

### **“THE PREPARATIONS OF JOY”**

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Last August Cecile and I walked the beach at St. Andrews, Scotland. The movie *Chariots of Fire* both opens and closes there. It's a sports film with no trite triumphalism. Sprinter Harold Abrahams is a Jew trapped in the WASPy aristocracy of Cambridge University. One very telling scene falls late in that film. Before running his 100 meter sprint at the '23 Paris Olympics, Abrahams expansively opens to his friend Aubrey about his fear of running, so closely paralleling his fear of living.

“I'm forever in pursuit and don't know what I'm chasing. In an hour's time I'll raise my eyes and look down the corridor, four feet wide, with ten seconds to justify my whole existence. I've known the fear of losing. But now I'm too frightened to win.”

The rivals solemnly dress in the tense numbing quiet of a shadowy locker room. They walk into the blinding daylight and mindless roar of the teeming stadium. They all stretch, dig in, wait, and then the gun blasts. Abraham prevails. He wins. Cutaway with me to the jubilant locker room. Straw hats are tipped back framing broad smiles. Teammates hold champagne glasses aloft with a hint of swagger. The room is abuzz. But Harold Abrahams silently clasps his suitcase with his back to the rituals of victory, and quietly slips out of the door. He can't handle it.

His friend Aubrey hails him back but a wiser teammate stifles his ill-conceived try. “Don't do it. Can't you see that the poor fellow is waxed?” “Yes, but he won,” Aubrey protests. “Exactly,” he counters. “Someday you are going to win. It's pretty difficult to swallow.” If that seems strange it makes more sense as we dig deeper.

I'm telling you, we're all Harold Abrahams if we're honest. Groucho Marx spoofed our tendency, quipping once he'd never want to belong to a club that would have someone like him as a member. That sounds funny but it's about our darker side.

As a senior, I learned my college was considering me as a college nominee for a Danforth Fellowship. Twelve of us were interviewed by a panel. The day of my interview? I woke with strep throat. How would I ever handle this? They designed the screening to be intimidating because the competition was very steep. They sorely tested us. So far that concerned me, it worked. I was so nervous. My voice was tight and way up high, like this. It was like I'd channeled Mickey Mouse and he was involuntarily speaking through me. But then my professor of physiological psychology, Dick Paschke, was on the panel. He asked me his question and my voice dropped back to my normal tenor range. And my brain also began to work.

I went home, took my antibiotic, and hid under the covers, certain I'd flamed out. But the phone rang. Paschke was on the line. You are our nominee for a Danforth. “No,” I said, “it's not possible. It's all wrong. It doesn't work.” I couldn't quite

believe what I was telling this professor who had gone to the mat for me. I later apologized to him. (And yes, I was eliminated in a later phase of the competition.)

So why my reaction in the face of this good news? No one in my family attended college. I went to lowly Grand Valley State because I was paying and could afford it. A small Hampshire College-like alternative college was on campus. It was a great place to learn, but the status-minded sniffed at it. I studied hard because it was my only shot to use gifts beyond manual labor. But I knew they were making a real mistake by elevating me to such heights. Friends, as big blessings find us, and we cannot believe we are worthy, no one else can possibly convince us.

This isn't about confidence. It is about something bigger: the preparations of joy. What I mean by preparations of joy is that some gifts of grace are so vast and great, so underserved and humbling, we had better ponder and prepare for them well in advance. And even then, they will drive us to our knees. Gifts like Isaiah receiving his call from God amid smoking incense. Gifts like being given two angelic daughters like Victoria and Juliet. Gifts like a lady who cares for me and loves me as much as Cecile does. Gifts like a young man whose life was in rubble seven years ago, now standing tall, fully claimed by God as his minister. If we lack urgency as God comes to us to gift us, we need to take our spiritual pulse.

And this is what today's parable of the wise and foolish maidens is about, friends. How do we live in light of the highest gift possible, Jesus' death and resurrection? Does it change our life details, what we pay attention to, how we spend our time? Do we give our utmost for God's highest? Or do we presume upon God's grace?

Ten bridesmaids wait with their lamps for the arrival of the bridegroom. Five are wise, bracing themselves for the long run by bringing extra oil for their vigil. Five are foolish. They just wing it. The bridegroom—picture Christ's return to redeem and save us—is delayed. All of the bridesmaids grow understandably drowsy and drift off. But the foolish bridesmaids are out of oil. They had not taken seriously what is required of us all to meet the bridegroom face to face. They ask the other five bridesmaids to share their oil. But that would have meant no light at all for anyone as the glad shout goes up and the bridegroom finally arrives. The foolish bridesmaids end up outside looking in. Who are you? the bridegroom asks them. With joy coming, keeping your light ready and alive matters in a darkened world.

Like most parables of grace, we want to fall back to fairness to protest the story. We prefer fairness to grace, but God decidedly works by gifts of grace. Still, we all know some things cannot be shared. SAT scores. Dental floss. Fingerprints. Physical fitness. Spiritual fitness is also something we cannot do for each other.

It's striking how, captive to our fears, we can spend so much of life preparing for the worst possible thing happening, anxiously projecting all kinds of catastrophe. But then we neglect the preparations for when the best possible things God has promised come to pass, even if we must wait for them longer than we'd prefer to.

Do you recall when the Berlin Wall fell? No expert saw it coming. All were taken aback. We had resisted, labored, outlasted, and waited for 30 years, spending billions of dollars. What was the response of our leaders to this joyous tide of events? Perplexed invisibility. The authorities were flummoxed, so much so that it was left to David Hasselhoff to emcee that historic change. David Hasselhoff?

Jesus used the image of a wedding because weddings are joyous occasions. But I've done lots of weddings. And no matter how far away a wedding is, it always surprises the couple how quickly time passes and how much there is to prepare. Neither the wedding nor the marriage is a casual commitment. Urgency is good. So joy is the keynote, yes, but joy brings responsibility. Joy demands a response, like any great and life-shaping gift. Joy will take us out into life's deepest waters.

Paul the Apostle writes this to a church in Corinth taking a whole lot for granted: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will all be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

'Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?'

... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

What great joy! This is the ultimate gift. But don't sneeze at it, friends. Don't imagine there is time in the future to get around to it. In another parable Jesus comments, "this very night your life might be demanded of you." No one else can prepare for you. Kierkegaard said, the turnstiles into heaven go one at a time.

Do you remember the Facebook picture of Gary, Erica and me with Gary doubled over weeping after I relayed the news that was unanimously approved? Actually, what I said to him was, you now have an ordination to go with your new blue tie. That picture had 663 likes last I checked. We could be like Aubrey to Harold Abrahams and say but why is he weeping? Why is that poor fellow so waxed? After all, he won. I tell you, friends, the preparations of such deep joy are complicated. That photo is worth much more than my 1623 words trying to break this all down.

It is the drama of God not only having something to do with us as human, but singling some out to be witnesses to God's truth in Jesus. I hope you come and see the next act this afternoon at 3 pm. Because it is the greatest story ever told. Amen.

