



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 20: 1-12

Acts

“God’s Grandest Work”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] So we’ve been in the book of Acts. So let me bring you up to date if you’ve forgotten. In Acts 19, Paul is in the city of Ephesus. He was there a total of three years and had a very significant ministry. All Asia heard the gospel because of his outreach. He established the church there in Ephesus, which became a very significant church in the first century and beyond. But as is always the case, when the word of God is preached, and when the gospel is seeing success, there’s going to be opposition, and opposition arose. So a riot occurred in Ephesus. That’s what Luke devotes much of Acts 19 to. We read that chapter; we dealt with it, and God delivered Paul and all of his friends from it. In fact, nothing even came of the riot, but that became the occasion for Paul to depart the city, and that’s what we read beginning with verse 1 of chapter 20.

“After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece. And there he spent three months, and when a plot was formed against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. And he was accompanied by Sopater of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus, and by Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. But these had gone on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas.”

Now you’ll notice we read, “waiting for us,” a first person plural signals that Luke is now with the apostle Paul on this phase of his journey. So what we have in

this chapter is an eyewitness account of events that took place. And Luke has given us a rather brief account of events in the first verses of chapter 20. These first six verses really cover a lengthy period of time – about a year in Paul’s life. In our lesson, we will cover some of the details of that because it was quite a significant journey, but he has gone up to Macedonia. And then in verse 6 we read, “We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, ‘Do not be troubled, for his life is in him.’ When he had gone back up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long time until daybreak, and then left. They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.” May the Lord bless this reading of His word and our time of study together. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do look to you to bless us in this hour as we consider the meaning of the texts that we have just read. It is a great text, and it reminds us of much of what went on in the meetings of the early church. We pray that we would learn from that. And remind us of what is important in the meeting of the church and what we’re to be doing. And remind us, Father, of the importance of the church – what a privilege it is to be a part of it – to be a part of the body of Christ and to be a part of a local assembly and to do the work of the ministry, which we are all to do in one way or another. Remind us of that, and impress upon us the greatness of that privilege. There’s really no greater privilege, Father, than you by your grace have taken sinners who were lost, who were dead – gave us life, gave us faith. You joined us to your Son. We are absolutely, eternally secure in Him.

We have work to do. We have a great mission before us, and you have called us into that. May we see the privilege of that, the greatness of it, and may we engage ourselves in that work. May our time together further us in that and move us to do that. We pray, teach us this morning, and build us up

in the faith. This is why we are here, Father, to learn your word and to grow in the faith that we might serve you faithfully and well. There’s nothing more important than that.

Time is short. Our lives will soon be over. How will we spend the time? That is what you will ask us someday, Father. We will stand before your Son. We will stand before His judgment seat, and we will give an account for what we have done and what we have said both good and bad. May we be able to give a good report.

We pray for ourselves spiritually. Build us up in the faith. Motivate us to live good and righteous lives. But bless us in the material, the physical things of life as well, Father. The two are very much joined together. We are affected spiritually by our material condition. Maybe our financial situation or a matter of health or just the circumstances of life as they bear down upon us, they influence our spiritual life. They test our walk with you, and by your grace, you use those incidents to strengthen our bond with you and increase our faith. But we pray that that would be the result of the afflictions that we go through. We pray for those who have asked for our prayers on our prayer request list. We pray that you bless. We pray that you give healing where it is needed. We pray that you give encouragement. We pray that you would use all of the difficulties and the various kinds of difficulties in life – there are many more than are listed here. Father, you know the needs of each and every one of us that maybe are kept secretly within our hearts. You know those needs. Use them. Use those situations to draw us close to you. And may we see your hand in our lives. And may those who have asked for our prayers see your hand. And may they be healed or may they be encouraged, whatever thy will is, we pray that they would experience it.

We pray for our nation, and we pray you bless it. We approach a day of decision. In the weeks to come, we will be electing a new president and congress people, and we pray that those who we choose would be wise and good and a blessing to this land. We know, Father, that ultimately you are the one that decides all of those things. You put kings on their thrones, and you take them off. But we look to you and pray that you would bless this land with wisdom that we would choose good and wise people to govern us. We

seek that blessing. So bless us to that end. And bless us in this hour. Bless us as we sing our final hymn, and bless us as we study the scriptures. Together we pray. And we pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] Shortly after the Civil War, Americans began building the Transcontinental Railroad that would join the East Coast and the West Coast and unite the country. As work began, one of the promoters, a businessman, called it the “grandest enterprise under God.” And of course, in its day it was a big deal, but today with jets flying around the world in a matter of hours and shuttles circling the globe in minutes, that seems a little shortsighted – maybe even overblown. But what would people today call the grandest enterprise? I expect some would say exploring space or conquering some dread disease – saving the rainforest. Is that really any more clear-sighted?

What is the greatest work in the world today? It’s a good question, I think. And I think Charles Spurgeon got it right in one of his sermons long ago when he said of the gospel that, “God looks on it as the grandest of all His works. It has been the chief subject of God’s thoughts and acts from all eternity,” he said. That’s true. And that means that the grandest enterprise under God is God’s own enterprise. His work of saving the lost and building the church. That’s what Christ said he would do; that is what he is now doing. The church is his bride. Paul called it, “the pillar and support of the truth.” There is nothing more important in this world and nothing more precious to God than the church and the work that it does. He died for it. The apostles labored for it. Paul crossed continents establishing churches, suffering hardship for them – hunger, cold, beatings, shipwrecks, and daily he said he was concerned for all the churches.

It follows then, doesn’t it, that we too should be concerned for the church? It is God’s great work. It is Christ’s great love. It is the channel of grace to the lost. And by God’s grace, you and I, every believer in Jesus Christ, if that is what you are, are part of it. We share in God’s grandest work. So it is important that we do the work well – that we conduct the affairs of the church faithfully, which brings us to our passage in Acts 20 because here we get a firsthand account of a meeting of the early church. It gives us a model of how things are to be done in the household of God. I think it’s fair to say that it differs from what happens in most churches today. It was a simple meeting. There was teaching – a lot of it, and breaking of bread, which is the Lord’s Supper. Those were the basic elements of a meeting of the early church. That’s what happened every Sunday. A

lot has changed since then, but most churches still have at least one point of contact with the primitive church – people still fall asleep during sermons. Even Paul had to suffer that.

But Paul suffered much for the churches because his great concern was for them. We get an indication of that in the first verses of Acts 20. Paul had devoted three years to establishing the church in Ephesus. He had fought with wild beasts there. He told the Corinthians that we don’t know what that refers to. It’s probably a metaphorical expression of the hostility that he experienced when he was in Ephesus. He was constantly dealing with opposition during that time. He survived a riot. God preserved him through all of that, but now it was time for him to move on. Before leaving, he gathered the disciples together, and Luke says he exhorted them. We don’t know what he exhorted them to do. We don’t know what he said, but no doubt he reminded them of the challenges to come, reminded them of all of the hostility that he had experienced. They’d just come off a riot. God preserved them, but that’s certainly an indication of what they could expect. There would be hostility to the work that they were doing, but he encouraged them to persevere in it, to continue in it, to continue in the faith, to be faithful to the Lord, and to his Word. I don’t doubt that he said that very thing.

Then he left for Macedonia and Greece. He had a great concern for those churches, particularly for the church in Corinth. Luke doesn’t give us much detail in these verses about Paul’s journey, but we do learn a lot about it from Paul’s own letters. We know that during the three years in Ephesus, problems had developed in Corinth. There were divisions in the church. A party spirit was there. Some were saying they were of Paul; others were saying they were of Apollos, and then those who consider themselves particularly spiritual were saying they were of Christ. There was immorality in the church, which is being tolerated. There was an abuse of the Lord’s Supper. The result of that is some had died. So from Ephesus, Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians to correct these problems and others.

He also sent Titus there to minister the Corinthians. Paul intended to meet Titus in Troas on the north coast of Asia Minor after he left Ephesus, and Paul went to Troas after Ephesus. He waited for Titus, who would come, he hoped with good news about events in Corinth. But Titus did not come. He was delayed for some reason. And Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2 that he was worried – worried about the church, worried about what was happening in Corinth, and so Paul crossed over to Europe intending to go down to Corinth to visit the church. He didn’t have to do that. Titus arrived in Macedonia, and he arrived

with news that was very encouraging to the apostle Paul. He told him the problems there in Corinth had been resolved.

Well it was from Macedonia that Paul then wrote what we know as the book of 2 Corinthians. And he ministered in that region for a time. Luke tells us that he went through those districts, meaning Philippi and Thessalonica and Berea, and there he gave much exhortation before travelling south into Greece. He also went west. We know that from Romans 15:19 where Paul says that he went to Illyricum, which was the former Yugoslavia – northern part of Albania, and there he fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. He then went on to Corinth. He spent the winter there. He spent three months there, and there he wrote the book of Romans. And then from Corinth, he began his journey to Jerusalem.

So it was an important trip. He made it to minister to the churches but also in order to collect a gift of money for the poor in Jerusalem. There had been a famine there; many were left destitute. And so Paul took up an offering for the poor of that city. He travelled through Macedonia and then into Greece, to Corinth, to collect that. And we’re told in 2 Corinthians that the Macedonians gave very liberally, very generously. And that’s significant because they were poor churches. They did not have much, and Paul was not going to accept money from them because of their own condition. They insisted that he take it. They rejoiced in the opportunity to share in that ministry. They offered what they had generously out of love for the brethren and out of gratitude to the Jewish people. The church has a debt of gratitude to the Jewish people, and they expressed it in their gift.

Now Paul didn’t travel alone. Representatives from other churches were with him. They’re listed in verse 4. Luke was also with him so this is a first hand account of things. The others had gone on to Troas where Paul planned to meet them on his way to Jerusalem. But before setting sail from Corinth, Paul learned of a plot by the Jews to kill him. They hadn’t forgotten Paul and the influence that he had had in Corinth. So when he came back, they hatched a plot. Perhaps they were going to push him overboard during the voyage. But Paul learned of it so Paul changed his plans, and he traveled over land through Macedonia. Now this isn’t the first plot that had been uncovered, and it wouldn’t be the last. But in the providence of God, each one of those plots is discovered. It’s a reminder of the fact that the Lord never leaves us. He always is with us, and He always is protecting us. I think it was John Wesley who said, “We are immortal until our task is over.” I don’t know if it was him, but it’s certainly true. Whoever said it said a correct statement. We are immortal until our work is finished.

And so Paul was protected and would continue to be protected, and God would lead him and guide him to the right place – the places where He willed that he go. So Paul, using his wisdom, travelled north, and he stayed in Philippi where he celebrated the Passover and then crossed over to Troas where he met up with the others and stayed there for a week. Troas was near ancient Troy. But far more important than the wars and adventures of Achilles and Odysseus was the work that the apostle Paul did there. This was his third visit to Troas.

Through his ministry there, a church had been established, which Luke tells us met on the first day of the week. It was a small group that gathered in an upper room that was lighted by some flickering lamps. It hardly seems to be what we would call a great work, but Christ died for this church, and in a little over 20 years since his crucifixion, small groups like this one were gathered and growing all over the ancient world as lights in the darkness. And through such groups as this small assembly in Troas, the light of the gospel would spread across the earth and across the ages calling the lost out of spiritual death, out of spiritual darkness into spiritual life and light. What work can be more significant than that? In spite of appearances, it is God’s greatest work.

It is a work in progress, and the church in Troas gives us a model of what we’re to do – how we’re to conduct ourselves in the house of God. It met on the first day of the week, on Sunday, which was a major change from the synagogue, which met on the last day of the week, on the Sabbath, which is what the Old Testament commanded. That’s the command of the law of Moses. But at a relatively early date, the church began regularly meeting on Sunday because it was on the first day of the week that Christ was resurrected. And so it became the Lord’s day. The fact that many Christians, and many of whom were Jewish, would make such a change is an added proof of the resurrection. It would take something as significant as that – something as significant as the resurrection to cause such a change, moving the day of worship from the last day of the week to the first day of the week. Sabbath was the day of rest. It was the day of gathering. It was the law of God, and a violation of it was punishable by death. How do you explain such a major change moving from the last day to the first day? Well, the resurrection explains it. And that’s the significance of Sunday worship. Every Sunday, we meet as a celebration of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Whether you realize it or not, you are here as a testimony to the fact that Jesus Christ is not a dead martyr, a dead hero. He is a living Savior. He is alive today.

Now they met in the evening. We read of a room full of lamps, and Paul speaking until midnight. The reason for that was the social makeup of the church. Many of the early Christians were slaves. Their time was not their own. They had to work for their masters in the daytime, and they were not able to meet until night. And so evening was the convenient time for the meeting of the church. And this scene in Troas gives us a glimpse into the worship of the early church. It gives us, as I said earlier, a model for how the church is to function, what are the basic elements that are necessary in order for the church to function effectively – a light in the world. And here we see essentially two elements. The church met, first of all, for the breaking of bread, which is the observance of the Lord’s Supper and secondly, for the teaching of scripture. “On the first day of the week,” Luke writes, “When we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them.” More than that happened in the meeting of the church. There were baptisms when there were new converts. There was prayer. There was congregational singing. That’s what Paul writes of in Ephesians 5:19, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” He’s referring to the meeting of the church in that context.

Now, I’m sure that that all of that happened – that there was praying, there was singing of hymns that night. But Luke records two essential elements that regularly occurred in a meeting of the early church. First, the church came together to break bread, to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. That happened weekly in obedience to the Lord’s request, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Now that’s the reason we do it. The Lord’s Supper is an opportunity to reflect on who Christ is and what He has done for us. It is an opportunity to remember Him.

Now the importance of doing that is witnessed in the fact that this is some of the last instruction that Jesus Christ gave to his disciples. And the early church did it every Sunday. That is not generally the practice of churches today, though many students of scripture have recognized that the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper is consistent with the New Testament. Calvin, for example, advocated that. In the Institutes, he wrote that the Lord’s Supper should be administered at least once a week. I find that interesting because he’s not saying once a week, but at least once a week, which would leave it open to doing it more than once, which is very unusual. Most churches don’t do that. And I – I’m not an authority on most churches, but many churches do it quarterly, four times a year. Calvin said once a week at least. The Baptist, Charles Spurgeon said, “Shame on the Christian church that she should put it off to once a month. Those who once know the sweetness of

each Lord’s day, celebrating His Supper will not be content, I am sure, to put it off to less frequent seasons.” Well, the early church didn’t put it off; it celebrated the Lord’s Supper weekly and did so in connection with the preaching of God’s word.

Paul was talking to them and talking to them for a long time. It was evening. It seems likely that he began around 7:00 at night and went on with his message until midnight, Luke said. So it was a message of four or five hours. And the congregation sat there patiently listening – I’m sure listening intently to all that the apostle was saying. That would be difficult today. We’re not trained to listen for that length of time. Most sermons – generally about 30 minutes in length. That’s just about max for most congregations. There’s a story about a man who came into church one morning. Dr. Johnson told this story some years ago. A man slipped in very quietly to the back pew and discretely asked the man sitting next to him, “How long has he been preaching?” And the man answered, “30 or 40 years, I think.” So the man said, “Well, I’ll stay. Must be nearly done.” We don’t like long church services, but the meetings of the early church were not regulated by the clock the way they are today.

The saints of Troas had an opportunity to hear Paul, and they didn’t care how long he went. They could go beyond midnight. They were intently listening. They had great stamina. At least most of them did. Not everyone in the room had the stamina to stay alert. Sitting on a windowsill was a man named Eutychus. In verse 12, Luke calls him a boy, which normally covered the years of 8 to 14. So he was a young man. And young people often have other things on their mind than the detailed, probably deep study of the word of God. So maybe he was not too interested in all that Paul had to say, or maybe he was. Maybe he just worked very long and hard that day. That may account for what happened.

Certainly, the circumstances of that long evening also contributed because a meeting occurred at night in an upper room. Luke says there were many lamps. And so the room was filled with smoke, the oxygen was thin, and Eutychus, trying to find some fresh air, found a seat on the window ledge. But it was late – after midnight – past his bedtime, really past everybody’s bedtime. People rose with the sun in those days. And the flickering light of the lamps cast shadows on the wall that had something of a hypnotic effect, and it all began to affect Eutychus. As he sat there, he became drowsy. He fought to keep his eyes open, but finally he lost the battle, was overcome with sleep, and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead.

Some question that he actually died because in verse 10, Paul says, “Do not be troubled, for his life is in him,” suggesting that he was unconscious and only appeared to be dead. But remember, Luke was there. This is an eyewitness account by him, and Luke was a physician. And he writes that Eutychus was picked up dead, which seems to be his clinical opinion. It was only after Paul fell on him that he said that, “His life is in him,” which indicates that Paul’s contact with Eutychus put life back in him. It is similar to two incidents in the Old Testament when both Elijah and Elisha raised boys from the dead by stretching themselves upon them. Now here in the same way, Paul fell on this boy and raised him up from the dead. That’s the work of an apostle. It was another of the signs of a true apostle that are mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:12.

Now if apostles are for today, as some claim, and if the miracles that they did are for today and as is maintained by some, then we should expect to see these same kinds of miracles – the raising of the dead. The Lord did it; Peter did it; Paul did it, but we don’t see that today because these events occurred at the beginning of the church for a special purpose in order to establish the church with proof of the truthfulness of the power of the Christian movement. And so amazing events occurred to make that happen to establish the church in that way. The raising of Eutychus did that. Those who saw it had confirmed in their minds the power of God with the church. And those who would hear about it and could confirm the fact of that miracle by talking to those who witnessed it would have this established also. It was a proof that God was with the apostle – that God was with the church. But it also illustrates the nature of Christianity. Paul did this out of compassion for the boy and for his family and friends. For the church, he embraced Eutychus then assured the people, “Do not be troubled.”

How often did the Lord make similar comments? “Fear not,” he would tell his disciples. Well, that’s the characteristic of Christianity. Those who are in a right relationship with the Lord, those who know Him as their Savior don’t have reason to be troubled or to fear. The Lord is in control. The Lord is working all things together for good. And so Paul, characteristic of himself, of the Christian faith says to those believers, “Do not be troubled.” He’d done a miracle, and it was a miracle of mercy, which is what salvation is. Because Christ embraces us, we have spiritual life. The spirit of God regenerates. He quickens the spiritually dead, and He does that through the preaching of the gospel. He gives faith and joins us to the life of Christ. He saves the helpless, and that’s what mercy is. That’s what salvation is, and that’s what’s characteristic of the whole

Christian life. God is constantly being merciful to us. And so those words apply to us every day of our lives, “Do not be troubled.”

Well after the miracle, we read in verse 11 that Paul returned to the room on the third floor where they finished the Lord’s Supper and the meal that often accompanied it. Now that was accompanied by teaching. Paul talked with them a long while until daybreak and then left. So instruction continued. This is instruction of a more informal kind in which Paul probably talked about the miracle. I can’t imagine him not going into the miracle somewhat. And maybe he did just what I have done – made a parallel between that miracle that had taken place and raising that boy from the dead and the miracle of salvation that occurs when God quickens the spiritually dead and brings them to life, brings them to faith, and joins them to His Son. It certainly illustrates the power of the gospel to save. And all of those in that room had experienced it. I’m sure Eutychus was there too, and this time, he was paying very close attention. Well the passage concludes, “They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.”

In 2 Corinthians 1:3 Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” He is that. And this incident in Troas illustrates it because He can raise the dead. He can overcome any problem of life. Now that doesn’t mean that He’s going to remove from your life every problem, every obstacle that’s in your way. He does not do that. But what He does is He makes every obstacle and every difficulty and every problem serve His good purpose. And He gives strength in the midst of those problems so that we can endure them and we can bring glory to Him and they can be a benefit to us. Now that is a wonder working God who can turn difficulties into blessings, who can use them to teach us to lean on Him, to trust in Him. That’s why we have afflictions in our life so often. It’s to correct us, or it’s to teach us to lean on Him, to trust in Him.

It’s very difficult to do that when everything is going well and we feel independent and we feel that we can handle our situation just fine. That’s when we begin to drift a bit. That’s when we begin to neglect prayer and study and the fellowship of the saints so affliction comes to remind us of our weaknesses and to draw us closer to Him. And it’s through that we grow in faith. It’s through that that we are made mature. That, as I say, is a wonder working God who can use everything in this world that touches us for our good and does so. That’s God’s work. What we are to do is to look to Him, trust him. He gives comfort. That’s one of the lessons we learn here. There are others.

We learn about the meeting of the church. Maybe that’s the main lesson that we have here. We learn what the early Christians did on Sunday. We learn that the regular practice of the early church involved essentially two things, instruction in the word of God and celebrating the Lord’s Supper weekly. We saw that back in chapter two at the outset of our study where Luke writes in verse 42, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” That’s what makes a church strong. That’s what makes Christians strong so that the church can then carry out God’s grand plan of being the witness of Jesus Christ in the world. Two essential things: first of all, teaching the scriptures. The fact that Paul taught all night until sunrise indicates the importance of teaching the word of God. And these early Christians were devoted to it. They eagerly sat in a stuffy room until the early morning hours listening to the apostle Paul preach. They did not consider that a burden. They considered it an extraordinary opportunity. That accounts for much about the early church and its vitality. It is inevitable that when the local church neglects the scriptures, it grows weak, it drifts, and it dies.

But equally important to the study of the word of God in the life of the church was taking the Lord’s Supper. Why is that? Why, someone might ask, is it necessary to take the Lord’s Supper? What does it add to my life? Does it save my soul? And to that, the answer is clearly no. It does not save. In fact it is only for those who are saved. But we do it, first of all, because Christ requested it. “Do this,” he said, ‘in remembrance of me.’” It is a memorial service in which we remember all that the Lord did for us on the cross, and it has great value because as we obey Him and take the elements, the bread and the wine, they bring Christ into our thoughts in a very tangible way. And as we meditate on Him, as we remember who He is, and reflect on all of His majesty, all of His glory, all of His suffering, what He humbled himself to do for us, remember His sacrifice, His love for us. That has a sanctifying effect. That’s a good way to prepare ourselves for the week ahead, and it gives us an opportunity to express our faith in Him and our devotion to Him.

Now we do that every Sunday evening here at Believers Chapel. There are hymns and prayers and instruction from scripture customarily on the person and work of Christ. Usually the teaching doesn’t go on until midnight. At least, that hasn’t happened yet. Ideally 2 or 3 men speak no more than 10 or 15 minutes apiece. Then we break – then we take the Lord’s Supper. It’s a simple meeting. That’s what those early Christians did every week. That is true Christian fellowship, and it is one reason the church in those days was

vigorous and earnest about its faith. Acts 20 gives us a glimpse of that and also reminds us of a potential problem, that of sleeping in church – not physically. I know that we all have difficulty with that. I know that you do because I see every Sunday. In fact the early service we were about to sing the second hymn, and I looked back and there in the back row was a young boy about Eutychus’s age yawning. I thought, “Well, I’m setting the stage for our sermon.” That’s something we all struggle with, but Eutychus’s situation, what he did, what happened to him only illustrates really the greater danger. It was not physical sleep; it was dozing spiritually.

There are other examples in the Bible of dangerous sleep. On the night of the Lord’s arrest in the garden, do you remember? He took some of His disciples aside, and as He went into the inner garden to pray about the cup that he was about to drink, He asked them to sit and watch, but they slept. And then when the enemy came, they were scattered. They fled. They all deserted Him, and Peter even denied the Lord.

Samson was a believer but not a careful one. And one day fell asleep in the arms of Delilah. The text says he awoke from his sleep and said, “I will go out and as at other times and shake myself free,” but he didn’t. The Philistines bound him, banded him, and made him grind at their mill. It was the consequence of sin. It was the consequence to indifference to spiritual things. It didn’t happen overnight. It happened at a long process. And all of these examples of physical sleep illustrate the danger of spiritual drowsiness. It’s a danger that we all face.

Martin Luther is said to have had a dream in which the devil is sitting on his throne listening to his agents report on their progress in opposing the truth of Christ and destroying the souls of men. One spirit said, “There was a company of Christians crossing the desert. I loosed lions upon them, and soon the sands were strewn with their mangled bodies.” The devil said, “Well, what of that? The lions destroyed their bodies, but their souls were saved. It’s their souls that I’m after.” Another said, “There was a company of Christian pilgrims sailing the sea. I sent a great wind that drove the ship against the rocks, and all onboard were drowned.” “Well, what of that?” the devil said. “Their bodies were drowned in the sea, but their souls were saved. It is their souls that I am after.” And a third gave his report, “For ten years, I have been trying to cast a Christian into a deep sleep, and at last, I have succeeded. And with that the corridors of Hell rang with the sounds of triumph.” Well, that’s the danger that we all face. It’s the danger of sleep, of spiritually dozing. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

So what are we to do? We are to discipline the flesh. We are to be a disciplined people. We need to stay awake. We need to keep watching and praying. If the work of the gospel, which is the work of the church, is God’s tremendous work, then there is nothing more important for us to be doing than that work. And imagine you and I as believers in Jesus Christ share in that work. God has enlisted us in His service to do the greatest work under Heaven. So we need to do that well, which means we need to stay alert. And one way we do that is by being obedient to the commands of scripture, being under the word of God, taking the Lord’s Supper regularly, reminding ourselves of who He is and what He’s done. We need to follow the pattern of the New Testament church. We need to protect and promote it. We need to be alert. We need to be vigilant in the faith and guard against drifting and dozing.

But it may be that someone is here this morning who has not yet awakened. Eli and the evil one – sleeping and unbelief. My word to you is wake up before it is too late. Trust in Christ. It’s not enough to attend church. It is not enough to hear the scriptures taught or even take the Lord’s Supper. In fact, if you do that, and you have not yet believed in Jesus Christ, those things merely condemn you. It’s not enough to do any of that. Salvation occurs when a person recognizes his or her need of salvation and trusts Jesus Christ as the only savior. So if you’re here as one who has not done that, may God help you to do that. The moment you do, you are saved – completely forgiven. You become a child of God. You’re given life everlasting. You can never be snatched out of the Savior’s hand. You are secure for eternity, and you have been given a great work to do. And may God help you to do that and help all of us to engage in that work of service, of ministering, carrying out this grandest of God’s works the work of the church. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace to us. We come to a text such as this, and we’re reminded of the great work – what truly must be your greatest, grandest work – that of salvation and building the church. We are a part of it as believers in Jesus Christ. May we not begin to drift and to become spiritually drowsy and fall asleep. Keep us alert. Keep us vigilant. Keep us very active in the work of the ministry, which you’ve given us to do in this place at this time. Make us to be lights in the world. We pray. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.