

SLEEPING IN CHURCH

Acts 20:7-12

As Saint George is the patron saint of England and Peter is the patron saint of Rome, so Eutychus is the patron sinner of sleepers under a sermon.

Sleep is so death like that we dare not trust ourselves to it without prayer. It is a welcome visitor in the palace and in the hut, on the farm and in the city, on the sea and on the land.

The fact of sleep we do not deny. Every living creature has slept and does sleep. This is true of the white cranes of the air and the black monsters of the sea, the minnow of the shallow rill and the whale of the ocean, the serpents in the slime of the earth and the beasts in the jungle, the swine in the wallow holes and the sheep in the pasture. The fool and the philosopher, the soldier and the sailor, the prince and the pauper, the queen and the washerwoman, the king and the clown, the plowman and the poet all sleep.

The necessity of sleep we do not deny. As water is necessary for the flesh, food for the stomach, air for the lungs, light for the eyes, garments for the body, rain for the fields, and fire for cooking, so sleep is necessary to all.

The blessing of sleep we do not deny. Life without the complete relaxation of sleep is impossible. Sleep is a friend, but it can be made an enemy. It can be misused. At times sleep is sinful and shameful. Proverbs 10:5 says, "He that sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame." Sleep and harvest are both blessings, but to sleep in harvest is to brand ourselves sons of shame.

A man is useless while he is asleep. There is no use to make an impassioned appeal to him about God's most daring enterprise while he is asleep. He cannot be used in any program of the church while he is asleep. God wants us wide awake spiritually. We must be sure that we are not asleep when God needs us and wants us.

It is clear that the first day of the week was used by the apostles as the day for Christian worship instead of the Jews' Sabbath. This is the first trace of the observance of Sunday in the history of Christianity, and the allusion to it here shows that its observance had become customary. The fact that the first day of the week had become the usual day of worship for Christians was one of the marks of Christianity and the proof of their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. It was the distinguishing feature of Christian worship.

Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, on his return from his third missionary journey, which had taken him as far as Greece. He had crossed over from Macedonia to Troas, and there remained long enough to meet with the Christian disciples in that city and worship with them.

Paul was the chief exponent of the Christian movement in his day. His coming was an occasion of unusual interest. The house, where the service was held, had three stories. We can visualize the eager congregation assembled in that large upper room, with a window open toward the moonlit Aegean Sea.

In the room many lamps were burning, not only to give light, but to protect the Christians against the popular slander that they met in the darkness to celebrate their feasts to the accompaniment of licentious and immoral conduct. The enemies of the early Christians were ready always to raise all manner of evil reports against the disciples; and they would gladly have represented these nocturnal meetings as

scenes of great iniquity. To prevent any occasion for such accusations, the disciples took care to have the place of their assemblies well lighted. It is quite probable that it was for the express purpose of obviating all such remarks that this fact was recorded. It teaches us that we should be always on our guard against even the appearance of evil, and cut off occasion from them that seek occasion against us.

We do not have a record of Paul's sermon on this occasion, but we can be sure that, as everywhere, he preached Christ and Him crucified, exhorting the disciples to love one another, to be godly in their daily living, and to look and to work for the advancement of the Lord's work. The clock had not yet been put on religious services as it is today. People went then to a Christian assembly just as they go today to social meetings, or popular entertainments, with no thought of how long it was going to last, but expecting to remain unto the end.

That night Paul preached an unusually long sermon. Luke says that he "continued his speech until midnight." Paul was not a brief preacher. He was not given to sermonettes. They did not put a clock before his face and tell him he had to quit preaching in twenty minutes. If they did he forgot the clock and the people forgot the request, for at midnight he was still speaking.

Paul felt sure that they would not see his face again. Believing that he might never return to them, he disregarded the lateness of the hour and the atmospheric condition of the room, and preached on.

Perched in the window, which was a lattice opening, and, for the sake of air to the crowded room, the lattices were put aside, was a young lad named Eutychus. Boy-like, he had taken this conspicuous but dangerous seat, where he could see and hear everything. But as Paul was long preaching, and the hour was late, the room close, and the atmosphere stifling with so many lamps burning, the young man became drowsy and at length fell into a deep sleep. In his sleep he must have had a dream; and, starting up suddenly, he lost his balance, grasped vainly at the window sill, and with a cry plunged headlong from the window. The congregation gave a horrified ejaculation. Then in a moment there was the ghastly thud of the body striking the surface three stories below. At once the congregation broke up, and Paul along with the rest hurried down the winding stairs, their lamps and torches held high in their hands, to render what aid they could, and doubtless above the shuffling of the feet and the murmuring of the crowd were heard the loud cries of the boy's father and mother.

Paul, who was always a man for the emergency, and who could do other things than preach, when he arrived on the scene where the boy had fallen, told the crowd to stand back. The procedure of the apostle in embracing the boy and in placing himself on the dead body, resembled that of Elisha in the case of the deceased son of the Shunammite woman, and that of Elijah in the case of the son of the widow of Zarephath. It was his way of expressing his desire to reanimate the lifeless body. His resotation to life was effected by the miraculous operation of the apostle.

When he had restored the boy to life, Paul led the crowd back up the stairs and resumed his interrupted sermon, and the service continued until the rosy-fingered dawn came up over the sea.

As far as we know this young man is the only one of Paul's hearers who fell asleep while the apostle preached. Of all the multitudes to whom Paul preached we only read of one who slept under his impassioned eloquence, and whether because of his singularity, or because his slumber was attended with such disastrous results, his case is regarded as sufficiently important to be given a place in the scriptures. In fact, this is the first record we have of a man who slept in church. He has had a multitude of successors; but this is the first recorded instance of one who fell asleep under a sermon. Listening to the greatest message of the ages, he had no

response to offer. Sitting under the mightiest preacher Christ has ever had, his mind was so dull and his heart was so cold that he just fell asleep. His case reminds us that the listlessness and sleepiness of the hearer cannot always be attributed to the preacher. An awakened soul is needed as well as an impressive preacher. Even Paul preached in vain to the man who was asleep. One may preach or teach with all the eloquence of a Paul, and yet some who ought to heed will only nod and doze. Illustration: Dr. G. T. Cowan's Sunday School Class in the Carlisle, Kentucky, Baptist Church -- "Telephone."

There are not only those who sleep physically in church, but there are many who sleep spiritually to the glorious opportunities of service.

1. Men who are asleep to the great opportunities of the church.

Many church members are merely spectators. They not only fail to perform their duties, but they miss the joy of working for Christ in the church. Christ asked Peter, James and John to watch with Him in His agony, but they fell into a deep sleep. And when He awakened them the third time, their opportunity for serving Him in that particular capacity was gone forever. So far as that was concerned, Christ could then say to them, "Sleep on now, and take your rest."

2. Men who are asleep to sinful habits and evil life.

An evil habit is fastening its coils about many, and they are unaware of the danger and the death of it. Satan casts men into a deep sleep, gives them a false sense of safety, and the conviction that while temptation and evil might destroy others, it could never destroy them. It is while men sleep that the devil does his work. Satan delights to cast a man into a deep sleep, because in this way there is no resistance on the part of the victim. Remember that no practice is more shameful, disrespectful and embarrassing than sleeping in the house of God.

Of all the ills that flesh is heir to, insomnia or inability to sleep is one of the worst. This desperate disease requires a desperate cure. Hugh Latimer tells of an afflicted lady who had, without avail, tried everything in medical science to enable her to sleep. Finally she said, "Oh, do take me to the parish church! I've slept soundly there for the last forty years, and I think I could sleep again!" They took her to the church and she was soon fast asleep. Andrew Fuller saw several go to sleep in the beginning of his service at Kettering, whereupon he struck the lecturn three times with his Bible and said, "What! asleep already! I often fear I preach you to sleep, and grieve over it; but the fault cannot be mine today, for I have not yet begun!"

3. Men who are asleep to God and to eternal life.

It is quite possible to listen to the proclamation of the tremendous truths of the gospel, calling for repentance and faith, pointing out the gulf between men in the next world, and yet both the will and conscience be sound asleep. It is easy to sleep away your chance of eternal life. All that is necessary to lose eternal life is to sleep and neglect it. "It is high time to awake out of sleep." "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Ephesians 5:14.