

MARK 13:26–37. (EHV)

“Then you will see the Son of Man coming on clouds with great power and glory. At that time he will send out his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of the sky. Learn from this illustration of the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. So also when you see these things happening, you will know that he is near—at the doors! Amen I tell you: This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Watch! Be alert and pray, because you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going away on a journey. When he left his home, he put his servants in charge and assigned what each one was to do. He also commanded the doorkeeper to keep watch. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house is coming: whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: Keep watch!”

We are familiar with the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus tells eight of his disciples to sit in one part of the garden, while he himself goes a little farther with the three others—Peter, James, and John. After going deeper into the garden, he tells those three, “Stay here and keep watch,” and later, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” Jesus knew Judas was coming with the horde, but as true man, he didn’t know exactly when. So he told his disciples to keep watch and to pray, so that he would know when Judas and the horde were arriving, and so that, when they arrived and the events transpired that would lead to his crucifixion, the disciples would also be ready and not fall away on account of him.

We are in a situation similar to that of Jesus and those disciples. We’re not looking for Judas. We’re waiting for Jesus himself. We know he’s coming soon with his angels, but we don’t know exactly when. And when he comes, that’s going to be it; there aren’t going to be any second chances. We need to be ready. So Jesus tells us, “Keep watch!”

1. Keep Watch—For What?

In order to keep watch, we first need to know what exactly we’re looking for. When we have kids at our house who are first time visitors, when it gets near the hour, we like to get their attention, point at our cuckoo clock, and say, “Watch!” But inevitably they miss something, because we haven’t told them the different things to watch for. A similar thing will happen to us if we don’t listen to Jesus tell us what to watch for.

Jesus has been talking about the end of the world and the signs leading up to it. He says that there will be signs in nature, like earthquakes and famines. He says that the world will get worse and worse, not only in general, with wars and rumors of wars and increased hatred and violence, but it will become particularly bad for Christians, with all sorts of false teachers and persecutions. He describes this period leading up to the end as the distress or tribulation for Christians. But he says that distress will come to an end on Judgment Day, and we will know that Judgment Day has arrived when we see the sun and moon go dark, the stars falling from the sky,

and the powers of the heavens shaken. In other words, it will look like the universe is shutting down and falling apart.

“Then you will see the Son of Man coming on clouds with great power and glory.” No matter where we are on earth, whether in the United States or China or Australia or South America, we will see Jesus coming on clouds. And this will be Jesus as no human has ever seen him before, except for those who witnessed his transfiguration. As the hymn writer says, “not as of old a little child to bear and fight and die, but crowned with glory like the sun that lights the morning sky.”

“At that time he will send out his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of the sky.” Having the four cherubim at the four corners of our new altar hanging is meant, in part, to remind us of this, that when Emmanuel comes, his angels will gather those he has chosen from eternity to be his own from the four winds. Only there will be a lot more than four angels going out into every corner of the world to gather up believers, both the believers who are still alive and those raised from the dead. But the angels won’t only be going into every corner of the world. They will be gathering “from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of the sky.” Jesus wants to assure his believers that, wherever they are, they won’t be missed or overlooked. If there are believing astronauts in outer space, on the moon, or perhaps even on another planet, like Mars, the angels will gather them from there too.

And once we are gathered together to meet the Lord in the air, we will be with the Lord forever in the new heavens and the new earth, the home of righteousness and uninterrupted happiness.

“Keep watch!” Jesus says. And now we know what we are watching for. We are ultimately watching for his glorious return on Judgment Day.

2. Keep Watch—How?

But how do we keep watch? How do we make sure we’re ready?

Well, knowing what to watch for is a start, but it’s not all. Jesus tells us we need to watch diligently. “Learn from this illustration of the fig tree: Whenever its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. So also when you see these things happening, you will know that he is near—at the doors!” The fig tree illustration maybe doesn’t help us in South Dakota. Maybe we would talk about the buds and leaves of oaks or elms or cottonwoods or crabapples, or maybe we would talk about fawns and bison calves in the fields. We still understand the point. There are signs in nature that summer is near, and when we see those signs, we get excited and anticipation builds—warmer weather and longer days and summer break and vacations are coming. So too, we see the signs that Jesus gave for the end of the world all around us, on the news and in our lives every day, and so we should be excited and anticipation should be building and we should always be ready. He could be here any day.

Jesus stresses this by saying, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Jesus says even he doesn’t know, in his state of humiliation on earth. So don’t believe anyone who tells you that it’s going to be a certain year or a certain day, which would give you an opportunity to go and fill up your life with sin until that day comes. We should rather be ready at all times for him to return at any time.

Jesus continues: “Watch! Be alert and pray, because you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going away on a journey. When he left his home, he put his servants in charge and assigned what each one was to do. He also commanded the doorkeeper to keep watch. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house is coming: whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or early in the morning. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.” Be alert, Jesus says. Regularly spend time in his word and regularly listen to his word. Receive the Lord’s Supper regularly. Be in the gospel so that you trust in him as your Savior and can lift up your heads when he returns, rather than fleeing in terror. Don’t view any hour as a chance to take a break from your faith.

Pray, Jesus says. Pray that you do not fall into temptation and fall away from the faith. Pray for awareness of the devil’s schemes. Pray for forgiveness, joy, and peace. Pray for strength to fight temptation and live a godly life. Pray for your family members, neighbors, and friends. Pray for the salvation of souls.

And then simply go about your assigned tasks to God’s glory, Jesus says, like a household servant with a specific to-do list. If you are parents, be good parents to the glory of God and help your children be ready for Jesus’s return. If you are spouses, be good spouses to the glory of God and reflect Christ’s love for you in serving and loving your spouse. If you are children, honor and obey your parents and teachers and do your chores and homework to the glory of God. If you prepare or serve food, prepare or serve it well to the glory of God and for the strengthening of those you serve. If you work in the field, work hard to the glory of God and the good of the humans whom your work will benefit. If you handle business transactions, do it honestly and well to the glory of God. If you help others, help them in Jesus’s name and treat them as you would want to be treated. If it’s evening and it’s time to relax, if it’s time to celebrate a special occasion, if it’s time to take your family on vacation, if it’s time to sleep, do it in Jesus’s name to the glory of God. When Jesus says he doesn’t want to find you sleeping, he’s not talking about physical sleep, but spiritual sleep, spiritual apathy and indifference. At whatever unexpected time Jesus comes, let him find you fulfilling your calling and assigned task with joy, faithfulness, and skill, to the glory of God your Savior.

“Keep watch!” Jesus says. There’s a reason that he compares his coming to summer and not to winter. Summer provides us with maximum light, with maximum opportunity for useful work and every kind of enjoyment. Jesus is the one who died to pay for all of our sins. He is the one interceding for us at God’s right hand. He is the one controlling and ruling over all things for our good. He is the one preparing a place for us in his Father’s glory. He is the most beautiful of the sons of men, as the psalmist says (Psalm 45:2). His coming is something we should look forward to and watch for with eagerness.

And now we know not only what we are watching for, but also how to watch—diligently, alertly, with prayer, fulfilling our daily tasks and callings in Jesus’s name and to his glory. Amen.