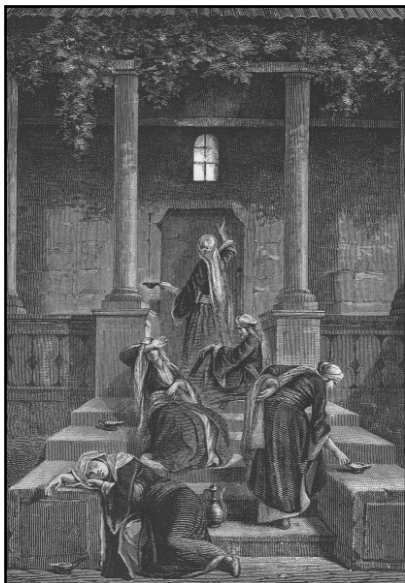


**The Thief in the Night,
the Faithful and Unfaithful Stewards, the Wise and Foolish Maidens**

Mt 24:42-25:13



ANCIENT WEDDING BACKGROUND

- *Ancient middle-eastern weddings* were joyful and long. There was no honeymoon. Instead, after the families had concluded the financial and civil arrangements, the groom would come to the bride's house to take her away. This could well occur be delayed until the middle of the night. Young female friends of the bride would escort the two with torches [the "lamps" in the parable] to his house. Once they arrived and went in, the door was shut, and there was no possibility of late access. One or more weeks of festivities followed, including feasting and music.
- "To participate in their friend's wedding was a great honor; as virgins, these young women were in a sense practicing for their own impending weddings around the ages of 12-16. But to have spoiled the wedding for her by failing to do their appropriate part was a great insult to their friend and to the groom and guests." "The expression 'I do not know you' was sometimes

used when one wished to treat others as strangers and keep from approaching. This was an offense they would never be allowed to forget." (Craig Keener, *A Commentary of the Gospel of Matthew*).

QUESTIONS

The Thief in the Night

1. Read 24:42-44. "Keep watch" can mean many things, from "be awake & alert" to "look for" to "anticipate immediately." In what sense is it meant in 24:42?
2. How does Paul interpret and apply the Thief in the Night and the Olivet apocalypse in 1 Thess 5:1-11?
3. Read Peter's discussion of the Thief in the Night in 2 Peter 3:3-16. Why does God delay his return? What attitude does he advocate towards Jesus' return, and why? How can we affect the time of his coming?
4. Paul mentioned that "whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him" (1 Thess 5:10). We may, like those for the past two millennia, die before the *parousia*. How does this affect your reading of another passage where Jesus uses this metaphor, the letter to the angel of the church in Sardis, Rev 3:1-6?

The Faithful and Unfaithful Stewards

5. Read 24:45-41. Generally, who is Jesus warning? (Remember Jesus' scorching words to the Pharisees in the previous chapter, Mt 23.)
6. Of this parable, Capon writes

...In spite of tens of thousands of sermons that have expounded [this parable] as proclaiming reward for the good and punishment for the bad, it never once identifies the rewarded

servant as good, only as faithful and wise. It cannot be said too often that in the New Testament, the opposite of sin is not virtue, it is faith. Not only does Paul say as much in Rom 14:23: 'All that is not of faith is sin'; his endless insistence that salvation is not by the works of the law but by grace through faith (not to mention Jesus' constant habit of making prodigals, unjust stewards, tax collectors, and sinners into heroes) hears witness to the fact that our morals have nothing to do with either our salvation or our damnation. [*The Parables of Judgment*, 149-150.]

The Jerome commentary, on the other hand, says "The servant errs through lack of charity and responsibility. He does not imitate God's forbearance." Discuss. Cf. Mt 7:24-26.

The Wise and Foolish Maidens

7. Read 25:1-13. Did the foolish maidens do wrong by sleeping?
8. How does this parable describe the response Jesus received during his first *parousia*?
9. Of the finality of the judgment at the end of the parable, and the judgment by Jesus it represents, Michael Green writes,

There are some times when it is too late. 'Too late' is a terrible verdict. The job has been lost; it is too late to say you will try harder. The divorce has come through; it is too late now to make amends. The examination starts today; it is too late now to prepare for it. And those terrible words are never more awesome than when applied to the *parousia*. Make sure you don't miss the party! That is what Jesus means. Readiness is the key. [*The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*.]

C. S. Lewis describes it this way:

We can understand hell in its act of privation. All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond hope, that you have attained it, or else, that it was within your reach and you have lost it forever. [*The Problem of Pain* (New York, Macmillan Press) 1962, p. 148.]

How does this finality fit with your understanding of a loving God? The theme of finality runs through the Olivet apocalypse as well as these parables. How can and should it play a role in your spirituality—your relationship with God and the church?

10. Jesus warns elsewhere about judging by appearances. He says that he will deny association even with some who associated with him (Lk 13:23), prophesied in his name, drove out demons and performed miracles (Mt 7:22). Of this, Michael Green writes,

The girls all looked the same, but they were not. Only half of them were ready for the feast and went in to enjoy the festivities with the bride and groom. And then the door was shut! What a warning! It tells us that it is all too possible to be often in church and in Christian company and yet be a stranger to the Holy Spirit. It is possible to have a lamp that looks good, but has no oil in it. It is possible that one day Jesus may have to say, 'I never knew you'. All that is a great surprise to churchgoers, in Matthew's day and ours. [Ibid.]

By contrast, Jesus calls wise those who put his words into practice and do the will of his Father (Mt 7:21, 24). How might those in our midst *appear* ready and not be? Is this our concern more than it was for the wise maidens?