

“A Long Winter’s Nap”
The Gospel According to Mark 14:32-42
December 23rd, 2018

Are you familiar with the poem entitled, “A Visit from St. Nicholas”? I’m sure you are. It’s better known by its opening words:

*“’Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house,
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;”*

Its author, Clement Clarke Moore, was born in 1779. He was an author and noted Hebrew scholar. Legend has it that he wrote this poem on Christmas Eve 1822 during a sleigh ride home after buying a turkey for his family.

Moore read the poem to his wife and six children the night he wrote it, and supposedly thought no more about it. But a family friend heard about it and submitted the poem to a newspaper in upstate New York, which published it anonymously the following Christmas. Moore's poem immediately caught the attention and imagination of the state, then the nation, and then the world. We read it regularly each year as part of our family Christmas celebration.

As I prepared this message, I thought about the lines *after* the opening stanza:

*“The children were nestled all snug in their beds;
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And ma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap,*

This stanza speaks of sleep, the blessed reward for the Redeemed of the Lord. *Don’t think so?* This is **Psalm 127:2** – “*It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep.*” Often in the Bible, sleep is a metaphor for *death*; those who sleep in Jesus – rest in Jesus – will be raised again from the dead at the last day to be forever with God.

Today’s sermon text mentions sleep, though not in a positive way. Jesus found His disciples fast asleep three different times in these 11 verses from **Mark 14:32-42**. Their capacity to be asleep at the switch while Jesus poured out His heart to God the Father in prayer is simply amazing, and hard to believe. But, then, when we consider our own propensity to sleep through important times and events, it’s not that strange after all!

Here, in the Garden of Gethsemane, according to author and theologian Sinclair Ferguson is “one of the most sacred and solemn scenes in the entire Bible.” (Ferguson, 238)

Mark 14:32-42:

³² Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³ And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. ³⁴ Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, *even* to death. Stay here and watch."

³⁵ He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. ³⁶ And He said, "Abba, Father, all things *are* possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You *will*."

³⁷ Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak."

³⁹ Again He went away and prayed, and spoke the same words. ⁴⁰ And when He returned, He found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. ⁴¹ Then He came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

There are three points evident in this text, the first of them is **The Spiritual Pain Jesus Endured**. The first indicator of this comes in the second half of verse 33 – "...He began to be troubled and deeply distressed." The term 'distressed' was deep emotional distress. Then, in verse 34, Jesus said, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, *even* to death."

Jesus was becoming deeply distressed as His time of arrest drew near. He knew the cross was coming and what that entailed. "But as He looked into the cup He must drink that night, He was astonished and overcome with horror. No human being, however great his or her anguish, has ever experienced anything like this!" (Hughes, 166)

The cup mentioned in verse 36 was not a literal cup. Rather, it was a symbol of the outpoured judgment of God. This is consistent with the Old Testament prophets who used it that way (**Is 51:17 & 22; Ezek 23:31-33; Hab 2:16**). And it was full to the rim with human sin. Commentator Kent Hughes notes, in the cup "(Jesus) saw all the brutality of a thousand "Killing Fields" – all the whoring of earthly civilizations – blasphemy – profanity – a cup brimming with jealousy, hatred, and covetousness. Jesus saw Hell opened for Him..." (Hughes, 167)

Several documentaries have focused on the physical pain Jesus suffered. What He suffered spiritually was so much more than mere physical torture. This was eternal death in the place of His people, so that He would pay for all of our sins. Jesus would suffer for every one of those souls the Father had given to Him, and that He came to earth to save. That meant that He had to suffer being forsaken by God the Father and taking upon Himself all the pains of hell. Jesus was now facing all of this as the time drew very near; and it was almost too much even for God the Son.

As we apply this point, we realize that Jesus has entered into *our* darkness and experienced such grief as He did for *our* comfort. He understands our darkest hours! More so, it means that

Jesus has drawn the sting from our darkest hour for He has entered our God-forsaken condition so that we might share His God-accepted relationship to the Father! (Ferguson, 239)

We've seen the **Spiritual Pain Jesus Endured**; we next see **The Spiritual Poverty the Disciples Demonstrated**. In verses 37, 39 and 40, Jesus finds His disciples sleeping when He had instructed them to instead be watching and praying. Back in verse 27, Jesus prophesied that they would desert him. Yet, here in the Garden, with Judas Iscariot on the loose, betraying Him to the Roman authorities, Jesus needed His men to be guards and lookouts. Yet, they failed Him miserably. "Time and again, they heard Him urge them to watch and pray; time and again they could not summon the resources to stay awake with their Master." (Ferguson, 240)

When admonishing His followers, Jesus declared in verse 38, "The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak." Oh, how we find this to be true on a daily, if not hourly basis! Our minds, whether they are burdened with trivia and barely useful information, or crammed full of the concerns of every day, forget things. Physically, we wear out after several hours of hard work and ministry!

At my first duty station while on active duty with the Air Force, I worked a lot of midnight shifts on the base flight line as a security policeman. We were heavily armed as we protected high dollar weapon systems. Our shift supervisors were tasked with, among other things, making sure the people posted to protect aircraft and munitions were awake and vigilant. The late hours were compounded by the absence of bustle and activity to keep the mind busy. The horror that awaited those who fell asleep and their weapons may have been taken from them as they slumbered!

The Bible speaks to this – **Proverb 6:9-11** – "How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep—So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man." There's also the example of the virgins in **Matthew Chapter 25** who slept while the bridegroom was away. When He returned, they were not ready with oil in their lamps, and they were shut out of the wedding.

As we apply this to our own lives, we must discern the difference between the people who are exhausted at the end of the day because they worked hard and were productive, and those who are lazy, sleeping their days away in unproductivity, thereby wasting the resources and talents that God gave them. We will give account to God of how we have employed the gifts and talents He has given us to be used for His glory and the good of others. *What do you need to work on, friend? Waste not; want not.*

So far, we've discussed **The Spiritual Pain that Jesus Endured** and **the Spiritual Poverty of the Disciples**; we now examine **The Spiritual Power of Prayer**. It was the very night in which our Lord Jesus would be betrayed by Judas Iscariot, *and what is He doing?* He's praying – in the Garden – alone. God the Son seeks communion with God the Father. In His distress, Jesus seeks for God.

What a scene to replicate in order to patiently bear our own affliction. “The first person to whom we should turn in our trouble is God. The first complaint we should make should be in the form of a prayer. The advice of James is wise and weighty – “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” **(James 5:13a)**

An example from American history can be encouraging. The Philadelphia Convention of 1787, under the leadership of George Washington, was marked with much dissension and quarreling. The new found independence of the Colonials was in danger of being lost or damaged tragically.

An elder statesman called on his countryman to pray. “In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard; and they were graciously answered.” It was now more than a decade after the Continental Congress first convened.

He continued, “And have we now forgotten that powerful Friend? Or do we imagine that we no longer need His assistance? I have lived, sir, a long time; and, the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And, if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?”

You know who this statesman was, don't you? Benjamin Franklin.

The kind of prayer we observe in Gethsemane was typical of Jesus in submitting to the will of God the Father. For instance, we read these words in **Hebrews 5:7-9** – “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” *(NIV)*

Jesus chides His followers, again, to “watch and pray.” We pray to God because “all things are possible with Him.” (Verse 36)

The application of this point should be obvious. Each of us should give ourselves to regular, daily prayer. If you are not living a life of dependent prayer with God, you are out of accord with God’s Word. Put simply, you are sinning, and you must seek His forgiveness. Don’t wait until after the long winter’s nap is concluded! Pray, pray, and pray some more!

I’ll close with a Christian variation on Clement Moore’s ‘Twas the Night before Christmas:

‘Twas the night before Jesus came and all through the house
Not a creature was praying, not one in the house.
Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care in hopes that Jesus would not come there.

The children were dressing to crawl into bed, not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.
And Mom in her rocker with baby on her lap was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.
When out of the East there arose such a clatter, I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!

When what to my wondering eyes should appear but angels proclaiming that Jesus was here.
With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray; I knew in a moment this must be The Day!
The light of His face made me cover my head; it was Jesus! Returning just like He had said.

And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth, I cried when I saw Him in spite of myself.
In the Book of Life which He held in His Hand was written the name of every saved man.
He spoke not a word as He searched for my name; When He said "It's not here," my head hung in
shame!

The people whose names had been written with love He gathered to take to His Father above.
With those who were ready He rose without a sound while all the rest were left standing around.
I fell to my knees, but it was too late; I had waited too long and this sealed my fate.

I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight; Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.
In the words of this poem the meaning is clear; the coming of Jesus is drawing near.
There's only one life and when comes the last call, we'll find that the Bible was true after ALL!

You can only have a Merry Christmas if you are a child of Jesus – if you've never called on Him to save you from the hell we're all headed (apart from His grace), then do so this very day. Do this, and you will have the merriest Christmas you've ever had!