

SURPRISE ENDINGS

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We all like surprise endings. Until they happen to us! Unless it turns out better than expected.

So much of the perceived value of novels and films depends upon creating suspense in the reader or viewer by developing a hoped-for but never-assured outcome. Then, with each twist and turn of the plot, hope rises and falls. If the story ends with hope crashing to disappointment, we say, "It was a sad story." On the other hand, if, in the end, hope rises to fulfillment, we say, "It was a good book!"

A great many people are actually disappointed that their own lives are not as exciting as a 225-page novel or a 115-minute movie, for which they paid \$10-\$20.

Jesus' disciples had their share of suspense—and surprise endings. When Jesus reached a peak of popularity, He began speaking in a way they were unfamiliar with: musing about His own death by treachery. Not a pleasant theme in any circle, but so much less when all their hopes were pinned on His successful rise to victorious power among men. So, when He was arrested, mockingly accused of blasphemy, and sentenced to die in under 24 hours, they were shocked and deflated. It was over. Was it all for nothing?

Three days later, when He began to show Himself to them, alive from the dead, they were shocked again, and elated. What could this mean?

Forty days later, as He was raised bodily into the heavens before their eyes ("Returning to the Father, He had said.), they were shocked and amazed. What now?

Ten days after that, while they waited together in prayer, "*suddenly, a sound like a violently blowing wind came from the sky and filled the whole house where they were staying. Tongues that looked like fire appeared to them and came to rest on each believer. All the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability to speak*" (Acts 2:1-4). They were shocked and overwhelmed. And then all things began to become clear!

The recurring waves of challenge and victory and disappointment did not cease, but their purpose became clear. Now, for two thousand years the church has been growing, owning today more people than were alive on the planet in that day of beginnings. Challenged by setbacks and opposition, within and without, the church continues to move forward to "*lay hold of that for which for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of [us]*" (Philippians 3:12).

We are motivated by hope, though the specificity and clarity of our hope varies greatly among us. And there are surprise endings ahead for all of us.

Near the end of His days on earth, Jesus spoke with His disciples about what was to come, attempting to prepare them for what lay ahead and what they must do. They listened, and faithfully recorded His words, even though they understood very little. Even after generations of Bible scholarship and teaching, we are not much better off. Perhaps these matters are not intended for our understanding, so much as our readiness and motivation. In any case, Jesus' words were full of warnings of delays, deceptions, and difficulties—all enveloped in the hope of His triumphant return and the ensuing day of judgment.

In the midst of this, He told them three stories to help them be prepared and become successful.

Prepared for His Friendship

Matthew 25

¹⁻⁵ *“God’s kingdom is like ten young virgins who took oil lamps and went out to greet the bridegroom. Five were silly and five were smart. The silly virgins took lamps, but no extra oil. The smart virgins took jars of oil to feed their lamps. The bridegroom didn’t show up when they expected him, and they all fell asleep.*

⁶ *“In the middle of the night someone yelled out, ‘He’s here! The bridegroom’s here! Go out and greet him!’*

⁷⁻⁸ *“The ten virgins got up and got their lamps ready. The silly virgins said to the smart ones, ‘Our lamps are going out; lend us some of your oil.’*

⁹ *“They answered, ‘There might not be enough to go around; go buy your own.’*

¹⁰ *“They did, but while they were out buying oil, the bridegroom arrived. When everyone who was there to greet him had gone into the wedding feast, the door was locked.*

¹¹ *“Much later, the other virgins, the silly ones, showed up and knocked on the door, saying, ‘Master, we’re here. Let us in.’*

¹² *“He answered, ‘Do I know you? I don’t think I know you.’*

¹³ *“So stay alert. You have no idea when he might arrive.*

This is a story about the friends of the bride and bridegroom. They were the light-bearers, lighting the way of the celebratory procession and, perhaps, the area where they gathered. Five of the young women wisely prepared for possible delays over the long haul, since such celebrations could last for days.

Some, however, were foolishly unprepared—thinking, “I’ll just borrow some, if I need it,” or not thinking ahead at all. They didn’t value their friendship sufficiently to prepare for what may lie ahead.

It takes little thought to be friendly, but to be *friends* will cost you something. Every friendship has its delays—of joy, of satisfaction, of reward. Even your friendship with God (and that’s what this story is really about).

There are inexplicable delays. The lag time between His promise and its fulfillment (2 Peter 3:4). The multitude of repeated prayers. The seeming silence from heaven. Are you prepared for them? Is your faith ready to endure? Are you a real friend of God?

By His design, you have no idea when He might arrive, so stay alert.

Prepared for His Work

Matthew 25

¹⁴⁻¹⁸ *“It’s also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master’s investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master’s money.*

¹⁹⁻²¹ *“After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’*

²²⁻²³ *“The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master’s investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’*

²⁴⁻²⁵ *“The servant given one thousand said, ‘Master, I know you have high standards and hate care-
less ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disap-
point you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to
the last cent.’*

²⁶⁻²⁷ *“The master was furious. ‘That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If
you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done
would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little inter-
est.*

²⁸⁻³⁰ *“ ‘Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this “play-it-safe”
who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.’*

The story is about servants, workers. Their task is to invest what belongs to their boss astutely and courageously, taking calculated risks to gain the greatest return. Two of them were faithful to their master’s aims and doubled their investments for Him.

One was overly cautious. He was afraid to disappoint his boss. He misjudged his boss’ attitude and misunderstood his objective. He thought his task was to secure what he had been given; actually, it was to multiply it.

What are you doing with the things you have received from the Lord— grace, truth, faith, knowledge, gifts, blessings, provisions? Have you been investing them for multiplication, or simply securing them for yourself? Are you a worker who wins his Lord’s approval (2 Timothy 2:15)? Or, will you be one of those busy Christians who will stand ashamed on that day (Matthew 7:22-23)?

Get rid of the “play-it-safe” attitude and give your all to the Master. Invest your whole heart in worship, in prayer, and in witness.

Prepared for His Cause

Matthew 25

³¹⁻³³ *“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.*

³⁴⁻³⁶ *“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:*

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’*

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ *“Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’*

⁴¹⁻⁴³ *“Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’ the ones on his left, and say, ‘Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—*

*I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,*

*I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.'*

⁴⁴ *"Then those 'goats' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?"*

⁴⁵ *"He will answer them, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.'*

⁴⁶ *"Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."*

This is a story about nations. Not geo-political nations, with boundaries and governments and constitutions; this is about people (ethnos), who have come together for a purpose, a mission. Their mission: to give care, to compassionately respond to the needs of others outside their group by giving.

This story reveals two kinds of groups. The first was insightful and compassionate, and gave selflessly and generously whatever was needed to those that others overlooked or ignored. And in so doing, they ministered to God Himself, in whose image the hurting and impoverished had been made.

The other group were indifferent and stingy, and they failed to see the point in giving to such "losers." I suppose they might have thought, "They made their own bed, now let them lie on it." They were good to nobody; and good for nothing.

When people come together for a cause, they develop a critical mass. The force of their actions *together* are greater than the sum of their parts. Remember the builders of the Tower of Babel? God said, *"The people are united, and they all speak the same language. After this, nothing they set out to do will be impossible for them!"* (Genesis 11:6). That's the potential of a united group—a nation, or a church.

The United States of America has been the major contributor to meeting human needs and raising the human condition around the world; it is one of our shining stars. Yet, Americans still spend more each year on dog and cat food than we do for compassionate outreach. What is wrong with this picture?

Show footage of children, bloated by starvation and disease, and people will turn away in horror. But, show pictures of pets, mistreated and malnourished, and people, with tears, will open up their checkbooks, or, with anger, will contact their congressperson. What's wrong with this picture?

The church of Jesus Christ has been gathered together for a purpose—*His* purpose—and there can be none greater, for His is eternal in its impact. *"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son"* (John 3:16). Jesus came *"to seek and to save those who are lost"* (Luke 19:10). In a nutshell, that's His purpose. What is the purpose of your church?

To what do we give our personal and collective efforts? On what do we spend our accumulated monies? Will we be remembered for our compassion to the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the shivering, the sick, and the imprisoned? Is this why our church exists?

If we don't do these things, what else matters? Our property holdings? Our reputation? Our bank account? Our church performances? Our doctrinal accuracy?

We have been given the enormous privilege to be His church and to pursue His cause. Let's do it willingly and energetically!

Which End Will Be Yours?

Friendship is a loose affiliation. All who enter into friendships are hopeful seekers. However, some are content only to be seeking, without ever intending to find. They will be turned away. Don't be that kind of a friend to God. Get in, for the long haul. Be prepared to pursue Him until you find Him, and then surrender your everything, with a lifelong commitment. Then you will be gathered in and welcomed.

Workers are individually committed to their jobs. They are hired individually and, if they are fired, they will be fired individually. They may be committed, but they remain separate as employees, each with their own tasks. Whatever those tasks may be, their objective must be larger—it is to make the boss look good, to make the company do well. If an employee cares only for his own position, he will become fearful or lazy, while thinking himself safe. To make the boss proud, you must take calculated risks to improve his image and to increase the bottom line. While it may not line your pockets directly, it will come back to you—*“pressed down, shaken together, and running over”* (Luke 6:38). A faithful worker is not one who merely does his work, but one who makes his work meaningful.

Nations are people who have identified themselves together as a group. One for all and all for one, they have become united for a cause, and the potential for doing good is tremendous. But, just “going to church” is not enough. If the church's cause is not Jesus' cause, they will eventually be herded to their doom. Identifying with each other is only half of the task; identifying with *Jesus'* cause is the all-important capstone. When we get that right—and live to be a blessing to others by giving ourselves away—then we will truly find ourselves, and find the life abundant. Jesus told us, *“If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it”* (Matthew 10:39).