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KnoWhy #344 - Why Does Jesus Say that “Ye Must Watch and Pray Always”?

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Abstract: In 3 Nephi 18:15, the Lord gave instructions for things that His followers should do, which would help them to always remember Him. He told them that they “must watch and pray always.” If we are “watching,” we are keeping ourselves “awake” and “vigilant,” avoiding evil and keeping ourselves ready for the return of Jesus. We also “warn” others of the need to stay close to the Savior’s teachings. Praying always, as Jesus instructed, also demonstrates that we are always remembering Him and His teachings.

Why Does Jesus Say that “Ye Must Watch and Pray Always”?

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye must watch and pray always, lest ye be tempted by the devil, and ye be led away captive by him. ... And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you. Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your children may be blessed.”

3 Nephi 18:15, 20–21

Context and Content

When Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament among the Nephites, He declared: “this shall ye do in remembrance of my body [and] my blood ... that ye may witness unto the Father that ye do always remember me” (3 Nephi 18:7, 11). As the people covenanted to always remember their Savior, Jesus promised that if they did, “ye shall have my Spirit to be with you.”

In 3 Nephi 18:15, the Lord gave further instructions for things that His followers should do, which would help them to always remember Him. He told them that they “must watch and pray always.”

The word “watch” is used many times in the Scriptures, and especially by Jesus Himself.¹ In the Old Testament, there is the image of the watchman, one who would be set up at a height so that they could watch for approaching enemies or thieves and warn others of their coming. This imagery is carried into the New Testament, where Jesus admonished His disciples to be ready for His Second Coming. Matthew 24:42, for example, states: “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.”²



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Couple praying via lds.org

In Revelation 3:3, Jesus warned: “Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. 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.” The word most often used for “watch” in the Greek of the New Testament is *gregoreo*, which means to “stay awake,” “be vigilant,” or “watchful.”

Jesus also used these ideas to warn His followers to watch out for the evil designs of the Devil.³ He admonished them to: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). This is very similar to what He told the Nephites in 3 Nephi 18:15: “watch and pray always, lest ye be tempted by the devil, and ye be led away captive by him.” Alma had the same advice for the people of Ammonihah in Alma 13:28. He pled for them to “watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye can bear.”

The counsel to “watch” is often accompanied by the instruction to “pray.” The Lord has admonished us to call on Him through prayer from the days of Adam and Eve (Moses 5:4, 8; Genesis 4:26). The Lord asked the Neph-

ites to “pray always.” In 3 Nephi 18:20–21, Jesus gave further counsel regarding prayer, including the promise that “whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you.” He directed the Nephites to “Pray in your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your children may be blessed.”

Doctrines and Principles

When Jesus shared the sacrament with the Book of Mormon people, He had them covenant to always remember Him. The word “remember” had additional meanings in the Hebrew of the Old Testament than it generally does in modern English. The Hebrew word for “remember,” *zakhor*, also had the meaning of paying attention and obeying, or acting on what you remember.⁴

This is likely why Jesus, after asking the people to remember Him, then admonished them to do specific things, including continuing to partake of the sacrament and keeping His commandments (3 Nephi 18:12–14). He also asked them to “watch and pray always.” Doing these things would help believers to always remember Jesus Christ and what He had done for them.

If we are “watching,” we are keeping ourselves “awake” and “vigilant,” avoiding evil and keeping ourselves ready for the return of Jesus. We also “warn” others of the need to stay close to the Savior’s teachings. King Benjamin taught his people of the need to watch themselves. He admonished:

But this much I can tell you, that if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. And now, O man, remember, and perish not. (Mosiah 4:30)

The scriptures often speak of figuratively “sleeping” in contrast to “watching.” Those who are sleeping instead of watching can more easily be taken captive by Satan. Lehi used this concept when he told his sons that they needed to “awake; awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell, and shake off the awful chains by

which ye are bound” (2 Nephi 1:13). Similarly, we need to be awake to the teachings of the Savior so that we are not found unready for His Second Coming. In Mark 13:35–37, Jesus said:

Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.

Praying always, as Jesus instructed, also demonstrates that we are always remembering Him and His teachings. Believers may wonder how they are expected to “always” be praying. Alma 34:27 helps us understand how this is possible. After explaining that we can pray at any time and in any place, Amulek stated that when you are not actually saying a prayer, you can “let your hearts be full, drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare, and also for the welfare of those who are around you.” In other words, you can be communicating with your Heavenly Father in your silent thoughts. Elder Lynn G. Robbins, General Authority Seventy, had this to say about 3 Nephi 18:15:

This entreaty of the Savior to avoid temptation consists of two acts of faith: to watch and to pray. The Guide to the Scriptures teaches us that to *watch* means “to be vigilant, to [be on] guard,” which is wise advice in defending ourselves against a very real and ever-lurking enemy. And the corollary to the Savior’s wise advice to pray to avoid temptation is that without prayer, we will not have the spiritual strength or stamina to win this battle on our own.⁵

Further Reading

Lynn G. Robbins, “Avoid It,” *Brigham Young University 2013–2014 Speeches* (17 September 2013), online at speeches.byu.edu.

Gary J. Coleman, “Lessons from the Old Testament: Watchmen of the Lord,” *Ensign* (Sep 2006), online at lds.org.

Notes

1. See, for example, Isaiah 52:8; 56:10; 62:6; Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 3:17; 33:1–7; Matthew 24:42; 26:41; Mark 13:33–37; 14:38; Luke 21:36; 22:46; Revelation 3:3; cf. Doctrine and Covenants 101:45. See also Elder Gary J. Coleman, “Lessons from the Old Testament: Watchmen of the Lord,” *Ensign*, September 2006, online at lds.org.
2. See Matthew 24:42–51; Mark 13:32–37.
3. Also related to these ideas regarding the sacrament, Passover night was characterized as a night of watching (Exodus 12:42) and that was the night when the Lord protected Israel from the destroyer and delivered them from Egypt. In later Rabbinic times there was discussion as to what the watching referred. “According to the Talmud, there are two opinions as to what a night of watchfulness means: one is that it was continuously watched for from the six days of creation; the other is that it is ‘a night which is under constant protection against evil spirits.’ Most commentators stress the latter interpretation, as does the Targum,” Monford Harris, *Exodus and Exile: The Structure of Jewish Holy Days* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, 35). Note the reference to protection from the devil or Satan (cf. 3 Nephi 18:15, 18).
4. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Helaman Want His Sons to Remember to Build Upon the Rock? (Helaman 5:12),” *KnoWhy* 332 (June 28, 2017). Note that Jesus also asked the people to be “built upon my rock” (3 Nephi 18:11–12). Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, 2nd ed., (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1989), 107, as cited in Louis Midgley, “To Remember and Keep: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 95–137. For more on this topic, see also Louis Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 168–176; Louis Midgley, “‘O Man, Remember, and Perish Not’ (Mosiah 4:30),” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 127–129.
5. Lynn G. Robbins, “Avoid It,” *Brigham Young University 2013–2014 Speeches* (17 Sep 2013), accessed online at speeches.byu.edu.