



Seminary Convocation Address

The Christian and the Future Waiting for the Kingdom Waiting for the King

*An address delivered by Dr. D.A. Carson in Jarvis Street Baptist Church
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How shall we envisage the end of the world? Shall we follow one of the models that contemporary society offers us? Shall we descend the spirals of decadence, of decay, of meaninglessness powerfully described by T.S. Eliot? He pictures the whole world dying in its own pollution and rot.

This is the way the world ends.

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This is the way the world ends:

Not with a bang, but with a whimper.

Of course, he wrote before the days of threatened nuclear holocaust. Perhaps instead of T.S. Eliot we should think of Neville Shute and his vision of the end; an exchange of missiles, nuclear winter descending on the northern hemisphere, and, as the seasons come round the particles of radioactive dust fall farther and farther south of the equator until finally Australia and New Zealand are fatally contaminated and whatever little life there is on Antarctica, it all expires. Shall we think of the end in those terms?

Or shall we project billions of years into the future when, allegedly, our race will colonize other galaxies? Should we

think less in terms of Neville Shute and T.S. Eliot and follow, instead, science fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov?

But all this seems so remote. We grow older, rheumatism sets in, our hair falls out, root canals are done, our vision is impaired, our hearing dulls, our mental processes slow down and we do not think of the end of the world. We think of death, our own, personal death.

Or do we? Shall we courageously face the fact that death is the only remaining taboo word in our culture? You can talk about sex in public discourse, you can talk about abortion, you can advertise for condoms but don't talk about death. Shall we oppose this trend and follow the poet, Dylan Thomas, writing as his father expired,

Do not go gentle into that night.
Old age should rage against the dying
of the light.

Rage, rage against the dying of
the light.

Or shall we follow the great North American way and just not think of death at all? Pretend it is not there. Hope that by not talking about it, it will somehow go away. In the Puritan per-

iod a rather unqualified poet, a Christian man by the name of Thomas Nash wrote his only good piece. It was one of those periods when plagues swept through the land, and he contracted the dreaded disease. He wrote a very moving poem with the recurring line,

And I am sick and I must die
And I am sick and I must die.

We wouldn't say that today. Now we say, "And I am sick and National Health had better take care of it; that is what we pay our taxes for."

Repressing thought is never the path of wisdom. The only thing more certain than taxes is death. We had better think about it.

How then shall we think of the end? Amongst Christians who think about these matters there is, as this conference has ably demonstrated, a vast array of opinion about what the Scriptures say will happen at the end. My perception is that opinions are less sharp amongst Christians in this area today than a bare twenty years ago. We have gained something. We have gained a certain amount of tolerance, a certain amount of mutual respect, an appreciation for

the fact that we may not know all there is to know about the Scriptures. We have also lost something. What we have lost, on virtually every front, is a passion for the return of Jesus Christ. We do not say meaningfully with the Church in every age, "Even so come, Lord Jesus."

But surely all thoughtful Christians, once they have left their disputes about whether you are Pre, Mid or Post, tribulational, will surely confess that the ultimate hope of the Church is not our relation to the tribulation; it is not the Millennium, however conceived; it is not the prospect of dying and being with Christ. The ultimate hope of the Church is the consummation of all things, the New Heaven and the New Earth reigned over by the Triune God, while we, in resurrection bodies like that of Christ who rose from the dead on the third day, worship and obey God without taint or failure. And to that we rush. Many scoff, of course, about such notions; but Paul, for instance, says that belief in the fact that we shall have a resurrection body at the last day is nothing less than the entailment of believing that Jesus rose from the dead and even now has a resurrection body (1 Cor. 15). Indeed, Peter puts these things in the starkest possible terms. He writes, "You must understand that in the last day scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.' But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water. By water also the world at that time was deluged and destroyed by the same word. The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends, with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness. He is patient

with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." And then a conclusion — a startling conclusion. Perhaps it ought not be startling, for in text after text where the Lord's return is introduced this kind of moral entailment is not far away. Here it is: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet. 3).

Now, in this conference the organizers have asked me to treat that which is in fact most dominant in the New Testament — how we ought to wait for that return. And surely on these points there ought to be substantial agreement amongst us. When you open your Bible to the eschatological discourse, the Olivet discourse found in Matthew 24 and 25, you discover that only one quarter of it, half of one chapter, is given to the details over which we dispute. The remaining chapter-and-a-half tells us how to wait for those details. This evening, therefore, I want to direct your attention not to the details over which we will continue to dispute even after this conference is ended, but how we, the Lord's people, ought to wait for the coming of the kingdom; how we ought to wait for the coming of the King. And so I direct your attention to Matthew 24, verses 36ff.

How should we wait for the coming of the kingdom? How should we wait for the coming of the King?

FIRST, WAIT AS THOSE WHO KNOW THE KING'S COMING WILL BE UNEXPECTED. The text says, "no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor

the Son, but only the Father" (24:36). This text emphasizes what we do not know, and elsewhere the same truth is underlined. We are not to know the day nor the time nor the hour nor the season, and those who fear the Lord must surely conclude that it is none of their business. Indeed, we ^{can't} profitably pursue how the text can say ^{it} (cf. Mark 13:32) that the eternal Son of God, he who shares with the Father the attributes of deity, actually does not know his own hour of return. That is what the text says. We could profitably explore how to articulate this truth in a way that is faithful to Scripture, but that is not my purpose this evening. My purpose, rather, is to point out that it takes considerable cheek to think that we can isolate the general time of the Lord's return when the Son of God himself does not know. The text says we do not know, we cannot know and that not even the Son of God knows. Therefore we are to wait as those who know the King's coming will be unexpected.

If someone writes a book and says that the coming of Jesus Christ must take place within one generation of the return of the Jews to the land of Israel, which occurred in 1948, and that one generation is 40 years, then I confess I am sufficiently perverse to wait breathlessly for January 1, 1989. For this text says we are not to know the day nor the time nor the hour nor the season, and therefore we may be reasonably sure that the Lord will delight in not returning when so many of his people are arguing that he will.

Much of the rest of this chapter, Matthew 24, is illustration of that point. There is a "for" that introduces verse 37. What Jesus then gives us is a number of quick illustrations to underline the unexpectedness of the Lord's return. First, we read of the days of Noah. "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen

until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (24:37-39).

There are many who read this account and argue that we must be living the last day because there is so much wickedness around, not unlike the wickedness that prevailed in the days of Noah. But that, quite frankly, is not the analogy that the Master himself draws. He does not say, "As it was in the days of Noah with all of their terrible wickedness; so it will be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man." He says, rather, "As it was in the days of Noah so it will be with the return of the Lord; they were marrying and giving in marriage." They were simply living life. No matter how much evil, you will still find wedding announcements in the Toronto newspapers. There will still be births and deaths, the normal cycle of life. You may have wars and famines, you may have eclipses, you may have starvation. You will still find the normal cycle of life going on, curtailed, constrained in some ways but still people will be going on through the cycles of life oblivious to the cataclysm that is about to descend.

And that, Jesus says, is the way it will be at the end. That is, it will be unexpected. It will not be at a time when a lot of the Lord's people have dawned ascension robes and are sitting on a mountain in California. They'll be too busy getting married and having children and attending funerals and generally getting on with the normal affairs of life. That is when the Lord will return. That is Jesus' first illustration.

The second has to do with two pairs: "Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left"; "Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left" (24:40-41). Now, in the nature of family farms in the agrarian society of the first century the two men are likely to be father and son or two brothers — at least, very close participants in the same household. The two women sitting at a hand mill are squatting around

a stone. One pulls the lever 180 degrees, the other reaches over and pulls it around the other 180 degrees. They drop in a little grain at the top and pull the stone around and around. In the nature of the case, the two women are likely to be a mother and a daughter, or two sisters. And around and around the stone goes, and suddenly one is taken and the other is not.

Now the text does not here specify "taken (in glory)" or "taken (in rapture)" or "taken (in judgment)". Indeed, judging by the "taken" language in the previous verses (those who lived in Noah's day were *taken* by the flood and destroyed), we may even guess that this "taken" language is toward judgment. But in fact, the text doesn't say: I do not know and I do not much care. The point, rather, is that there is instantaneous division — instantaneous, irrefutable, irremediable division between the most intimate of family members. There they are, fully engaged in the normal pursuits of ordinary life and one is taken and the other is not. At that point nothing more can be done. It is then too late.

Jesus' coming is unexpected. That is also the point of the last illustration: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (24:40-41). The plea is not that we should become expectant by arguing when he will return. The plea, rather, is that because his coming is unexpected, no matter how much you think otherwise, you had better be ready when he does. That is the plea. You cannot predict the coming of the thief. The Lord's return is as unsuspected, unpredictable, unforeseen as the coming of any thief who invades our home and walks off with our goods. The Lord's coming is unexpected, so we

must wait as people who know the King's coming is unexpected.

SECOND, WAIT AS STEWARDS WHO MUST GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF THEIR SERVICE. We read, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him (the continuing "unexpected" motif) and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (24:45-51).

This tells us not only that the Lord's return is unexpected but that we are to wait as stewards who must give an account of their service. Note that this is directed to those who profess to be the Lord's followers. These are the senior servants, apparently, in the Lord's household. This is not directed to those who are clearly outsiders. Other passages are addressed to them. This is addressed to those who claim to be insiders, but who have become so negligent and so indolent regarding the promise of the Lord's return that they no longer live in self-conscious and constant recognition that they must give an account of their stewardship.

I submit to you, brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, that the Church in the west, evangelicals in the west, conservatives in the west now boast many in their number, many in our number, who no longer live with the self-conscious recognition that we must give an account of our service. We think in terms of promotion. We think in terms of strategy. We think in terms of outreach. We think in terms of style. We think in terms of influencing society.

We think in terms of the transformation of politics. We think in terms of redeeming the entire structures of our decaying civilization. But we do not think in terms of giving an account for our service. And when that happens the standards of stewardship begin to fall and we begin to think more secularly, even in our plans of outreach. Even in our attempt to proclaim the gospel of Christ we begin to think in fairly secular categories. At first, nothing too hopelessly unbiblical is introduced; but even so, the standards of integrity, the standards of authenticity, the standards of meekness, the standards of prayerfulness are gradually whittled away and we start playing politics, ecclesiastical politics. It's a wonderful game — ecclesiastical politics. Anyone can play. All you need to do is to make a profession of faith. There are no rules. None. And the strongest man wins. But the Master said, "The rulers of this world lord it over one another but it shall not be so with you." And so we use our poison pens to criticize God's people instead of edifying God's people. We identify our own opinions on highly disputed matters with God's truth so that anyone who disagrees with us is disagreeing with God. Or we become so careless about God's truth that we will utilize any method so long as it works: Pragmatism with a capital 'P'. But we must still give an account, an account of every word that is spoken, every thought, every style, every approach. We must give an account.

As I grow older in ministry, as I work harder than I have ever worked before at my preaching, I tell you frankly, there is scarcely a sermon I preach today when I do not descend from the pulpit and say, "Oh God, I see some ways I should have done that better." We must give an account. And the best of us are, at best, unprofitable servants.

This passage quite frankly speaks of rewards, rewards for the just and rewards for the unjust. The one who is reliable is put in charge of all the Master's possessions. The other is assigned a place with the hypocrites

where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. One of the most helpful illustrations I ever read about how to think through this question of rewards was written by C.S. Lewis. He pictures two men. One wants to have sex with a prostitute, so he pays his money and he gets his reward; the other falls in love with a beautiful and charming young woman and, with honour and dignity, with humour and integrity, he courts her and woos her. He wins her love and he lavishes good things on her. In due course they are married, and he has his reward.

What is the difference? The difference is that in the first case there is no connection between the payment and the reward. They are fundamentally different — so different, in fact, that the payment is a disgusting token compared with the immensity of the reward; and thus the reward itself is defiled, it is made obscene because the two are not commensurate. But in the other case the reward is nothing more than the consummation of a relationship already entered. That is all it is. Thus, in a sense, the rewards of glory are given by God to those whose lives have so developed in holiness and service here that the final translation involved minimal culture shock. They are merely continuing along the path that was started by God's grace and for his glory here. That is all it is. And the rewards are simply the entailment of the first steps of grace.

We never enter into God's fellowship because we are worthy. But at the same time God's fellowship is the environment in which we work. God is at work in us both to will and to do his good pleasure. That is *why* we *must* work, and our works are part of the increasing conformity of God's people to God's Son until the day we hear him say, "Well done good and blessed servant."

How, then, are we to wait? We are to wait as stewards who must give an account of their service. Let me tell you frankly, when that truth is placarded in

my mind it affects the way I read the mail, it affects the way I talk to people, it affects the way I prepare sermons, it affects the way I write, it affects the way I rebuke my children, it affects the way I budget time for my wife, it affects the way I talk to strangers, it affects the tone of courtesy that I use, it affects the way I agree or disagree with Christians and with non-Christians. We must give an account of our stewardship.

THIRD, WAIT WITH ALL PREPARATIONS APPROPRIATE FOR A LONG DELAY BEFORE THE FINAL CELEBRATION. "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet and the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said, 'open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' Therefore keep watch because you do not know the day nor the hour" (25:1-13).

Now there are all kinds of wonderful interpretations of this parable which seek to excel one another in ingenuity and creativity, and which entirely miss the point. It has been argued that oil here represents good works. Unless you have adequate good works you do not get in. But the Christian's final plea will

be the blood of Christ. If entry depends on good works we are not going to make it. Others argue that oil symbolizes the amount of grace, the quantity of grace that you must receive. I am not sure how grace is measured out. So many gallons? In any case, this explanation does not take adequate account of the plot of the story, which turns on the delay. Others think that oil here represents the Holy Spirit: you must have an adequate quantity of Holy Spirit. One very creative scholar by the name of Josephine Massingbyrde Ford argues that the virgins represent Jewish scholars, the lamps represent Torah and the oil represents good deeds. These wretched Jewish scholars do not get in because although they study Torah they have not performed enough good deeds.

Others are upset because this parable does not talk about the bride. It mentions only the groom, and in our increasingly feminist society this is taken as undoubted evidence of perverted masculinity in the Scriptures. In our weddings, of course, it is a little bit different. We compose wonderful descriptions of the bride with taffeta and lace and how long the train is, who her mother and father are and the like, but at the end of the description it says, "The groom was also present."

We need to understand something of the culture in which this parable is delivered. There were different forms of weddings in the first century, but the form that this represents runs something like this: A young man falls in love with a young woman. She would almost certainly still be residing in her father's home or in the home of an elder brother. All of the wedding expenses fell to the groom. That is one of the reasons why men got married a little later: they had to earn enough to be able to pay for the wedding. Most of the festivities would take place in his house if his house were of adequate size, perhaps in the front courtyard. The first step in the wedding was for him to walk with some of his friends to the house where his bride lived. Various ceremonies and a brief meal took place

there. Eventually there would be a procession back through the streets to his own house where the public festivities began. Such festivities could go on for a few days, a week, or in some cases, even two weeks. Now, very often the meeting at the bride's place was sufficiently delayed that the procession actually took place through the street at night. Not only the members of the party, but invited guests who were not invited to the bride's place, only to the groom's place, processed through the streets, the latter joining the procession as it wended its way to the groom's home. These guests would sit by the side of the road with their torches; they would talk and wait and rest. Perhaps the wedding invitation said, "We expect to come through on the first cock crowing", or "at the setting of the sun". Whatever the arrangements, this groom was delayed. The wedding party was having a wonderful time at the bride's place; meanwhile the guests waited, their lamps burning away quietly as they talked. Some fell asleep. There is no moral reprehension here connected with falling asleep. That view misunderstands the story. The entire plot turns on the unexpected delay of the groom, not on sleep. Both the righteous and the unrighteous, both the wise and the foolish fall asleep.

The point of the narrative, rather, is that the wise were prepared for a long delay. And so finally, when the groom and his bride come through, those who were wise still had oil, and immediately joined the procession. In fact, in some areas those who did not have lit torches would be perceived as party-crashers and excluded at the gates of the groom's home. They were not allowed in. Those who had been invited would have brought their torches, wouldn't they? These people without torches burning were exposed as crashers.

In other words, Jesus here speaks against those whose faith is adequate for the short haul but who do not persevere to the end. They are not prepared for long delay. In the New Testament there is a wonderful tension between a living

expectancy, what theologically is often called the "imminent" return of Christ, and warnings to be prepared for extended delay. Now, some understand "imminent" to refer to an any-second expectation. In the tradition which I represent, I do not take it that way. I take it rather to refer to the open expectation of the Lord's soon return. He may well come in my lifetime; He may, and I am to live and work in that hope; but I am also to remember that his coming may be long delayed. This same Master has given this commission, "Occupy till I come." And so we commit ourselves to live and work and serve for the long haul. We are to wait with preparations appropriate for a long delay before the final celebration. And, indeed, once this motif is clear in our mind, we find many Scriptures that attest the same truth. For example, the seed sown on rocky ground in the parable of the sower speaks of those who are instantly converted, who receive the word with joy when it is presented to them but who, as soon as trouble or persecution arises, immediately keel over and die. There is no depth to their rootage. The roots of the plant have gone down to search for moisture to recover their strength from the blazing eastern sun. Instead, they hit the limestone bedrock; this is rocky soil, and they perish. That which seemed the most promising of the crop turns out, on inspection, to be nothing but puff, nothing but show. It is only those who bear fruit on the long haul who are the Lord's.

We are to wait with all preparations appropriate for a long delay before the final celebration.

FOURTH, WE ARE TO WAIT AS SLAVES COMMISSIONED TO IMPROVE THE MASTER'S ASSETS. We read, "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five

talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time (there's that "long delayed" theme again) the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master', he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with the two talents also came. 'Master', he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master', he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed. Well, then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.' Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:14-30).

The first point stresses the unexpectedness of the coming of the King. The second shows that merely passive

watchfulness is not adequate: there must also be acceptable behaviour, a discharge of our responsibilities. The third passage insists that the delay may be long. Now Jesus takes us one more step. He says that the Master's servants must not only be prepared and perform their duty even if there is long delay, more, he says, they must improve their Master's assets. That is their job.

Now this talent is a measure of money. We must not think of it as we think of modern talents: "I can sing" or "I can teach" or "I can play hopscotch" or whatever. This talent is a unit of money. The talent in the ancient world was either of silver or of gold, and there were two sizes. If this is the larger, more expensive talent, one talent was worth about three thousand denarii, that is, about twenty years of a day labourer's wage. I do not know what a day labourer earns in Toronto these days, but let's say twenty thousand dollars. One talent would then be \$400,000 so five talents is a lot of money — about two million dollars. In other words, the master's provision of goods here is very substantial. He is entrusting his servants with a great deal of money. That contributes to the point, for the Master himself views this as just a *little* test. For later on, when he speaks to the good servant who has discharged his duties, he says, "You have been faithful with a few things (your two million dollars!); I will put you in charge of many things."

That is what heaven is all about. The Master has entrusted us with many good things, and he has commanded that we invest them for his glory when he returns.

But the third servant, the wicked servant doesn't see things that way. He says, "It is a bit of an unfair treatment, this. My Master expects me to work very hard and when he comes back, although I have done all the work he gets all the money. That is a hard man. I'm not going to cooperate. I acknowledge the money is his; I'm not going to steal it. I'll just dig a little hole, put his money in the ground and when he

comes back he can have it back. After all, he is such a hard man that if I invest it and if I work and toil and I lose it, what will he say? Suppose I put it into a business and the business fails? He is such a hard man he'll take it out of my hide."

So that is the way he addresses his Master: "I knew you were a hard man. You want to reap where you haven't sown. You haven't done the work that I have and you expect me to give an account. I can't do that; I won't take the risk. Here is your own. You can have it back."

In our democratic, union-oriented society that sounds like a reasonable argument. What we must understand, however, to comprehend Jesus' reply, is that he is not addressing a union cardholder, he is talking to a slave. A slave does not talk to his master that way — at least, not twice. What this slave forgets is that he is bonded to serve his master and if his master gives him something to do, he does it or he is held to account.

We are slaves of Jesus Christ. Our job is to improve the Master's assets. That is our job. And if we do not do it we are held to account. However long the delay may be, if we think that we can enjoy salvation, enjoy the blessings that he gives us and then sit in our polite churches on comfortable pews with what we take to be our escape ticket from hell tucked in our inside pocket while we do nothing to increase the Master's assets, on the last day we will be called wicked and lazy servants and be delivered into hell fire. That is what the text says. We are to wait, aiming with every ounce of our being to improve the Master's assets. That is part of what it means to be a bond slave of Jesus Christ. It is part of what it means to be a Christian. That means that, whether we pack pork to pay expenses, sit at a computer terminal, bring up our children, serve as secretaries, firemen, theologians, whatever, we are thinking constantly, "How can I so live, how ought I so to pray, how should I bring up my children that in

consequence of my life of service here I have improved my Master's assets? And if we think we can get to heaven without that attitude we do not understand the salvation described in the Word of God.

AND FINALLY, WE ARE TO WAIT AS PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES ARE UNSELFCONSCIOUSLY TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL. Now, that's a mouthful, I know. I could not think of another way to say it that is a little simpler. So let me say it again and then try to unpack it. WE ARE TO WAIT AS PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES ARE UNSELFCONSCIOUSLY TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL. That brings us to the last parable. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on the right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a

stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life'' (Matt. 25:31-46).

Now, this passage is much quoted today. It is a favourite passage to refer to in defense of various forms of social activism, many of which are beneficial in themselves. The argument runs like this: Unless we treat the poor as we treat Jesus, unless we treat the prisoner and the destitute as we treat Jesus, not only are we misunderstanding Scripture but our very discipleship, our Christianity is called into question. And indeed, by doing such deeds it transpires that we are serving Christ and are consequently admitted through the pearly gates on the last day. Some want to go further yet and say that it is precisely this kind of service which not only proves that we are the Lord's but which qualifies us for being the Lord's.

Of course, if you go so far you will find great difficulty in reconciling this interpretation with the rest of the New Testament, which makes it already, in principle, a suspicious interpretation. I hasten to say that the Scriptures say a great deal about the believer's social responsibility. You cannot read Amos on your knees without cringing. There is a tremendous amount in the Scripture about caring for widows and orphans, doing good to all men even if especially to the people of God. There is a great deal said about believers pursuing justice and righteousness in every society in which we are a part. But with all respect, this passage is not one of those. It is simply not focused in that direction. To take it that way is to misunderstand the text profoundly.

There are two things to observe.

First, Jesus refers to the treatment of those whom he calls his *brothers*: 'whatever you did for one of the least of these *brothers* of mine ...'. And in Matthew's Gospel as indeed in almost all the New Testament, 'brothers' either refers to actual siblings, those who are connected by bloodlines, or to fellow believers, those who are true believers. "Go tell my *brothers*..." the resurrected Jesus commands. And indeed, already this point has been made rather sharply in this Gospel, at the end of Matthew 12, with something similar to the end of Matthew 13. Jesus' mother and his brothers come to him. They want to see him, and in the press they cannot. Someone comes to Jesus and says, "Your mother, your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you" (Matt.12:47). Jesus replies, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Matt.12:48). He adds, pointing to his disciples, "Here are my mother and my brothers" (Matt.25:49). So in the first instance we must understand that this text in Matthew 25 is referring not simply to the treatment of the poor, but to the treatment of the broken, the despised, the poor *amongst the brothers*. Indeed, that theme has already been established in this book. In the great mission context of Matthew 10 Jesus ends up his discourse by saying, "Those who receive you receive me. Those who reject you reject me. Those who open their doors to you and to your gospel, in fact, are not simply opening their doors to you — they are opening their doors to me. Whoever gives you a glass of cold water in my name, is doing it for me." You see, the pattern has already been established. How we treat Christ's people, how we treat Christians who are broken or in prison or persecuted or hungry how we treat Christians is what is primarily here in view.

The second turning point in this parable is even sharper. It is that both the sheep and the goats are surprised. Have you noticed? The sheep say, "Lord, when did we see you and give you something to drink when you were

**Incarnate
Joy**

**"Oh joy!
there sitteth
in our flesh,
Upon a throne
of light,
One of a
human mother
born, In
perfect Godhead
bright!"**

thirsty? When did we see you naked and give you some clothes to wear?" And the goats likewise say the same thing. "Come on, Lord, your sentence isn't quite fair. We never saw you that way." In other words, there is tremendous stress in the parable placed on the unselfconsciousness of the behaviour of the sheep and of the goats. You see, if it were so arranged by God that our salvation could be gained by simply doling out a few alms here and there, then life would be a great lark. You may sin like a trooper, and all you have to do is pay a few rupees into the alms collection and you enter into heaven. You look for someone who is needy, you give to the Oxfam or to the United Way, you remember those who are in Bangladesh in the latest flood disasters, you send off a cheque and then you continue your own sweet life of rebellion and moral chaos. It doesn't matter. You remembered the poor and the indigent. And you know you are safe, for when you get to the Great White Throne the

Lord says, "On what grounds do you enter here?" You reply, "I wrote a cheque for relief in Bangladesh, and you said in Matthew 25 that if you do it for the poor I'm in."

That is not Jesus' point. The point, rather, is that these people do *not* know, they cannot figure out what Jesus is talking about. They are *unselfconscious* in their response. When Jesus says, "You did it to me", they do not know what they have done or have not done. They are surprised by this sort of answer from the Master. What is the point? The point is this: We are to wait as people whose lives are *unselfconsciously transformed* by the gospel. You see, the sheep get in because they will naturally treat other sheep that way; they will naturally treat God's people this way. If we hear of Christians who are suffering in Ethiopia we will be far quicker with our chequebooks than if we hear of the vast majority of mankind, will we not? And it ought so to be. Who will look after the Church

of Christ if it is not the Church of Christ? And so in poor areas of our cities the Church ought to be involved, first of all, helping fellow Christians. And we do not do it in order to get into heaven but because we are Christians — Christians helping Christians because they, like me, are Christ's. Of course we will do it. We give a cold glass of water in the name of the Lord. We help fellow Christians; we help the missionary going off or the person who needs bread or another coat. The Church will respond and minister to the Lord's people, to his sheep, to his brothers. And we do not do so in order to gain "brownie points" in heaven. We do it because they, like us, are the Lord's people. We remember that Second and Third John attest this theme. Those who participate in support for missionaries are one with the missionaries in ministry and reward. Those who care nothing for the Lord's brothers, never care how persecuted or tired or discouraged or depressed or unfortunate or set upon

the Lord's people are; they don't listen to them, they don't open to them, they don't give them things, they don't support them, they don't care for them. And by rejecting the Lord's people they reject the Lord.

Now the point of the parable, then, is this: WE ARE TO WAIT AS PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES ARE UNSELFCONSCIOUSLY TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL. Those who are amongst the sheep on the last day have learned in growing discipleship to be committed to the Lord's people. "I love Thy Church, O God." They sing it with a great smile. And their smile does not mean simply that they like the pipe organ. It means they give themselves to the support, the nurture, the edification, the sustenance, the building up of the Church, whether in the moral realm, the physical realm, the spiritual realm — it makes no difference. They help the Lord's people because they are the Lord's people. Did not the Lord Jesus insist, "You are to love one another as I have loved you; by this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (cf. John 13:34-35)? This is the same test in other terms.

How then shall we wait for the end of the age? More than twenty years ago Martin Luther King Jr. stood in front of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. and delivered his

great "I Have a Dream" speech. It was a great speech. He articulated his dream of a society in which colour was not a discriminating feature, where there would be integrity and mutual respect, where justice would be truly blind, where there would be equal opportunity for all. "I have a dream", he said, and he ignited a fire. Whatever your brand of politics, however, that dream was still an inferior dream compared with the dream that every Christian has. The Christian stands up in this world and says, "I have a dream, and unlike other dreams of utopia, which at best are only partially fulfilled, my dream will come to pass; my dream is predicated on the Word of God, and in this dream I see a New Heaven and a New Earth, the home of righteousness. There will be no sin there. There will be no selfishness there. Lust will be unknown there. There will be no one upmanship, no ministerial jealousy, no ecclesiastical politics, no salaciousness, no hate, no death, no crime, no tears, no sorrow, but the Lamb will be there. There will be no need of a sun or moon for God and his Son, they are the light of that place. And we will so be transformed that we will have glorious resurrection bodies like Christ's resurrection body and we will live forever. Perhaps we will have a million years or so, or a billion or two years to sing great anthems before the throne of God. It so far outstrips my imagination that words

fail me. I cannot articulate it, but that is my dream. And with every ounce of my being I join Christians in every succession of the Church's life and I cry, "Even so, come Lord Jesus." And in my dream I see that every knee will bow before this Jesus — those who love him and those who do not. Everyone will give an account before this Jesus. We must give an account to him, and we wait for the coming of this King. Will you join me in honouring this Jesus? This Jesus who is the Son of the eternal God, one with the Father, the One who has died for us that we might live. Every knee will bow in heaven and on earth before him, and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord on that day, either in great rejoicing and immense relief or in cataclysmic terror. That is my dream.

The Christian who articulates that dream learns to wait for the kingdom, learns to wait for the King. The truth is that if we argue about eschatological details and do not share this perspective on how to wait for the coming of the Lord, we are merely trafficking in untried truths. Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, may God grant us the grace in our ministry, in our lives, in our homes, in isolation and in the public square, to live in the prospect of the Lord's anticipated return and to cry with the saints in every generation, "Even so come, Lord Jesus." Amen.