

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Watch and Pray

by Dan Trygg

“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Matthew 26:41

“...after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise people speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be watchful...” Acts 20:29-31

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the slanderer prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ stand over against him, firm in the faith...” 1 Peter 5:8-9

“Watch, stand in the faith, act like an adult, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all things you do be in love.” 1 Corinthians 16:12

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He told his disciples to “watch and pray”. The form of the original words communicates ongoing action, “watch-and-keep-watching and pray-and-keep-praying”. The purpose of this is “in order that you might not enter into temptation”. We ought to *want to avoid temptation*. It is *not* something to dabble with, or play with. Jesus taught His disciples earlier to ask the Father to “not lead them into temptation (or, a ‘test’, ...same word in both of these contexts), but to ‘rescue, save, deliver, snatch us out from’ the evil one. Clearly, a test or temptation is *an undesirable thing, and can be dangerous*. It is something that requires “rescue”. Interestingly, the word for “rescue” implies “snatching *to oneself*”, ...a very vivid word picture describing both the potential and immediate danger of the circumstance, and the urgent love of our heavenly Father. He reaches into our situation and “snatches us *out from* the evil one (or the evil situation)” and draws us *to* His own breast. *That* is the word picture from the Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6:13). In 1 Corinthians 10:13, we are told that **there is no temptation that is not human** (Often translated as “common to man”, but it just means “human”. Wherever the temptation may come from, **the weakness or vulnerability is inside of us!** – cf. Jas. 1:14), and **God will not permit us to be tested beyond our ability or strength**, but together with the test or temptation, **He will make “a way out” or “an end”, so that we can endure or bear up under it**. Of course, the “way out” or “way of escape” is only helpful to us *if we use it!* If we don’t recognize it, or take it, it won’t benefit us. *Again, the strong message is that it is in our best interest to avert, evade or sidestep temptation, if possible.*

Here, in Matthew 26:41, we have Jesus’ counsel on how we might do that, “Watch and pray in order that you might not come into temptation.” We often acknowledge the importance of the “pray” part of what Jesus said, but we tend to disregard the “watch” aspect. The word means to “be alert, awake, and watchful”. They were to be aware of their surroundings, paying attention to what was taking place around them, ...AND, they were to maintain a mindfulness toward God, keeping communication open toward Him, speaking to Him of what they were seeing, and asking for His perspective, His protection, and His empowerment. **If they wanted to avoid temptation, they needed to invest in both of these areas: watchfulness and prayer.**

The Greek word for “watch” is *gregoreō* (the name, Gregory, is derived from this word). It occurs 22 times in the NT, and 16 of these occurrences are by Jesus. He used it in parables where a servant was left in charge, and was told to stay alert, and be prepared and ready for when the master came back (Matt. 25:13; Mk 13:34-37; Lk. 12:36,37). Those servants who stayed alert had been faithful, were ready and able to respond, and were commended. Those who had not kept watchful were caught unawares, and were not prepared. He tells us to be watchful and alert in preparation for His coming (Matt. 24:42,43). The apostle Paul indicates that, as children of light, we ought not to sleep or get drunk, as others do. Instead, we are to be watchful and sober. Consequently, we will not be unaware of His coming (1 Thess. 5:4-8).

Being alert, watchful, paying attention to what is going on around you, and being attentive to carrying out your responsibilities as servants of God are important aspects of discipleship. The opposite is to be unattentive, oblivious, preoccupied with your own interests (or the interests of the world), and becoming lax, irresponsible, distracted, and disobedient. With the lack of focus, purpose and perspective comes temptation, laziness and self-deception.

These examples are general exhortations to be watchful, alert, and attentive. In Revelation 3, however, Jesus very directly confronted the church of Sardis. They had become lax, compromised, and had not fulfilled the works that God had for them to accomplish. They were near the point of death as a group. He challenged them to “Wake up, strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die.” If they would not wake up, they would become oblivious to His coming, and He would come suddenly, like a thief. There were “a few people in Sardis” that had remained faithful. Their inheritance with Jesus was sure, no matter what may happen. It appears that the believers took this rebuke from Jesus to heart. There remains the ruins of a 4th century church building that had been constructed in the unfinished courts of a temple dedicated to Artemis. Apparently, the Christians repented, rallied, and refocused their efforts. Jesus told them to “strengthen what remains” and to “remember what you received and heard”. They were to keep faithful to what they had been taught. The fact that their meeting place was built in the unfinished

temple of Artemis indicates that they were able to turn the people of Sardis to following Christ, instead of the Greek goddess. The church persisted until it was destroyed in the invasion of the Ottoman Turks in the 11th century. The church building was eventually abandoned and was destroyed in 1402. The churches at the time of the advance of Islam had often become formalistic and spiritually dull. They, once again, had come to “have a name that they were alive”, but, in reality, “they were dead” (3:1). This time, they did not wake up, repent, or rally. They gave in, and were absorbed. There are no known Christians in the area today.

In Acts 20, Paul warned the Ephesian elders that there would be false teachers that would come in among them. Some would come from the outside, and others would rise up from their own group. **They would introduce strange and twisted teachings.** In the letters to Timothy, who was stationed at the same church, Paul described these teachings as **controversies about the law, arguments about words, teaching that was divergent from the original apostolic doctrine and instruction.** There would be **speculations, myths, or unsubstantiated tales.** The purpose of these teachers, ...to recruit people to follow *them* and *their cause*. **They wanted to “draw away the disciples after them.” Draw them away? Draw them away from what? They were attempting to draw the disciples away from Jesus and sound, healthy teaching, so that they would follow what these deceivers were promoting.** ***Some of them even *could be* promoting something that *sounds* good, ...*even things that were from the Bible...*, but **they were not consistent with what Jesus is calling His disciples to focus on.***** Sometimes what *seems* good is *not* truly good, in the big picture. **If a “good thing” draws us away from following Jesus, ...it is not from Jesus!** Paul warns us, **“Therefore, be watchful, alert!”**

In 1 Peter 5:8, the apostle warns us to be clear-headed, sober-minded, and to be alert. We are to keep our eyes open, and be watchful for the enemy. Our adversary, ...literally, our “opponent at law”, who is a “slanderer” (the word “devil” literally means “slanderer”) is prowling about “like a roaring lion”, seeking someone to devour (‘gulp down’). **This word picture is a mixture of an attorney looking to find something to use against you, and that of a lion, who roars to flush out his prey. He wants to get you to say or do something that is inconsistent with your claim to be a disciple of Christ. He wants to discredit you, even if he has to lie to do it.** Furthermore, **he wants you to do something foolish.** He wants to push your buttons so that you act in fear, or speak in anger, or say something in retaliation. **And he would love to put his slanderous words into your mouth! Peter’s counsel is “Keep your eyes open, and your mind clear! Then, stand-firm-against him, or his messengers.”** The word “resist” is not the best translation. **In our minds, “resist” may sound like “fight back”. We definitely are not to retaliate!** If you work through the letter, Peter mentions this over and over. **The lawyer/slanderer is trying to get us to fight back!** He *wants us* to get angry, to name-call, to act out, to get abusive or even violent! **That kind of behavior is not Jesus!** He is our example, ...who did not revile in return, nor resort to threats, but kept trusting His Father (1 Pet 2:23). **No, what Peter advocates is that we “stand firm in the faith”. We don’t break and run, and we don’t break and fight.** We stand-firm-against the enemy’s lies, meaning we don’t buy into them or react to them. **We stand in the faith, ...not “your” faith, as in some translations – It is about what is true, not about how strong your faith might be.**

We see a similar sentiment in 1 Corinthians 16:13,14, “Watch, stand in the faith, act like an adult, be strong. Let all things you do be in love.” This is the concluding exhortation of Paul to the Corinthian church, before his final goodbyes. Without having to go back through the entire letter, **these are fitting words. They, too, had been under the influence of false teachers,** who tried to exploit and dominate them. **They had been under spiritual attack,** and God used the weapons of truth and the Spirit to expose the arguments and strongholds of the enemy. Throughout the letter, **Paul was calling them to go deeper, to more consciously act as co-workers with God, demonstrating by their reactions, attitudes and behavior that they were indeed servants of Christ.** So, with all that going on in the background, Paul’s words are carefully and appropriately chosen. **“Watch”, because such dangers, issues, challenges and opportunities will come again. They need to be paying attention. They need to “stand in the faith”.** Their footing needs to be securely founded and rooted in the truth, and that must be their source for testing other teachings. The phrase that I translated as “act like an adult” is literally “be like a man”. It is in contrast to being like a child. It implies coming of age, and behaving as a mature person. **They were to grow beyond their previous level of experience, and be sound-minded and responsible.** They were to “be strong”, instead of weak. **The preeminent goal to be guided by the pure love of God in all that they did.**

Then, we have Jesus’ words to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:38-41; Mk. 14:34-38), which were very specific and practical for *their* situation. **What was the test that they would soon be facing?** Was it not the arrival of the soldiers who were coming to arrest Jesus? **Jesus told them to stay awake, to be alert, watchful and to pray that they not come into temptation.** They did not do any of those things. **When the soldiers came, were they ready?** No. They were startled, and **Peter even pulled out his sword to fight. Jesus stopped him, or they all would have died.** “Those who take the sword, will perish by the sword.” **Thankfully, HE had been watching and praying.**