

Luke 12:35-48
Be Ready

In 1878, the president of the Jehovah Witnesses, Charles Taze Russell, predicted the beginning of the end of the world. It didn't happen. The prediction was revised to begin in 1881, then again for 1914, 1918, 1925, and 1975. Each time the prediction failed.

But Russell and his adherents are not alone. We all remember Y2K. History has been filled with "end of the world as we know it" predictions. Believe it or not, there was also a Y1K (though they didn't call it that). Others thought the world would end during the Great Mortality, others with the cataclysm of WW1 and still others with the rebirth of Israel as a nation in 1948. In a like manner, many characters have been thought to be the antichrist - be it Hitler or Stalin or Osama bin Laden.

We know that the Bible clearly teaches that one day the world will end as we know it. That much is certain. For example, it is certain that Jesus will rapture His church,

“⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)

“¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

It is certain that a tribulation will occur,
Revelation 6-19

It is certain that Jesus will return

“³¹But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left” (Matthew 25:31-33).

It is certain that there will be the millennial kingdom rule of Christ,

“Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4).

It is certain that there will be the final judgment,

“¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of

life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Revelation 20:11-12).

It is certain that there will be the end of time as we know it,

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10, 12).

But there is uncertainty as well, for the Bible also teaches that “of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Mark 13:32). As a result of this uncertainty, many people err by trying to figure out too closely the details which cannot be known. They overemphasize the end of time to the detriment of living for the kingdom of God in the here and now. But others err by complacency. They place limited importance on the return of Christ. Some even think it best that eschatology not to be taken too seriously.

If we truly believe that the world is not eternal, and that the Bible relates how the world will end, then it seems we would want to be ready for such an event. Jesus thought so too. So, in this passage we see how He instructed His disciples to be ready for the end of time as they knew it.

How to be Ready

Jesus had been challenging those listening to avoid the temptations of this world when it came to wealth. He had reminded them of the foolishness of thinking they had any ultimate control over their lives and encouraged them with the good news that their Heavenly Father loved them and would provide for them. He concluded by stating that the disciples ought to focus on things of eternal value, for “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34).

Having finished telling His disciples to focus their hearts on heaven, Jesus wanted His disciples to look forward to His return. Though it was an idea they would not fully comprehend until much later (after Pentecost), Jesus planted the seeds of understanding that the Holy Spirit would nurture and bring to fruition. To do this, Jesus gave His disciples two illustrations of how to be prepared for eternity.

First, He told them to “be dressed in readiness” (v. 35). The phrase literally refers to girding up the loins. We can think of pulling up the long robes worn at the time to allow a person to run. A contemporary example might be of stripping off warm ups prior to an athletic contest. It was a concept very familiar to the disciples, for it related to the most significant event in the history of Israel. In the instructions regarding the first Passover, the Lord said, “now you shall eat it in this manner: with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste - it is the Lord’s Passover” (Exodus 12:11).

It was also used metaphorically as a sign of being ready, for when God confronted Job, He said

“Now gird up your loins like a man,
And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!” (Job 38:3).

It is the same word used by Peter, “therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). Peter is literally saying that we ought to “gird up our minds” for action. Simply stated, we ought to be ready for Jesus to return.

Jesus also said the disciples should “keep your lamps lit” (v. 35). Lamps had but one purpose - to provide light. And light was frequently used as a metaphor for understanding. So Jesus was instructing His disciples to not only be prepared physically, but also mentally for His return. He had taught much the same thing in the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-12). In that story, the wise virgins brought oil for their lamps but the foolish ones did not. Having to return to buy oil, the foolish virgins missed the return of the bridegroom but “those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut” (Matthew 25:10).

Paul taught the same,

“¹¹Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. ¹²The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Romans 13:11-14).

In commanding the disciples to be ready, Jesus is not asking anything too difficult. Neither is it too costly. What in this world is of such value that it would be placed before the opportunity to be reunited with our Lord and Savior? What is of such importance that it surpasses heaven?

Jesus said the disciples ought to “be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast” (v. 36). These days, weddings begin and end at given times. But not so in the ancient world. Then weddings and the accompanying feasts lasted for days as visitors and well-wishers travelled to make their appearance. There was no way for the slaves to know exactly when their master might return from such festivities, so they had to be in a state of constant readiness “so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks” (v. 36).

We must stop and realize that this is not a salvation by works argument. We are not saved because we wait in readiness for the return of our Lord. Justification is not about doing something, but sanctification is. This is not an illustration about faith, but about holiness.

Such faithful slaves would receive the approbation they deserved, “blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes” (v. 37). In fact, so pleased would their master be that he would in fact “gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them” (v. 37). What a change of place. The master would serve the slaves! This was not only instruction, it was prophecy for Jesus would treat His disciples in just this way, “for who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

And Jesus lived out this instruction, “³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. ⁵Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (John 13:3-5).

They challenge, of course, was being ready at all hours, “whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third” (v. 38). The point was that the master returns in the middle of the night. The point was that the master comes home unexpectedly. Such slaves must be ready all the time. It was difficult, but still, ‘blessed are those slaves’ (v. 38) who were ready.

Switching His illustration, Jesus spoke of a thief. Homes at that time were made of dirt and clay, and therefore they were easily broken into right through the walls. Keeping watch for thieves was a full-time job. And certainly “if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into” (v. 39). If a thief told us when he was coming we would be ready. But thieves don’t do that. We must always be ready, for as Jesus concluded, “the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect” (v. 40).

The metaphor of the thief is a good one. Paul used it when he wrote “for you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Also, Peter, in a passage we have already quoted, wrote “but the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10).

We have no idea when Jesus might return. That He will is certain. When He will is not. Therefore we, like the disciples, must always be ready. Such readiness involves the process of sanctification, for Peter continued “be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless” (2 Peter 3:14). Growing in our faith, developing our spiritual gifts, and sharing the gospel are all things which point to our being ready for Christ’s return.

Why to be Ready

Peter then asked a question, “Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?” (v. 41). Why did Peter ask this question? Jesus had been speaking to the multitudes, but then, beginning about verse 22, He seemed to be addressing His disciples. Did that mean that Jesus was stating that even some of the disciples would not be ready for His return? Peter, naturally, was puzzled.

Jesus answered indirectly with another parable. He asked hypothetically, “who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?” (v. 42). The question of what makes a good servant is one Jesus had mentioned before (for example, the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30). This meant that it was something Jesus considered important enough to emphasize in His teaching on several occasions.

The story had two servants. One is faithful, one is not. One is blessed, the other is punished. The connection between believers and unbelievers is too obvious to need mention by Jesus. Since all people are one or the other, Jesus does answer Peter's question about the intended audience of the parable.

Implied in the parable is that there was a master who needed to go on a long journey. Not wanting his household to fall into dysfunction while he was away, he chose a servant to be in charge while he was gone. This servant was to make certain things ran smoothly and that the others were provided for.

In the narrative, first there is the "faithful and sensible steward" (v. 42). The word used, *pistos*, invariably is used in the New Testament to mean a believer. The word for sensible, *phronimos*, means the thoughtful wisdom given by God to a believer. It is so used in James 3:17, "but the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy."

The faithful steward was ready. He had done as his master instructed, and all was in order when the master returned. He was "put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time" (v. 42), and that is just what the master found upon his return. So pleased was the master, that the servant was rewarded for his being ready, "blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes" (v. 43).

Notice that the servant is 'doing'. He was not worrying or speculating about when his master might return. Nor was he neglecting his responsibilities while the master was away. He was doing what he ought to be doing. So ought we. So pleased was his master, that Jesus assured the disciples that he would "put him in charge of all his possessions" (v. 44). The lesson for the disciples is that their faithfulness would be rewarded in the coming kingdom of God. The lesson for us is the same.

But the story did not end there. There was also an unfaithful servant. Jesus used him as an example as well. This slave "says in his heart, 'my master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk" (v. 45). This slave had no sense of responsibility. His complacent attitude about preparedness would be his downfall. He took advantage of his position of authority without regard for the wishes of his master. He enjoyed his power and position. He abused his privilege. He ate. He got drunk. He beat his fellow slaves. He lived as though there would be no accountability.

He was mistaken. So are those who choose to disregard the teachings of Scripture on the danger of not taking seriously our obligations to the kingdom of God and on being prepared for the return of the King. Hebrews 6:4-8 serves as a powerful reminder,

"⁴For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned."

There is a point of no return for those who choose to harden their hearts,

“³⁷But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. ³⁸This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ ³⁹For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ⁴⁰‘He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them’” (John 12:37-40).

This servant was caught unawares. His master chose to return “on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers” (v. 46). This is a graphic illustration of the punishment awaiting unbelievers. Only one place can be meant by Jesus in this story - hell itself.

But it seems that Jesus taught that there were different degrees of responsibility, and therefore different degrees of punishment for unfaithful servants. First was “that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will” (v.47). For his blatant disregard of his master’s wishes, he “will receive many lashes” (v. 47). Then there was the slave “who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging” (v. 48). As a result of his ignorance, his sin was punished by only a few lashes. One might wonder why a slave who did not know his master’s wishes would be punished at all. The answer is that ignorance is never absolute. All have some knowledge of the Master, “for since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

Jesus concluded with a statement that summarized in unmistakable terms the basic point, “from everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (v. 48). The degree of punishment for unbelievers is directly related to the opportunity they had to know the truth.

“²⁶For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know Him who said, ‘vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘the Lord will judge His people.’ ³¹It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:26-31).

Takeaways

May we live in the anticipation of Christ’s return, and be found a good steward of our responsibilities to the kingdom.