

Words and Deeds: Staying Awake
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 121; Luke 22:39-46; Acts 20:1-12

Our final Scripture reading today is Acts 20:1-12. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.”

I love naps. Naps are one of the greatest things invented. In some societies around the world, particularly Spanish-speaking countries, a siesta in the middle of the day is common. And you know what? Napping is good for you. People who regularly take an early to mid afternoon nap have a 37% less chance of dying from a heart problem because of reduced stress on the cardiovascular system. Now that’s a mid-afternoon nap – no excuse for falling asleep in church! But I’d take a nap every day if I could.

But there are times when we must stay awake. Falling asleep on the job is a good way to lose your job. Falling asleep in class will get you sent down to the principal’s office. And falling asleep behind the wheel is deadly. It also has other consequences too. A recent study found that the economy will take about a \$3.3 billion hit in productivity from people staying up late to watch the last season of *Game of Thrones* who then will show up late or not at all to work the next day because they’re sleeping in. Who knew our sleep patterns could be so costly?

Today’s passage doesn’t have a clear theological message. It relays to us the ongoing voyages of Paul and his companions, and it contains a miraculous story like what we’ve read before in Acts. (We’re getting used to seeing the miraculous as commonplace, which I think can be a really good thing to remind us that our God is a wonder worker!) But it also makes us think about who we are as Christians and what it means not only to literally fall asleep, but what it means to be spiritually asleep. It might challenge us and make us a little uncomfortable, but in the long run, the challenge will be worth it.

Paul has finally left Ephesus, where he has been preaching and teaching the last two years. He travels through Macedonia to Greece with several short stops along the way, helping encouraging the established churches. And while his time in Greece wasn't eventually, there's another plan afoot to take Paul out of commission, and so he wisely avoids it, changing his plans to escape their grasp.

We hear a little bit about Paul's traveling companions and how they eventually caught up with Luke and some others who would join the group. While this particular bit of the passage isn't terribly important, it reminds us that Paul was under constant surveillance by the Jewish contingent who opposed the message of Jesus. As the story of Acts continues, we'll see why it matters as the opposition to Paul comes to a head.

So finally everyone catches up with each other at the city of Troas. And we get the sense that this is part of a whirlwind tour; Paul isn't staying any particular place too long. He's only got a week in Troas, and so he's going to make the most of it. Preaching all day and all night to the next morning was not a normal pattern for Paul; this was a marathon session even for him. But with such a limited time with the believers in city, it was a gift of love for him; he wanted them to understand and believe and rejoice in God's message for them, as much as he could share with them in the brief time he had.

So if you've ever thought that me speaking for twenty-five minutes on a Sunday morning could make you a little drowsy, imagine going to a Bible study where the speaker tries to go for 24 hours straight! And while Paul was known as a forceful writer, in person he describes himself as meek and mild without a lot of the polish and pizzazz of the famous Greek speakers of the day. Even Luke admits that Paul seems to be going on and on – one translation says Paul kept talking “still longer.” I've been to some Bible conferences where the speakers were so powerful and interesting that you could enjoy them all day, but even the apostle Paul couldn't hold everybody's attention that long.

Then there's Eutychus. He's a young man; the Greek word means someone a man in the prime of life, usually between 24-40, not yet married. He's not a child or a teenager; this scenario didn't happen because of an unengaged parent. Still, the question remains: why is he sitting in a window? Now this is only speculation; don't take it as fact. But I'm guessing that Eutychus was desperately trying to engage with what Paul had to say.

Why the window? They're in an upper room in the Mediterranean, third story. Can you imagine how hot it was getting in there? Lamps all around trying to keep the darkness at bay? My guess is that Eutychus knew he was tired. Where's the one place that was cooler, where he could catch any sort of breeze at all when it came up? The window. He goes to the spot that makes the most sense for him to try and stay awake. As it turns out, it doesn't go so well. Finally, he falls completely asleep and falls completely out the window. And when his friends get down to the street, they try to revive him, pick him up, but he is dead.

But that's not where the story ends. Paul goes down to the street and embraces Eutychus, putting his arms around him. "Don't worry," Paul yells up to the crowd in the upper room, "he's alive!" Then what's just as surprising, Paul goes back upstairs, gave everyone something to eat, and he continues until daybreak! I'll tell you what – I doubt anybody fell asleep again that night! Finally, everyone goes back home, and when they see that Eutychus is fine, they are encouraged both by the message they've heard and the miracle they've witnessed.

So what should we be seeing in this passage? What can advise us, comfort us, challenge us? First, let's talk about the simple fact of this church meeting in Troas. Here's the thought: *the early church set the standard and example for believers in dedicating itself to the preaching and understanding of God's Word.* Now I don't want us to think that Paul's marathon preaching session was a standard. This doesn't mean this was the only time he did this, only that the unique miracle warranted the explanation as to what happened. But we don't get the sense that this kind of thing was common.

Yet the early church wanted more and more of God and was praised for it. Back in Acts 2, the believers met together every day. We might remember a couple chapters ago in Acts 17 that Luke said "the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." There was an earnest desire to learn the Scriptures, to learn what God had said and done, so that it became a part of their very beings.

This pattern lasted throughout the church's history until relatively recently. The pattern of the early church in the form of "mass" shows the daily coming together to hear the word of God. John Calvin, one of the staunchest Reformers against the false teachings that had come into Catholicism, had no problem with daily worship – throughout most of his ministry, he preached twice on Sundays and almost every single weekday. Into the mid-20th century, most American churches had services Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, a Sunday school class, a Wednesday service, and both Bible study and service groups throughout the week.

If you want to look at the issues facing our country and its radical turn away from Judeo-Christian thought, you only need to look in our churches and see that the turning away happened here first. The number of church services and Bible studies isn't a one-to-one sort of thing; it's not that having more of them will bring a revival. They are a symptom of the larger problem. The larger problem is that our heart for God as a people has grown cold.

Nobody is asking to bring Sunday night and Wednesday night services back. Nobody is banging down my door for more Bible studies. We do many things well as a church; we're generous given our size, we're great at caring about one another and fellowship. But when it comes to the love of God and His Word that was shown in previous generations, we along with most of the modern American church fall way short.

It is not as if the blame is wholly on our shoulders. This is the American church we inherited. At my home church, the Sunday evening service died in the mid-'80s; we never had a Wednesday night service. Bible study was something a small percentage of people did. And this was a big evangelical church with over 1,000 people at one point! Guilt won't fix the problem.

Instead, the issue we must confront in ourselves and encourage others to confront in themselves is this: *are we spiritually asleep?* Because for whatever flaws he may have had, Eutychus didn't seem to suffer from being a spiritual sleepyhead. He will always be remembered as the guy who fell asleep during one of Paul's sermons and fell out a window. But we don't see spiritually dead or stupefied people receiving miracles in the Bible much. I think God gave this young man back his life in part because he had a flawed human response to an 18-hour sermon, but he was still there listening!

It's funny because some commentaries I read this week about this passage wanted to make a point of shaming people who fall asleep in church. One called it a "great evil." Apparently I'm guilty, because when I was a teenager, I'd been known to fall asleep in church a few times. It's not about that at all. I think that many people get to the sermon and fall asleep because when they start hearing God's Word and they remember the goodness of God, their defenses start to come down and all the tension and stress of the week starts to fade and the body's natural reaction is to rest. Now I'm not giving anyone an excuse to fall asleep during my sermons! But I don't take it as seriously as some people do.

What I am far more concerned with is whether or not we are spiritually asleep. Here are some signs that you're spiritually dying or on life support: you believe in God and the truth of the Bible, but you have no desire to read more of it for yourself or to find more about God from it other than Sunday mornings. Prayer doesn't come naturally or spontaneously, and when things get rough, your first thought isn't to God but to what earthly fix you can manage. Helping others as Jesus commanded seems like too much work, even if the church organizes it. And perhaps most importantly, nobody in your day-to-day life really has any clue that you're a Christian from your actions. Those are the signs of spiritually dead, dying, and asleep people.

While the lack of participation in church activities may be a symptom, it's not the disease itself. Plenty of truly awesome followers of Jesus aren't in church but once a week. But they're engaged with the community helping others so that they know God's love for them; they host Bible studies or fellowships or small groups; they're studying the Bible on their own and listening to Christian radio or podcasts or whatever will feed them the Word of God throughout the week; they are actively dying to themselves and living for Jesus in their workplaces, in their homes, in ways that others can see and say, "I want that in my life."

The question is, which are we? We will never be perfect in our faith or our actions this side of heaven, but if we look at ourselves honestly, where do we fall? Scripture has a lot to say about this metaphor of spiritual sleepiness. Take Ephesians 5:14, where Paul quotes from an early Christian hymn, "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." In the book of Revelation, John writes to the church of Sardis a word from Jesus. He says, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God." Paul writes to the Roman church, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." God wants us to be wide awake to all that He's done and He's doing. And as your pastor, I don't want us to be caught napping when He comes for us.

So what can we do about it? If we recognize that we've been asleep at the wheel, or if we recognize once we were excited about God like on a sugar rush but now we've gotten drowsy, what's next? Here's our final thought for today: *God does miracles in the lives of the faithful who strive to stay awake spiritually.* Our salvation is assured by Christ alone through faith alone. We do not earn it. It comes as a gift from God who draws us to Himself. We cannot wake ourselves from spiritual death; only God can do that. But with the power of the Holy Spirit, we play a part in waking up from spiritual slumber, pursuing God and receiving the blessings that come from faithfulness and obedience.

God brought Eutychus back from the dead, I believe, because he was striving to be faithful; he wanted to learn more; he was devoted enough to be there for Paul's all-night training session. That isn't a promise that things will look just like that in our lives or that we should start dangling from windows! But God has given us the Holy Spirit. He has provided for us the power we need to overcome the obstacles that stand in our way to being awake.

So, two steps I can think of, ones that I'm starting to think through in my own life... first is, what do I need to eliminate from my life in order to make room for God to work? What is keeping me from the spiritual caffeine, the spiritual coffee, that's going to keep me pumped to be about God's business?

There's been a really popular Japanese woman in the news lately, Marie Kondo, with a book and series about tidying up. Her method is based around keeping only around you the things that bring you joy. She just works with physical stuff. But what if we were to ask of everything in our schedules, "What brings me joy?" What in my schedule is drawing me closer to God, helping other people, making me a better Christian? What in here is actually cutting me off from joy? And how might that change me?

Now many of us might say, "Work! Work is keeping me from joy!" There's no doubt that even those of us who love our jobs don't always find joy in them. But I'll tell you what – paying a little more to have someone shop for and deliver our groceries rather than going frees up a lot of time. Maybe shopping brings you joy and stress relief, so you'll find something else. Maybe some difficult choices like limiting the number of outside activities your family has or paying someone to mow the lawn. But the endless rat race of American society is killing the amount of time we have for God. What can we eliminate that steals our time for joy in God?

The second step is, what would God have me do to be spiritually revived? There's no one right answer, but it should balance study, fellowship, and service. We live in an age of possibilities and choices, so they are endless ways this can happen. Read Scripture. If that is hard or you're time-crunched, listen to a podcast; turn on Christian music. Determine that you'll go to a spiritual retreat this year and make it happen. Serve a soup kitchen; serve at your local school; serve somewhere. *Do something!*

I think that is where the true miracles happen. As we restructure our lives around Christ – not church, necessarily, but around Christ – we will see God working out the details. Some balls will get dropped. Some things we once considered so urgently important will have to take a back seat. And yet, I believe God will make it worth it. We may see amazing miracles like the one in today’s passage. But I also think we’ll see more subtle miracles. We’ll enjoy our lives more. We’ll appreciate our faith more. We’ll recognize that this world is not first and foremost about having a great career or great stuff or even a great family. This world is about getting to know our great God, who provides for us all the other things that we can enjoy.

So let us encourage one another – let’s not stay sleepy. Let’s not be satisfied with an hour in church and a half-hearted prayer here and there. Let us be the wide awake people, the people hungering for more time with God and knowledge of Him and love of Him, people willing to restructure how we live our lives so that we can enjoy more of Him each day.