

Becoming People of Spiritual Vigilance

The city of Babylon at its peak was a glorious city. The walls of Babylon were around 14 metres high – that's a little over four stories. There was an inner and outer wall, and at some places, the wall was seven metres thick. It is said that you could ride a chariot on top of them. So thick and high were these walls that any attack on them was considered futile and foolish. In 540B.C. the king of Babylon Nabonidus went off on a military expedition, and left the city in the hands of His Son Belshazzar. Nabonidus was killed by the invading Persians, and then they turned their attention on the city of Babylon. As they lay siege to it, Belshazzar decided to mock their attack by hosting a lavish feast. They had been stockpiling food for a few months prior to the siege, and they really did have years' supplies of food. So, with arrogant abandon, he threw a feast, essentially saying who cares about your siege outside. You'll never get past these walls, and we have enough food in here to last us years. What they didn't know, is that the attacking Persians had diverted part of the Euphrates River which flowed through the city. As the level of the river dropped, their army was able to sneak in under the wall, and they came in that night and slaughtered King Belshazzar, and took over with hardly a fight. Babylon had lost its vigilance, and they paid a price.

Living in Johannesburg we all know about vigilance when it comes to protecting our persons and our belongings. None of us surrender our vigilance when our personal safety is at stake. But how spiritually vigilant are we? If you had to compare how vigilant you are regarding locking your doors at night compared to say, your prayer life, which is more vigilant?

What is spiritual vigilance?

At least ten times in the New Testament, we are told to watch'- that is 'watch' in the sense of be on your guard, be alert, on the lookout for dangers. Be spiritually vigilant and careful. Spiritual vigilance is connected with spiritual desire, zeal and fervency. When you are filled with desire for Christ, you are filled with vigilance at what might destroy that desire for Christ. Spiritual vigilance is an overall awareness of threats. It is aware of dangers. It is aware of the times. It takes necessary precautions. It responds with necessary seriousness, commitment and action. It is battle-ready, and possessed of a wartime mentality.

What I want to do is show you from the Bible why you need spiritual vigilance, and how you obtain spiritual vigilance.

Why is it needed?

I. The atmosphere is poisonous

Revelation 3:14-18 "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ¹⁵ ¶ "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' -- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked -- ¹⁸ "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

Jesus writes to seven churches in what is modern-day Turkey. To each of the seven churches, He says something about Himself, something about them, some kind of command or exhortation, as well as a promise to overcomers.

The Laodicean church is the only church that Jesus has nothing good to say about. He describes them as neither hot, nor cold, but lukewarm. There's a bit of geography that helps us understand

what Jesus was saying to this church. Laodicea was about 8 km away from the city of Hierapolis, in which there were hot springs. The city of Colosse had cool and cold springs. The city of Laodicea did not have any springs, so it piped its water from Hierapolis. But by the time the hot water reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm. Anyone knows that you either want a drink to be cold or to be hot - either the cold waters of Colosse or the hot water of Hierapolis, but not the lukewarm waters of Laodicea.

So in the same way, Jesus looks at this church and says, you are neither refreshing to me, nor are you comforting. You do not cool me down when I am hot or warm me up when I am cold. Your spiritual state is neither here nor there, and it is sickening.

Jesus then explains why they are in this spiritual state:

"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'

The Laodiceans were materially wealthy and comfortable, and their comforts were making them proud, self-satisfied and complacent. They were so content that Christ Himself was outside the door of the church. But here's the tragedy: all of their comfort blinded them to their true spiritual state, which Jesus says is horrendous:

Revelation 3:17 and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked

Their economic atmosphere blinded them to their spiritual poverty.

It's not too much of a leap to compare this church at Laodicea with the modern church in the West. We are some of the richest, wealthiest, most comfortable Christians who ever lived. And we have lived this way so long, we do not notice it any more. Pretty soon, we begin thinking that we have some kind of right to a Christianity of comfort; a Christianity without cost; a Christianity of convenience.

We get so used to our conveniences and comforts and lack of sacrifice, we do not notice that the atmosphere is toxic to our love for Christ. I can see at least four results of breathing in the atmosphere of materialism and hedonism:

- 1) Spiritual complacency: "I have need of nothing". The atmosphere breeds complacency. I don't need grace to keep me from sinning. I don't need grace to keep me from denying Christ. I don't need grace to keep me from falling into scandalous sin. I don't need to call on Him for my daily bread. I don't need him to feed me on His Word daily. I don't need the protection of the local church. I have need of nothing.
- 2) Spiritual blindness "blind". The atmosphere breeds a blindness to what we should see. When you're blind, you don't know what you can't see, because you can't see it. We cannot see our true spiritual state – if there are sins eating away at our very spiritual health. We cannot see the needs around us. We cannot see the goodness of God and His promises to us. We cannot see the enemy and His deceitful tactics. We cannot see the times for what they are.
- 3) Spiritual weakness "wretched, miserable, poor and naked". Jesus describes this church like a hunger-eaten street-child clothed in torn rags, sores on the body, weak with hunger. In spite of the fact that the church in wealthy lands is living it up with the world in its eating and being entertained and making merry, Jesus looks at this church's love for God, its holiness, its discernments, its spiritual wisdom, and it looks like a shivering, dirty homeless child. When you are spiritually weak, you are prone to fall. You are prone to fall into temptation. You are prone to believe false doctrine. You are prone to compromise. Not only are you prone to fall, you are too weak to do the things God requires. You are unready for battle. You are not ready for missions, for suffering, for martyrdom or for the judgement seat of Christ.

It is as if you are in a room, and you find out that there is small gas leak. It is too small to hear, and it releases the gas too slowly to smell. But you can see its effects by the way people are starting to yawn, some are even dozing off. And let's say you knew that if someone falls asleep in a gas-poisoned room, they will never wake up. What will you do? If you cannot leave the room, you will at least put a scarf or a hankie over your mouth, you might try to sit near the window.

So as you look around you and you see the state of the church around us- complacent, self-satisfied, slouching and giggling its way into apostasy, what do you do? Do you just keep on living the same old life that your pagan neighbours do? Or do you realise: this atmosphere is poisonous. I need to be on my guard. It is not that the gifts of God are to be spurned. It is that the world system of the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life is a spiritual anaesthetic, and if you don't keep splashing your face with the cold water of spiritual vigilance, you may not wake up.

II. The enemy is prowling

1 Peter 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

The apostle Peter employs an image here, and it is the image of a lion walking about. Lions don't usually roar just before they strike, because it will cause their prey to run away. They roar over their prey, when they have caught and killed it. They roar when they are hungry and ready to hunt. The idea is that Satan is deadly serious. He does not aim to just scare. He aims to kill. Someone says, 'Well, I don't really have to fear Satan, because I am saved, so he can't touch me.' True enough. But do you know that it is one of Satan's tactics to make you think you are saved when you aren't, and to keep you in false confidence until the day you die. And on that day, as you descend into the fires of hell, Satan roars victoriously over another victim.

The only defence is what is commanded in this Scripture: spiritual vigilance.

If you have an active enemy, you must have an active watch - an active patrol, a vigilant, cautious look at the situation.

Let me give you some examples of how active Satan is:

He exploits divisions in churches.

2 Corinthians 2:10-11 Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

Satan likes to take conflicts in church, and exploit them into massively divisive and destructive things. If we are spiritually asleep, we will not know what is happening while things go up in smoke before our very eyes.

He exploits spiritual naiveté

2 Corinthians 11:3 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:13-14 For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.

Spiritually dull and slothful people get the wool pulled over their eyes, swept up in false teachings, turned over to false doctrine. Only spiritually vigilant people are on their guard against the wealth of false doctrine and smell a rat when it comes.

He exploits lengthy periods of self-denial

1 Corinthians 7:5 Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of

self-control.

Satan can take a very good thing- fasting and abstinence – and turn it into an occasion for sinful indulgence. If we're spiritually drowsy good things get turned into bad things.

He exploits unchecked anger

Ephesians 4:26-27 "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, ²⁷ nor give place to the devil.

Satan can take righteous anger as sin, and tries to turn it into bitterness and malice, and soon it what was meant to be a laser beam to burn out a cancerous sin, has become a blazing forest fire, destroying lives.

Do those prove that the enemy is prowling? Satan is playing for keeps. He wants to take down not just individuals, but families. He wants to take down whole churches. He wants to destroy spiritual leaders, those who preach the Word. He is not passive.

You have a very ancient enemy, who is very experienced. He has had thousands of years of practice. However, like any hunter, his first attack will be on those people and churches whose spiritual watch has lapsed. Those churches who no longer hold prayer meetings, or where the members see no need to gather to pray; Those churches where sin is no longer preached against; Those churches where the spirit of comfort, fun, entertainment and flippancy is now wedded with Christianity.

It is the spiritually slothful, apathetic, disinterested that are easy prey for Satan.

III. The end is approaching

Luke 12:35-46 Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; ³⁶ "and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. ³⁷ "Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. ³⁸ "And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. ³⁹ "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁰ "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." ⁴¹ Then Peter said to Him, "Lord, do You speak this parable only to us, or to all people?" ⁴² And the Lord said, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? ⁴³ "Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁴ "Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. ⁴⁵ "But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, ⁴⁶ "the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.

The parable Jesus tells here is of a steward who begins to become less and less vigilant as the master's return seems delayed. He becomes self-indulgent; he becomes contentious. Jesus says the return of the Lord comes when he isn't ready for it, and the man ends up with the unbelievers. He is not spiritually vigilant, and he suffers for it when his master returns.

We get a similar theme in Romans 13

Romans 13:11 ¶ And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us

cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.

Revelation 16:15 "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame."

Now we could spend a lot of time on what I think the Bible describes as the timetable of events running up to Christ's return, and sometime, Lord-willing we'll cover that. But one thing I want you to notice. Again and again – in Luke 12, in Luke 21, in 1 Thessalonians 5, in 2 Thessalonians 2, you get the same message: vigilant Christians will not be overtaken by the return of Christ like a sudden shock. Christ will come as a thief, but as I Thess 5:

1 Thessalonians 5:2-6 or you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. ³ For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. ⁴ But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. ⁵ You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. ⁶ Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.

Revelation 3:2-3 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. ³ "Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.

Regarding His return, the Lord said again and again, 'Watch!'. Did He mean 'watch the news everyday? Did He mean watch events in Israel everyday? No, he meant, be watchful. Be spiritually vigilant, awake, alert. Be people who are spiritually alert, not people who are rocked to sleep by the rhythm of this world.

I am no prophet. I cannot put times and dates on the Lord's return. I can confidently tell you from the Scriptures that if God wanted to, He could delay His return by another thousand years. I will say this though. It seems to me that this world cannot take much more of its own evil. It seems to me that the signs he told us to look for are on the increase. It seems to me that the board has been set, the pieces are on place, and much that was predicted thousands of years ago could begin happening before our very eyes.

But Scripture is unanimous on this point: those who are not ready will face a penalty. There is some kind of loss. Some people lose their souls because they thought they were Christ's. But they were never spiritually vigilant enough to earnestly examine themselves. That day comes, and they are lost in the judgement. Others are saved, but experience a kind of shame in being found so caught up in their own lives that the return of the Lord completely upends their world.

The time to get ready for a famine is not during a famine. By that time, the food is gone. The time to get ready for a fire is not during a fire. The time to get ready for the Lord's return is not when He has already returned.

When Jesus was marching up to Calvary, He told the women not to weep for him but for themselves and for their children because of the judgement to come.

Then He said this, "*Luke 23:31 "For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?"*

If you do this to the Messiah during the green wood of peace, what kinds of things will they do during the Great Tribulation?

The atmosphere is poisonous. The enemy is prowling. The end times are approaching. For this reason, more than ever, we need to be spiritually vigilant.

How do we do that? What does that look like?

Firstly, it is cultivating a serious-mindedness.

We are told here in I Peter 1:13

1 Peter 1:13 Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

Gird up the loins of your mind means to dress for action. It is the idea of tightening the belt so that the loose-fitting clothing would not trip you up. Peter says for you to be someone who rests fully upon the hope of Jesus Christ, you need to be a serious-minded person, whose thinking is not sloppy, playful, or flippant.

The word for sober has the idea of clear-headedness. Someone who is not intoxicated can think straight. Be a straight, clear thinker who understands what is going on, and understands the seriousness of what is going on.

For that reason, every time leadership qualifications are given, sober-mindedness is listed. In I Timothy 3, pastors are told to be sober-minded. Titus chapter 1 repeats this qualification. In Titus 2 the older men and women who teach the younger are told to be sober-minded and reverent. The last thing we need is Christian leaders who don't take anything seriously.

But understand, if you live in a culture that lives for amusement, nothing is very serious. People work, so that they can have enough money to buy entertainment: TV, DVDs, holidays, games and hobbies. Nothing wrong with leisure, but our world worships it. Everything must be amusing and entertaining. Not only must the comedies and soapies be entertaining, but the news must be entertaining. War must be entertaining. Justice must be entertaining. Never in the history of the world, has it spent so much money on games - sports.

And that's why you seem like an oddball when you tell people about an eternal hell, and a coming Tribulation, and a judgement seat of Christ.

In order to maintain a serious-mindedness, you are going to have to make sure your intake of the Word of God is strong and consistent. You are going to have to learn to watch how much games and fun and entertainment you make a part of your life. You can no more be a serious person with your mind saturated with sports, entertainment and trivialities, than you could be a healthy person if you car's exhaust was piped into your lounge.

Secondly, and leading on from that, we need to have soberness of life.

Luke 21:34-36 " But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. ³⁵ ¶ "For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."

1 Thessalonians 5:6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. ⁸ But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.

Romans 13:11 ¶ And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.

Now why, in all of these Scriptures are the things that are regarded as opposite of being watchful revelry, drunkenness, carousing, lewdness, lust, strife, envy? Because these sins are all sins of self-indulgence. When I am committed to pleasing myself and gratifying my flesh, I eat too much, drink too much, sleep too much, party, indulge sexual cravings, and even fight and envy those who have what I want. And the idea seems to be exactly what happened that night in Babylon. When you give yourself to a life of ease and self-indulgence, the gates of your soul open to anything and everything. You cannot be permanently on self-indulgent mode, and expect to be spiritually serious. You cannot always be titillating and tickling your body, and expect to have a vigilant, serious soul. It's self-evident that a nation of drunkards, sluggards, gluttons and sleepers will be easily conquered. A church made up of people who live for one sensual experience after another are softening their spiritual muscles and injecting themselves with a strong spiritual sedative.

I'm not speaking of asceticism. I'm not advocating self-flagellation. I'm simply reminding you of the fact that a life of self-indulgence ends up with your body mastering your mind, and its appetites becoming more important to you than any spiritual concern.

1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Thirdly, spiritual vigilance is made up of standing guard at prayer.

1 Peter 4:7 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.

Colossians 4:2 Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving;

Notice the imagery there is that your prayer is like being the sentry, the watchman. Your prayers are a form of keeping alert. When you pray, you stand guard over your church, your family and your own soul.

How so?

Well, when you pray the kinds of prayers which the Bible teaches you to pray; you become aware of what is really going on. For example, when Jesus prayed, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" we become aware that temptation is a real threat to our souls. We need to be aware of the way we are being tempted. We become aware that the Evil One seeks to harm and destroy us, if not physically, then spiritually, by destroying our faith. When we read Paul's prayers, we become aware that the bulk of his prayer life was not for the physical healing of other Christians, but for their spiritual growth, their enlightenment, their increasing understanding, their endurance, their establishment in the holiness, their encouragement. When we pray these prayers, we understand what our churches and families really need. Not more money, not more holidays, - but more experience of Christ - more holiness, more spiritual wisdom.

When we pray like this, we see the biggest threats are not criminals, but our own unbelief. The biggest danger is not nuclear war but apostasy. We start to see that false doctrine is a bigger problem than inflation. We start to see that division is a bigger danger to the church than persecution. We see that the biggest need our children have is salvation, not the best possible education.

Prayer acquaints us with reality, if we will let it. And because we are praying, we are calling for grace upon these things. We ask for faith, for endurance, for spiritual growth, for unity, for sound

doctrine, for purity.

Until you see the danger, you will not pray. But until you pray, you will not see the danger. So trust God, obey Him when he says pray individually, and do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together to pray.

What do you think happens to the church which stops praying together? We effectively open the gate to our every spiritual enemy. What do you think happens to the family that stops praying together? They drift into worldliness and selfishness. What do you think happens to the Christian who stops praying? He or she falls into a spiritual sleep, where temptations, sin and Satan come in and begin to plunder him.

Do you want to be ready and not ashamed when the Lord returns? Do you want to avoid being prey for Satan? Do you want to escape being intoxicated with the atmosphere of self-sufficiency and entertainment and complacency? Then you must take steps. You must let the dominant force in your thinking not be games and sports and entertainments and holidays but the Word of God. You need to watch that the gate into your soul isn't being worn down by self-indulgence. You need to remain at prayer corporately, as families and as individuals.