

Articles and Sermons :: STAY AWAKE AND PRAY - Doug J. McKenzie

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"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the Bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The Bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."
Matthew 25:1-5,13 (NIV)

This classic Scriptural parable instructs Christ's church (through the metaphor of the "ten virgins") to stand ready and remain alert while awaiting "The Bridegroom" (Christ Jesus) who will come unannounced and at any time. Reference is made to the brides' slumber, and their awakening upon the announcement of the Bridegroom's arrival. Those who had prepared for His coming with oil reserves are given access to God's Kingdom; and those who had squandered their gifts were turned away.

Jesus' warning in this parable begs the following question: What could possibly be more important than to be urgently and presently involved in Christ's Great Commission? Are we asleep as a church, or are we ready and waiting for His imminent return—having been faithful with the resources He has given when we are finally called to enter into His presence?

It may be fair to say that the "Persecuted Church," whom we serve throughout the world, has a very different perspective on the immediate reality of serving Jesus while waiting for the Bridegroom to arrive than we do in North America. Their faith is refined and focussed through the fires of adversity, and they live with the ever-present reality that, at any given moment, they may have to surrender their lives while pursuing Christ's Great Commission and serving as steadfast witnesses of His saving grace.

In John's Revelation of the events to come, also included within the seven letters to seven churches, we read the following warning to the church in Laodicea: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with Me" (Revelation 3:15-20).

The letters of Revelation were written to specific churches of John's day, but it is believed by many scholars that they were intended to teach all generations thereafter, including today's. The letters are intended to prepare the "bride" (Christ's church) for His Second Coming. Is it possible that our North American churches (and more specifically for our constituents, our Canadian churches) have fallen prey to some of the perils of prosperity and protectionism, which have caused us to fall asleep, while others are living a reality of suffering that we find difficult to even comprehend?

After Jesus and His disciples had partaken in the Upper Room of the meal that we now refer to as "The Last Supper," they went to the Garden of Gethsemane. I believe the unfolding events in Gethsemane were pivotal to all that followed. We can certainly learn and apply some critical teaching from this amazing story which is recorded in Matthew 26:36-46.

Remarkably, Jesus' friends, although witnessing the anguish He was suffering that night and having been implored by Him to "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation," repeatedly drifted off to sleep under the olive trees of Gethsemane while their Lord and Master surrendered Himself to His Father's almost unbearable terms of grace, mercy and reconciliation.

Is it possible that we as a Canadian church have fallen into temptation, giving precedence to our various ministry "programs" and impressive edifices, while priding ourselves in our doctrinal distinctives? I am quick to address such questions to myself, asking the Holy Spirit to re-shape my own heart and mind according to God's perfect purview. Is it possible that our church is modelled in this story as those disciples who have fallen asleep under the olive trees while Jesus pr

ays in anguish for their very salvation?

May our prayer be that we, as the Canadian church, would experience an awakening into the reality of the plight and privilege of the "persecuted." Through this awakening, may we also be empowered to do all we can to engage as caregivers to those who are in peril for the cause of Christ. This includes being truly vigilant in prayer and diligent in teaching and motivating our fellow parishioners and church leadership to participate.

Often those of the persecuted church "with whom we are one" pray that we, who are part of the North American church, would share in the refinement of the Christian faith, something that usually comes through adversity and suffering. I imagine their prayer would encompass not falling prey to any temptations that would cause us to become "comfortable" in our pews, but rather that we would be ready and faithful, with oil to spare for our lamps, until the time of Christ's return.

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