

'As A Thief In The Night'

by David C. Grabbe

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As we slide further into the time of the end, and the bright summer days continue to be spiritually dark, it is common for us to look around for an indicator of how long it will be until Jesus Christ returns. We might scan the horizon for any clue to how and when the end-time prophecies will be fulfilled and Christ will return. We watch events in the world continue to churn seemingly out of control, but we do not see many key prophecies being fulfilled.

In the parables, prophecies, and epistles, a phrase is used frequently with regard to the Day of the Lord and the return of Jesus Christ. Though it may vary slightly from verse to verse, numerous instructions are given to "*watch*, because the Day of the Lord [or else Christ Himself] will come *as a thief in the night*" (emphasis ours throughout). "Watch" in such instances does not mean what many think it means. It is tied closely with our Savior's return, yet it has little to do with physical observation. Why is such watching important? What does it have to do with Christ returning as "a thief in the night?"

One oft-quoted "watching" verse is Luke 21:36: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." It is frequently interpreted to mean that we should be closely watching current events so we know how close we are to Christ's return. The common paraphrase of this command is "watch world news, so that as you begin to see prophecy unfold, you can escape the horrors of the Tribulation."

This interpretation has led to a cottage industry of sorts within the greater church of God. A tremendous amount of effort is put into commenting on world events and tying them into biblical prophecy. The underlying assumption is that God wants us to have our finger on the pulse of the news, and this knowledge—combined with prayer—will make us worthy to escape all those prophesied things. But does this assumption agree with Scripture?

In fact, the Greek word translated "watch" has nothing to do with looking at events or keeping world news under close observation. Even without examining the underlying Greek, we can tell from the context that Jesus has something else in mind. Verse 36 begins, "Watch *therefore*," signaling that it concludes or summarizes previous material. We cannot understand verse 36 until we know what preceded it.

Keeping an Eye on Number One

Verses 34-35 provide the context for Jesus' command to "watch":

But *take heed to yourselves*, lest *your hearts* be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth.

Clearly, Jesus' message is not an admonition to watch world events so that we will know when He will return. Instead, His instruction is to watch *ourselves*, which is what "*take heed to yourselves*" suggests. He is talking about being vigilant about our own spiritual state, as well as being

circumspect and spiritually awake as we go through life. The danger is that, if we do not "watch" ourselves—that is, continually take stock of our condition and responsibilities—self-indulgence and material concerns will distract us, and we will find ourselves spiritually unprepared when the end comes.

Luke 21:36, then, is not an injunction to be glued to CNN, FOX, the Drudge Report, or any other news source. In fact, a subtle danger exists in being too caught up in current events, as it can distract us from the more vital *spiritual* preparation. The upshot is that the Day will come, and we do not know when.

Watching events unfold is not what makes us "worthy to escape," but our cooperation with God as He forms His character image in us does. Thus, in addition to prayer, we have to be vigilant in our covenant with Him. We have to "take heed" to ourselves constantly, examining our walk and how we are seeking and imitating God.

The Greek word translated "watch," at its most basic, means "to be sleepless," implying continuous and wakeful concern, such as being on watch when a loved one is ill. It means to be intent or to exercise constant vigilance over something, as a shepherd watches over his sheep or a leader watches over his charges (Hebrews 13:17). Watching signifies a state of being untouched by any influence that may cloud the mind; one "watching" guards against drowsiness or confusion. Hand-in-hand with "pray always," it denotes being alert for spiritual dangers and beguilements. Obviously, this state will not transpire from following—or even deeply analyzing—current events.

Luke 12:35-40 provides a good illustration of watching:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning [that is, be prepared]; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. . . . And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. 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. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

In verses 37-38, Jesus pronounces a blessing on those whom the Master finds watching *when* He returns. It is not that they have their noses pressed to the glass, watching *for* His return. Instead, those who are vigilant and careful in their responsibilities will be blessed. They are watching over the Master's house, ensuring that all is in order, even if it means sleepless nights. "Be ready" in verse 40 is a simple summation of the "watching" He desires.

Verse 38 warns that He might return in the second watch or in the third. Regardless of whether the Master returns early or late (from our perspective), He wants His servants to be ready and His household in order. He wants them to be maintaining the house, diligent in their duties, so that all is prepared for His return. If they spend their days staring out the window, watching the road for His return rather than fulfilling their duties, they will be neglecting what He has charged them to do.

The duties of a typical servant include many mundane, monotonous, and repetitive chores. It is easy for a servant to think, "What is the use? Do I *really* have to do this *right now*? Since there is no sign of the Master right now, perhaps I can just relax, and prepare quickly when His return seems near."

Such a servant would be inclined to spend more time watching from the window for the Master's return than he would be performing his assigned tasks. Yet, a servant's responsibility is to be prepared and to make sure the household (the church) is prepared, not to anticipate the timing of the Master's return.

Jesus says repeatedly that we will not know. If we believe Him, our focus will be on being faithful and vigilant in the things He has given us to do. His return will take the household by surprise—there is no other way to understand His many statements. The critical point is the state of readiness and the usefulness of the household and the servants when He returns. If the household is not ready, or if the servants have been sleeping rather than working, they will face His wrath.

A Steward's Responsibility

In verses 42-47, the instruction to watch continues. However, this time Jesus focuses specifically on the responsibility of the steward—the one given authority over the household while the Master is away:

And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes."

His theme is preparation and faithful continuance of duty. He tasks the steward—a type of the ministry—with giving the household "food in due season." Similarly, Paul outlines the responsibilities of church leadership in his letter to the Ephesians. Notice that the focus is on the church, not on the world: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, *for the equipping of the saints* for the work of ministry [service], *for the edifying of the body of Christ*. . ." (Ephesians 4:11-13). Church leaders are responsible for feeding and preparing God's household and encouraging them to watch *themselves*.

If the steward does not properly watch, however, the human proclivity is to let down—and abuse. The steward in Luke 12:45 is focused on the Master's return—or lack thereof—rather than on his own alertness and attention to his duties. As a result, he falls into excesses of eating and drinking (rather than providing food for the household). He ends up beating those he was supposed to watch over, as if he thought they belonged to him. Clearly, those who have stewardship responsibilities in the church have an added weight to "take heed to themselves" lest they neglect or even damage those for whom they are supposed to be providing spiritual food.

Mark 13:32-37 provides another illustration of watching:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. *Take heed, watch and pray*; for you do not know when the time is. 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. Watch 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—lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!

In this parable, it is even more apparent that the Master intends for the servants to be watchful—diligent, alert, taking heed to themselves—in their work and authority rather than for His return. Twice, He says that no one knows the timing of His return—not even Himself! Here, He tells us that we do not know the "day and hour," but after His resurrection He expands this unknown variable to "times or seasons" (Acts 1:6-7).

So, even though we might be able to have a rough idea when that time draws near (see Matthew 24: 32-33; Luke 21:29-31), in general, it is secret and indeterminable. Our time, then, is best spent focusing on our responsibilities before God rather than being caught up in the details of how it *might* unfold. These things are unknowable, but even if one *could* correctly anticipate them, it would all be for naught if the individual is not *spiritually prepared* for Jesus Christ's return (see also Matthew 24: 42-44).

Coming in the Night

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) uses a different metaphor, but the critical admonition is the same. A cry awakens them all at midnight, but it leaves them no time for preparation—it announces the Bridegroom's presence and commands them to meet Him. At that point, there is no opportunity to get things into shape quickly—to grow hurriedly, overcome, develop a relationship with the Father and the Son, and take on their character image. The period of preparation has ended; the time that has been prepared for has come. The Bridegroom tells those who had not made advance spiritual preparations, "I do not know you." They lose out on the opportunity that God had given to them because they would not watch themselves—not make the necessary preparations.

In I Thessalonians, Paul also addresses the Day of the Lord coming "as a thief in the night":

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. . . . But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Thessalonians 5:1-2, 4-9)

Like us, the return of Christ was much on the minds of first-century Christians, yet Paul tells them he felt no need to write concerning its timing. Why? Because they should have known that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. There was no point in Paul trying to outline it all, as it will happen at a time that nobody can anticipate.

However, he writes something that seems contradictory in verse 4: Since they are not in darkness, that Day should not "overtake [them] as a thief." What is actually meant is that the day of God's

wrath would not *possess* them—literally, "take them over." God's wrath would not swallow them up, or the destruction of that Day does not need to *have power over them*. He does not mean that it would not *surprise* them, but as a parallel verse clarifies, "For God has not appointed us to wrath" (verse 9), even though they *will* be surprised.

Verse 6 contains the same admonition seen elsewhere to be awake, to be sober, and to watch. Though we are not *appointed* to wrath, other verses show that we can certainly still incur it if we are not taking heed to ourselves (see Hebrews 10:26-31). So we are instructed to watch—to be vigilant about our spiritual state, to have continuous and wakeful concern over fulfilling our part of the covenant, to be on guard against spiritual dangers, spiritual drowsiness, and deception. Those who do these things, along with praying always, will be accounted worthy to escape the wrath. Simply watching down the road for a sign of the Master's return really does not prepare us for anything at all.

Letter to Sardis

Finally, Jesus writes this same message to a portion of the end-time church:

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, "These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: 'I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. 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.'" (Revelation 3:1-3)

After calling them essentially the "church of the mostly dead," He instructs them to "be watchful." He complements this with, "strengthen the things which remain," which qualifies the meaning of "watch." There is still a glimmer of life within this church, but the letter gives the impression that they have relaxed in their spiritual responsibilities so much that they are nearly comatose. They have not been vigilant in their core responsibilities or on guard against deception, apathy, or neglect. They have not had sleepless nights over their standing with God.

Interestingly, in the Bible's first mention of the Day of the Lord (Isaiah 2:12), it says that it "shall come upon everything *proud* and *lofty*, upon everything *lifted up*—and it shall be brought low." The primary target is the proud—the self-assured. The ironic thing is that this state of spiritual near-death could easily come about even while they are avidly watching world events. They could be quite adept at following the news reports and may know better than anyone what is really going on in the world and how it fits with prophecy.

But that does not fulfill Christ's and the apostle's commands to *watch*! It is not that it is wrong to keep tabs on world news, but watching world news is chiefly about *observing*. True watching emphasizes *diligence*; it is being *alert* to *spiritual* dangers more than physical ones. It is about faithfully carrying out our God-given responsibilities, like a servant in the Master's house. None of that results from simply being a news- or prophecy-addict.

In verse 3, He tells them to call to mind the previous lessons and instructions they have heard. He tells them to repent and to guard and maintain their position so they backslide no further. As before,

His description gives little indication of spiritual vibrancy or zeal. There probably *is* a great deal of activity, since He says that they have a name—or reputation—for being alive. Yet, in the areas that truly matter—like growth, faith, seeking God, and overcoming—not much is happening.

He also warns them that, if they will not watch *themselves* and their covenant responsibilities to their Master, He will come upon them like a thief. He implies that they will not be counted worthy to escape. They may not be appointed to wrath as the world is, but they certainly are not immune to it. In fact, they stand a good chance of experiencing some of it, having not been vigilant and alert in watching over the things that God has given them.

Plainly, Christ will return when we do not expect Him. We may be able to observe some general indicators when key prophecies are fulfilled, but the overall timing will be a mystery. His coming will be like a thief in the night, *purposefully* hidden from all. Rather than trying to discern the timing, we are instructed to "watch"—not world events, but to *watch over* all that God has given to us, so that when that Day arrives, we are ready. He knows that if we are faithful in little—in the mundane, the monotonous, the unexciting—we will also be faithful in the truly great things that lie ahead.