

Rousing the Sleeper

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Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

How do you wake someone who's sleeping soundly?

For me, an alarm clock and a cup of coffee get the job done.

I'm a morning person by nature. My alarm goes off at 5:30 am. I quickly make my way to the coffee pot, grab a cup, and sit down to read the headlines. By my second cup of coffee and my devotional, I'm usually ready for a workout and the rest of the day. It's easy to wake me up.

For our youngest son, an alarm clock wasn't enough.

As a teenager, he started sleeping through his alarm in the morning. His alarm would buzz loudly for five to ten minutes, and he wouldn't move a muscle. Sometimes, Tammi or I would go in, turn the light on, and pull the covers back on the bed. When pulling back the covers stopped working, I started going in with a loaded water gun to spray him. When he started sleeping through the water gun, I took a glass of cold water, and got him moving! Waking someone physically is one thing. Waking someone spiritually? That's another matter.

Are you spiritually asleep or awake?

To be spiritually asleep is to miss the signs of Jesus' return, live as if you made the rules, and ignore the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Spiritually asleep people go to hockey practice and sock away money in 401k accounts; they're looking forward to vacations and planning for retirement; they work hard and play hard. Their field of view is self and family, here and now. To be spiritually awake is to watch for Jesus to return, live as if it could be today, and advance the Gospel while we wait. Spiritually awake people are aware that Jesus is coming again and that it could be anytime. They ask, "What does God want?" about their life choices. And they are looking for opportunities to help more people come to saving faith in Jesus. All non-Christians are asleep spiritually. But sometimes, Christians can doze off, too. Which are you? Are you spiritually awake or snoring away?

If you are spiritually asleep, Paul's got a cold glass of water for you.

Jesus is returning. When He does, some will be saved and some will be judged. Some will enter eternal life, while others will enter eternal death. We REALLY want to be spiritually awake. Paul tells us that Jesus' coming will be like a thief in the night. Paul will explain how to stay awake, but we begin with the thought of an unexpected, unwelcome midnight intruder.

A thief in the night would wake anyone.

Our burning question about Jesus' return is "when?", and we aren't going to get an answer.

In **1 Thessalonians 5:1**, Paul tells them and us that God is not going to tell us when Jesus is returning,

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you.

The Bible is 100% clear—we will not know the time or season of Jesus' return. Even if we study the question closely and ask insistently. Why? Because God wants us to wait expectantly, no matter the season. He wants us to have one eye on the sky at all times, watching to see if Jesus is going to step from heaven to earth, riding on the clouds today.

Paul's description of Jesus' return sounds threatening, and it is!

In **1 Thessalonians 5:2-3** he continues,

For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Jesus isn't a thief, so why would Paul choose that image? And why would Jesus Himself use it several times? A thief comes suddenly and unexpectedly. You never go to bed thinking, "Tonight someone is going to break into my house." Plus, when a thief comes, loss and destruction follow. But when Jesus returns for all to see, those who oppose Him will face God's wrath. They will be destroyed from the earth and ultimately be cast into the lake of fire forever. There is no escape from that fate once Jesus returns. So, for some, Jesus is coming like a thief in the night.

I have a recurring dream about a thief in the night.

In the dream, I hear a noise in my house. Somehow know that this isn't a normal nighttime noise like the house settling or a box falling. Someone's in the house and coming for me. I am in danger. But in my dream, I am in bed. I need to move but can't; I need to scream but can't; I need to open my eyes but can't. The dream is so startling that I am trying to wake up—but only part way. My body still wants to be asleep. The experience is called sleep paralysis, and it's genuinely frightening.

Non-believers frequently have spiritual sleep paralysis; they can't wake up!

The New Testament speaks about signs of Jesus' Second Coming: wars, earthquakes, and famines. At some point in the future, there will be specific, apocalyptic wars, earthquakes, and famines that will signal Jesus' Second Coming. But these signs happen in every age. Do they give us a date for the Second Coming? No. They give us reasons to think, "Jesus could return at any time!" But non-Christians keep sleeping while things are going bump in the night. Which is unbelievably tragic because whether they recognize the signs, Jesus is coming again. And His return will shake the world.

However, we believers know that Jesus is no thief.

Paul continues in **1 Thessalonians 5:4**,

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.

We know that Jesus is coming again. He isn't coming with wrath for us; He's coming to save us. To us, Jesus is not a thief. At some point we woke up and realized that. The problem is that sometimes we nod off again. For us, the challenge is clear—stay awake.

Wake up, sluggish saints!

Sometimes we Christians fall asleep on the job.

My friend has a co-worker who keeps a cot under the desk. This co-worker crawls into the cot for about an hour a day and goes to sleep. It's the perfect picture of the way we Christians sometimes snooze. A

napping Christian is a little different from a non-Christian who is fully asleep. To spiritually snooze is to quit watching for Jesus' return, pick and choose between God and the world, and ignore those who don't have the Gospel. Snoozing spiritually is like climbing onto a cot under your desk in the middle of the day; you're asleep on God's time.

Paul sets off an alarm in 1 Thessalonians 5:6:

So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us **keep awake** and be sober.

The alarm? "Keep awake!" Let's not nap or slumber. It's a powerful and resonating Greek word, *gregoreo*. It means to be fully awake and vigilant. Disciples of Jesus are fully awake and vigilant. *Gregoreo*, stay fully awake.

Gregory the Great sounded the alarm in his day the way Paul did in his.

Gregory lived in Rome in the late 500s AD at a time when the world around him was falling apart—the Roman empire was in serious decline, German invaders threatened Italy, and the wealthy leaders had fled east. He became Pope and inherited a Church in serious decline—corruption was widespread, priests were struggling to pastor the people, and the mission to spread the Gospel had stopped. That's what a Church that's asleep, filled with disciples who are snoozing, looks like in practical terms. Gregory's name came from the word, *gregoreo*. He was fully awake as a Christian himself, and he called the Church to wake up. He got rid of nepotism and of corrupt church officials. He taught priests how to pastor their people and sold Church lands so that the poor could eat. He sent a team of missionaries to England to spread the Gospel to people who had never heard it—he amplified the Gospel to new people and places.¹ Gregory the Great woke the Church up.

Paul is sounding the alarm today, *Gregoreo*!

Let's make every choice about our calendars and bank accounts as if Jesus were returning soon. Let's choose our words as if they might be our last before we see Jesus. Let's share the Gospel across the street and around the world as if this were the last time anyone is going to hear it. That's a Church that's not slumbering; those are Christians who are wide awake. In **1 Thessalonians 5:11**, Paul tells us again to help each other,

"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."

Gregoreo! Wake up!

Jesus already roused us from the deepest sleep.

God has not destined us for wrath, which is very Good News!

In **1 Thessalonians 5:9**, Paul wrote:

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ ... For those who are apart from Christ, Jesus' return will mean that God's wrath is poured out on them. In **Amos 5:18-19** the prophet describes the coming day of the Lord for anyone who opposes God:

... It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2008/08/gregory-great/>

If we are in Christ, though, we will be saved. We will be resurrected and live with Him forever. That's a stark difference, and it is built on a massive move that has happened in our lives.

We have moved from the night to the day.

Paul says that there are some who live in darkness and others who are children of the light. He is describing two kingdoms: the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. The kingdoms of this world are characterized by darkness, night, and evil; people there are asleep spiritually, as though they were drunk; that kingdom answers to Satan. We all started out in the kingdoms of this world. The Kingdom of God is the realm of light and good; people there are awake and sober; that Kingdom belongs to God. We have moved from the kingdoms of this world to the Kingdom of God. And the move happens because of Jesus!

It's all because of Jesus' work on the cross.

Paul puts it very simply. We live because Jesus died. Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our sin, so our sin can be forgiven. When we accept that forgiveness, we are reconciled to God. We are transferred from the kingdoms of this world to the Kingdom of God. All of this is because of Jesus, not because of us. Think back to our thief in the night. We hear a sound in the night, but it isn't a burglar at our front door. It's an Amazon delivery truck bringing us an overnight delivery. Inside is the greatest gift we have ever received! We are forgiven! We have become children of God, children of light, children of the day.

You don't need a spiritual energy drink.

Energy drinks give us a jolt to keep us awake. As we think about staying awake, it almost sounds like we need a spiritual energy drink to keep us awake. That's another version of following Jesus by trying harder. But that's not what Paul is saying. He's saying that when we were in the kingdoms of this world, we were in darkness surrounded by night. That's when you fall asleep. But that's not us any longer. We are now children of the day. We are now rebuilt by the Holy Spirit to stay awake. The Holy Spirit has put an alarm clock inside of us. It will sound. Will we listen? But what about those who are stuck in the kingdoms of this world?

Let's join God in rousing the slumbering world.

The world is still slumbering.

There are 2.6 billion Christians in the world right now—which is amazing! But it also means that out of more than 8 billion people in the world today, nearly 6 billion of them are still asleep spiritually. Over a million lost people live right here in Hartford and Litchfield Counties alone. Those are our friends and family members. As I read 1 Thessalonians 5, I see that Jesus' return will lead to wrath for them, and that troubles me deeply.

It reminds me of Paul Revere rousing the sleeping countryside.

Poetry turned Paul Revere into a hero of the Revolution because of his midnight ride. In April 1775, British forces stationed in Boston planned to march outside the city to arrest patriot sympathizers and seize stashes of weapons. Paul Revere left Boston and rode throughout the countryside raising the alarm. He called patriots to action. The Revolution began in earnest the next morning with the battles

of Lexington and Concord.² That midnight ride was about rousing a slumbering world that was in danger.

God is rousing the slumbering world that is in danger right now, and the news is encouraging!

The number of Christians in the world is growing rapidly. Revivals are underway in Africa, South America, Asia, and even in the Middle East and North Africa. Stories I hear suggest that renewal is building in Western Europe (particularly in the UK) and here in the United States. Vision New England reports that across our own region, the baptism rate is up more than 90% since 2019. That is astounding news! In two weeks, we will start our own World Outreach Week, and you'll hear how many people across the world have come to faith through our world-outreach partners in the past year. The numbers you will hear are staggering. God is waking up sleepers everywhere. He's doing the hard work.

We want to join Him.

Let's pray for five non-Christians. That has been a basic spiritual habit of mine now for years. I am always praying for five lost people I know personally. Let's build closer relationships with non-Christians. Serve them to start a relationship or eat together to strengthen it. Then those relationships open doors for us to share our story and God's Story. And let's give generously to support outreach work across the street and around the world. God is at work rousing sleepers; He is on a midnight ride warning people of danger and calling them to action. We get to join Him. We can't slumber when we're joining God in His work.

What will your midnight ride look like?

Paul has called us to "keep awake". *Gregoreo*, I can hear him booming at us. The wakeup call is rousing some of us from a nap. But then there's this picture of Paul Revere riding through the countryside, calling people to wake up. *Gregoreo*, I can almost hear him saying it, too! And that picture sticks in my mind. God is calling you and me to call someone to wake up. What will your midnight ride look like? Find a horse, saddle up, and go.

² <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>