

Stay Awake

Luke 21:34-38 | September 27, 2020 | Bryce Beale

When it comes to the truth of God's word, it is not enough to know. Demons know the truth, and they shudder. Crowds upon crowds heard some of these very words as they were first spoken by the lips of our Savior, and the crowds silenced those lips, crucifying their possessor.

If bare knowledge of the facts contained within this tome were the final mark of goodness, then Christianity would belong to the intellectual elite. The smartest would by definition be the best Christians. But you and I know many intelligent yet immature Christians, and many mature believers who are not naturally quick-witted.

The disciples were uneducated, most of them day laborers. The smartest persons in their day were the Pharisees.

This is not to disparage those who are intelligent, for they are as necessary in the kingdom as any other. But it is to emphasize an important principle: it is not enough to know God's word. You and I are called to know, and then to move beyond knowing into being and doing.

To borrow another's metaphor, when you study the word of God you are gathering firewood and putting it all in a pile. But once the wood is gathered, you do not simply go inside as though you had done all that needs be done. What was the point of gathering the wood in the first place? To light it! The purpose of gathering wood is to make a fire, producing light and warmth.

And the point of knowing God's truth is so that, at God's gracious spark, that truth might blaze within you, producing goodness and godliness, worship, awe, life, fruitfulness, love, joy, courage, peace, good works.

This is what James means by his famous command, "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."¹

Do we believe that "the word of God is living and active"?² Then, if that word abides in you, we expect you to be living and active,

¹ Jas. 1:22 (ESV).

² Heb. 4:12.

don't we? If the battery has charge and we put it in a working remote, we expect the remote to work, do we not?

The apostle John directed his writings to certain young men because, he said, "you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."³ These three facts could not exist apart from each other—the word dwelt within them and thus produced the strength to overcome the devil himself. They did not merely know the facts of God's word, but it had sunk into their hearts like a seed deep into the soil, producing a sprout.

And when I look at each of you, I know that those good fruits which hang from your branches are the evidence of God's word at work deep in the soil, among your roots. Any good that we have ever been, individually or as a local body, has been the consequence of God's word acquired by effort and attention and study, but taken deep within to produce new life in us, and new behaviors, and new relationships, and new sacrifices.

It is not enough to know God's word; we must know it, and then be controlled and changed by what we know.

I mention this because we have come to the end of the Olivet Discourse of Luke 21. Jesus has been kindly predicting for us the end of the world. He has added greatly to our knowledge, informing our eschatology, our understanding of the end times.

But now at his speech's end, he applies that knowledge to our lives. If we study his words with fervor and zeal, but do not change as a consequence, to be and to do what he says this knowledge must make us be and do, then we have only wasted our time.

Let us see then what our knowledge of the world's end should, must, produce within us.

LUKE 21:34-38

You can tell by those final two verses that Jesus now concludes his Olivet Discourse. Jesus was in the temple at the start of this chapter, he left and went eastward up onto the Mount of Olives,

³ 1 Jn. 2:14.

and there answered his disciples' questions about the end of the temple and the end of the world.

And here we find that after answering their questions, Jesus continued his typical pattern of activity for the passion week. "And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him."⁴

During each day, he would teach large crowds in the temple; at night he would depart and stay either on the Mount of Olives or, as we learn in the other gospel accounts, in that town on the east side of the mountain known as Bethany.

So we have come to the end of the Olivet Discourse, one of the most important and dense sections of teaching on the end times. We have learned quite a lot about eschatology, have seen how the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 foreshadowed the very end of this world. Our knowledge has grown.

But it is not enough for our knowledge of the end times to grow. That knowledge must do more than just sit boringly in our minds. You, a disciple of the Son of Man, must take these words of his and welcome them deep into the innermost recesses of your heart. You cannot keep them at a safe distance for mere analysis. You are at the mercy of Scripture, it is not at your mercy. It is your master, you are not master of it. And it must have its good effect in you.

What is that effect? Jesus tells us now, at the end of his discourse. And he tells us in two parts, for there is something this knowledge must keep us from doing, and something this knowledge must lead us to do. There is a negative and a positive, and this word must prevent the one and produce the other in us, or we have not understood it.

Let us see then these two good fruits, praying that God might give us the strength to produce them.

To keep us from

First, Jesus' teaching on the end times must keep us from something. See this in verses 34 and 35:

⁴ Vv. 37-38.

But watch 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 trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.

I think we all know the dangers of looking within ourselves too closely, performing what is called morbid introspection. It is sometimes a fault associated with the English Puritans, though that charge is very much overblown. But, there is a real danger in thinking too long on ourselves, of descending within ourselves to look for evidences of good, of turning our eyes away from Christ and thereby losing our hope.

But we are in a text today that I must preach honestly, and it does begin with this command: “watch yourselves.” And what is more, “watch yourselves *lest...*”

This is a self-watching meant to prevent us from dangers we might, if we are careless, fall into. And I use the word “fall” very intentionally, because you and I are creatures bound by gravity, in the physical and in the spiritual realm. If you want to suspend a chandelier from the ceiling, you must fasten it in some way or, left to itself, it will fall. Gravity will bring it down. If humpty dumpty sits on a wall, he is in danger not of flying upward, but of falling down.

And the same is true of us. If you sit upon your couch and assert no effort for the next four or five days, you will not find your hair suddenly combing itself, your teeth becoming cleaner, your clothes becoming less wrinkled and more orderly, and all the affairs of your life carefully cared for and arranged. Just the opposite will happen—if you apply no effort, all the parts of your life will fall apart, deteriorate, succumb to gravity.

The same is true in our walk with the Lord. If you give no attention to your relationship with Christ, do not expect spiritual health. If Sunday morning is the only time you think on these things, you are a chandelier hanging on by a single loose bolt.

See the dangers that loom beneath us: “lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life.”

These are the forces that like gravity pull us downward—the cares of this life, along with the worldly ways we try to numb those

cares, “dissipation and drunkenness.” All of these attempt to weigh down your heart, that is, to make your heart stop feeling what it should feel, to make it droop and move slowly and lethargically, to become stony rather than fully alive.

And you know that when the cares of this world are your chief cares and you give yourself over to them, or when you try to drown those cares with partying and carousing and substance abuse and overdosages of entertainment, that your sense of Christ diminishes.

But what does any of this have to do with the end times? How is this an application of eschatology? Jesus tells us just afterward.

But watch 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 trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.⁵

Again, Jesus may direct these words in part to those persons who will be converted during the tribulation, just before his return to rule for a thousand years. Jesus may mean these words for “this generation” that he spoke of in verse 34.

But be that as it may, he clearly means these words also for you, who live before his first return to snatch up or rapture his church. For just as that day of his return to rule at the end of the tribulation will come suddenly upon many, so even more so, the day of his return to snatch us up will come suddenly and unexpectedly.

One reason you must not let your heart become desensitized by worldly concerns is because this world is a ticking clock, counting down to its own certain end. First John says the same in chapter 2:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing

⁵ Vv. 34-35.

away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

If you let your heart grow heavy, “that day” will “come upon you suddenly like a trap.” The thief will break in once you have gone to sleep; the master will return when you are mistreating his servants. There is a time limit on all of these things that we are experiencing in this world—that is the point. No matter how pleasant our experiences here may be, they do not go on forever. They have a definite end in the near future. That is why we do not love this world, do not fully devote ourselves to it and to its interests, because it is shifting sand that very soon shall shift.

The same principle of course applies even if you and I are not that blessed generation that will see the return of Christ. For you and I must leave this world one way or another, be that by the Christian sleep of death, or by our being snatched up at his return. No matter what the case, our final day on this earth is a definite and certain thing.

Jesus emphasizes this point with his added comment in verse 35: “For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.” The end comes for everyone, no one goes on living in this world unaltered and unaffected forever.

Surely in Noah’s day, so many people just like you and I were living their lives, expecting day to follow day as it always had. But then, one day, the flood did come. And in the days of Abraham, the inhabitants of Sodom expected Wednesday to follow Tuesday, and Thursday to follow Wednesday unchanged as it always had. But on one of the days, fire rained down from the sky and life could not continue on as before.

You who hear these words, you are living now on this earth before the time when you must stand before the Son of Man, before your own departure, and before Christ’s return to this earth to finish what he has started. Jesus’ words to you who live in this sliver of time are this: it is only a sliver of time. Do not chain yourself to this world, or you will go down with the ship. Watch yourself, that you not worship this creation. It is destined for fire.

If your consideration of the end times, that knowledge, has not at all detached you from the pleasures and pursuits and interests of this world, then you have not yet known as you ought to know. Our knowledge of the last days, our eschatology, must produce in

us a careful self-watch that keeps us from sloppy and lazy living now.

To lead us to

Besides, as we see when we move to the rest of our text, which we must now do, so much more than this earth is offered to you. Something more definite and certain and enduring. We have considered what our knowledge of the end times must keep us from—from being too attached to this world and weighed down by its dirt, since we know it must end.

But now we turn to consider what our knowledge of the end times must produce positively in us. See this in verse 36: “But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The command to “watch yourselves” is repeated in another way: “stay awake.” We are all very much like Peter in Gethsemane, awaiting our Lord with heavy eyes that want to droop shut, so Christ’s command comes to us as it came to him: “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.”⁶

This command has nothing to do with your natural energy levels, but with what you do with the energy you have. Do not give the prime of your substance to that which cannot satisfy, to exertions for worldly gain and a false sense of security here. No, stay awake. To quote that same sleepy disciple years later, “preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”⁷

It is possible that someone here is overwhelmed by all this talk of introspection and warning. You may wish to watch yourself and stay awake, but you know your own frailty. You know how easily this world lures you into its trap, and how faintly your heart beats toward heaven. What hope is there for you?

There is more hope for you than for most. For notice *how* you are to stay awake in our text: “stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength.”

⁶ Luke 22:40.

⁷ 1 Pet. 1:13.

No one prays for strength who thinks they already have it. This is a command that only the weak, the self-consciously weak, obey.

You and I are aware that responsibility sits upon our shoulders to obey God which, here, means to stay awake, to remain vigilant, not to give ourselves over to worldly concerns. But you and I also know that an omnipotent God holds the earth and its affairs in his hand. His sovereign control extends like an infinite sheet over the entire universe. We bear a responsibility, yet God is the sovereign enabler. We do, and God does, at the same time. We call this the doctrine of “concurrency.”

So if we, in the words of our text, manage “to escape all these things that are going to take place”—that is, by enduring them, or by being snatched up before the worst of them occur—“and to stand before the Son of Man,” not to shrink back before him at his coming, this will require our own efforts at staying awake. No one accidentally stands before the Son of Man, it is a lifelong effort at wakefulness.

But that is only half of concurrency, for we know that more ultimately our standing before the Son of Man is the consequence of God’s sustaining power toward us. He is our Shepherd who holds us in his bosom through the trials of life. If it were not so, why would we pray for strength to do these things? We are asking that God strengthen us in the inner man. Yes, we are praying, yet our prayer proves our inability, not our strength. We must ask God to preserve us in all these things which are coming upon the earth.

If you feel yourself too weak to endure and stand before the Son of Man unashamed, then cast yourself in the Shepherd’s arms. As the day of the Lord approaches, or the day of death,

Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.⁸

If we stand on that day before the Son of Man, it will only be because of the Son of Man.

⁸ Is. 40:30-31.

Conclusion

We are at the end of this great discourse on the end times, and we see that we must not only know the data that Jesus presents, but it must sink into us and keep us constantly awake and ready for his return, earnest to grow in holiness in anticipation of that day.

At the discourse's end, there is Jesus daily in the temple, with large crowds coming early to hear him. But you and I know these same crowds are about to turn on him.

Next week, we begin the end of Luke, the passion narrative concerning our Savior's end on earth. Jesus has urged us to be ready for our end, and he will now show us that he is ready for his.

He is ready to do what is necessary to take you into his gentle arms. He is ready to face his earthly end with vigilance, with complete dedication to the will of the Father, and with love for you.

He knows you cannot stay awake on your own, and rife with sins as you are, you cannot stand blameless before him on the last day. So he goes now to his end, so that you can stand at yours.

He will face God's wrath, the very wrath that will come upon all who dwell on earth—but he will face it so that you do not have to. He will be weak upon the cross, so that you may by his merits be strong at your end, endure all things to come, and wearing his righteousness and innocence upon you, may stand before him.