



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1989 Series, No. 7

Ten Little Maidens  
(Matthew 25: 1-13)

December 30, 1989

W. Burney Overton

I was sort of a tag along with Jesus and his followers, and had been almost from the beginning of his itinerant ministry. I guess, in a way, I was a follower, but I always stayed in the fringes of the group. I wasn't quite ready to declare myself a disciple. None the less, I got to know Jesus very well, although I admit that I often didn't really understand what he said and did – nor why. For that matter, it seemed to me that those who considered themselves disciples didn't either. They appeared to believe that, sooner or later, Jesus was going to aggressively declare himself to be the promised one of God and lead the people of Israel to their proper place over all the nations. What Jesus said and did, didn't fit that expectation at all.

The time came when Jesus wasn't very popular with the Leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem. In fact, rumor had it that they were so negative toward him that they had decided to silence him, even if it meant having to have him killed. I didn't put much stock in the rumor, for, from my point of view, there was little reason for them to be upset with him, much less to the point of seeing him as a major threat that needed to be eliminated. He healed a lot of people. He taught differently than the Religious Leaders. But he wasn't a rebel, nor did he preach rebellion. In fact, he seemed pretty harmless to me, although I had to admit that he was challenging.

Jesus, however, seemed to believe that the rumor was true, although he did absolutely nothing to protect himself if it were. It was almost as if he wanted it to be true, for he appeared determined to give the Religious Leaders every conceivable opportunity to carry out their threat. Though the disciples tried to dissuade him because of the apparent danger to his life, he even insisted on going to Jerusalem and continuing his teachings in the Temple itself.

There, for the first time, I heard him point an accusing finger at the Religious Leaders, especially the scribes and Pharisees. Although he spoke very plainly about their shortcomings, they said and did nothing to challenge him, nor to silence him – not at that time. Had I been one of them, I would have at least felt threatened, and would have wanted to do something to neutralize what he said. But I don't think I could ever have reached the point of plotting to have him killed.

It wasn't long until the whole company of followers were pretty tense. We knew that something had to happen. Jesus remained calm and serene, although he was clearly troubled that Jerusalem had not heard and heeded his message.

Maybe I was just stupid, but I knew that I had not heard and heeded Jesus' message, neither. Nor had the disciples. They were still looking for a Messiah to come who would lead them against their enemies and conquer them. I didn't know how they reconciled their expectations with what he said.

I thought Jesus would be pretty discouraged with the disciples, but he didn't seem to be. Instead, one day, he left the Temple and went up to the Mount of Olives, inviting the disciples to go with him. Apparently he had something pretty important to say to them. I tagged along, as I usually did.

There on the Mount, Jesus began to teach the disciples again. How wonderfully patient he was. At the time, I had little awareness of what he was really saying to them, but later it became clear to me as did much of his earlier teachings. He was trying to help them grasp, the significance of the Kingdom of God, and their role as members of it. What he said was different from anything that I had known and believed or understood before. Maybe I can express what I came to understand by talking about just one story that he told the disciples on the Mount that day.

Jesus compared the Kingdom Of God to ten maidens, who, with their lamps lighted, were to meet the bridegroom when he came and accompany him to the marriage feast. When I first heard it, the story didn't make much sense to me. Five maidens were foolish, Jesus said, and five wise.

The five foolish maidens didn't have any extra oil for their lamps, but the wise ones did. The result was that, when the bridegroom came, the foolish ones didn't have enough oil for their lamps. However, they had a ready solution to their problem. The wise ones could just share the oil they had. No problem.

But the five wise maidens refused to share their oil lest there not be enough for all of them. Consequently, those who weren't prepared had to go and buy oil, and it took so long that they missed the coming of the bridegroom and were unable to attend the marriage feast.

Jesus ended the story, saying, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

At first, I couldn't make any sense out of what Jesus had said. What did that story have to do with the Kingdom of God? Five girls had brought extra oil. Five had not. It was pretty selfish of those with the extra oil to be unwilling to share it. Maybe the girls were jealous of each other. Maybe they just figured it was better for some of them to be able to attend the wedding feast than to risk all of them missing out. And, after the girls with short supply had gone and bought more oil, why were they not allowed to attend the feast? How did that compare to the Kingdom of God? I couldn't figure it out.

And there was the business about not knowing the day nor the hour. What did that have to do with the Kingdom of God? When Jesus started his preaching ministry, its main theme was, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." At hand? If it is already at hand, we aren't waiting for it to come. We don't need to know the day and the hour of its coming. If the marriage feast represents the Kingdom of God, then we were already at the feast – or so it seemed to me.

While Jesus talked, I pondered. In fact, I didn't really hear the rest of what he said.

Later, I tried to talk with some of the others in the company, but I didn't get very

far. They didn't know what Jesus meant either. For some reason, they didn't even seem to be particularly concerned. I don't know what they thought.

I continued to ponder during the days ahead. I heard Jesus saying more about the plan of the Religious Leaders to kill him. He even said, specifically, that it would be by crucifixion. I didn't believe him, but, as each day came and went, the tension grew worse, and, finally, what Jesus had been saying became reality. He was arrested, tried (if you could call it a trial), and crucified.

None of us were prepared for that event. All that we had hoped for and dreamed of was over – or so we thought. The Kingdom of God wasn't at hand. The Messiah had not come. We had no leader to lead us to victory over our enemies.

Even so, I couldn't get the story of the ten little maidens out of my mind. In the light of what happened, the story seemed so irrelevant. But I couldn't dismiss it from my mind.

What made the five little maidens wise, and the others foolish?

The setting of the story Jesus told was a very familiar one. Everyone knew how weddings were celebrated. Everyone knew the role of the maidens with their lamps. It was a festive occasion, and the importance of the bridegroom was measured, in part, by the size of the celebration and the number of celebrants there were.

At first, I thought the point of the story was that the five maidens were smart. They saw to it that they were in the right place, at the right time, and with all the right equipment and supplies. They were ready. They had anticipated the need, and equipped themselves to be in on the celebration. They weren't going to risk missing anything.

Then I wondered how the other five could be so foolish as to be in that setting and not be ready. They also knew what was going on and what their roles were. They knew what to expect. They knew what equipment and supplies were needed. They had been in similar situations before. How could they be so foolish as to get caught short at a crucial time?

Why would Jesus tell that kind of story, especially considering the situation in which he was and how he had been reacting to it? What meaning did fit?

What was I missing? What did the story have to do with the event of the past few days, or the Kingdom of God, for that matter? The meaning eluded me.

It was wee hours of the morning of the second day after Jesus was crucified. I couldn't sleep. By then, I was obsessed by that story. Over and over, I told it to myself as I sought an answer. Ten little maidens. Lamp bearers for the bridegroom. Some had enough oil. Some did not. Those who had, refused to share. Those who did not missed the marriage feast. "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Is the Kingdom of God a future reality, and not a present one? Am I supposed to figure out how to be prepared for that future reality? Was Jesus suggesting that the point of our lives is to be constantly on the alert lest we miss out on that great day? Was the focus of the story that one be sure to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom – the coming of the Kingdom of God? The answers to those questions didn't fit the setting of the story, nor what Jesus had been teaching.

The Religious Leaders certainly believed that the Kingdom was to come and that they were appropriately prepared for its coming. They knew the Law. They kept the Law. They kept the very letter of the Law. They anticipated the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of the Kingdom. They fully expected to have a primary role in the Kingdom. Who could be more prepared than they?

I don't know what the company that had traveled with Jesus thought, now that Jesus was dead. For them, there was no evidence of the Kingdom as they expected it, and they feared for their own lives after what had happened to Jesus. They didn't even know what to watch for any more.

I tossed and turned that night, and went over the story again and again – to no avail. Until suddenly it came to me like the first rays of the sun at the beginning of the new day. My problem was that my perspective was all wrong. I was focusing on the wrong parts of the story. Whether or not some were prepared for the coming of the bridegroom and others were not wasn't the point. Whether or not those who had oil shared with those who did not wasn't the point. Whether or not some got to attend the wedding feast and others did not wasn't the point. Whether or not anyone knew the day and the hour wasn't the point.

The point was that it is of primary importance to be prepared to live life each day, and therefore to be prepared for whatever may happen whenever it happens.

The wise little maidens saw to it that they were equipped and prepared all the time. The foolish ones did not.

The wise little maidens knew who they were, what their job was, how they needed to be prepared, and what equipment and supplies they needed to do their job. They planned. They prepared. They were equipped. They had everything they needed. Whatever happened – and when – they were ready and on the job. That's what made them wise.

In telling the story, Jesus was both talking about himself, and trying to enlighten and encourage the disciples to be wise about themselves. Jesus was saying, in effect, "It is necessary for me to go on about my life and to do my job. I must not be pre-occupied with concern for my own safety, nor satisfied with just getting by, nor giving priority to being in on the party. I am equipped and ready. I must – and want to – be consistent as I live as a child of God. That I face death at the instigation of the Religious Leaders must

not – and will not – deter me from the life I have chosen."

The question is not, "Will I be ready when the bridegroom comes?" The question is, "Am I ready for life right now?" and, "Have I planned and learned. Am I appropriately equipped? Do I have the outlook I need? Have I chosen to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God here and now?"

Jesus had both lived and taught, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." He had the kind of life that is the Kingdom life. Of course he understood that the Religious Leaders were threatened and must do something to remove the threat. Of course he realized that the disciples had found it extremely difficult to let go of long-held beliefs. Without their being aware of, it, all of them had shut themselves off from the larger, wider point of view that he brought and lived.

No wonder Jesus had seemed determined to incite the Religious Leaders to their actions against him. Two points of view were in conflict. One was that of the foolish little maidens, and one was that of the wise little maidens. One was, "When the time comes, we will figure out a way to be ready." The other was, "It doesn't make any difference about a time to come. It is important – necessary – to be ready now and to live now."

The Religious Leaders and the disciples were still the foolish little maidens. None of them had recognized that the time and place of living is right now. The Leaders, to preserve their own position, had seen to it that Jesus was crucified. The disciples, never realizing that they needed to change their point of view, had abandoned Jesus to be crucified lest they also be captured and crucified.

Who, then, were the wise little maidens? When Jesus told the story, and in the days that immediately followed, it appeared that no one was except Jesus himself.

But everyone could be wise little maidens. The kingdom of God is at hand. There is a way of life in the Kingdom. Jesus lived it. Jesus taught it. Jesus was true to it. Jesus was crucified. And Jesus is alive. So might I be.

There it was. The story made sense to me. That night, in the wee small hours of the morning, I knew. The Kingdom of God was a present reality. Jesus had lived among us as citizens of the Kingdom live. He told the story to tell me – all of us – to be wise as the little maidens were wise. Always be equipped and ready to live the life God has called each of us to live. Plan and prepare – and live. That way, I had no need to know the day nor the hour. If I lived as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, I was always prepared.

It was up to me to decide. It is up to each person to decide.