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Encephalitis Lethargica

The Great Sleeping Sickness

The tragic case of a man being in the world and yet out of it was described to me yesterday. This man, workless and homeless, more than three years ago walked into the West Highland Rest Home. He complained of being terribly tired, and it was obvious that his complaint was genuine. He simply could not stay awake. When the doctor examined him he found he was suffering from sleepy sickness, and he was put to bed right away. He is still sleeping.

—*The Daily Post*, 1927

This medical condition is known as *encephalitis lethargica*, which means, literally, “inflammation of the brain that makes you tired.” The symptoms start with a fever, sore throat, and headache, and move to lethargy, sleep inversion (night becomes day), catatonia, and—many times—death. It has a 35 percent mortality rate. Those who survive are usually left in a catatonic state that bears a creepy resemblance to sleep, which is where the illness gets its more common and pronounceable name: “sleeping sickness.”¹

While *encephalitis lethargica* is extremely rare, from 1915 to 1926 an epidemic of it spread across the globe, killing more than five million people. That would be like twenty million today, allowing for inflation (which I imagine is not quite the right term to apply to such a statistic). Think about it—twenty million people suddenly nodding off and never waking up. There has never been anything like it before or since.

Many who survived the epidemic never fully recovered, spending the rest of their lives in a dreary netherworld somewhere between life and death, real and unreal, sleep and awake—and “these patients were put away in chronic hospitals, nursing homes, lunatic asylums, or special colonies; and there, for the most part, they were totally forgotten.”² In 1973, Oliver Sacks published *Awakenings*, a book that detailed his treatment of several dozen survivors of the epidemic who were still alive in 1969, still in cognitive slumber in some run-down mental institution in Brooklyn, New York. Here’s how Sacks described the patients prior to treating them with the wonder drug L-DOPA:

They would be conscious and aware—yet not fully awake; they would sit motionless and speechless all day in their chairs, totally lacking energy, impetus, initiative, motive, appetite, affect or desire; they registered what went on around without active attention, and with profound indifference. They neither conveyed nor felt the feeling of life; they were as insubstantial as ghosts, and as passive as zombies. . . . They were ontologically dead, or suspended, or ‘asleep’—awaiting an awakening.³

It’s hard to imagine anyone living in that condition. But I’m afraid *we* might be.

SLEEP IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

Sleep is a peculiar state, in that you're not aware when you're doing it, which is why sleep aids like Ambien carry warnings not to "operate heavy machinery," of which I can't help but picture forklifts and bulldozers and such. To be aware of the moment you fall asleep isn't physically possible; once you've woken up, you're only aware you were asleep. This defining aspect of sleep is what makes it so applicable or analogous to spiritual life.⁴

The Bible is filled with spiritual metaphors for every illness known to antiquity: blind, deaf, lame, leprous. But sleep and its related cognates (dull, drunk, drowsy) are far and away the most common in the New Testament—and the terms usually attributed to us, Jesus' would-be disciples, not the unbelieving world.

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray. . . . Remain here and watch. . . ." And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? . . . And again he went away and prayed. . . . And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come."

Mark 14:32, 34, 37, 39–41

It's a fitting metaphor. I mean, what better way to describe someone who has been quickened by God's Spirit but remains oblivious and unresponsive to spiritual reality? They're not dead, but they're certainly not alive. They're asleep, or drowsy, or drunk, or dull, or slow . . . and the biblical metaphors go on.

To be asleep is to be oblivious to being oblivious. The danger of sleep is the danger of carbon monoxide: it's colorless, odorless, and you're anesthetized before you know it—before you ever hit the floor. And this is why sleep (spiritual unreceptivity) received the sternest and most repeated warnings from Jesus: "And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake" (Mark 13:37).

It's difficult not to see something prophetic in the disciples falling asleep in Gethsemane. Why the sudden narcolepsy? Why does Jesus go away, leaving them until he *returns*? Why do the disciples fall asleep, not once or twice, but three times? What of Jesus' parable about his return—"If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants!" (Luke 12:38)? There are certainly hallmarks here of an enacted prophecy or parable. The warning is clear enough: sleep is a very grave danger to the church and to the disciple. If anything will be our undoing, sleep will.

THE SILVER CHAIR

[Jill] was very angry because she could feel enchantment getting hold of her every moment. But of course the very fact that she could still feel it, showed that it had not yet fully worked. . . .

[Jill said,] “*We* come from another world.” . . .

“Tell us, little maid, where is this other world? What ships and chariots go between it and ours?” [said the Witch.]

. . . Jill couldn’t remember the names of the things in our world. And this time it didn’t come into her head that she was being enchanted, for now the magic was in its full strength; and of course, the more enchanted you get, the more certain you feel that you are not enchanted at all. She found herself saying (and at the moment it was a relief to say):

“No. I suppose that other world must be all a dream.”

“Yes. It *is* all a dream,” said the Witch. . . .

“Yes, all a dream,” said Jill.

“There never was such a world,” said the Witch.

“No,” said Jill and Scrubb, “never was such a world.”

“There never was any world but mine,” said the Witch.

“There never was any world but yours,” said they.⁵

In this scene from C. S. Lewis’ *The Silver Chair*, the children slowly, imperceptibly fall under the witch’s spell: an enchantment that turns reality into a dream, and dream into reality. In the story, Prince Rilian has already come under the spell and no longer knows that he’s Prince of Narnia. But each night Rilian is tied to a silver chair while the enchantment wears off, and for an hour Rilian is Rilian again. Prince of Narnia. Fully aware of his identity and bondage, and loathsome to begin another mindless, twenty-three-hour cycle.

This is my day, and I assume yours too. A struggle against sleep—spiritually speaking, that is. The day begins prayerful and usually ends that way, but in the hours between . . . *oh the hours between*. The world and its celebrities and trends and news and Netflix and caffeine and Wolf Blitzer, it’s all so bewitching, as are my gadgets, my apps, my shows, my photos, my music, my posts, and did I already mention Wolf Blitzer? It’s beguiling. We are brought inside the City Gates, strolling about the Great City, striding among People of Purpose . . . we are absolutely out of our minds.

And then, at some point in the day, we return to ourselves, to prayer, to Scripture, and to God. Looking back on the day, it’s hard to place when nap time began, but somehow we entered the world mindful, and before the day was done our minds had become the world, and God and Christ and sheep and angels all seemed so out of place, like a crèche in Macy’s. Another day, another cycle.

Now, you wouldn’t want to say that distractions were any less of a problem for Christians living in the past or at least before the iPhone, but I’m going to say it anyway because I think it’s true: a less distracted spiritual life *was* easier for non-wired Christians. That’s a totally fair statement. Just as it would be fair for a fourth-century believer to whine about us having Christian podcasts. There are challenges unique to every age. Let me give you three of ours.

1. *The Modern World*

[H]ark! there is a whistle of the locomotive,—the long shriek, harsh above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony. It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who come to spend a day in a country village,—men of business,—in short, of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world in the midst of our slumberous peace.⁶

That reflection comes from 1844 (the word *hark* was your clue). Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote this in his journal as a train arrived in Connecticut from New York City, interrupting Nathaniel's afternoon of quiet repose. He was none too happy about the disruption to his usual peace. Oh dear, sweet, ignorant Nathaniel, if you only knew what was coming.

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan insightfully noted that “the new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves” have a “numbing or narcotic effect . . . that lulls attention.”⁷ The clock, for example, took away our sense of time, just as maps replaced our sense of direction. But only in the past decade have tools replaced some major brain functions. It's not worth enumerating the number of calls, texts, and e-mails we get, or the number of hours we spend online. It's a lot. Probably better not to know. But what makes it all the more disturbing is that we have no idea of the long-term effects.

The one side effect that *is* readily apparent is that technological connectivity aggressively conspires against spiritual connectivity. “The Net,” says Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows*, “is by design an interruption system, a machine geared for dividing attention.”⁸ It chops up our attention into bits and parcels it out the same way it sends e-mail: “The Net seizes our attention only to scatter it.”⁹

There's no precedent for what we're experiencing. None. The distraction of our modern world is an overwhelming obstacle to keeping our minds “on things above” (Colossians 3:1, NIV) and hearing God's voice within. And this is not the only challenge facing us.

2. *Long for This World*

I was recently reading *Long for This World: The Strange Science of Immortality*, a book on the science of gerontology (aging), and was struck by this provocative statement from Aubrey de Gray, one of the leading figures in gerontology, and the resulting implication:

[De Gray said,] “Of course if you live a thousand years, driving will be outlawed! It could be a highly risk-averse world.” If you hope to live a thousand years and you are struck by a cab at twenty-five, you lose an awful lot.¹⁰

De Gray was speaking to the relationship between the length of our lifespan and our outlook on life. His speculation is that a thousand-year lifespan would lead to a risk-averse society, but that's not so much provoca-

tive as just a little crazy. What's provocative is the idea that the length of our lifespan affects our outlook—how little or how much time we have left.

In 2006, Stanford professor Laura Carstensen published “The Influence of a Sense of Time on Human Development,” which has been enormously influential in the social sciences. What Carstensen's research showed is that the perception of how much longer we have to live, and not chronological age, is the primary factor affecting human motivation:

The subjective sense of future time plays an essential role in human motivation. Gradually, *time left* becomes a better predictor than chronological age for a range of cognitive, emotional, and motivational variables.¹¹

Among other revelations, Carstensen discovered that the risk and experimentation of youth is not so much about age as about the perception that death is a long way off. Who knew? That's a big thought with enormous spiritual implications, because you and I *already* have an enhanced lifespan, and it's *already* affecting our spiritual awareness. We just haven't given it any thought.

You and I approach the Christian life in a fundamentally different way than do believers in any other place at any other time. No one else reading their Bible in the past few thousand years has read it with the confident assumption that they'd still be alive and kicking in their nineties. Our minds unconsciously do the math with any Scripture calling for obedience: “be holy” (for another sixty years); “forgive your enemies” (for another sixty years); “avoid sexual immorality” (for another sixty years).

Two of my kids returned from a youth conference not too impressed with the program, so I asked what they didn't like about it. They said, “It was all about recruiting for missions,” and I politely nodded my head. Then I said, “That's because you're freaks,” because shocking non sequiturs are the only way to capture a teenager's attention. And into the created void, I said:

A couple hundred years ago if your father was a farmer—you were a farmer, end of story. How many people in human history have had the freedom to choose what they want to do for a living? You can also travel; you can pick any place on the planet and go there . . . today. When has anyone ever been able to do such a thing? And wherever you go in the developing world, your life expectancy will be about twenty years beyond the indigenous population. Your situation is utterly unique, and *that's* why the recruitment to missions.

My kids, however, reckon their own finish line to about seventy years from now, so my words had all the gravitas of an adult in a Charlie Brown special.

Spiritual attentiveness, hope, perseverance, and self-control are all temporally bound, inseparable from the length of waiting. And here, you and I are tasked to remain spiritually vigilant almost twice as long as our

brothers and sisters throughout history. To regard this as a *challenge* may be an understatement.

3. *Alternative Worlds*

It's a little abstract to point to a moment when escapism and fantasy came to dominate the American psyche, but I'd like to cast my vote for this moment right here:

Someone asked, "How do you feel?" Tim couldn't speak. It was all too much. Everything around him started taking on the shimmer and glimmer of jeweled patterns. *How do I feel? Far away. Gone. Far. Far. Gone. Drifting off into a cavern of sea light.*

Making his way back to the house, he fell on the bed, into the arms of another woman who had taken the mushrooms. *Bodies like warm foam rubber. Marshmallow flesh. Mermaids. Laughing. Poking fingers through bikini lace. Quicksand flesh. Dark hair. Ponytail. Cherokee princess. Hummingbird words buzz from mouth. Stop talking. Look outside. . . . The undulating sea! Deep. Plants twirling together. Not even the plants know which leaf, which stem, belongs to which. Interconnected. Giant jungle palm time . . .*

Everything was quivering with life, even inanimate objects. . . . Nile palaces, Hindu temples, Babylonian boudoirs. . . .¹²

In 1960, seven psilocybin mushrooms and a bottle of beer took Timothy Leary on a psychedelic voyage beyond the lines of latitude, past the borders of sea monsters and westerly winds, and clear off the map. Leary was Columbus in the new age of exploration, and during a summer sabbatical in Cuernavaca, Mexico, while experimenting with hallucinogenic mushrooms, Leary made landfall in the New World. News of the discovery spread across college campuses, and a generation eager to stake a claim tuned in, turned on, and dropped out.¹³

It's like any fantasy world—you can't really say it doesn't exist, but it certainly does in the mind of the person experiencing it. Escapism can be drug-induced, lust-induced, greed-induced, boredom-induced, media-induced, induced any number of ways—but what is induced is another reality, an alternative landscape that provides for us what the real world cannot or will not.

We were made to jostle between worlds, which is why it comes so naturally to us. Our minds naturally accommodate the perceptual commute between God's Kingdom *here* (in the physical world) and God's Kingdom *there* (in the spiritual world). There-and-back, there-and-back, we ride the rails all day long. Like looking at an object with the right eye closed and then the left, spiritual wakefulness is the ongoing alignment of two realities, two kingdoms.

If spiritual awareness consists in this ferrying between point A and point B, escapism is an alternate point B, a different destination. Today the destinations are so vast and varied, so immersive, addictive, and accessible, that I think we need to acknowledge this as a challenge unique to us. I mean, knowing Martin Luther as we do, if he were around today, wouldn't someone need to be checking the history on his web browser? I would think.

We could of course keep going, and for quite some time, surveying the unique challenges we face given that

modernizing forces have been as vulgar and violent to the soul as Cortez' modernization was to Mexico.

But we have more important things to do. Jesus has instructed us to stay awake, so if everyone will please put their cellphone on vibrate, we'll get on with it. Sure, it'll be a challenge, but so what? What are you doing a week from next Thursday? What other grand pursuits do you have on the calendar? What else is worth the effort? So, if that's settled, I can tell you where we're going. Jesus told us to be awake, but what exactly does this mean?

THE NEW TESTAMENT'S THEOLOGY OF WAKEFULNESS

[W]aves move a disturbance through a medium. . . . Paradoxically, [a wave is] both an object and a motion. When wave energy does move through a medium—water, for instance—the medium itself doesn't actually go anywhere. In other words, when a wave rises in the ocean and appears to race across the surface, that specific patch of water is not really advancing—the wave energy is. It's like cracking a whip. . . . In order to exist, waves require a disturbing force.

—Susan Casey, *The Wave*¹⁴

Picture the powerful surge of a tsunami. Its force is generated by some concussive event on the ocean floor, and the energy from that event ripples through water in a wave, cresting, curling, and finally crashing on some unlucky shoreline. The physics of a wave is the physics of momentum, and it's important to see this in the pace and tempo of the New Testament: a wave. Jesus' death and resurrection would, I think, qualify as a concussive event. And from it, surging forward, verse to verse and book to book, is a wave of momentum, "like cracking a whip," ultimately crashing upon the shores of the New Heaven and New Earth.

As a book, the New Testament is not an exhaustive history like Chronicles or Kings, or a collection of poetry like Psalms or Proverbs, or Ezekiel (whatever *it* is). Rather, its inspired genre is, more or less, the epistle: letters written on the run and on the lam, dispatched with urgency, sent by courier, signed with longing. Driving momentum forward are the constant reminders of the brevity of life and the temporal nature of this age: "the time is near" (Revelation 1:3); "the end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter 4:7); "the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16); "the hour has come" (Romans 13:11).

And while the Kingdom is inaugurated, it has yet to be consummated, and so the clock is always ticking. Alertness is unsustainable without reference to a clock, which is why Jesus constantly references it (Mark 13:35: "Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come"), as do authors throughout the New Testament (1 Corinthians 7:29, NIV: "What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short").

Like any book, the New Testament has a tone and tempo, and this is its divinely inspired tempo. Now, you can pull out some Kingdom-y quotes and repackage it as a utopian manifesto telling us to stretch out, settle down, build a better world, but that's not what it is. Twisting Scripture's tempo is still twisting Scripture.

The New Testament is not written to an audience in cultural ascendancy, but to persecuted, temporarily dis-

placed outcasts of this world who are waiting for their King to return and a new age to dawn. It is the instructions for how to live in this in-between time, this waiting between the ages; it is an eschatological handbook on how to survive while the lights are out.

As such, the New Testament has as a primary concern keeping us awake, alert, undistracted, and motivated while we wait. In this age, we are the disciples in Gethsemane, and Scripture is constantly checking on us and poking at us to stay “awake” (Revelation 16:15) and “prepared” (Luke 1:17), always “watchful” (Colossians 4:2), “alert” (1 Peter 5:8, NIV), and “on guard” (Mark 13:33).

There is a very clear theology of wakefulness in the New Testament: biblical truths and teachings given by God to create in us—and sustain in us—spiritual alertness through the present age. In the rest of this book we will trace that theology, looking to those passages and teachings that speak directly to alertness and vigilance or warn of its absence. But before we start, we need to briefly distinguish between two types of alertness, or wakefulness, found in Scripture, because there are two different ways to be awake, and both are important.

TWO TYPES OF ATTENTION

Human attention (awareness) has become one of the most intensely studied topics in psychology, sociology, and neuroscience, and current research indicates that we pay attention through two distinct processes: “top-down” attention and “bottom-up” attention.¹⁵ “Top-down” attention is conceptual in nature—seeing the “big picture.” “Bottom-up” attention is awareness of our more immediate physical environment. And yes, I’ll explain.

Let’s suppose that the peaceful inhabitants of Switzerland have finally come unhinged and declare war . . . on everyone. The nation is a seething cauldron of bankers. Now, imagine you’re in charge of the American military. Your highest priority is to create a battle plan, and to do this you need a room full of medal-chested men in buzz-cuts; you need analysis of troop movements and weaponry; you need weather models and casualty projections; you need tactical scenarios with names like Broken Sparrow and Operation Bunny Rabbit. You need total awareness, but it’s total *conceptual* awareness. This is “top-down” attention.

The second type, “bottom-up” attention, is what is needed by the soldier on the front lines, in the trenches. (Assume, for the sake of my anachronistic metaphor, that soldiers still fight in trenches, the Kaiser rules Germany, and the Hindenburg rules the skies.) For a combat soldier, awareness is perceptual, not philosophical: you’re discerning the enemy not with your mind, but with your eyes. You are trying to be *physically* alert. Strategizing generals don’t need this sort of awareness; they don’t need to be keenly aware of their conference table or the hands darting for snacks.

Because God made us this way, it’s not surprising that Scripture speaks both to our big picture, forward-looking awareness (like being ready for the Lord’s return) and to our immediate awareness of God in our circumstances: “Suppose [you notice] a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food . . . but [do] nothing . . . what good is it?” (James 2:15–16, NIV). We need both, which is something of James’ point here: what good is conceptual awareness of biblical doctrine if you are oblivious to the practical opportunities and application?

This is an important grid through which to see the New Testament's teaching on alertness, and through which to read the chapters ahead. The most abstract thinker must see the importance of practical, in-the-moment attentiveness, and the most practical doer must see the relevance of big-picture doctrines like rewards or the return of Christ. Scripture addresses both because we need both. The Kingdom is "already but not yet," and so requires both top-down and bottom-up attention. In the present age, being either nearsighted or farsighted is not being fully alert.

And being fully alert? Well, that's being fully alive. When we live awake in our faith, our life changes, and the lives of everyone around us change. And that reminds me: There was a very happy ending for some of those patients treated for sleeping sickness. Dopamine, fittingly nicknamed *resurrectamine*, demonstrated an amazing ability to reverse the symptoms of sleep and reanimate the slumberers:

The next day Mrs. Y "exploded" as the nursing-staff put it. . . . On Saturday 17 May, about half an hour after receiving her morning gram of L-DOPA, Mrs. Y suddenly jumped to her feet, and before incredulous eyes walked the length of the ward. "What do you think of that, eh?" she exclaimed in a loud, excited voice. "What do you think of that, what do you think of that, what do you think of that?" . . .

Throughout the course of this amazing weekend, Mrs. Y walked excitedly all around the hospital, starting conversations with fellow-patients who had never heard her talk before, rejoicing ebulliently in her new-found freedom. Her capacity to chew and swallow were suddenly increased, and so too was her appetite: "Don't give me any of that slush! . . . I want a steak, well done!"¹⁶