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THE FOUR WATCHES

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Read: Mark 13: 31-37; Matthew 14: 22-27; Luke 12: 37-38

I have nothing of a sensational nature to present to the reader, for I realize that spiritual fireworks leave but burnt embers; and though it may be said of Israel—'he feedeth on ashes' (Isa. 44:20) such cannot afford a satisfying portion to the hungry soul, though it does remind one of where a fire has been.

The Preface

Christ's allusion to the four watches as recorded by Mark is prefaced by an observation which has troubled many down the ages. I refer to Mark 13:32. The Lord indicates that there is not a man alive who is aware of the hour when the Lord Jesus Christ shall fulfil His promise and return to take out of this world His own. Proceeding the Lord Jesus says that the angels do not know the day or the hour: even heaven's hierarchy are ignorant of this coming event so far as the day or hour are concerned. In stating this the Lord indicated that He knew more than angels, for He knew that they did not know. Not having seen angels I am unaware of either their form or their knowledge; but Christ knew that they did not know the day or hour of His coming. The next statement is the one that has proved a problem to many readers of the Holy Scriptures for the Lord said 'neither the Son, but the Father.' We may ask the question 'Since Christ is God manifest in the flesh He must know everything.' With this we readily agree! He is God, blessed forever, though He came in lowly grace and accepted the body prepared for Him—Heb. 10:5. There is no constituent in the vast polygonal ensemble of divine glory absent in the Man Christ Jesus! His omniscience cannot be doubted for John 2: 23-25; 6:6 confirm this. How are we to understand His statement here?

Mark presents Christ as the perfect servant, and only Mark makes this observation. We know that 'the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth.' It is as Servant He declares that the Son knoweth not the day or hour, only the Father knoweth. Though He knows all things because He is God—and hold fast to this

with all your might—He knows all things essentially, because He is God; eternally, because He is from eternity to eternity, and intrinsically, because of His divine omniscience; yet He does not know by communication. The Trinity is like a business with three partners—one looks after the sales; another looks after the stock; and another looks after the finance. They have each a particular responsibility in the business and one does not intrude into that relating to the other partners. The Lord Jesus indicated that 'It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power' (Acts 1:7). As this is the province of the Father the Son is happy to leave it there. The italicized words at the opening of verse 34 of Mark 13 do not convey the proper thought. J. N. D. in his New Translation renders it thus '(it is) as a man gone out of the country.'

The Night

What constitutes night? When the sun has sunk silently on its crimson couch beyond the western horizon then darkness descends and night is with us! When the Son of God left this world—He had said 'As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world,'—then the darkness descended and spiritual night set in. Paul alluding to this period says 'the night is far spent'—Romans 13:12. Yet that night has continued for over nineteen hundred years, but presently the Day Star will appear to usher in the eternal day. The division of the night into four watches was that acknowledged by the Romans. The Hebrew night was divided into three watches as can be confirmed by examining Judges 7:19 where we read of 'The middle watch'. There cannot be a middle watch of four, but there can be of three. The four watches are defined by Christ in Mark 13: 31-37: they are Evening, Midnight, Cockcrowing and Morning. These four watches suggest in the spiritual realm, four divine movements.

The evening and morning watches are especially applicable to God's earthly people, and are treated of particularly by Matthew. The Midnight and the Cockcrowing belong to the Gentiles, or, if you will, to the Church, and are specially mentioned by Luke.

The Evening Watch

The evening watch suggests that divine movement when the Lord Jesus Christ left this earth and returned as a Man to that realm from whence He had come. We turn to Matthew 14 to see this exemplified. Christ 'went up into a mountain': Matthew 14:23. In this we may see prefigured for us the Ascension of our Lord to the right hand of the Majesty on high. Jesus went there 'apart to pray' v. 23. The Lord Jesus engages Himself on high in a dual ministry—as High Priest He intercedes on our behalf because of our infirmities; and as the Advocate with the Father because of our sins. What a debt of gratitude we owe to our Lord for this wonderful intercession on our behalf! The preventive ministry and the restorative ministry are engaged in by Him, and not till we get home will we realise our indebtedness to Him. 'When the evening was come He was there alone': Matthew 14:23. The exalted Christ as the night began—the evening watch—is seen alone. There is a Man in the glory of God to-day and the glory of God shines out from the face of that Man.

Down below on the lake the disciple's frail craft was tossed about with adverse winds and waves: v. 24. This connotes the buffeting that the faithful remnant shall receive during the time of the Great Tribulation; for the disciples represent the faithful remnant of the coming day. The adverse wind suggests to us Satanic activity; for the Lord rebuked the wind; and He never would have rebuked anything that had come from or been sent by His Father: see Mark 4:38. Despite all the storms which may assail the faithful remnant of the day yet future be assured of this 'He shall bring them to their desired haven.' Psalm 107:30.

The people who saw Christ go away at the first watch—the evening watch—were eleven converted Jews. Who shall see Him when He returns at the last watch—the morning watch? Converted Jews, we reply: that faithful remnant who stand loyal to God and His Word throughout the fierce affliction of the Great Tribulation: (Matt. 14:25) He comes in the 4th watch. At the beginning of their national life Israel saw the sea divided and they were allowed to pass over dry-shod to the wilderness side of

the Red Sea, at a place called 'Pi-hahiroth', which means 'the opening of liberty'. At the end of their severe testing under the Beast and the False Prophet they will see the earth divided and they shall find a way of escape from their cruel enemies. Their original deliverance, associated with the dividing of the sea, is recorded in Exodus 14; the deliverance at the close of the Tribulation is recorded in Zechariah 14. There are also two fifteenth chapters it would be good to remember, viz., Exodus 15, when the first song is sung. There were no songs in Genesis—this book opens with life in pristine grandeur and beauty and closes with a man in a coffin in Egypt, the silent, but eloquent testimony to sin's entrance into the world and death by sin. The other chapter 15 is that of the Book of Revelation where we get the last song in the Bible; it is 'the song of Moses and the Lamb.' Redemption is the theme of both songs!

The people of the Lord who were delivered from Egypt sang 'the Lord is my strength, and my song, and He is become my salvation.' The remnant will sing the same song in the coming day; and for proof of this see Hosea 2: 14-15 and Isa. 12:2.

We find that the first and last watches are specially applicable to Israel.

The Second and Third Watches

Turning to Luke's Gospel chapter 12 verse 38 we read, 'If He shall come in the *second watch or third watch*' Luke's Gospel is the gospel of largeness. If in Matthew 8:11 the Lord speaks of those who will come from 'the east and the west' and sit down in the kingdom Luke states in chapter 13 verse 29 'they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God.' It is universal in its appeal this Gospel by Luke. Luke alone gives us the story of the Good Samaritan; and also of the father running to welcome the returning prodigal. It is, of course, the Christian Gospel, and the genealogy of the Lord is traced back to Adam. It declares the rending of the veil ere it states the fact of the death of Christ. Perhaps in this we can see the joyous anticipation of a man who was a Gentile and who had no representative within the veil as an Israelite would have had. Luke anticipated

Christianity and is enthusiastic to announce a rent veil, showing that the way into the immediate presence of God was made manifest.

The second watch is the midnight watch. There was a cry made—('Wake up!')—'Behold the Bridegroom cometh.' Matt. 25: 1-13. This cry went forth at the beginning of last century when the truth which had been lost sight of for many centuries was restored, viz., that the Lord is coming to receive unto Himself those for whom He bled and died and thereafter come with them to establish His kingdom and reign in equity. The saints were then aroused and they began to trim their lamps and be ready for the coming Bridegroom.

Enquiring saints have been asking 'When may we expect the Lord Jesus Christ?' No one knoweth the day or the hour—but there is one fact, the Lord *will* come with all His saints—"The Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee." Zec. 14:5. If He will come with all His saints then He must have come and taken them away first. But He is coming to establish His kingdom in the last Watch, i.e., the morning watch, then it is imperative that He come in another watch to take out of the world His own before He can return with them, and as the first two watches are past it is logical that He should come in the third watch. This is the term used by Luke. The equivalent term used by Mark is 'the cockcrowing'. If you have ever stayed at a farm you will have observed that in the early hours just as the first grey streaks of dawn are creeping over the horizon the clarion notes ring through the farm-yard. The cockcrowing is the precursor of day. Peter's word is 'the day star' see 2 Peter 1:19; while John's word is 'the morning star' see Rev. 22:16.

We would avoid any speculations as to the day or hour but feel that with confidence we can say that He will come for His own in the third watch.

We are now well into the third watch, and know of no prophetic event which has to be fulfilled ere the Lord comes. His coming in the third watch will usher in for us the joys of the Father's House and the prelude to eternal delights in the company and fellowship of the lover of our souls.