

Beware of These Last-Days Thieves Sneaking Into the Church

My wife and I were working at her father's house on Sept. 1, 2016, when suddenly my phone vibrated in my pocket. Our neighbor called to inform me that our home security alarm had been triggered. I sped to our house to find an intruder had tried to kick in the front door (a dirty shoe print was visible, and the deadbolt was bent). Unsuccessful, he went around to our French doors in the back and kicked them in. The alarm squealed and spooked the burglar. As he fled, he slammed his vehicle into our basketball goal, knocking the backboard and rim off the pole. (Part of me hopes it landed on his trunk or tailgate to match the certain dent in his bumper.) Remarkably, nothing was missing from our house. I often pray that angels will surround and protect our home and, if anyone comes on our property with ill intent, the fear of God will fall on them. Prayer answered!

Scripture compares Satan to a prowler, "be sober and watchful, because your adversary the devil walks around as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." (1 Pet. 5:8). Jesus warned us of a thief lurking about to steal our spiritual valuables—"The thief does not come, except to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10a). Satan wants to steal everything valuable in your life—your peace, joy, victory, salvation, purity, family, marriage, health, finances, and so on. In this same passage, Jesus revealed that He is the "Good Shepherd" and "the door" to the sheepfold. Ancient sheepfolds consisted of a simple stone enclosure with only a rough opening for a door. During the day, sheep were led out to graze in the pasture; then at night, they returned to the fold. Once they were all accounted for, the shepherd would lie down and sleep in the doorway of the fold. The shepherd literally served as

the door. No sheep could get out, and no predator could get in unless it climbed over him. No wonder Jesus added, "My sheep hear My voice ... I give them eternal life. They shall never perish, nor shall anyone snatch them from my hand" (John 10:27-28). Our protective Shepherd fends off the prowling wolves.

Jesus knew something about thieves. After all, Judas, His treasurer, had sticky fingers (John 12:6). Matthew was a tax collector before becoming a disciple (publicans were infamous for cheating people out of their hard-earned money). Furthermore, Jesus used robbers to illustrate His sermons. In His Parable of the Sower, He described how birds (the evil one) swoop in to steal the seed of the Word that is sown in people's hearts (Matt. 13:4, 19). His story of The Good Samaritan features a man who was assaulted by thieves and left half dead—a fitting image of all who are victimized by Satan and sin and need to be rescued by the Savior (Luke 10:30-36). Barabbas, the man whose place Jesus took on the cross, was a notorious criminal whose rap sheet included robbery, murder and sedition. Finally, Jesus was crucified between two thieves, representing how all humanity has stolen from God's glory.

The crooks at the temple enraged Jesus the most. Up to 4 million pilgrims flocked annually to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast. Each person or family was required to offer a sacrifice. Traveling with homegrown animals was difficult, plus, if the priests found any blemishes, they were deemed unclean or unworthy. Thus, many people bought lambs or doves at the temple at inflated prices. Another requirement for Jewish males 20 years old and up was the half-shekel temple tax (Ex. 30:12-16). Roman coins were banned from the temple site because they bore Caesar's profile, a violation of the second commandment about graven images. Money changers exploited the exchange rates to make bigger profits. Jesus' objection was not the selling of sacrificial animals or the

necessary changing of money; it was the price gouging, the blatant fleecing of God's people. It had degenerated into a money-making scam. Avarice and dead ceremony replaced the sincere worship of God. Furious that people were being ripped off, Jesus wove a whip and drove the greedy merchants from the Temple, shouting, "'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it 'a den of thieves'" (Matt. 21:13). Thieves are lurking near our temples today as well—carnal thoughts, worldly attitudes, selfish motives and evil spirits that try to steal our passion and priority for spiritual things. We, like Jesus, should use the whip of God's Word to cleanse our own personal temples.

The Second Coming of Christ is compared to a "thief in the night" five times in the New Testament. Jesus said, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord will come. But know this, that if the owner of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for in an hour when you least expect, the Son of Man is coming" (Matt. 24:42-44). Paul reminded us, "For you know perfectly that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2). Peter also used this thief in the night analogy (2 Pet. 3:10). How does a thief come? Suddenly, unexpectedly—without warning. A thief doesn't call in advance and say, "Get your gun ready, I'm coming to steal your stuff tonight at ten o'clock." Twice in the book of Revelation (3:3; 16:15) Jesus warned He will come like a thief, so we should live in a constant state of readiness for His return and not be caught off-guard or unprepared.

Paul shared this insight, "But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this Day should overtake you like a thief" (1 Thess. 5:4). In other words, the coming of Christ will shock the world because they will not be ready for it, but the true church will not be surprised because the Holy Spirit is preparing us. Neighborhood Watch stresses vigilance and

reporting prowlers in communities, but it's even more important to be watchful for Christ's soon return. Jesus reminded us to stay alert, "What I say to you I say to all: Watch!" (Mark 13:37). So, let's watch out for prowlers and watch even more for the promise of His coming. {eoa}

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