

## Spiritual Watchfulness

1 Chronicles 12:23–37, 1 Thessalonians 5:5–8

The title of the message today is “Spiritual Watchfulness.” Since Christians are “sons of light and sons of the day,” therefore, it is our responsibility to “watch and be sober.”

What kind of watching is Paul calling for? Not against physical threats like hostile intruders. Yes, we live in a violent world and must take precautions. On Friday, two masked gunmen entered St. Patrick Catholic Church in Myanmar (Burma) during services and fired a volley of bullets at the parish priest, Father Aung. Aung had just finished reading from the Bible when the gunmen stormed in and opened fire. He was struck by bullets in his jaw, hand, and thigh but survived. His assailants escaped.<sup>1</sup> Three weeks previously, gunmen shot dead a Baptist pastor in Myanmar’s Kachin state while he worked at his computer shop. They shot him in his stomach twice, and when he did not die, they shot him in the head. He is survived by his wife and three children.<sup>2</sup> How the heart of our Father God must be grieved!

It is appropriate for churches to take reasonable precautions against violent threats. Grace OPC’s services are public, and peaceful visitors are welcome. But the potential for violence is real, and certain men in our congregation are prepared to ward off threats. Our elders recognize our duty to protect the flock from physical violence.

In Myanmar, the Kachin state has been embroiled in deadly fighting between the military and rebel forces since a 2021 military coup. Hundreds have been killed and thousands have been displaced by violence. Political fighting has taken a religious turn in Kachin, where Christians account for about 34 percent of the population. The military has targeted and attacked churches, church-run organizations and Christian-majority villages, accusing them of supporting the resistance forces.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, where we worship, most threats to the church are spiritual. Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Paul echoed that, saying, “I know . . . that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” The emphasis in Scripture is on protecting the flock from false teachers. The standard of truth is God’s Word, the Bible. As Christians, we follow Christ. Jesus said,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/faith/2024/04/12/masked-gunmen-shoot-catholic-priest-during-church-service-myanmar/> accessed 4-12-24

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257370/myanmar-priest-shot-while-celebrating-mass-amid-violent-conflict> accessed 4-13-24

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-baptist-pastor-shot-dead-attackers-identity-unclear/104509> accessed 4-13-24

“Blessed are those who hear *the word of God* and keep it!” (Luke 11:28). Note well: Who are blessed? Those who *hear* the word of God and *keep* it! What does the Lord want us to hear and keep? The word of God, not the opinions of men! Where do we find the word of God? In the Bible alone. Anything else—decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits—is *not* the Word of God but man’s opinion. The church is purest that adheres to the Word of God.

As we consider spiritual watchfulness this morning consider first,

### **1. What is spiritual watchfulness?**

Note that our text begins: “You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.” Here are two sentences, and both essentially refer to the same people, though different pronouns are used: “*You* (the members of the church in Thessalonica) are all sons of light and sons of the day. *We* (Paul and the Thessalonians) are not of the night nor of the darkness.” Think of the theme of light and darkness in Scripture.

The contrast between light and darkness brings to mind the first day of creation, when “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” The light in Genesis 1 is physical, the light that illuminates the beautiful world that God made. But “light and darkness” can refer to spiritual realities as well: light representing *truth* and *understanding*; and darkness, *ignorance* and *blindness*. It is this figurative imagery that we see in Isaiah 9, where we are told: “The people that walked in *darkness* have seen a great *light*: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath *the light* shined.” In Isaiah’s usage, “the people that walked in darkness”—the Gentiles—did not have the light of the gospel, but now it is clearly seen with the coming of Christ, the light of the world.

In 2 Corinthians 4:6 Paul speaks of the new birth, by which the Spirit of God gives spiritual understanding to the benighted soul. He writes, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” If you know and are convinced that you are a sinner and have no hope of eternal life apart from Christ, then that is evidence that the light of the gospel has shown in your heart. You, with all the saints, are a son or daughter of light and of the day. You are not of the night or of darkness. You have been spiritually enlightened: born again! Only those who are born again can understand and embrace the gospel.

Referring to our text this morning, Calvin points out that Paul “gives the name of *day* to the doctrine of the gospel, by which the Christ, the *Sun of righteousness* (Mal. 4:2) is manifested to us.”

Since God’s people are sons and daughters of light, Paul writes: “Therefore let us not *sleep*, as others do, but let us *watch* and *be sober*.” Here are three verbs, all first person plural. “Us” refers to the church in Thessalonica and includes the

apostle Paul. Here is God's will for Christians: we are not to sleep but watch and be sober. Paul is not telling us not to get our eight hours of daily sleep. After all, sleep is a precious gift of God. As the Psalmist writes, "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep" (Ps. 127:2). God doesn't want us to stay up every night, eating the bread of sorrows, worrying whether everything is going to turn out all right. He wants us to get adequate sleep. Jesus said, "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' . . . For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matt. 6:31–32). If you are prone to worry, memorize these verses and meditate upon them.

When our text says, "Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober," it is talking about *spiritual* watchfulness. This is actually a large theme in the New Testament. Jesus said, "*Watch* therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (Matt. 24:42). None of us knows when Christ is going to come back from heaven. In light of this we are to examine our hearts, take regular stock of our spiritual condition and be ready for his return.

When, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsamene to pray, he instructed his disciples, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and *watch* with Me" (Matt. 26:38). He knew he would be facing a mighty spiritual battle as he went to the cross, and he wanted his disciples to "watch"—that is, stay awake and pray—with him.

When Paul, on his third missionary journey, sent for the Ephesian elders and gave them instructions about how to faithfully perform their work, he warned them that "from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore *watch*, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears." Here, "watch" means *give attention to duty*.

In 1 Corinthians 16:13 he tells the church, "*Watch*, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong." In Colossians 4:2 he says, "Continue earnestly in prayer, being *vigilant* in it with thanksgiving" (*vigilant* translates the same word in the original). Note how *watching* is connected with *standing fast in the faith* and *continuing earnestly in prayer*. These are spiritual exercises that every Christian needs to learn to perform. We do them because the Christian life is spiritual warfare. We must "fight the good fight of faith."<sup>4</sup> Our adversary is the devil. The goal is to cast down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). This is a huge order, and it cannot be accomplished in the power of the flesh. It requires dedication, commitment, understanding, and dependence on the power of God in

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Tim. 6:12

order that we might achieve success and not become spiritual wash-outs. In Christ, victory is secure, but to achieve it we must practice spiritual watchfulness. Second, consider

## **2. Who should practice it?**

Notice to whom this is directed: “brethren,” “sons of light and sons of the day,” “let *us* watch and be sober.” This spiritual discipline is for every Christian. All of us who profess Christ are to watch and be sober. This is not just for some super-spiritual Christians, it is for all of us. It is not just for those who have known the Lord a long time, it is for all of us, no matter where we are in our spiritual journey.

It is not something we think of near enough. I have been preaching for nearly fifty years, and I cannot recall that I have ever preached before on the topic of spiritual watchfulness. I say this to my shame. I have read this and similar texts many, many times. There are even hints of it in the Old Testament. The LORD told Moses, “Command the people, saying, ‘You are about to pass through the territory of your brethren, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. Therefore *watch* yourselves carefully’” (Deut. 2:4).

Cities in Israel would customarily have a watchman—someone to keep alert and warn of danger. In Psalm 127 we are told that “Unless the LORD guards the city, the *watchman* stays awake in vain.” Pastors and elders should be watchmen, warning their flock of danger, but all of us can have a part, understanding the danger of worldliness, of Satan, the enemy of our souls, of the dangers of spiritual laxity, of taking our eyes off Christ and becoming complacent. All of us should “be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

The hymn which we will sing after the sermon is for us all: “Rise, my soul, to *watch* and pray, from thy sleep awaken; be not by the evil day unawares o’ertaken. For the foe, well we know, oft his harvest reapeth while the Christian sleepeth. *Watch* against the devil’s snares, lest asleep he find thee; for indeed no pains he spares to deceive and blind thee. Satan’s prey oft are they who secure are sleeping and *no watch* are keeping.”

We have considered: “What is spiritual watchfulness?” “Who should practice it?” Thirdly, consider

## **3. How do I do it?**

Paul writes, “those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.”

How do I practice spiritual watchfulness? By avoiding drunkenness, practicing sobriety, and armoring ourselves for spiritual battle.

“Drunkenness” is overindulgence. This can refer to overindulging in drink, but more broadly it can refer to overindulging in the affairs of this life. Paul would

later write to Timothy, “No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.”<sup>5</sup> The Christian’s commanding officer is Christ! *He* is Lord of all. Whatever he says, we are duty-bound to obey. The Christian life is spiritual warfare. The Christian is called specifically to wage war against the world, the flesh and the devil and devote himself to God. When we get too caught up in the affairs of this life we take our eyes off Christ and become distracted from our main duty, which is to please God.

What about you? Have you gotten “drunk” on the affairs of this life such that they have become more important to you than your God? Paul declared, “All things are lawful . . . but I will not be *brought under the power* of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). If some lawful pursuit has captured you under its power, it is an idol that must be dethroned and trodden underfoot. The Christian is not to overindulge in drink or overindulge in any pursuit or pastime. Nothing must become more important than obeying Christ!

Furthermore, we must armor ourselves for spiritual battle. As Paul puts it, “Let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.” Here is an introduction to a topic he will develop more fully in Ephesians 6, where he talks about putting on the “whole armor of God.” Here in 1 Thessalonians he mentions only the breastplate and the helmet. These are defensive in nature, protecting the chest and head from the attacks of the enemy. In Bible times warfare was up close and personal; soldiers fought with swords and spears. The best soldiers were strong, valiant men who could wield a sword or spear effectively. These weapons were very sharp and could easily pierce the skin and mortally damage the heart, lungs or brain, causing instant death. A soldier going into battle must be protected.

In the Ephesians text Paul speaks of “the breastplate of righteousness”; here, it is “the breastplate of faith and love.” The two descriptions harmonize perfectly: the *righteousness* of Christ which alone qualifies us for heaven is received by *faith* and produces the fruit of *love*. Are you trusting in the perfect righteousness of Christ? Does your life exhibit the fruit of love for God and neighbor?

In the Ephesians text Paul speaks of the “helmet of salvation”; here it is expanded to the “hope” of salvation. The Christian’s only hope of salvation is Christ. Our good works are like filthy rags in the sight of a holy God. We are not saved by our good works but by Christ’s perfect work. He, alone among men, is without sin, and with him the Father is “well pleased.” By receiving Christ in true faith we can say, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Tim. 2:4 NIV

with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10).

How does one practice spiritual watchfulness? By watching particularly over our hearts, thoughts, affections, words and actions.”<sup>6</sup> It all starts with the heart: does God have first place in our heart? Moreover, Christian charity requires us also to watch over our fellow Christians, helping one another in the path of righteousness.

Furthermore, we are to “be sober.” Calvin defines spiritual sobriety as “[using] this world so sparingly and temperately that we are not entangled with its allurements.”

Our Old Testament text this morning contains a list of men who supported David’s becoming king. As you read through the list you notice that every tribe of Israel is mentioned. At this early stage in his kingship David enjoyed widespread support. This was a big deal. Here was not only a change of king, but a change of *dynasty*. The first king, Saul, intruded into the priest’s office and had to be replaced. God chose David, a man after his own heart.<sup>7</sup> Reading through the list we see the vast majority of those referenced were “mighty men of valor, fit for war.” But one group is different: the sons of Issachar. These were men “who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do” (v. 32), This is an unusual expression. “Understanding the times” means *understanding the present situation* or *understanding what is needed now*. The Holy Spirit highlights these unnamed sons of Issachar as men of exemplary character and unusual spiritual insight. They understood Scripture and applied it admirably to the times in which they lived. They stood out among their countrymen as examples of the kind of man that God seeks. These were from the tribe of Issachar; they were not priests or Levites, men who authoritatively taught the law of God. Here are examples for the laity in every age. A strong church not only has faithful pastors and elders who are “apt to teach,” it has also lay men and women who know the Scriptures and know how to apply biblical principles to their own lives and to society at large. They understand the big picture and realize that in a fallen world it all comes down to God or Satan. Our responsibility always is to obey God.

In Luke 12 Jesus chided people because they understood weather patterns but did not “know how to interpret the present time” (v. 56). Multitudes of Jesus’ hearers did not discern that they were privileged to live in the time of the Messiah’s coming—the day of salvation for those who receive him, and of vengeance for those who reject him. Jesus was speaking to people who all their lives had gone to temple or synagogue and had heard the public reading of the Holy Scriptures—people who knew that the Messiah was coming, and that when he came, he would

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<sup>6</sup> Gill

<sup>7</sup> 1 Sam. 13:13–14

do miracles that proved his messiahship. Yet when the Messiah came, they did not recognize him. How tragic!

*Our* greatest threat is not gunmen firing at us while we worship but good things that take our attention off of Christ. For this reason we must constantly practice spiritual watchfulness, guarding our hearts with all diligence. Brothers and sisters, may all of us always have understanding of the times and practice spiritual watchfulness over our hearts and minds, to the glory of God. Amen!