

FINAL THINGS

My mother told me that when she was a little girl, her grandfather told the family he had a secret to tell but he wasn't going to reveal it until he was on his deathbed. Unfortunately, he died in his sleep, so no one ever found out what it was. They knew he had changed his name when he immigrated to America and surmised that it had something to do with who he was before leaving England. Was he nobility, heir to land and a castle, or a despicable criminal? We'll never know because he never had the chance to say what apparently was very important to him.

Matthew 24 and 25 record Jesus' final teaching to his disciples before His arrest and crucifixion. He has already told them several times that He will be betrayed and killed, so I think we can assume that He would be emphasizing the things He considered most important and wanted them to remember.

In response to the disciples' questions, He explains what things will be like when the temple is destroyed and when His return is imminent. He tells them to watch and interpret the signs of the times and warns them about being ready at all times because no one knows the day of His return.

He then tells three parables about what the kingdom of God will be like when he returns. The Parable of the Ten Virgins speaks of living our lives in such a way that we are prepared when the time comes. The Parable of the Talents emphasizes the importance of using what God has given us, for the increase of His kingdom and glory. And the story of the Sheep and the Goats describes for us the basis on which we will be judged and the sentences that will be carried out.

As I've read through this final teaching of Jesus, I am reminded of Moses' final words to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land (Deut. 29-30). He has just given them an extensive list of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience which they are to post and recite when they will have entered the land (ch. 27-28). He reminds them of the miracles prior to the Exodus and of God's provision during the wilderness wanderings. He admonishes them as to the solemnity of entering into a covenant with God and warns them against idolatry.

Deut. 29:19 struck me as being similar to the unprepared virgins and the unfruitful servant in Jesus' parables. "When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, 'I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.'" The unprepared virgins had their lamps and some oil; the unfruitful servant had been given much. Both evidently thought they were on safe ground, but their lack of obedient action proved otherwise. Moses next sentence is chilling: "This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry." The Body of Christ is a single organism. Any part that does not function as it should brings consequences upon the whole.

Moses concludes his message with the statement that he has set before them life and death, blessings and curses. The King in the story of the Sheep and the Goats says to the sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matt. 26:34). And to the goats He says, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v.41). Once again we see life and death, blessings and curses set before us. And we must make our choice now and live accordingly.

We are not guaranteed any more than right now. My mother's family could have either lost out on some big money or been saddled with a terrible reputation. Either way, the consequences would have been minor compared to the consequences of failing to take seriously Jesus' (and others') many admonitions to put our faith into actions.