will bring. The lone events in history that matters for our joy in this life and the next is simply this: Christ has died, Christ is risen. Christ is coming again. Amen.