

Watch!

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[0:00] As some of you may know, I took up a new hobby last year. I attend an art class once a week. Now, I'm never going to be very good, but I am learning. One of the most important things I've learned is how to look at things, to take in their shapes and colors and tones and shades and forms.

I'd like to think that I've become a far more observant person, even if my artwork still reflects that of a three-year-old. So, when you go home after the service, look at your garden. You'll see green grass, green trees, green bushes.

But as you look deeper, you'll realize how all those shades of green are subtly different from one another. Art teaches you to watch out for things.

Luke chapter 21, verse 29 through 38, in this passage, in view of all that Jesus has said in the previous passage concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, he is calling us to watch out, to be observant, to always be on the lookout.

As Christians, we are not to dig our heads in the sand. We are always to have our eyes wide open. The Christian gospel teaches us to watch out for things, subtle things, but the most important things.

[1:29] In our passage, we're taught to watch out for four things. Watch the times, watch the Word, watch yourselves, and watch Jesus.

Watch the times, first of all, in verses 29 through 31. Watch the times. Our passage begins with a parable. Jesus draws his listeners' attention to the trees and how when they come out in leaf, we know that summer is near.

Now, given that we are now officially, I believe, in springtime, this is a parable that should work well with us today. The trees are budding. The leaves are beginning to grow.

The summer is not far away. We've endured the worst of the dark and cold, hopefully. And now it's time to look forward to the light and warmth. The icy grip of winter is giving in to the rainy embrace of summer in Glasgow.

In light of all that Jesus has said in the previous passage about the end times, Jesus goes on to say, So also, when you see these things taking place, you know the kingdom of God is near.

[2:36] Now, as we saw two weeks ago, it's very difficult to know whether Jesus, when he says this kind of thing, is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 at the hands of the Romans, or whether he's referring to the Romans.

Or whether he's referring to his second coming. However, in this instance, I'm confident he's referring to the first of these, the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus talked at length, early in the chapter, about Jerusalem being surrounded by its enemies and being trampled underfoot by the Gentiles.

A clear reference to the siege and destruction of the city at the hands of the Romans. And he's telling the people, watch out for these things. Keep your eyes open.

Be aware of what's going to happen. It's what comes next, which is new. In verse 31 and 32.

Truly, sorry, verse 31 and 32. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know the kingdom of God is near. You know the kingdom of God is near.

[3:43] Does Jesus mean by this that the destruction of the temple in AD 70 will mean that he's coming then and there? Will it herald his second coming?

That we are to understand the kingdom of God as Jesus' code for his second return? I don't think so.

Rather, he's referring, he's using the term kingdom of God to refer to something he spoke of earlier. Jesus. As the times of the Gentiles in verse 24.

They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. Jesus is using the word kingdom of God and the times of the Gentiles as synonyms of each other.

Bear with me. Following on from the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians were scattered across the entire Roman Empire.

[4:53] Wherever they went, they spread the good news of Jesus to Gentiles, non-Jews. More and more Gentiles became Christians. They believed in Jesus and the church began to grow.

Ever since then, the church has been overwhelmingly populated by non-Jews. These are the times of the Gentiles where non-Jews in their millions are turning toward Jesus for life and salvation.

To know the times for the immediate people to whom Jesus is speaking relates to how they should respond to the upcoming Roman invasion of Judea and the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem.

Things like leaving the city for the countryside and so on. But for us to know the times is very different precisely because we live in different times. We live in the times of the Gentiles where the kingdom of God, assuming Jesus is referring here to the church, is growing exponentially from an influx of Gentiles from all over the world.

So for us to know the times in 21st century Glasgow is to realize that we live in the day of Holy Spirit-empowered gospel mission to all the world.

[6:19] There will come a time at the end of days when Jesus returns, when the days of gospel mission will be over. When the door of entry to the kingdom of God through faith in Christ will be closed.

But this is not it. We live in days of the unlimited and unfettered spread of the gospel, the good news of Jesus as our Savior and Lord.

We live in the days of mission. But to know the times in Jesus' sense does not merely relate to an intellectual understanding of what days we are in, but to act accordingly.

For first century Jews, it meant leaving Jerusalem, making for the countryside because Jerusalem is going to be attacked. What does it mean for us today? What do we have to do?

It means, in the first instance, for those of us here who are not yet Christians, to be sure that we take every advantage of the gospel, to believe and trust now in Jesus.

[7:29] The day is coming when the door of salvation will be shut, and then it will be too late. But now is not yet that day. The door of salvation is still open, and anyone, anyone, whatever their background or situation in life, is invited to believe and trust in Christ and to freely receive forgiveness, eternal life, and a new heart.

Let me urge anyone here who is not yet a Christian to know the times, and before it's too late to take advantage of Jesus' free offer of salvation.

But in the second instance, for those of us who are already Christians, it means to make sure that we do not waste these days of evangelism and mission.

There will come a day when the decisions our family and friends have made about Jesus will be final and ultimate.

But now is not that day. We still have time to pray and work for the salvation of the souls of those we love the most.

[8:41] There will come a day when billions of people across the world who at present have not yet heard the gospel will be judged. There will come a day, but now is not yet that day.

These are days when churches must put aside their petty differences in the interests of gospel mission so that the world, and not just them, can believe in Jesus and be saved.

Knowing the times does not mean for us to work out the exact timing of the return of Jesus. That's folly. And foolishness. It means wholeheartedly engaging in gospel mission until the days of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

And then Jesus shall return in glory. Watch the times. Second, verses 32 and 33. Watch the word.

Watch the word. When it comes to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, many of those who heard Jesus speaking in the temple that day would still have been alive.

[9:48] After all, Jesus spoke these words in Luke 21 in approximately AD 30. Forty years is not that long a time. That generation shall not have passed away until Jesus' words concerning the destruction of Jerusalem were fulfilled, both in terms of the coming of the Roman legions and the beginning of world mission to the Gentiles.

Perhaps some of those listening to Jesus that day in the temple had become members of the early church, had identified themselves as Christians. But in AD 70, the world changed forever.

Not only was Jerusalem destroyed and the temple burned with fire, but Jews were banned upon pain of death from ever returning to Jerusalem. They were scattered across the entire Roman world.

Today, although there is a nation-state called Israel, the vast majority of Jewish people are scattered all over the world. Some of us are old enough here to remember the evacuation of African Jews from Uganda during the terrible reign of Idi Amin.

If you've seen *The Last King of Scotland*, you know what I'm talking about. Up until AD 70, life continued normal for the Jews, just as it had done for hundreds of years.

[11:08] But from then on, everything changed. But then, change is normal for everyone. They say that there are two certainties in life, death and taxes, but change is another one.

We change and the world changes around us. It's always been this way. It can be very difficult to deal with change, especially the older we get, changes for the worse and changes for the better.

It's all too easy for us to watch the changes in us and in our world and become anxious and worried. But in verses 32 and 33, he is saying to the Jews in the first instance who were listening to him and then to us, Watch less the changes in yourself and in your world than you watch my word.

Watch less the changes in yourself and in your world than you watch my word. Heaven and earth may pass away, but my words will stay the same.

They will never pass away, no matter whether you're a Christian reading Christ's words with St. Cyprian. In 2nd century North Africa, actually he was 4th century North Africa, or in 21st century Glasgow.

[12:21] The words of Christ do not change, they remain the same. The gospel he proclaimed and embodied remains the same. Anyone, whether he be a Roman citizen in 1st century Spain, or a citizen of Glasgow in 21st century, anyone who hears that word, it remains the same.

The promises of Jesus to us remain the same. The power of the Holy Spirit remains the same.

Those first disciples anticipating the destruction of Jerusalem must have asked themselves, How will I cope when it happens?

The words of Jesus comforted them, Come to be all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And in difficult times, we in 21st century Glasgow ask ourselves, How can I cope with all the challenges I face?

To which Jesus says, Come to be all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. In a world where everything changes, the word of God does not change. But more than that, because it does not change, it alone can be trusted.

Many of the 1st century Jews believed that whatever happened to them, there would always be a Jerusalem, and there would always be a temple.

[13:35] But what happened in AD 70 destroyed their trust forever. Now, I don't know what's going to happen in the future in any one of our lives, but this I do know we can trust in the words of Jesus, because they will never pass away.

In this information-rich world, as Christians, do we watch more of what's going on in the world than we do about what the Bible says about our world?

Do we watch ourselves change more than we study the unchanging Word of God? In light of what Jesus says here in Luke chapter 21, 32, and 33, perhaps it's time to reappraise our commitment to the Bible as our ultimate source of truth.

Everything else will pass away, but not the Word of Christ. So let's invest not in the words of men, but in the Word of God.

Watch the Word. Third thing, watch yourselves. Watch yourselves, verses 34 through 36.

Sometimes we're so busy watching everything going on around us, we forget to watch ourselves.

[14:49] We're so distracted by the noise outside, we fail to listen to the warnings inside. I can't remember who it was who said, I think it was Nietzsche. Be careful about looking too deeply into the darkness, lest you become the darkness itself.

For Jesus' earliest followers, within their lifetimes, they would see the entire structure of Judaism fall apart, and the city of Jerusalem destroyed.

It would be understandable for them to be so taken up with what's going on on the outside that they forget what's going on inside. So for that reason, Jesus commands them, watch yourselves in verse 34, and stay awake in verse 36.

Both commands are in the present imperative, indicating that they are commands, and they are to be the continual concern of Jesus' followers. This is to be their daily practice. Watch themselves. Stay awake. Now, of course, Jesus isn't talking about physically falling asleep. He's speaking about them spiritually falling asleep. So, the destruction of the temple is 40 years distant from the words of Jesus here.

[16:02] And perhaps, in these intervening years, some of Jesus' followers would have forgotten his predictions. Maybe they said to themselves, it hasn't happened yet. Therefore, it will never happen.

Spiritually, they began to fall asleep, and be unprepared for when that day comes. They'd get so sucked into their day-to-day lives, they'd forget the coming judgment of Jerusalem.

Perhaps the bite of Jesus' words would lessen in their hearts and minds, and they'd let the daily pressures and concerns and pleasures of life overwhelm them, and then suddenly, the day of destruction would be upon them.

The legions would arrive at the walls of Jerusalem like a trap, and because they'd spiritually fallen asleep, they'd be unprepared. Perhaps, though, this is an issue best facing us as the church today. Jesus has promised he will return, but 2,000 years have passed with no sign of his return. Maybe we're tempted to say, it hasn't happened yet, so it will never happen.

[17:13] The reality of Jesus' return and the implications for our daily lives fade away, and instead of living for that day, we live for today.

If we forget that Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead, we begin to think to ourselves, well, no one's going to hold me accountable for what I think, what I say, how I live, so I allow myself to get weighed down by the pleasures and cares of this life and forget all about God. When I was a student, an older man in the congregation in Aberdeen used to challenge me. Sam will. Some of us would remember him.

He would say, Colin, be ready for the day of Jesus' return. Will he find you doing something which honors him? Where will he find you when Jesus returns?

It was a convicting challenge because all too often as a student, I allowed the pleasures and cares of this life to dominate. I clearly remember one night in a pub in Aberdeen, a little bit worse for wear, remembering that man's challenge to me.

[18:34] He came and hit me like a hammer between my eyes. I felt extremely guilty and repentant. Immediately, I went home. Imagine Jesus had returned at that precise moment and found me there half cut in a pub in Aberdeen.

It's very simplistic, but I still think of that man's challenge. Do the cares and pleasures of this life act as a spiritual lullaby putting me to sleep, making us forget that Jesus will return at a moment we do not expect.

So, we must watch ourselves. We must stay spiritually awake, praying that we may have strength to grow in righteousness and persevere until the time of His coming. What a challenge this is for all of us, especially for those of us who are not yet Christians.

Are you ready for the day of Christ's return? Are you prepared? I don't want to scare anyone. But imagine if ten minutes into a flight, the captain came over the speaker and said, ladies and gentlemen, we don't know exactly when, but in the next hour, we're going to crash.

Now, you can be sure for that next hour, you wouldn't be watching an in-flight movie. You'd be checking out, where's my life jacket? Where's my nearest exit? In the same way, Jesus says, you do not know exactly when I will return, but you must be ready.

[20:08] Before we do anything else, we need to get our relationship with Him right so that when He does come, He finds us prepared. And the only way we can do that is to believe in Him as the Son of Man, the Savior who suffered and died, to take away our sins and give us eternal life with God.

It is so important. It is too important to ignore. Watch yourselves. Stay awake. Watch the times. Watch the Word. Watch yourselves. And lastly, from verse 37 to 38, watch Jesus. Watch Jesus. Now, these final verses in chapter 21 serve an important function both from a literary and theological understanding of Jesus and His Word.

From the perspective of the Gospel of Luke, they form final brackets around the last major teaching session, Jesus' teaching in the temple, which has covered the entirety of chapter 20 and 21.

These are meaty sections. We've preached our way through them in the last few months, where Jesus is clashed with the Jewish ruling authorities. He has predicted Jerusalem's destruction.

[21:27] They're important sections. They detail the identity of Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man, the Jesus who will suffer and die for His people, but rise to glorious new life.

But this is not why I'm highlighting these last verses to you about Jesus spending the day in the temple. That's what He did. He would spend the day in the temple, and at night He would go out to the Mount of Olives.

Now, for those of you who've been to Jerusalem, the Mount of Olives overlooks the city of Jerusalem. It contains the... I've never been there. I'd love to go there to the Garden of... to the Mount of Olives. I've been to Jerusalem, but not to the Mount of Olives. It contains the Garden of Gethsemane as well as other notable sites. Having left the temple, Jesus would go there to spend the night returning early in the morning to the temple to continue teaching the people. And as I was studying this passage, the question came into my head, why didn't Jesus just stay in the temple? At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we learn about this incredibly godly lady called Anna.

[22:38] And she was a prophetess. She never left the temple. She was there day and night. Why didn't Jesus just do that? Wouldn't that have been easier for him than having to walk the miles outside Jerusalem to go and pitch tent outside and stay in the Mount of Olives?

Here's the answer. Jesus, in light of all that He knew He would soon have to endure, retired nightly to the Mount of Olives to rest and regain His strength.

That's why He went. The key's in the last verse. Early in the morning, all the people came to the temple, came to Him in the temple to hear Him. If Jesus had stayed night and day in the temple, He would have been constantly swamped and would never have had a chance to sleep and rest.

We need to remember, Jesus was a flesh and blood human being just like us. We cannot go long without any sleep. And Jesus needed to sleep.

Not only was His daily routine in the temple tiring, He knew that in just a few days' time, He would need all His strength. Why? He would be betrayed to the Romans, tortured and crucified.

[23:57] And Jesus knew it would take all His strength to die well. Jesus knew it would take all His strength to die well.

For those of you who have lost loved ones, you know it takes a lot of strength to die well. He went out to the Mount of Olives at night for very human reasons, namely because He was tired.

But He did not go there for selfish reasons. He went there to build up His strength so that when the time came, He'd be able to give Himself as a willing sacrifice for our sins.

Can you imagine an exhausted, delirious Jesus? Delirious from a lack of sleep. He would not have been able to consciously stand before the Jewish and Roman authorities with dignity and give solid and reasonable answers to their questions.

He would not have been able to voluntarily give Himself for us. So even in this minor detail, it's a minor detail of His nightly retirement to the Mount of Olives, we see the depth of His love for us and His determination to save us from our sins.

[25:11] Engaging an art is teaching me to look deeper into things that I can see with my eyes. But for the Christian, the greatest of all artistic disciplines is learning to look deeper into the beauty of the love of Jesus for us and the sheer grandeur of His magnificent work of salvation on our behalf.

So, in light of His nightly retiree to the Mount of Olives, we say, keep your eyes on Jesus. The world may change, but Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

before He became a Christian, in His famous hymn, Jehovah Tsid Kenyu, which we're going to sing in a moment, Robert Murray McShane, famous minister of St. Peter's in Dundee, said of himself, we'll sing these very words, when friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree, Jehovah Tsid Kenyu was nothing to me.

That was before He was converted. Jesus meant nothing to Him. However, after He was converted, after He became a Christian, everything about Him changed. I went to university with his great, great, great grandnephew, who's also called Manny McShane.

Understanding that Jehovah Tsid Kenyu was Robert Manny McShane's way of referring to Jesus, there's a verse in that hymn that we don't sing. We should sing it, but we don't sing it, but this is the way the verse goes.

[26:40] Listen to this. Jehovah Tsid Kenyu, my treasure, my boast.
Jehovah Tsid Kenyu, I ne'er can be lost. In thee shall I conquer by flood and by field.

My cable, my anchor, my breastplate and shield. Before he became a believer, Jesus meant nothing to him. Now he was a Christian, Jesus meant everything to him.

And all because McShane, the Christian artist, looked deeper into who Jesus was and why Jesus came. Where are your eyes fixed today?

What takes up the attention of your mind and your heart? Jesus is calling us to take our eyes off the world around us and fix them on him, our crucified, risen, glorious, returning savior.

Will you do that very thing today? Will you pray that God would help you to look deeper into Jesus and having realized that he is your treasure and your boast, he is your everything, will you believe in him and will you be saved?

[27:54] Amen.