

THE WORLD ASLEEP

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We had recently to consider what is involved in the declaration of Paul that the arrival of the day of the Lord will be preceded by a cry of peace and safety; and that while this comforting cry is in full voice throughout the world, sudden destruction will descend like a whirlwind upon the whole fabric of human society, and lay it in ruins for the manifestation of the righteous judgment of God, and to pave the way for the new order of things, styled new heavens and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. On the present occasion we shall do well to realise what our attitude ought to be in the prospect of a revolution so unprecedented and so awful.

You will find that Paul instantly introduces this topic after speaking of the day that cometh as a thief. This is a feature of all the epistles—the practical application of the facts introduced. It is, more or less, a characteristic of the entire Scriptures. Subjects are never treated as matters of theoretical interest. Mere knowledge is never placed high. On the contrary, it is disparaged. Knowledge in this sense is said to "*puff up*" (1 Cor. 8:1). It is taught that a man may understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and yet be "*nothing*" (1 Cor. 13:2). It is the right use of correct knowledge that is the burden of all Scriptural exhortations to wisdom. The tendency in connection with the truth in our day to exalt knowledge over the love of God and His service, is due merely to the popular extreme in the opposite direction from which we have all more or less suffered. It is difficult, in the presence of the universal revolt against the knowledge that brings salvation, to exercise that wisdom which, while holding fast the truth as the foundation, aims to build on that foundation the fabric of holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. Yet it is this at which we must constantly aim. A constant study of Paul's Epistles will help us.

In the case in question, having spoken of the coming day and its thief-like advent, he says,

"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."

Here is something to be avoided that is common; something to cultivate that is rare. What are we to understand by this sleep which is the common habit of "*others*"? It is important we should know, for how otherwise shall we know how to steer clear of it? Of course it does not mean literal sleep, for taking of rest in natural sleep is good and necessary, and was done by the Lord himself. Paul here means sleep in a figurative sense. Jesus used sleep in this sense when speaking on the same subject. He said,

*"The Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore . . . lest coming suddenly, he find you **sleeping**"* (Mark 13:34).

What is this sleep? We see it in the relation of a sleeping man to the midnight visit of the burglar, from which the figure is derived. He is totally unconscious of what is going on. He is unaware of the actual situation of things. He thinks in his dreams, it may be, that he is in a palace, surrounded with pleasant company at a splendid feast, listening to the strains of music. His feelings are highly soothed as he contemplates the illusions of his wandering imagination. He would resent any attempt to awaken him. He prefers to cling to his pleasing fancies; and while he slumbers and lingers in the fairyland of his deceptive brain, the burglar proceeds with his fell work, and the man awakes at last to find his money all gone. Had he been awake, the calamity would have been avoided; but he was asleep, and the thief came.

Now, as Paul observes:

"They who sleep sleep in the night."

He adds,

"Let us who are of the day be sober."

Here we have the idea suggested by the figure of sleep further carried out. There is a day and a night to be considered. The day, we are told, is at hand, but not yet arrived. It is the day of Christ, introduced by him as the rising sun. In his absence it is night. The night, we are told, is far spent, but still lingers; and because it is night, an almost universal sleep prevails in which men are oblivious to the real facts of life, unconscious of the actual situation, and dreaming their time away with thoughts and pleasures and aims that are all illusions at the root, and will disappear before the dawn of the day of Christ as completely as the dreams of the sleeper fly before the rising of the sun. There is one about

to break into the house of these dreamers, even Christ, who comes to take all things to himself; but they are unaware of the fact. They prefer their dreams. They will awake to find desolation.

Paul says we are not to “*sleep, as do others.*” What is this but saying that we are to keep the facts of our situation in constant memory? These facts are the truth. They are facts that the natural man is most liable to “*let slip.*” That the earth is the Lord’s; that He has made it for his pleasure; that this pleasure principally consists in the enlightened appreciation and praise and faithful obedience of man; that man has departed from this obedience; that he is consequently under the dominion of evil and death; that God has purposed and is carrying out a plan of remedy which, while rescuing us, will exalt his own praise; that this purpose centres in Christ who was born, proved, crucified, and raised from the dead one thousand eight hundred years ago; that he is now above at the Father’s right hand as a priest over his own house, with actual results even now; that he is coming at the appointed time to take possession of all the kingdoms of men, and to judge his house and assign them a place in the earth, his inheritance, or to reject them altogether, “*according as their works shall be*”; that, meanwhile, that house consists of those who hold fast the confidence and rejoicing in this hope to the end; that they are now a priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices in showing forth the praise of Him who has called them; that they are strangers and sojourners in the earth at present, as all the fathers were; that while they are in the world they are not to be of the world, but to accept the commandments of Christ as the unvarying rule of their lives, walking as children of light in denying all ungodliness, and living soberly, righteously and godly in the present evil world. I say there is nothing that the natural man is more liable to forget than that all these things are so. The world around us is absolutely unbelieving—dead asleep. A few have their sleep disturbed, but do not wake up. They have the truth brought to their notice, and give it momentary attention, but it lays no hold of them in a lasting way. Some wake up, but go to sleep again. They are interested in the truth for a while, but gradually let other things engage their attention and interest. A few wake clear up, and remain in possession of their faculties, but even these have to make an effort to keep awake. The air is full of narcotic fumes, so to speak, which can only be neutralised by the constant application of the antidote provided by the Lord of the house. Neglect the antidote, and sleep will assuredly overcome us. That antidote is to be found in the word of God, and in what it requires at our hands—prayer and assembly with the saints.

Therefore, the way practically to obey the exhortation of Paul, “*not to sleep as do others,*” is to take those means that will keep us awake. The man who neglects the daily reading of the Scripture is not taking those means. He is deceiving himself. He thinks he can keep awake by a mere effort of the will. He thinks as he knows the truth it is unnecessary for him to trouble himself with the reading of the word. He forgets first, that no man can ever know the truth thoroughly by a mere study of first principles at the beginning, in consequence of the diffuse and diversified form in which it has been divinely communicated, and in consequence of the natural antagonism between human thoughts and divine thoughts; and secondly, he forgets that even if we could know the truth thoroughly at the start, the mind quickly loses the knowledge it has acquired, so far as its power is concerned, especially because it is the knowledge of God which the mind is so prone to throw off rather than to retain.

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”

This is the declaration of Jesus, and all men will find it true at last on one side or other. “*Bread alone,*” will only give us the natural energy of mind and body which, after a while, will pass away never to return. The word which God has spoken, incorporated now into the mental man by daily reading and meditation, will even now, while it sanctifies us to God, impart a healthful nobility and joy, and in the end ensure a participation in that length of days, for ever and ever, which the Father gave to Jesus in answer to His prayer (Psa. 21:4).

While taking care to use the means to keep awake, it is necessary to avoid the things that tend to draw us into the universal slumber. On this head, there are books not to be read, companions not to be kept company with, pleasures not to be followed, pursuits not to be engaged in, habits not to be practised, objects not to be aimed at. There are “*weights*” to be “*laid aside*”—to use another of Paul’s figures when comparing the calling in Christ to a race. Every earnest man will be able to recognise these for himself. They are discernible by the simple test of whether they interfere or not with the growth of Christ dwelling in our heart by faith. By this test, novel-reading will be abandoned. There is no more powerful spiritual sleeping draught than this. It conjures a fictitious picture before the mind. It invests human life with a beauty that does not exist in fact, and teaches men to be interested in

trifles, and to be interested even in important things and in men from the wrong point of view. It excludes God from sight, draws a veil over real wisdom, and hides the glory to be revealed. The Bible appears a very dull object to the eyes of man or woman just turned from the dazzle of brilliant story-telling. So companions who know not God, and have consequently no sympathy with divine objects, motives, and prospects of life; pleasures that excite a narrow-minded emulation, or bring us into friendly relation with godless people; pursuits in politics or science that would give us an interest in the property of the present order of things, or in other directions; pursuits that have an ill-savour, or exact too much of our time and energy; habits that identify us with the unholy, debase the mental powers, defile nature, or make holiness a dim idea; objects which, in the process of their attainment, would require us to sacrifice all opportunities of the service of Christ, or in their realisation would expose us to a dangerous fellowship with the world (such as aiming to be wealthy)—all these are things to be avoided, and that will be avoided, by those who have earnestly set their faces for the kingdom of God. Such are not to be scared away from the path of wisdom by outcries which have their origin elsewhere. We have to remember that the world at large have not only forgotten the theory of the truth, but that they have never realised to what it is that men are called when they are called to be sons of God, and brethren of Christ, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. From this unenlightened world most brethren have but recently come. Consequently they are liable to bring the world's maxims with them. Casting about for the right one, the only safe plan is to rely for guidance on the word only. Brethren are only trustworthy in so far as they echo its sentiments and principles. If they complain of the way of godliness being narrow, or the standard high, they complain against the word. If the way is narrow, and the standard high, it is God who has made them so, and it would be madness in us to tamper with them while professing to accept them.

Taking care, then, to use the means of keeping awake, and to avoid the causes of that sleep which holds the children of the night in deadly thrall, we shall attain to a different condition of life from that which is common to the world, and which was common to us all in the days of our darkness—different as to our state of mind, and, therefore, as to the purpose for which we live. Paul gives frequent and forcible expression to this difference in various forms in his Epistles. They may all be taken as comprised in his saying to the Ephesians,

*"Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light . . . proving (or realising in yourselves) what is **acceptable unto the Lord.**"*

The question with us will be, what state of mind, what course of life is "*acceptable unto the Lord.*" This is a rule of judgment totally unrecognised in the world. The recognition of it constitutes the difference between a sinner and a saint. It will not be difficult to apply the rule if we are diligent readers of the word of truth, for that which is acceptable to him is made very plain there (and nowhere else can we learn this). Paul is a great instructor in the matter—"a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity"—whose word we are enjoined to receive as "*the commandments of the Lord*" (1 Cor. 14:37). It is a phrase he makes frequent use of. It is profitable to ponder the things which he says are "*acceptable to God.*" Righteousness, peace, **joy in the Holy Spirit**, are in the category. He says (Rom. 14:18),

*"He that in these things serveth Christ is **acceptable to God.**"*

To the Philippians he gratefully acknowledged their ministration to him in temporal things.

"I am full," he says, "*having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice **acceptable, well-pleasing to God***" (Phil. 4:18).

Of the subject of requiting parents, by looking after them in their old age, he says "*that it is good and **acceptable before God***" (1 Tim. 5:4). Of "*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks*" he says "*this is good and **acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour***" (1 Tim. 2:3). Again he exhorts brethren "*to present their bodies as **living sacrifices,***" which he says are "*holy, **acceptable to God***" (Rom. 12:1). Peter makes use of the same phrases in reference to two other matters: first, "*the offering up of spiritual sacrifices, **acceptable to God by Jesus Christ,***" and secondly, "*when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently: this is **acceptable with God***" (1 Pet. 2:5,20). Examination will discover numerous other cases in which, though the same phrase is not employed, the same idea is expressed, such as when it is plainly said, "*with such sacrifices (doing good and communicating—giving), God is well pleased*" (Heb. 13:16).

A perseverance in the course of life that is “*acceptable to God*” will bring great peace when pursued with a pure regard to His approbation. It will not, however, be found a path of roses. While toward God there will be peace, towards man there will be much to mortify and perturb—much to endure in the way of present sacrifice and crucifixion of feeling. The path of probation is purposely a path of thorns. Hence the words of Paul,

*“Ye have **need of patience**, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry”*

(Heb. 10:36).

See also Peter: . . .

“Salvation (is) ready to be revealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:5-7).

The accepted of God in all past ages have exemplified this rule.

“Take, my brethren, the prophets,” says James, *“for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.”*

Of the congregation of the chosen as a whole, it was said to John when he saw them glorified in vision and asked who they were, *“These are they who came out of great tribulation,”* reminding us of Paul’s words to the ecclesias among whom he went to strengthen them in a season of great trouble:

“We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

Let us not be discouraged, then, if we find our present lot a bitter one because of our submission to the will of God. We require to rally ourselves on this point. It is pleasant enough to talk about tribulation preparing us for the Kingdom of God; but it is hard in the actual experience. The heart sometimes grows sick. The waters come into the soul, and the spirit is overwhelmed. Let us beware of straying from the path for ease. Let us remember the words of Christ concerning some that *“in time of temptation fall away.”* Let us not lay down the cross because it is heavy. Christ asked us to take it up and carry it. Let us, when hardly beset, follow the example of David, who says,

“From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed.”

This is what James exhorts,

“Is any among you afflicted, let him pray.”

It is what Jesus himself says.

“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint.”

“Watch and pray, lest ye enter into (fall a victim to) temptation.”

Resorting thus, in our trouble, to the Rock that is higher than ourselves, we shall be given a strength that will enable us to endure, and a help that will open a way of escape that we be not tempted above that we are able to bear.

And soon the fight will be over, and the race run; and who shall tell the consolation that awaits the victory of “*him that overcometh*”? Christ will confess him, the angels will rejoice with him, and a multitude of true brethren will give thanks to God for his triumph. Glory will rest upon him, honour will be poured upon him, and life granted him for length of endless days. A crown will be placed upon his head; the sceptre of righteous rule in his hands; and an exhaustless bounty of blessing placed at his command for those whom his iron rod shall rule. In the strength of immortal vigour, and the joy of the mantling spirit, and the possession of all divine excellence, he will forget the sorrows of this age of sin except as the background of his eternal joy; and will give thanks to God for evermore that he was privileged to know and do the will of God in the day of his dishonour and shame.