

KEEP AWAKE

MATTHEW 24:3, 36 – 44

by Elaine Poproski

Back in the late 1960s, a guy named Larry Norman was part of something called the Jesus Movement. It was a “countercultural Christian youth revolution that emerged in the United States” alongside the broader cultural revolution that was happening at the same time.ⁱ Larry Norman was a musician. One of his most famous songs was titled “Why Should the Devil Have all the Good Music.” It’s a song that exactly captured what was happening at the time. It’s such a fun song I wanted to play you a bit to get it into your head.

[Play clip.](#)

A couple years before that song was released, Larry Norman released another song that might sound familiar. There’s a line in it, and you can hear some of the overtones from today’s scripture reading from Matthew 24. It’s slower tempo ballad titled “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” Here’s a short clip from that song:

[Play clip.](#)

That song was the basis for a truly awful, low budget movie released in 1972, titled “A Thief In the Night.” I thought you’d appreciate seeing the first few minutes of the movie. The background music that carries through this movie is that Larry Norman song, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.”

[Play clip.](#)

Twenty-three years later a book by Tim LaHaye was published and took the evangelical Christian world by storm. It was titled “Left Behind.” Five years after that, the book was turned into another truly awful, low budget movie. I’m not going to show you any clips from that movie. But it’s a lot like “A Thief in the Night.” It has the same themes as that movie as well as of the Larry Norman song, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.”

The idea is that at some point Christians – *true* Christians – will suddenly and all at once be taken to heaven by Jesus, leaving everyone else behind. Scripture passages like the one we read a few minutes ago from Matthew 24 are often used to support this idea. We call it the Rapture. My guess is that you’ve probably heard of it before.

But did you know that the whole idea of the rapture didn’t show up until the 1800s? It’s not something Christians talked about or even considered as truth until this guy named John Darby showed up in Ireland. He was a lawyer who became a priest, but then left the priesthood after less than three years because he was fed up with the whole institutionalized system. He joined with others who were similarly disenfranchised. The rapture is something John Darby came up with. He would have said it was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, who gave him fresh, new understanding of Scripture.

I would say it wasn’t revealed by the Holy Spirit and it isn’t an idea that’s consistent with Scripture.ⁱⁱ That being said, it’s not my intention to lead us through an academic dismantling of

the rapture this morning. That's not something we can do in this setting, though if anyone wants to, I am willing to talk about it later. So, why did I bring it up?

I brought it up because it's such a prevalent belief among so many Christians in our part of the world, that when we read passages of Scripture like the one from Matthew 24 that I read earlier, those beliefs can actually hide the true intent of Jesus' words from us. The things we believe always affect what we hear when we read Scripture. Sometimes we're conscious of the things we believe, and sometimes we aren't. Sometimes those things help our understanding, and sometimes they hinder our understanding.

Think of it this way: Most of you recognize my voice. You hear it a lot. Because you hear it a lot, you can usually pretty accurately understand the words coming out of my mouth. But what if I mess with my voice like audio technology lets us do? Listen to this recording:

Play audio clip.

It's obvious that I did something to that recording to make it sound like nonsense. But what if what I did was more subtle – just a bit more bass or a bit more treble? My voice would be different, but you might have no idea that it's different. Of course, messing a bit with a recording of my voice doesn't impact your ability to understand my meaning, unless I've messed with it so much it completely garbles the words, of course.

When we read the Bible, there are all sorts of things we believe that affect the way we understand what we're reading. Sometimes those beliefs help our understanding, but sometimes they hinder our understanding. And when the things we believe are so deeply embedded in us that we're not even really aware they're there, we are in serious danger of misinterpreting and misunderstanding what we read. We're in danger of misunderstanding and misrepresenting Jesus. That's what I think belief in the rapture has done.

So, if what we read from Matthew 24 *isn't* about the rapture, what *is* it about?

The first thing to recognize is that our passage is actually part of a much bigger speech in which Jesus is preparing his followers for life without him. We might be tempted to read these words as all about the end of the world, and there's definitely an apocalyptic tenor to what Jesus is saying, but Jesus' most immediate purpose here has to do with the fact that he's going to die soon. He knows it. And he knows it's going to be really hard for his disciples to keep going once he's gone, even though he's already told them that he'll return one day.

The disciples want to know how long they're going to have to wait. How long will it be between Jesus leaving and Jesus coming? How long will we have to live without him? How long will we suffer the evils of this world before Jesus returns and puts an end to them once and for all? "Please Jesus," we hear them pleading here, "Please Jesus, tell us when, tell us what to look for. How will we know when it's time for you to come back?"

Don't we have the same questions? Don't we also long for Jesus to return – for God's kingdom to finally come – for all that's wrong in our world to finally end? Don't we long for that time when Isaiah's words about swords beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks will come true?ⁱⁱⁱ

Our world is in such bad shape, the question isn't whether or not it's going to be destroyed, but rather, how it will be destroyed. Will the nuclear war we've been fearing since the last century finally be our end? Will it be flood, fire, earthquakes, volcanoes – the death of our created world because of our horrendous abuse of it? Will it be famine? Will it be disease? Perhaps it will be a combination of all of the above? Will it happen all at once or over a period of years? Has that period of years already begun? "Please Jesus," we plead with the disciples, "Tell us when this will be."

But Jesus doesn't tell us. He warns that all sorts of people are going to come along claiming to be him – to be a saviour. He warns that there will be wars and famines and earthquakes. He warns his disciples that things are going to be really hard for them specifically – they're going to face persecution and execution, animosity and betrayal. But all of those things are simply descriptions of the world and of life. They aren't signs of his return. They aren't signs of the end of the world. They also aren't unique to Jesus' day or our day or any of the days in between. This is life in a world infected by sin. This is life in any kingdom that is not God's kingdom.

Here's what Jesus does promise: he promises that when he comes, he'll be really obvious about it. In verse 27 of Matthew 24, he likens his return to lighting that flashes across the entirety of the sky. In verse 30 he talks of his return "on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." He speaks in the next verse of a loud trumpet call that will be heard around the world. But if we want a sign – if we want to be able to predict when he's going to come, he can't help. This is what he says, in verse 36: *But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the son, but only the Father.*

To emphasize the unpredictability of it, he gives a few examples. He says, *For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.* [Sometimes that's the term Jesus uses to refer to himself; it's from Daniel 7.] *For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.*

It's interesting to me that these verses are sometimes used to prove the rapture as a Biblical thing. The rapture is about the so-called true believers being taken and everyone else being left behind. But what happens in the *days of Noah* is that it's everyone else who's taken – swept away in the flood – and it's the true believers – Noah and his family – who are left behind.

The point clearly has nothing to do with the rapture or any other predictions about Jesus' return. It's simply an illustration of the point that no one but the Father knows when it will happen. And no one but the Father will ever know until it happens.

The next illustration makes the same point. This is what we read in verses 40 and 41: *Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left.*

Do you remember earlier, when I talked about how things we believe affect what we hear when we read Scripture? This is a great example of that. In these two verses, all we're told is that there are two people; one is taken, and one is left. We're told nothing about the people other than what

they're doing at the time. We're told nothing about their beliefs or about their goodness as people. Nothing is said to explain why the ones who were taken, were taken. And yet, when read through the lens of the rapture, the assumption is that those who were taken were the true believers. But there's nothing here to support that interpretation. If anything, following after the Noah illustration, it makes more sense to think maybe the ones who were left behind were the believers – the good ones.

Jesus' point isn't about who's left behind and who's taken. His point is the same as it's been all along: *About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*

But Jesus doesn't leave it there, because he's talking about something other than the disciples' initiating question. Jesus' whole point in this two-chapter long speech is to prepare his disciples for life without him. Part of that preparation is the promise that he will return – that their life without him won't be forever. But the bigger question has to do with what they're supposed to do with themselves in the meantime. How are they supposed to live? What are they supposed to do? This is what Jesus says, beginning in verse 42:

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this, if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Keep awake.

For how long? Back when I was in university there were occasions when I stayed up all night. Sometimes it was to finish a paper. Sometimes it was because the party kept going. I can't do it now. But here's Jesus, telling us that he's going to come back one day, though he doesn't know when, and we should stay awake until that happens. What are we to do?

First, and this might be obvious, but I think it's important to say anyway, this instruction to keep awake isn't meant to be taken literally. Jesus is not instructing us to literally stay awake – to go without sleep – until he comes back. What he's talking about is readiness. He's talking about a particular posture we are to take. In the rest of Matthew 24 and through to the end of Matthew 25, Jesus tells 4 parables, all of which are meant to help us understand what it means to keep awake – to be ready.

In the first parable, a master goes away for a time and leaves one of his servants in charge of everything, including making sure all the other servants continue to be provided for.

In the second parable, a group of ten bridesmaids are tasked with meeting up with the groom to guide him back to his bride on their wedding night. The bridesmaids have lamps they need to keep lit for the journey.

In the third parable, a man goes on a journey and entrusts three of his servants with his money, to invest it and work with while he's gone.

In each of these parables, there's blessing for those who do what's expected, and some kind of punishment or rejection of those who don't do as expected. It's a theme that carries through the fourth parable as well. This fourth parable is the climax of the speech. It's the ultimate answer, not to the question of when, but to the question of what we're supposed to do in the mean time.

In this parable, Jesus paints a picture of all the people of the world gathered before him on his return, separated into two distinct groups. Of one of the groups, he says this: *For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me in, I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was ill, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me.* These are the ones who are blessed. The other group – the group of people who did not do these things – are accursed.

What are we supposed to do as we wait for Jesus' return? What does it mean to keep awake? It's not about literally never sleeping again. It's about continuing in the ways of Jesus, until Jesus comes back.

There's a theme that runs through Advent, that's here in this passage, though it's not stated explicitly. It's part of the whole keep awake thing. It's the theme of watchfulness. Because we're not just keeping awake, we're keeping awake and alert for Jesus. There's an interesting twist in the last parable – the one at the end of chapter 25. After Jesus tells the people why they're in the group they're in, they are somewhat confused. Here's how the first group responds:

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?

The second group had the same question: *Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or ill or in prison, and did not help you?*

In both cases, Jesus' answer is the same: *Whatever you did (or did not do) for one of the least of these, you did (or did not do) for me.*

To keep awake is to continue in the ways of Jesus. And as we continue in the ways of Jesus, we discover that even as we await his return, Jesus is among us in the people who are around us. We know, as Christians, the testimony of the Holy Spirit that through the Holy Spirit Jesus' presence is still among us. Every time we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter those who have no shelter... All of that work, that was Jesus' work to begin with, is as if we are ministering to Jesus himself. That's what it means to keep awake. That's what it means to be watchful – to keep our eyes open for where Jesus might be present among us.

Jesus wasn't interested in answering the question, "When will all this happen?" He was interested in answering the question, "What do we do in the meantime?"

ⁱ Got Questions Ministries. *What Was the Jesus Movement?* <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-Movement.html>

ⁱⁱ Technically, the rapture refers simply to the resurrection of believers at the coming of Jesus – the idea that all believers will be caught up with Christ upon his return. However, what Darby taught, and what’s represented in the movies I talked about earlier as well as what seems to be the popular modern understanding, was that the resurrection would happen before the final coming of Jesus. According to this teaching, there are going to be two returns of Jesus. The first will be a secret return, during which all true believers will be taken; the second will occur some years later after a time of tribulation throughout the earth. Alan S. Bandy provides a good summary of the teaching in his article, *The Rapture Question*, at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-rapture-question/>. Another great article is by Joshua Rivera, writing of his own experience with this belief system, in an article titled, *Vanished from the Earth*, at <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/05/rapture-fear-evangelical-americans-church-miller.html>, May 2, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 2:1 – 5.