

Let Us Not Sleep

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“And that knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now is our salvation nearer when we believed.” (Rom. XIII:2).

When these words were first written the Church, under the New Testament Dispensation, was still in its spiritual infancy. But even then the Apostle could see a dark cloud of persecution descending upon it. The Dragon was casting a flood out of his mouth that he might devour both the Church of Christ and her seed. The heathen were raging against the Lord and His anointed. Satan’s emissaries never tire in their opposition to Christ and to those who serve Him. But the Apostle was aware of another danger. This danger was within the Church itself. It was that the people of God might, in their hour of peril, lose their spiritual vigilance and forget the exhortation that they should always watch and pray. This danger within the Church was, we believe, much greater than any to which she might be exposed from without. Let us offer a word on:

I. The Sin against which we are here warned

“Let us not sleep, as do others.”

We can, dear friends, expect nothing from a godless world or from the multitudes who make a dead religious profession but that they should remain in this state of spiritual slumber and death. But the people of God have, in a day of His power, been delivered out of this condition. They are a people whom God has awakened out of their spiritual unconcern. They heard His voice: “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead and Christ shall give thee light.” “And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” But the danger is that they may sleep again. Needless to say, the true people of God can never return to that state of total spiritual death out of which God has called them. They can never fall out of a state of grace, or lose their souls. In the day of their regeneration Christ gives them eternal life. But while they have grace in their souls, that grace may not always be in exercise. Spiritual slumber may overtake their eyes. The Psalmist prayed against this danger. “Lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”

Are there not influences abroad in our day which induce this state? Many have, for example, gone to sleep on the lap of their material comforts. They “wax fat” in the enjoyment of temporal favours while they “kick” against their spiritual duties and neglect the Throne of Grace. There are also ensnaring distractions peculiar to this age which too often eat up our time and deaden our souls. Some of these have invaded our very homes.

And the world in which we live, with its deceptive haze of religious formalism, may become an “enchanted ground”. When Christian and Hopeful became aware of this danger on their pilgrimage to Heaven they had to stir up one another lest the fatal atmosphere by which they were surrounded, and which so menacingly touched their eyes, should overcome them. How solemnly is this brought before us in the parable of the virgins. If this slumber began with the foolish ones, it did not end with them. It overcame the wise as well. Spiritual sleep, we believe, is infectious. Our Lord predicted that in the latter days the love of many would wax cold. It was here that the sad decline of the Church at Ephesus began. She had forsaken her first love. This was the root cause of her fall. The Lord, however, did not say that the love of all would wax cold, but that the love of many would. How we ought to thank God that there are, throughout the land, the “few names” who do not defile their garments and who keep watch on the walls of Zion!

Many also, as we know, sleep on the lap of a false hope, and many others are lulled into this state by the voice of the false prophet — so common in our age — whose favourite words are, “peace, peace”. But the Lord tells us that for such “there is no peace”.

We ought to remind ourselves that prayer, whether at the family altar or in the public means of grace, is good and necessary in its own place; but the Lord also commands us to watch as well as to pray. The two go together, and what God has joined together let no man put asunder.

The Church in the Song sought Christ on her bed in the night; but the Psalmist said that He would give no rest to his eyelids, nor go up upon his bed, till he had found a place for the Lord, or till the Lord would return to His Zion, the place where He desired to dwell.

All the people of God have their own infirmities and we make no excuse for these. In the awful crisis of Gethsemane the disciples slept. While the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. They slept during the hour of danger and of their Lord’s agony. But Satan and all his followers were wide awake. Judas Iscariot was not asleep in that dread hour. “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion.” In the days of the prophet Isaiah there was a fatal spiritual stillness within the Church and over which God’s prophet mourned. “There is none that calleth upon thy name; that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us because of our iniquities.” Was he not an exception? Yes, he was. “And I will wait upon the Lord that hideth his face from the

house of Jacob, and I will look for him.” These are his words in regard to his own secret exercises before God at the Throne of Grace. May we be like him. Observe also:

II. The Danger and Aggravation of this Sin

“And that knowing the time.”

In the world of nature there are seasons when we can relax. A ship — to use an illustration — may be sailing on a calm sea. The wind may be favourable. The sky clear. All is peaceful. But for the Church of God there are no such seasons in this world. For it, the wind is often contrary, and the hour may be dark and perilous. Its enemies in hell and on earth are ever seeking its hurt. There is not a moment in its life here when it should remain listless or discard “the whole armour of God”, since all the principalities and powers of the kingdom of darkness seek its destruction. The Christian life is not a sleep but an unceasing warfare and a constant watchfulness.

And are there not times in the history of the Church which call for greater vigilance and greater spiritual activity? The days we live in are laden with danger. Whether we think of the political or ecclesiastical world the same thing is true. These truly are times of peril without parallel in history. The shadow of nuclear devastation is over our planet. And this, we fear, is something that we cannot now escape. There are, we believe, those who have the mind of the Lord in relation to this coming woe. Are we not really paving a way for God’s indignation? The very sins for which God, in His fierce anger, destroyed peoples and nations in the past are rearing their ugly heads in our midst and are being condoned and sanctioned by our government, by many godless men and by some of our so-called Church leaders. This should be one of our deepest sorrows, spiritual concern before God.

You recall that when God told Abraham of his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah he immediately prayed that God would spare these cities should He have a remnant there. He was in the path of duty. With a cloud of wrath over those evil places Abraham did not go to sleep. And why does His judgment tarry with us? You remember what is written — “For except the Lord had left its a very small remnant we should have been as Sodom and like unto Gomorrah.” Another prophet prayed in a later age that the Lord in the midst of wrath would remember mercy. Jonah was in the way of disobedience when he slept in the ship. He had been sent to warn the people of Nineveh, and to pray that God might give them a spirit of repentance. Instead of doing this he sought to flee from God’s presence and gave way to slavish fear. Some of its here have seen two generations given over to the sword. We have witnessed two waves of God’s judgment passing over the nations of Europe. “The second woe is past and, behold, the third woe cometh quickly.” How can we be at ease in Zion in such an hour?

But there are graver dangers than these potential physical perils. What of the spiritual realm? What of the cause of Christ in our day? The time was when “Bethel” could be

written on the very portals of the Reformation Church in Scotland. The Lord was there. But as it happened in Israel of old “the boar out of the forest” has broken down her hedges, and the once faithful vine whose branches covered our land is now in a state of decay. Not only so, but there are many men now within her pale whose sole aim is to bring her under the papal yoke, and into the bondage of darkness and idolatry out of which God once delivered her.

The process of spiritual degeneration can hardly go further. And how could such a thing happen? What caused this decay and decline? It all happened “while we slept”. Christ is his parable of the tares reminds us that the enemy, and those who serve him, are ever trying to undo God’s work. It was “while men slept” — the men who ought to have kept watch in the night — that the enemy did his evil work. Look at the Protestant Church in Britain today. Is it not evident that its ministry is largely graceless or unconverted, for no man born of God departs from God’s word either into the way of unbelief or into the way of an unscriptural unity, or as to how God should be worshipped. And ought we not to mourn over this for it is the outcome of our own spiritual slumber and that of our fathers with whom, in the words of the Psalm, we have sinned.

A famous Highland minister, Mr Lachlan Mackenzie, once made a comment in one of his sermons on Christ when he was asleep in the ship while, on the other hand, the disciples were awake and crying to Him for His intervention in their danger. Neither the roaring sea nor the howling wind wakened Him, but the prayers of His disciples did. “As long,” he said, “as we have in the Church of God on earth men and women who keep praying to God for the preservation of His cause, the Church, like the Ark in the flood, is safe.”

But woe to the Church when its watchmen sleep. The cry of the people of God in such an hour is, “Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? Arise; cast us not off for ever. Wherefore hidest thou thy face and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?”. As great storms are approaching our world, it is not the roar of war on the billows of His judgment that shall awake Him out of sleep, but the cries or prayers of His people. This is what brought Him down in other days. “I have heard the groanings of my people who are in Egypt. I have seen their affliction and I am come down to save them.” When Mordecai saw how the enemies of Israel had decreed their destruction he reminded Queen Esther of her urgent duty, and warned her against remaining silent in such an hour. “For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; bitt thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed”. God will have a cause in the world to the end of time, but He has often removed His candlestick out of places which had been highly favoured of Him and transferred it to other places and lands. Why? For the misuse of privilege and the neglect of spiritual duties. O, that the spirit of grace and of supplication might remain with us! If we grieve Him, He may leave us. It is easy to alienate God’s presence from our midst, but it is not so easy to bring Him back again. This is one of the solemn lessons before us in God’s Word. We know of many places where the Lord once tarried but where He is now a stranger. The cry of the prophet is full of instruction: “O, the hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in

the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?" There is only one answer to this question. Their own sin and their spiritual unconcern in the presence of many evils had alienated His presence from their midst. Although the Lord shall never utterly forsake His own people in His covenant or in His promise, this denial of His presence and saving power is the greatest chastisement that He can bring upon them in this world. It were well for us if we could say with the Psalmist, "My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say more than they that watch for the morning." And listen to the voice of His Bride, "Until the day break and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense." These words express the soul exercises of the Church in other days, when, in the way of prayer and patience, she remained on her knees. Notice also:

III. The Duty Urged

"Let us, therefore, cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light ."

There are garments which are appropriate for the night as there are garments which are suitable for the day. It would be wrong and unbecoming to appear in the day time in the garments which clothe us in the night. And the call of God to His people is to put off their former conversation, or the habits which dominated their lives in the days of their ignorance. As the children of the day, they should discard these forever. All imitation of an ungodly world they should for ever forsake. "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them." This, we know, is a continuous exercise of soul with God's people. The works which they seek to put off would still cling to them so that, in the words of another, they are always beginning. Not till they close their eyes in time shall they be made perfect in holiness.

You notice that as they cast off the works of darkness they put on the armour of light. We are commanded to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and to make no provision for the flesh. As the children of the day, they are in conflict with the powers of darkness, but since they have put on the Lord Jesus Christ no enemy can prevail against them. He is an almighty Saviour. When David went forward to engage the giant of Gath he was not afraid. "I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom thou hast defied."

The Scriptures speak of the believer as clothed in Christ as his righteousness, his strength, his light and his salvation; but the word which is here used means also those weapons of our spiritual warfare which the apostle mentions in his letter to the Ephesians. And how adequate these are for all those who fight the good fight of faith! Hell has never forged a weapon, and never shall, which shall overcome God's child if in his armour he be clad, and if these weapons he rightly employs. This is what John Bunyan discovered when, with the Sword of God's Word in his hand, he challenged the great adversary. "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me." "The armour of light." "The Sun of Righteousness." "For the Lord our God is a sun and shield." These words proclaim that

while all the graces, all the provisions and promises of God are at the disposal of the Church of Christ in her spiritual warfare and perseverance He is, at the same time, present with her Himself. Therefore, no weapon formed against her shall ever prosper. But the warfare must go on, till we, by God's grace, can say with Paul: "I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day." Finally, notice:

IV. The Anticipated Salvation

"For now is our salvation nearer than when we believed."

The people to whom Paul wrote these words were already in a state of salvation; but the end of their faith was their final salvation from all conflict, from all darkness, from all sin and from all sorrow. And such a state can be enjoyed only on the other side of the "river" — with Christ in Heaven. Not till then shall our warfare be over. Each breath we breathe, each step we take, brings us nearer to our heavenly Home. What does this salvation imply? One of Paul's sorrows on earth came through the buffetings of Satan and through the untiring evil of sin working in his members. This is the plague of our hearts, but soon we shall enter upon that glorious liberty of the children of God and shall be made perfect in holiness.

Sin is a darkness; but "there shall be no night there". Night shall be swallowed up in an everlasting day. There shall be no night of sorrow through temptation, fear or loneliness in that place where the Lamb, Who is the light thereof, shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. Neither shall they hunger any more, for He who is in the midst of the Throne shall feed them and lead them to living fountains of water. In His presence there is a fulness of joy, and at His right hand are pleasures for evermore. And we ought to live each day as if it were our last day here. We should always be ready; for we know not the hour when our Lord shall come. Have you ever noticed how those who are on a voyage across a sea stand in readiness to disembark when the harbour comes into view? Those who are going to the heavenly country may even now, by faith, view the desired haven and the fair shore of a better world. May he find us ready when He comes, with our lamps lit and our staff in our hand, and ready to disembark on the shore of that country wherein dwelleth righteousness.

But the night is far spent, the day is at hand. It may be that there are some listening to my voice who are moving toward a lost eternity. Is it not time you should leave the way of sin and return to God! Why should you die? "Behold, now is the day of salvation." Our earnest exhortation to you is — "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead and Christ shall give thee Light."

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