

Broomfield



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God in the Hands of Frightened Sinners, Part 3

Sleeping as Christians

I can't imagine sleeping through one of the most profound moments in redemptive history... but the disciples managed!

It had been a long couple of days, and Christ was speaking about so many incomprehensible things. They had just eaten a huge meal consisting of a food which they consumed only once a year. Their bellies were full; their minds were buzzing. And Christ still wasn't finished! Late that evening when most families were settling down to bed, Christ took His disciples out to a garden and He gave them these instructions:

Matthew 26:36b-38, "Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me."

Now you know the story. During an hour of intense agony and grief for the Lord, Christ came to His disciples no less than three times... where He found them sleeping!

Watch and pray? Are you kidding? The disciples were sleeping and dreaming!

I wonder how many today in the body of Christ are sleeping when they should be watching? Or dreaming when they should be praying?

I think brothers and sisters that there are far more than you and I might guess. For we are so often exhorted:

Romans 13:11, "And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed."

1 Thessalonians 5:4-6, "But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."

1 Corinthians 15:34a, "Awake to righteousness, and sin not."

In other words, “Wake up!”

And the grand-daddy of them all is this verse about the night Christ found His disciples sleeping when they should have been praying, He said this:

Matthew 26:41, “Watch [which is a word denoting the opposite of sleep; it refers to a spiritual vigilance] and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

And this is the key, our flesh is weak! When confronted by the kingdom of God, the glory of the Lord, and His greatness and goodness a coping mechanism is to shrink back, fall asleep, and thereby consume ourselves with so many things other than the Lord. And we see this in our passage. In the presence of a great and mighty Lord, the people of God endeavored to cope first through superstition, then through relegation, and now as we will see, through inactivity!

Coping through Inactivity

1 Samuel 7:2, “**And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years:** and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.”

In order to appreciate this statement, consider the prior eight month history covered in 1 Samuel up to this point. Eight months prior there was a general peace that pervaded God's people. Eli — though aging — was still active in the service of God's worship. Hophni and Phinehas— though in many ways wicked and evil— nevertheless performed the work of a priest. And there was the wonder-kid, Samuel, through whom God was speaking now on a regular basis. All seemed fine, peaceful, and predictable.

But then all manner of chaos broke out. As retribution for Samson's exploits (recall that 1 Samuel 1-6 took place during the later part of Judges), the Philistines marched north with the plan of turning east at the Israeli city of Aphek, then marching on to Shiloh to destroy this holy place.

Now at this point, the Ark of the Covenant — the glory of the Lord — becomes the focus of 1 Samuel 4-6. First we note that it is manipulated by God's people. They looked upon it as a magic charm. Secondly, this passage traces the downfall of Hophni and Phinehas, Eli, and the army of Israel. Third, the Ark is captured by the Philistines and then brought as booty into the house of Dagon — their chief god. The Ark is then moved to a variety of cities in the hopes of abating the plague that had come upon the Philistines. Then the Ark is sent back to Israel on a cart — and with it more death. Sixthly the Ark is relegated to a high place in the hopes of assuaging God's anger. And then the Ark is entrusted to a professional with the anticipation that he would bear the burden of this holy vessel — and not God's people.

But then we come to our passage and read, “And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years” (1 Samuel 7:2).

Now in the context, this statement stands out. It is almost shocking after so much activity. The implication is that Israel has embarked upon a new era in their walk with God. The abuses of Hophni and Phinehas are no longer taking place — if they were you can be sure that the transgressions would have been recorded as well as the resulting deaths. And the Philistines have been quelled such that there seems to be a tentative peace between themselves and Israel.

So what is Israel doing?

Apparently nothing. They are living, moving, marrying, living their lives, working, and rearing their families. But as to God, the Ark, Kingdom Living... that's a subject better left alone.

In fact there is no question that during this time, God's people did not worship as prescribed by Moses. And they did not celebrate the Day of Atonement. They were bereft of a morning and evening sacrifice. And they were bereft of many more things. For all of these privileges required the ark- which was packed away in Kirjathjearim for safe-keeping! Matthew Henry put it this way:

“It was very strange that all the time that Samuel governed, the ark was never brought to its place in the holy of holies, an evidence of the decay of holy zeal among them... So long the ark remained in obscurity, and the Israelites were not sensible of the inconvenience, nor ever made any enquiry after it, what has become of it; though, while it was absent from the tabernacle, the token of God's special presence was wanting, nor could they keep the Day of Atonement as it should be kept. They were content with the altars without the ark; so easily can formal professors rest satisfied in a round of external performances, without any tokens of God's presence or acceptance.”¹

Truly when it comes to the children of God frightened by the Lord, we behold here the ultimate end — satisfaction with the status quo. And when it comes to our walks with God: INACTIVITY!

So what do frightened sinners do when it comes to God?

First they resort to superstition whereby they attempt to placate the Lord. This moves to relegation whereby the responsibility of walking with God is entrusted to a professional. And then they arrive at inactivity in their walks where the obvious focus rests upon just living life, getting by, not upsetting the apple cart, and neglecting the eternal for the temporal.

And this is where so many of us are in walks!

You say, “I've never felt traumatized by God... this sermon is not for me!”

You have in Adam. And as a consequence — whether consciously or unconsciously — while you are far from where you know you ought to be in Christ; nevertheless, you generally are satisfied with your current life. And, you are too busy with the status quo to do much different.

And so, rather than watching, we are sleeping. Rather than praying, we are dreaming. We are dreaming about what we're going to do this coming week. We are dreaming about what our children will be when they grow up. We are dreaming about our finances... our future... our retirement. We are dreaming about our health. And we are dreaming about mundane things like these:

- What am I going to get for my birthday?
- Will that someone special call me this week?
- What must I do to be more popular?

¹ Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry in One Volume, page 291

And yet having said this, I think we have been traumatized. Specifically we have been disappointed by God. We have been traumatized by Him. His providence has been bitter. His will appears hidden and unknown. And thus as a coping mechanism, we have resorted to inactivity in our walk where we hold to a form of godliness but deny its power!

We retreat to the security of an average walk with Christ. Here we no longer desire great things or do great things. We are settled in. We have given up. After all we are weary of fighting the good fight of faith.

Sardis

The church in Sardis was like this. The history of the church in Sardis is intractably tied to the history of the church in Ephesus. The gospel was introduced to Ephesus by Paul's close friends and partners in ministry, Priscilla and Aquila.² They were soon joined by the eloquent preacher and powerful debater, Apollos.³ And so together, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos laid the groundwork for Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

The Apostle Paul stopped briefly in Ephesus near the end of his second missionary journey.⁴ But his real ministry took place on his third missionary journey where he stayed no less than three years.⁵ During this time the entire city and the population around the city was dramatically effected.⁶

Well it was during this zealous time that the Christians of Ephesus spread the word of God and the entire province of Asia heard the gospel.⁷ This resulted in the planting of many churches. And in one of the cities which was profoundly impacted at this time was Sardis — an impregnable city approximately thirty miles northeast of Ephesus. Ironically because of its geography, the history of Sardis had always been one of over-confidence. It was built on a mountain with near vertical sides! The only way to enter the city was from the south which always was guarded. In fact, so dramatic were the perpendicular rock walls that the kings of Sardis did not guard them — even during a siege! And so twice in its history, foreign armies scaled the unguarded sides of Sardis and conquered the city.⁸

Well in the fervor and excitement of the spread of the gospel in Ephesus, the gospel was preached in Sardis and a thriving and devout group of Christians began serving the Lord in that city. And yet the church parroted the history of its city, and so in time it became overly confident, lazy, and static in their walks with Christ. They fell asleep!

Now forty years later, this is the word that was given to this congregation by the Lord:

Revelation 3:1-2, “And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.”

² Compare Acts 18:18-19

³ Compare Acts 18:24-26

⁴ Compare Acts 18:19-21

⁵ Compare Acts 20:31

⁶ Compare Acts 19:18-41

⁷ Compare Acts 19:10

⁸ Once with the Persian forces under Cyrus; another time under Antiochus the Great.

In other words, they had a reputation that they were a vibrant church had fallen asleep. Their lives consisted of the status quo.

So what was Christ's command?

Wake up!

I have no doubt that such would be the cry of the Lord to our generation! For you see, we too have grown lethargic in our walks. The former days when Christianity was new and vibrant are gone. We are preoccupied with living and making a living. We have to rear our children. We enjoy just looking good — and yet underneath we are struggling with faithlessness, devotion, fear, and boredom.

Christ's Command

How do you awaken from such lethargy? How do you go from spiritual distance to spiritual vigilance?

I want you to notice the four-fold command that Christ gave to the believers in Sardis/

Revelation 3:2-3b, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things⁹ which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.”

The first thing we are called to do here is to “strengthen the things that remain, which [are] about to die...” The word *things* is a neuter noun in the Greek. It doesn't refer to people but to spiritual realities. Christ exhorted the Christians in Sardis to fan into flame the dying embers of the remaining spiritual graces in their church.

- Had they had quiet times? — Then they must get back into the word.
- Did they place a high priority on worship? — Then they must renew such conviction.
- Was fellowship at one time important? — Then they must return to the body and invest in others.

Secondly they were to “remember therefore what [they had] received and heard...” In other words, they needed to go back to the simple truths of the Word of God, remembering the GOSPEL! Truly, the believers in Sardis needed to reaffirm their belief in the truth about Christ, their sin, salvation, and sanctification. They needed to understand that even in their laziness and slothfulness, Christ still was their God. In other words, we must remember from where we have fallen and do the deeds we did in the beginning.¹⁰

Thirdly, having gone back to the truth of the gospel, they needed to “keep it.” It is not enough to affirm the gospel; we must live in light of it!

Again we must never forget that we are the greatest of sinners. Even our righteousness is filthy rags before God. We deserve wrath, but in Christ have received grace, mercy, and peace!

Lastly, they were called to “repent.” This means they needed not only to turn from their spiritual daze, and confess their apathy, BUT they were to turn again and afresh in reliance upon Christ for their growth

⁹ λοιπος λοιπος

¹⁰ Compare Revelation 2:5

in grace and sanctification. Truly, brokenness and mourning over their sin — repentance — must again be that which characterized them. Brothers and sisters, that is what constitutes “waking up” from spiritual lethargy!

And yet, you rightly point out that this begs the question. If waking up includes strengthening our spiritual disciplines, remembering the gospel, keeping the gospel, and turning from self unto God; then how can one force himself to do such things when you are asleep? This is the problem that we are asleep, isn't it?

God is Working

That brings us to a wonderful truth found in 1 Samuel 7. Just like in creation where we read these words:

Genesis 1:2, “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

So too in the lives of genuine yet slothful Christians, God is working behind the scenes and in darkness to bring about our Spiritual growth in grace!

We see it here. While we read of no activity amongst the people of God for twenty years, the text indicates that God was not inactive.

1 Samuel 7:2, “And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjathjearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: **and all the house of Israel lamented¹¹ after the LORD.**”

The word for *lament* refers to the wailing that accompanies mourning and is used in the context of funeral dirges¹² and the brokenness of rebellious people.¹³ There is no doubt among commentators that this references the sincere mourning that accompanies repentance.¹⁴

Now that this occurs toward the end of the twenty years is evident from the link that exists in the Hebrew between vv. 2 and 3 15. It was upon Israel's lamentation that Samuel “spoke to all the house of Israel” (1 Samuel 7:3). In other words, Israel's mourning was the precursor to Samuel's call to repentance.

Well where did this mourning come from?

Clearly genuine mourning is a grace in the life of the child of God which comes from the Lord! Speaking of the Spirit, Christ said, “And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8). It is the Spirit of God who provides conviction, mourning, sorrow, and a longing for righteousness.

Jude 14-15, “And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and

¹¹ נָהָה nahah

¹² Compare Jeremiah 9:9-11, 16-21; 31:15

¹³ Compare Micah 2:4; Amos 5:16 both of these reference funeral dirges.

¹⁴ Compare also Matthew 5:3, 4: 15:22

15. The “then” of v. 3 is a wow-consecutive!

of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

The work of the Lord is the work of conviction! And thus Paul said, “Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner” (2 Corinthians 7:9). If ever there is sorrow and mourning over sin in the life of the child of God, it is testimony of the work of the Spirit of God in our lives.

And thus we conclude here that during the twenty year sleep in which God's people were happy with the status quo in 1 Samuel 7:2 that God was working in the lives of His people. He was turning their rejoicing into mourning, their gladness into sadness, and their light to darkness.

This is how the Lord produces mourning the life of the child of God.

Psalm 106:15, “And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.”

Now on account of the “leanness of soul” that the Israelites encountered they began to lament. They saw their pitiful condition was because of their absence from the presence of God. They knew they were slothful and this resulted in their impotency.

They began to call to mind their first love — and this reminded them of what it was like before. They saw their previous zeal, and holy longings. They desired their spiritual passion for God. And this led to their spiritual revival which is seen in 1 Samuel 7!

Are you tired of hog slop?

Let me therefore ask you family of God, “Are you tired of eating the food of pigs?” Oh how I exhort us all. If you are one this day who believes that you too are sleeping in your walk then the place to begin is in prayer. Pray for God to awaken you in the Lord. Pray for mourning and lamentation. Pray that the Lord will break your stubborn heart and soften it with grace.

But we must do more than pray. We indeed must also act. We must strengthen our spiritual disciplines. This means we must get back into the word. We must go back into the service of God's kingdom. We must get back into the fellowship of the body. We must remember the gospel. We must keep the gospel. And we must turn from self unto God. In other words, one must live in constant brokenness and dependence upon God.

I close with the words of Spurgeon:

“Many saints are content to live like men in coal mines, who see not the sun; they eat dust like the serpent when they might taste the ambrosial meat of angels; they are content to wear the miner's garb when they might put on king's robes; tears mar their faces when they might anoint them with celestial oil. Satisfied I am that many a believer pines in a dungeon when he might walk on the palace roof, and view the goodly land and Lebanon. Rouse thee, O believer, from thy low condition! Cast away thy sloth, thy lethargy, thy coldness, or whatever interferes with thy chaste and pure love to Christ, thy soul's Husband. Make him the source, the centre, and the circumference of all thy soul's range of delight. What enchants thee into such folly as to remain in a pit when thou mayst sit on a throne? Live not in the lowlands of bondage now that mountain liberty is conferred upon thee. Rest no longer satisfied with thy dwarfish attainments, but press forward to things more sublime and heavenly. Aspire to a higher, a nobler, a fuller life. Upward to

heaven! Nearer to God!”¹⁶

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 5, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.

¹⁶ Spurgeon, Charles H., *Morning and Evening*, Evening, November 23