

**The Rev. Billy Cerveney:**

So quickly, so easily. And then I can walk around and as long as I'm on my feet, I'm practicing faith. If I'm teaching or I'm study, or I'm in a Bible study, or I'm living out loud my faith, it's so easy when I'm on my feet. But I know the time is coming where I'm going to have to sit down.

And eventually when I sit down, I will find myself slowly drifting off to sleep and I will catch myself. Oh, I haven't studied my Bible in a while or I'll be be, you know, going through my days and all of a sudden I catch myself, oh, I've not been to a small group or oh, I've not, you know, reached out to this brother or whatever.

But eventually, inevitably, I fall into this deep coma like spiritual sleep. And it's during those times, the difference between normal sleep and spiritual sleep is this we don't just sit there inactive, we're actually sleep walkers. And when we do that, we begin to engage in things we would never engage in. And when we're spiritually attuned, when we forget, when we drift off, that's when we find ourselves drifting into old habits.

That's when we wake up one day and we startle. We realize that we're contending with an anger that we've dealt with, that we haven't dealt with in forever. Or we, we find ourselves in an old habit that we had worked so hard to overcome or some secret sin that we used to battle against. We realize, oh, you're not battling against it so much these days, are you?

And you wake up and you think to yourself, how did I get here? Like, how much time is passed? What's going on? How do I overcome this? And you vow to never do it again? But guess what? Inevitably you find yourself back in that place and you read passages like the one we read today where Jesus is talking about the Second Coming.

And this is this is kind of the one of these passages that I refer to as the Santa Claus is Coming to Town passages where it's like, he knows when you're sleeping, you better watch out. He's going to get you. That's kind of scary sounding passages and we read a passage like that where Jesus seems to be staying, stay awake, because I'm going to be coming back, and I'm coming like a thief in the night.

You don't want to miss me, because if you miss me, you're going to wake up. You're going to be in an empty classroom, and you're going to get kind of left behind. And what do you do with this? How do we stay awake? How do we stay on our spiritual toes in such a way that makes us aware of the second coming of Jesus?

That was a good question. You read our passage is perfect for the advent season. It doesn't sound very Christmassy, does it? But advent, as you know, is it was we begin our calendar year in the church. It's the time that we as Christians that we celebrate the birth of Jesus, and we anticipate the waiting or waiting for the coming of Jesus being born in the stable and all that.

But as believers who live on this side of the cross, it's also a time that we prepare our hearts and we're preparing our hearts. Looking forward to when Jesus is going to come again. So when we read passages like this, what we're doing is we're trying to break the soil of our hearts. And what does it mean for us to be watchful people?

What does it mean for us to live in the realities of our God, in the realities of our salvation, so that when Jesus does come, we are prepared? And our passage today is in Matthew 24, Jesus is at the Mount of Olives. And this is this is a story or versions of the conversations Jesus is having on the Mount of Olives.

He has, in the book of Luke, he has in the book of Matthew, has in a couple of different places. And one of the things that he's talking about with his disciples before is when they are standing up. If you remember from a week or two ago, he's standing up and the disciples are looking out at the temple, and they're seeing how beautiful it is.

And Jesus is, is, prophesying. He's saying that not one stone will remain on top of another one. And he begins to speak about what's going to happen in 70 A.D., though he doesn't tell them 70 A.D. with the destruction of Jerusalem. And then he begins to talk about a day that's in the distant future where there is the Second Coming, what we call the Second coming, the end of the age.

And in verse 36 it says, but about that day in our this is Jesus speaking, but about that day, an hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only the father. So what he's saying here is you're asking me when this is going to happen and that day and that hour. No one knows.

Not the angels, only the father in heaven. I wait a second. That's kind of crazy, because when I think of Jesus, I know Jesus is. He was a he was a person, but he was also 100% God. And for as a as someone who was 100% God, he shared all the attributes with God. And one of the attributes Jesus shares was God is his omniscience.

He does not. There's not a thing that the father knows that he doesn't know. So to say that he doesn't know is that imply that he's somehow lesser than God in this way. That's not what he's saying here. What's happening here is there are times in Scripture where you see Jesus flexing his divinity, where you see him flexing his God muscles.

And there are other times where you see Jesus, where he is flexing his humanity, where you see him walking, where it talks about in Philippians two, where he emptied himself, where he humbles himself, where he didn't find equality with God, something to be grasped, where he chose to be in this place, not though being in the very nature of God, he took on the very nature of a servant being in human likeness.

And so what he's doing in this moment, what we see Jesus, is he is flexing this humanity. He's being 100% man, and he's instructing them. And what he's saying is, I'm trying to teach you right now what it means to be a human being walking by faith in relationship with God the Father. And in this moment, I'm trying to prepare your heart.

I'm trying to prepare your soul, the soil of your heart. And what I'm saying is this. This is information for you that is only attainable to the father and for you to walk by faith. So what? Jesus, he continues, he's saying that day that's coming, it's going to be like the days of Noah where people are eating and they're drinking and they're getting giving each other in marriage.

And they knew nothing about what was happening until it was happened, until it happened and they were taken away. All of a sudden, it's going to be like that with the second coming up with the Second Coming, two people are going to be in the field and one is going to be taken away, two people going to be working, and then all of a sudden one another person is going to be taken away.

Now there's a couple points that I want to I want to make here about this. A lot of times when people read this passage, they think that this is some picture of the rapture, that that God's going to come, he's going to snatch. The believers are going to take him away, or vice versa or whatever. However that works.

That's not what's happening here. What Jesus is not saying. As Noah entered the ark and was whisked away, Christians will be whisked away and others will be left behind. The point he's making here is he's saying that just like the flood was a surprise to these people, the second coming of Jesus is going to be a surprise to you and that you don't know when the Second Coming is going to going to happen.

So don't spend your time sitting there trying to decipher signs and wonders. X does not mark the spot. Don't spend your years just trying to figure out when Jesus is going to come. Jesus is not some divine leprechaun that we need to catch when he comes back. So we get our part of salvation. That's not how this works.

What Jesus is saying here is that these are fruitless exercises, and all they do is they give me some a semblance of control over my life that I can't. Jesus is going to come next Wednesday. Here's the truth if I knew when Jesus was going to come again, guess what I would do? I'd negotiate with him. Wednesday is not good for me.

You know that passage where he says, well, yes, Jesus, I'll follow you, but let me go first. Bury my father and mother. That's what he's talking about. That heart posture that we want so much control of this scenario. And he's saying the mysteries belong to God alone. So that's one point. He's making a second point that Jesus is making.

And I think it's a deeper point, is he's warning us about a heart posture. He's warning us about a heart posture that we carry. That is our that will be the enemy to our being aware and being watchful and waiting for Jesus's coming again. And the way he warns him is he talks. He points to the story in no.

Of the days of Noah, and he. And he points to an aspect of this story in a real ironic way. But I'll tell you why. When you read the story of Noah, what happened before the flood, the people that were living during that time, it was totally depraved. There was a spiritual reality that was going on, unlike one that we have never seen before.

The people were living in ways the Scripture says, in ways that that that we had never seen before. So much so that God was wiped out the earth. But when Jesus is talking about the heart posture of the people, the heart posture to avoid, he's not talking about any of that. He's not talking about the depths of depravity and the, you know, cooperating with the spiritual forces of evil.

What he's saying there is he's saying, as in the days of Noah, you're going to be eaten and you're going to be drinking. Are you just going to be going about your lives? And his point is this they're living in this spiritual oblivion, getting up, doing the thing, blah, blah, blah, people. It's a picture of people living in indifference, completely a nest despised by the trivialities of life rather than living in the realities of God.

And what Jesus is pointing out here is this. And this is a profound point that in matters of salvation, indifference is just as bad as defiance. Indifference is just as bad as defiance. Let me tell you what I mean. If I had a terminal disease and I was dying, and you had a terminal disease, and you were dying next to me, and I put a cure right there, and that my person over here that is defiance is saying I would never take this cure, this medicine that would heal me.

I would never take this. And then you come over to the indifferent person. I'm like, you know what, I don't care. I'm not going to take it. I'm indifferent. Who's worse? Neither one of us. Hey, we're both going to die. My indifference in matters of salvation is just as bad. Is defiance. It's just the soft version of rebellion.

This is when and say I've got it released. I'm going to be more preoccupied with this. The difference is also, though, is the one profound difference with, with my indifference or our indifference is that it's so much more poisonous because it's so much more sneaky, so much sneakier, because indifference to God almost always is obfuscated, almost hides behind my sense of urgency and my passions about this world.

Those things that I can so easily justify. I'm not just indifferent to God. I'm excited about something else I got. You know what? I got to make sure that my bank account, I got to provide for my family, I can justify it. That's really good. That's an important thing. So I'm indifferent to God. I've got to, I don't know, something about my bank account or creating holiday memories or my addictions or whatever it is.

These things that seem so vitally important to us that we can hide behind, but it's just a way of masking my own indifference, and it lulls us to sleep. Anytime that we put anything on the throne instead of Jesus, it will lead to our indifference to Jesus and it will allow us to sleep. So what do we do about it?

Verse 42, therefore keep watch. If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come. And an hour when you do not expect him. Okay. Keep watch. All right. But didn't Jesus just say a second ago that we're not to keep track of signs and wonders and all these different things?

That doesn't mark the spot. So what am I keeping watch for? And if I'm trying to keep watch, how do I muster the strength to be someone who is prone to falling asleep? How do I keep watch?

See, the good news is, keeping watch isn't about putting toothpicks under my spiritual eyelids so that I don't fall asleep. It's not about inducing enough anxiety, so I don't drift away or enough fear. So I am diligent because I'm scared that I get left behind. Keeping watch here. Any time you hear the word, be ready or keep watchful.

Anything that implies a watchfulness, that is enduring and in the New Testament, an enduring watchfulness. Any time you hear that, I want you to think of that is synonymous with one word repentance. That's what this passage is really about. How do we keep watch? We live in repentance. What does repentance mean? Let me tell you, there's two pieces of repentance.

One is that we are aware of ourselves.

In this passage, Jesus is again we're drawing. He's drawing on the days of Noah. You got two people that are standing in the field, one is taken away and the other one is left behind. What's the difference between those two people? The difference is it's not what they're doing. They're both busy at work. They're both plowing the fields.

They're both doing the same thing. It's not performance. They're functionally living the same life.

What it's saying here is one is spiritually awake and the other was not. One was spiritually aware, the other one was not. How does that person stay spiritually awake? Because I fall asleep. Now, I don't know this person's story in this in this parable that Jesus, because we don't get many details about him. But I can tell you this.

I know about spiritual slumber. I know what about it in my life, and I know about it in your life. And I know that there's one way that God wakes us up to ourselves, and one of the chief tools in God's hands to wake us up, I'm sorry to say, it's not fame and fortune. It's just not. It's not vacations.

It's not relaxing on the beach, the way God generally wakes us up to ourselves in the things that are breaking our hearts, that we have chosen, is through pain. It's through suffering. It's through the things that are not working out in our life. Now, listen, I don't know all of you. I know a lot of you. But I know this about all of us.

We all are carrying something. You've been through the thing you're going through the thing. You're going to go through the thing. And it's heavy and it hurts. And some of those things. I probably don't have a reference point for some of the things that you're dealing with in this room, and I won't pretend that I can identify with all of those things.

And I'm not being cavalier when I speak to the pain in your life. I'm not just saying that, oh, God's trying to get your attention, or God's wagging his finger because he's the great lesson teacher in the sky, and your pain is just some tool in his toolbox. And he's doing that. He's not that cavalier. I'm not saying that, but I am saying this.

Whatever God's purposes are in those places for allowing the pain, I promise you this that when we lean into them as believers, if when we suffer well, God will always use our pain for the good of those who love him. God will always use that thing to bring a profound self-awareness of our own need, of the depth and longing of our own hearts.

It will. It will turn the grand lens of our lives so we can finally see those things that we are leaning into, that we are focusing on, that we are demanding. That would give me life when I when it did blow me into spiritual indifference. Those things that I cling to when they break down. Some people call them idols.

You can never really see your idols until they're smashed, because you don't see them when they're working for you. So God uses those things and I tell you this, my, my, my call to you today when it comes to that part of repentance, to the to the pain piece, is self-awareness. Because if there is a hard thing, don't harden your hearts.

Don't waste your pain, don't waste it. Because if you harden your heart, doesn't mean you're going to stop hurting you, just means on the other side of it, you're going to be a hard hearted person. There's nothing more cliché. We always say as Christians, like God uses our pain and suffering to deepen my well and make me wise and you know better and things like that.

But, you know, there's nothing more cliché than a bitter Christian person. Why? Because it doesn't. Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean you're going to suffer in such a way that



this will produce life and vitality, that will produce wholeness or produce some wisdom in you. So my, my, my call to you, my call to my self in this I'm speaking to me.

So waste our pain here. How do we lean into it in your marriage and your physical issues and family issues? How do we lean into it in such a way that when we come to that place, we can focus on? I'm not saying that it's all your fault, but focus on those things that God needs us to see in that place, that we can come before the Lord with empty hands.

It's the first part of repentance that I can say, I see it, Lord. I see the things my heart are so are so committed to. I see the things that I have leaned on that are not you. I see the things that have clung to, that are not you. There's repentance, the repentance, the first part of it. If it causes us to focus on our own heart.

The second part of repentance is it causes us to run towards Jesus. That word, repentance is loaded especially for us in the South. Repent. You see it on signs. It's kind of the turn of burn word. And repentance is about what you're what you stop doing. Repentance is about what I'm saying no to it. Let me tell you this repentance, the power of repentance is not about what you're turning away from.

Period. The power of repentance is about what you are turning towards. It's not about what you're turning away from. And I'm not saying it's bad to turn away from things because we need to. It's about what we are turning towards. You read the story of the prodigal son. He's in the pigsty and he and he gets up and he realizes, oh gosh, look where I have, I ended up, look, look at all this.

And he says, I'm done with this. And he turns away, what's the what's the punchline of that story? Where's the gold in that story? It's not turning from the pigs. It's him turning towards the father. And what does he discover when he turns towards the father? What is the father doing? He's standing on a hillside watching for his boy.

He sees him and he comes sprinting towards him. And when he gets to his son, his son begins this long speech of please, dad. He falls on his neck. The scripture says I falls on his neck. That's

a literal translation. He embraces his son. You know what he's doing in that moment. He's smelling his son. I've got you back.

Finally. The power of repentance is what we are turning towards.

So we let the Holy Spirit. It breaks the soil of our hearts. In these trials, we see the bankruptcy of our need, and we lift our eyes and we see a Savior. We see a Savior, and we hear Jesus talking about a thief that's coming. And we understand that the thief is coming. This is not a scary thief because we've met that thief before, haven't we?

We've met that thief before when he broke in the first time and he broke in the first time, he broke into history. And that's what we're celebrating is when in advent is when Jesus did the thief, as he calls himself, he breaks into history and he's born in a manger, and he lives this life in the only thing he came to steal and to take away from you was your sin.

The only thing that Jesus came to take away from you was death itself. And he leaves behind life. His spirit. He leaves behind righteousness. How do we stay awake his people with this spiritual sleep disorder that we keep just falling asleep, and we get a nest of sighs? We realize that while we might sleep, Jesus doesn't. That's the punchline of Gethsemane.

He. When Jesus was in the garden and he would come out, just stay awake watching me pray with me. They fell asleep. They fell asleep. But guess what? Jesus is the greater apostle. He was. He is the true Son of God. He doesn't fall asleep. We have a Savior that does not fall asleep, and we live our lives with open hands saying, it is my power.

It is your power, not mine, your sufficiency, not mine, your resolve, not mine. Guess what happens in that moment? It gives me freedom. It gives me freedom to rest, not to live in anxiety. But I live in the rest of repentance. And when I close my eyes in this place, I am not reclining into the emptiness of this world.

When I close my eyes in this place, I am reclining into the arms of a Savior who says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And there we can sleep, but not in a way that's unaware. We can sleep in rest in a way that is watchful and expectant, because the thief that is coming is the same one who came, and he's coming for the same reason.

He's saying, come to me. And much like when the father ran across the hill, Jesus, our older brother, he will gather us. He will gather us all, and there's going to be some party. Amen, Amen.