

Imagine walking into a packed theater at a moment when the show is most dramatic and exciting. Everyone sits on the edge of their seat, ears attuned to every uttered word lest they miss something of great importance. The intensity of the moment is palpable. But alas, you, my friend, missed the first act and so you have no clue as to why this moment, this dialogue on stage is of such import and intensity. Yet you dare not interrupt anyone to receive contextual clues or for a review of the first act lest you or they miss the climax of the performance.

Luckily for us we are not walking into a live performance of Matthew 25. We have the benefit of taking the necessary time to review the first act (Matthew 24) so that the immensely relevant parables and exhortations of Matthew 25 pack their full intensity. If we stepped into Matthew 25 without the requisite preparation that context brings by reviewing Matthew 24 we certainly would be left to feel the palpable intensity and urgency of the Lord's message without fully understanding the importance or reasons why.

Matthew 25 is a continuation of Christ's preaching of the coming Kingdom of Heaven found in Matthew 24 (or found in the Pearl of Great Price under *Joseph Smith—Matthew*). Let us briefly review this "first act." That way the Matthew 25 parables of the coming kingdom and the exhortations to be prepared for that great day will resound with greater intensity and importance within our souls. ((Using parables as a method for teaching the truth, Matthew 25 covers several key themes of the Gospel: The Kingdom of God, Seeking the Kingdom of God, Preparing for the Kingdom, and Inheriting the Kingdom.))

Joseph Smith Matthew 24—The Day of the Lord

First, a personal note. The topic of the Day of the Lord (found throughout Matthew 24 & 25) can easily bleed into doomsday discussions and feelings of hopelessness or despair. This, perhaps, is particularly acute today with the swirling confusion of world events. Yet, I personally do not believe that the Lord spoke these words so that we whip ourselves up into the frenzy of doomsday despair. Instead, let us remember that "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have *joy*" (2 Nephi 2:25, emphasis added). Though pain, trial, tribulation, yes even mighty destructions will take place, the Lord does not speak of these things to our despair, unless we need to repent (see Moroni 10:22), but rather for our sakes, that we might understand and be saved.

Being a people that believe in continuing revelation, we can use the Joseph Smith translation (version) of Matthew 24 found in the Pearl of Great Price, pages 43-46 of the 1981 English edition. The chapter begins with an introductory statement, which shapes the discussion throughout, where Christ reveals to his disciples that he will again come upon the earth. Newly enlightened, the disciples inquire:

Tell us when shall these things be which thou has said concerning the destruction of the temple, and the Jews; and what is the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world, or the destruction of the wicked, which is the end of the world? (JS—Matthew 24:5)

In response, Christ describes how wickedness will abound among the Jews and other nations, how they, the disciples, will be killed, how false prophets and false Christs will arise, and then how the Jewish temple and nation will be destroyed. Christ then shifts the focus from the destruction and calamities of ancient days to the perplexities and commotion of the Latter-days. He reveals the signs of his coming and describes some of the tribulations and destructions that will be known throughout the earth. He cautions his disciples to be wise and to not be deceived. Several parables underscore this caution; those who know the signs of his coming, and, more importantly, live righteously will not be deceived and thus will have no need of fear or concern. He then exhorts his disciples, again by means of a parable, to not despair and think that he has delayed his coming, for he will come, just as surely as the sun rises to greet the new day.

It is here that the intense expectation of the coming of the Lord reaches its height. We are about to hear a full description of that day, but the chapter ends. Many leave during this intermission and fail to return for the second act. However, for us it merely requires that we turn to Matthew 25 and hear the rest of the Lord's oration on this subject.

Matthew 25—The Coming of the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 25 is the second (and often neglected) half of Christ's two-part sermon regarding the destruction of the Jews and his eventual triumphal return in the last days. This chapter is a series of three well-known parables: The parable of Ten Virgins, the Parable of the Talents, and the Parable of the Goats and the Sheep. But since Matthew 25 is seldom read in the context of Matthew 24, most of us miss the real significance and power of these unique parables. Each of these parables serves as a representation of the types of individuals that will be found upon the earth when the Lord returns. On the one hand will be those prepared to receive the invitation into the Kingdom of Heaven, while on the other hand will be those who knew not the Lord and hence were not known by him.

Now that we have been empowered to understand these parables in their proper context, let us search them diligently to find the doctrines and truths to inform our spiritual preparation for the coming Kingdom heralded by the returning Lord himself.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)

This parable greets us with a scene and a problem: 10 virgins waiting for the bridegroom; five were truly prepared for the coming celebrant, but five foolish were not. It is obvious to our gospel-trained eyes that the bridegroom is none other than Jesus Christ. He brings with him the wedding party; his entourage is the Kingdom of Heaven. As the kingdom advances to the wedding feast, which is none other than the feast of the sacramental table, guests continue to join the thronging multitude. There is great joy and anticipation of the mighty celebration and outpouring of rejoicing that will take place at the wedding feast.

Several Old Testament writers have taken up the idea of the coming bridegroom. A close study of those relevant passages reveals a number of salient themes: The bridegroom brings with him the promise of safety, security, renewal, increase, and all of the blessings of happiness, restoration and enduring life. Let us now see these powerful themes in a few Old Testament passages so that our knowledge of the coming bridegroom will be increased. One passage comes from the poetic book of Psalms, two passages were penned by visionary Isaiah, and the final passage was uttered by Jeremiah who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem.

Psalm 19

1 The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.

2 Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

3 *There is* no speech nor language, *where* their voice is not heard.

4 Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun,

5 Which *is* as a **bridegroom** coming out of his chamber, *and* rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.

6 His going forth *is* from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.

7 The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple.

8 The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD *is* pure, enlightening the eyes.

9 The fear of the LORD *is* clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD *are* true *and* righteous altogether.

10 More to be desired *are they* than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

Isaiah 61

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *them that are* bound;

2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

3 To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

4 ¶ And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations.

5 And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien *shall be* your plowmen and your vinedressers.

6 But ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD: *men* shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.

7 ¶ For your shame *ye shall have* double; and *for* confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them.

8 For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

9 And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they *are* the seed *which* the LORD hath blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a **bridegroom** decketh *himself* with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth *herself* with her jewels.

11 For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.

Isaiah 62

1 For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp *that* burneth.

2 And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name.

3 Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God.

4 Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land

shall be married.

5 ¶ For *as* a young man marrieth a virgin, *so* shall thy sons marry thee: and *as* the **bridegroom** rejoiceth over the bride, *so* shall thy God rejoice over thee.

6 I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, *which* shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence,

7 And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

8 The LORD hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength, Surely I will no more give thy corn *to be* meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou hast laboured:

9 But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the LORD; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness.

10 ¶ Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people.

11 Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward *is* with him, and his work before him.

12 And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.

Jeremiah 33

9 ¶ And it shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and an honour before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear all the good that I do unto them: and they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and for all the prosperity that I procure unto it.

10 Thus saith the LORD; Again there shall be heard in this place, which ye say *shall be* desolate without man and without beast, *even* in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, that are desolate, without man, and without inhabitant, and without beast,

11 The voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the **bridegroom**, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the LORD of hosts: for the LORD *is* good; for his mercy *endureth* for ever: *and* of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the LORD. For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first, saith the LORD.

12 Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Again in this place, which is desolate without man and without beast, and in all the cities thereof, shall be an habitation of shepherds causing *their* flocks to lie down.

13 In the cities of the mountains, in the cities of the vale, and in the cities of the south, and in the land of Benjamin, and in the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, shall the flocks pass again under the hands of him that telleth *them*, saith the LORD.

14 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

These passages speak profoundly to our expectant hearts of peace, restoration, and divine fulfillment of promises both ancient and modern. It is the coming Bridegroom who is the Guarantor of such blessings.

Alas, the divine guarantee of such remarkable blessings is not sufficient to overpower another divine gift—agency, or the power to act. Those who do not heed the call to prepare for the Bridegroom cannot receive the promised blessings. Such individuals have chosen to put themselves far away from the path of the wedding party, the coming Kingdom of Heaven. Though *all* ten virgins did go “forth to meet the bridegroom” (in other words, though many, if not all of us have every intention of meeting the Lord), only those who have thoroughly prepared their vessels to take up their light and let it shine once the Bridegroom arrives will be allowed to join him on the path that leads to the sacramental altar of the wedding feast.

Let us put this parable back into the context of Matthew 24-25 and see a few other key ideas. We remember that Christ had giving stern warnings and admonitions to his disciples about being prepared for the Day of the Lord. One of the themes that Christ stressed in Matthew 24 is that the disciples should “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come” (v. 42). Christ also strongly cautioned against the attitude, “My lord delayeth his coming” (Matthew 24:48), which leads to insobriety, oppression of one’s neighbor and ultimately to untrimmed lamps entirely lacking of sustaining oil. This, I submit, was the problem of the five foolish virgins. Though together with the five wise virgins they “went forth to meet the bridegroom” (Matthew 25:1), fully expecting to meet with the Lord while their lamps were yet burning, the Lord came in an hour that they did not expect, indeed, from their perspective he tarried. And thus they were unprepared. They felt that their meager supply for the initial journey to meet him would be sufficient to take them to him. Instead, as is the reality of our spiritual journey, the Lord required that they were prepared with continual light, which comes through the purifying sacrifice of continual righteous living, not only for the first stages of the journey, but also the last. Thus through this parable the Lord again urged his disciples to not be deceived but rather expectantly prepared to receive him when he comes in great glory.

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)

Alerting his disciples to the perils of spiritual unpreparedness Christ then issued another parable in the context of being ready for the Day of the Lord. In this parable, which is compared to the Kingdom of Heaven, a man (likely to be identified as the Lord) travels to a far country. Before doing so, he gathers his servants and gives each of them a talent. ((Now in the English language we understand the word “talent” to refer those natural gifts and attributes that make up our character and abilities. However, the word “talent” in this sense refers to a sum of money, in fact a rather large sum of money, perhaps equaling ten or hundreds of thousands of dollars in today’s terms.)) After receiving their allotted talents based on their ability (some five, some three and some one), each was left to his own devices to do what he would with the talents entrusted to him. What is important to remember is that the talents were given to them by the Lord. The talents were indeed a divine gift.

Those servants entrusted with several talents exerted themselves to increase what they had. Through their efforts each of these servants doubled their talents and when their master returned he rewarded them plentifully, even beyond comprehension. On the other hand, the one servant who had little did little. He hid away his talent and thus had nothing to offer his returning master. The little that he did have was returned to the rightful owner, the Lord who was the giver of the gift. The Lord then delivered this talent to one who had displayed responsibility and effort with other God-given gifts.

Taking this story out of context we may judge the Lord to be impartial, unfair and even oppressive. That is not at all what is going on with this carefully crafted parable suited for a particular context. We remember that the Lord is seeking to prepare his disciples (and us, by extension) for his glorious return. Through these parables he is delivering to them the secrets of preparedness: Stay alert, watch and pray always, be not deceived, exert effort to do good and righteousness with whatever gifts the Lord has given unto you, do not idle away your short and transitory time on earth for the day of reckoning will take place, if you have not improved your time while on earth your just reward will be as the slothful servant who hid away his life in fear or in idleness. Several scriptures clearly express the main intent of this parable.

30 And now, my brethren, I would that, after ye have received so many witnesses, seeing that the holy scriptures testify of these things, ye come forth and bring fruit unto repentance.

31 Yea, I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your hearts, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you.

32 For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors.

33 And now, as I said unto you before, as ye have had so many witnesses, therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed.

34 Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world.

35 For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and he doth seal you his; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked.

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18 And all this for the benefit of the church of the living God, that every man may improve upon his talent, that every man may gain other talents, yea, even an hundred fold, to be cast into the Lord's storehouse, to become the common property of the whole church—

19 Every man seeking the interest of his neighbor, and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God.

Each of us can reassess our lives, we can inventory the gifts and talents entrusted unto us and review the ways that we have sought to increase our talents that they might glorify the Lord and light our lamps.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)

Christ comes to the close of his sermon regarding the coming Kingdom of Heaven with one final parable. It is as though the three parables of this chapter are representative of stages of testing that we must go through to be admitted into the presence of the Lord. ((Of course, we must not forget that each of these three parables can also be rightly understood to refer to the same thing, namely being prepared through faith, righteousness and good works to receive the Bridegroom and admittance into his coming Kingdom)) First is the test of being prepared to receive the Bridegroom with lamps trimmed and ready when he comes. Next, if we are found worthy to partake of the wedding feast, we must then stand before him and give an accounting of all our talents and how we improved our time while on the mortal journey. Then finally there will be a great sorting out of the sheep and the goats. The sheep and the goats? I thought that the Kingdom of God was for His children and not for barnyard animals! Yes, the Lord uses the image of sheep and goats in this last parable to offer some of the most seemingly simple, but ultimately profound remarks concerning the path of righteousness.

In this parable, the Lord states in no uncertain terms that there will be a great division at the last day when all people and nations stand before his throne. Some will be separated onto his left and labeled goats and some will be separated onto his right and called his sheep. It is his sheep who have hearkened unto his voice throughout their lives that will hear the most glorious and desired words: Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom

prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34).

What makes the difference between the sheep and the goats? What are the criteria for such a resounding and final judgment for eternity? In the simplicity that marks the power of God's divine message of salvation the Lord reveals the sure path to eternal life:

Matthew 25:35-36, 40

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me.

Let us trim our lamps brightly by placing our feet firmly on the path of unbridled charity as we increase our talents in the service of others and our God. May we then be found prepared, awake and ready to receive our awaited Bridegroom.