

Be Prepared
By Jason Huff
Psalm 40:1-8, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Luke 12:35-48

Our Gospel reading today comes from Luke 12:35-48. Listen now to God's Word. "[Then Jesus said,] "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." Peter asked, "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?" The Lord answered, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.'"

I rarely get to start a sermon by telling you about a great new show I've seen on TV. But this week, I watched a new show called **FlashForward**. As the first episode starts, everyone in the world blacks out at precisely the same time, and each person flashes forward to a moment six months in the future. Some people's circumstances have gotten better, others worse. Many don't have a vision at all. The show revolves around figuring out why this happened and if the future everyone has seen can be changed...and if those who didn't have a flash forward are fated to die in the next six months. It's a fascinating "what-if" kind of show.

But it got me to thinking...if we knew for certain that we were going to live another six months or six years or sixty years, would it change the way we live? What if we knew for certain we *didn't* have that much time? A couple of weeks ago in our Bible study, we had a discussion about how people put off following Christ until "later." When is later? And when is later too late? Who knows if we have another day or hour to commit our lives to Christ? That's the issue that Christ discusses in today's passage. Jesus paints several different pictures for us about His return, all of which point to one thing: be prepared.

The first story Jesus tells this morning has a radical, surprise ending that's powerful for believers. Jesus says we should be dressed for service with our lamps ready, waiting for the master of the house to return from a wedding feast. In Jesus' day, everyone wore long tunics, and the image in the Greek is of a servant who's taken a belt and tied up his robes so he's prepared for work. Now Jesus' listeners knew that a wedding party could go on for a week or more; nobody knew exactly when it would be over. So the servants keep watch round the clock waiting for their master to come home. Jesus says that when the master returns home and finds his servants waiting for him, they are going to be blessed. In fact, the master will actually switch roles and become the servant and serve them! This would have sent gasps around the crowd. A master serving his servants was unthinkable...it went against every cultural norm. But that's the comparison that Jesus makes.

And so the first story illustrates the reward for the believer staying vigilant. It's hard work...these servants are up past three in the morning waiting. They're tired, they've worked hard all day, but still they want to see their master come home safely, and so they persevere. In the same way, there's a lot to do to remain strong in our Christian walk...staying in prayer, reading the Bible, serving, sharing our faith with others, living out the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It's hard to work all day and then come to Bible study or get up early on Saturday to help with Angel Food. Sometimes it feels like we're on that third shift and it's all we can do to stay strong in faith.

But God promises that those who persevere will be rewarded. James 1:12 says, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:25, "All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize." We will receive eternal life through our perseverance and share in God's own glory. God has already served us through the gift of Jesus Christ, His only Son, and those who stay awake, who stay vigilant in their faith, will be blessed in ways we can barely know or understand.

At the same time, Jesus' second scenario emphasizes the need to stay ready and active serving the Lord. There's a burglar ready to rob a house. When is the thief going to strike? Nobody knows. The only way to keep a thief from stealing anything is to always be on guard. Jesus says that his return will be just like a thief in the night. The passage we heard from 1 Thessalonians this morning says the exact same thing. If Jesus' first story emphasizes the blessings believers will receive for staying vigilant, the second emphasizes that the suddenness of His return gives us more reason to be ready.

Then the apostle Peter asks a question...who do these stories apply to? Jesus then addresses those like Peter who will lead God's people. First, Jesus makes it clear that we who lead the church are to be servant leaders. He compares us to the manager who himself serves the other servants by making sure they're fed. When the master comes home and finds the manager working diligently, he's going to be blessed even more – he's going to be put in charge of everything! But there's a warning too...if that manager abuses the servants underneath him and uses his power for his own gain while the master is away, there's going to be judgment. That person will be thrown out of the household entirely with no hope of return.

In this church, a lot of us are leaders. Many of us have been elders or deacons or led Sunday school. We've been called to serve. In a small church, more of us have to take on leadership roles. God grows us through them. But it also means that we have more accountability to God for what we do. The blessings are greater, but so are the dangers of leading people astray. Those who are entrusted with a lot will have to show for it. Just as we heard last week, God gives us physical wealth so we can bless others by sharing it. God also gives us spiritual wealth not just for our own gain but so others might be blessed by it and come to know Christ as savior and lord. We have to commit to using our gifts the right way.

The truth is, too many of us know of religious leaders who have abused those who trusted them. It comes from not staying alert. We're dangerous when we get lukewarm because we start to think that because we're believers, somehow the rules don't apply to us, that God will forgive us when we break them. Jesus did come to forgive us our sins, there's no doubt, and He forgives those who truly turn from their sin in faith. But Jesus says that judgment is going to be harsh on people who know what God wants from them but won't do it. The judgment will be less harsh on those who act sinfully but out of true ignorance. The Bible is clear: in Matthew 7, Jesus teaches that not everyone who calls Him Lord will be saved, but only those who do the will of the Father, which proves their faith is genuine. Some people who do miracles in Jesus' name will be denied access to the Kingdom because they are still wicked in their hearts and never turned from their sin. Sometimes we sin and we genuinely hate the sin we do...we fail and we know it, and we confess it to God and turn away from it, and Christ forgives us and moves us forward with Him. But Jesus is warning us to stay awake, be ready, be prepared.

What can we do to make sure we are staying prepared? There are a few questions I think we can ask ourselves to see. First, *am I taking my faith seriously?* Second, *am I taking my mortality seriously?* And third, *am I seriously persevering as I wait on Christ's return?*

First, *am I taking my faith seriously?* This passage makes me ask that question of myself, and I have to ask it of everyone here because you are a part of my responsibility as a manager over God's people. This question is the lynchpin to whether or not we are prepared for Christ's return. We can answer it by answering a bunch of little questions. Am I really all that interested in participating in Christian activities? Are the things that Christians are called to do like tithing and serving others and becoming like Christ blessings to me or burdens? Do I even work to do them? Do I care whether or not I sin? Does it matter to me if other people around the world know about Christ or not? Those are questions that we need to use to examine our faith.

Now if we find that we do care and that we are prepared, great! But if we're not, the solution is not necessarily getting more involved. You can come to every Bible study and join the praise team and give 10% to the church and serve the poor and do it through clenched teeth. Participating may open you up to God, but it's no guarantee, and works aren't the way to God. The only real solution is to pray. Pray that God might give you His heart. Pray that God would make those things that seem like burdens in the Christian life into blessings. Pray that if sin isn't serious to you, God would show how serious it is to Him and how it grieves Him. Pray that Christ's death and resurrection might be real to you, real enough to overcome any disbelief that's getting in the way of following Him. God has to make the changes in you so that you truly believe in Christ, so ask Him that those changes might take place.

Second question: *am I taking my mortality seriously?* We all know we're going to die, but we act like we're going to live forever. It's not that we drive too fast or live recklessly. It's that a lot of us go through most of our days never really thinking about God. We assume we'll have time for God tomorrow. And yet none of us knows that we have a tomorrow.

Some folks aren't worried about the return of Christ because they really aren't sure how they feel about it...they wonder whether after 2000 years, we didn't somehow misunderstand something and that Jesus isn't literally going to come back and make an appearance on the earth. I believe He will. But whether or not you believe in a literal return of Christ is actually unimportant. Whether He will return literally to bring justice and judgment and righteousness at the end of time or He is just returning figuratively to take us at death doesn't matter – either way, you don't know the date and time of it. There's no way to know. And when it's over, it's over. There's no reincarnation, no replay, no second chance. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:2, "I tell you, *now* is the time of God's favor, *now* is the day of salvation."

Finally, *am I seriously persevering as I wait on Christ's return?* The key to this whole passage is perseverance. Paul used the metaphor of the Christian life being a marathon where the participants have strict training so that they can finish the race and win the prize at the end. But we've got to complete our race. Do you know what place a person who runs 26 miles in a marathon gets? They get a DNF – "did not finish" – the same as a person who quits a mile in. They've got to run that last two tenths of a mile to complete the race. And the same goes for us.

So check yourself to see if you're persevering. As the old proverb asks, if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you beyond any doubt? Would the jury say that the evidence all points to the past or to the present and the future? Have you said, "Now it's time for somebody else to do the job," or are you still saying, "Let me serve the Lord while I still can?" Don't get caught in the trap of thinking we can coast into God's Kingdom. We need to be active in our faith for as long as our lives carry us.

It's hard to be brutally honest with ourselves about our faith. We want to believe, but our doubts and fears and worries and sins get in the way. That's where the church comes in. We aren't just a bunch of individuals traveling in the same direction. The Bible calls the church a body. We're interconnected in Christ. When one of us stumbles, we all stumble; when one of us excels, we all excel. Jesus has given us each other to be partners in training. I don't know about you, but I'm not motivated enough to work out alone. There're three other guys I play racquetball with three times a week. We spur each other to play a better game and to be there for every match. The same is true of the church; we're in this together. So know when you examine your faith, you aren't alone. If you aren't where you need to be spiritually, if you haven't taken that first step of faith or your faith isn't what you thought it was, talk to me sometime or email me, or talk to someone in the church you trust. Let's work together to persevere. Christ didn't tell these stories to make us doubt our salvation but to encourage us to be prepared for His return.

This week, take the time, do a personal inventory, and start getting prepared so that when Christ comes for us, no matter when it is, He will be able to say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Let's be ready together for our King to come home, knowing that when He arrives, we will receive God's richest blessings and inherit eternal life.