

'watch.'- Mar 13:37

by G. Campbell Morgan

Jesus commands us to watch, being wide awake, alert, and cooperative in our loyalty to Him, with a courageous attitude, and a sleepless vigil of prayer and work.

Scripture: Matthew 24:4-51, Matthew 25:31, Mark 13:5-37, Luke 21:24

Topics: "Faithfulness in Trials", "Vigilance"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the command of Jesus to 'watch' in light of His prophecy regarding the end times, urging believers to remain vigilant and faithful amidst turmoil and uncertainty. He explores the significance of Jesus' predictions about wars, false prophets, and the need for spiritual alertness, highlighting that the end of the age will not be marked by peace but by conflict. Morgan stresses the importance of loyalty to Christ, courage in the face of adversity, and the necessity of prayer as integral to the act of watching. He concludes by reminding the congregation that their duty is to work diligently while awaiting the Lord's return, as the signs of the times unfold.

Transcript

Mar 13:1-37.

THUS in one arresting and ringing word of command, the Son of man summarized the duty of His followers, in view of a prophecy which He had uttered of a most solemn and imperative nature. The interpretation of this command to watch must be sought in a consideration of the prophecy. Therefore, without any further preliminary words, let me indicate the scheme of the meditation, and proceed therewith.

I propose first to survey this prophecy of Jesus; secondly, to attempt to indicate its teaching in its bearing upon our present situation; in order that I may finally emphasize the command to watch.

First then let us survey this prophecy of Jesus. It is at least a noticeable fact not to be forgotten, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke record this Olivet prophecy. Moreover, they all place it in the same relation to the ministry of Jesus; at its very close, in that last shadowed week. Matthew gives the prophecy with greatest fullness. Mark and Luke give the same sections of the prophecy.

Two matters demand our attention, preliminary even to this survey of the prophecy as a whole. They are those of the occasion upon which our Lord uttered it, and that of its full content.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem, departing from His usual method, and provoking demonstration. Having done so, and looked round about upon all things on that first day, He passed out to the quietness and the seclusion of Bethany. On His way back to Jerusalem in the morning He had destroyed the fig tree. Then moving into the temple He had cleansed it by the exercise of a most remarkable power, and had then entered into conflict with the rulers. This was followed by that last act of judgment in Jerusalem, when He sat and watched the givers in the treasury, and appraised the value of the gift of the lonely woman.

Immediately following these things, His disciples drew His attention to the temple itself, as Mark tells, to the stones of the building, as Luke declares, to the precious stones and the glory and beauty of the building. It was a significant action. He had been there with them before. Why did they at that moment draw His attention to this temple? Surely, we see in their action the result of their own attitude of mind. He had cleansed the temple; He had denounced the temple; finally uttering its doom, "Your house is left unto you desolate." Now they drew His attention to the temple itself; and immediately with swiftness and inclusiveness, He predicted its complete destruction, telling them that not one stone should be left upon another that should not be flung down.

Then leaving the temple and the city, they climbed Olivet, until they came to a place which the evangelist describes as "over against the temple"; that is, a place on the mountain side from which they could look back on the temple. These men, strangely moved by the things He had been saying, came to Him with their question. Four men are named by Mark as coming to Him. They asked Him, "When shall these things be? What shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the consummation of the age?" The prophecy constitutes our Lord's answer to that threefold enquiry.

To glance at the prophecy as a whole, I return to the record in Matthew's Gospel. There we discover that in it there are three distinct sections. In answer to their enquiry, our Lord first spoke to these men purely from the standpoint of the Hebrew Messiah (Mat 24:4-44). These are predictions that have in them the note of things concerning Israel, the Hebrew people, the Messiah of the Hebrew people, and the theocracy of God, according to their ancient economy. At the forty-fifth verse in that chapter is a break in the discourse, with this question: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant?" In the next section (Mat 24:45-51 - Mat 25:1-30) there is a new outlook, no longer upon the Hebrew nation, but upon the Christian Church, and the responsibility of that Church. At verse thirty-one in chapter 25 (Mat 25:31) is another beginning: "But when the Son of man shall come in His glory." The outlook is thence no longer upon the Hebrew nation, no longer exclusively upon the Christian Church; it is worldwide, upon the nations. In the central section He never spoke of Himself as the Son of man. He closed the first section with that descriptive title. He resumed it in the third section.

He was evidently looking with clear eyes while the clouds were gathering about Him, and He walked the *via dolorosa*, and knew His death was imminent. His disciples had asked Him, "When shall these things be?" this casting down of the temple. "What shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the consummation of the age?" Here we see the Lord, never more wondrously, looking quietly on, and viewing the coming centuries from the standpoint of His ancient people Israel; from the standpoint of His new people, the Church; and at last from the standpoint of the nations of the world.

Looking at one age from the three standpoints, the perspective is not always clear. Our Lord was describing, not so much the whole course of the age, as the crises, the mountain tops. As standing upon some height we look out upon the mountains and see one great mountain peak before us, and shining in glory behind it another, which seems near enough to the first peak to kiss it; but when we have travelled to

the first we discover that between us and the other, there are whole stretches of valleys; so here, things seem to be near together which are really as far apart as the first advent and the second. Therefore, we need most carefully to remember the necessity for the sense of perspective as we study a prophecy like this.

In the thirteenth chapter of his Gospel, Mark has no record of that second section where the outlook is upon the Church; and no record of that final section where all the nations are gathered together before the Lord. He only gives the first section, but with much more of detail than that recorded by Matthew. Let us, therefore, simply move through this thirteenth chapter, in order to the discovery of its movement, in the answer of our Lord to the enquiry.

His answer to the enquiry commenced at verse five; and in the paragraph (verses 5-8) [Mar 13:5-8] is a record of introductory warnings, the value of which is not exhausted in the following paragraphs, but runs through the whole of what our Lord subsequently said. He called His disciples first to take heed as to their loyalty to Himself. He definitely told them that when they heard of wars and rumours of wars they were not to be troubled, for wars and rumours of wars were not the sign of the end. He told them finally, that whenever they should hear of such things they were to know that they were the beginning, the birth-pangs of travail, a travail that proceeded toward rebirth and new life.

Having said so much He began to speak immediately to the men who were round about Him, giving them personal instructions (verses 9-13) [Mar 13:9-13]. In that paragraph He told those immediate disciples of a period of persecution that was imminent. We know to-day how literally that word was fulfilled in their particular history, and how in that particular period of persecution, the strength, the comfort in all the true sense of that great word comfort that sustained them, was that of the presence with them of the Holy Spirit.

Then He proceeded in the next section (verses 14-32) [Mar 13:14-32] to describe the crises, of which there are two. In verses 14-23 [Mar 13:14-23] He first foretold distinctly all that was fulfilled at the fall of Jerusalem within a generation. Continuing, He said, "But in those days, after that tribulation"; and we may be inclined to think that "those days" of verse 24 must be close to the end He had already described in verses 14-23 [Mar 13:14-23]. As a matter of fact, here we have two mountain peaks, but between the first and the second there are great valleys.

Luke makes this fact a little more clear: "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luk 21:24). That little verse covers a period from the fall of Jerusalem until to-day. Jerusalem is still trodden down of the Gentiles, because the times of the Gentiles have not yet been fulfilled. Yet notice, with that illuminative declaration, Luke resumes exactly as Mark does. "And there shall be signs in sun and moon and stars." To return to Mark, in verses 24-32 [Mar 13:24-32], He speaks of another crisis after the fall of Jerusalem, the crisis of His own definite and positive second advent in judgment; and all ends with instructions in verses 33-37 [Mar 13:33-37]. "Take ye heed"; and thus we are brought back to the Key-note, as at the commencement.

In attempting to gather the teaching of Jesus, notice first that the prophecy contains a clear revelation of the fact that according to the conception of the Master Himself, the age from the Cross to His personal advent would be one of perpetual conflict and turmoil. Our Lord's outlook upon this age was not that of one in which there should be a gradual cessation of strife between the nations, by the victory of the preaching

of His Gospel, until the whole earth should be reduced by that preaching to a condition of, peace. I am told that these prophecies were compiled after the events. If so, I can only suggest that if a man had been compiling these records after the events, he could have written far more clearly. Our Lord had no expectation that in this particular age war or turmoil would cease. He distinctly revealed the fact that right through the age there would be conflict and turmoil to its very end. Indeed He foretold upon this occasion in harmony with all the great prophets of the Hebrew economy-that the consummation of this strange and mystic age, the meaning of which was never perfectly known by the ancient Hebrew seers, would be in carnage and bloodshed, clash and strife.

Observe in the second place that in this prophecy we have the definite declaration that wars and rumours of wars are not the sign of the end of the age. They are neither the sign that the end of the age is near, nor that the end of the age is distant. In order to our peace of heart, and to the clarity of our testimony to-day, Christian people need to be reminded of the fact that Armageddon is not yet. Armageddon in principle, is often repeated but not yet in finality. Josiah the king was killed at Armageddon. Zechariah the prophet saw Armageddon in his own age. Har-Magedon is yet to be; but wars and rumours of wars are not the sign of it. Wars and rumours of wars are part of that perpetual process in which God, overruling the forces of the world, makes the wrath of man express itself to His ultimate praise, and girds the remainder .upon His thigh, restraining it as within His own will.

Observe in the next place how in this prophecy our Lord uttered the most solemn warning against false Christs and false prophets, declaring that in hours of stress and strain, of wars and rumours of wars, of pestilences and famines and earthquakes, such would arise. From that hour until this, in all the history of the Christian Church, it will be seen that times of strong emotional distress have been times of grave peril concerning the person of the Lord Himself, and there have continually arisen false Christs and false prophets. The warnings of our Lord are most clear, that in such times we need to take heed that we are not lured from our loyalty to Him by any voice that claims to be His, or by any that shall tell us, Lo! here is Christ, or there is Christ!

If this language of our Lord, as recorded by Mark, Luke, and Matthew, means anything, we have an explicit declaration that the approach of the final manifestation will be heralded by supernatural signs, stars falling, sun darkening, moon refusing her light, the powers in the heavens shaken; and that the Son of man will be clearly manifested.

It was in connection with such foretelling that our Lord gave the authoritative assurance that these things must be. "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but My words shall not pass away." This is a great text. An application of its declaration may be made to the whole teaching of Jesus; but its first application is to this apocalyptic utterance, this prophetic foretelling, this clear declaration concerning the end.

Still further observe that in this prophecy of Jesus there is an arresting insistence upon the fact that the time is not known. It was here He Himself did say, "Of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." Immediately afterwards He added, "Take ye heed . . . ye know not when the time is"; and repeated it, "Watch, therefore: for ye know not when the lord of the house cometh." In those words He solemnly warned His disciples, and us, and the whole age, that we know not when. Not in this prophecy, nor anywhere else in the teaching of Jesus, nor in the whole New Testament is there a single declaration that can help us to fix, even approximately within the limits of a human almanac or calendar, the hour of the advent. Nothing could be plainer than this: "Ye know not."

All that brings us to the final and commanding declaration as to the duty of His followers, more than once repeated in this final paragraph, and summarized in the last word, "Watch." What our Lord meant by; that is indeed focussed in the very word itself. Readers of the Greek New Testament will remember that two words are both translated in our English Version, "Watch." They are not contradictory, but complementary to each other. "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is"; and then presently, "Watch, therefore"; and finally, "What I say unto you I say unto all, Watch." I take the second word, twice repeated, "Watch," literally, Be wide awake; the positive word. I take this word, and feel my way into it, to see where it came from, and how it came to pass that men used this particular word in this connection. At the heart of it I find the thought of the market-place. Probably, therefore, the thought of watching comes from the idea of the market-place as a place of purposeful and alert gathering together. There is a passage in the New Testament where that same figure of the market-place is discovered. When Paul was writing to the Ephesian Christians he said, "Buying up the opportunity," "redeeming the time" as the old translation rendered it; and the figure again is that of the market-place; a merchant man, eager and alert; a company of such merchants, all eager and alert, with their hearts all set upon their business.

These values are all in this word "Watch." Take the word in its application to the individual soul. It means the faculties gathered together, alert, wide awake. That is what Jesus said to these men. He did not charge them, to climb some mountain height, and watch the east for the flush of dawn; but He charged them to be watchful. He would put them in Jerusalem and Samaria, send them on journeyings toward the uttermost part of the earth; but He charged them that wherever they should find themselves, they were to be wide awake, all their faculties gathered together, alert, cooperative.

The word, and the meaning of our Lord in the use of the word, is interpreted by all the injunctions. They may be summarized thus. He charged them first to be careful, supremely careful in the matter of their loyalty to Him. Take heed!-twice repeated-lest ye be led away by voices which claim to be My voice, and prophets which claim to speak in My name.

The second note of injunction is that in which He enjoined them to the attitude of courage. Be not troubled when ye hear of wars, and rumours of wars. Be not even anxious when the tide of hostility focusses itself upon you, and you become persecuted, suffering. Be not anxious.

Then immediately He linked the watching with prayer. "Take ye heed, watch and pray." "Watch." This is the other word. It has exactly the same meaning, but from the other standpoint. It is the negative word. It means, be sleepless. Do not fall on sleep in this one particular matter of prayer.

Once again we are arrested by a Greek word. It is the peculiar word that describes the attitude of the soul in worship, including asking for something, but not necessarily so. There can be praying, without a petition in it, and the thought is never exhausted by the idea of asking. We may ask for something perpetually, and yet never pray in the sense of this word. Praying here is the prostration of soul in the presence of God; praying here is the wishing of the desiring soul forward toward God. We may be unable to ask for anything; and so I feel on many a day, that I do not know what to pray for. But I can pray in the sense of this word; the soul desiring itself out to God. There is a great word in an ancient psalm when the soul of a man found expression: "My soul followeth hard after Thee." That is prayer. What shall we pray for to-day? There are things we cannot ask for lest we cut across some Divine purpose; but our souls can go out to God. Watching is the sleepless vigil of the God-desiring soul.

And once more I put it last because He put it last, not that it is least in importance-watching is working; definite work appointed by the absent Lord; personal work, to each one his work; work in which the small becomes glorious in its relation to the whole.

Our watching is first, the solemn and resolute maintenance of our loyalty to our Lord and Master. It is secondly, that of courage of heart that is not troubled by wars and rumours of wars, and is not anxious even in the hour of suffering. It is thirdly, that prayer-life which is not for ever seeking for the second coming of the Lord, in order that we may escape from something; but that is for ever seeking His Kingdom, His glory; the accomplishment of His purpose.

Finally, watching is working. The attitude of the stargazer with regard to the advent was rebuked at the very beginning of the Christian era when the angel said: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye looking into heaven? this same Jesus . . . shall so come." There need be no anxiety. Our business is to fulfill His command. "To each one his work."

My last word is personal. None of the things happening in the world which surprise and startle me, surprise. or startle God. None of these things which I confess I am less able to explain to-day than yesterday, for the puzzle and the wonder grow were unknown to my Lord so long ago. He saw the age into which He had come. He knew the measure of the forces that were against His Kingdom, which is righteousness, peace, and joy. That is the order in His Kingdom; first righteousness, then peace, and joy is never worth while until it comes out of the peace that follows upon righteousness.

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