

SEVEN 5 - A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION
REVELATION 3:1-6
June 11, 2017

There's a story of a man and woman recently, who were having an ongoing problem. The milk was always empty or near empty and the woman wasn't drinking it. She blamed the man and he completely denied it. Week after week this happened. The milk was gone, the woman hadn't drunk it and the man denied it. Something was wrong with this picture. This argument continued for some time until the woman noticed some strange behavior and set up a couple of cameras for some detective work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKYQPZBskIk>

Turns out nobody was drinking the milk. Turns out this guy is a sleep walker. Somnambulism is usually used as a punchline and often questioned, but recent studies state that around 8.4 million Americans are sleepwalkers. These episodes can last for 30 seconds all the way up to 30 minutes. One of the stranger parts is how routine it often is. There are a few bizarre stories of people driving, drawing and cooking, but it's usually just wandering around for a few minutes and then spilling back into bed.

It's wandering through life asleep. It's doing the mundane without really being awake. It's going through the motions without really getting things done. When you describe it like that, you probably realize it's a lot more than 8.4 million people in the United States who are sleepwalking, wandering through life asleep. Stuck in the mundane without really waking up. Going through the motions without getting anything done. For all intents and purposes, we are a nation of sleepwalkers. Getting up to the same job, the same stress and the same commute every day. Call it autopilot. Call it coasting. Call it sleepwalking, but you have seen it and you have felt it.

You've felt it when a whole week has gone by and you can't remember a single thing that happened. You have felt it when you showed up to a meeting and allowed your eyes to glaze over and sit like a bump on a log. You have felt it when food just became fuel, when dreams vanish, when all you do is react, when all you feel is anxiety or hopelessness. It happens. Life can lull us into sleepwalking. Routines can lull us into sleepwalking. It looks like life, but it isn't. It looks normal because a lot of other people are doing it, but it isn't.

People sleepwalk and churches sleepwalk. Vance Havner is quoted as saying that the life of a church often looks like this, 1) a man, 2) a movement, 3) a machine, 4) a monument. A man or woman who burns so brightly that others gather around the cause or mission. That leads to a movement. That movement has so much success that it becomes necessary to harness and package it so that more people can get in on the movement. That machine ends up having a lot of success, fame and money which people tend to want to protect. That is when it becomes a monument.

Church can lull us to sleep, figuratively and literally. A couple hundred years ago in the church in America, there was a role in many New England churches called the tithes man. He would round people up for church. He would make sure and collect every one's tithes and offerings, but his most interesting job was during the service. He carried a pole. On that pole on one end was a metal knob of some sort. On the other end was something soft like feathers or a linen strap. If men fell asleep in church, he would whack them on the head with the metal knob end. If a woman fell asleep, he would more gently brush the feathered end on their face. If children got out of line or were unruly, he would bop them with the metal knob end. So, he would wake up the sleeping and calm down the unruly until everyone was just compliant and sedate enough. Apparently that's where the church likes its people, awake enough to listen to the sermons but calm enough not to do anything about them.

Now we don't have a tithes man today and we don't have a discipline stick yet, but many churches today are guilty of the same sins. They seem designed to keep everyone comfortably numb. A step above sleep but many steps below action. That sounds like

sleepwalking to me. For some reason, I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind when he said the church he would build would be so powerful that the gates of hell could not withstand its power. I think the church and its people should be wide awake to life. Thriving and alive. Today we want to know what spiritual somnambulism looks like and what we can do to stop it. To do that, we are going to read about a church that was sleepwalking through life.

Revelation 3:1-6

The church in Sardis was asleep at the wheel, but it wasn't always so. They had a reputation of being alive. They used to do really good work. Let me give you a little background on Sardis that will make this imagery all the more powerful.

Sardis was a city on a hill. It was on the southern slope of a mountain and had an impressive acropolis. This acropolis was impressive because of where and how it was built but also because of its military victories. Sardis became famous for rebuffing outside armies. They got a reputation as a lively town that could not be conquered or beaten. They always had the high ground and were unable to be overcome. Eventually they were overcome. Twice by outside military powers and then a massive earthquake leveled it in 17AD, and it was never quite the same. When we pick up in Revelation several decades later, Sardis is a city that used to be great. Their past was impressive, their present-not so much. They had a reputation of being alive, but those days are gone. They aren't who they used to be.

Just as impressive as the acropolis was the necropolis. The people of this region buried their dead in burial mounds in huge clusters together. Today there are some 500 known burial mounds in the region. When you rode through Sardis you had these two ideas always in sight. A vibrant city that used to be and a huge necropolis with a constant reminder of death. When these words are offered, you have the reputation of being alive, but you are really dead. You are sleepwalking through life. Your city and your faith are resting on your

reputation. You are proud of the past, passive in the present and seemingly absent from the future.

They are quite literally sandwiched between life and death in Sardis, and it seems they aren't sure which one they want to be. First reason many of us end up sleepwalking? We're tired. Sleepy people sleepwalk.

You've probably heard the phrase before "resting on one's laurels." Laurels, of course, were the wreath-like objects that winners of wars and races would have placed on their heads. Call them medals. Call them titles. Call them accomplishments. They are your past victories. When you rest on your laurels, it means you are no longer competing, no longer fighting, no longer in the game. Here is the interesting part, the phrase didn't originally mean something negative. A couple hundred years ago, it was said that people would repose under their laurels at retirement and honorary celebrations. It started off with good intentions. When soldiers would retire, it was remembering the good work they had done. But as people began to live longer, the meaning of the saying changed as they realized that it was a longer and longer time to rest on your laurels. Just like the people of Sardis sandwiched somewhere between life and death, and not quite sure what to do.

One of my ministry mentors, Gary Brandenburg, said it well, "When your memories exceed your dreams, death is near." When the laurels earned exceed the laurels sought, you might be sleepwalking, and this isn't an age issue. You can go into laurel resting mode at many stages of life. It happens in work. It happens in ministry. It happens in marriages. It happens in churches. When you do the same thing for a long time, it's easy to grow weary. When you are in the battle for a long time, it often seems easier to opt out.

I get it. Sardis was conquered twice and then they were leveled by a massive earthquake. I'm guessing they felt it was easier to just be okay with where they were. Life is tiring. Sleepy people sleepwalk. They stopped worrying about rebuilding. They had their day in the sun, but now it was time to step back.

The second reason people sleepwalk is complacency. Satisfied people sleepwalk. The Church of Sardis was lulled into complacency. This same concept happened in the church at Sardis. They have a reputation, a name for themselves for being a vital church, but their present state is only a glimmer of their past. Apparently in Sardis, the Jews had earned a high level of respect from the culture. As monotheists, they were largely left alone. They were not persecuted or bothered. The Christians in Sardis were able to coast based upon their affiliation with the Jews. They had no opposition. They had no confrontation. Their faith went from being a river of life to a dried-up creek because they never had the need to drink from it. Their resilient faith had become a simple philosophy. They were no longer dependent on God for anything except their fire insurance. The reality of Christ did not affect their everyday life. They were not guilty of idolatry but simply of complacency.

You know it's quite a gift to live in America, but one downside is that we often have everything we need especially here in the Bay Area. We have great weather, we have a great economy and we have great things to do. Which is a great but an unintended consequence is that we rarely have a need for God. When there are problems, we are only one app away from a solution. With our brains, our cash and our innovation, we think we are capable of fixing every problem. Never mind that all of our solutions are stressing us out, bleeding us dry and making us busy. We have this perception of never needing a thing.

We are complacent or satisfied when we take for granted all that we have and assume it will always be so. When we are largely unopposed, we tend to drift away from God and not seek out his presence. When life goes smoothly and we don't have a lot of problems, we can forget that other people do have a lot of problems, and we just go on autopilot.

As an individual, I want you to think about this, in your work, are you sleepwalking? In your marriage, are you sleepwalking? In your ministry efforts, are you sleepwalking? As a church, are we sleepwalking? Church life can wear you out. The weight of ministry can bleed you dry. You can see the worst in people and decide to opt out. Show up on Sundays and not much else.

So, what can be done about sleepwalking? How can we be alive to life? Alive to what God has called us to do?

Wake up, *gregoreo*, literally means to keep watch. This word would have had great meaning for the people of Sardis. Remember they were conquered twice. Once in the sixth century BC when the watchman fell asleep at his position and the armies snuck through a side entrance. You have to imagine the watchman had been at his post for years with the same thing every day, very little action. Maybe occasional blips on the radar, but he gets lulled to sleep, and the moment he isn't watching, the moment he isn't awake, the enemy takes down their city. Now for generations, this loss and this story permeated the people of Sardis. They passed on to their kids this sad truth and everyone stayed awake. Until 300 years later when the exact same thing happened again.

Wake up. Keep watch. I love what he says next, "Strengthen what remains and is about to die." To avoid sleepwalking caused by weariness and complacency, keep watch. Look around at what you have and strengthen it. I think this is a bold reminder for Christians in every area of life, your job, your marriage, your ministry. It's easy to go through the motions, but if you wake up and take it all in and strengthen what you have, you will find something special. This really goes to this idea of sleepwalking through life and missing all of the gifts and beauty you have.

I was doing a little bit more reading on somnambulism. Three of the biggest causes of sleepwalking are sleep deprivation, alcohol abuse and overmedication. While it can be related to other issues, sleepwalking is caused when people are dulling themselves. This idea of waking up and keeping watch is a good reminder. It's easy to dull ourselves to our lives, but what if we look around at what we have been entrusted with? One of the greatest antidotes to sleepwalking is keeping our eyes open. Some sermons immediately take this to keeping your eyes peeled for enemies and being hypervigilant, but I think it is just as important to keep watch for all of the good things. Instead of keeping watch and being awake so that bad things don't happen. It's about keeping your eyes open to all of the beauty and opportunity in front of you, and then strengthening what you have. It's easy to

lull yourself to sleep and coast through life, but what if we came alive to the things we do have?

This message is further reinforced when he calls on Christians to remember what you have received and to hold it fast in your heart. He is saying, wake up and stay awake. Don't forget that you are a child of God with a commission. To love God and to love others. To be Jesus in a hurting world. To be salt and light. To love your enemies and pray for people and bind up wounds.

These are all grand opportunities, and I am hoping you will take a look around. First and foremost, to make sure you are awake. If you have been coasting, look around at what you have been given by God and the gifts he has entrusted you with. To now say, "What can I be doing?" I know caring for other people can be tiring and loving other people can be hard and sometimes it seems easier to just opt out, but you have gifts, you have a calling and you have joy waiting for you. We have talked about this several times before, but there is great joy in service. There is great joy in loving God by loving people. I'll finish with this.

Mark 5: 35-43

There is a very common misconception around sleepwalking that you should never wake a sleepwalker. That's not true. People think if you wake up a sleepwalker, they'll have a heart attack or something like that. The opposite is actually true. It can be dangerous to let a sleepwalker do their thing, falling in the house, letting them play with kitchen utensils or get in their car. Here's the key, you don't shake them or shock them because they will probably come out of it screaming and fighting. You gently wake them. A lot of people in Silicon Valley are sleepwalking through life and the only encounter they've had with Christians are those who loudly try to wake them up. Yelling at them that they are sinners. Shaking them with the message of their wickedness. But we can be the voice that awakens them to real life, abundant life, waking life.

