

“Watch and Pray”
The Gospel According to Mark 13:24-37
November 25th, 2018

The churches of northeastern America grew rapidly in the early 1800s, fueled by one revival after another. The new Christians had little theological education, yet many of them began to discuss details of biblical prophecy with great excitement and vigor.

Speculation boiled over as to the exact day and year when Jesus Christ would return to earth. Among the speculators was a simple farmer and Baptist layman from Low Hampton, New York, William Miller.

Miller, when newly converted to faith in Jesus Christ, dug through the prophecies of the Old Testament prophet Daniel. He concluded in 1818 that Christ would return to earth in 1843 or 1844. When he later began preaching, this became a keynote of his sermons, and his listeners, finding him earnest, eloquent, and sincere, multiplied. He finally announced that Christ would return to earth on October 22nd, 1844.

The financial panic of 1839 contributed to the belief that the end of the world was approaching. Enthusiasm for Christ’s return became so great that prophetic charts were added alongside stock-market listings and current events in the newspapers. Miller’s teachings swept through New England, and large numbers of people followed him – they were known as Millerites.

From mid-August to October 1844, the Millerites engaged in a frenzy of activities. They flooded the country with their periodicals, books, and pamphlets. Many sold their property, closed their stores, resigned from their jobs, and abandoned their animals and crops.

As the morning of October 22nd, 1844 dawned, a sense of fear and foreboding fell over New England. People gathered on mountaintops and in churches. Normal activities ceased as everyone waited the sudden rending of the skies and the end of the world.

When the day passed uneventfully, many professing Christians grew disillusioned. The unsaved became cynical. The following years saw a decline in conversions to Christ, and the period of revivals came to an end. The event became known as “The Great Disappointment.”

It’s also interesting to note that some of the Millerites stayed together, setting new dates for Christ’s return – 1845, 1846, 1849, and 1851. Some of these people would begin a new denomination – the Seventh Day Adventists.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are perennial date setters for Christ’s return – they’ve predicted it would happen in 1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975, and 1984. Each time, they’ve been wrong, causing great embarrassment to themselves, and unnecessary stress to those in their membership.

It’s a great temptation to live this life in ways other than God commands. **He commands that “we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7).”** Yet, there could be those here today who read the horoscope column to learn what their day has in store, at least according to the stars and those who profess to read them.

In contrast, we have the teaching of Holy Scripture, and a comforting passage for believers in Jesus Christ is before us today.

Mark 13:24-37:

²⁴“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; ²⁵the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷And then He will send His angels, and gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest part of earth to the farthest part of heaven.

²⁸“Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So you also, when you see these things happening, know that it is near—at the doors! ³⁰Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.

³²“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. ³⁴*It is* like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. ³⁵Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning—³⁶lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. ³⁷And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!”

Having spoken about things the disciples *can know* in the first 23 verses, Jesus now enters a section of teaching where “*no one knows*” as He puts it in verse 32. In the first 23 verses, we see there *is time* given for Christians to flee the judgment of Jerusalem; in the second section there *is not time* for flight.

In verses 5-23 (which we’ve covered the last two Sunday mornings), Jesus answered the disciples’ first question in verse 4 – “Tell us, when will these things be?” He spoke of the signs preceding the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. He taught His disciples that those things would happen in their lifetimes – in verse 30, He said that all those things He had just spoken of would take place before they would “pass away.”

As we are now some 2,000 years after Jesus spoke these words, we know that the temple was destroyed when the Roman armies under General Titus surrounded and destroyed Jerusalem near the end of the first century AD – the year 70. (Take note of the *Busenitz’ News and Views* missionary update in today’s worship bulletin!)

But what He now teaches from verse 24 on is the answer to the disciples’ second question back in verse 4 – “And when will be the sign of Your coming, and the end of the age?”

Perhaps the most important lesson Jesus teaches in the verses before us today is what I’ve chosen for this sermon’s title – we must “watch and pray.” “What God requires of His people is not a last-minute turning over of a new leaf prompted by a warning ‘sign,’ but a life of constant readiness.” (France, 936)

Over and against the teaching of false christs and prophets, Jesus teaches something very important in verses 24-27: His appearing will not be something you have to look in small places for – His coming will be so big, so grand, and so obvious, the entire world will know. This is verse 26, “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.”

Jesus uses Old Testament judgment language in describing His return to earth. **Isaiah 13:10** – “For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.” In its original context, this spoke of the then-coming destruction of Babylon.

Isaiah 34:4 – “All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; all their host shall fall down as the leaf falls from the vine, and as *fruit* falling from a fig tree.” This speaks of a threatened judgment on “all nations”, later narrowed down to Edom.

The Old Testament prophet **Ezekiel** proclaimed judgment against Pharaoh and Egypt in his **32nd chapter, verses 7 & 8** – “When *I* put out your light, I will cover the heavens, and make its stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of the heavens I will make dark over you, and bring darkness upon your land,’ says the Lord GOD.”

Consider the same sort of cosmic language in these next two verses, which are judgments on the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel:

Amos 8:9 – “And it shall come to pass in that day,” says the Lord GOD, ‘That I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight;”

Joel 2:10 – “The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; The sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness.”

Verses 28-31 contain the Parable of the Fig Tree. Jesus’ point here is that just as there are signs of things to come naturally, so there are spiritually.

Then, with verses 32-37 of today’s passage, Jesus teaches the suddenness of His return, likening it to servants not knowing the return of their master. The return could be at any time of the day; without any kind of warning. This is the teaching throughout the New Testament - Jesus’ return will be sudden and unexpected. Consider:

- **I Thessalonians 5:2-3** – “For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.”
- **2 Peter 3:10** – “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”
- **Revelation 3:3** – “Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.”

What are we, as faithful servants, to do in light of Jesus’ unexpected coming? We are to “watch” which appears in today’s passage four times (verses 33, 34, 35, and 37). And we are to “pray” (verse 33).

1 – “**Watch.**” The Millerites thought watching meant scanning the skies. So, did the disciples immediately after Jesus ascended into glory, we’re instructed in the first chapter of Acts. Listen to verses 10 & 11 – “And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men

stood by them in white apparel, ¹¹ who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This *same* Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

To ‘watch’ is to understand that Jesus is coming back again. It is the teaching of Scripture and the teaching of our creeds. Our nature is to slumber and sleep, even as the disciples did in the Garden of Gethsemane, despite Jesus’ instruction for them to stay and watch (Mark 14:34; 38).

There is an old fable in which three apprentice devils were talking to Satan. The first one said, “I will tell people there is no God.” Satan replied, “That will not fool many, because they know there is a God.”

The second devil said, “I will tell them there is no hell.” Satan said, “You will never fool many that way, because they know there is no hell.”

The third devil said, “I will tell people there is no hurry.” Satan said, “Go, and you will ruin millions.”

2 – **We are to “pray.”** “When Jesus speaks about the future, his words are meant to change the way we live in the present.” (Ferguson, 218) When it comes to prayer, “we are to keep up habits of regular communion...with God. We are to allow no strangeness to come in between us and our Father in heaven, but to speak with Him daily; that so we may be ready at any moment to see Him face to face.” (Ryle, 294)

What are we to pray for? For sure, we should pray as the video we watched earlier in this service of worship – we should pray for Christians who are persecuted, and for their captors. We should pray that we have right motives in ministering to others, along with right behaviors as Scripture details them. We must pray for the unsaved; those whom the Holy Spirit has not brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ. The impending return of Jesus to earth ought to compel us to be persistent in evangelizing of our close friends, family, and loved ones that do not walk with Jesus. Finally, we are to pray that God’s will would be done on earth even as it is in heaven. (Heaven, incidentally, is mentioned *five* times in the verses before us today!)

Bishop JC Ryle adds, “Moreover, we are to make special prayer about the Lord’s coming, that we may be “found in peace, without spot and blameless,” (2 Peter 3:14) and that our hearts may at no time be “weighed down” with the cares of this life, and so the day come upon us unexpectedly.” (Luke 21:34) (Ryle, 294)

Mexican jails are not known for their tidiness or orderliness. Shortly after having taken office, the then President of Mexico, Luis Echeverria, decided to do something about this.

Without giving any advance notice, he chose to visit the jails at midnight. He found guards away from their posts, prisoners not taken care of, and other discrepancies between the expectations and reality. He proceeded to fire people and clean up the system.

We never know when our Lord may come. Let us not be lax in our responsibilities so that the Lord finds us lacking.