

“Behold, I Come as a Thief”

“Behold, I come as a Thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame” (Revelation 16:15)

These words which form part of Messiah’s last message to his brethren comprise an exhortation for readiness at the time of his coming again. In our considerations therefore, it is appropriate to examine the exhortation, and take the lessons learned to heart!

“Behold, I come as a Thief...”

This expression is used by Messiah a number of times, to encourage a state of readiness in the minds of those who look for him. Naturally speaking, a thief enters a house under cover of darkness, and takes to himself those things he considers to be valuable. Having collected together those things, he leaves just as silently as he came. No-one knows what has happened before the breaking of a new day, when the occupants rise from sleep and find their house ransacked, and their goods taken. Even so it will be with Messiah at his coming: he will come to a world in darkness, and gather to himself his special treasure. He will remain undetected by man until the dawning of a new Millennial day, when it is seen that the graves are opened, the dead raised, and those saints who are alive and remain until that day have been taken away from their midst. So Messiah spake thus:

“know this, that if the Goodman of the house had known in what watch *the thief* would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. Therefore *be ye also ready*: for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man cometh” (Mat. 24:43-44, cp. Lu. 12:39).

We, who do not know the day, never mind the hour of our Master’s coming, need to be in a constant state of readiness. Like a man who knows that the thief will come some time in the darkness of the night, but does not know when, we must always be alert, waiting for him to come. Again, Paul exhorted the believers:

“... of the times and seasons brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh *as a thief in the night* ...” (1 Thes. 5:1-2).

And again, the words of Messiah:

“ ... if therefore thou shalt not watch, *I will come on thee as a thief*, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee” (Rev. 3:3)

The common theme in these passages, is to be in a constant state of readiness. When a thief comes, it is to the detriment of the householder in that valuable things are lost. But also, there is a rejection of those things that are worthless: they remain amongst the mess that the thief leaves behind him, having ransacked the place. Even so shall it be when Messiah comes to judge the household of faith.

“Blessed Is He That Watcheth”

A key point referred to in some of the passages cited above, is the need to “watch”. “Watch therefore: for ye do not know what hour your Lord doth come” are the Master’s words (Mat. 24:42). Again, Luke further records him as saying:

“Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when he cometh **shall find watching**: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them” (Lu. 12:37).

The question requiring an answer here, is What is it that we should be watching? The answer in the first instance, is those things that go on around us. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, saying: “... O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” (Mat. 16:3). The “signs of the times” therefore constitute the things to be watched, and “discerned”. Through the light of a sure word of prophecy, we can discern our place in the outworking of the purpose of God in the affairs of men. By watching the things that go on around us with the illumination of the Word, we can make more sense than most, in the tangles and threads of human affairs.

There is another important sense in which we must “watch”. Peter exhorts: “watch unto prayer” (1 Pet. 4:7), or be alert to the things of God in our prayers before Him. This is what Jesus required of his disciples during his agony at Gethsemane, yet it was something they could not do. “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, **and watch with me**” (Mat. 26:28). But this was something they could not do. Though the spirit was willing, their flesh was weak, and so the spirit of Christ in the Psalmist wrote: “I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none” (Psa. 96:20). So Christ spoke to Peter, who had only just avowed loyalty to him (Mat. 26:33), “What, could ye not **watch with me** one hour?” (Mat. 26:40). This is our task. Even as the disciples waited for their master to come back to them, so we await his return. They could not “watch” for one hour, for the weakness of the flesh. But what of ourselves? We will only know in that day to come, when Christ shall come for us, no longer in weakness, but with power and great glory. It is written that “where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18): the word “perish” is rendered in other translations as “made naked”. To avoid being “made naked” therefore, we must have a clear vision and focus on the things of the spirit, seeking above all else, the Kingdom of God.

“And Keepeth his Garments, Lest he Walk Naked ...”

The figure of a “garment” occurs many times in Scripture. Jude exhorts the believers to try and save lapsing brethren, “hating even **the garment** spotted by the flesh” (Jude 1:23). The ecclesia at Sardis had those within it “which have not defiled their garments” (Rev. 3:4). And Isaiah was told to be a living parable, and “walk naked” as a sign to Israel and the nations amongst whom he lived. So the word came to him:

“... go and loose the sackcloth from off thy loins, and put off thy shoe from off thy foot. And he did so, **walking naked** and barefoot. And Yahweh said, Like as my servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia, So shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians prisoners and the Ethiopians captives, young and old, naked and barefoot, even with their buttocks uncovered, **to the shame** of Egypt.” (Isa. 20:2-4)

The Egyptians were to be shamed by the uncovering of their nakedness, as enacted by Isaiah in his walk before men. We can well anticipate a similar situation to come upon the world at large when Messiah comes. In this age – maybe more so than any age – there is great pressure to present an outward appearance of things. To wear the latest fashions and designer clothes: to make a show of ourselves and our things. Israel of old did this very thing, as Isaiah describes in chapter 3 of his prophecy:

“... the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet ... and it shall come to pass that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink, and instead of a girdle a rent; and instead of well set hair baldness; and instead of a stomacher a girding of sackcloth; and burning instead of beauty” (Isa. 3:16-24 – read the whole chapter for context).

The outward beauty of Israel therefore, was to be stripped away, and sackcloth – a garment of mourning - be worn instead. For Egypt and Ethiopia however, it was even worse: they would be “made naked” without even sackcloth to cover their loins.

We need then, to ensure we are clothed. But as the parable of the wedding feast shows, those garments must be of a particular type (Mat. 22:11-12). So it was so since the foundation of the world: Adam and Eve devised their own garments which were rejected by God. What is needed for man is not for himself to devise his own covering for sin, but to make use of the garments provided by God. Yahweh is the offended party, and only He can state what is acceptable to reconcile man to Himself. The clothing of His providing, being skins, involves death and sacrifice, foreshadowing the merciful sacrifice of His Son. It is only through Baptism that a man can adorn himself with the proper garments, as it is written:

“put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14).

Jesus is the Slain Lamb: the One through whom forgiveness will come. He provides a covering (the Hebrews for “atonement”) that the shame of nakedness be not seen before Yahweh. The teaching of Paul is identical:

“... ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ **have put on Christ**” (Gal. 3:26).

Putting on these Christ-garments, we can draw near to the throne of the Most High – not with any sense of shame, but rather rejoicing in a clear conscience, being sprinkled by the blood of the Lamb (Heb. 9:14).

“... and they see his shame”

Exodus chapter 32 records Israel’s return to idolatry, soon after they had left Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Verse 6 records that the people, in Moses’ absence “sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play” (Ex. 32:6) Moreover, they corrupted themselves in making a molten calf to worship, to which they offered sacrifices, both burnt and peace offerings.

In these circumstances, we see a parallel between the situation of Israel as they awaited the coming of Moses again, and the way in which we ought to wait for Messiah, the prophet “like unto” Moses. Israel proved themselves to be “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:4). Eating, drinking, and playing are the Spirit’s words that characterise this people. Whereas the exhortation in the Apocalypse is “blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments”, Israel walked naked and their shame was displayed to all:

“...when Moses saw that the people **were naked**; (for Aaron had made **them naked** unto **their shame** among their enemies:) Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on Yahweh’s Side?” (Exo. 32:25,26)

The reference to “their enemies” implies that what they were doing was open for all – both friend and foe – to see. Whether they literally took their clothes off, or whether the description is of a spiritual nakedness, we can see the parallel with our own day. In the absence of our Great King, do we “watch”, patiently waiting for the coming day, or do we, as Israel, grow tired of waiting, and turn aside to the pleasures of this life for our amusement and gratification? Only we can answer this question individually.

In this question, we have the example of Moses to help us:

“by faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharoah’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season: Esteeming the reproach for Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward ...” (Heb. 11:24-26).

Here we see the difference between Moses and the people he led. They enjoyed the pleasures of Sin, whilst Moses forsook Egypt and all the attractions and lures thereof. He “had respect” or “looked away” towards the things of God, rather than the things of Egypt. Suffering affliction at the head of a stiff-necked and rebellious people, his patience was truly tried to the uttermost.

The Master, Jesus Christ

In each of these particulars, we see Messiah, particularly in the context of his sufferings. Of him it is written that:

“for the joy set before him [he] endured the cross, despising *the shame*, and is set down on the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

In the day when sin’s flesh was laid bare, he was physically stripped of his garments by the Roman soldiers, and impaled upon the tree of cursing. We see the example of Christ in choosing and enduring affliction and shame for his people’s sake. It is written: “the eyes of Yahweh are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry” (Psa. 34:15). So it was that the pre-eminently Righteous One cried to his Father: “and was heard in that he feared” (Heb. 5:7). He was one who “watched”, in that he always had his Father’s glory in his sight (Heb. 12:2) - and he presents a powerful example for us to follow.

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