Wisdom, Folly and Being Prepared

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 8 November 2026

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 • Matthew 25:1-13



1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Matthew 25:1-13: Jesus said, "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 ones, 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. 'Lord, Lord,' they said, 'open the door for us!' 12 But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.'

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

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We all wonder about what will happen when we die. The question has always fascinated humans, and always will, I suspect. One of the clearest explanations in the Bible is in our Thessalonians reading today. Paul is writing to the church in Thessaloniki, which is in Macedonia, in northeastern Greece. This was one of the churches which he helped to set up. He lived there for a time and writes that "we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (1 Thess 2:8). The people there became his friends, and then his brothers and sisters in Christ, and they were very dear to him; so he wants to learn whether they have maintained their faith and the teachings of Christ. The Thessalonians seem to have been good students and faithful servants to the Lord, for he was delighted with them when he was there; and later had further reports from his assistant Timothy that they were indeed keeping their faith strong.

Paul in his letter reinforces the teachings he gave them earlier, and then writes to them about what will happen in the times to come. It is unclear if this is new information, new teaching, for them; but what he writes will certainly have

been something they have been wondering about. He speaks of the coming of the Lord and what will happen to the faithful believers — not just those who are alive now, but those who have died in the faith. He lays it out very clearly:

> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1 Thess 4:16-17)

Can you imagine this? Can you see it in your mind's eye? Jesus coming in the clouds and all the faithful ones, those who have died and those who are still alive, rising up to meet him in the air? That will be the great day, indeed.

Some of us wonder whether, when we die (and assuming we are worthy), we go to heaven immediately, or wait for the Second Coming. This passage suggests that it is the latter, or perhaps our spirits will be with Christ just after our deaths, and be reunited with our new bodies when Jesus returns. Paul writes to inform the Thessalonians "about those who sleep in death" (4:13), and so perhaps they will be unaware of time passing until the day Jesus comes back, when they are gathered up with all the worthy people who are still alive. Paul is not specific about time, but his main purpose is not really to give us concrete details about what will happen when we die. He wants to assure the young church that any of their members who die before Christ comes back will not miss out on ascending to heaven. This is encouraging for us too, for we all have loved ones who have gone before us and we naturally want to know that they will be with God in heaven — whenever that happens.

It is difficult and requires much study to make a full picture of what happens when we die, and even then some questions will remain. Our men's group spent an hour and a half wrestling with it this week. But the one clear thing in all this is that whatever happens, and whenever it happens, God wants us to be ready. That's what our Gospel passage is about — being ready for the day of the Lord. Jesus puts his teaching into the form of a parable about virgins, or young women, who are part of the wedding party, waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. As William Barclay points out (and it's in the reflection this week), the parable is based on actual events in Jesus' time. The young women are to be ready for the bridegroom when he comes, for they all then join with him and the rest of the bridal party at the wedding banquet. They don't know how long it will be until the bridegroom arrives — it could be hours. They bring lamps because they might wait far into the night. (Is the bridegroom at a First Century bachelors' party?) Likewise, we don't know how long it will be before Jesus arrives. People sometimes give forecasts — next month, or next year — but

they come and go. So far! It's a fruitless effort to try to predict it, and Jesus knows that we can't, and so he tells us not to try. Just — be ready.

I think it's significant that the young women are carrying lamps, besides their not knowing how long they'll have to wait. As long as the oil lasts, the light will last; and when the oil runs out in the foolish women's lamps, their light goes out. Jesus is the light, and he gives us light. Remember he said in another parable: "Walk while you have the light" (John 12:35)? He was referring to his time on earth; but we apply this also to our faith in him. Jesus is the light of the world, and his light has not gone out. As long as we continue to believe in and trust Jesus, we will share in his light, and the darkness will not overcome us (John 1:5). The women who brought extra oil continued to walk in the light, and they were admitted to the banquet, the one we all hope and trust we will come to some day, with our Father in heaven. Those who were not prepared will be cut off from God's presence.

So what does it mean to be ready? We cannot buy our way into heaven; God won't count up our good deeds and award us according to the numbers we reach. It will not depend on how much we know or how many church services we've attended. All that we need is one thing: faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. From the Letter to the Romans:

> If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

Faith in your heart and the Gospel in your mouth is what you need to be ready. Keep your faith alive; keep the light in your hearts burning bright, and you will join Jesus in the eternal light of heaven. Amen.