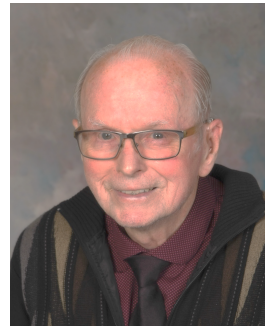


PREPARED FOR LIVING

Rev. R.C. (Bob) Garvin



Our lives can be cluttered with too many gods. God or gods are whatever comes first in a person's life. The Old Testament prophet Joshua found it necessary to challenge the Israelites on this business of gods. They were now settled into the Promised Land. Joshua reminded them that centuries earlier God had called their forefather Abraham and challenged him to obey the Lord God who promised to make a great nation from him.

Joshua recounts this history and the subsequent 400-year enslavement of the people to the Egyptians. Finally Moses came who confronted the Pharaoh and eventually lead the Israelites to freedom. Under Joshua they had entered the Promised Land and either by conquest or negotiation had settled in cities and towns that they had not built, and enjoyed the produce of the land that they neither planted nor cultivated.

Joshua then challenged them to clean up their religious act: **Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the Lord....Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.**

Throughout all history people have been religious; that is, they have realised there was something greater than themselves and sought to find and worship that reality. For countless people this has implied the desire to worship something tangible as seen for example in the adoration of idols. When Moses was delayed on Mt. Sinai the people requested Aaron to make them gods, so he crafted a golden calf. Gods tended to be localized and hence, when the people moved, they either took their idols with them or worshipped the gods revered in their new location.

What was known about the God of Abraham was largely forgotten during the four centuries of enslavement. Moses was called to go back to Egypt and tell the people that the God of their ancestors had sent him. Moses queried, **If they ask me your name, what shall I tell them?** The name of a person was equated with his or her identity. God replied, **I Am Who I Am. Say to the Israelites that I Am has sent me to you.** The challenge of Joshua was to put away all other gods and idols and worship the Lord God alone. Hence his personal commitment: **as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.**

Today we Christians have made a commitment to enshrine Christ as the Lord of our lives. We have confessed our faith in the one, Triune God: Father, Son and Spirit. With Joshua we have said, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

But sometimes I fear our lives are cluttered with other gods. How many hours a week do we spend in worship, Bible Study and prayer in comparison to the hours spent watching TV? How much money do we spend on sports, entertainment and recreation in comparison to what we place on the offering plate? It is strange how small a twenty dollar bill looks in the grocery line up or at the wicket to buy a couple of tickets to a major sports event or concert, but how large that same bill looks on the offering plate.

Long ago Aaron said of the golden calf, **These be thy gods O Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.** These be thy gods, O Canadians, that captivate your lives: money, power, possessions, fiscal security, entertainment and sports. Joshua put it straight: choose your God: the Lord or idols. The first challenge for us this morning is to examine our lives and exorcise whatever pushes the Lord our God into second place. Joshua's challenge pertained to their every day lives. In all they did, God was to have first place. That should be true for us as well.

Serving the Lord implies that we need to be steeped in our faith. We need to be faithful in worship, to be consistent in having a daily quiet time with God, and to avail ourselves of the opportunity of Bible Study, prayer and discussion. The greater our participation in such activities, the greater will be our ability to live lives pleasing to God and our ability to face the crises of life.

There is a lesson for us from our Gospel reading, a lesson about being prepared for living. The story of the ten virgins or bridesmaids is one of the parables of the kingdom. It is a parable about the future, the promised return of Christ at an unknown day and hour.

But upon examination it is not so much about the suddenness of Christ's return or about the final accounting. Rather it is about preparation. It is a parable about preparedness or lack thereof with the clear teaching that the unprepared will be left out.

To understand the story we must appreciate something of the events in a Jewish wedding. At one point in the proceedings the groom and his attendants went to the home of the bride and her attendants. As is the case in this parable, the groom often came at an undisclosed time. He was delayed, we read. But when he finally arrived he took his bride and her attendants and walked through a joyful bridal procession to his home or that of his father. As this was at night, and the law required that one could not be out at night without a lamp, we have the story of the ten bridesmaids waiting, lamps in hand, for the groom.

His delay was considerable, so much so that they grew weary and slept. It is related that half of the attendants were wise in thinking ahead to bring a flask of oil to refill their lamps should that be necessary. The other five were unprepared, had given no thought to the possibility of delay and therefore brought no spare oil. The question of the parable was not about when the groom would come but rather about the preparedness of the attendants. Their task was to light the procession regardless of any delay. Those who forgot to bring extra oil found themselves excluded from the party.

If you place this in the context of the second coming of Christ, we are dealing with an unknown timeline. We believe in the return of Christ and in the final consummation and judgement but the day and hour are not ours to know. Paul likened the return to a thief coming in the night—totally without warning. So when Christ returns, people will be prepared or unprepared. There will be no time for changes, for making amends, for doing right.

But I believe the parable is also about being prepared for daily life, for whatever happens to us tomorrow. Central to this is our pledge that we will serve the Lord, and our fulfilling of this through regular worship, prayer, devotions and Bible study. We need to be spiritually prepared for tomorrow.

A minister told the story of arriving at a home where the elderly gentleman had just died. His grief stricken wife turned to her minister and the first thing she said was: "What did you say about the resurrection in your sermon two Sundays ago? I really need to remember it now!" Her faithful participation in worship was preparation, was training for what she would think and do on a day such as when her husband died.

Most of you are not in crisis now, but what of tomorrow? How you live your faith today is your preparation for the unexpected of tomorrow. As Christians we know that there is nothing that will ever separate us from the love of Christ, not sickness, tragedy or even death. We are spiritually prepared for tomorrow by our active participation in our faith today.

We live in a society which, in a practical sense, is powered by money. We need to be financially responsible, to plan, invest and spend wisely. Part of our being prepared is our concern for what happens to those we love and to our resources after our death. This is why it is so very important for every adult to have a Will, which is a legal document not about death but about life after a death. A companion document to a Will is full Power of Attorney. This is a document that enables a family member or friend to administer your financial and personal affairs should you be unable to do so because, for example, of a severe stroke. A Will and Power of Attorney are two essential items for each of you to be prepared for tomorrow. If you do not have these documents, or if they should be updated, please, act this week.

Ask yourself: does your Will reflect your faith? For many years you have faithfully given a portion of your money to God in your weekly offering. Should this commitment not be reflected in your Will? As a responsible Christian you need to consider the important area of a bequest as a means of advancing God's work after your death.

The motto of the Boy Scouts is: *Be Prepared*. This is a great motto for the Christian. Remember Joshua's challenge and affirmation: **as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord**. That you might be prepared for living, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Is there anything in my life that removes God from having first place?
2. That I might be spiritually prepared for tomorrow, do I need to make some changes in my worship, prayer, Bible Study and devotional commitments?
3. That I might be practically prepared for tomorrow, do I need to take action on the important areas of my Will, Power of Attorney and estate planning?

These questions are too important to shelve.

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