

SLEEPWALKING INTO ETERNITY
A Devotional Meditation from
Deuteronomy 10:12; Micah 6:8; Matthew 7:21-23; John 21:22; Acts 1:7
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*“The Return of Rip Van Winkle,” John Quidor, 1849
([Washington, National Gallery of Art](http://www.nationalgallery.org/art/rip-van-winkle)).*

How could someone sleep for 20 years? Washington Irving explored that question in his short story, “Rip van Winkle,” first published in 1819. According to the story, Rip was walking through the Catskill Mountains near his home when he encountered some strange little men who shared with him a potent liquor that put him to sleep for two decades. When he finally awoke, the world had changed so completely he could hardly recognize it. The American Revolution had transformed the political, economic and social landscape so thoroughly that he found it difficult to navigate the once-familiar surroundings of his native New York. Moreover, he learned

that his wife and many of his friends had died, his children were grown, and no one remembered him.

In this new reality, Rip van Winkle found himself bypassed and irrelevant, which, oddly enough, did not seem to bother him very much. Once his identity was established, he went to live with his daughter and her family, and spent the rest of his days doing exactly what he did before his lengthy nap. As Washington Irving explains, “Rip was ready to attend to anybody's business but his own; but as to doing family duty, and keeping his farm in order, he found it impossible.”* After dropping out of society for 20 years, Rip had no farm to keep up and no family to support, so he resorted to his habit of idling with other men at the local tavern for hours on end.

We might ask, what really changed for Rip van Winkle? He had missed the earth-shaking events of his age, but the essence of his life remained the same.

The answer to that question could apply to just about anyone in any age. The affairs of nations rarely impact the lives of ordinary people for very long. To be sure, war and its attendant ills of famine, plague, and death make life precarious, and the periodic changes in political and social structure may expand or contract the freedoms to which one is accustomed, but bills and taxes still must be paid, hungry mouths must be fed, growing children must have clothes and shoes, husbands and wives must continue to negotiate the parameters of their relationships, and every human being must come to terms with their Creator.

* Washington Irving, “Rip van Winkle,” The Literature Network (<http://www.online-literature.com/irving/2053/>).

It matters little whether we live in a free and open society with plenty to eat, or a constricted, tyrannical society where bread is at a premium. We will always have to deal with other people, and always have to wrestle with our place and purpose in the universe – which, of course, means wrestling with the question of whether there is a God, and if so whether and how we relate to Him.

One would think this is a simple matter for those who profess faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but it isn't. Even if we grew up in a godly family with a strong Christian faith, there is still that necessary, but difficult, transition of making our parents' God our God. He wants a relationship with every individual, and that means we do not have the luxury of coasting through life on the faith of our fathers. Neither is it enough to know the scriptures by heart, nor to know all the signs of the times, nor even to have a perfect attendance record in Sunday School. This is the scary part about what may be the most frightening words Yeshua spoke:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, and drive out demons in Your name, and perform many miracles in Your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from Me, you workers of lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:21-23 TLV)

This should make us stop and think. If the Messiah is speaking about people who serve God faithfully – or at least seem to serve faithfully – then how can we avoid such a rebuke when our time in this life is done? What is really important to the One Who made us and redeems us? Moses explained that to Israel long ago:

So now, O Israel, what does *ADONAI* your God require of you, but to fear *ADONAI* your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve *ADONAI* your God with all your heart and with all your soul, to keep the *mitzvot* of *ADONAI* and His statutes that I am commanding you today, for your own good? (Deuteronomy 10:12 TLV)

In other words, love God and do what He says. If we have any doubt about that, the prophet Micah not only repeats that instruction, but applies it to the whole world:

He has told you, humanity, what is good, and what *ADONAI* is seeking from you: Only to practice justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8 TLV)

Now it is no mystery that in this world of distractions, it's easy to shift our gaze and our efforts from these instructions. That's why this is not a matter of going through the motions and checking the right boxes, but of connecting intimately with our Creator. This is a matter of the heart, and always has been. The real question is whether our heart is fixed on our Redeeming God, or on something else – and that is a question we have to ask ourselves daily.

But we really don't want to ask that question because the answer will discourage and frighten us. The truth is, we want to get distracted with the urgent things of life, the shiny things, the interesting things – with anything other than the penetrating light of the Holy Spirit that illuminates the stumbling blocks in our hearts that pull us off the narrow path and keep us floundering in the wilderness.

There is some comfort in the fact that God's people have always needed reminders about what is really important. If our hearts really are for Him, then He will make every effort to meet us where we are. That's why Yeshua took pains to meet Peter and the other apostles in Galilee after His resurrection. Peter especially needed help after he shamefully denied the Lord. It seems Peter was more prepared to die fighting to defend Yeshua than to live the life of an outcast while feeding His sheep. When confronted with that painful truth, Peter tried to deflect the conversation by asking about the fate of his colleague John. Yeshua would not be deterred, but returned the challenge to Peter, saying, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" (John 21:22 TLV)

He said something similar to all the disciples a few days later, just before He returned to the Father. When they asked about the fulfillment of prophecy, He said,

"It is not your place to know the times or seasons which the Father has placed under His own control. But you will receive power when the *Ruach ha-Kodesh* has come upon you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and through all Judah, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:7 TLV)

How do we serve as Yeshua's witnesses? We do what He says, which is the same as what His Heavenly Father has told us from the beginning. Yes, do keep an eye on the times and the monumental events in the earth, for there is a day of reckoning coming. We need to know when and where to go when danger approaches, not so much to save ourselves, but to demonstrate the love of our God by helping others as we are able. But even as we keep our eyes open, we must keep our hearts fixed on our Creator. Otherwise, we risk sleepwalking into eternity.