

**When In Rome:
YOUR WAKE-UP CALL**

Romans 13:11-14

Now is the time to prepare for the reign of God.

A sermon preached by
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Max Lucado tells a true story in one of his books about an ill-fated mission to find the fabled Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean by way of the Arctic. The year was 1845. The captain was Sir John Franklin, one of England's best sea captains. The sailors were 138 of the Queen's finest. Hopes were high as the two ships set sail, but the expedition proved to be the last attempt ever to find the Northwest Passage, because all 138 sailors and Sir John perished on the journey.

There was one basic reason for such a senseless tragedy. The British sailors were not prepared for the Arctic. They failed to take into account how cold it got up near the North Pole. They were anticipating a long journey—two to three years possibly—but they only carried 12 days' worth of extra coal for the steam engines. For clothing they wore their standard-issue British Navy uniforms, quite adequate for a chilly night in London, but hardly enough for below-zero conditions. However, what they forgot in terms of fuel and clothing, they made up for in luxuries. Each ship carried a 1200-volume library, a pump-organ, fine china and sterling silver for the officers' mess, and cut-glass wine goblets for everyone.

The tragedy began to unfold soon after the Franklin expedition hit the icy waters of the Canadian arctic. Ice formed on the decks, the masts, and the rigging of the ships. Then the sea froze around the ships, trapping them. Over the next twenty years, parts of the expeditionary force were found frozen in the ice for miles around. The Inuits, a Native American tribe that lived in the area, reported seeing men pulling a lifeboat across the ice; later they found 30 sailors frozen to death under the craft. In another direction, 35 bodies, some of them cannibalized, were found in a tent. Captain John Franklin died on his ship; by his side was the backgammon board his wife had given him as a farewell present. One of the officers who struck out on his own was discovered still frozen years later, his thin coat pockets stuffed full of sterling silver flatware.

It's hard to believe that a group of experienced sailors would set out on a journey so ill-prepared, fitted out more for afternoon tea than a voyage into the Arctic. Lucado comments, "Don't Franklin's men remind you of us? We sometimes act as if the Christian life is a retirement cruise. We have little fuel but lots of entertainment. We are more concerned with looking snappy than with being prepared. We give more thought to table settings than to surviving the journey. We give little thought to the destination, but we make sure there's plenty of silver to go around.

"And so when the freeze comes, we step out on the ice with forks, games, and skimpy clothing and pass our final days walking against the wind, often blaming God for getting us into this mess."¹

The Christian journey is not easy. If you do it right, following Jesus is a challenge, a marathon, a consuming passion. But often we act like we come here to find the easy way, to get the simple answers, and to leave the hardships of the world behind.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, said, "I would like to call your attention to the fact that Christianity is the religion of the difficult and the religion of the impossible. Christianity, often misrepresented, has been made out to be a soft kind of thing. Why, Christianity is the toughest religion ever formulated in the history of the world. Just look at its symbol—a cross—not one of those nice chaste gold crosses that hangs beautifully from the neck amid perfume and lace, but a tough crossbeam of wood, splintery and hard. That is the symbol of Christianity.

"Christianity is the religion of the difficult, for when the going gets hard and things are tough, that is when you find God. That is when he really draws near to you, because you are drawn near to him. That is when you put on the armor of God."²

Maybe we need to see again today the majesty and glory of our faith—the length and breadth and depth and height of the thing. Maybe we need a reminder of what a mighty God we serve. Maybe we need to remember who is King. Maybe we need a wake-up call.

Paul gave a wake-up call to the Romans in the 13th chapter of his letter: *“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”*³ Paul believed that the return and reign of Christ was imminent, coming soon. It was closer than it had ever been, and everybody better be ready.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. This is the last Sunday in the Christian year. Next week we start the cycle all over again with Advent. But today we celebrate how it all ends: God triumphant, Christ on his throne, evil, sin, and death defeated for all eternity. In the end, we can be sure who wins.

When will this happen? We don't know. So we always have to be ready. We have to be constantly and consistently faithful, or we will miss the party.

Jesus told a story about ten bridesmaids who were waiting on the wedding feast to begin. They were all dressed up; they had their oil lamps; they were ready to party all night. The groom was delayed, however, and five of the bridesmaids forgot to bring extra oil for their lamps. When the groom finally came, they were out of oil. The five smart bridesmaids had plenty, but not enough to share. So the five foolish bridesmaids ran out to the all-night oil store to get some more. But when they got back, the party had started, the door was locked, and they were left outside.⁴ The point? No matter what the day or the hour, we need to be prepared to follow Jesus.

How can we be adequately prepared for this challenging journey of discipleship? How can we be fully awake, so we don't miss the party at the end? Let me suggest three ways we can live.

First, **LIVE AWARE.** Be aware of your context and surroundings. Pay attention to the world and to other people. Pick up on the clues that will guide you through the wilderness. Be present in the moment. We live so distracted by our technology, our problems, the constant

bombardment of information. We need to focus on what's important. Take deep breaths, and be aware.

I read a devotional some time back by a pastor who was dealing with conflict in his church. He had just had a meeting with a church member who was very critical of his leadership. Then he took his wife to lunch, and he just sat there silently brooding. He was thinking about that critical person and what she had said to him, and he was getting more and more depressed.

Suddenly the pastor had a revelation. The critical church member was not at the table with them. The words that had been said were no longer being said. Instead, there was a beautiful lady who loved him sitting across the table, and there was music playing, and a waiter was offering him a choice of delicious food. Soon his anxiety evaporated as he spent a few moments enjoying a relationship and a good experience with his wife.

Husbands, wake up to your wives. Wives, be aware of your husbands. Parents, pay attention to your children. Children, wake up to your parents. Live aware of the people around you who matter.

Author and teacher Tony Campolo remembers taking a graduate course in Chinese philosophy. The Buddhist monk who taught it said, "As a Christian, you teach your children to pray all wrong. You teach them to pray, 'If I should die before I wake.'" You know the prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." If you think about it, that is a scary prayer for a child: What, I might die before I wake up? I'm not going to sleep ever! So the Buddhist monk told Tony, "It would be better if you taught them to pray, 'If I should wake before I die...'"⁵ The Buddhists actually have a term for this; it's called "wakefulness." If you want to be fully awake, live aware.

Second, **LIVE HONORABLY**. This is where Paul goes with his wake-up call: "*Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in*

*quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”*⁶ If we want to be fully awake to God, if we want to be prepared for Christ our King, we will live morally, ethically, and honestly. We will simply choose the honorable thing day by day.

I have been disgusted, as I am sure you have, by the multitude of allegations recently as women have started speaking out about sexual harassment and abuse. The list of prominent and powerful men is long. It has never been right, but in many instances it has been tolerated because women were afraid to speak up, or women were assumed to be weak, or men were assumed to be allowed to prey on women. Some of the men accused profess to be Christians. But people who follow Jesus cannot tolerate, condone, excuse, or be silent about that kind of behavior. I pray we have reached a turning point in societal acceptance of sexual harassment and abuse.

What Paul tells us to do is to live honorably, to put on Christ, to wear the love, grace, mercy and morality of Jesus like a garment over our lives. If you put on the Lord Jesus, you will be prepared for the conditions of the world. He will be your down coat against the howling winds of despair; he will be your woolly long johns against the frigid frost of fear; he will be your insulated snow boots on the slippery ice of temptation. If you don't dress for the conditions, you'll die out there! Don't forget to wear your Jesus.

Live aware. Live honorably. And finally, **LIVE URGENTLY.** Discipleship is important. Faith is a critical matter. We need to give attention to this right now. That's the thing about a wake-up call. It jars you, disturbs you, pulls you out of slumber, and gets you going. Which is exactly what Paul wants to happen: *“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”*⁷ Or in another letter, he says, *“We urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ...Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”*⁸

Methodists are not an urgent group by and large. We're usually pretty laid back, patient with people, not a lot of pressure. I like that about us. I don't want to be high-pressure, in your face, or emotionally manipulative with something as beautiful as the Gospel.

At the same time, it does matter whether you give your heart to Jesus. There is an expiration date on this offer of salvation. Life is too uncertain to assume that you will have a particular amount of time left to make your decision. Ask anyone who weathered a hurricane or a wildfire this summer. Ask anyone who survived the shootings in Las Vegas or Sutherland Springs. I don't want to scare you, but I want to be real with you. Life can take a tragic turn in a moment, or for that matter, the King can return to claim his Kingdom. We need to be ready. Whether our time on earth is long or short, the time to follow Jesus is right now.

Pastor Tim Wilson served time in the Army as a paratrooper. At Fort Benning, Georgia, he went through training to prepare for his first parachute jump. He knew that after the training, they would soar hundreds of feet above the red Georgia clay and hear the jump-master bark out the orders, "Stand up! Hook up! Check equipment! Stand in the door! Go! Go! Go!" So they were giving the instructor their undivided attention.

The sergeant's voice was confident as he explained what to do in case of a parachute malfunction. "If your main parachute should fail to deploy, don't panic—pull the handle of your auxiliary parachute. Should your auxiliary parachute fail to fill with air, don't panic—pull it in toward your body and then vigorously throw it away from yourself. Should your auxiliary chute again fail to deploy, don't panic—vigorously repeat this process."

He paused dramatically, then with a slightly mischievous grin he slowly stated, "Should this also fail, don't panic. You'll have the rest of your life to get your parachute to deploy."⁹

You have the rest of your life to wake up to God. Whether your time on earth is minutes or months or decades, the time to take steps to

become fully awake is the same for everyone. It's right now. It's this moment. It's right here. Live aware of your context in the moment, and love those around you. Live honorably, like someone standing in the light of day and not hidden in the cover of darkness. And live urgently, because there is nothing more important at this moment and for the future than that you and everybody around you know Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior, and King. That's the mission, and it cannot fail.

¹ PreachingToday.com. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin%27s_lost_expedition.

² Norman Vincent Peale, *Positive Thinking*, October 2001, p. 9.

³ Romans 13:11-12a.

⁴ Matthew 25:1-13.

⁵ Tony Campolo, "If I Should Wake Before I Die," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 124.

⁶ Romans 13:12b-14.

⁷ Romans 13:11.

⁸ II Corinthians 6:1-2.

⁹ Tim Wilson, "Urgency," *PreachingToday.com*.