

What Are the Dangers of Falling Asleep in Church?

Acts 20:7-16

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On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. - Acts 20:7-9, ESV

The title of this devotional is a joke, with a purpose: We can often misuse the Scriptures and twist them from their original meaning to serve our own purposes. For example, I could say "Learn from the example of Eutychus and never fall asleep in church!" Of course, you could come back to me and say, "Learn from the example of the Apostle Paul and don't preach too long, unless you have the power to bring people back from the dead." Such potential manipulation of Scripture would be humorous if it weren't a little too close to reality.

When we study Scripture, we observe what is in the text, then we interpret the text and, finally, we apply the text to life. Each text of Scripture is open to a variety of interpretations, most of which are wrong. Even if we can agree on interpretation, the meaning of a text is open to a wide variety of personal applications. A variety of applications can each be valid (unlike a variety of interpretations), but not all of them are. Handling Scripture accurately means taking care at each stage of interpretation and application.

So, how should we understand today's text? Well, in part this text serves as a confirmation of Paul's apostolic authority. Paul is on a journey that will end with him in jail for several years. Many people who opposed Paul's ministry and message used the fact that he was in jail as an opportunity to undermine his credibility and his apostolic credentials. But if Paul could restore Eutychus to life, then he has the authority of an Apostle.

Furthermore, we see the deep concern Paul has for the church at Troas, as he has shown for all of the churches. This shows us where the heart of a God-honoring minister should be: Pastors should be deeply committed to the spiritual well-being of their flocks. It also shows us that the primary way a minister cares for his flock is by preaching and teaching the word of God.

Finally, we see again Paul's decision-making. He is trying to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, and so he decides to sail past Ephesus and not make a stop there. Ephesus was important to Paul, and he knew that if he stopped there, he would spend some time in Asia Minor and this would delay his trip to Jerusalem. Oh, and we do see that some people do fall asleep in church, even under the very best preaching. (Just kidding!)

Heavenly Father, give us wisdom and care that we might handle Your word accurately and faithfully. Your word is truth. Your ways are right. We are Your children and Your servants. May we hear, understand and communicate Your word to others with great care and faithfulness. In Jesus' name, Amen.