

Waiting, Watching and Working for Jesus

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[0 : 00] The title of the talk today that I've given, a little bit different to the one that was on the screen, is Waiting, Watching, and Working for Jesus.

Waiting, Watching, and Working for Jesus. The passage that John read to us, in some ways, is one that maybe takes us a little bit of time to fully get our heads around. Because actually there are three short stories woven together and told really quickly in this.

And we're going to dive in in just a minute or two to each of those three short stories. But I want you to get a sense of the overall themes of what Jesus is actually communicating to us.

If you do have your Bible, either in paper version or on phone, it'd be great if you could look with me to Luke chapter 12, verse 35 to 48. Stick with me. Make sure that I'm not going off-piste at any point.

Because it's God's word and it's God's voice that we need to hear today. As we open up his word and try and really think about what he has to say for us. So the first thing that jumps out for me as I look at this is two words that are repeated time and time and time again.

[1 : 09] And I'm using the newer version of the NIV here. And I find in this passage that 11 times over, I hear the word or I read the word servants or service.

Okay, let's just rattle through some of them. Verse 35, we have to be ready for service. We have to be like servants waiting for their master to return.

Verse 37, it'll be good for servants whose master finds them watching. And as we go on, he will dress himself to serve. Verse 38, it'll be good for servants whose master finds them ready.

Verse 42, who is the faithful and wise manager whom the master puts in charge of his servants.

Verse 43, it'll be good for the servant whom the master finds doing.

And so on and so on. Lots and lots of references, 11 and all, to being servants. And then the other word that we see running right through this, stick with me, is the word master.

[2 : 06] Let's look out for that, okay? So verse 38, waiting for their master. Verse 37, good for the servants whose master finds them watching. Verse 38, good for the servants whose master finds them ready.

And verse 46, the master of the servant will come on a day when he's not expected. Verse 47, the servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows, it says in this version.

So stories told in different ways with slightly different twists in them, all trying to make absolutely clear. Remember, this is Jesus teaching.

There's a crowd around, but he appears to be focused largely on his disciples. And he's talking to them about the master and the servant relationship. He's using these stories, I think, to emphasize to them that his followers should see themselves as servants and should see him as the master.

And the other theme that keeps running through the stories is the idea of the master going away, but the master's sure and certain return, albeit no one knows when that return will be.

[3 : 24] Now, this raises quite a number of questions in my mind as I look at these stories. And some of the questions in my mind are simply not addressed in this passage at all.

And I want to just mention two of the questions that are not answered here, which I think are quite important for our understanding of what is actually talked about and explained here.

So as I think of these stories of the master and the servant, I wonder, why does the master go away? It's a common theme in all of them. The master tasks his servants with things, but then leaves them.

Big subject. Why does the master go away? For me, I then think, so if Jesus is the master and we are his servants, why does he leave? Why is he not here physically present with us as he once

was?

And for that, I turn to John 14, another gospel for some answers where Jesus says, Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me.

[4 : 27] My father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.

You know the way to the place where I'm going. So why is he going away? He is going away in order to prepare a place for us. And the words that I'd really like you to bear in mind today are these words that he said in John 14.

I will come back. I hope for many of us, these words might bring comfort. I hope for some of us, they might bring real challenge. They've certainly challenged me as I've reflected on them.

I will come back. They could hardly be simpler words, could they? They could hardly be clearer words. And yet it's also a theme threaded through our passage. The master who goes away is the master who says, I will come back.

Another question I have. Why do the servants have no idea as to when the master is returning? It's another theme that runs through. No idea. Why is that?

[5 : 37] The answer is not really given here. But for that question and that answer, I turn to the book of 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 8 to 10 where I read this.

With the Lord, a day is as a thousand years. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

And I could look to so many verses of scripture which contain what for many of us is sometimes difficult and at times confusing teaching about what the return of Jesus will actually look like.

But I want us to hold on to some certainties today as taught in the Bible. Number one, as we've learned, Jesus saying, I will come back. Number two, the reason why he's not yet returned back, the reason why the servants don't know when he's returning back, is because of the patience of God.

[6 : 45] It's because God is patient and loving and wants everyone to have a chance to come to know him. He doesn't want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

That verse is one which I encourage you to hang on to, to find real comfort in. 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 8 to 10, alongside that incredible teaching that with the Lord a day is like a thousand years. A thousand years are like a day. Think of all of this through God's perspective. A day like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day.

So I think then if those are some of the unanswered questions, one of the key questions that are answered in this passage or that is answered is this question. What should the servants do while the master's away?

Okay, we don't know when he's coming back. We're absolutely certain he will come back at some point. But what should we do while he's away? Now you notice, I think the thrust of this passage is teaching for those who are already in a relationship with a master.

[7 : 52] Okay, so I'm going to be focusing largely in my comments over the next few minutes on those of us who would already say, yes, we're signed up to follow Jesus. Yes, we've experienced what it is to know Jesus as our, as our saviour.

And so we are in that relationship with him. But there is, of course, plenty of other teaching in scripture and indeed relevance in this passage for some who might be here today who would acknowledge, perhaps, or think that it's possible that you've got no relationship at all with Jesus. And when you hear this business already of Jesus coming back and of us not knowing when because God is patient and wants us all to have a chance to repent, then I wonder what, how that impacts on your heart and your life.

And I trust that for all of us, we would have a desire today to be ready for when Jesus does come back. And I trust that we might also recognize that that could be even today.

One of the songs that I really enjoyed and was challenged by as I was growing up was the Larry Norman song. I wish we'd all been ready. Can I test the room? Do some of you know this song?

[9 : 04] I'm not seeing much recognition. Margo does, which is great. Margo and I must have some similar music tastes. Man and wife asleep in bed. She hears a noise and turns her head. He's gone.

I wish we'd all been ready.

Two men walking up a hill. One disappears and one's left standing still. I wish we'd all been ready. There's no time to change your mind. The sun has come and you've been left behind.

Really challenging, solemn words in that song. I will come back. But I have to say my own experience of my own journey to faith and to knowing Jesus was not one where scare stories had any impact on me at all.

And that is not what I want to bring today. Rather, I think this passage encourages us to think of what it looks like for us, his followers, to be waiting for the return of Jesus, our Lord and Master. So let's look at the stories in a little bit more detail. Verse 36, let's get into this one. Servants are waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet.

[10:11] And it's quite clear that these servants have got no idea at all when he will return. He might be returning in the middle of the night, or they might have to wait until almost daybreak before the master actually returns.

But despite this, what should they do? Well, the lamps should be kept burning. The master should not be coming back to find the house in pitch darkness.

He should not be coming back to find that the doors are locked, the windows have been shut, and the servants are fast asleep in their beds. The master is expecting a sense of anticipation, a sense of readiness for his return.

Now, as I was beginning to prepare this, I thought, you know, we don't really have that master-servant relationship so much today. And then I thought, how silly am I? Of course we have it, and I am one of the servants.

Perhaps along with some of the others, I know certainly some of you have had a career in the civil service. Some of you, like me, live our whole working lives merely to serve.

[11:16] We don't live our lives to be in control or to pursue our own agenda, but to, in my case, to be serving the ministers of the government of the day, whoever they may be, whatever their policies might be.

My role is to help and support and serve them as they seek to implement their policies. But, of course, there's lots of different jobs in the civil service, and the one that really comes to mind as I was reading this passage about people awaiting the master's return was the job in private office in the civil service.

It's a job that Aileen, John Gemmell's pastor, used to have. And in private office, the key thing that you have to do is ensure that every need of your minister is attended to.

In particular, they must know where they are going, when they are going to go there. They must have clear and proper material about exactly what they must do and say when they are going to wherever they are meant to go.

And the key thing about being in private office is you have no idea what your working hours will be. No idea. Because you are a servant there to serve the minister.

[12:23] So if the minister goes to an event and it goes on a bit because there are engagements or conversations or things to happen, do you think for a minute that the civil servant says, well, sorry, it's quarter to five, I'm away home?

Not at all. They won't survive in private office for a week if that was their mentality. Contrary to those of you who think in the civil service, we only work from 10 till 4. It's not true. The servant will simply be there waiting, waiting for the minister to finish their business, whatever it might be, whatever the time of the day or night.

And when the minister is finished, we'll be there to continue to serve them. Where do we go to now? What can I pick up from that meeting that you'd like me to do? Are there any particular action points that need followed up now, even though it might be late at night?

That's fine. Here, happy to serve. But isn't it strange in this passage, there's a twist. Did you notice the twist? It's not the case that the master returns and says to the servants, the good servants, well, thanks for waiting up.

Right, where's my three course meal? Well, despite the time of the day or night. That doesn't happen. What does the master do here? The master comes. Stay with me to make sure that I'm not, that what I'm saying is true here.

[13:38] It says, verse 37, it will be good for the servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he'll dress himself. He, the master, will dress himself to serve.

Will make them recline at the table. And will come and wait on them. This is an amazing twist. This is a twist where the master, the one who is in charge, chooses to become the servant.

Does it remind you of anything? Does it remind you of the great God and the great Lord whom we have been worshipping? Who humbled himself?

Who, despite being Lord of all, took on himself the nature of a servant and was made in human likeness. Does it remind you of the one who, when with his disciples, when they were all standing on ceremony and thinking, well, we're all too important to wash one another's dirty feet.

Does it remind you of the one who would take the towel? The one who would kneel at the feet of his disciples. He who was Lord of all would be the one who would come in front of them and serve.

[14:44] This is a wonderful master whom these servants are actually tasked with serving. Not one who will manipulate, not one who will use or misuse his power, but one who, despite being the master, is also the one who will return and who will serve.

I trust we can be encouraged by the opportunities that we have to serve a master like this. But the key point from here, clearly, is that we should be watching and waiting for the master's return, even though we have no idea when he will be returning.

And I wonder if some of us have assumed that that return will never happen. Been so long.

Nothing's changed. It's never going to happen in our lifetime. Maybe some of us think it'll never happen at all.

In which case, we need to go on to the second story because the second story's got particular resonance for us if that's where we're at. It's there in verse 39. It's such a short story, you could almost miss it. But it is a different story because here it says, if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he wouldn't have let his house be broken into.

You must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour where you do not expect him. You must be ready for the Son of Man will come at an hour where you do not expect him.

[16:02] Can I illustrate this point here, please, by telling you about the puppy that has come into the lives of the Johnston family in the last few months and is probably actually on the cusp of becoming a full-grown dog.

The one thing I have learned about our puppy, Harris, is that he loves it when we come home. And I don't know really what he does for the hours and hours and hours that we sometimes leave him on his own.

But what I do know is that nine times out of ten, as we drive into our driveway and look at the small panes of glass either side of our door, he's there.

He's there, poised, waiting. For all I know, he has potentially been there looking out the window, waiting for the preceding four or five hours. He's possibly there now. Spare a thought for him.

Just waiting, patiently. And how does he react when we come? He's got no idea when we come, but no matter when we come, he's there, leaping, bounding, jumping up, showing his absolute joy and delight that we have returned.

[17:10] And I'm challenged as I look at this and I hear this second story from Jesus. I'm challenged about whether I've got that real desire for the Son of Man to return.

And am I ready? Or have I got so many things that I want to do in my life that in some ways I see as more important than the return of Jesus Christ, whom we've been singing as Lord of all.

That's the second story. But I have to say, the third story is really important because there, the analogy of my little dog breaks down entirely. Right? Because the reality is, Harris, while he's waiting for our return, is doing absolutely nothing.

Right? He is just sitting there, maybe sleeping. And I wonder if some of us, and I think as we look at the book of 1 Thessalonians, we see that some of the early Christians thought that what they should do while they waited for Jesus' return was nothing.

Right? Jesus is coming back. So I suppose we need to make sure we keep ourselves pure and we keep ourselves clean and we make sure we're ready. But actually, what we do, well, it doesn't really matter what we do.

[18:15] So let's give up our job. Let's sell up our house. Let's make sure we basically gather together in a little huddle and just hope that he comes back soon. Is that what the Bible teaches us to do? Absolutely not.

Let's look at the third story. If the first two stories tell us about waiting and watching for Jesus' return, the third story speaks to us about working while we await Jesus' return.

Because in this story, what we see is that the master has tasked the servant with work to do. He said, listen, I'm going to give you a real responsibility while you're here waiting for my return. And so I'm going to ask you to look after some of the other servants in my household and I want you to give them their food at the proper time and, you know, manage the affairs of my house. And we read in verse 43 that it's going to be good for the servant who understands what he needs to do and sets his mind to it and does it with all of his heart and soul.

And that servant is going to get an even greater reward. Verse 45, we've got an example of someone who also knows what he needs to do. He's been given work to do while he awaits the master return and what does he decide to do?

[19 : 28] He becomes lazy. He says, oh, my master's taking such a long time to return and so he starts to beat the other servants, both men and women. He eats and drinks and he gets drunk and that person comes back and faces what is a pretty gory punishment as you'll read about in that passage.

I find this a hugely challenging story and it makes me think about the sort of work that Jesus, our master, might want us to do while we await his return.

What were the characteristics of the terrible servant in that story? What were the characteristics? He wasn't marked by a care or a love for those that were in the household.

Rather the reverse. He was abusive. He was selfish. He was lazy. What were the characteristics of the servant who was rewarded?

He was one who was working diligently while he awaited the master's return. Look at verse 47, 48 which I think talks to us about the importance of knowing what it is the master wants to do.

[20 : 43] So in verse 47 the servant who knows what the master wants to do will need to do it. Verse 48 recognises that some of us might be a little bit unsure about what the master actually wants to do and there there'll be greater leniency.

Verse 48 reminds us that from those to whom much has been given much will be demanded and I think we can probably pause today and look at our own life and circumstance and recognise that much much has been given to all of us.

We've been given time and energy. We've been given an assurance through Jesus that we're loved we're valued. We've been brought into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We know our sins are forgiven.

We know the Holy Spirit lives in us. We've been given much. We have great hope for the future and now I do feel that the challenge of this passage is that just as faith without works is described by James as dead so simply receiving all of that from God and responding by doing nothing with it and by sheer laziness and idleness is perhaps the very scenario that we need to feel challenged about. How does God want us to work? Well I'm going to invite one of our church members Robert to come and tell us a little bit about his experience of work and Robert I am now realising that the questions that you and I had discussed in advance I do not have in front of me here which I'm really sorry.

[22 : 11] So Robert stick with us. I think the first one was probably just to tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do and maybe your journey to get to what you're doing. Okay. Hi I'm Robert for those of you that don't know me.

I'm a GP family doctor I work down in Peebles a small town about 20 miles south of here and I've done that for the last four years prior to that I was doing various training jobs in hospitals and so on and before that medical school I was relatively late in going back to medical school.

I was 26 when I went back to study prior to that I had studied engineering and was on a completely different course in life and really came to be aware in quite a profound way that that's not what God wanted me to do.

I had a good job and I enjoyed working there where I was but I came to gradually realise it was something else in life for me so it was actually quite a big step for me to go back to study at that age.

Suddenly I had no money and all sorts of issues around where to live and so on and God really provided along the way and probably the most notable thing is that if you ever find yourself in that situation you're maybe not sure that this is where you're meant to be just now certainly my experience was that God in a very real way can speak and change that and it's I think important to be aware of that potential and to really be still and listen to God because I had enormous blessing although I took what was actually quite a tricky decision at the time to change direction I was

enormously blessed for doing so.

[23 : 53] So Robert you've got this real sense that the work you're doing now is the work that God wants you to do which I think is tremendous which kind of takes us on then to just really keen to hear a little bit about how does that conviction make a difference?

Well so in my job I see all sorts of people from the beginning of life to the end of life and all the challenges that go along the way and that in itself can be a difficult thing it can take its toll on your own health you know just the stresses and strains of that as many jobs can do but it's a real reassurance to know that this is what God wants me to do you know it could be quite discouraging at times people talk about burnout and various different jobs and something to be aware of but it really gives me a reassurance and I suppose my job enables me to practically apply a lot of the teaching in the Bible about people and for looking after people when they're struggling in life and so that's a joy really to be able to do that.

In terms of my own well-being the Bible really provides a lot of support and guidance on that as well the passage I was going to mention here is in Philippians 4 verse 6 where it says don't be anxious in every situation every situation present your petitions to God in prayer and God will give you the peace that passes understanding it's this peace that is beyond what we're able to understand and that is a real strength and a real encouragement to me and as it should be to everyone that's there and it's a very real thing.

Robert thanks so much was there anything else that you wanted to add about this namely any other questions I've forgotten? Right excellent thanks so much Robert it's great to hear a little bit about what work looks like for you and just before I finish up here could I I just hope some of you might be genuinely encouraged to think much perhaps more deeply about what it means to be a Christian in the workplace or what does it mean as a Christian to be seeking to do good work if you're maybe not in an employment situation what does it mean to be doing good work day in day out if so I've got a book to recommend for you it's this book by a guy called Matt Perman what's best next subtitled how the gospel transforms the way you get things done so it's not primarily a book about just being more super efficient there's a little bit there but it's a book that fundamentally says that as people who recognize ourselves as servants of God in what we do as people with a real purpose in our everyday situation we have unlimited opportunities to do good works that's what the servant in our passage who was commended did he did good works he sought to love and serve others and the servant in our passage who was punished was one who was selfish and only looked out for himself and I love this little section from the book which says this when you're answering emails you aren't just answering emails you're doing good works when you attend meetings you aren't just attending meetings you're doing good works when you make supper for your family you aren't just making supper for your family you're doing good works when you put the kids to bed you aren't just putting the kids to bed you are doing a good work and he goes on to talk about a life of serving God as a life of joy adventure and excitement far more exciting in fact than a life lived for yourself no matter how many times you might get to travel the world so our time is nearly up and I want to hand back to Andrew to close us with two great songs that I think will allow us to focus our minds on that certainty of Jesus return but as we close let me be very clear about one thing despite what we've talked about in the last few minutes about the need for those servants not only to be watching and waiting but also working let's be very clear that being in that relationship with Jesus in the first place is what this all hinges on I'm not suggesting for a minute that by simply working our socks off and trying to do good we will thereby be ready for the return of the master not at all but rather those of us who have had that encounter with Jesus Christ are now encouraged to be people who will watch who will wait and who will work let's pray so Lord Jesus we thank you for the confidence that we have that you will return help us to anticipate that more today help us to watch help us to wait and help us to do exactly what you would call us to do in service of you as we await your return talking bye me important find out fine no no no no