

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 11, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

SONG OF SOLOMON 5:2

“I slept, but my heart was awake.”

THE WAKEFUL HEART

What does this strange verse mean? Picture for a moment a mother, asleep beside her sleeping baby. The woman is asleep but let that little morsel of humanity kick the end of the crib, or utter the faintest cry, and at once that mother is awake! Asleep -- yes -- but her heart is awake!

I have heard of a mathematician wrestling for hours with a problem, and then going to bed with the problem still unsolved, and then waking in the morning to find that in his sleep he had solved it! Asleep -- yes -- but his heart was awake!

On one occasion, I had a similar experience with a sermon. I retired in the small hours of the morning with an unfinished sermon on my mind. When I woke up a few hours later, it was to discover that I had dreamed the sermon complete, and I was able to commit the conclusion of it to paper in a few minutes. I am just indolent enough to regret that such a happy issue out of my afflictions has happened only once!

Or think of a habit like eating. As you sit at table, perhaps discussing the events of the day with your family, and at the same time enjoying a juicy steak, you are not conscious of the fact that your lower jaw is moving up and down 70 or 80 times a minute! A part of you is asleep while you eat, but nevertheless there is a very important subconscious part of you which is alert and fully awake, otherwise you could not perform the act of eating at all.

Now lift this thought into the realm of the soul. We can't be thinking deliberately about God every moment of the day. To try to do that would be neither desirable nor healthy for any one of us. Religious cranks and fanatics are people who try to do that; and they become obsessed with the awful solemnities of the faith; and it often makes them mentally unbalanced.

Someone has said that no one ought to go to bed at night without taking a look at the stars, in order to tranquilize his anxious and tumultuous thoughts and to rebuke all his mean and petty ways. But it is surely a good thing that through the day, with all its tasks and duties, the stars are hidden from our sight! We all have our work to attend to, and we must give to that work our undivided attention throughout the most of our waking hours each day.

But what distinguishes the Christian from the worldly is this -- while the Christian does his daily toil conscientiously and well, concentrating upon it and working hard -- nevertheless, at the same time, his heart is awake toward God.

To say that a person's heart is awake toward God simply means that his subconscious self

is in tune with God and is controlled by God. You see, in a very real sense you are like an iceberg. Seven-eighths of an iceberg is below the surface of the water; and seven-eighths of your personality is under the surface of consciousness. Your conscious actions in the past have left their mark upon your character; and those impressions, in the form of habits and sentiments, are all stored away within the depths of your mind. One thinks of Mr. Lincoln's comment when he said he did not like a certain Cabinet member's face. "But the poor man is not responsible for his face," replied his friend. "Every man over forty is responsible for his face," countered Lincoln.

"Our deeds still travel with us from afar,
And what we have been makes us what we are."

Now, a truly committed Christian is one who, day by day and year by year, keeps storing his subconscious mind with thoughts of Christ, and of those things which, in the words of St. Paul, are "pure and lovely and honest and of good report."

How can we do this? How can we lay up treasure where moth and rust shall not corrupt?

We can do it in only one way, and that is by planning our conscious life in such a way that we shall make time for regular acts of devotion and meditation and thanksgiving. This is the tremendous value of set periods of prayer -- definite times each day which we set apart for reflection and spiritual meditation.

There is a man sunbathing on the beach -- allowing the health-giving and body-building properties of the sun's light and heat to fortify him against winter illness. And there is a man on his knees in devotion -- allowing the soul-renewing rays of God's holy love to fortify him against the assaults of evil.

One is reminded of the French peasant who used to come daily at noon, in his blue smock, from the field where he worked, to meditate in the little church nearby. The priest asked him one day what he thought and saw as he knelt and gazed upon the Crucifix, and the man's answer was, "I look at Jesus, and Jesus looks at me" -- and in that very act of devotion the man's soul was refreshed and fortified.

Our Lord said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"; and it is in such moments of devotion that we really see God, and then go back into the world to help others to see Him too.

The point is this, by short, frequent acts of devotion you bring your whole personality into unanimous submission to God, and you thus create within yourself a wakefulness of heart.

Have set times for devotion, even as you have set times for taking your meals. It is almost more important that you pray when you have promised to pray than that you pray often or long. Jeremy Taylor, the famous seventeenth century English saint and scholar, made the striking of the clock at the hours the reminder to him of God, and at the sound of the chime he would offer a one sentence prayer.

I read somewhere that John Wesley, through many years of his life, prayed for five minutes of every waking hour. Most of us would find such a strenuous spiritual discipline so exacting that we simply could not carry it out. But surely all of us could set aside three regular periods a day in which to speak to God and allow Him to speak to us -- in the morning (three minutes), before the day's work begins; at noon (three minutes) during the lunch break; and at night (four minutes) before we go to rest. Don't tell me you can't begin by devoting these ten minutes a day to the cultivation of your devotional life.

In a recent television special on the subject of jogging they gave this advice to would-be joggers: "Start slowly and stay with it." That is good advice for those who are in earnest about developing a meaningful devotional life. "Start slowly" -- 10 minutes a day -- "and stay with it." Keep at it, day in and day out, and you will soon be spending much more than ten minutes a day in devotion.

Read a verse or two from the Gospels or the Psalms (carry a New Testament in your pocket or purse); offer a short prayer asking pardon for sin, thanking God for His goodness, or asking Him for His guidance, or praying for someone who badly needs your prayers; and keep at it day in and day out, and see how real God will become to you!

It is by these short frequent acts of devotion that we fortify ourselves against the day when sudden temptation or some trial hammers at the door of life.

Here are two professing Christian men suddenly faced with a sharp temptation to do wrong; one gives in to the temptation, and life for him is never the same again. The other resists the hateful thing, and his character is enriched and strengthened in the process. Now why does the one man yield and the other resist? Just because the one man, by walking with God, had been recruiting battalions throughout the years, and in the moment of peril, those unseen battalions, watchful and alert, came to the rescue. The other man, by sheer neglect of his soul, had no such allies upon which to fall back.

When people yield to temptation, they sometimes say, in excuse, that they were "taken off their guard." But no one is ever really taken off his guard. When we are unfaithful to God, and to our own soul by neglecting the means of grace which God has provided for our spiritual strengthening, then we are really leaving the back door open for what we think is a surprise visit of the devil. No one ever falls merely because of the suddenness of a temptation, no matter of what kind the temptation may be. That person's past unfaithfulness to God has always prepared the way for Satan's victory.

We preachers are always telling people (and telling ourselves), and rightly so, that God can do things for us, that Jesus can deliver us from the bondage of bad habit, prejudice, indifference and every other form of sin. The message of the New Testament, in a sentence, is this: "Victory through Christ!" And this is how God does it -- He offers us the means of grace -- the Bible, prayer, worship, Christian fellowship and service, and the stewardship of time, talents and treasure. And regular, deliberate, punctual devotion on our part is cooperation with God in the cultivation of our soul, and the enrichment and strengthening of our whole personality.

Take the common and loathsome temptation of evil thoughts. A man confessed recently that he had had in the past what we all suffer from at times -- strong and sudden temptations to unclean thinking. His method of dealing with these evil thoughts was simple and effective. He accustomed himself, whenever the invasion came, to recall a definite image of the wounds of Christ. Whenever the bad imagery flooded his mind, he would drive it out by a steady meditation upon those wounds caused by our sin. After some time, he discovered that, quite unconsciously, without willing effort on his part, these holy images would arise in his mind. They appeared, involuntarily, a split second earlier than the evil thought that was already on the horizon of his conscious thinking. So, when the evil thought presented itself at the gateway of the mind, it found that mind occupied and absorbed in thoughts of the Lord by Whose stripes we are healed.

You see, if we are going to experience victory in our Christian lives, then we must cooperate with God in the cultivation of our redeemed personality. Certainly, our salvation is not achieved by our own merit, but is entirely the result of God's mercy and grace. We don't deserve salvation, and we can't earn it. We can only receive it gratefully as a gift from God through Christ.

Nevertheless, living the Christian life calls for discipline, hard work and sacrifice on our part -- it involves struggle and costly effort.

You remember how Henry Drummond so arrestingly stated this great truth. He said, "The Christian life is like a club in which the entrance fee is absolutely nothing, but the annual subscription is everything you've got!"

There are people, alas, in every church, who are industrious in everything except the cultivation and nurture of their soul. Even as we recognize that salvation is entirely the gift of God, we also remember, and it is a sobering thought, that Jesus taught that we must ask and seek and knock; and method and discipline in our devotional life is just the way we Christians have of asking and seeking and knocking, so making it possible for God to do for us what we so much want Him to do.

But if the heart is awoken toward God, we may be up to the neck in our varied duties and occupations, but we will possess the secret of spiritual poise and power. The spiritual life may appear to be asleep in the midst of our thronging duties and cares; but the heart that is awake toward God will always stand guard over the inner citadel of the soul.

"I slept, but my heart was awake!"

AMEN.