

FOLLOWING JESUS BY MAKING WISE DECISIONS

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I. Few days are more significant than one's wedding day. In our culture wedding preparations usually follow a familiar pattern. A couple set a date often based on the availability of a reception hall. They ask the pastor to marry them. The pastor meets with them ^{to discuss} the wisdom of their decision to marry. As the wedding nears, the bride's mother busies herself with the minutest details. She wants everything perfect for her daughter's wedding. The father usually wisely stays out of major decision-making. *Finally, the day arrives.* The guests take their place, the mothers are seated, and the pastor, groom and groomsmen assemble in the chancel. The organist plays the processional and the bridesmaids enter. Just before the bride enters, her mother stands, signaling the congregation to rise. The bride's father escorts her to her place beside the groom and the service begins. After a statement on Christian marriage and a prayer the pastor asks the couple to repeat their vows and exchange rings. The pastor then asks God to bless their life together. They kiss and the recessional begins. *But that's not the end.* The guests travel to the reception and await the arrival of the wedding party. Sometimes the guests grow impatient. "I'm getting hungry. Why do they have to take so many pictures? When will they arrive?" Eventually, the DJ announces the arrival of the wedding party ~~and introduces the wedding party~~ and they take their places. Immediately people tap their water glasses and the couple kisses. The minister says grace and everybody eats, drinks, and is happy. Music and dancing follow. After the reception the couple go off on their honeymoon exhausted. *That's the standard way we do weddings.*

How did they do it 2000 years ago?

II. In comparison with modern weddings, *marriage ceremonies in the days of Jesus were far more elaborate and took much longer.* Years before the marriage, two families discuss the possibility of marriage for their children. If the families agree on the marriage ^(downy) present and terms of the marriage contract, and if they think the time is right, the wedding takes place. Before their wedding, the bride and

groom bathe, anoint themselves with oil and perfume, and dress in special clothes. The bride veils, puts on jewelry, and carries flowers. *The public ceremonies begin when the groom and his companions process through the village streets to the bride's home.* When he arrives, he greets the bride's family, and the families give and receive gifts. They enjoy drinks and then they all return to the groom's house in a lively processional dance accompanied by music (and lanterns if night has fallen). *At the groom's house,* before the meal, the groom reads out the marriage contract. Then all the guests bless the couple. The next morning they have a wedding breakfast - a great meal attended by all the friends and relatives. People wear their best clothes. It's an insult to decline a wedding invitation or to dress improperly. At the feast, wine flows freely and songs are sung. *Finally,* the evening concludes with the groom symbolically wrapping his coat around the bride and, escorted by parents and bridal attendants, leads her to a specially prepared marriage chamber in the groom's house. Only then does the bride remove her veil and the marriage is consummated. This, however, wasn't the end of the celebration. Eating, drinking and music continued for another week.

III. Jesus told a story about a wedding³ ^{unusually} delayed because the groom hadn't arrived. I'll retell it in terms of *our* wedding customs. The guests take their place in the sanctuary. The wedding party is dressed and ready to go - but the groom hasn't arrived. The bride worries. Has he chickened out? Maybe he couldn't get his car started, or was involved in a car accident, or got lost, or ran out of gas - *but why hasn't he called?* Minutes pass into hours. The guests grow restive. Some of the bridesmaids say, "I'm not staying in this gown. Who knows when he's arriving?" So they take off their gowns, put on old clothes, and hang up their gowns in a closet. They shut the door and lock it. The other bridesmaids wisely keep their gowns on despite their discomfort. Finally, at midnight the groom shows up with a good ironclad excuse. ^{One that even satisfies the brides' wishes.} The wise bridesmaids hastily line up for the processional. The foolish bridesmaids ask, "Does anybody have the key to the closet?" They can't find the key! They're locked out! There's no way they can share the gowns of the wise bridesmaids so they miss out on the joy of the wedding. ^{The Bride, no man is furious with them, "I don't know you people"} They aren't bad or sinful - they simply made a foolish choice.

① One question that disturbed me.

Look again at the parable Jesus told. The parable raises a lot of unanswered questions. Why was the bridegroom late? Why does Jesus tell us to stay awake when both wise and foolish bridesmaids fell asleep? And why don't the wise bridesmaids share their oil? There are many unanswered questions. As I thought — but one thing seems clear: some things can't be borrowed. We can't borrow time from someone at the midnight hour when we've wasted our years? Students can't borrow knowledge from friends at the midnight hour when they've put off studying? If we live a foolish lifestyle that destroys our health - at the midnight hour we can't borrow health from someone who exercises and eats wisely. We can't wait until the midnight hour and then think we can borrow musical talent from a friend who has spent years practicing. At our midnight hour, we can't borrow faith from someone who has spent years developing faith through pray, worship, and service. So the wise bridesmaids weren't selfish. It's possible to miss wonderful opportunities when we make foolish choices.

② Another thing that bothers me: The finality of the closed door

In most of the issues of life, opportunities come again and again. And God, in love and grace, makes repeated and insistent calls for us to prepare ourselves for wonderful things. But it's also true that a last time comes. All our opportunities have the possibility of finality. Fundamentalist preachers, perhaps, were right when they warned that our response might be 'too late'. How many of us regret that we expressed our love to someone until it was too late? How many, even now, are alienated from neighbors from whom we've put off seeking reconciliation? God wants the very best for us. He's given us natural resources that can light the way for all of us, if we don't squander them. The door of opportunity sometimes shuts and we're locked out.

③ Why was the bridegroom late?
Waiting is one of the most difficult things we humans have to endure and we often make foolish

choices because we're so impatient. Waiting to get married. Waiting to retire. Waiting to heal.

We don't always know when we have to wait so long but
Waiting to graduate. But while we wait, let's make ourselves useful. Let's prepare ourselves. When opportunity comes I want to be prepared for the good things God wants for us.

All of us are ultimately waiting for the bridegroom. Where is he? Will he ever arrive? Has he stood us up? When I hear about another suicide bomber in Israel I know the bridegroom has not yet arrived. When I hear of earthquakes swallowing up villages with their children as in Italy I wish the

bridegroom would arrive. When you're going through a divorce or battling a disease – we pray for the bridegroom to arrive before it's too late for us. We can't force the bridegroom's arrival. We can only wait in readiness.

④ There are rewards for waiting, hoping, expecting the bridegroom to come.

The novelist Reynolds Price, in his book *A Whole New Life*, tells of a stunning vision he was given at midnight during his illness with cancer. When he'd been diagnosed with cancer he prayed for healing – but the bridegroom didn't show up. He went through chemotherapy and radiation treatment – but the bridegroom didn't show up. The cancer paralyzed him from his waist down and still the bridegroom didn't show up. But he kept waiting. He kept hoping. And one midnight the bridegroom arrived and Reynolds Price was ready and waiting. Christ came and said, "Reynolds, you're forgiven." Reynolds responded, "Forgiven? I don't want forgiveness – I want healing." And Jesus said, "That too, Reynolds."

Reynolds Price has received thousands of letters from people telling him how the bridegroom showed up for them in their midnight hour. When he was being interviewed about the book, the most frequently asked question was, "Did it really happen? Did Jesus really come to you?" Price responded, "Look, I'm from North Carolina. Maybe that explains it. When you grow up in that part of the world, you just naturally get the impression that Jesus cares about you and that one-day -- or night -- he's going to show up. So, when he finally showed up in the vision the vision happened, I just thought to myself, 'Well, here he is. I was ready for him, being from North Carolina.' you don't have to be from N.C. - from Oxford or anywhere ... wait, here, make wise choices so you'll be ready when the good thing comes, well be ready. Jesus ends today's parable with the admonition to watch. Be ready for the bridegroom when he

comes. Make wise decisions while you wait. ~~Watch!~~ Be ready!

Lord, help us to make wise decisions while waiting for the bridegroom. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.