

Stay Alert, Watch, and Be Ready

DAVE BAST

Every so often, you read about a group of religious people who are busy getting ready for the end of the world. They are usually followers of some leader—some self-styled prophet—who has determined that Jesus will come back to earth on such and such a date; so these folks get busy selling their houses and possessions and moving out to some commune or other, where they can watch and wait together for the end to come; and it never does. So, the fanatics are disappointed; some lose their faith, and many, many more secular people see one more reason to dismiss the whole idea of Christ's second coming. What *did* Jesus say about his return? How *should* we prepare for his coming? Jesus talked about that shortly before his crucifixion, and we will too, today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, now we have come to program number six in our series for Lent on the final teachings...the last few days of Jesus' life, and the things that he said and did—the interactions—many of them that he had with people...some of them good, some of them not so good. Last program we looked at the incident with the widow and her sacrificial gift at the Temple, contrasting the...sort of the hypocritical leaders who should have been taking care of her; and today we are going to look at a big chapter—a couple of them—it is really the same material, but Matthew 24 and Mark 13, which contain Jesus' teaching about his own return.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in what we call the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all of them have what is sometimes called the Olivet discourses or the apocalyptic discourses because just before the end comes—just before Maundy Thursday and the last supper with Jesus, and his betrayal and arrest and all that—he is turning his mind to the end of all things; and so, in Matthew, Mark and Luke we have fairly lengthy chapters about what will the end look like; how will you know; how are you to think about this? As you said, today we are going to do Mark 13, and Matthew 24.

DAVE BAST

Right; and these are really complicated chapters. They are not for beginners, let me put it that way, if you are trying to understand the Bible; and one of the biggest complicating factors is the fact that Jesus seems to be talking about two different...well, not *seems* to be...he is talking about two different ends, in a sense. One is the end of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, and the other is the end of the world and his return—his second coming. So, it all starts when they are looking at the Temple and Jesus begins to speak to his disciples.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Mark 13:1 As Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what massive stones; what magnificent buildings!”² “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down.”³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives,

opposite the Temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴“Tell us, when will these things happen; and what will be the sign that they are about to be fulfilled?” ⁵And Jesus said to them, “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. Those are the beginning of birth pangs.”

DAVE BAST

¹⁴“When you see the abomination that causes desolation standing where it does not belong (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁵Let no one on the housetop go down or enter into the house to take anything out. ¹⁶Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. ¹⁷How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers. ¹⁸Pray that this will not take place in winter, ¹⁹because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning when God created the world until now, and never to be equaled again. ²⁰If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive; but for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them. ²¹At that time, if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah,’ or ‘Look, there he is,’ do not believe it. ²²For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. ²³So be on your guard. I have told you everything ahead of time.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, as you said, Dave, these are not easy verses.

DAVE BAST

No, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is not Bible 101; this is...

DAVE BAST

They have caused a lot of mischief, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they have—they have precisely because they could be interpreted, and have been, in so many different ways.

When I was in seminary, we kind of learned about something called the “telescoping of horizons.” In the Bible, when you get apocalyptic talk...and you can see this in the Old Testament in Daniel, in Ezekiel; you see it in the book of Revelation principally, in the New Testament; there is always a sense in which the writer, or in this case, Jesus, is looking at a near-term horizon, but he is also looking at the more distant horizon at the same time, where similar things will happen when the *real* end of all history takes place; and they are kind of weaving in and out of each other, and Jesus is seeing both horizons—the near one and the distant one—in one glance; and we need to learn to do that, too, because if you don’t, and just kind of zero in on one thing, that is when you can start making mistakes.

DAVE BAST

Right; they are sitting in the Temple, or they have been in the Temple. Jesus has been teaching there, and as they are walking out, the disciples...some of them point to this magnificent building. They say: Wow, look at that, Jesus. Isn’t this tremendous?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Tourists with cameras snapping pictures of the Temple.

DAVE BAST

Right; maybe selfies...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

And Jesus says: You know what? Look at those big building blocks. Not one stone will be resting on another. This whole thing is going down. This whole thing is going to be destroyed. And then they say: When? What...how?

SCOTT HOEZEE

They don't say it right away. I think they are stunned into silence. It is like, whoa, we were just saying how pretty it was, Jesus; where did that come from? So then later they come and say: Um, you know that stuff you were talking about, Jesus? When? When? Give us a clue.

DAVE BAST

Give us the scoop. So, Jesus sits them down on the Mount of Olives and he talks about signs of the approaching end. The problem is, is he talking about 70 AD, when the Temple is going to be completely obliterated by a Roman war—a Roman siege of the city in a war—or is he talking about who-knows-when AD...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the answer is yes.

DAVE BAST

When he comes...yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is both, right? It is both. He is telescoping them. The one thing will be a portent, a future preview of the ultimate end. So, he is talking about both. He is talking about the destruction of the Temple that is coming up, and we see that elsewhere. If you read the triumphal entry story from Luke's Gospel, Jesus pauses in the middle of it and weeps because he foresees the destruction of Jerusalem that is going to come in 70 AD; but again, he is also looking ahead to something far, far beyond that, because the next thing Jesus says points us farther down the road. So, he goes on.

²⁴“But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. ²⁵The stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁶At that time, people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory; ²⁷and he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.”

DAVE BAST

Right; so, one of the elements in this chapter that people often talk about is what they call the “signs of the times...”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, what are these signs that this end is approaching, so we can find out when we see them? Then we will know, then we can make sure we are ready for it. The interesting thing is that most of the signs that Jesus talks about have been things that have been happening all throughout human history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They repeat.

DAVE BAST

They happened then. He talks about wars; he talks about natural disasters; he talks about false prophets and people claiming, 'I am the messiah, I am the new thing,' you know. He talks about signs in the heavens...sort of maybe eclipses...things like that. These are things that have been happening all along. Now, there is one sign that is very specific that he gives as a warning, and it is what he calls "the abomination of desolation," which is also pretty mysterious; but probably refers to something that happened in the intertestamental period—the time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New—when a Greek general set up his image in the Temple, and before he was finally chased out, that was a horrible thing that desecrated the Temple.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it contaminated the Temple. So, these are things that have happened—that will happen. Some people have wondered, did Jesus really think he himself, that he was going to be returning very, very soon? Was he mistaken? Well, probably not; but we want to look at that; and we will look at what else is contained in this chapter, which probably tells us this is not designed for us to do what so many preachers have done, and try to fix a calendar date; and we will see why in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at a very complicated passage...part of Jesus' last teachings...the apocalyptic discourse, or the Olivet discourse, where Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for an event in the fairly near future—the destruction of the city by the Roman armies, which did happen; and the longer term event of the end of the world with his return. So, we mentioned this thing, the abomination of desolation, or the desolating sacrilege, as it could be called, and probably that was a specific warning relating to the Romans. If they saw the Roman armies coming with their eagle standards—each legion had one of these pagan symbols—if they saw that approaching Jerusalem, then it was time to bug out. Get out of town. And that is what he means when he says: Pray that it will not be in the winter, or feel sorry for pregnant women and nursing mothers because it is going to be really hard on them to get away; but you need to get out of the city because they city is going to be...and actually, history tells us that did happen. The Christians mostly fled from Jerusalem and escaped with their lives. But then comes the question: Well, are we meant to try to interpret these signs to know when his *return* is approaching?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And did Jesus think he was going to be coming back sooner than...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is now two thousand years later...sooner than we know can possibly be the case. No, probably not; because seen in context...and we have done a series on the parables before...Jesus is clearly...often in his closing parables, he is not training the disciples to be hundred-yard-dash sprinters. He is training them to be marathon runners. This is going to be a while. Jesus himself hints that this could be a while, so be patient. Do not be taken in by people who say the end is near, or the messiah is over there. Do not believe them. Be patient. It is going to take a while; and Jesus also gives us a clue that we are not supposed to calculate dates here when he says the following, going on here, where Jesus says:

³²“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Be on guard, be alert. You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going away. He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with his assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep

watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back, whether in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows or at dawn. ³⁶If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷What I say to you I say to everyone, ‘Watch.’”

DAVE BAST

But notice here the emphasis Jesus puts on the fact that you cannot tell...you do not know...nobody knows. I do not even know, he says, when I am going to return; which is a rather amazing statement for him to make.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is; not because, all things being equal, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not all know the same things, this may be a self-imposed limitation that Jesus accepted for the time of his being on earth as an incarnate human being. We are not sure about that, but it could be that even as Jesus normally is the Son of God, he would be omnipresent—he would be everywhere; but to be a real human, he was in one place at a time. Normally he would be omniscient; he would know all things; but maybe for a time his knowledge was restricted by his own decision, not because of any weakness or fault or anything. So, he is saying: I do not know. I do not know; and therefore, do not scrutinize my words for hints. I am not dropping any hints. I do not know.

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you might say: Well, how can he say that? He just told them a whole bunch of stuff to look for: Wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes; but as you said, Dave, those are things that are typical of our fallen world. They tend to repeat themselves. So, Jesus is not saying that every war and every earthquake means, well, tomorrow is it; but that these are the kinds of things that are going to keep happening, and they are going to lead to the end eventually; and when it comes, you will know...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It will not be a secret return. He already warned against thinking that way. You will know; but in the meantime, just be vigilant; keep watch.

DAVE BAST

I didn't mention this among the signs, or we didn't mention it, but he says the Gospel must first be preached to the whole world, and people have said: Well, look; now finally the Gospel has been preached to the whole world. Look at radio, look at media, look at the Internet. Everybody can hear the Gospel now, so it must be close. The Bible uses the word *world* in a kind of a general way. How are we to know when that has actually happened? Only God knows. So, do not try to figure it out. That is Jesus' point. You cannot tell.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In sermons I have preached on these passages—these Olivet discourses—I have used the analogy that imagine you are in college and you are taking trigonometry...you are taking this math course, and it is very difficult; but imagine that your roommate at some point says to you: Listen, I want to tell you something. I do not know a thing about trigonometry. I know nothing about trigonometry. I cannot help you with that. Wouldn't it be weird if you then said: Nevertheless, I am going to pay attention to every single thing my roommate says because hints to trigonometry are in there somewhere. No they are not! He told you he doesn't know it. Jesus says: I do not know the hour or the day; so therefore, do not look at my words for clues. I am not dropping hints here; and yet, as you said, Dave, there has been a cottage industry throughout Church history of people saying: Oh, no, no, no; if we look at Jesus' words hard enough, we will figure it out. It will be October 22, 2007. You mark it down, and then of course, no.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, what that tends to do is discredit, really, the Gospel in many people's minds. They look at that and they just say: Oh man, they are a bunch of nuts, and there is no second coming. It is not going to happen. So, it can do actual harm. It can hurt people; it can kind of undermine their faith. The stories are legion of those who were utterly, firmly convinced that they knew Christ was coming, and then when he didn't, they kind of lose their faith all together.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and you know, there are some interesting things, too; in the nineteenth century with the Millerites, and some of the things that kind of gave birth to the Seventh Day Adventist movement, in fact...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Their leader had made a prediction that Jesus was going to come back. He didn't, obviously, so then they said: Oh, no; he did. It was secret—it was a secret return; which Jesus himself says: Don't buy it!

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But people do anyway, and that is how they react to their disappointment; but they do all of that, I think, because they think maybe that is what it means to watch...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But I think we want to think about that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and here is the other thing Jesus says. You cannot figure out when, but when it does happen, it is going to catch everybody by surprise—it is going to be unexpected, even if you are expecting it, it is going to be unexpected. So, you need to be ready and you need to be watching and to be vigilant; and we are going to talk about what that means in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have been in Mark 13, but now we want to go right away to Matthew Chapter 24. It is the same conversation Jesus is having, but Matthew includes some things that Mark didn't write down, and some of them are very interesting. So, let's listen to Matthew 24, beginning at verse 36, and this repeats something we just heard from Mark 13 initially.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.³⁸ For in the days before the

flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away, and that is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man; ⁴⁰two men will be in the field; one will be taken, the other left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken, the other left. ⁴²Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³But understand this; if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let him into his house. ⁴⁴So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

DAVE BAST

⁴⁵“Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions; ⁴⁸but suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹He will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”
So, it ends on a rather ominous note there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it does; but two things we want to cover quickly before this program ends, Dave: One is, what does it mean that everybody will be surprised, even us believers? The other we will want to talk about, and that last analogy will help us answer the question: What does it mean to watch?

On the first one, I sometimes have thought, you know, yes, when Jesus returns even us Christians are going to be startled. The trumpet will sound and we are going to jump out of our skins the same as everybody else; but, our surprise will be different from nonbelievers, because we were told this was coming; and I have often thought, you know, if a thief breaks into your house, or if you are sitting in the den one night reading quietly and you look up and there is a stranger standing menacingly over you, you are going to be terrified because you did not know he was in the house. Now, you can know that your daughter is in the house, and you are reading quietly, and all of a sudden she bombs into the den: Hi, Daddy! You are going to go: Oh, my goodness. You about scared me to half to death; but you are not surprised to see her. You knew she was there. That is what it will be like, I think. We will be as startled as everybody else, but we will not be surprised to see Jesus; we knew he was coming; and that is the difference, I think...that we will all be startled, but we will not be finally floored by it because we were told this is our Jesus.

DAVE BAST

The point is, you cannot live your life in a state of perpetual excitement. It just does not work. Nobody can sit there forever dressed in a white robe looking up in the sky. We are not supposed to. Remember what the angel said to the disciples...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

After Jesus ascended: What are you doing standing around with your heads looking up in the air? Go on; get back to Jerusalem and do what he told you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

And that brings us to the second point: How we are *really* ready—the way we *really* watch is by doing what he told us to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why I love that last part, Dave, that you just read in Matthew 24, where Jesus makes the analogy of the servant; and what does Jesus say makes him a good servant...and this is on the analogy of what it means to watch and to be in a state of watchfulness...he makes dinner at the right time and gives it to the other servants. Jesus commends him for making dinner. How simple is that?! He is just being faithful in his job, and that is watchfulness, Jesus says, because that is just doing what you are supposed to do. So, do what you are supposed to do as a Christian: Feed your children, do your job, do your work; be honest, be ethical, be upright; be loving, be compassionate; because you believe in Jesus and he is coming again; and when he comes, if he finds you just feeding your kids grilled cheese, that is a faithful servant that shows watchfulness because you are a good person who knows you are living in God's world.

DAVE BAST

And notice that he contrasts the servant who goes out and gets drunk and sits around and parties all the time with a bunch of losers; which is to say, this not about literal drinking and eating...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

This is about are you living for yourself or are you living in responsible relationship with those who depend on you, with those whom God has called you... I mean, we just got done in a former program talking about the great commandment again. What does the Lord require? In addition to whatever sacrifices we offer, what he really wants is love from us; love for him and love for the neighbor that he puts next door to us, or that he puts in our way, or that he puts on our conscience. So, that is what the good servant is doing; that is what it means to be ready...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is what it means to watch; and the point is, do it now. One of the real lies that we tell ourselves is, oh, there will always be another day, you know; I can put it off; I do not have to get right with God right now. I mean, maybe when I have gotten a little further along and done what I want to do, then I will get serious about Christianity again; or I will come back to church, you know, after I... No, no, no; you have got to do it now. You don't have tomorrow, maybe. You never know, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and here is such an important point. Watchfulness does not mean just taking your binoculars and constantly scanning the distant horizon to look for Jesus on clouds of glory. Yes, you are literally watching, but if that is all you do, or if all you do is load up your pickup truck with dehydrated food and bottles of water because you think you have to go to a bunker before the world ends, yes, you could say that is watchfulness, but that is not how Jesus defines it. Jesus defines watchfulness as simple acts of service and faithfulness; doing the ordinary things you do every day, but doing them in an extraordinary way because you know this is God's world and Jesus is going to come back.

DAVE BAST

Even, you know, that little parable I guess you could call it, that he throws in there about the two guys in the field. If we are doing what we are supposed to be doing when he comes, all will be well with us, as long as we are ready to greet him with joy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope that you will join us again next time as we celebrate the risen Christ and hear his command to follow him and to feed his sheep.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest scripture passages and topics you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

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