

Watch

by Tom Macartney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of watchfulness in our daily lives, and encourages us to be spiritually awake and alert, ready to meet the Lord at any moment.

Scripture: Isaiah 62:6, Matthew 24:10, Matthew 26:38, Mark 13:33, Luke 21:34, Acts 20:17, 1 Corinthians 16:13, Ephesians 6:13, Hebrews 1:14, Revelation 3:1

Topics: "Spiritual Vigilance", "Faithfulness"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches on the importance of watchfulness in the scriptures, emphasizing the need for vigilance, wakefulness, and spiritual alertness in our devotion to the Lord. He explores various contexts where the concept of 'watch' is mentioned, such as the second coming of Jesus, the connection between watching and praying, standing firm in the faith, and the dangers of having a reputation without true spiritual life. The sermon delves into the role of spiritual responsibility and service in the church, the significance of unseen angelic allies, and the necessity of watching in times of testing and evil days.

Transcript

While we are familiar with the words, "Watch and pray". There is a great deal more in the scriptures than we realise about watchfulness, an issue of particular importance in these days. The word watch includes the ideas of vigilance, wakefulness, keeping and being awake and alert spiritually, and is therefore connected with wholehearted devotion to the Lord. The church at Ephesus in Revelation 2 had forsaken its first love for the Lord - gone to sleep spiritually - through lack of watchfulness.

Let us consider eight of the contexts in which this word (and similar ones such as 'take heed' and 'wake up') occur. These naturally overlap.

1. The coming again of the Lord Jesus

In such passages as Mark 13:33-37 and Matt. 24:42-44, the word watch occurs in connection with the Lord's second coming, "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come ... be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him." It is clear from 1 Thess. 1:9, 10 that the second coming was part of Paul's gospel, for the Thessalonians had not only turned to God from idols, but were also waiting for His Son from heaven. Our attitude to His coming again is very important - it will affect our whole lives. Consider:

(i) Christians of every generation should live in the light of His immanent return because He says so. He has not given us His timetable but simply told us to keep watch and be ready. This remains true even when we feel that other scriptures (e.g. 2 Thess. 2:1-12) indicate that certain events must happen first. The fact is, none of us knows for certain, therefore wisdom says, 'Expect Him today, while acknowledging the possibility He may not return in our life-time.' And, of course, meeting Him is always only one second away should we be called into His presence.

(ii) Watching for His return is a great incentive to spiritual progress. In 1 John 3:3, we read: "Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." Living in the light of His return will urge us onward to know Him better and to become more like Him. It will deliver us from the time-wasting pursuits of this present and passing evil world, will sort out our priorities and help us store up treasure in heaven.

(iii) His coming provides us with a searching test of the reality of our professed love for Him. Paul puts his finger on this in 2 Tim. 4:7, 8. After expressing his confidence that the Lord, who has enabled him to fight the good fight, finish the race and to keep the faith, will give him the crown, he adds: "And not only to me, but also to all who have loved and longed for His appearing." Are we among these? Do we want Him to come today? Or is there something we would like to do first? A searching test for us all, particularly for young people. Is the language of our hearts that of Rev. 22:20, "Yes, I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus"? Are we watching for His coming?

2. Watching and praying

In Matt. 26:38-41, we read: "Watch with Me ... could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray." In Eph. 6:17-20, Paul concludes his description of the whole armour of God with the weapon of all-prayer - "Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit ... with all prayer ... praying ... and watching ... with all perseverance." (Bunyan tells us that as Christian was passing through the Dark Valley, he was forced to put up his sword and take up another weapon called all-prayer.)

(i) Note this link in Eph. 6 between praying and watching and the armour provided for our spiritual warfare. Paul is drawing his illustration from the Roman soldier to whom he is chained, who would be in constant touch with his commander, and ever watchful on duty. So, we too must be in continual contact with our Commander - praying without ceasing, and ever watchful. But is not true prayer difficult? It is sometimes a battle to pray at all, and certainly to persevere in prayer, and what about getting to (and praying in) the prayer meeting at the end of a tiring day? We must watch against our prayerlessness, our disinclination to pray and our excuses for not praying, remembering that the Holy Spirit is committed to help us in prayer, knowing our special weakness here (Rom. 8:26, 27). Yes, true prayer is difficult, and not without reason, for it is co-operating with the Lord in the working out of His Will. It is not a mere routine, formal and mechanical, something we do because we ought to, but vital fellowship with the Lord about His interests.

(ii) Note the two focal points of prayer in Eph. 6: (a) For all the saints, the true church of Christ. In this present age, the Lord's primary task may be summed up in the words: "I will build My church," for it is His capital, the centre of His government and of all His activities. And (b) For Paul: "And for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me to make known the mystery of the gospel". In Col. 4:3, Paul puts it like this: "Praying for us ... that God may open ... a door for our message, to speak the mystery of Christ." What need there is today for an authoritative proclamation of the New Testament gospel, "The mystery of the gospel ... the mystery of Christ," which is so much more than the inadequate gospel and version of the Christian life so often presented. One wonders how many are waiting for such a

proclamation, accompanied by, as it would be, the convicting and enlightening work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11; Acts 2) - further matters for prayer. These two focal points give us the heart of prayer.

(iii) Note the practical implications and results of this union of praying and watching, in Col. 4:2: "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." If we are praying in fellowship with the Lord and according to His will, we will be watching for the answer, persevering if it is delayed, and thankful when it comes. We shall not be content to pray and then forget it. We need to be sensitive to spiritual need in people and situations so that these automatically become matters for expectant prayer. Are we spiritually awake and alert in this way in our daily lives, and watching for opportunities of sharing the gospel? As we look out from our watch-tower on the world about us, we shall be constrained to pray. Watching and praying are inseparable.

3. Standing fast in the faith

In 1 Cor.16:13 we read: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong. Do everything in love." Note the position of 'stand firm in the faith' immediately after 'be watchful', which suggests a link in thought. Certainly there is a great need today for us to, "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and to, "Keep ... the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12). Note how the church at Ephesus tested and rejected the false apostles who appeared among them (Rev. 2:2). Note what the Lord Jesus said in Matt. 24:4: "Watch out that no one deceives you."

There are many old heresies in circulation today, and we need to beware. But there are also many subtle, side-tracking teachings around. It has been well said that the old serpent is more dangerous than the roaring lion. It is here that we need to be particularly watchful. How shall we spot these? We suggest: Anything which diverts our attention from Christ, however apparently good, must be regarded as a snare. When, for example, aspects of truth become central, they have become a snare. When people are continually talking about it, be it some doctrine or some experience, instead of talking about Him, let us beware. Paul would let nothing divert him from following and preaching, "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

4. Reputation without reality

This was the trouble in the church at Sardis - "I know your works; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Be watchful! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works finished in the sight of my God" (Rev. 3:1-3). Here was a church content with outward appearances, merely going through the motions of worshipping and following the Lord, and blind to the truth about itself. The members attended the meetings, but the Lord's word went in one ear and out the other - they were hearers and not doers of the word. They would enthusiastically start some new activity, but never saw it through, because they were not in touch with the Lord and His will. Nothing they started was ever finished. Let us watch against all unreality in spiritual things. It is a great enemy.

5. Our unseen allies, God's holy angels, keep watch

One of the most encouraging things revealed in the Bible is that we have on our side, under the Lord, countless unseen angelic allies, ready to do His bidding - "Are not all the angels serving spirits sent to help those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:14). While we look to Him alone, He may and clearly does use these in His service in a variety of ways and particularly on special occasions. This service is too little understood, appreciated and spoken of by us. In the unseen world, there are not only the devil and his

angels, but His holy angels who remained loyal to the Lord when Satan fell. There is not only an organised hierarchy of evil under Satan (Eph. 6:12), but also a host of mighty angelic beings who are part of God's kingdom and government. In Daniel 4:13, 17, 23, in His dealings with Nebuchadnezzar, God used angels, who are there called the watcher, the holy ones. It would appear that one of their duties is watching and reporting back to the Lord. From Matt. 18:6, 10, we learn that believing children - "Little ones who believe in Me", have guardian angels to keep an eye on them. In Rev. 1-3, the angels of the seven churches must surely be angels in the normal meaning of the word in a book such as Revelation, which is full of angels. We suggest that each church had an angel-watcher given the task of reporting back to the Lord. Remember that John was in two realms at the same time, in Patmos and in the Spirit. So, while he was told to send the letters to the churches, he was also told to inform the angel concerned of the Lord's message to each. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the whole book was communicated to John by the Lord through an angel (1:1; 22:16). Then, we recall the service of the angels in the life of the Lord Jesus, in His temptation (Matt. 4:11), and in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43), and how He said He could call for more than 12 legions of angels to rescue Him (Matt. 26:53). And, in the life of Paul, when all hope had gone in the storm, "He stood up ... and said ... take heart ... there stood by me this night an angel of God ... saying, Fear not" (Acts 27:20-25).

And what of the story of Elisha and his fearful servant: "And Elisha answered, Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them. And Elisha prayed ... and the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw ... the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:15-17).

Yes! It is not only written, "The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4), but also, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them".

And, "If God is for us, who can be against us" (Rom. 8:31)!

All very encouraging!

6. The prophets were watchmen as well as spokesmen

If we want to serve the Lord (and all Christians should) it is important we note this point. In Isaiah 62:6-7, we read, "I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the Lord (in prayer; who are the Lord's 'remembrancers', reminding Him of His plans for and promises to His people), give yourselves no rest, and give Him no rest till He establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth." Note the link again between watching and praying, and also that this is the Old Testament equivalent of Eph. 6:18, 19: "Praying ... and watching ... with all perseverance ... for all the saints and for me." Like Isaiah, Paul was a watchman. Isaiah proclaimed the Lord's Word in his day (Isaiah 62:1) and those who listened to him gave themselves to prayer for the fulfilment of that word. Note, the real fulfilment of these verses is in the church, not in Israel. Whatever prophecies remain to be fulfilled regarding Israel, it is the Church (the heavenly Jerusalem, Heb. 12:22) which is at the centre of God's eternal plan; "I will build My church."

Isaiah, of course, prophesied long before the captivity, while seeing far beyond it to the New Jerusalem and the new heavens and new earth (Isaiah 65 and 66). Jeremiah had the sad task of prophesying in Jerusalem during its last days, warning the people in vain of impending judgment (Jer. 1:18; 6:17). Ezekiel prophesied to the exiles while with them in Babylon during the captivity. To him the Lord said twice: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them

warning from Me" (Jer. 3:17; 33:7). His task was to explain the exile to the broken people of God - why they were there and God's future purpose for them - and to prepare the new generation for the promised return. He has been called the pastoral prophet, for he spoke to the individual as well as to the people in general. All three prophets (and others) were the Lord's watchmen, seeing the situation through His eyes, concerned about it with His concern, and speaking His mind about it. Sadly, only a minority ever responded. (Even when the call came for the exiles to return to Jerusalem, only a minority left Babylon.) However, this minority became the Lord's 'remembrancers' and worked together with Him for the fulfilment of His Plan - in this their response was crucial. The relevance of this for us becomes clearer when we realise that in His letters to the churches in Rev. 2 and 3, the Lord apparently only expected a minority to listen and respond. This naturally leads us on to consider...

7. Spiritual responsibility and service in the church

Once again we start with Paul. In 2 Cor. 6:3-10 and 11:23-33, he gives us an insight, from his own experience, into what it means to be a servant of God. In both passages watching is mentioned - "Watchings" (6:5), and "In watchings often" (11:27). No doubt this included sleepless nights as some versions translate it. What a challenge these passages are. Please read!

Do we know anything of such costly service? Then in Acts 20:17-33 (a most moving passage) we meet our word and emphasis again. Paul has sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus on his journey to Jerusalem. He reminds them of his manner of life and service among them and urges them: "Guard, take heed to, yourselves and all the flock," knowing that after he had gone the church would be assailed by grievous wolves from outside, and self-seeking and deceived leaders from inside (verse 28-30 - the future fully justified his warnings). "So, watch, be on your guard, remembering that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (verse 31).

Then, turning to Heb. 13:17 we read, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you." Here we not only learn of the right relationship between those called to carry the responsibility of under-shepherds (under the chief Shepherd) and the sheep, the flock of God, but also the nature of all spiritual responsibility and service to which every member of the family of God is called. Note the following four points.

(i) Leaders (elders, in Acts 20:17) is in the plural. Leadership in the local church is not committed to one or two individuals but to a group of spiritually mature and gifted men who function together under the Lord as Head of His church.

(ii) Carrying spiritual responsibility involves costly caring and watching - "For they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account." Obviously, leaders will have to give an account of their own stewardship as well as for those they are responsible for leading. Verse 7 indicates twin aspects of true leadership. True leaders not only speak the word of God, but also embody it in their whole lives. Example must back up words and teaching, if leaders are to be trusted and followed.

(iii) It is unfortunate that the words obey and submit fail to do justice to the meaning - they are too harsh. The meaning is, 'Trust, be persuaded by, listen to', and, 'Yield, surrender (your self-will) to the judgment of others.' The obedience is not produced by submission to authority, but by trust and persuasion. There is a fine balance in this relationship in practice. This verse is a two-edged sword, as much a challenge to leaders as to the led. There is a true spiritual authority and leadership in the church, but it is very different

from many of our ideas. It is not official but essentially moral and spiritual, rooted in a true knowledge of the Lord and a genuine concern for people's deepest needs (their relationship with the Lord and their spiritual progress). Inevitably there are sad consequences when such leadership is rejected. But note, there is a spurious authority that must be rejected. It is characterised by, for example, pride of position, ostentation, drawing attention to itself, asserting its rights, claiming obedience, and thrives on fear. There is nothing of this in the kingdom of God, where no one claims to be anybody and there is a total absence of self-interest. Even the King Himself received all authority in heaven and on earth from His Father - He did not need to claim anything. He just is the King, and everyone knows it, for He alone is worthy, being the One who laid aside His majesty, and came to serve and die on a cross. In Him we see the meaning of true authority.

(iv) In the true church, while some are called and equipped by God for responsibility (always spiritually mature men - not young men trained for the job), all Christians are called to carry responsibility according to their maturity. In a family, while the parents carry prime responsibility, the older children help look after the younger. So, as we ourselves grow up, we can help those who are younger in the Lord. The true church, "Grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:16). So, this watching and caring for others in the church applies to all who seek to serve the Lord (which should be everyone), not a select few, or just the man up at the front.

8. Watching in the evil day - the day of testing

In Eph. 6:13, we read, "Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done all, to stand unshaken." There are not only times of special testing in our lives, but times in world history when the nations are in turmoil and evil seems to come out in the open; then, watchfulness is particularly crucial. We live in such a time. For the disciples, Gethsemane and the cross was a time of deep testing, and they failed the Lord - "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death ... Watch with Me ... Watch and pray lest you fall into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:38, 41). Of that hour the Lord Jesus said to His enemies: "This is your hour - when darkness reigns." (Luke 22:53)

The Lord Jesus warned us of the evil day again in Luke 21:34-36, with regard to the end of world history (as we know it) before His coming: "Take heed to yourselves ... Be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Then, in Daniel 11 we have a prophecy whose final fulfilment will be at the end of history, clearly perilous times of terrible trial, when some of the Lord's people will stand and others will fall (See verses 31-35, and more). This does not mean, of course, that any of the Lord's true children will be lost, but some will fail in the day of testing. Peter, James and John failed the Lord in Gethsemane and all the disciples forsook Him and fled, but none of them perished. They failed Him, but He did not fail them! He cannot fail! To fail the Lord in the evil day, though bound to have sad consequences, is not to forfeit our eternal salvation. But we shall do well to let these scriptures (and many others) challenge our hearts and lead us to take stock of our lives.

Consider Luke 18:8, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find the faith on the earth?" (that is, the true faith of Jesus, and, the faith in Him which endures to the end.)

Consider Matt. 24:10-13, "At that time many will be offended and turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the

increase of lawlessness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." But there is no need for us to fall in the day of testing since He has made full provision for us to stand, in fellowship with Him - "Watch, with Me." In Him and with Him we can be more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37).

Bible references: Matt. 6:19-21; 16:18; 20:25-28; 24:31; 25:41; 26:56; 28:18; Luke 9:26; Acts 1:7; Gal. 1:4; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 5:17; Tit. 2:11-14; Heb. 9:28; Jas. 1:22; 1 Pet. 5:1-9; 1 John 2:15-17; Rev. 3:21; 12:7-9; Psalm 91:11, 12; Proverbs 11:14

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