

### **What Are You Waiting For?**

There is a very famous play by Samuel Beckett that some of you may have been forced to read in High School or College. It is not a very enjoyable read, but it is called, *Waiting for Godot*. In the play there are these two tramps, two hobos, that are sitting around stage rambling on and on as they wait for this Godot fellow to show up. Day after day they carry on this dialogue, they are waiting for Godot, but in the meantime they are just sort of rambling about meaningless stuff with each other. As the audience listens to these two hobos, they quickly get the idea that this is not going to be classic Shakespeare with great lines like: "To be or not to be? That is the question." Or, "Romeo, Romeo, where for art thou, Romeo?" These two tramps carry on this kind of mindless banter. One of them will talk about the bunion on the bottom of his foot and how it has been hurting so much. The other is talking about what he ate for lunch the day before, or the weather, or how the street hasn't been swept recently. They are not really communicating with each other, they are just talking. They are just rambling and chattering.

Beckett's point is that real life and real communication—real relationship can exist only if you are waiting for a real Godot and he really comes. See, what he trying to say is that life is a waiting game and the quality of your life depends on what you are waiting for. If you are not waiting for anything, or you are waiting for something that never happens, then you just sort of sink into a meaningless, purposeless existence. I mean, if there is nothing really to wait for, nothing to look forward to, your life has hit a dead-end street, then its pretty bleak.

Now, I was thinking about this the other day how waiting for something really good gives the zip, the fizz, injects the joy into life. You know, many of us look back at our childhood with fondness and recall childhood being a whole lot better in retrospect than it really was when we were going through it. The reality is that when you are going through childhood, very often it is quite painful. I am not just talking about the major kinds of abuses and wounding and hurts that some of us suffered growing up in abusive families. There are all the little slights and hurts that make a child's life so difficult. See, the reality is that many of us were not chosen for the baseball team, or weren't chosen first. I mean, where are all the people who never got chosen. Statistically, there should be about 10% of the men here who never got chosen for the baseball or football team or were always chosen last and were the one out of the nine kids who everyone said: Awww, does he have to be on our team, oh no, can't we play with 8 players? Or, where is the girl who never dated? There was at least a quarter of our high school class who never went out on a date at all. Well, 25% of us here should be like that. And yet, those memories are often pushed to the recesses of our minds as we think back on childhood as being an idyllic time. What made it so wonderful?

I think that a large part of what makes childhood so special and so wonderful is that children are constantly looking forward to something and waiting for

something in a way that adults stop doing. I mean, I can remember *really* being excited about summer vacation coming. Every year had at least one good thing to look forward to—the summer! Summer was coming. And, I would be out of school and I used to go to camp. So, I had summer to look forward to. But, now, summer just means that basically I have to go to work in the heat and have the kids home all day to entertain on top of working in the heat. Remembering that I don't get a chance to go out in the day and swim.

Children look forward to being old enough to drive. Children look forward to and eagerly anticipate the time when they will move out of the house. Children look forward to getting their own car, their own place, or going off to college. All of those future dreams and hopes fuel the joy of childhood. It is precisely the death of these dreams that I think create what we now call "middle age crisis."

What I see in people who suffer a middle age crisis (and many of you are in that pool of potential crisis people), what I see there looming is the death of all of your dreams. When it really comes down to it, there are very few things that a person who is in the midst of middle age crisis is really looking forward to. Oh, they could come up with something—Oh well, I am looking forward to grandchildren one day—but, by and large all of the things that they had projected into the future either have happened, and turned out to not be so wonderful or satisfying, but they've happened and are now old hat, or they haven't happened and they are not likely to happen. A man is forty years old and either he has hit his career goals, by and large, and now he basically lives that out for the next thirty years and then dies, or he hasn't hit his career goals and at 40 is not likely to hit his career goals or economic goals and will live the next thirty years and die. The reason I state it in such bleak terms is that is the making of the kind of thinking that gives rise to a middle age crisis. And so, what middle age people tend to do, or what anybody at any age tends to do when they have nothing to look forward to is either despair and sink into a depression *or escape* and get into some cheap escape which is the essence of middle age crisis.

Well, I've got no dreams to look forward to, so I will buy a little red sports car. Or, take off with this 22 year old woman, or get myself a nice toupee and unbutton my shirt to my belly-button and let my chest hair stick out. I'll comb it every once in awhile. That is what middle age people do—they escape to prevent the reality of a death of dreams from really bumming them out.

You see this process, by the way, of the absence of dreams and what people do, profoundly at work in America's inner-cities. When you are living in a closed box and there is really very little perceived future for you; you see no economic opportunities and very few job opportunities; and very little, if anything, good on the horizon, what do you do? You do what everybody does. You try to escape. You smoke dope, or get involved with a girlfriend. Life becomes totally expendable, very cheap, not worth almost anything, without dreams for the future.

I started last week a series that I am going to continue for the next five or six weeks called *Recovering Our Christian Hope*, as I really believe that the post-modern culture that we live in [by the way, by post-modern I mean we have gone beyond the modern era now in the 90's. The modern era was an optimistic era

believing in the achievability of many things by human kind. If we just set our minds to things and we have enough scientists to work and enough experts, we could solve all problems. The post-modern mind is of a more negative and pessimistic cast. It has come to the conviction that we cannot solve all of our problems and that things are sort of breaking down.]—this post-modern mind has ripped people off of an enduring hope of something wonderful that lies in store for you. Something really good that you can anticipate with even greater joy and enthusiasm than a child would summer vacation or a bride would her wedding day. That is the blessed hope of the Lord's return.

The quality of our lives depends in very large degrees on whether we are waiting for nothing, just hooked like gerbils running a tread mill for the next 30 or 40 or 50 years, or whether we are eagerly anticipating the most wonderful of events—what the Bible calls the blessed hope of the second coming. I have called today's talk, *What Are You Waiting For?* Let's pray.

What I would like to do is to begin with some broad strokes in answering the question: What is the future going to look like for this world—in big terms, according to the Bible? As you read the Bible, what does the Bible say, what is the Christian view of where the whole world is going in the future—especially in the last days? You should know that according to the Bible, the last days, that phrase, means the whole period from the time of Jesus' first coming to the time that Christ returns. It is the expectation of Christians that Christ is going to return. But the last days period is a description for that whole period from the first to the second coming. So, when I am using the phrase *last days*, I am using it in a narrower sense to mean the very last days—the end of the end, you know, the final two minutes of play in an NCAA Basketball game, the time when it's really worth turning it, where all the action is.

What does the Bible teach about what the future holds for the world? Will we end up with a cold, lifeless planet because people finally have blown themselves up? Human life will have been eradicated, so we will start all over with the, you know, with the slime molds and the little one cell amoebae and start the whole thing over again. Or, is global warming going to create, you know, Vineyard Aruba right here in Columbus? It's so nice and warm all year long that we will all be out sunning ourselves. Will the cast and crew of Gilligan's Island get together with the cast and crew of Cheers for one final gigantic reunion show? Maybe Ginger will run off with Norm. I mean, these are questions that Inquiring minds want to know. What is in our future?

As I begin to describe what the Bible teaches about the future this week and over the next several weeks, I have to be honest with you and tell you that I am only giving you *my* view about what the Bible teaches about the future. There are a lot of very sincere Christians who look at the same Bible that I look at and come up with some different conclusions about the future. So what I am giving you are my thoughts and painting of the scenario. I really want you to know that I respect those who differ and this particular question of what the events are going to be like leading up to the return of Christ are very much a subject of debate within Christian orthodoxy. We are not talking about the fundamentals of the

faith here and what is the bare minimum that a person needs to believe and trust in order to have eternal life. These are issues that are very much subject to debate. But the fact that there is a lot of controversy shouldn't cause us to shut our Bibles and say: Ah, forget it. People disagree here. This issue of Christ's return is probably not worth thinking about too much. I think that's what happened to a lot of Christians in the last 20 years—especially those who made commitments out of the Jesus movement. We got so tired of all the hype and fighting that we said: Ah, there are a lot more important things to talk about. and in our over-reaction, we lost our view and our grip on our future hope.

Part of the reason why there is a lot of swirl and question regarding the future of this planet, as one reads the Bible, is because many of the passages are very difficult to interpret. A lot of the passages about the future are filled with symbolism and are written in such a style that make them quite difficult to interpret with certainty. Beyond that, not only are the passages difficult, but each of us comes to the Bible wearing a certain set of lens—an interpretive grid—that we read passages through. We often don't know that we are wearing certain presuppositional lens, philosophic lens, that cause us to come up with a certain interpretation of the Bible, but, in fact, those things are there. To use an example, if we simply do not believe that the supernatural exists, then every time you come across a passage in the Bible that speaks of some supposedly supernatural occurrence—like the parting of the Red Sea, you will interpret that passage away and say: Oh well, the people back then believed in those kinds of things—that God would simply step in and part a river or sea. Of course we know now that that kind of thing could never occur. That was just primitive superstition and what probably happened was that an earthquake occurred and the water parted for a period of time and those primitive superstitious people back then believed that it was God. But that couldn't really happen.

Well, people take similar kinds of presuppositions and philosophic approaches to the whole question to what the Bible teaches about the future. And that causes us to differ. So, as I teach on this subject, I want you to hear a general tone of respect and a general concern for the unity of the body and a respect for other Bible readers, even though I take a certain perspective.

What I would like to do is look at Matthew, chapter 24 and give you my perspective on Matthew, chapter 24. And then we are going to look at Matthew 25, a little later, for one of the major texts of this sermon. In Matthew, chapter 24, if you have a Bible like mine, it's titled *Signs of the End of the Age*. Now, that wasn't in the original text, but the authors obviously have a certain view of Matthew 24. What Jesus is talking about in Matthew 24 in what is known as *The Olivet Discourse* is what is going to happen at the end of the age. What is going to happen in the future and where this whole world is going.

The passage reads this way: "Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 'Do you see all of these things,' he asked, 'I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another. Everyone will be thrown down.' As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. 'Tell us,' they said, 'when

will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

The most impressive feature of Judaism at the time that Jesus was walking around here on earth was the temple in Jerusalem. There was nothing more central to the practice of Judaism than the temple. That was the very center of Jewish life. Not only was it the most important by way of its religious significance, but the temple and its surrounding buildings were the most impressive structures, architecturally, in the whole Near East at the time. Herod had built glorious buildings for the temple and his palace in Jerusalem. So, when the disciples looked at the temple, they didn't just see some buildings in front of them, they saw the very center of their religious life and they also saw the most glorious and impressive buildings from an architectural and ascetic viewpoint. Jesus said: Do you see this, these buildings in front you, this temple, with all of its significance? Not a stone is going to be left on top of each other. It is all going to be wiped out. Then the disciples' minds, because this is such a radical statement—I mean it goes beyond the "Do you see the Capitol Building in Washington and the White House? This is all going to be leveled." This goes way beyond that. It is like, you know, everything your culture pins its hope on is going to be completely dismantled. Their reaction was "When is this going to happen, Jesus, and what is the sign of your coming?" See, they naturally assumed that if the center of their cultural life and religious life was going to be wiped out, that meant the end of time.

And so, Jesus begins to answer their question, which is really two questions—When is the temple going to be destroyed? The second question is: When is your second coming? In their minds it was one event. It was all wrapped together. But, as we have learned from history, it has become two events.

So, Jesus answers their questions. In the rest of Matthew 24, regarding the false Christ arising, he speaks of people coming alone in the future who will deceive (in verse 4: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name claiming I am the Christ and will deceive many."). He speaks of wars, and rumors of wars in verse 6; famines and earthquakes in various places in verse 7; persecution and hatred against Christians in verse 9 and 10; the gospel of the kingdom being preached to all nations in verse 14; and then, the abomination that causes desolation in verse 15 and forward.

The rest of this passage has been subjected to a variety of interpretations. What is Jesus trying to say? Well, the two basic schools of interpretation are these: Number one—Some people say that Jesus never dealt with the first of their questions. When will this happen—that is, when will the temple be destroyed? Instead, he almost either didn't hear that or chose not to respond to that question. Instead, he immediately launched into a long description of the end times and the whole period of time that has become known as "the great tribulation"—the very last days before Christ returns. And, what Jesus is saying to his disciples is: I am going to answer the second question. What the sign of my coming will be. It is going to be signs of terrible tribulations and terrible distress. Verse 21 says: "For then there will be great distress unequalled from the beginning of the world until now and never to be equaled again. If those days

hadn't been cut short, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. Forget about what is going to happen to this temple in front of you. That is not really important. I am just going to talk about the end of time and a great tribulation that is going to occur." So, one major view of Matthew 24 is that entirely and exclusively concerned future events that did not occur in the lifetime of the disciples or in the next generation or in the generations up until now, but only apply to the great tribulation period that is coming sometime before Jesus returns to earth.

A second totally different view was that Jesus was answering the first question—when will this be regarding the destruction of the temple and what life was going to be like when that beautiful building in front of disciples was destroyed. And all of his remarks regard something that did, in fact, happen in history. The 30 or 40 years after Jesus said these words to the disciples, the temple in front of them was wiped out by a Roman invasion under the General named Titus. And, not a stone of the temple was left on top of each other. They actually took chains and leveled the whole thing. For the Jewish people, those were days of distress never to be equaled in intensity again. While the Holocaust killed more Jewish people, the persecution of the Jews, for that size group living at one time, was never exceeded, even by the Holocaust. Judaism in Palestine was utterly wiped out. People were reduced to cannibalism. Virtually every man, woman and child was killed in Jerusalem.

And so, what is being taught here is something that occurred in history and not some tribulation period reserved until the end of time. What is my view?

I believe that Matthew 24 is both a description of what has happened in history, both in 70 A.D. and in the succeeding years throughout history and what will happen in even sharper focus at the end of time. The Bible has a way of using one prophecy to project forward two events. Some people have titled that *Prophetic Foreshortening*. The idea is this: the prophet looking ahead describes a certain event. For example, a terrible war that is going to take place in the near future. That war does, in fact, take place in the near future. Has the prophecy been entirely fulfilled? Well, yes, by that near event it has been fulfilled, but it has not been entirely fulfilled because the war becomes a type of a larger future war that is still waiting for the end of time. You see this prophetic foreshortening in Isaiah, chapter 7 when Isaiah prophesied that a virgin will conceive and bare a son and she will call his name Emmanuel. That means God With Us. Within Isaiah's lifetime there was a child born and that child was named and it was a sign, just as was prophesied, but we know that this prophecy in chapter 7 had a greater fulfillment, this prophecy of a virgin conceiving and bearing a son had a greater fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ.

So, my view of Matthew 24 is very simple. I believe that many of the events described in Matthew 24 answered the first question regarding the historic destruction of the temple, but the destruction of the temple and the destruction of Judea was a type or a shadow of events that would occur throughout history culminating in a very great tribulation period in the day immediately preceding the return of Jesus. What we are seeing is a double exposed picture. There is one image in the front, if you look carefully behind, you will see another image.

The question that arises: If there are terrible things in the future, if you say what does the future hold, Rich, according to the Bible? And I respond: Well, in part, the Bible says that there is a great tribulation that this world will go through. There will be increasing wars and earthquakes and false religions. And many, many people, like David Koresh, will come on the scene and claim to be the Christ. And many more people will be deceived. And even worse will occur than what occurred with David Koresh down in Waco, Texas. Will we, who have trusted in Jesus, have to live through those days? Will Christians be here on earth during the period of time that is described in the Bible as the great tribulation period?

Just like with respects to Matthew 24, there are two very different views. Some people have taught that Christians, right before this terrible last day scenario, will be snatched away from the earth in an event known as a *Secret Rapture*. Jesus Christ will secretly come back and take Christians out from the midst of this world. Then the world will suffer these great tribulations described in Matthew 24 and in Revelation 8-18 and then Christ will come back at the end of that period in a glorious way to judge the world and to begin the new age.

Are we going to see that—a secret snatching away of Christians? Cars careening all over I-71 as their drivers are suddenly snatched out of the car and the car goes bounding down the highway without its Christian driver behind it. Airplanes smashing into airport runways without their Christian pilots. Ships all over the world, you know, smashing into one another as their Christian captains are snatched away. And, trains going off course and school buses filled with non-Christian kids rushing down hillsides. Is that what is going to happen? You will drive up to the drive-through window at McDonald's and they will say: "May we take your order?" You will ask for something and drive to the window and no one will be there to hand you your Happy Meal. Where is Ronald McDonald? Oh, he's been raptured. Or, even worse, you come home at night to your family who were supposed to be asleep in bed and you go upstairs and no one is home. You suddenly realize that that old song was true: You've been left behind.

I want you to know that this is the most popular view out in the marketplace today in the United States on what is going to occur in the future. With due respect to those who hold that view and many of you here have absolutely been taught that view in the past from your church background or from a Hal Lindsay book—*The Late Great Planet Earth* or from tapes or from radio preachers, I don't buy it. I do not believe that the Bible teaches that Christians are going to be snatched away before the end.

Now why, even though I respect completely the opinions of others, why don't I think that we are going to be secretly taken away in a secret coming of Jesus, but instead, if we are here for the very last days, have to go through the many events described in Matthew 24? Why do I think that Christians are not going to escape the great tribulation period that will fall on the world?

Well, number one, I believe this because I find no scripture, no verse anywhere in the New Testament that teaches in an explicit clear way a secret coming of Jesus back to this world. Remember, the view that we are going to be snatched away and cars are going to be careening all over the road, you know, with their bumpers saying: "In case of a rapture, remember this car is going to go

out of control." That view requires Jesus to *secretly* come back for the church and to pull the church out of the tribulation. Now the New Testament describes the second coming of Jesus in a lot of ways, but it never describes it as a secret coming. In fact, we read verses like this: Matthew 24:30 - "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky and all the nations on the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds—from one end of the heavens to the other." Or verse 27: "For as *lightening* comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will the be the coming of the Son of Man." His coming will be with power and great glory. His coming will be *like lightening*. Look at 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, in verse 16: "For the Lord, himself, will come down from heaven with a loud command with a voice of the archangel and with a trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first." The Lord will come back with a trumpet blast and a cry of command that will be loud enough to raise even the dead.

Look at 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1, verse 6: "God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels." Going on to verse 9: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who believe." His coming is going to be in blazing fire. It is going to be a marvelous event accompanied by the holy angels.

When you look at the verses describing the second coming of the Lord, they all describe a glorious event. The Bible words used (and there are three different terms for the second coming in Greek)—*parousia*, *apocolypto*, *epiphania*—all convey the notion of a glorious manifestation, a wonderful outshining. Something that is bright and evident, like lightening—like the sun at noon-day, only 1000x brighter, that will flash from the east to the west. It is this glorious event, the epiphany of Christ, the revelation of Christ, the *parousia*, the coming of Christ that is the blessed hope, what the church is looking forward to in all of the Bible passages—not a secret rapture. Over and over it is the blessed hope of the glorious manifestation of Christ that has held forth as what pulls us along toward the end. It is the blessed hope that Christ will return as the conquering king and fully save us that is held out throughout the Bible as the reason you don't have to get even now with all those who have hurt you. Christ will even the scales. The glorious Christ will straighten everything out. You don't have to avenge yourself for every hurt. You can let it go knowing Christ will take care of it. Our hope is that we will be snatched out of our cars, or pulled through the top of the dryer at the beauty parlor, or pulled out of the shower with just enough time to throw on a robe as go through the bathroom ceiling. The blessed hope described in the New Testament is the rushing of believers into the arms of Jesus Christ at his one and only glorious coming back to earth.

Now I realize there are a lot of texts that we need to explore, but, I believe each one of them can be interpreted very well and more naturally as what is



going to happen when Jesus gloriously returns at the end. He will separate one man from another and two women will work in a field, and at the end, he will snatch one out and one will be left. That will all happen when Christ returns in blazing glory—not secretly, but as the Rescuer, the Prince on a white horse.

History will end with the Prince coming on a white horse snatching his bride and riding off into the sunset. The Cinderella ending to the story is not too far from Revelation. Beyond the individual interpretation of scripture, we need to deal with a philosophical underpinning of the view that God is going to take believers out before these terrible events occur in the world. And, the basic philosophical argument that underlies this view is the notion that God, in his love, because he is so kind, would never let his people go through tribulation described in Matthew 24 and the book of Revelation—surely God would snatch us away from all of that. That was the apostle Peter's initial response to Jesus' announcement that Jesus was going to suffer and die. No way, Jesus, God would never allow that to happen. A lot of Christians in America will be in shock, totally surprised like Peter was when things take a turn for the worse. We don't understand from a New Testament perspective that God frequently does not shield his beloved people from great persecution and great tribulation. Jesus said on the very night that he was arrested—one of the last things he said to his disciples was: "I have told you these things [in John 16:33] so that in me, you may have peace." In this world you will have trouble and tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world. In me you will find peace. Don't look for it in the world, in your job, in the economy, in news coming out of Washington D.C.—folks, it ain't there and it ain't never gonna be there.

In Revelation 1:9 the apostle John writes: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering in the kingdom and the patient endurance that are ours in Jesus." We don't usually put verses like that on our refrigerator. Suffering in the kingdom and patient endurance and, Paul adds in Philippians 1:29: "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but to suffer for his sake." Here is the great gift God has given you, beloved church, not only to believe in Jesus, but also to suffer for his sake. The truth is that throughout history, God has not seen fit to deliver his beloved children, and he loves us more intensely than we love ourselves—it is not a want of love—but he has not seen fit to deliver his beloved children from great suffering and tribulation and persecution.

You tell the church that has suffered under Mao Tse Tung in China that God, in his love, will deliver them from tribulation and they will shake their heads and say: You don't understand. You tell the church that suffered under the Nazis or under Stalin or under Idi Amim or the suffering church today in Muslim countries—you tell them that God, in his love, will not allow his people to undergo great tribulation or persecution and they will say: Hold on here, don't you understand that being a Christian means walking in the steps of Jesus. Part of that is undergoing and sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. I tell you that to be honest with you that the bottom line notion that God will deliver us from tribulation strikes me as more of an American and western viewpoint than it does a New Testament viewpoint or even a historical viewpoint of the church.

We, Americans, are shocked whenever we get anti-Christian backlash or anti-Christian rhetoric on television or people march in the streets with anti-Christian signs. We say: How can this be? This is so unfair. We get bitter. We practice the politics of resentment. Christians are being ripped off by such and such a group. People don't react well to Christian morality. Brothers and Sisters, this is the lot—this is what has been granted to us along with the joys of knowing Jesus and the promise that he will be with us. It has been granted us that we suffer for his sake. And, unless the church is prepared for this, we will not be able to patiently endure. We will wash out believing that something has gone wrong here. Maybe we need to change our message. Maybe we need a better P.R. firm. Maybe we need to advertise better. This is not the way it is supposed to be. Well, it is not the way it is supposed to be according to the script written by modern America. It is not the way it is supposed to be according to the script that teaches that life should be fair and that life should only give us goodies and never anything bad—or, that Christians and Christian viewpoints should be immensely popular.

You know that same Peter who was so shocked by Jesus' prediction of suffering in Matthew 16 gave a very different perspective on the issue of suffering in his first letter. In chapter 4 he wrote: "Listen, don't be surprised by the painful trial you are going through as if something strange were happening to you. But, rejoice." I really like that. Don't be caught off guard by the fact that you are going through some present difficulty, as if it were something strange—something that ought not happen. But, rejoice. It occurs to me that Peter said these words as an older man. When he was young, he thought life should be fair and that life ought to dish out goodies. He was so afraid of the prospect of suffering. Young people are always so afraid as they look to the future as if something terrible is going to happen. But, the apostle Peter said: Hey, now that I am an older man having gone through the wars, I can tell you that suffering is neither so strange or so terrible. I can look you in the eye and say: Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to get on the field and live out this thing that we call the Christian life—being faithful to God. Don't be afraid of that. Instead, rejoice.

See, I think people who have gone through it understand some things. Having gone through it, they say: You know, I didn't think I could survive. I was always so afraid that if this happened or that happened, if I lost this person, or that job, or that approval, or this amount of money—if this particular terrible thing that I was always so afraid of actually happened, I would die, I would collapse. But, the truth is now that I didn't die and I didn't collapse and I am still here. And I have discovered that a lot of what I was building my life on, in fact, was not permanent and was not Christ. There are some beautiful discoveries that people make through suffering that actually turn out to be causes for rejoicing. Suffering, no one enjoys. But, some of the discoveries that people make through tribulation and through trial are causes for rejoicing. We discover that we can endure. We didn't think we had the stuff. But we can endure. And, having endured, we rejoice at what God has done in our lives. And, we also discover that Christ, alone, is enough. We say that Christ is enough, but we have 87 different ways to protect ourselves with insurance policies and safety nets and

security blankets to protect us from having to have Christ alone. And when some of those things get stripped away, we come in contact with the real Christ. And, it is like all of the false props get pulled away and there is this solid knowing that, yes, Christianity is indeed true. I feared before I suffered that it wasn't true, that it was just something that I laid hold of or a psychological crutch. But now, I know that it is true. And, there is nothing more wonderful than discovering that you can endure and make it and that Christ, alone, is enough. Because nothing that comes along can shake you then. Peter said: Don't be surprised if tribulation comes your way, but rejoice, because you will survive and Christ is enough for you. And, brothers and sisters, what I am saying today is that we are going to get to discover that perhaps.

Now, I would only be giving you half of the New Testament message if I urged you not to be surprised by coming trials or coming difficulties. Because in answering the question, *What Are You Waiting For?*, the New Testament doesn't simply say: Well, wait for trial and don't be surprised by it. The New Testament also tells Christians: Don't be surprised by the joy that is coming your way. Frankly, I think, to use C.S. Lewis' term: Many many people are surprised by joy. Often when the return of the Lord and his sudden coming is presented, it is presented with a note of fear that he is going to catch you doing something bad and that your preparation needs to be a preparation of the avoidance of judgment. How very few of us are prepared at a moment's notice for joy. We prepare for the worse. But, how rare it is to have a person prepared for joy. I don't have the time to go through the passage regarding the parable of ten virgins in Matthew 25. I will tell you the story real quick.

There was a wedding feast; there were ten virgins who were bridesmaids. Jesus said in Matthew 25: "Five of them were foolish; five of them were wise." The Bridegroom was delayed and the five wise bridesmaids had oil for their lamps. The five foolish bridesmaids did not. They all went to sleep and suddenly in the middle of the night, the cry rang out: The Bridegroom is here. The five wise bridesmaids were prepared for the Bridegroom. Lit their lamps and went out to meet the Bridegroom. They were ready for the wedding. The five foolish bridesmaids didn't have any oil for their lamps. They tried to borrow some oil and couldn't. They weren't prepared for the wedding. What is the point of the parable?

The point of the parable is—don't be surprised by God's surprising interventions in your life. Don't be surprised by joy.

So often, we, as Christians, are caught off guard by God's surprising interventions. We talk with someone who begins to show an interest in spiritual things, but because we are spiritually unprepared—we have not been in a close relationship with God—we miss the divine opportunity that God has for us right there to share the abundance of life that we have found in Christ. Day after day God nudges us. We miss his nudges. We miss his love. We miss him drawing near to us. God has so many things for you, brothers and sisters. He is constantly stepping into your life and surprising you. But many of you are unprepared for his surprising joy. And, you know, here is the funny thing about joyful interventions and the joyful return of Christ. Joy is a lot like crisis. You

can't borrow preparedness. Like the foolish virgins, if you are not ready at the moment's notice, when the cry rings out, good or bad, at that moment you can not borrow preparedness.

When there is a crisis in your marriage, if you haven't worked on the stuff, the communication, the love, the trust, the forgiveness for years, when the crisis comes, it is almost too late, then, to try to build what should have been there for many years. And when the joy suddenly breaks in, when there is an incredible opportunity suddenly, because of your child's openness—suddenly, they ask a question; they seek you out for advice; they have an open heart; or when your parent suddenly opens up to you; or a friend; or a girlfriend; or a boyfriend; suddenly, someone opens up to you and seeks your counsel out—if you are too busy at that moment; too caught up in other things; totally unprepared because you haven't been walking in intimacy with Jesus, you miss the joy. And the whole point of the parable of the ten virgins is designed to address the balance in Christian minds regarding what the future holds and what you are waiting for. The parable of the ten virgins says: Listen, don't just get ready for coming crisis. Get ready for the joy. Be prepared for the joy. Don't miss the joy—the joyful interventions, the divine opportunities to share the abundant life that you have.

You know, in many ways, I hope that I am wrong regarding Christians having to go through painful trial and even the great tribulation. I hope I am wrong, but I fear that I am right. If I am wrong, well, some of us will have a good laugh in heaven as we tell stories about fly-balls that were caught by gloves without players attached to them. We will have a good laugh about some of my silly teachings, if I am wrong.

But, if I am right, and if I have properly presented the Bible message to you regarding the future, then I have prepared you for what is ahead. Both in terms of coming crisis, that you are not shocked or surprised; but, also in terms of coming joy. So you don't miss the joy that is yours if you are attached to Christ. What are you waiting for? The future, as described in the Bible, is anything but dull. Let's pray.