

The difficult of staying awake
Mark 13:24-37

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You're driving home late one night. The highway is dark. The car is warm. The lines on the highway begin to blur together as you drive mile, after mile, after mile.

Have you been there before? Road fatigue? Falling asleep at the wheel?

Driving is difficult and dangerous enough, but when you add fatigue and sleepiness to the mix, driving becomes lethal.

How do you stay awake?

Years ago, the well-known Evangelical theologian, James Packer entered into a long-standing discussion among those who believe firmly in the need for and the possibility of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The discussion was this: how can we know the will of God?

Many had given answers to this question, but the answers always seemed to have to do with figuring out what God was doing and following it or figuring out what God wanted you to do and following it. Packer's illustration was much more helpful. He said basically that the real question was not so much knowing God's will as doing God's will, and that doing God's will was like driving a car: you get into a car, knowing pretty well where you want to go and why, and then it is a matter of making sure that you drive well and that you attend to the signs along the road. You might be driving to your destination just fine, when all of a sudden a deer jumps out in front of you; so you take the appropriate action to miss the deer and keep on going.

Even if you don't know where you are going, the rules are still the same: drive well! You, your family, your church... may not know exactly where you are going, but you can do certain things to stay in the will of God: drive well!

- You keep your car well conditioned; you keep your spiritual life well conditioned. (If some people put as much care in their spiritual life as in their cars, or bicycles, or snowboards, or whatever means of transportation you use, the question of doing the will of God would be a lot easier!)
- You make sure that you have enough fuel to get you where you are going; you make sure that you have spiritual fuel for the road.

- When problems arise, you take action, in your car, and in your spiritual life.

But, Packer did not deal with another problem: what happens when, along the way, you start to wear out and grow weary? What happens on that highway, at night, after having driven already a fair distance, you start to nod off? How do you stay awake?

What happens, when, along the way of your Christian life, you've been a Christian some time, part of a Christian family, maybe going back some generations, and you've come a long way, and you start to get tired? I don't mean you get tired of being a Christian; I mean that you get lulled to sleep, you start taking things for granted, and then, before you realize it, you are asleep. You start to lose your focus, to lose your drive, to lose your attentiveness to your surroundings - such that when things happen, you aren't ready for them.

Now getting tired spiritually is different in one way from getting tired driving your car. The main difference is this: in the car, you know that if you nod off, you're done for! The car: in the ditch! In your spiritual life, you nod off, well, that's OK, I mean, who will care, who will notice?

For generations the people of Israel waited for God, only to fall asleep when the trip was longer than they had thought it would be. There was that marvelous exodus out of Egypt, but then 40 years of wandering. They waited another few hundred years until God raised up David to unite them as a people, but then fell asleep again as their kingdom was divided up into ever smaller pieces. There was that marvelous exodus out of Babylon, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but then another few hundred years until the Maccabee brothers tried to revive the kingdom of David. But that was short-lived and the people waited and waited.

But throughout the history of Israel, there were always men and sometimes women who were raised up by God to wake the people up. They were people like Moses, like Isaiah, like Elijah. They were prophets.

One day, one such a man appeared in the wilderness near Jerusalem, telling the people that the big day that they had waited for so long was approaching. John the Baptist told them to get their lives in order and to be ready for that day.

The day came quickly, but when it came the people did not see what they thought they were going to see. Rather, what they found was a man who was a lot like John the Baptist, a prophet, but one who seemed to speak with greater authority than other prophets. Still, he was a prophet. He was telling them to get ready for an even bigger event than his appearance.

Ah, now they knew: this was the one who was going to bring Israel to greatness. He was the one who would ride into Jerusalem and force the enemy Rome to bow at the feet of Israel. And then he would ride toward Rome and cause the whole empire to come under the power of God. This is what they had been waiting for.

They were awake now. They rubbed their eyes. They couldn't believe that they were living the very days of Elijah, the days of David, the days of Moses.

And then he let them down. He didn't attack the Romans. He didn't condemn the sinners. He didn't shake the foundations of corruption. He healed the sinners. He extended a hand to the enemy.

But, he did point a finger directly at the religious establishment of the people of Israel and say that they would put him to death. And because of that, and because they would put to death those who adhered to Jesus' word, the judgment of God was coming on Israel and upon Jerusalem in the same way that it had come upon Egypt and upon Babylon. And so he said to the people:

"Watch. Wake up! Don't you see that you have become Babylon, concerning whose judgment and fall Isaiah had written: "The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light." (Isaiah 13.10); now it will be said of Jerusalem! Don't you see that have become the new Babylon, whose fall was to be preceded by the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds (Dan 7.13)? Learn from the fig tree: the fruit is there and the harvest is near. "

Why does Jesus speak in these fierce tones? Because Jerusalem was about to put to death the true embodiment of the people of Israel, Jesus, the one who carried the authority of God, and who gave that authority to his followers. The people had fallen asleep; they had become deceived by those among them who wanted power, not to serve, but to have their way over the people. And asleep, they were going to do the worst deed imaginable.

The result? The end of Israel's dreams did come, just as it had for Babylon: the Son of Man did appear on the clouds; Jerusalem was judged and it was judged within the life time of many of those who heard Jesus speak prophetically just 40 years after his appearance. Those who were awake before the end came in AD 70 knew what was going to happen, and fled. Those who woke up as the fires burned through the streets of Jerusalem woke up too late, like the driver awakes just as his car heads off the road.

It is important that you know this part of the history, our history, and why we are here. The Fall of Jerusalem that Jesus predicted in Mark 13 was the end of the beginning. Israel had thought that it was the end of the story, that what God was about was bringing Israel to glory and making the whole world bow at Israel's feet. But Israel was just God's way of getting salvation started in the world. It wasn't Israel that was going to save the world; it was God, and He was going to save the whole world. This is why the people didn't accept Jesus.

This was the end of the beginning, but it was also the beginning of the end, the beginning of God's plan to bring salvation to all men and women, not just to Israel. To us.

And so, what about us?

Well, unfortunately, after some years of being “God’s people”, the same thing began to happen to us. After some years of being “God’s people, we begin to feel pretty good about ourselves. We began to believe in our own righteousness, that God was primarily concerned about us. It didn’t take long for the Church to stop being a missionary church and concerned only for those already within the walls. It created temples, and priests, and a whole hierarchy of people to maintain what we had. It forgot that this is exactly what had happened to Israel.

Oh, the Church never stopped being active. It went about its business; it produced great art and great thinkers. But, it forgot its mission; it was lulled into a sense of false security about itself. Like teenagers who drive at 100 miles per hour thinking that nothing can happen to them -- though never stating such a belief aloud -- the church continued its “progress” thinking that things would always continue the same. It ignored the rise of Islam... until it was too late. It ignored colonial practices ... until it was too late. It ignored the rise of Enlightenment atheism ... unless it was too late.

Yet, throughout the history of the Church, God in Christ has still appeared with prophetic words of warning: wake up, continue your watch, don’t be lulled to sleep again. Don’t lose sight of who you really are. You were not saved from wrath just to sit back and enjoy yourselves. You were saved to go out and share what you have with those who do not have it. It is the whole world that I am interested in, says the Lord, not just in you!

Jesus’ words sometimes come to us through prophetic words from members of the church. Sometimes the warnings or wake-up calls come to us as we look at the world around us, our world, and see mad pre-dawn shopping sprees to begin the season of the Lord’s birth, as we see politicians juggling for power, or as we see the murder of a youth on the steps of one of God’s own churches in Toronto. That church’s pastor, Andrew King, said it all in talking about that murder: This is a wake-up call!

So, the wake-up call comes. If it is timely, we have an opportunity to right the car’s direction before we end up in the ditch. But, what about if it is almost too late? What about if we have been asleep for longer than we had thought and the car’s front wheels are now in the ditch? How shall we then respond?

The gentle, well-known, hymn that we sang just a little while ago, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”, was written by one of the greatest preachers in the American Episcopal (or Anglican) Church, Phillips Brooks. (All of us who are Anglicans thank God for Phillips Brooks, because we have so few other great preachers to give thanks for!)

Brooks wrote the hymn just months after the end of the American Civil War, a war in which more Americans lost their lives than in all the other wars in which America has been involved all put together. The country was still reeling from the devastation and losses of the war. The

gentleness of the hymn, which expresses a hope for righteousness and justice, belies the smell of war still in the air.

It was written after the fact, after the country had gone off the road. The Civil War was a wake-up call to America. Was it too late though? The war had been fought by God-fearing Christians on both sides. How could this be!? Something had gone wrong, and that something was that America that had not dealt with and had ignored a profound injustice, namely, the slavery of other humans. Brooks, a staunch anti-slavery advocate, had stood solidly on the side of the North, and he didn't believe it was too late. He believed that God could still bring good out of this situation.

But, how? It would have been very easy in the waning years of the war for the North to have begun to see itself as something special, to have lorded it over the south, to have proclaimed itself more righteous than the South and that that is why they were winning and eventually won. But unlike the leaders of Israel, who thought themselves more righteous than others and were eventually destroyed, unlike the leaders of Rome, who thought themselves invincible, only to see their Empire crumble beneath them, the President, Abraham Lincoln, took a very different tack.

Many of you probably think, as many Americans do, that Thanksgiving, which Americans just celebrated this last Thursday, derives from the fact that the Puritans ate with the Indians to give thanks for the harvest before the winter. No doubt they did. But, the reason that Americans celebrate Thanksgiving when they do in November, rather than in the early Fall, when we still do, as the English have done for centuries and as the Pilgrims probably did, too, is because of Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation from October 1863.

The turning point of the war had occurred that summer: the Battle of Gettysburg, which, along with the other battles of 1863, brought the total number of dead to well over 100,000. Lincoln wanted to mark the occasion. How? The logical choice would be to give thanks for our victories and to proclaim our righteousness. Lincoln chose otherwise. Oh, he would give thanks for victories that were bringing the bloodshed to a close, and for the prosperity of the nation that would enable the nation to progress after the conflict was over, but that is not what he sets aside the fourth Thursday of November for. Here is how the Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1863 concludes:

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and voice by the whole American People. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which

we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union.

My friends, I believe that most of you here know what God's will is for your lives: for your family's life, for your Christian school, for your Christian business, even for the country. But, sometimes we are lulled into a false sense of security, believing that things will continue as they always have, believing in our own Christian growth in righteousness.

Others of you don't know what the road ahead of us holds for us.

But for both groups the advice drawn from today's Gospel is the same: be alert, drive well, use the tools that God has given you by His Spirit. But also be realistic: know that you will be lulled to sleep by the long journey. Pray the Lord of the harvest to keep you from falling asleep, to send you prophets from whom you can learn. Open the window, let the fresh air come in and revive you, and as you do listen for the Spirit is saying to the Churches. Read the news discerningly, not just for what it tells you, but for what God says to you as you read. Talk to your companions on the journey; help them stay awake, too.

Watch. Stay awake. Do not be deceived. And listen. Let us pray that we are not already asleep and that, if we are lulled toward sleep, that it is not too late.

Sources:

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