

Philipp Nicolai was a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the late 1500s. If you thought that our times were tumultuous, consider his. Plagues were not uncommon in his time, where entire towns would be decimated. From plagues flowed famines because if you don't plant due to illness, there will be no crops come autumn. Many had to flee towns when foreign troops invaded. Nicolai had to do this at least twice when Spanish troops invaded the town in which he lived.

Most striking is a plague in the town of Unna in which he served. In 1597, an epidemic swept through the town of Unna and it killed 1,400 of the 2,500 residents of the town. In the month of July, three hundred people died, and at times Nicolai was burying more than thirty people a day.

Yet in the midst of this terrible storm of death and suffering, Nicolai wrote a book, *The Joyous Mirror of Eternal Life*. Nicolai used Romans 8:18 as a theme verse: **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”** This 400-page book has not been translated into English from German.

However, in these four hundred pages, we have a couple items that the Church has treasured. Two hymns, first, “O Morning Star How Fair and Bright” which is sung usually around Epiphany. The other, “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying” we just sung earlier in the service and takes as its basis our Gospel reading from Matthew 25, the parable of the ten virgins.

Jesus tells us the meaning of this parable: **“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”** Since Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven, the Church has been on the lookout for his second coming. Jesus Christ is the bridegroom of His bride, the Church, and we are to be ready. This is as true as it was in the days of the apostles as it was in the days of Philipp Nicolai, as it is true today.

The bottom line is this: the bridegroom is coming, and He wants you to be ready. You don't know what tomorrow will bring, so don't wait to fill up on the supplies you need. The Scriptures you hear today will come in handy tomorrow. The Christian encouragement you receive this week will give you the perseverance to make it through next month. In tough times, we as Christians need not fret. **THE BRIDEGROOM WILL SUPPLY US FOR HIS JOYOUS ARRIVAL.**

First, I. Life makes us weary to wait for the bridegroom's arrival. As the parable goes, the ten virgins took their lamps to meet the bridegroom, some were foolish and didn't bring oil. Others were wise and took extra oil. What we do know is that the bridegroom was delayed and they all fell asleep.

These days, it seems like the arrival of the bridegroom is delayed. Where is Jesus? He said he was coming. I checked off all the boxes: I got baptized, I got confirmed, I go to church regularly, and I pray often enough. I got the oil and I'm ready. Why is it that He isn't here to fix all of my ills?

The headlines don't help with the daily case counts of COVID and the death tallies. The election is over, but there is still anxiety about what the future will bring as newly elected politicians plan to take office. We're anxious to see family and hope for life to return to normal.

Even Philipp Nicolai, the author of our hymn, reflected how he was discouraged as he did daily funerals in the double digits throughout the peaks of the plagues. He reflected that as bad as things were, at least things weren't as bad for him as King Hezekiah who said, **"I shall not see the LORD, the LORD in the land of the living; I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world"** (Isaiah 38:11). He thought he was as good as dead as he himself faced sickness and death all around him.

And that's just it. As Christians we are called to be vigilant and watch for the bridegroom to come again. The devil will throw everything at us to abandon post: he'll throw apathy at us—there's got to be something more important than prayer, attending church, or reading the Bible. Satan will attack us with fear: fear of losing relationships with family and friends, fear of sickness, or fear of death. He will even threaten us with death.

Yet it won't be long before we hear, "'Wake, awake, for night is flying,'" The watchmen on the heights are crying; "Awake, Jerusalem, arise!" Midnight hears the welcome voices And at the thrilling cry rejoices: "Oh, where are ye, ye virgins wise? The Bridegroom comes, awake! Your lamps with gladness take! Alleluia! With bridal care Yourselves prepare To meet the Bridegroom, who is near.'"

As we wait for that day, we need not fear as II. The Bridegroom supplies us with everything we need. What supplies us also supplied Philipp Nicolai, and it is simple—three things: the Word of God, the Sacraments, and prayer.

Nicolai writes in his book *The Joyous Mirror of Eternal Life*, "Never let yourself be disposed in any other way than to remember that you are kept safe in the word of God as in your mother's womb, from the reception of baptism until your last hour. There [in the word of God], by the almighty power and working of the Holy Spirit, persevere and let yourself be directed toward another life."

Dear Christian friend, as you await the bridegroom to come again, or even as you face your own mortality wherein you go to be with Jesus in His presence, you do not wait unaided. Jesus Christ the bridegroom gives you the oil in your lamp that you will need: the Word, the Sacraments, and prayer.

He gives you His Holy Spirit through which you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. He claims you in baptism and makes you His own. He gives you His Word which keeps you safe in faith in Him as a child is safe in his mother's womb. He even gives you the words to pray. He gives you the Lord's Prayer which is not just words on a page, but a model prayer for all prayers. In this

prayer He promises to forgive your trespasses, lead you not into temptation, and deliver you from evil. He fulfills these words of the Lord's prayer, delivering you from evil even as He delivered the town of Unna in 1597 through evil.

You might ask, "Deliver us from evil? How can that be?! Over half the town died." Yet deliver us from evil doesn't mean no evil will befall us. It means that the bridegroom promises to give us the oil in our lamps to make it to the bridal feast. He will supply us with everything we need to remain faithful. He promises to deliver us through the midst of evils. He promises to deliver us from the evil one, namely, the devil. He does so ultimately by rescuing us from this veil of tears and delivering us to himself in heaven.

The key is to fix your eyes on the prize. Fix your eyes upon Jesus. Nicolai writes, "You must come to the place that you hold onto this man and remain fast in the faith and confession, having ever practiced these in life and in death, saying: I know of no other help or counsel, no salvation or consolation, no way or path than my Lord Christ alone, who suffered, died, rose, and ascended to heaven for me."

Philipp Nicolai's encouragement is the same as today's: When the troubles of life face you. When the devil tempts you. When death rears its ugly teeth. Look no further than Jesus Christ who lived a perfect life for you. Who died to forgive your sins, and who rose again to assure you that you too will rise. He is the one who provides His Word as encouragement, the Sacraments as your assurance, and prayer as your lifeline to make you ready in that day He returns.

And so it is with this encouragement that we can see the return of Christ as a joyous occasion. As our hymn goes, "Zion hears the watchmen singing, And all her heart with joy is springing; She wakes, she rises from her gloom. For her Lord comes down all-glorious, The strong in grace, in truth victorious; Her star is ris'n, her light is come. Now come, Thou Blessèd One, Lord Jesus, God's own Son, Hail! Hosanna! We enter all The wedding hall To eat the Supper at Thy call."

III. The Joys of the Supper will make the wait worth it. As we reflect on Jesus' parable of the ten virgins, certainly the focus is on being ready for Christ's second coming, but we cannot forget where the virgins were headed: to the marriage feast. As we go through this life which is often characterized by pain and suffering, fears and disappointments, we are never to forget the glories that await us as Christians at the Supper that is to come.

Philipp Nicolai writes a letter in January of the following year and the plague had subsided by that time. He shares with us the secret of how He got through the epidemic: "During the entire time of the plague I put all disputes in the back of my mind with prayer and with the praiseworthy reflection upon eternal life and the condition of precious souls in heavenly paradise prior to the day of resurrection. [Nothing was more precious]... than the contemplation of this noble and elevated article concerning eternal life, purchased by Christ's blood."

No matter where your life may take you, never forget where you are headed. **“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,”** This is the encouragement of the martyrs as they faced violent deaths. This is the encouragement of pastors such as Philipp Nicolai who face the deaths of many in their flock. This is the Church’s encouragement as we face what appear to be gray and latter days. This is your encouragement as you face your own mortality. We can go to death as to a wedding reception knowing that Jesus Christ won’t be long to bring us joys and comforts everlasting. Never lose sight of this eternal hope.

So let us close with this last stanza of “Wake, Awake for Night is Flying”:
“Now let all the heav’ns adore Thee, Let saints and angels sing before Thee With harp and cymbals’ clearest tone. Of one pearl each shining portal, Where, joining with the choir immortal, We gather round Thy radiant throne. No eye has seen the light, No ear has heard the might Of Thy glory; Therefore will we Eternally Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee!”