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Lesson III. April 15. Matt. 24: 42-51.

CHRISTIAN WATCHFULNESS.

GOLDEN TEXT.

"And what I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch."—Mark 13: 37.

I. THE DUTY OF WATCHING. 42. A. WHAT IT IS TO WATCH. *Watch therefore. Watch*, both in the Greek and English, is closely allied to *wake*. It expresses not a mere act, but a state of wakefulness and watching. *Work and watch.* Unless we work we shall not keep spiritually awake and lively; unless we are awake we shall not work.

B. AGAINST WHAT TO WATCH. *Therefore:* on account of the state of things Jesus had just been describing. There were to be wars, persecutions, great iniquities, false prophets, the love of saints even growing cold, fearful tribulations. So we are to watch against temptations from within and without; against pervading iniquities which fill the air with moral malaria, or chill the piety of even the church; against failure in duty; against the loss of the warmth of first love; against the day of death and of judgment, so as to be prepared for them when they come.

C. FOR WHAT TO WATCH. For the coming of the Lord; watch for openings to serve him by helping his poor children, watch for opportunities of comforting the sad, upholding the weak, reclaiming the erring, teaching the ignorant, leading men to Jesus, aiding his cause.

D. WHY TO WATCH. *For ye know not what hour* (or *day*, as in Rev. Ver.) *your Lord doth come.* Ignorance of the time of his coming is the reason given for watchfulness. The same reason will apply to death and the judgments which are coming on the earth. We should watch, since we know not their time. The second advent described in this chapter is a threefold unity.

(I.) There *was a second advent which culminated at the destruction of Jerusalem*, when Christ's kingdom had really been established on the earth in the place of the old dispensation; the removal of the holy city and the temple and its sacrifices made for the acceptance of the true kingdom and sacrifice of Christ: the accuracy of the prophecy recorded in this chapter in its application to this event, the repeated declaration that this coming should take place *in this generation* (ver. 30), and while some of the disciples who heard Christ should be still living (vers. 34; Mark 9: 1), proves that this must be what is referred to.

(II.) *There will be a coming of Christ, in visible presence, at the time of the judgment and resurrection*, as in 1 Thess. 4: 13-18; Rev. 20: 7 to 22: 5; and Matt. 25. These comings were not always clearly distinguished, because they are really one great whole.

(III.) Practically the Lord cometh to each of us in every great crisis of our lives, but especially in the hour of death, "after which is the judgment."

II. THE DUTY ILLUSTRATED BY ONE WATCHING AGAINST ROBBERS. 43. *But know this, that if the goodman of the house:* the master or owner of the house. *Had known in what watch the thief would come:* or was coming. In earlier times the Jewish night, from sunset to sunrise, was divided into three watches, but under the Romans into four. *He would not have suffered his house to be broken up:* broken through, or into. Literally it is "to-be-dug-through," a graphic word, appropriate to describe the action that would be required to get into a house whose walls consisted in a great measure of mud. Such was the kind of houses inhabited by the mass of the people in primitive times.

44. *Therefore be ye also ready:* be always prepared, never be spiritually asleep, never be away from your place and duty. One cannot always watch his house; he must have times of sleep; but in spiritual things he can always be ready for the coming of his Lord. *For in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.* "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5: 2; see also 2 Pet. 3: 10). The comings of the Lord are ever unexpected to us,—his coming at death, his coming to judge the world, his coming in the crises of our lives, his coming with opportunities and open doors, his coming with the power of the Holy Spirit. The only way is for us to be ever about our Master's business, ever doing his will, ever loving his presence, ever walking with God, and we shall be ready and glad when he comes.

III. ILLUSTRATED BY A FAITHFUL SERVANT 45. *Who then is a faithful and wise servant?* or steward, who was generally a slave whom his master had chosen on account of his trustworthiness and intelligence to be the steward of his estate. *Whom his lord hath made ruler over his household:* while he himself went abroad. This power was conferred on account of previous faithfulness and ability. *To give them meat* (food) *in due season:* according to the duty of stewards of a large estate. So ministers are to break the bread of life to those under their charge, giving to each one his portion.

46. *Blessed is that servant.* When our Lord uses this epithet, "blessed," he always means to represent the thing spoken of as high and rare,—a rare man, a hero, one of a thousand. It means further that great shall be his reward.

47. *He shall make him ruler over all his goods:* he will promote him to the highest position in his establishment, thus conferring upon him the highest honor and reward of which he is susceptible.

THE GOOD SERVANT. The good servant is faithful, to his lord and in his trust; prudent, in watching for his lord's coming; beneficent, using his power as a trust, for others; patient, in continuing his well-doing till the coming of his Lord.

THE REWARD is both outward and inward, more glories and blessings and joys, and larger capacities for usefulness and enjoyment. Larger fields and wider spheres are given, greater opportunities for doing good.

IV. ILLUSTRATED BY THE UNFAITHFUL SERVANT. 48. *If that evil servant shall say in his heart.* He would be ashamed to say it openly.

49. *And shall begin to smite his fellow servants:* not only neglecting their interests, but actually abusing them in the spirit of a petty tyrant. *And to eat and drink with the drunken:* carousing at his master's expense, instead of keeping the household in order, and exercising a prudent economy.

50. *The lord of that servant.* Christ is still "lord" of the unfaithful and sinful servant. *Shall come.* Doubt of his coming does not hinder it. *In a day*, etc. The unexpected, sudden coming is again brought forward. Before the second advent, when the whole church shall be tried as to faithfulness, the coming to individuals is at death.

51. *And shall cut him asunder:* literally, shall cut him in two. A terrific form of capital punishment, carried sometimes into execution with a saw. (See 2 Sam. 12: 31; Heb. 11: 37.) *And appoint him his portion with the hypocrites:* as referred to in the last lesson. He must go with the hypocrites because he is one. Each to his own place. *There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* This is a phrase often used to denote the bitterest agony and convulsions of pain and rage. Cutting asunder indicates destruction; weeping and gnashing of teeth, a living in suffering.

Arthur Alverton's Temptation

In the elegant home of Mr. James Alverton there was, perhaps, no room that better indicated his taste than the library. The bookcases were quaint in design and form; rare works of art were distributed about the room; the engravings also had been selected with great care. But Mr. James Alverton had done with it all. Sunlight rested and dews fell upon his grave, over which tender, delicate grassblades thrust a kindly covering; and that which his thoughts devised and his tastes developed, together with the great fortune which had ministered to it, must pass into other hands. It had been a question into whose hands it should fall, for he had no direct heirs, having never married. There had always been vague rumors of an early disappointment, from which he had never rallied. The truth was this:

He had been supplanted by a younger and only brother in the affection of a lovely girl to whom he had confessed the nature of his regard, and who had in turn assured him that it was reciprocated. Had she been fairly and honestly won from him, he might have accepted the disappointment as one of the dark events of his life, to be courageously met and overcome, and in time have learned to look upon his own loss and another's gain with indifference, if not with generosity. But unhappily there had been treachery and deceit, which a nature so genuine and truth-loving as his could not respect; and while he never became a cynical misanthrope, he put love and domestic ties from him, and plunging into his profession distinguished himself, amassed a fortune, and wedded himself to literature and art. He never resumed friendly relations with the brother who had so cruelly deceived him. As for him, he married the faithless girl, but as they were not strong enough to struggle and not capacitated to get on, they led a thriftless sort of existence for awhile, then dropped out of life, leaving one child, a boy of fourteen, Arthur Alverton, to find his way in the world. But nature had been kind to him, and had endowed him with an earnest, high-toned soul, an active, intelligent mind, as well as with a great deal of force and push; so that he grew into young manhood self-educated, self-made, and self-supporting, though he held but a clerkship in a large publishing house. Indeed he was not unlike the uncle whose natural heir he was; but of him Mr. James Alverton knew little, but that little knowledge had come to him but a short time before his death, so that, though every way worthy, there was scarcely a possibility of his being the inheritor of his uncle's fortune.

There was a second cousin, a young man whom Mr. Alverton had befriended; indeed, he was regarded by some as being a protege, and it was generally supposed that, except certain annuites to one or two old servants, and several bequests to benevolent societies that he had hitherto remembered, to him would fall the accumulated wealth of a successful career. But life is a curious study. We translate some histories as if they were an easily told tale, when suddenly we fall upon some idiomatic phrase that seems incapable of solution. It was utterly out of harmony with the methodical business habits of this gentleman's life that he should leave no will, yet such was the fact; at least none could be found. There had been no last last hours in which to make final preparations, or to say kindly words of parting to faithful attendants or some tried friend. Alone he had met the "shadow feared of man." They had found him in his easy chair, with his stately grey head bent low upon his breast, and with hands folded quietly upon his knees. No evidence of agony, no trace of pain: he had simply done with life, and sat there in awful stillness, while Guido's radiant Hours with clasped hands and hastening feet looked down upon him.

And he had left no "last will and testament!" It was impossible! So vigorous search was made among business and private papers, in his public desk and private cabinet. Not a folded paper with prophetic seal; not a trace of pen that could furnish any purpose or explanation could be found. Himself a laywer, he could make and unmake, signatures could be requested and given, and it not be necessary to know what lay folded within. Evidently there was nothing to be done but to accept the fact, and let the kindly law take its way. It did, and Arthur Alverton, nearest of kin and yet comparatively a stranger, for whom life had done little else than open the door for hard, continuous work, found himself, while still young, the possessor of a fortune.

It was a sudden transformation, or transition, for, said Arthur to himself, as he sat quite alone in the library that had once been his uncle's—"I do not mean to be transformed by this unexpected change in my circumstances. I must not yield my purposes to grow, therefore I must not yield my habits of industry. My uncle's home I should like to have stand as it is. It is an exponent of himself, and will serve to reveal to me more and more what he was, and what his wishes might have been. That cousin! I should like at a proper time to do something for him, and if possible cancel in some measure the disappointment he must naturally feel. I should very much like to know what is my duty towards him"—and Arthur sighed.

Great wealth is by no means a magnificent shelter into whose grateful shade its possessor may retreat, and feel that he has passed beyond the heat of anxiety and care. Even if one has no moral conviction concerning it, there remains the inevitable and oftentimes oppressive question, "What shall I do with it?" Arthur Alverton felt something of this, but he brightened with the thought of the good that might be done with this fortune that had seemingly dropped into his hands. There were many that he knew (the very circumstances of his life had been such as to bring them within the circle of his knowledge) whose burdens he could make lighter and whose way he could render smoother. And then—he confessed to himself with beating heart and flushed face—the sweetness of the hope that his new position would draw him nearer the lovely girl whom he had dared to love; but whose path in the world diverged so widely from his own, that he himself had deemed it presumption to try to win her affection. But now it was something to be grateful for, to be able even to strive for her love.

For awhile he gave himself up to blissful dreams and happy castle building; then rousing himself, he rose from his seat and wandered around the room, idly-looking at the well-filled book-shelves, when, espying a large, worn-looking volume, evidently of unusual date, he took it down, saying, "I must become acquainted with my new friends," and began to turn its pages slowly over. Directly every vestige of color fled from his face, while his hand trembled so it almost refused to hold a paper he had taken from the book. There upon its folded back was the red seal, while across the front was written in clear legible characters, "My last will and testament."

He looked bewilderingly around the room, as if for some support by which to steady himself. Here was a sudden death to all his hopes and expectations, a cruel disappointment to his carefully-laid plans of duty and delight. The coals still gleamed in the grate, and an almost restless impulse seized him to thrust it into the eager fire. There was no one near to see, and the flames would never reveal the secret committed to them. And after all, who had a better right to his uncle's fortune than he? Had not Providence seemed to place it directly in his hands; and had he not himself already fixed upon an endless purpose of good to be wrought out with it? Life hitherto had been such a perpetual struggle with him, and for what? "Surely enough, for what?" he cried, burying his face in his hands in an agony of mortification that such thoughts should find lodgement in his heart even for a moment—"surely enough, for what, if to perjure his young manhood, to sacrifice his honor, to invite remorse and shame into his heart where peace had dwelt a tranquil guest?" For peace had been something more than a sacred conscience in the soul of Arthur Alverton, it had been an actual Presence whose coming had not been of this world. Should he suffer it to depart? No! no! Better never hold riches for a day than to sink his nature to the level of dishonesty, or to sap the pure spring of his precious life. "I will go back to my old living," said he, "and suffer honest effort and a helpful Providence to work out my future—and as for you, dear Elanor Wynne,

—'the God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love,
I claim you still, for my own love's sake.'"

He rose, replaced the old volume on the shelf, and putting the document in a private drawer under lock and key, went to his room, firm in the purpose to carry it with the seal unbroken, the following morning, to an attorney, a friend of his uncle's. This he did, explaining how he had come to discover it, and then turned to leave the office.

"But, Mr. Alverton," said the lawyer, "will you not sit down and await its contents? They certainly must concern you."

"They are hardly likely to. None know better than you that my title was rather the choice of fate than the choice of my uncle,"—and bidding him good morning he walked out into the open air, doubtless very much excited, but for all that very much at peace. He might possess nothing, but he owned himself, or rather was owned, of God.

But the recompense of truth came sooner to him than to most. When the will was opened, a singular revelation was made. It was of recent date—indeed, it had been drawn up but a few days before the death of Mr. James Alverton, yet it was fully and legally attested. After revoking any and all wills previously made by him, and bestowing certain annuities upon two old and faithful servants, he made several bequests to different benevolent societies; generously remembered the cousin who had often been the recipient of his favors; and then proceeded to speak in touching language of his advancing years, compelling the conviction that he must soon leave this world; of his unwillingness to bear its animosities into another; of his wish to bury the past, and to forgive as he hoped for forgiveness; of his desire to repair in so far as possible whatever injustice he had done the innocent. He then gave and bequeathed to his "sainted mother's grandson, his own nephew—Arthur Alverton," whom he had "recently learned to be worthy of such confidence," that which remained of his fortune after the above bequests had been complied with, together with his home and household effects. Doubtless, had months or even days been added to his life, his nephew would have held a high place in his affections, for when such natures break down the barriers of pride, prejudice and anger, not a trace remains.

No one could have been more surprised than was Arthur Alverton at the contents of the will. It seemed to him that directly over against his renunciation had arisen a reward. Certainly, through its discovery, his fortune had been diminished, but that which he now possessed was infinitely more to him. It was a seal of reconciliation and peace. It was recognition and remembrance, and it was everything to be recognized and remembered by his uncle; it seemed to make the possession more rightfully his own. The amount still exceeded the wildest dreams of his youthful ambition, and opened to him the largest opportunities for usefulness, which he did not fail to seize and employ in the years that followed.

They were years full of untroubled peace and unbroken happiness, and were made blessed by the presence and love of Elanor Wynne, for though she had seemed as far removed from him as the silent stars that shine out of the purple night, he was successful in winning her affections, and, "for love's sake." And now childish feet wander through the old Alverton mansion, and childish lips are taught to speak reverently of the "Uncle James" who once dwelt in their beautiful home, and left it only for one more beautiful beyond the blue of the skies.—*Sel.*

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