

## Praying Always (Part One)

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Luke 21:36 is a familiar scripture that we have heard often during our years in the church: "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." To illustrate a common use of this scripture in the church, notice a quotation from Lesson 3 of the Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course, *The Sensational Return of Jesus Christ!*:

That's why God commands us to "watch" (Luke 21:36)—to watch world news so we may be aware of the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, and to be accounted worthy to escape the nuclear holocaust soon to fall upon this heedless, rebellious world!

Because we so often use such familiar scriptures for a specific idea, we can overlook a fundamental truth or instruction that the passage reveals. What is the message Christ gives us in this verse? It may be one of the most important survival instructions, both physical and spiritual, that He gives to those living during the end time. He gives us the essence of how we can escape the worst of the Tribulation and be with Christ in God's Kingdom.

### A Review

To begin to understand Luke 21:36, we need to review Luke 21 as a chapter. For most of it, Christ gives the warning signs that signal the end of the age (Luke 21:6-7; Matthew 24:2-3). Luke 21:7-33 prepares us for the various physical events to look for, and verses 34-35, as we shall see, prepare us for spiritual events.

In verses 7-19, Jesus informs us about the visible signs, the world events, which signal that the end is near. In verses 20-24, He is still talking about these visible signs, but specifically about those that involve Jerusalem. Verses 25-28 describe the cataclysmic events in the sky and on the earth, heralding His imminent return. Thus, through verse 28, our Savior reveals to us the events presaging His return in the world (verses 7-19), in Jerusalem (verses 20-24), and in the sky and earth (verses 25-28).

Next, Christ relates the Parable of the Fig Tree (verses 29-33) to give instruction regarding His warnings in the previous verses. The "these things" in verse 31 refers to the question asked in verse 7 and Jesus' subsequent answer in verses 8-28. "These things" are the events foretold to happen as the end nears. In the parable, Christ provides the perspective we should have as we anticipate the unfolding of the previously described events.

What owner of a fig tree would spend hours each day scrutinizing his tree to see if it was budding? Would he make the fig tree the focal point of his day? Of course, no one would. An owner of a fig tree would be aware of its location, its level of health, and its progression through the annual cycle of growth, but these matters would not require his all-consuming effort.

The parable, then, shows us that we should be aware of prophecy, we should keep an eye on what is happening in the world, but it does not require—and we should not allow it to become—our primary

focus. In the fig-tree analogy, Jesus illustrates for us the balanced view we should have toward prophecy. We *must* be aware of what is taking place, but we need not be over-attentive.

Some make the mistake—a spiritually dangerous mistake—of ignoring the lesson of this parable by making prophecy a major or even sole focus that distracts them from their primary spiritual responsibilities. It is easier to focus on prophecy and world events than it is to give the same scrutiny to the evils lurking in our corrupt human nature (Jeremiah 17:9). In Luke 21, Christ definitely does not overlook the latter, as we see in verses 34-35:

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.

With the opening "But" in verse 34, Christ's message takes a definite turn. He is still talking about preparing us for the end of the age, but He shifts from the external events of verses 7-33 to the internal: "take heed to *yourselves*, lest *your* hearts. . . ." He is no longer talking about world events, the physical and external, but our "hearts," the spiritual and internal. He gives a warning to those who are not spiritually aware and focused—those who are distracted. They will be caught completely off guard—"that Day come[s on them] unexpectedly"—because their hearts are misdirected.

Verse 35 re-emphasizes that the end will be a surprise to some people, one that Christ compares to a bird snared or trapped. Why? Verse 34 supplies the reason: They are burdened by the "cares of this life," not focused on what counts. They are looking in the wrong direction, and the trap springs on them without warning. Rather than overcoming the world (I John 5:4), as Laodiceans, they are being absorbed by it (Revelation 3:14-22).

Between verses 8-33 and verses 34-35 of Luke 21, we can also see a contrast in the awareness levels we need to have regarding the physical versus the spiritual. For the physical, we are to be aware but not over-attentive. For the spiritual, however, Christ raises the level of vigilance: "Take heed to yourselves," or be on guard! He exhorts us to be in a high state of spiritual alertness.

### **Watch What?**

With verses 34-35 as an introduction, Christ commands in verse 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."

According to *Strong's Concordance*, *agrupneo*, the Greek word translated as *watch*, means "to be sleepless, i.e. keep awake." Frequently, when the Bible mentions being asleep or tells us to wake up, it refers to our spiritual state (Matthew 25:5; Romans 13:11; I Thessalonians 5:6-8). Instead of "watch," some Bible versions use words such as, "don't go to sleep at the switch" (The Message), "be always on the watch" (NIV), "be ready all the time" (New Century Version), "keep awake" (Amplified Bible), "keep on the alert" (NASB), "stay awake" (ESV), "keep a constant watch" (Living Bible), and "beware of slumbering" (New Testament in Modern Speech). This is a call to the spiritual, not the physical.

Just over two decades ago, an elderly man named Herbert Armstrong cried out, "Wake up!" and he was not talking about any other waking up than a spiritual one. Because we did not heed his warning then, the church has experienced twenty years of apostasy and scattering. If we do not wake up eventually, God has a three-and-a-half-year plan guaranteed to get our attention.

In our former association, we obeyed the instructions in Luke 21:7-33 to watch world events, but we did not closely follow Christ's commands in Luke 21:34-36 to guard our spiritual condition, hence the scattering. Interestingly, the condition of the church at that time mirrors how Luke 21:36 was generally applied—physical rather than spiritual.

It is always a good practice to allow the Bible to interpret itself rather than adding extra-biblical interpretations (II Peter 1:20). Because the Bible uses sleep and waking from sleep as spiritual metaphors, why would we want to add another meaning to the "watch" of Luke 21:36? That would be walking on shaky ground (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32), and we want to avoid repeating past error.

To emphasize that "watch" in Luke 21:36 is all about the spiritual and *not* about the physical, notice how *agrupneo* is used in its only other appearances in the New Testament:

**Mark 13:33:** "Take heed, *watch* and pray; for you do not know when the time is." (This verse parallels Luke 21:36.)

**Ephesians 6:18:** ". . . praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being *watchful* to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints." (The context of this verse is putting on the whole armor of God—definitely a spiritual exercise.)

**Hebrews 13:17:** Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they *watch* out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (The ministry's first priority is the spiritual health of called-out Christians.)

These facts lead to the conclusion that "watch" in Luke 21:36 has little, or perhaps even nothing, to do with watching world events.

### **Prove All Things**

It may just roll off the tongue to say "watch world news," and Luke 21:36 seems to make that very easy. Just because it is easy and comfortable, having been saying it for decades, does not justify clinging to an old notion unless we have a solid foundation *in the Bible* for that belief.

I Thessalonians 5:21 instructs us to "test [*prove*, KJV] *all* things," which would include our old notions, and *then* "hold fast" to the good ones—the ones that pass the test. A mistake many make is to follow tenaciously the instruction of Revelation 3:11 to "hold fast to what we have" while completely ignoring the additional instructions of I Thessalonians 5:21 to test first.

Experience proves that not all that we believe is truth, even if held fast for forty years—a Sunday rather than a Monday Pentecost is but one example. We have to test our beliefs continually and rigorously against the only standard that counts—the Bible (Acts 5:29).

Human nature is lazy and takes the easy road at every opportunity. It will rely on human reasoning, the word of others, or tradition rather than do the hard work of studying the Bible and believing what it actually says. Human nature also will not naturally do the humbling work of allowing the Bible and its plain, unambiguous verses to prove matters rather than following humanly devised ideas. The church's history over the last few decades displays the fruits of taking doctrine for granted rather than allowing clear scriptures to guide our understanding of the truth.

Why do people have so many different opinions about what the Bible says? Generally, people come to the Bible with preconceived ideas and latch on to any scripture that *seems* to prove their belief. At the same time, they will ignore or make light of a clear verse that obviously contradicts their belief.

God can use this as a test to determine the true intents of the heart. Where does one's allegiance really lie? Will a person humbly submit to the clear instructions of God, allowing them to lead him or her to create a true spiritual foundation (Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Psalm 149:4)? Alternatively, will they choose instead to hold on to their preconceptions or other ideas of men—their idols (Revelation 21:8)—desperately grasping at the straws of unclear scriptures to build a shaky foundation?

When doctrinal disputes arise, if a person cannot or will not prove beliefs using clear and unambiguous scriptures, that fact should raise a red flag. Clear scriptures are a solid-rock foundation. Ambiguous scriptures, open to private interpretation, lead to a foundation of sand. Only one of these foundations will stand when storms come (Matthew 7:24-27).

Therefore, a careful reading shows that the "watch" of Luke 21:36 is only minimally directing us to watch world events. Overemphasizing that meaning of this verse has overshadowed its real message, perhaps the most important survival instructions Jesus gives to Christians living at the end.

## **Overcoming**

In our day, "watch" has lost much of its original power. Is there anything more passive than watching television? We live in a spectator nation. We watch movies, news, the markets, and sporting events. Watching has become an activity that puts us on the sidelines and not on the field of battle, an idea foreign to the original meaning of the word. At the time of the King James translators, "watch" emphasized the carefulness, attention, and vigilance in the way a soldier kept alert for any sign of enemy movement.

A concept that has more meaning to us today can be found in the word "overcome." This word implies that we watch ourselves to spot our problems, do battle with them, and overcome them. "Overcome" better communicates the battle we have joined (Romans 12:21; I John 5:4-5; Revelation 21:7).

If we watch ourselves spiritually, we are not just watching our human nature, but doing battle with it. We are not just watching the world and its influences as they bombard us, but fighting against them. We are not just watching Satan's devices as they toy with us, but defending ourselves against them. In other words, "watch" as originally intended covers the entire process of overcoming that is our calling. We are to be identifying the problems, engaging them, and putting them to flight (Revelation 3:2; 16:15; I Corinthians 16:13; I Thessalonians 5:6-8).

Therefore, "overcome," more clearly than "watch," communicates to someone living today what Luke 21:36 says we should be doing as we near the end of the age. The premier end-time book,

Revelation, repeatedly emphasizes that overcoming is "job one" for us (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 21:7).

### **The Message**

Luke 21:36 suggests that those who alertly overcome and pray always are those that may be counted worthy to escape and stand before Christ in God's Kingdom. In verse 36, Christ ties together all He has said throughout the chapter. If we do not neglect the spiritual (verses 34-35), and instead watch and pray always, we can "escape all these things" (verses 7-33) and enter God's Kingdom.

Luke 21 is a chapter about the end time, and in verse 36, we have spiritual instruction directly from Jesus to anyone living during that time. He is telling us how to escape the final effects of the turmoil that is ahead and to enter God's Kingdom. This, therefore, becomes an extremely powerful verse in helping us to understand *exactly* what we should be concentrating on at this time. It is a roadmap to safety and salvation.

What if someone told us where to find two tickets, which if purchased by us, would grant us escape from the end-time tumult and entrance into God's Kingdom? What price would we pay? Two such "tickets" exist, and we have the wherewithal to purchase them. Luke 21:36 shows us the two tickets. One is the "watch/overcome" ticket and the other is the "pray always" ticket. If we choose to be lackadaisical about overcoming or prayer, are missing either ticket, or have only a partial ticket, we will likely be required to "buy" those same two tickets at a very dear price in the Tribulation.

The Bible states quite a few "formulas" for producing certain things. We need to understand that none of these formulas stands on its own. They fit into a whole that includes other factors supplied from other instruction found elsewhere in Scripture. However, there are formulas, and then, there are *formulas*. Those that Jesus gives tend to be "trunk of the tree" formulas. They *must be* our base, and then we can stack other instruction on them.

These "trunk of the tree" formulas not only form a foundation that supports everything else, but they also give direction and boundaries for what and how we can add to them. Once a builder lays a foundation for a small, three-bedroom house, it automatically limits what he can and cannot construct on it. Consequently, we cannot build a beautiful spiritual temple on the wrong foundation. Luke 21:36 is an integral part of the right foundation for those of us living at the end.

As we have seen, in Luke 21:36, Christ reveals that the roles of watching—or paying careful attention to overcoming—and praying always are vital to our Christian lives at this time. Just how vital they are will be the focus of the next article in this series.