

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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TAKE HEED, WATCH

Mark 13:33-37

The Lord Jesus said that one day He will come back. And He also described how He will come back. It is going to be a sudden and unexpected return. Let's read His teaching in Mark 13:33-37.

*Mark 13:33. Take heed, **watch**; for you do not know when the time will come.*

*34 It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the **watch**.*

*35 **Watch** therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning --*

36 lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

*37 And what I say to you I say to all: **Watch**."*

Notice the double stress of Jesus' words when He begins this section. *Take heed, watch*. These two terms mean almost the same thing. Notice also the repetition of the word 'watch.' It appears four times: v. 33, v. 34, v. 35, and v. 37. When we read a warning like that, several questions come to our mind. Watch for what? What exactly am I supposed to watch? Jesus says that nobody knows the time. Then how do you watch what you cannot expect?

Coming like a thief

This word 'watch' is important in the Lord's teaching. It is repeated at least two other times at the end of His ministry, each time in the context of not knowing the time of His return. In Matthew 24:42: ***Watch** therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.* And in Matthew 25:13: ***Watch** therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.* The context of Matthew is interesting because Jesus compares His coming to the breaking in of a thief at night. We will read the full text. Matthew 24:42-44.

Matthew 24:42-44. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.

43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

44 Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Here the thief represents Jesus. At first glance, that is somewhat surprising. Of course, the point of comparison is not that Christ is a thief. It is much like the metaphor that compares God to an unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8. God is not an unjust judge. The point that Jesus is making in Matthew 24 is that like a thief, He will come back at an unexpected time. The break-in of a thief illustrates something that is unpredictable. That is why Jesus said, 'If the owner of the house had known when

the robber was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. In fact, he did not know the time. In the same way, the Son of Man will come when you least expect Him.'

So Jesus instructs his followers to be aware of the suddenness of His coming. He repeats the same warning a few verses later where He compares the time of His coming to the days of Noah. *For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man* (Matthew 24:38-39). To the unbelieving world, the flood came unexpectedly and with shattering suddenness. It will be just like that when the Son of man comes.

A loss

Our passage in Mark 13 raises another question. A break-in is a shocking and traumatic experience for anyone. How does that fit in with the experience of welcoming Jesus at His second coming? Surely, believers look forward to a joyful occasion at the time of His return. For those who know Him, His return will be a pleasant event. They are not going to treat Him like a thief. Is Jesus suggesting that His return to earth will be a bad experience? Well, the answer is yes and no. Here Jesus is very straightforward about the reality and seriousness of the judgment. He compares His return to a break-in because for those who are not expecting Him to come back, His coming will have the effect of a break-in. This means that if He catches you unprepared, you will suffer loss.

Let me explain. When a robber breaks into a house, what does he do? Is he going to say 'Hello' to the owner of the house? Of course not. He is going to walk off discretely with everything that he can carry. And when the victim wakes up the next morning, he will realize that many things of value disappeared during the night. He will realize that he has suffered loss. So the point of Jesus' warning is this: 'When I come, if I find you unprepared for my coming, you will suffer loss.'

In 1Thessalonians 5, the apostle Paul uses the same picture of a thief when he warns us that the day of the Lord will come as destruction and judgment on those who are in darkness, i.e., those who do not expect Jesus' return. 1Thessalonians 5:2-4.

*1Thessalonians 5:2. For you yourselves know full well that **the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.***

3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief.

Peter also speaks of the day of the Lord in terms of a thief that comes at night. 2Peter 3:10.

*2Peter 3:10. **But the day of the Lord will come like a thief**, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.*

You see that in one sense, Jesus' return 'will come like a thief' for everyone, i.e., its timing is unknown to all. The angels lack that information. Even the Lord Jesus does not know the time. Only the Father knows. In another sense, it will not be like a thief for believers who are prepared and expecting His coming at any time. But for unbelievers, who are not expecting Jesus, it will be like a break-in. They will suffer a traumatic loss.

The sleep of death

Now let's go back to the word 'watch.' *Take heed, watch* (Mark 13:33). The Greek word here translated as 'watch' is *agrupneo*. This word literally means 'without sleep.' It comes from the combination of two words: 1) the privative particle 'a', which means 'without'; 2) *hupnos*, which means 'sleep.' Literally, without sleep. Sleepless. You are watchful to the extent that you stay awake. You do not allow yourself to fall asleep. In the context of Mark 13:34, the doorkeeper was 'commanded to watch.' He had to keep awake and answer the door when the owner of the house returned during the course of the night.

That is the basic meaning of the word 'watch' in Greek. In English, it is somewhat misleading, because when we use the word 'watch,' people immediately think of 'watching for what?' It is not like that in Greek. The point is not so much to watch for something. The emphasis is on the state of the mind, on the condition of the mind. To watch means literally to keep awake, to be without sleep, to avoid falling asleep.

This is important to understand because 'sleep' in the Bible often means death. For example, when the psalmist prayed to the Lord, *Enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death* (Psalm 13:3), he is saying, 'Revive me, Lord, otherwise I will die!' Now if 'sleep' has the symbolic significance of death, by analogy, being awake takes on the significance of being alive. It is important to keep that in mind in order to understand what Jesus means.

There is another Greek word which is translated as 'watch,' and it is the word *gregoreuo*. *Gregoreuo* means to stay awake, to be on the alert, to be active, to be wakeful. Jesus said in Matthew 25:13, *Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.* 'Stay awake' - *gregoreuo*. There is no point trying to guess when Jesus will come back. Nobody knows the day nor the hour. The point is to remain awake and to expect the Lord's return at any moment.

Now we have a picture that begins to emerge. The picture has two people. One is asleep, or dozing off, and the other one is awake and alert. The Lord Jesus is saying that we must be awake and alert at His coming, or else we are going to suffer loss. If we understand the imagery properly, to be awake is to be spiritually alive, and to be asleep is to be spiritually dead.

The apostle Paul uses the same kind of imagery in Ephesians 5:14: *Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."* Notice the relationship between sleep and death. *Arise from the dead.* Arise from your sleep. There are two kinds of people. Those who are spiritually alive, and those who are spiritually dead. Or, to use the Lord's language, those who are awake, and those who are asleep.

Right now, the gospel is calling man to life, trying to awaken every human being. That is why the preaching of the gospel is sometimes compared to the blowing of a trumpet that awakens us in the morning. Paul says, 'Wake up, you who are asleep. Rise from spiritual death. Christ will give you light. Christ will give you life.'

Notice that the responsibility of becoming awake, of responding to the gospel is with us. God has done His part in the proclamation of the gospel. He has done His part in the blowing of the trumpet of the gospel. And it is understood that this gospel is able to awaken anyone who is willing to wake up. Many do not want to wake up. Some will wake up, but they soon realize that the gospel disturbs their ears. They will shut it off. They will put ear plugs.

We belong to the day

1Thessalonians 5:5-10 is an interesting passage. It seems that when Paul wrote this passage, he had in mind this very teaching of Jesus about being awake and being asleep. Let's read it.

1Thessalonians 5:4. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief.

5 For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.

8 But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

10 who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him.

You see that Paul uses the word 'sleep' in more than one sense. He says, 'We are sons of the day. We don't sleep in the daytime. Those who sleep, sleep at night in the darkness. But we are not sons of night. We are not sons of darkness. Therefore we should be awake.' Here you can see how Paul's text seems to be influenced by the teaching of Jesus.

Now notice several contrasts in the text:

- There is the night and day contrast in vv. 5, 7, 8.
- There is the sleeping and watching contrast in vv. 6 and 7.
- There is the stress on darkness and night in vv. 4 and 5.
- There is the stress on light and day in vv. 5 and 8.
- There is the drunk and sober contrast in vv. 6, 7 and 8.
- There is the wrath and salvation contrast in v. 9.
- And finally, there is the life and death contrast in v. 10.

From these contrasts, we perceive two lines of thought:

A) night - darkness - sleeping - drunk - death - wrath

B) day ----light --- **watching** - sober ---life - salvation

When we put these two lines of thought in parallel, we observe that 'watching' is matched with 'sleeping.' Now we begin to see what it means to be watching. It means to be spiritually alive. It refers to a certain quality of conduct in our lives. The person who is watching lives as somebody who is awake, who lives in the light, i.e. in righteousness. Light refers to the righteousness of God. Darkness in the Bible refers to evil, to the blackness of sin. So I repeat. To watch means to be awake. It means to live as someone who conducts himself in the light, who lives a life of righteousness and truth.

We have mentioned several times in the past that being a Christian is not a matter of believing certain facts, that Jesus was crucified 2000 years ago, that He died for our sins, that He raised from the dead ... All that truth is very important, but it has no saving value for us until it wakes us up, until it moves us from the realm of darkness to the realm of light, until we begin to live as new creatures that Paul speaks about (2Corinthians 5:17), until there is a complete change in our attitude and in our conduct.

Will He find faith?

To watch means that there is a fundamental difference in our attitude. Let us go back to Matthew 24 to see this point. In Matthew 24:44, the Lord Jesus concludes a section where He states that nobody knows the hour of His return. *Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

Notice the next verse, v. 45. Jesus draws the logical consequence of His unexpected coming. He says, *Who then ...* The word 'then' is important. It leads to the logical conclusion of what has just been said. If then, if it is so, then it should be so. *Who then* means, 'in consequence of what we have just said about the coming of the Son of man being unexpected.' And what is the logical consequence? The consequence is that you have to be watchful. If Christ's return is going to be unexpected, then you have to be ready. What it means to be ready, Jesus explains it. Let's read Matthew 24:45-50.

Matthew 24:45. Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?

46 Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes (notice the coming) will find so doing (i.e. consistently doing what he was entrusted to do).

47 Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.

48 But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,'

49 and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken,

50 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know,

51 and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites (where do the hypocrites go? They go to hell); there men will weep and gnash their teeth (where do men weep and gnash their teeth? In hell).

This text is a warning about the serious consequences of not being ready for the return of Christ, of not being watchful. The readiness of the good slave consists not in sitting by the window watching for his master, but in getting on with the job he has been given to accomplish. The fault of the bad servant is in his assumption that the master will not be back soon and that therefore he will not be held to account.

So the basic question of the story is this: When the Son of man comes, will He find faith? Will He find His people still faithful? Will we, like this faithful servant, be found doing what we were called to do? And what are we called to do? Paul tells us that we are called to live a life in righteousness. We are called to a life of sanctification. We are called to a life of holiness.

Therefore, what does it mean to watch? As we mentioned at the beginning, it is not about what we watch. It is about how we watch. It is about a state of the mind. It is about being ready, staying awake, living the Christian life, living in the light. It is about living faithfully to God. So that when the Lord comes again, He will find us awake, spiritually alert, doing the things that He has called us to do.

Lest your hearts be weighed down

Let's close with this question. What causes a person to fall asleep? What makes a person to become drowsy spiritually? Just before telling us to be always on the watch, Jesus says this in Luke 21:34-36.

Luke 21:34. But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare:

35 for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth.

36 But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.

This word 'weighed down' (*bareo*) is very interesting. It is used in Matthew 26:43 to describe the heaviness of the disciples' eyes. There we read that their eyes were so heavy, *bareo*, so weighed down that they could not keep them open, they could not stop themselves from falling asleep. Jesus said to them, *Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.* And they were trying to watch and pray, but their eyes were just getting too heavy. In the end, *Jesus came to His disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting?"*

What causes the heart to be weighed down? What causes a person to fall asleep? We have three words here. The first one is 'dissipation.' It refers to the frivolity, the giddiness that comes from having too much wine, when your moral restraints start to loosen up. The next word is 'drunkenness.' This is literally to be intoxicated with alcohol. One of the effects of drunkenness is, of course, to fall asleep. You can drink to the point that you fall asleep. And the third thing is the 'cares of this life,' i.e. the preoccupation with and the unwillingness to part from the things of the world. In other words, an undisciplined life, abandonment to a worldly life can cause spiritual dullness and distract a person from being ready for Jesus' return. For those who will be caught off guard, the Lord's coming will be like a snare. It will come unexpectedly and they will suffer loss. On that day, there will be no opportunity for last minute repentance.