

“FALLING ASLEEP IN CHURCH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 20:1-12

Prayer: Holy Father, wake us up this morning for we confess we are weak, tired, dull, slothful, our minds wander, we need help. We are finite and flesh, wake us up to hear what your Holy Spirit wants to say to us through your Holy Word for our spiritual benefit and edification. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Introduction.

We have before us the tale of two bad trips, Paul’s attempt to go to Jerusalem interrupted by an assassination plot, and Eutychus’ bad trip from a third floor window.

Acts 20:1-6, Road Trip to Troas.

Paul’s life was an unending series of trials, troubles, suffering, hardship. It seems all his journeys were marked by difficulty.

After three years in Ephesus, by far the longest Paul spent in any one city, he determined it was time to move on and strengthen and encourage the disciples in other young churches.

Leaving Ephesus Paul heads northwest back to Macedonia, through Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, to Corinth. From Corinth he intends to sail straight east back to Syria so he can get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. He booked a direct flight to Syria.

But his plans get messed up. God in His providence uncovers a plot to kill Paul, so instead he retraces his steps walking over 300 miles back north to Berea, Thessalonica, and east to Philippi where he then sails five days back over the Asia (Turkey) to Troas. A nice 10 day Mediterranean cruise to Syria becomes months of walking and sailing.

I feel Paul’s pain. At the beginning of our vacation three weeks ago, we boarded our direct flight to Chicago, taxied to the end of the runway, sat there, then came back to the gate and were told the plane couldn’t go. So 150 of us are stuck in SeaTac waiting to be rebooked on other flights.

They booked us on a flight through Dallas that would get us to Chicago 8 hours late. I later learned that our connecting flight to Chicago was further delayed. I jumped ship and got a direct flight on another airline, but our luggage didn’t arrive until the next day.

My road trip started poorly, it was disrupted, I was greatly annoyed. I didn't do what Paul does. Notice Paul never complains about the disruptions and changes of plans, he never questions or doubts what God is doing and why God is doing it.

Paul always views life and life's circumstance through the lens of God's sovereignty and God's glory and God's eternal purposes in our lives. Paul always lives *coram deo*, before God. He is one of those people who says in all things, if it pleases God it pleases me, that all things must work for my good. Let me give you two examples from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

II Corinthians 1:8-10 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

II Corinthians 4:8-10 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

He relied completely on God and trusted God's power and grace and mercy. He was God's servant, content with whatever God was pleased to do. He took the good with the bad. He could testify to God's goodness in it all. In all our trials God disciplines us and disciplines us for His glory and our eternal good.

We are all on a road trip through life. It is filled with hardship, struggles, ups and downs, twists and turns. In all of them there is God's hand.

I have tried to figure out why the plane detour happened. All things must work for good. Maybe it was so I could have a sermon illustration this morning. Whatever the case, I am still learning to trust God and live more at peace and with contentment each day.

Acts 20:7-12, falling asleep in church.

This brings us to this second bad trip.

Have you ever fallen asleep in an inappropriate place or time?

I painfully remember sophomore year of college psychology class. The professor showed a film. Lights out, desks turned toward the screen. When I woke up my desk was the only one still turned the wrong way.

And yes I have fallen asleep in a sermon or two. Is there anyone who never has?

How many times have we sung a hymn but not worshipped, not actually heard the words?

How many times have we heard a sermon but not applied any of it?

How many times have we bowed in prayer, but our minds have wandered off somewhere else?

How many of us have fallen asleep driving with our eyes still open? Scary, dangerous.

But not as scary or dangerous as falling asleep spiritually and not waking up.

Eutychus is the father of all who have fallen asleep in church. He is forever immortalized in Scripture for falling asleep during a sermon by the Apostle Paul and falling to his death.

Luke gives a bunch of details that become the perfect storm to a seemingly unavoidable tragedy.

First, Paul apparently preached a very long time, possibly four or five hours.

Second, the first day of the week means people had worked all day, this meeting was at night.

Third, the room was lit with lamps meaning torches putting off heat and fumes. Lack of oxygen.

Fourth, the room was crowded, full. Eutychus was forced to find a bit of space in a window.

Fifth, he was a youth, between 8 and 14 and it was after midnight.

It was like a room full of narcotics drugging him to sleep. He tried to fight it, but was gradually overcome. A host of very natural causes caused him to fall asleep.

Lots of commentators try to cast blame either on Paul for being insensitive to his audience and preaching way too long. Or on Eutychus for being inattentive to the truth of the Gospel being preached. Which way do you lean? I say there is no blame to be cast.

What we are witnessing here is a church in its infancy. These are committed, earnest, hungry believers seizing a huge opportunity to hear the Word of God from one of the Lord's apostles the night before he leaves and they never see him again. They may be weary after a day of labor and the lateness of the hour, but they are determined to make the most of it.

Rather than blaming Paul for preaching too long or shaming Eutychus for not staying awake, we commend them for their hunger for the Gospel and their desire for fellowship with God and His people.

Notice what happened after Eutychus was restored. Rather than call it a night, they keep going until daybreak. No one wants to leave. They were not watching the clock but hanging on every word, and they go home the next morning comforted.

This is the church young, eager, hungry for the milk of the Word, ordinary working men and women united together in an incendiary fellowship of faith and love. We should be moved by this.

How eager we are to meet with God and His people on Sunday to hear the truth explained, proclaimed and applied? How determined are we to make the most of our opportunities for worship? If necessary, would we be willing to meet before dawn and after dusk in order to worship the Lord in the company with His people? May our hearts be eager to be where God is making Himself known through the preached Word.

The entire focus of the story seems to be on the importance of the preaching of the Word of God, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and how hungry the people were for it. That is a convicting consideration. The Gospel is good news and every soul should be hungry for the encouragement of the good news for sinners saved by grace.

Romans 10:16-17 “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ... 17 faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

The Gospel of the Resurrection.

Paul was preaching the Gospel of the resurrection, and God gives him an opportunity to illustrate his sermon by doing a resurrection, by showing the reality of the power of God to raise the dead.

Luke tells us Eutychus was dead. Luke is a doctor, he knows these things. When Paul says, “His life is in him” he is not saying he was never dead, that would mean there was no miracle. He means, his life has returned to him or is back in him again, by the power and grace of God.

This is important. This is the gospel. The power of the resurrection is real and applicable not just to Jesus but to us. Paul prayed we would know the power of the resurrection in our lives.

Ephesians 1:16-20 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, *that you may know* what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.

Philippians 3:8, 10 I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. ... 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection.

Romans 6:5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Just as Eutychus was in desperate need of a physical resurrection, something he could do nothing about or contribute nothing to, so also all of us are in desperate need of a spiritual resurrection to new life in Christ, something we can do nothing to earn.

But I don't doubt that we all also need an on-going resurrection in the sense of a revival, a reawakening from our spiritual slumber and slothfulness. We need new life breathed into our souls every day, new mercies every morning.

Conclusion: A Spiritual Warning.

Why did Luke include this story in his history of the early church? Is there a spiritual warning here for us? Should we take this story as an opportunity to do a little spiritual assessment? Are we spiritually awake or spiritually asleep?

This is a strange story with tragic consequences that is meant to wake us up and make us alert to the spiritual opportunities around us. Don't become like Eutychus and fall away from spiritual food and spiritual fellowship. Be spiritually vigilant, the days are evil and short.

Be aware of what contributes to spiritual dullness and slothfulness.

First, of course, there is the possibility we have never been awake. There are many who attend worship services every week, listen to sermons every week, but they have never been awakened by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Have you repented and believed? Have you called on the name of the Lord to be saved? (Romans 10:13).

Second, there are Christians who have been awakened but because of temptation have fallen into sin, into spiritual compromise, into worldly desires. Samson is an example, David is an example. Sin desensitizes us, makes us indifferent, uncomfortable so we drift off.

Third, there are Christians who have let familiarity breed contempt or boredom. They have not taken the initiative to keep their souls and faith alive to the daily fresh power of the Gospel in their lives. They have left their spiritual condition up to someone else like the church or the pastor. They have not heeded the frequent admonitions of Scripture to wake up, to seek after righteousness and truth.

If you have never been awake, then pray for the grace of God to bring you to faith and repentance in Christ, for Christ to make you new.

If you are in sin, repent, turn away. If you aren't killing sin, sin will be killing you. Joy in worship is found in confession and forgiveness.

For those afflicted by familiarity, make a specific point to consciously and deliberately engage in worship with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. When you sing a hymn sing the words with meaning. When there are prayers, pray along, silently agree. When Scripture is read, listen as if it is written directly to you. Be attentive to your eternal soul.

For years now I have had men in my life who ask me regularly how I am doing with reading Scripture and prayer. We all need someone in our life to help us on this spiritual road trip, it doesn't just happen, it takes Holy Spirit inspired and enabled effort. Why I take notes.

Why do we think *hard work* is such a virtue in the physical world but not in the spiritual world? Why are fathers proud their sons are such hard workers, but lazy spiritually? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

How many of us are spiritually sleep walking through life? How many of us eat one spiritual meal or at most two spiritual meals a week on Sunday only?

Jesus devotes a parable to this kind of warning, the parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13. The five wise bridesmaids take along additional oil for their lamps so they will be prepared for the bridegroom, who is delayed but arrives at midnight. However, the five foolish bridesmaids fall asleep and run out of oil; they are unprepared for the bridegroom's arrival and miss out on the wedding banquet. When Jesus reflects on the parable, he instructs his disciples saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Satan wants us to sleep, to keep pushing the snooze button when it comes to spiritual discipline. God wants us to walk up. Pray.

The problem is not the alarm clock, or the snooze button. The problem is our love, what do we love more, more sleep or the Lord and His Word? We sleep in when we forget who it is who calls us to Himself. The God who invites us to meet with Him is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, our Savior. He is worthy of our wakefulness, our firstfruits.

The Lord we sleep through or fall asleep on is the one the angels in heaven sing: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12).

Proverbs 26:14 As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.

I Corinthians 16:13 Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

Ephesians 5:14 Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

James 4:8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

I Peter 5:8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Psalms 90:14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.