

Ready for Anything

“You better grab a jacket.” “You probably should take a water bottle along with you.” “Do you have a hat?” “Where is your sweatshirt?” “Why are you wearing shorts in November?” “Are you sure you don’t want to take any snacks just in case?” “A book or two would be a smart thing to bring to occupy yourself.” “What’s happening? Why aren’t you ready yet? We’re leaving right now!” My wife and I say those kinds of things to our dear, precious, well-behaved children on a regular basis. Whether they are about to go off to school or on a hike or a long trip in the car, we will remind them about what they should bring, what they should pack, what they should have them, what they should be prepared for. Because you never know! You never know what situation you might encounter or what the weather is going to do or how long it’s going to take to get there. We want them to be ready for anything so that they aren’t caught unprepared.

Jesus tells us a parable today with the same thing in mind: he wants us to be ready for anything so that we aren’t caught unprepared. But he’s not just talking about a daytrip or the weather forecast of course; he’s talking about our eternity.

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' '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.' 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. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

Like many of Jesus’ parables, he summarizes the main point at the very end: “Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” when your Lord will come back on Judgment Day. Make sure you are prepared. Make sure that you are ready. Make sure that you do what those five wise bride’s maids did in the parable: fill the jar.

Those bride’s maids who were smart and who were thinking ahead brought oil in jars along with their lamps so that if their lamps ran out while waiting for the groom to show up, their flames wouldn’t be extinguished. The foolish bride’s maids on the other hand, those who didn’t plan ahead, failed to bring any extra oil in a jar and they were caught unprepared. Many authors see the oil in this parable as faith. But it might even be better to think of that oil as that which feeds the flame of faith in Jesus as our Savior. And so the oil would be God’s Word that we read and that we study and that we worship with, God’s Word that is connected to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, God’s Word that speaks clearly and powerfully about the cross and the tomb and the forgiveness that Jesus has won for us. The oil is that which feeds our faith. And Jesus wants to make sure that we don’t run out! He wants us to have plenty in reserve! He wants us to fill that jar!

Unprepared

But even though Jesus encourages us, I don't fill that jar often enough. I can't tell you how many times I have found myself in the position of the foolish bride's maids. They went out with only their lamps in hand without any oil in reserve. They didn't even bring the jars with them! They thought that what they had in their lamps was enough. They thought it would last. They thought they would be just fine... until they were caught completely off guard. And by the time they realized it, it was too late.

The oil that supplies my faith has run dry from time to time too. There have been situations when the devil has hit me in a soft spot – a gap in the armor. I thought I was strong, I thought I was protected, I thought I had everything covered, but he got me. He conned me. He somehow managed to get me to do that or to say that or to think that when I never imagined it could happen to me. I had been feeling pretty confident about the flame of my faith, but I hadn't been filling up the jar like I should have and I was caught unprepared.

There have been other times when a tragedy of some sort happened and I didn't know how to handle it. I assumed that my knowledge of Scripture and my ability to apply it would serve me well no matter what happened, but then I was faced with a dilemma where I didn't know what to say and I didn't know what to do! I was at a complete loss for words because my mind was in a frozen panic. I was convinced that I would be able to deal with anything that came my way, but it turns out that I hadn't been filling up the jar like I should have and I was caught unprepared yet again.

Sometimes it's not a big thing though. Sometimes it's just a moment, sometimes it's when you're lying in your bed in the middle of the night or when you're having a bad day or when you get a gut check that brings you back to the ugly reality of who you are. And at those times we reach back for some more oil to boost the flame of our faith so that we can get rid of those doubts and those worries and those fears, but the jar isn't even there. We had been coasting for too long, we had been so accustomed to getting by without any major challenges to our faith that we didn't notice how low our supply of oil was getting. And we didn't restock. We didn't replace what was used up. We didn't even bother to check. And so we wavered, we sputtered, our faith flickered in a desperate attempt to remain lit because it didn't have the fuel that it needed at the time it needed it most.

How full is your jar right now? Is it overflowing with oil or is it closer to running on empty? Are you confident that what you have now will be plenty to get you through whatever lies ahead or aren't you quite that confident? There is no doubt that we have been absent-minded, lazy, careless, and negligent with our faith at times in our lives. Our faith has almost been choked out by our own sinfulness on any number of occasions! We know how weak we are! We know how vulnerable! We know how foolish!

The Flame Is Still Lit

We are a lot like those foolish bride's maids in Jesus' parable aren't we? Of course the five wise women weren't without fault either. They fell asleep too! Just like their foolish counterparts, the wise bride's maids didn't stay awake, they didn't keep watch like Jesus says we are supposed to. But when the groom arrived he didn't chastise them for dozing off. He didn't brush them aside in disappointment and keep on going. He gladly brought them along and took them inside the wedding banquet anyway. Why? Because the groom forgives and he saw that just enough oil remained in their jars to keep the flame lit.

We may act like the foolish women on occasion, but we aren't part of that group. As Christians, as those who believe in Jesus as our Savior, we are part of the Wise Five. Faults and all! Mistakes and all! Sin and all! We fall asleep too, don't we! We fail to keep watch as well! We aren't always the people we are supposed to be and we certainly don't fill our jars as often as we need to. But the Groom is forgiving. The Groom is understanding. The Groom is compassionate and sympathetic and unceasingly loving. And he sees that just enough oil remains in our jars to keep the flame of our faith lit.

Even though our lives up to this point have been nothing to brag about, the flame still remains. You believe that the Son of God himself came down into this world and took the form of a human being, don't you? That means the flame is still lit. You believe that Jesus wasn't here for himself, he wasn't here for his own pleasure, he wasn't here for his own gratification, but you believe that he was here for you, don't you? The flame is still lit. You believe that every miracle he performed, every sermon he preached every act of power he displayed was to prove to you who he was and what he had come to do, don't you? The flame is still lit. You believe that his cross wasn't just a torture device, but the reason why you are now forgiven. You believe that his tomb wasn't just a burial chamber, but the reason you will beat death one day too. You believe that his reign on the throne in heaven is not just a power play, but a guarantee that you will reign with him. This is what you believe about Jesus your Savior and so the flame of your faith is still lit. And when he comes back he will see that flame of faith shining brightly as you patiently wait his return.

When the Groom comes back to this earth he is not going to make his decision about you based on how well you have been living or how faithful you have been to his Word or how diligent you have proved to be when it comes to his commands. He is going to see the flame of your faith – the same faith he once gave you as a gift – and he will immediately take you with him and into the wedding banquet of Paradise. No questions asked. No accusatory finger. No demand for an explanation why you were so foolish for so long in so many ways. There will not be any interrogation by your Savior when he comes back for you. He will simply take you in his arms and never let you go. And that flame of faith that got you through this life will carry you into eternity.

You Can Never Have Enough

That flame of our faith is lit for you right now. It might be a little weak at times, it might waver and flicker every so often, but it's real and it's true and it shines. As we wait to see him face to face, let's make sure that we keep filling that jar with oil so that this flame never goes out. Let's keep replenishing our supply so that we are not caught unprepared. That means, of course, that *this* has to keep happening: worshiping together around God's Word. That means that Bible study has to keep happening – and if it isn't already for you, now is the time to start. That means that reading your own Bible at home and devotions with your spouse and conversations with your kids needs to keep happening – and if they aren't yet, what better day to begin than today? Fill up the jar. Fill up the jar. Fill up the jar. Over and over and over again. Because you can never have enough! You don't know what you're going to run into! You don't know what kind of difficulties you'll have to face! You don't know how long it's going to take before the day of your death comes or Jesus himself returns! You are going to need an ample supply of oil so that the flame doesn't fade! You think the devil won't try to blow it out by the wind of his deceptions? You think this world won't try to snuff it out by overloading your life with

everything else? You think your own sinful nature won't try to choke it out by cutting off that oil supply every chance it gets? Protect that flame. Feed that flame. Fill up that jar, you can never have enough.

Over the years I have bugged you, I have urged you, I have encouraged you ad nauseam to fill up that jar with God's Word. And you might have gotten sick of me saying that a long time ago, but I say it so often because God does. He wants to see you in heaven. And I want to see you in heaven too! And so I repeat it and repeat it and repeat it because I realize how often I need to refill my own jar with the oil of God's Word! I'm not speaking from a position of expertise! I'm speaking in a position right next to yours! Together we act like the foolish bride's maids, but by God's grace we actually are the Five Wise Bride's maids waiting patiently for our God. And so we need to help each other and remind each other about that jar of oil. We need to encourage each other to fill it up with the cross. Fill it up with the empty tomb. Fill it up with the prophecies about Jesus and the miracles by Jesus and the truth that is Jesus. Fill up that jar with his overwhelming forgiveness and his indispensable strength and his precious, precious peace. You never know when you're going to need it. You never know where you're going to need it. You never know how long you're going to need it. But you will need it and so will I. Let's fill up that jar with the oil of God's Word so that our flame of faith will always burn strong until our Groom returns to take us home.

Amen.

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.” – 2 Peter 3:18