

## **SLEEPING DURING WORSHIP IS DEADLY!**

**Today's Text: Acts 20: 1- 12**

### **Extracts:**

***Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. ... And in a window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep; and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third storey and was taken up dead. But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him, said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him." Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed. And they brought the young man in alive, and they were not a little comforted [Acts 20: 7-12].***

*6-year old Dominick Andujor and his 12-year old sister lived in Camden, New Jersey, an impoverished city across the river from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.<sup>1</sup> Their mother was still in hospital after a recent surgery. So, a 14-year old girl had been helping to look after them. On Saturday, September 1, 2012, while the kids were asleep, Oswald Rivera, a 31-year old neighbour that was reportedly high on PCP-laced marijuana, attacked them, killing Dominick and seriously injuring his sister. But the teen girl looking after them escaped because she was wide awake at the time. Rivera has since been arrested, facing trial for murder.*

*The attacker succeeded because he caught the kids fast asleep. There is a spiritual lesson for us there. Satan, like that murderer, is out to kill, steal or destroy believers wherever he finds them sleeping, especially in the house of God during worship. When we fall asleep there, we make it easy for him to attack us physically and spiritually. Can you afford to let him? In this week's Bible story, Paul was preaching during a Sunday Communion service at Troas and a young man fell to his death while he was fast asleep! What if he had died before he had had time to repent and be saved? Some of us fall asleep during worship. What are you going to do about it before it becomes deadly-physically or spiritually? There is a message for all of us in this week's study. Read on!*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Bruce Shipkowski, "NJ man arrested in deadly attack on sleeping kids," *Associated Press*, Mon. Sep. 3, 2012; <http://news.yahoo.com/nj-man-arrested-deadly-attack-sleeping-kids-161411123.html>

## 1. Background: A young man falls asleep during a Sunday Communion service

There is the story of a pastor who found himself in an embarrassing situation. He was preaching on a subject that he considered very important to the top members of his congregation. But, just at the point where he thought that he was hitting some home runs, he heard heavy snoring from the front row. It was the Chairman of the Parochial Committee that was fast asleep! How was he going to wake him up without offending him or the elders of the church? An idea struck him. He said to his listeners, “Those of you who want to go to heaven when you die, stand up!” Everybody jumped up except the snoring old man. Then, the pastor spoke again, “Those who want to go to hell should remain standing.” Everybody sat down. The noise finally woke up the old man who jumped up, looking embarrassed as people started laughing. He looked at the pastor and said, “I don’t know why they are laughing but only you and I are standing!”

Sleeping in the church during worship is becoming an issue in many houses of God. There could be multiple reasons for it. For example, in the face of dwindling employment opportunities in most economies of the world, people are working harder than before. They may be doing two or more jobs or running multiple businesses at a time. They may be doing shift work that they go to before or after coming to church. Apart from physical exhaustion, some people are dealing with emotional and health issues and they may be on medications that send them to sleep every now and then. Yet, when they come to the house of God, they are required to concentrate so that they can reap the spiritual benefits of showing up at all. How can we deal with such pressures without losing out on both ends? *Is it possible to come to church and feel refreshed even when we are tired? Such questions and more are the ones that we shall attempt to answer in this week’s study.*

The Bible story comes from Paul’s last missionary journey when he went to Troas for a goodbye service. He had stayed in Greece for three months and was about to sail to Syria. However, when the Jews plotted against him, he decided to return through Macedonia. He sent ahead of him to Troas some companions during his journey to Asia (Minor), such as Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, Gaius of Derbe, Timothy and Tychicus, and Trophimus of Asia [Acts 20: 1-4]. The story continues as follows:

### a) Paul ministers at Troas

Paul and his team stayed in Troas for seven days. Then, *on the first day of the week, “when the disciples came together to break bread,”* Paul decided to give them a message because he was departing the following day [v. 7]. The first day of the week is Sunday and “coming together to break bread” means a Communion service (called Holy Mass in the orthodox churches). This passage confirms that going to church on Sunday was already well established in the early church. For example, writing to

the Corinthian church, Paul said, “On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come” [1 Cor. 16: 2]. Again, that suggests Sunday as their day of worship.

Paul was about to depart finally. That is, they were not likely to see him again before his death. Therefore, that Communion service was going to be a special one. He was going to break bread and eat it with them. He was going to speak with them to make sure that the gospel of Christ was firmly planted in their hearts and actions. It was a very important occasion requiring his listeners to pay attention and be alert.

b) *Eutychus falls asleep*

We are told that Paul “spoke to them and continued his message until midnight” [Acts 20: 7]. If we assume that the service began in the morning and Paul was still preaching to them at midnight, we are looking at over twelve hours! How many worshippers today can stand a service that lasts more than three hours? If Paul were to do that in the modern church, you would see many people slip out. Sooner than later, you would have empty pews. Those of them who might not find it politically correct to leave early might be struggling to stay awake or alert all the time!

A young man called Eutychus was sitting by a window on the third storey [story-US] of the building during that long service. Soon, he found himself “sinking into a deep sleep.” He struggled to stay awake but as Paul did not stop speaking, he was “overcome by sleep [and] fell down from the third storey and was taken up dead” [v. 9].

We do not know at what point the young man fell asleep because we are told that he had struggled to stay awake. While struggling to stay awake, he could not have concentrated on Paul’s message! How often have you found yourself in a similar situation? You are present in the church but absent-minded. Your mind is wandering over so many issues that have nothing to do with that day’s worship or message. You may be under pressure to leave early for an important business or family appointment. You did not budget for that “unnecessary” delay because of that old and rambling preacher! If you have your way, they should shut him up and let the service end as soon as possible!

The problem, however, is that ***God may be using that long service to deliver you from danger out there. The message could be for you, for your deliverance, but are you paying attention?*** What if the young man that fell to his death had not given his life to Christ? Could he face his judgment and expect God’s mercy simply because he came to church that day? ***How many of us fall asleep when we come to worship? You do not***

***have to close your eyes to do so. When your attention flags from the message or worship, you are asleep- spiritually. When you are impatient to leave the presence of the One who owns time and space, God Himself, you have fallen asleep.*** Wake up or face that young man's fate!

c) *But God shows him mercy*

But God showed him mercy. Paul stopped preaching, rushed down through the staircase (there were no elevators then!) and fell on the dead young man. He embraced him and said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him" [v.10]. Paul returned to the Communion service. When it was over, he talked a long while with the worshippers "even till daybreak." Thereafter, he departed. Meanwhile, the people were greatly comforted because the dead young man had been brought in alive [vv. 11-12].

Paul's faith and God's mercy are abundantly demonstrated here. He prayed and believed that God would restore the dead man back to life. On that faith, he went back to complete his pastoral work. God gave the young man the privilege to come back alive to complete his mission on earth. God showed him mercy.

***From the foregoing, we learn that sleeping during worship can be deadly. We may not die physically as in the case of Eutychus but we could be spiritually hurt.*** The word of God says that whoever breaks a hedge will be bitten by a serpent [Eccl. 10: 8]. ***The place of worship is the most fertile place for demonic forces to operate because it is supposedly a gathering of Satan's enemies!*** Can you imagine how dangerous it is to expose yourself to spiritual infection by falling asleep or being distracted during worship? You can do something about it!

## 2. How to fight distractions during worship

***It is better to be absent than to be absent-minded.*** Therefore, you can fight distractions, such as sleeping during worship, by following the following simple steps:

a) *Know what is distracting you*

The first thing to do is to identify what distracts you each time you have to do what pertains to God, such as reading the Bible, praying or concentrating during church service. We know that ***external factors*** will always be there. For example, there are self-serving pastors and priests, who see worship days as their five minutes in the sun! They will do everything to tie you down in the church premises on worship days. If you try to show them that you are time conscious, they call you arrogant. Well,

as long as church is a voluntary organisation, you are free to go to another parish or church for your own sanity and spiritual well-being.

***In most cases, however, most causes of distraction are self-inflicted*** because of our flagging faith. We may claim overwork and yet we have time to watch sports or movies on television for long hours at a stretch. We can read a business report even in the bed room but fall asleep as soon as we open a page of the Bible. We allow worry over our finances to surface during worship but keep that out when we are drinking with friends and colleagues at work or in restaurants. It is a question of knowing your priorities.

Take the case of the five foolish virgins in the Parable of the Ten Virgins [Matt. 25: 1-13]. They took their lamps but without extra oil since they did not know the time that the bridegroom would come. In no time, they ran out of oil and the five wise ones could not afford to give them part of theirs. So, while they went out searching for oil, the groom came and went in with the five wise virgins. By the time the foolish ones returned, it was too late. The lesson that Jesus said we should learn from that story is to watch because we do not know the day or the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. It could be at the very moment that you fell asleep during worship!

b) *Be vigilant!*

That you can identify what distracts you and deal with it is not enough because all of us can easily become complacent again. You must be vigilant, that is, not to take anything for granted. Young Eutychus could not have imagined that the Sunday Communion service that he was used to would run into midnight. Therefore, you must ***plan for the unexpected that can disrupt your routines.***

When Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him to the Garden of Gethsemane, He told them, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.” But when He returned a while later, were they sitting? No! He found them sleeping. Surprised, Jesus said, “What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” [Matt. 26: 36-41]. ***Unless you are vigilant, you may not be able to spend one hour with Christ during worship without sleeping.***

c) *Be alert!*

Most of us who have the facility on their mobile phones receive alerts from our banks any time there is a new transaction. We are told what the transaction is all about and what impact it has had on our bank balance. What that does is to alert you in case there is an unauthorized transaction

or you have the need to replenish your balances. In like manner, your spirit should alert you when Satan tries to distract your attention, especially with sleep, during a worship service. Such a distraction is spiritual warfare. That was why Jesus told Peter, James and John, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” [v. 41].

See what a different being you can become when you choose to fast or do night vigil. Ordinarily, you may wilt in a few hours when you miss your breakfast. But when you are fasting, you do not feel any hunger pangs! In like manner, you easily fall asleep at night. But during a night vigil, you may not feel any sleep at all. What is making the difference? It is the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus has said, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” [Jn 6: 63].

From the foregoing, we can conclude that *you can do whatever you set your mind to do. If you want to come to church and remain alert, no matter how long the service lasts, you can do it.* All you need to do is to have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 16]. He never sought His own will but that of His Father who sent Him [Jn 5: 30].

### 3. Conclusion: Could you not watch one hour with Christ?

Serving God is voluntary because He has given you the free will to do whatever you choose. Nevertheless, serving Him diligently is imperative because that is the whole duty of man on earth [Eccl. 12: 13]. As a person sows, so s(he) shall reap [Gal. 6: 7]. If you have chosen to come before the Lord in His holy house to worship, that is not the time to fall asleep or be distracted by your earthly cares. As Jesus asked Peter, James and John in the Garden of Gethsemane, He is asking you the same question each time you step into your place of worship: “Could you not watch with Me one hour?”

Sleeping during worship is dangerous to your spiritual health.