

Keep Watch & Pray

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[0 : 0 0] there's a story told about a preacher who was going on for a very very very long time people were getting bored it was also quite cringy because not only was it very long and very dull but he was throwing his arms in all directions and he's thumping the pulpit and all sorts and after this had gone on for a very long time he accidentally knocked his notes and they went flying all over the place well in a bit of a panic he went down he started picking up the notes then he looked around desperately at his congregation and said where was i and three people in three corners of the room independently said you were just coming towards the conclusion ever had that experience where you just wanted something to happen you're just waiting for it maybe it's a release from a situation maybe it's it's putting more positive terms it's something that you you're just longing to happen you've been waiting for so so long when we read these words of jesus which talk about the end keep watch and pray as he urges us to be expectant right at the heart of those words is this urge to be expectant but in a positive way that life is not always going to be as we now know it it's going to change and it's going to change so much for the better beyond our imagination so be ready for it be prepared for it be expectant of it keep praying for it keep watching for it as a young christian in my teens i was went to a stage where i was actually quite deeply disturbed over the end of the world and some of the some of the things that scripture said particularly in the book of revelation and uh i actually even had dreams i had nightmares of the world coming to an end and i remember one day talking to a a christian another christian who was much older and very much wiser and they reassured me on a number of counts the first thing they said was that apparently apocalyptic dreams are in fact quite common among teenagers the second thing is that in christ in christ the call to be ready is not about entering a state of psychological dread and terror it's the very opposite that call to be ready is an invitation to be excited to be expectant living like the kingdom is near is a positive thing it's not about living in dread and terror the third thing that they said after they'd established all of that is they said actually you know whilst we do not know when that end will come and we don't and if we think we do we need to go back to scripture because jesus himself says nobody knows when that end will come we do need to know that it will come it will come and there is a real danger that we can lose sight of that reality because it can seem so when we read scripture and we read of a promised new world where there'll be no more death or dying or pain or suffering and we read of how all the evil will be completely wiped out forever it seems so removed from our daily experience it seems hard to imagine

and to talk of jesus returning and there being an end it can seem so implausible but they said this this a very much older wiser christian said to me and it stuck with me that in fact that end is actually very close to every generation ask yourself this as a serious question and it's not meant as a bleak one but how many more years do you honestly expect to have left in this life now if someone was to say that jesus would return by the end of this century we would consider that's quite soon i think in the scheme of things if if the world was going to come to its conclusion and jesus was to return by the end of this century we'd say that's not actually in the scheme of things that far off my guess is is pretty well everybody in this room would have died by then and as i say without wanting to sound bleak the reality is that we will come face to face we will come face to face with ultimate reality with actually only just a few years decades perhaps but it's not that long in the scheme of things if that's not enough to convince us of the the plausibility of the end let me read to you something um by a physicist who died a couple of years ago now but um he he was a great physicist called john polkinghorn um he also was a christian and he was an ordained becker in the church of england and he spent a lot of his academic career um working out the relationship work uh wrestling with the relationship between his uh vocation as a as an academic physicist and also um as a as a christian theologian and a number of years ago he wrote a book called the god of hope and the end of the

world fairly early on in that book he actually says that you know whilst we might struggle to imagine as Christians an end he said within the sign within the scientific community from a physicist point of view it's a no-brainer it can't go on forever you know the end of the world is not an if it's a when he says this and I personally don't understand everything that he says in this piece I'm about to read to you but it's enough I think perhaps to make the point this pile is is um entitled certain catastrophes it says the sun shines through the effects of its internal nuclear reactions turning its hydrogen into helium in about five billion years time all the core hydrogen that will be exhausted and the sun will be will then swell to become a red giant burning any life surviving on earth into a frazzle in the process our understanding of the course of stellar evolution is good enough to make this prediction absolutely reliable of course by then it is possible that terrestrial life will have migrated elsewhere in the galaxy however the universe itself faces a highly problematic future its long-term history is controlled by the competing effects of expansion the explosive consequences of the big bang and gravity drawing matter together these contrasting tendencies are very evenly balanced and we do not know for certain which will win in the end if expansion predominates the possibility currently favoured by most cosmologists

cosmic history will continue forever in a world growing steadily colder and more dilute eventually all will decay into low-grade radiation if gravity predominates the present expansion will one day be halted and reversed what began with the big bang will end with a big crunch as the universe implodes into a cosmic melting pot now the time scales for these processes are immensely long spanning many tens of billions of years but one or other of them is a certain prognostication of the cosmic future however fruitful the universe may seem today its end lies in futility it is perhaps not surprising that the distinguished American theoretical physicist Steven Weinberg writing within the limited horizon of an atheist physicalism and with science alone as his guide could say that the more he understood the universe the more it seemed to him to be pointless you see the end of the world from a physicist's point of view it's not an if it's a when and if we're left just alone in this world with no sense of conviction that there is a God who is behind all of this what is the point?

but that's not where the Bible leads us the Bible talks obviously not in scientific terms but does talk with certainty and with conviction that life will not always be like this that things will come to a conclusion it will come to an end but not in a meaningless futile way with no purpose so we're just here for a few years and then gone although it may feel like that from a human point of view but rather and this is where we come to the words of Jesus we are called to be expectant because God has everything in his hands and he calls us to keep watch and to pray and to be ready and to be tuned into the fragility of life because we do not know when that's going to come to an end as individuals if not cosmologically but to be aware of that mortality and of that finitude but not from a place of despair the very opposite rather to be filled with Holy Spirit hope knowing that that which we know and love and which is good and wholesome and of God and is life-giving and life-transforming in a positive way will be eternal we don't know quite how that will be we don't know when it will be but it will be it's not an if it's a when so I'm going to take a pause now to be still and I'm going to ask you a question and I'm not going to turn ask you to turn to the person next to you to discuss this one

I am going to ask all of us and I'm going to join you in this as well to pray and there's a danger that this kind of question can seem like a cliché because it's often trotted off as a cliché almost I think a bit of a cliché question but I mean this is a serious question and the question I want to put to you is this if you knew beyond all doubt and by the way you can't know beyond all doubt but if you did know beyond all doubt that Christ was going to return within the next 24 hours what would you do? [12:18] that's a serious question and I'm going to invite each of us right now to just pause to be still for about half a minute and just ask ourselves that question and then I'm going to say a prayer Lord God we do not know the day or the hour of your return and we do not know the day or hour of when we will leave this life on earth but help us to be ready and help us to shape the way that we live around a genuine sense of expectation that your kingdom is near

Amen Amen We haven't reached the end yet of the talk in case you were thinking there's more to come what does this mean in practical terms?

well I want to share with you two thoughts the first thing in practical terms if we're to live like the kingdom is near sorry is that we are to live like the kingdom is near if we are to keep watching to pray it means having that sense of genuine expectation that what we see and experience going on around us does not match what ultimate reality will be according to the promises of God in 1982 in

Wisconsin there was an American football game taking place and the home team were playing and it was going disastrously wrong it was they were losing by a country mile and yet although as this game was going from bad to even worse to even even worse the crowd gathered seemed remarkably excited and the reason why they were excited was not because the game before them their home team were spectacularly losing right in front of them but 70 miles away their baseball team in another stadium were doing remarkably well now this was in the days before mobile phones and the internet but they did have portable radios and quite a few thousand people in that stadium that day had their portable radios and were following the match not only right in front of them but the one that they were winning 70 miles away and so you had this kind of rather bizarre contradictory scene of a match in a stadium that seemed to be going spectacularly badly and yet everybody was cheering excitedly with a sense of victory in the air you see while on the field before them was defeat their attention was on a victory that they could not see but knew was very very real it may not look like it but we are winning and to keep watching to pray expectantly is to live like the kingdom is near that's the first thing

I said there were two things here's the second one and the last one to keep watching to pray means to expect God to move in our lives not just in someone else's lives but in our lives not in a way that is contrived or false optimism but a genuine expectation coupled with a bit of mystery that we don't quite know how but nevertheless God will work in us the pastor and writer Rick Warren who was a leader of an enormous church Saddleback Church in America and the writer of the purpose driven life and the purpose driven church was interviewed at a leadership conference a few years ago and was asked what why does God use you and he said in what I think is a genuine genuine, authentic and non-arrogant way he said God uses me because I expect him to now think about that how might you expect

God to use you even in this next week I'm going to close with something visual it's not a magic trick just to warn you so don't be disappointed it's such an obvious illustration it's almost too obvious but sometimes the visual things can help us grasp things and I've got here a glove it's a bit of a dirty looking glove because it's a working glove but I'm going to pop it on there and I want that glove to work I want that glove to pick up that Bible and so I'm going to tell the glove to do that here it goes glove lift that Bible and there's not much happening so maybe the glove needs a little bit of encouragement come on glove you can do it come on you know you've got it inside you if you just deep reach deep within you can do it go on pick it up pick up the Bible come on come on come on it's not much is it maybe maybe it needs some training maybe it hasn't been told how to how to do its job glove if you just stretch out your fingers like that and your thumb and just grip them together around the Bible and then lift you can do that that's not really working what this glove needs is some fellowship it needs some other gloves around and about it it needs to be in a home group to give it some it needs to be surrounded by a range of other different types of gloves come on glove you can do it that glove needs to make a recommitment it needs to stretch out its hand it needs to be baptised it needs to make its life explicitly committed come on come forward give it your all no holding back you know as well as I do that that's not going to happen but you also know that that as a work glove was designed with a purpose to work and there's only way one way that that's going to happen it's not going to work by itself it wasn't designed to and neither were you or I we are wired to work in partnership we're called to work in partnership

[20 : 03] God created us to work in partnership God longs for us to work in partnership to keep watching to pray doesn't mean we step back and we expect God just to step in and do it even though it is all by his strength but to keep watching to pray means to be expectant that the one from without will indeed enter even our lives God's God's God's God's God's God's Holy Spirit is not simply near us or with us or beside us although he's all those things but that he is actually in us and Jesus' call to keep watch and to pray is that invitation that the living God who longs to occupy our lives in a way that will be unique to each and every one of us will fill us and enable us to fulfil that purpose for which he has designed us to keep watch and to pray is to be expectant to be ready that God the author of the universe the giver of salvation can and will enter us and use us in ways that we probably don't imagine so let's pray together now that he will do just that

Lord thank you that you call us to be expectant and ready not in a way that lives in dread but that lives in hope Lord help us consciously and subconsciously to be expectant that you can and that you will use us to live like the kingdom is here and to keep watch not in our own strength but in that expectation that you will enter our lives and that you fill us with your power and with your strength

so Lord as we seek to keep watch and pray now and as we begin Advent renew us in that expectation Lord we invite your

Holy Spirit to enter us like a hand entering a glove Lord be in every conversation in every interaction and move in those things Lord whatever these coming days or weeks have in store for us help us to be ready and expectant for you to move in each and every one of us fill us afresh with your spirit with your power keep us ever more expectant keep us watching keep us praying knowing that your kingdom is coming in Jesus name Amen Amen

Amen ■■ God valuable God