



Are Your Bags Packed?

"Are your bags packed?"

You can probably think of some times in your life where you heard that question. Maybe before a road trip. Before a family vacation. For me, that was the big question right before our daughter Emma was born. Her due date was January 15, and weeks in advance, we had lists of all the things we would need for the hospital. We had talked about packing some of the stuff ahead of time. But then, at the end of December, the doctor told us we would probably have to wait a bit, that she didn't expect the baby to come until after the due date. We came home frustrated, wondering, "When are we going to meet Emma? At least we have extra time before we need to be ready!"

But less than 48 hours after that appointment? Emma was born. We thought we had all sorts of extra time, and we were wrong! None of our bags were packed, none of our stuff was ready! We were completely unprepared!

In our text for today, Jesus talks about something very similar as he points us ahead to Judgment Day. This is the second week in a row we have talked about Jesus' return at the end of time. Last week, the focus was on God's judgment against evil. But this week, Jesus looks at his 12 disciples – and all of us – and says, "I'm coming back soon. You won't know exactly when. So are your bags packed? Are you ready?"

Jesus uses some striking imagery to talk about the kind of readiness he wants us to have. First: "dressed for service." Translated literally: "have your loins girded." Back in Bible times, people usually wore robes, not pants like we have today. If you were just walking around the house, that was fine. But not good if you need to run around! So when it was time to do something active, you would fold up your robe, and you could move. This is what you would do with your robes before you went on a long journey, or went into battle. It meant you could move as quickly as possible.

The second phrase Jesus uses: "keep your lamps burning." Thousands of years ago, you couldn't just switch on a flashlight to see in the dark. You needed fire of some kind. Which meant you needed a little lamp with a large enough supply of oil to keep it burning.

It's actually not the first time some of these phrases have been used. Back in the book of Exodus, the Lord took the ancient Israelites out of the land of Egypt, the place where they had served as slaves for hundreds of years. The night before they started to leave, they had a special meal called the "Passover". Listen to some of the instructions God gave his people on how they should eat this meal: [READ Exodus 12:11] Back in Exodus, these words didn't require further explanation. The land of Egypt was the land of slavery and death! The Israelites would have thought: God is leading us out! Let's be ready!

As Christians today, we might not be physically enslaved by anyone. But our preparation for Judgment Day is very similar to what the Israelites were doing on the first Passover. For years, our whole lives, we have been in this world full of sin and death and darkness! God is leading us out, he has opened the doorway to heaven, and he is coming to bring us to our real home! That's the best news you could ever possibly hear! Of course you want to be ready!

And you even now how that "readiness" happens. It's something God himself gives to us in his Word. Jesus talks about that a little bit too. In v. 37, he says, [READ]. That word he uses at the end can be understood a few different ways. Can mean watchful, or ready, or awake. That's the word Jesus uses to describe servants who are praying continually, keeping the Bible at the center of their lives, who are always looking forward to the next time they can worship with their brothers and sisters. That's what it means to be ready, to have your bags packed for Christ's return. Sounds great!

But do any of those words describe you? If I'm honest, there's plenty of times I can think of in my life where those words hardly seem to describe me at all. So why does that Christian readiness that all of us so desperately need feel so difficult to pull off? What's getting in the way of our prayer lives, our worship lives, our Bible reading?

To find out, we have to ask ourselves some tough questions. Is it external threats, perhaps even persecution that is keeping us away from the Bible out of fear? I think it's safe to say no. Is it that we don't think prayer is all that powerful, or that we aren't at all interested in making time for it? I don't think it's that either.

We get a hint to the real problem from Jesus himself. Listen to some of the things he says right before our verses for today. [READ] Worry. Anxiety. The things of this world. These are the things that fill our time, eat up our schedules, maybe even keep us awake at night. And if you're not careful, those worries can begin to crowd out the time you get to spend with Jesus in his Word.

Let me give a couple examples. Think of a middle-aged man busy at work. He isn't prideful, isn't all that concerned about climbing the corporate ladder, but he takes his work seriously. He is worried about doing a good job, about not letting the people around him down. In other words, he is worried about being viewed as competent by the people around him. So he goes all in on his job. He goes to extra meetings, extra trainings. He comes early to work, and stays late. And it begins to take over his life. He doesn't have time for personal Bible reading. Half the time, the only thing he eats in a day is a protein

shake, so it's not like there's much room to slow down and pray. He comes to church on Sundays, but by the end of the service the only thing he can think about is the projects he needs to work on and the time he could have spent getting ahead.

Then there's the parent who's first kid has just started school. She's worried about her child's success. She wants her kid to learn and grow. And in America today that means programs. There's dance class, and piano class, and tutoring after school, and after school events, not to mention appointments and all the other things your kid needs. This woman just wants to be a faithful mom, but has conflated successful parenting with an overcommitted schedule. And things fall away slowly. Family time in general starts to suffer. The devotion time that used to happen every night eventually becomes nonexistent. That's not even to mention this mom's time in the Word for herself.

In both examples, the person wants something that's actually very good. But through our anxious worrying, that good thing in our lives becomes a distraction from God's Word, the thing we need the most. When that happens, exhausted Christians don't spend time getting filled up by Scripture, don't refill their lamps. And the lights start to flicker. Or Christians rush around the house, rearranging the furniture instead of watching the door for Christ's return. In small ways we often don't notice, little by little, we walk away from the life of readiness and watchfulness that Christ calls believers to have.

If any of that sounds familiar, you aren't alone. And hope isn't lost. So the next time you feel discouraged as you look at your own weaknesses and failures, your sinful worry and misplaced priorities, remember what the Bible is all about. It's a book that teaches us everything we need to know about salvation. And everything we need to know about God.

Think of it this way. If you want to learn more about stars, you look into a telescope. When you do that, as beautiful as the night sky is, you'll have your mind blown. There's nebulae and supernovas and galaxy clusters – things your mind can barely comprehend. And by looking into a telescope, not only do you learn more, but you're able to appreciate the beauty as you see it in even more detail.

When you think about it, the Bible is like a telescope too. Except it isn't pointed at the night sky. It's pointed straight at God's heart. And as we study, what do we see? We see the cross. The place where God died to take away all the sins you've ever done – the sins that weigh down your heart, and even sins that you aren't even aware of. It's the place where God gave his perfect record to you, where Christ gave you his perfect love to cover over all the countless times your own love has failed.

And then we see something else too: God wanted to do this. He was excited about the thought of saving you.

We see that in today's verses. Right in the middle of this section where Jesus is telling his disciples to be constantly ready for his return, he says: [READ v. 37] Think about that. God will invite you to his personal table. He will shower you with even more blessings. And it says he "dresses himself for service," God girds his own loins, because he is so eager to be with you and show you his love.

Let that change the way you think about preparing for Judgment Day. When we think about Christ's return, I think that even as Christians we are tempted to give it a negative connotation. We imagine it'll be like a military drill instructor coming into the barracks for an inspection. Or maybe like an IRS employee coming to your house to give you a tax audit. But for Christians, that couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus is counting down the days until he gets to bring you to heaven. He is excited to see his followers, to bring good gifts to the children that he loves!

So as you prepare for Judgment Day, remember that you are not on the lookout for an inspection or an audit. Instead, you're dressed for service so that you can be ready to run and give Jesus a hug when you hear his knock at the door. Your lamp is burning so you can see the smile on his face when he looks at you. And you know that you are ready for this Day not because of anything you have done. But because of him.

So maybe your Bible reading isn't the best right now. Maybe your prayer life is not what you would like it to be. Maybe you used to be pretty good about devotions, but life has been so overwhelming lately you don't even know what happened. Well the best time to start again is right now. And life will get crazy again, your personal study will get thrown off in the future too. But keep restarting. Because through his Word, Jesus wants to strengthen you, to give you everything you need to keep your faith burning and bright. He is excited to talk to you more – he always has so many things to tell you. And he can't wait to bring you home.

Are your bags packed? Through the faith God has given you, yes they are. Because you have Jesus. He knows your problems and weaknesses. And he has just the thing. His Word. Where he forgives you. Loves you. Gives you everything you need. Forever. Amen.