

Luke 12:37–48 — Blessed Are Those Servants

Watching, Faithfulness, and the Coming of the Son of Man

Scripture Reading: Luke 12:37–48

“Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when he cometh, shall find watching. Verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.

And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.

And this know, that if the good man of the house had known what hour the thief would have come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken through. Be ye therefore ready also, for the Son of Man cometh at an hour when ye think not.”

Waiting and Watching: A Real Distinction

There is a meaningful difference between waiting for the Lord and watching for him. One can wait while sleeping, but one cannot watch while sleeping — watching means to be awake, alert, and attentive to the thing itself. The ten virgins of Matthew 25 all slumbered and slept; they were all waiting in some sense, for time was passing. But when the midnight cry came, only those who were prepared moved from a merely waiting posture into one that included watching.

Those who oppose the truth of the pre-tribulation rapture tend to flatten this distinction, working on the word “watch” until it is made to mean very nearly the

same thing as “wait.” But Scripture is precise. The distinction is there and it matters. Our verse 36 speaks of waiting for the Lord; verse 37 finds them watching when he comes. These are not identical postures.

Not Watching for Signs but for Him

For roughly a century and a half there has been significant interest in searching current events for signs of the Lord’s coming. But is that the watching our verse describes? It is not. Watching of that kind is actually counterproductive, because it works against the sense of imminency that Scripture seeks to cultivate in the believer.

Consider: there is nothing in Scripture that indicates the state of Israel must exist prior to the rapture. That Israel will exist prior to the appearing of Christ in glory is very true. But there may well be a transitional period after the rapture, and things can be built faster now than in previous eras. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is not a precondition for the rapture and was not given as a sign for which Christians were to watch.

Those who hold post-tribulation views are in reality waiting for the Antichrist to appear, since the Antichrist must precede Christ’s appearing in glory on their scheme. They say they are watching for Christ, but they are looking for a sequence of events to unfold first. This is not the apostolic posture. William Kelly observed that all Christians wait for the Lord, but many are not in the intelligence of it. To be in the intelligence of waiting for the Lord means to understand the pre-Daniel’s-seventieth-week rapture, and to live in the genuine expectation that the Lord could come at any moment.

Our eyes in watching should be looking for Him — for the Lord himself. He will not be found in the front page of a newspaper, nor in the back pages, nor in current events. He is at the Father’s right hand, and we expect him to come from there.

Date-Setting and the Precision of Scripture

Date-setting in its modern form grew out of historicism — the view that the church age flows directly into the millennium and that the approximate date of that transition could be calculated. Using the year-day theory applied to various prophetic numbers, different dates were proposed throughout the 1600s to 1800s, each one in turn failing. The French Revolution generated a flurry of speculation; 1846 and 1866 were prominent dates in certain circles, and each came and went. What largely put an end to date-setting was the recovery of dispensational truth — the very lines of truth that showed such calculations to be built on a false framework.

It is therefore a sad irony that in recent decades dispensationalists have taken up date-setting. The reestablishment of Israel as a state prompted talk of “this generation,” with a generation calculated at 40 years, producing 1988 as a significant date — and so the pattern repeated. But the word generation in Scripture almost invariably refers to a moral class, not a fixed span of years. “There is a generation that is wise in their own eyes” — one cannot locate that generation in a specific 40-year window. The generation the Lord spoke of is that morally responsible class that has been in existence since Moses and will continue until the final judgment comes upon it.

What lies at the bottom of date-setting, often, is self: the discovery of something, the sense that the Lord has shown me this. But the Lord shows his people things that humble them, not things that puff them up. And he shows them things consistent with his truth — not things that interfere with the posture of always watching, always expecting, never ruling out this very moment.

The Second and Third Watch

The Lord notes that the master might come in the second watch, or the third. The night was divided into four watches: roughly six to nine in the evening, nine to

midnight, midnight to three in the morning, and three to six. The second and third watches, therefore, are the hours when sleep would be most pressing — when maintaining alertness would be most difficult. Laodicean lukewarmness is precisely what makes watching hard at the late hour. It is not cold indifference but the gradual softening of expectancy as time goes on.

The man of the house and the thief add another dimension. If the householder had known what hour the thief was coming, he would have watched. He did not know, and so he did not watch, and the house was broken through. This confirms the point: if one knew the exact time, one could arrange to be maximally watchful at that moment and rest at all others. But the Son of Man comes at an hour when ye think not. As soon as one becomes convinced of a particular timing, that is a sign it will not be then.

He Girds Himself and Serves Them

The reward of the watching servants is remarkable. The Lord shall gird himself and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. This might seem, at first reading, an almost unprecedented reversal — the Lord serving the servants. But it would not be the first time. When the Lord was here, he came to serve. “I am among you as he that serveth,” he said in Luke 22:27. And which is greater, he that sits at table or he that serves? The one at table. Yet the Lord took the servant’s place both then and, in the day of reward, will do so again.

The figure is of communion. When we eat together, that is a different thing from eating alone. The watching, the girded loins, the burning lamps — these are the present posture. The sitting down at table with him is what that posture is looking toward. He is looking forward to it too. And when those servants find themselves reclining at table and the Lord himself coming out to serve them, they will be, one thinks, quite unable to take it in. It is just grace. But the magnitude of that

grace will be astonishing.

The Faithful and Wise Steward

Peter's question in verse 41 — “Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all?” — gave the Lord two possible answers: to us, or to all. The Lord answered neither. He said: “Who then is that faithful and wise steward?” The target of the parable is not a particular group of twelve, nor all Christians in general, but a character: the faithful and wise steward. This is the precision and accuracy of Scripture, which we do not sufficiently appreciate.

The parable also makes clear that watching does not mean idleness. The faithful steward is found “so doing” — giving the household their portion of food in due season. There is a Christian ministry that goes on. It is not a passive state of simply waiting. The watching is active, the loins are girded, and there is work being done for the good of the household. That servant, when the Lord comes, will be made ruler over all that he hath — a place of recognition and honor in connection with the kingdom.

The servant who says in his heart “my lord delayeth his coming” and begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with the drunken is a study in contrast. This is not a soul lacking intelligence as to the Lord's coming — it is a very bad condition of soul. He says “my Lord,” so he professes to know the Lord. He has a position of responsibility. But his heart has gone wrong on the very question of the Lord's delay. His portion will be appointed with unbelievers. Hypocrites and unbelievers are described in the same terms here, because the unbelieving professor is precisely that — a hypocrite, presenting two faces. The punishment is suited to the condition.

Many Stripes and Few Stripes

The closing verses speak of degrees of punishment in eternal judgment. This should not be softened. The context is the appointment of the unbeliever's portion in verse 46; the stripes of verses 47–48 pertain to that portion, not to chastisement of believers. Those who had greater light and greater responsibility will go worse for them than those who had less. There is no one beaten with no stripes — the distinction is between many and few, not between some and none.

This has a bearing on the question sometimes raised about the person who never heard the gospel. The answer Scripture gives is that God is just and will deal proportionately. Such a person may receive fewer stripes than the one who heard the gospel clearly and rejected it. But that observation should press hard on the very person asking the question — for the one who knows enough to raise it is certainly not in the position of the one who never heard.

Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when he cometh, shall find watching.