

Be Vigilant

"Follow Me to the End" Series, May 17 & 18, 2025 | Mark 13:28-37

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How well do you sleep?

Given that my grandfather snored like a muffler with a hole in it, there is no chance he slept well.

When I stayed overnight with my grandparents, I could hear my grandfather snoring.

He would take deep, sinus-rattling breaths and then let them out. One after another.

It sounded like a leaf blower going off a few yards from your head. But then, he would stop.

When he stopped, it was worse. Was he okay? Did he wake up? Did he die?

There is no way he was sleeping well.

What is the point of sleeping well? It's so that we can stay awake!

In some ways, sleeping well is its own gift. Do you like sleeping? I love sleeping, personally. I can fall asleep within moments of laying my head down.

We want a good night's sleep, a deep and refreshing sleep, so that we can be alert for life.

We want to be wide awake for life!

We can sleepwalk through life or live wide awake.

To say that we are sleepwalking through life implies that we are engaging in mindless activity, going through our days without much awareness or intentionality.

We're living "wide awake" when we are aware of what is happening around us, we are present in the moment, and we are intentional about what we are doing.

Are you sleepwalking through life? Or are you living wide awake?

Jesus urgently commands us to "stay awake."

We have seen in the past few weeks that in Mark 13, Jesus tells us that He will come again.

In fact, He says that He wants us to think of Him as coming again soon.

Even if years pass, Jesus wants us to be watching for His arrival.

He tells us to "stay awake." No sleeping or sleepwalking through life.

But that's not easy. Why does He want us to stay awake? And how can we do that?

Let's start by looking more carefully at what Jesus teaches.

Jesus tells us to, "Stay awake!"

In Mark 13:28, Jesus said that when we see certain signs, the future He predicted is breaking in:

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near."

The fig tree drops its leaves in the winter. Then the leaves come out late in the spring, a certain sign of summer. What an image!

Jesus is saying that when we see the signs He has given in chapter 13, the events they predict are near. When certain signs appeared in the past, the destruction of Jerusalem was near. When we see certain signs in the future, the end time is near.

It's God's own doing. "Learn a lesson from the fig tree," Jesus said.

Then in Mark 13:30, Jesus added that once things started, the pace would quicken:

"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."

In some ways, Jesus was saying that the generation alive in His day would not fully pass away until Jerusalem was destroyed. The judgment on Jerusalem for rejecting Him that He had announced would happen quickly. It wouldn't wait for centuries.

And Jesus is saying that when the end of time comes, it is going to come suddenly. Years will pass, not centuries, once everything starts. God moves quickly when the time is right.

In Mark 13:31, Jesus assured us that His words about the end times are certain:

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Jesus draws a surprising comparison between Creation and His Word.

On one hand you have creation—Heaven and earth. We think of them as eternal. As lasting.

But Jesus says that they will pass away. Heaven and Earth will pass away and be remade.

Jesus' words—His teachings and His prophecies—will last past the end of creation. Jesus' Word represents His will and His plan. His Word is not going to change. It is certain.

But in Mark 13:32, Jesus clarified that no one knows when the end times will begin:

"But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

This is a shocking statement for those of us who know that Jesus is God the Son in the flesh. He doesn't know the hour of His return. This is a case of Jesus limiting His divine attributes in His creation. He is not present everywhere, doesn't know all things, and doesn't use all power. These things are accessible to Him as God, but He chooses not to use these things.

One of the ways Jesus chooses to be limited is that He doesn't know when He will return.

Neither do the angels in heaven.

Only God the Father knows. This is important theologically and practically.

If anyone ever tells you that they know when Jesus is going to return, they are telling you that they know something Jesus Himself doesn't know. So, ask yourself this question, "Is the person telling me this better than Jesus?" If the answer is "no"—and it will be—then that person is lying.

Keep that in mind.

In Mark 13:37, Jesus commanded us all to "stay awake":

"And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

Jesus paints a clear picture with words. He talks about a man who went on a journey and left his servants in charge. He particularly told the doorkeeper to be ready to open the door for him when he came home.

What would the doorkeeper do? He would stay awake, waiting for the man no matter the hour.

And Jesus told us to think of ourselves as being like that doorkeeper. We are waiting for Jesus, and we are to be ready when He returns—no matter the day nor the hour. Don't fall asleep waiting!

We are to be awake. That's what Jesus is driving at. Stay awake! But how?

Stay awake by plunging into God's goodness.

You can't stay awake until you meet Jesus because that is like waking up for the first time.

You can't be waiting for Jesus to return if you don't know Him or haven't met Him personally.

In fact, you don't want to see Jesus if you don't have a personal relationship with Him.

When Jesus returns, eternal life waits for us if we know Him.

But when Jesus returns, judgment and eternal death wait for us if we don't know Him.

And He tells us that when He returns, our period of choosing is over. Our choice is made.

But if you meet Jesus today, it will be like your heart, which has been spiritually asleep all your life, comes to life and you become awake spiritually for the first time.

Then you realize that God's goodness is like a deep, clear pool of cool water on a steamy hot day.

Picture a hot, dry, dusty day in the middle of July. You've been out in the yard digging and mowing. You're hot, sweaty, and covered in dirt.

Now imagine diving into a crystal-clear pool of cool water. It's like you were covered in life and peace and goodness. That's what God's goodness is really like!

If you want to stay awake, you need to be in that pool of God's goodness and love regularly!

We are quick to step out of the pool when life gets busy, and we wonder why we get parched.

We experience God's goodness through things like worship, by being with other Christians, by using our gifts for God's glory, and by sharing the Gospel. We experience God's goodness by being with Him—by spending time in the Word and by prayer and fasting.

But when we get busy, those are the very things that we tend to cut.

When we cut those things out of our lives, it's like we're stepping back out of the clean, cool pool of God's goodness.

That's when life dries us out. That's when life makes us dirty. That's when life makes us tired. That's when life lulls us to sleep spiritually.

But then tending to our spiritual life is like staying hydrated on a long run.

Like a long run, life involves work—hard work.

But running makes a person thirsty. You're sweating and breathing hard and all the water in you is running out. (If you're like me, you're sweating like a pig; it's not pretty.)

Tending to our spiritual lives is digging back into those habits that connect us with God—yes, reading and studying the Bible, praying, fasting, and those kinds of spiritual habits. Also, those things we do together like worshipping, getting together with other believers in community, using our gifts to bring God glory, and sharing the Gospel are like a cold cup of water as we run the race of life.

They keep us hydrated. They keep us running. They keep us awake spiritually.

Prayer particularly channels life into us the way a hose brings life-giving water to a thirsty plant.

Prayer is a two-way conversation between us and God. My heart speaks to God's heart who speaks to my heart. Do you understand? You can have a direct conversation with God!

You don't need anyone to pray for you. You can pray yourself, and God is listening. He wants to hear from you. He wants to speak to you. And He answers your prayers!

Imagine that you are like a plant that is sitting under the hot sun, wilting.

Prayer is like God bringing a hose to put water at your roots that you can soak up.

It perks you up. It brings you life! It makes you alive spiritually. It's how you stay awake.

Stay awake by plunging into God's goodness.

Stay awake by listening for the midnight mosquito.

Have you ever had a mosquito in your bedroom when you try to go to sleep?

It's almost impossible to sleep through that haunting buzz.

You turn the light out, you hear the buzz, and you know that if you fall asleep, the mosquito is going to land and make a meal out of you. You can't sleep!

So, you turn on the light and hunt for the mosquito.

You know it's there, and you won't sleep until that mosquito is a bloody smear on the wall.

Jesus tells us that there is a mosquito in our room at midnight. It's distraction and deception.

Distraction and deception want to lull us to sleep, land on us, and make a meal out of us.

But when we know that distractions and deception are out there, we can stay awake and ready!

Distractions can sweetly sing us to sleep.

Distractions are the things that take our attention away from God, from our mission, and from doing life with God.

Some things are obvious distractions like over-working or wasting our lives on selfish things.

But some GOOD things become distractions when we let them get out of control. Hobbies can become distractions. Being busy can become a distraction. Or being the perfect parent. Or making everyone think that you are the perfect person. Even being over-involved in church!

Anything that takes you away from God, from your mission, and from life with God is a distraction, and distractions are dangerous. They lull you to sleep spiritually, and all of a sudden you are no longer awake and expecting Jesus to return.

Deception deviously dulls our senses.

Sometimes deceptions are false saviors convincing us to put our faith in them. The trap is sometimes pretty obvious. But sometimes, the false savior talks like Jesus. Or about Jesus. And everything sounds good. Or urgent. But if it's not Jesus, then it's not the Savior.

And deceptions more often come in the form of false ideas or false stories. We let false ideas and false stories become our beliefs and the stories that we tell to understand ourselves.

When we follow false saviors and accept false ideas or stories, they dull our senses to the truth. It's like we become drunk with deception and fall asleep.

Jesus calls us to be on the lookout for distractions and deceptions with the urgency we would listen for noises outside if we knew that bear might be rummaging through the garbage.

I can't put my garbage out the night before the garbage truck comes. No way. There are too many bears in our neighborhood. If I leave my garbage cans out overnight, some bear is going to tip them over, snack, and spread the garbage all over my front lawn and driveway.

Imagine your garbage can was out by the road at night. Imagine your bedroom window is open and you knew that there were bears nearby. You would listen for the sound of bears all night long. You probably wouldn't sleep very well that night.

Jesus repeatedly warns us about distractions and deceptions. He says that they are part of life.

It's like there are bears in the neighborhood looking for garbage cans.

When we know that there are dangerous distractions and deceptions around, we are spiritually awake and looking out for danger. Stay awake by listening for the midnight mosquito and the can-tipping bear.

Stay awake by asking the last-day question.

Marcus Aurelius thought that living as if today were the last day of our lives would make life richer.

Marcus Aurelius was a second-century philosopher-emperor of the Roman Empire well-known for his Stoic philosophy. He taught people to accept reality and live well in keeping with reality.

He advised people to live with the last-day question, "And thou wilt give thyself relief, if thou doest every act of thy life as if it were the last..." – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.5¹ In other words, what would you do if this were the last day of your life? Do that.

If we call that question the "last-day question," then Jesus is telling us the same thing. We want to live with the focus and clarity that we would if this were the last day of our lives.

The only thing I missed when I received a hopeful prognosis about my cancer was living with the urgency that the last-day question had created in me.

I was diagnosed with cancer over a decade ago in November. I had surgery in December.

I had no idea what was going to happen. For two months I asked myself, "If the rest of my life here and now is going to be short, what am I going to do with that time?"

After asking that question for two months, I saw a doctor in January who told me, "It looks like we got it all of the cancer. You should be fine."

¹ <https://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.2.two.html>

It was like life and time were opening out in front of me again. Which was a great gift.

It meant I didn't have to ask that question in the same way anymore. Which was good.

But that question was the only thing I missed. That clarity. That urgency.

Since then, I have sought to live with that same kind of clarity and urgency because I know that any day could be the end of my life, and any day could be the day when Jesus returns.

What would you do today if you knew this was the last day of your life?

Would you have a special meal or go to a place you love?

Perhaps you might share the Gospel with people who matter to you most—lost family members or friends. Would do something you have always meant to do or take time to simply be with family members or with God?

I am not suggesting that you quit your job, sell your possessions, and wait for Jesus to return. However, Jesus' imminent return poses almost the same dilemma to us. Jesus could return tomorrow. Or today. If that is true, how do we want to spend these days? Asking that question gives us the clarity and urgency to stay awake!

Jesus' imminent return gives us laser-like focus.

Knowing that Jesus could return at any moment gives us an urgency to do what we can while we can. We don't fear that we've failed to do something. The Kingdom of God is God's Kingdom to build, not ours. And we don't serve God to earn His favor; we serve God out of love. But knowing that Jesus could return any day makes what we do urgent.

And knowing that Jesus could return at any moment also gives us clarity. What we do with our days matters deeply. We could see Jesus face to face and answering the question, "What did you do with the day I gave you?"

That gives us focus that can keep us spiritually awake.

There is an end coming. It could be today; it could be a long time from now. We don't know.

Those who study such things closely tell me that the signs point to sooner rather than later.

Jesus tells us clearly that an end is coming. Expect it soon.

When the end comes, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is what will have mattered most.

Where we will spend eternity will be based on whether we belong to Christ or not.

We can spend the days we have left living for ourselves or living for God.

To live for God is to enjoy God, to love Him, and to be loved by Him. It is to glorify God. And it is to advance the Gospel.

Let's spend whatever days we have left bringing glory to God by advancing the Gospel.