

Stay Awake: Mark 13:24-37
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, June 26, 2011

We're going to finish our study of Mark 13 this morning. This is the Olivet Discourse. Jesus is speaking to His disciples on the Mount of Olives, responding to the question that Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Him. Jesus had just made the comment about the destruction of the temple, and then they asked, in verse 4, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished."

The rest of the chapter is Jesus' response to that question, and it seems that He is describing both the destruction of the temple in 70 AD *and* His second coming at the end of the age. There was a near fulfillment in 70 AD, and there is a yet-future fulfillment that we continue to wait for and watch for.

I've pointed out the many commands in this chapter, and I'll mention them again now. If we're going to understand the thrust of this chapter and apply this text rightly, we have to see this. Because Jesus doesn't say these things so that we can get out a calculator and look at current events and figure out when His return is going to be. He's not giving this to us as a kind of puzzle for us to solve, a code to crack, a mystery to be unraveled. That's not how we're supposed to treat this.

Rather, we should look at this as commands to obey, promises to believe, warnings to heed. Look at some of these verses with me. You might want to underline these commands in your Bible. Verse 5, "See that no one leads you astray." Verse 9, "But be on your guard." Verse 23, "But be on guard." Verse 33, "Be on guard, keep awake." Verse 35, "Therefore stay awake." Verse 37, "And what I say to you I say to all: stay awake."

Jesus is coming back, friends! The Son of Man is going to return someday, we don't know when. He could come at any time. Therefore we must be watchful. We must be waiting. We must be alert, on guard. We must be ready. That's the lesson for us in this passage. Jesus is coming back, and we need to be ready.

I want to ask you at the outset this morning: how much do you think of Christ's coming? Do you long for Jesus to return? Do you pray for His return? Or is it something you hardly ever think about? And when you do think about it, you secretly hope that it doesn't happen for a long, long time because you're really enjoying your life here on earth and you'd hate for anything to interrupt it?

This is so important for us to consider, because what we believe about the future will have a major impact on the way we live in the present. It will impact the way we think, the way we

plan, the choices we make, what we value. If I were to offer my 3-year-old daughter a bag of m&ms or a \$10,000 check to go into an education fund, what would she choose? The m&ms, of course. Why? Because she has no concept of the future. She lives in the moment. She doesn't much understand the concept of time or money. She doesn't grasp the value of education. So she would probably take a crayon and scribble all over the check while she ate the m&ms, getting chocolate all over her face like only a 3-year-old can.

What we think about the future, what we understand about the future, what we believe about the future, will have a tremendous bearing on the things we do now and the choices we make now.

If you're an atheist and you don't believe this stuff about Jesus returning, you don't believe in heaven or hell, you don't believe in any kind of afterlife, then how is that going to affect the way you live now? Well, you wouldn't be concerned about God holding you accountable for your actions. You wouldn't be concerned about eternal punishment. And on the flipside, you wouldn't be putting your hope in eternal rewards. Your hope would be only in the things of this world and this life.

I wonder how many professing Christians are living functionally as atheists. You would say, "Of course I believe in Jesus' return." But what impact does that have on the way you live? Do you think about His return? Do you meditate on His return? Do you get excited about His return and find hope in it? Do you live differently because you know that He's coming back? The choices you make, do they reflect that your treasure is in Christ rather than worldly things? Your attitude in life, especially in trials, does that reflect that your treasure is in Christ rather than worldly things?

John Newton, the writer of the song *Amazing Grace*, had a great illustration for this. He said, "Suppose a man was going to New York to take possession of a large estate, and his [carriage] should break down a mile before he got to the city, which obliged him to walk the rest of the way; what a fool we should think him, if we saw him ringing his hands, and blubbering out all the remaining mile, "My [carriage] is broken! My [carriage] is broken!"¹ Do you see the point? The man who is complaining about his carriage being broken is apparently not thinking about the large estate he's about to inherit. That's us so often, isn't it? Complaining about the struggles of this life, anxious and distressed by the pressures of

¹ Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of the Rev. John Newton*, p. 108. Quoted in John Piper's biographical talk on Newton, which can be found at www.desiringgod.org

this world, while we totally ignore the fact that Jesus is coming back!

Brothers and sisters, we need to meditate on Christ's return. We need to check ourselves this morning, we need to examine our hearts to see if we're actually excited for His return or if we could care less. This can serve as a kind of spiritual barometer for us. If we're not looking forward to His return, if we're not even really thinking about it, then we're probably not in a very good place spiritually.² On the other hand, if we're meditating on His return, praying for His return, hoping in His return, and thus finding great encouragement in the midst of trials and finding great power in the fight against sin, then we can see the fruit that God intends in this.

So my hope for us this morning is that we will exult in the great truth of Christ's second coming. And I hope we will hear these commands loud and clear, that we are to stay awake. We are to be on guard. We are to be watchful, because the Son of Man is coming! Let's begin, now, to look at some of the aspects of what these verses teach us about Christ's coming.

The Son of Man is Coming

Verses 24-25 begin to describe the amazing event of Christ's coming. Jesus uses apocalyptic language that alludes back to some Old Testament passages.³ It's impossible to know exactly what this is going to be like, but it's obviously going to be something unlike anything we've ever seen. "The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." That's quite a way to describe the cataclysmic things that will be happening just before the Son of Man comes.

And then verse 26 tells of His return. "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." Jesus speaks of Himself as the Son of Man, and this is a reference to Daniel 7:13-14 where Daniel has this vision, "and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

This is amazing! What an awesome proclamation of Christ's glory and dominion, which is over all peoples and will last forever. What's amazing about the context in Mark 13 is that Jesus is about to suffer and die. He does not appear, at that point, to be the Son of Man spoken of in Daniel 7. But this is the wonder

² See Wayne Grudem's discussion of this, *Systematic Theology*, page 1093.

³ See Isaiah 13:10 and Joel 2:10

of the Gospel, that Jesus Christ humbled Himself and suffered for us and was mocked and tortured, and He died on a cross and was buried. But then He rose again and ascended to heaven, and He is coming back as the glorious and eternal King.

Gathering the Elect

Verse 27, then, describes one of the amazing evidences of His universal dominion. He is King over all. All peoples, nations, and languages will serve him. So when He returns “he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” At that point the Great Commission will be fulfilled. Evangelism and missions will be over. All the elect will be saved, and they will be gathered to Jesus.

As we looked at last week, the days of tribulation are cut short “for the sake of the elect” (verse 20). And in verse 22 the implicit point is that it will not be possible for the elect to be led astray, even though the false christs and false prophets will be so persuasive. This is a great comfort and assurance to us, that God’s chosen ones are secure in His care. The One who sovereignly chose us before the foundation of the world will also sovereignly preserve us all the way to the end.

And then the elect from the all over the world, from all the people groups, from all nations, will be gathered to Jesus. What an awesome thought this is! I love to think of the diversity of heaven. The redeemed will be there from *every* tribe and language and people and nation. Heaven will be the most ethnically diverse gathering imaginable, and this diversity will be for the eternal display of God’s glory. He ordained that there be a multitude of ethnicities and languages and cultures, and He chose to save individuals from every single one of those groups. I marvel at God’s plans, and I long to see that Day which is spoken of here when Christ will return and gather all the elect to Himself. What a glorious Day that will be!

And in light of that, shouldn’t we desire to have some measure of that diversity in the church now? I certainly pray for that, and I rejoice at what God is doing among us. I hope you pray for that as well. Our little gathering here should be at least a faint glimpse of what our worship will be like in heaven. So let’s pray for the nations, far and near, and let’s pray that we will see, even right here in Pittsburgh, a multitude of ethnicities gathering together to worship Jesus.

Do you see how that puts a spotlight on the glory of the cross, the glory of what Jesus has done for us? By nature, we are wired to gravitate toward those who are most like us—same language, same color skin, same kind of job, same level of income,

similar background, etc. But then God breaks into our lives and changes our hearts and shows us something that transcends all of those distinctions. He shows us something that is infinitely more precious than our ethnic and cultural identity. He shows us the glory of the Gospel. And as we delight in the Gospel we begin to look around and see that there are other folks who are delighting in this same Gospel, and they're totally different than me in so many other ways.

What conclusion do we draw from that? The Gospel is glorious! The Gospel is powerful! Because the Gospel is bigger than culture. It's bigger than ethnic distinctions or language barriers. It's not just for white people or just for black people. It's not just for English-speakers. It's not just for Americans. We have got to get out of ourselves and see the global impact that the Gospel is having and will have leading up to Christ's coming. The Gospel *is* going to penetrate every people group on the face of the planet, the elect will be saved, and it will be such a day of rejoicing when the angels gather Christ's elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

That's an aspect of the end that should impact the present. We should be so excited about the coming of that day that we want to be involved in taking the Gospel to the nations. The elect are out there. The promise is sure. They will be saved. And we get to be God's mouthpiece to proclaim the Good News of Jesus crucified for sinners.

Imperishable Words (28-31)

Moving on to verses 28-31, let's consider briefly Jesus' imperishable words. In verse 31 He says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." This is an awesome thing to know about our Savior who is coming again. He has predicted these things, and what He says will happen will, indeed, happen. When Jesus speaks, we have every reason to believe that His words are true and trustworthy. Everything else will erode and fade, but His words will abide forever. That should be a great assurance and promise for us. When it seems like the sky is falling, when it seems like the earth is crumbling beneath our feet, we should rest assured that Jesus' words are a rock that cannot be moved.

What Jesus says just before this seems to apply more specifically to His immediate audience who would shortly experience the destruction of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He uses the fig tree as an illustration of how they could discern the coming of that destruction. And He says emphatically, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

As I've mentioned in previous weeks, I think the devastation of 70 AD was an immediate fulfillment of Jesus' words which also pointed beyond it to the devastation that will come at the end, just before Christ's return.

Stay Awake!

I want to move on now to the last section of chapter 13 where we have many of these commands about staying awake. In verses 32-37 I want us to look at the reason Jesus gives for staying awake, and then the illustration He gives of staying awake. And finally we'll ask the question, How can we stay awake?

The Reason for Staying Awake

Jesus is very straightforward in His explanation for why it is so important for us to be on guard and to remain alert. It's because we don't know when He's going to return. He cites this lack of knowledge 3 times. First of all in verse 32, "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

That's an astounding statement, because Jesus admits to having limited knowledge about His own return! This can be confusing to us, because we assume that Jesus has knowledge of all things because He is divine. If He's fully God, then He must be omniscient. He must know all things. So what's going on here? How can it be that Jesus doesn't know the timing of His own return?

This takes us to a consideration of the person of Christ. He is fully God and fully human. When we dig a little more into what that means, it must entail having a divine will as well as a human will, and having a divine mind as well as a human mind. The early church wrestled through this and declared at a church council in Constantinople in 681 that the monothelite view (that Jesus had only one will) was heretical. So in our affirmation of Jesus as having two natures, that must imply two wills and two minds. He is not two persons, though. He is one person, with two natures. As our Statement of Faith says, in the 1689 London Baptist Confession, "The Son of God, the second person in the Holy Trinity, being very and eternal God, . . . [took] upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; . . . so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man."⁴

⁴ Chapter 8: Of Christ the Mediator, paragraph 2.

This, of course, is far beyond our ability to comprehend. These are the mysteries of who God is. God is a Trinity—One God existing in three Persons (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). And the Son, Jesus Christ, is one Person who possesses two natures (divine and human).

As mysterious as this is, it does give us some framework for understanding what Jesus says about His lack of knowledge about the timing of His return. This is how we can understand His statement: in His human nature, His human mind did not know this. I know it may sound very strange to think about a person having two minds, one mind which knows all things and another mind that has limited knowledge. It sounds very strange, indeed. It's utterly unique. It's amazing. And it attests to the wonderful news that Jesus truly took on human flesh. He became one of us, completely, except without sin. And that's why He could die in our place.

So we see that the timing of Christ's return is known only to the Father. We must be on guard, we must be awake, because no one knows when that Day is going to arrive. Calvin wrote, "Surely that man must be singularly mad, who would hesitate to submit to the ignorance which even the Son of God himself did not hesitate to endure on our account."⁵ In other words, how arrogant and even insane it is to claim to know something that Jesus, Himself, said that He didn't know. If Calvin was writing that today, I would assume he was thinking of Harold Camping, who has claimed to know when the end is coming. He thought it would be May 21st. Now he's saying October 21st. Apparently there were similar folks in Calvin's day, who thought they could predict the end. How absurd! No one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

That's why we shouldn't look at this passage as a way of trying to figure out the timing of the end. Instead, we should focus on heeding the clear commands. We need to be spiritually alert and spiritually vigilant, because Jesus is coming back at some unknown time. If we knew the date, we would be tempted to slack off until a couple months before then, or a year before then. But since we don't know when it's going to be, we need to be alert constantly. We don't want Him to come back and find us slacking off. We don't want Him to come back and find us sleeping.

The Illustration of Staying Awake

That's the point of the illustration Jesus gives in verse 34. Notice in verse 33 Jesus mentions for the second time the fact that we don't know when the time will come. Then He gives this mini-parable in verse 34, "It is like a man going on a journey, when he

⁵ Calvin's Commentaries XVII, Harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke, page 153.

leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake.” Why should the doorkeeper stay awake? First of all, that’s his job. If he falls asleep on the job, then the house will be susceptible to intruders. He has to stay awake so he can be on guard, doing his job by protecting what his master has told him to protect.

The other reason for staying awake is that he doesn’t know when the master is returning. The command of verse 35 draws us right into the parable, and this is also the third mention of our lack of knowledge. “Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.” That’s what you don’t want to happen. It would be a horrible thing if someone broke into the house on your watch, while you were sleeping on the porch. It would also be a horrible thing if the master returned to find you sleeping on the porch. That’s not what you want to be doing when the master returns. You want to be alert. You want to be doing the things He has instructed you to do, protecting what He has told you to protect, and you want to be there to greet him when he arrives.

Verse 37 reiterates the command yet again, and Jesus emphasizes that this is for everyone. “And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

In just the very next chapter of Mark, we find Jesus rebuking the disciples for sleeping when they should have been watching and praying. Turn the page in your Bible and look at Mark 14:34. This is in the garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus is in anguish over what is about to happen. “And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” Then in verse 37, “And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”” (Mark 14:37-42, ESV)

Let’s learn from Jesus’ commands in chapter 13 and His rebukes in chapter 14. He wants us to be alert—watching and praying and obeying. He wants us to be about the things He is about.

How Can We Stay Awake?

There are many different ways to address this question, and I'm definitely not going to say everything that could be said in answering it. We should say, first of all, that it's only by God's grace that we will stay awake. As we looked at last week in the previous passage, it's God's grace to His elect that the days of tribulation will be shortened and the elect will not be led astray by false prophets.

Even as we say that, though, we need to be reminded again that it is our responsibility and duty to be vigilant in staying awake. Yes, God is sovereign and will preserve His elect. But we are also responsible to heed the warnings of Scripture and bank our hope on the promises of Scripture. We looked at this last week as well. We have the assurance in verse 22 that the elect will not be led astray, and then we immediately have in verse 23 a warning to "be on guard."

How should we do this? Should we become insomniacs who sit awake all night looking out the window waiting for the stars to fall? I don't think that's the point. He's talking about spiritual alertness. He wants us to be on guard so that no one leads us astray. He wants us to be alert so that trials and persecution don't destroy us. And God has given us various means of grace that encourage us and preserve us in these ways. We have the Bible to read, in which God has revealed Himself and His plan of salvation. We have access to Him in prayer. We have the fellowship of other believers and the accountability of the local church. These may sound like simple, mundane things, but we should see them as profound gifts! We desperately need all of these things. We cannot make it on our own. If prayer begins to be empty or absent in our lives, and Bible reading is sparse, then our spiritual eyelids will become heavy very quickly. We will find ourselves dozing. We will find ourselves very tempted by worldly pleasures. And then if we start avoiding fellowship with other believers, and we refuse to be accountable to other believers, then we will find ourselves fast asleep spiritually, with no interest in Christ's coming and no fear of His judgment.

I pray that this message will be a means of waking us up. Maybe you need to be shaken awake this morning, and I hope God will use these verses to do that in your life. Jesus is coming back, and when He comes there be great reward for those who are repenting of sin and trusting in Him, and there will be eternal punishment for those who have ignored Christ and rejected Him. I challenge you to consider where you're at this morning. Are you dozing? Are you asleep? Or are you wide-eyed and eager for the coming of Christ, listening for the slightest sound, alert to possible temptations, not wanting anything to distract you?

As we watch and wait, it's also our joyful duty to spread the word about Christ's coming. When He returns, we want Him to find us doing the things He instructed us to do. And one of the things Jesus said very clearly was "Go and make disciples of all nations . . ." So it's a matter of obedience. It's also a matter of increasing our joy in the Gospel as we see others come to delight in the Gospel.

So my encouragement to us, in closing, is to meditate on the coming of the Son of Man. Study what the Bible says about His coming. Marvel at what it will be like when He returns. And as you reflect on these things and pray to God about these things, you will find a joy and an eagerness welling up inside of you. That's my hope for us, that we will be a people who long to see our Savior. 1 John 3:2-3 says this, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." What a glorious thought that is. Then the next verse says, "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Let's be a people who are waiting for Christ's return, meditating on Christ's return, hoping in Him, and those desires will translate into pure and holy living, for God's glory and our joy.