

Sweet, Satisfying Sleep

Proverbs

We are in the midst of a sermon series in Proverbs on the fear of the Lord. In Proverbs 19:23 we read this:

23 The fear of the LORD leads to life,
So that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil.

As we've seen throughout Proverbs, the person who fears the Lord is most fully alive. The person who seeks wisdom and aligns his/her life with God becomes a person who experiences the fullness of life. That person experiences wholeness in relationships both with God and with others. By contrast, the person who could care less about God and His ways unwittingly follows the path that leads to death; that person experiences a world of heartache, frustration, and self-destruction. And so we are reminded here that "the fear of the Lord leads to life." That's what Jesus talked about when He said that He came to give life in abundance (John 10).

One aspect of life is sleep. Most people spend a third of their life asleep. And so we shouldn't be surprised that one aspect of the abundant life that God gives those who fear Him is satisfying sleep. It would be truly odd if a relationship with God had no affect on a third of our lives. The person who fears God is able to "rest content" (as the NIV puts it). That person has satisfying sleep. That person is also "untouched by evil" – meaning that s/he experiences God's protection in the nighttime.

Today I want to examine this basic perspective about sleep, namely that sleep is a good gift that God gives to those who fear Him. We'll look at a couple of other Proverbs as well as several Psalms.

I realize that there are numerous dangers associated with teaching about sleep. The first is that talking about sleep can make people sleepy. When my brothers and I were children, our mother taught us the following poem:

Now I lay me down to sleep.
The sermon's long, the subject's deep.
If he should quit before I wake,
Please give me a gentle shake.

I realize that I'm taking a calculated risk by talking about sleep on Sunday morning.

Second, sleep is a very complex topic. Many different factors affect whether or not a person gets a "good night's sleep" (however you define it). There are practical and medical issues that affect whether a person sleeps well at night. Some people, for example, can't drink caffeine after 1 p.m. or else they won't sleep well at night. If you're that sensitive to caffeine and you drink Red Bull after supper, you're not having a spiritual problem when you can't sleep at night. As well, sleep apnea is a common condition in our day.

And here's my biggest disclaimer: My habits of sleep are about as messed up as anybody I know. And my three brothers are just like me. We all have this God-given ability to fall asleep

almost anywhere (on the bench at the zoo, standing in line at the grocery store, lying on the Ab Lounger at Dick's Sporting Goods, etc.). We tend to wake up in the middle of the night for a couple hours. I don't want to give the impression that I've discovered the "Seven Steps to a Good Night's Sleep."

Please, please, please don't hear me saying that if you aren't getting a good night's sleep that there's something defective in your walk with God. There may be issues to consider, but that's certainly not always the case. Proverbs is wisdom literature which teaches in generalities. Nevertheless, the Scriptures do say quite a bit about sleep.

With all of this in mind, let's turn first to Proverbs 3. This passage puts satisfying sleep into the larger context of a satisfying life.

A Promise of Sweet Sleep, free from Fear (Proverbs 3:24) In verses 21-35 the father is pleading with his son to seek after wisdom. He emphasizes the blessings/benefits of having wisdom as his constant companion. Let's begin in verse 21:

21 My son, let them not depart from your sight;
Keep sound wisdom and discretion,
22 So they will be life to your soul,
And adornment to your neck.
23 Then you will walk in your way securely,
And your foot will not stumble.

This father wants his son to be accompanied by wisdom throughout the day so that he will experience security and stability. It's not that there won't be difficulties and suffering; but he will persevere. He will "walk securely" and his "foot will not stumble." And notice what he experiences when he goes to bed at night:

24 When you lie down, you will not be afraid;
When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

The father is telling his son that there will be continuity between the way he lives during the day and the way he sleeps at night. Because he has experienced God's protection and presence during the day, he'll experience the same when he goes to bed at night. God certainly won't abandon him when he goes to sleep at night. His sleep will be "sweet" or pleasant to him.

The opposite, of course, would be to lie down and be fearful and your sleep being fitful and unpleasant. (Psalm 91:5 speaks of not being afraid of the terror of night.) I suspect that each of us can think of times when that's been our experience. Sometimes we can fill up our days with activities and background noise, keeping the issues that trouble us at bay. But when we shut down for the night, our fears and anxieties come flooding into our minds. If we haven't really entrusted the issues of our lives to God and allowed Him to care for us throughout the day, we will "be afraid" and our sleep will not be "sweet."

I can think of times when I've dreaded climbing in bed at night because I knew there were unresolved conflicts that would come flooding into my mind and would rob me of sound sleep. There are examples in Scripture when people have faced such devastating circumstances that

they couldn't sleep; but that should probably be the rare exception. The general pattern of our lives should be to "cast all our anxieties on God because He cares for us" (1 Peter 5) and allowing the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

Again, there is this basic continuity between the way we've been living all day long and what we experience when we try to sleep. If our lives have been ruled by peace during the day, we usually experience peace at night. That's why the Scriptures advocate seeking God all day long. Psalm 55:17, for example, speaks of pouring out complaints to God "evening, morning, and noon." If the only prayer you pray is, "God, please give me a good night sleep," then you're not seeing the larger context. The whole tenor of Scripture suggests that as we seek God all day long and pray without ceasing, asking for sleep is just one more way we seek to experience God. The basic promise is that God gives sweet, satisfying sleep to those who fear Him.

In our time remaining I want us to examine some other Scriptures that mention sleep. These Scriptures fill out the basic perspective we've seen in Proverbs.

What we can learn from sleep (or sleeplessness):

Sleep reminds us of our human limitations. (Psalm 127:1-2) These verses also give the larger context of sleep. Sleep is depicted as a good, normal, important part of life. Specifically, these verses challenge the idea that we can make our lives successful without God and without sleep.

1 Unless the LORD builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the LORD guards the city,
The watchman keeps awake in vain.

Building a house (or possibly a "household" given the last few verses of this psalm) independent of God is vanity; it's only a matter of time before you get to the end of your resources. In the same way, building and guarding a city independent of God is vanity. The OT is full of examples of the limitations of human effort and military might. On a personal level, verse 2 says:

2 It is vain for you to rise up early,
To retire late,
To eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.

If you are living independent of God, you can get up early and go to bed late, working hard all day, and it will be vanity. Yet sometimes we live as if God put us on this earth and said, "Show me how hard you can work and how much you can accomplish without Me." But that was never what God intended. Next week we'll be looking at the topic of diligence and we'll see that it is good to work hard in every area of life. But we were never meant to work hard independent of God.

The last line of verse 2 explains why: "for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep." I think the NIV better captures the sense of what's being said here: "for he grants sleep to those he loves." Sleep itself is the good gift that God gives to those He loves. If you want to be a productive, successful person you don't simply work from early in the morning until late at night. You trust God throughout the day and then you receive the good gift of sleep at night.

You acknowledge the limitations of your humanity by letting God give you sweet, satisfying sleep at night. The fact that we *need* sleep is a daily reminder of our dependence upon God.

As followers of Christ, every time we lay down to sleep we are really acknowledging, “I’m not God because I need sleep.” (The fact that Jesus slept during His time on earth doesn’t mean that He wasn’t God, but it does point to the fact that He accepted the limitations of humanity.) By contrast, we read in Psalm 121:4 that God does not “sleep nor slumber”; He never gets tired or needs a nap. While we’re asleep God is active in this world. Remember that the Hebrew day began at sunset. If we live with the Hebrew mindset, we’ll realize that we begin the day by going to sleep (not very impressive). When we get going in the morning a third of the day is over. God has been at work while we’ve been asleep. Therefore, how foolish for us to live independent of God. [See Elijah’s taunt of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27, “. . . perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.”]

Sleeplessness should prompt us to listen for God’s voice. This dynamic is suggested in several Scriptures. Again, I would emphasize that having trouble sleeping doesn’t necessarily mean anything (there are many factors to consider), but it might.

For example, in Ecclesiastes 5:12 we have an example of sleeplessness being a symptom of something deeper:

12 The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much. But the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

Generally speaking, the person who puts in a full, honest day’s work lies down at night and has a good night’s sleep. The “rich man” has a full stomach but he’s not able to sleep. If you read Ecclesiastes 5 you’ll see that the rich man has “hoarded” his riches to his own detriment (5:13). His riches didn’t bring satisfaction – only anxiety. That’s evidence that he is living independent of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:23 also speaks of the person whose “mind does not rest at night” because of all his toils.) This man’s sleeplessness was a byproduct of the absence of the fear of the Lord.

I suspect that most of us have had the experience of waking up in the middle of the night with some issue weighing heavy on our minds. Years ago when I would wake up in the middle of the night thinking about something I only got frustrated. I’d dwell on how tired I was going to be the next day and how much I wished I were asleep. But trying to go to sleep usually doesn’t work. I’m beginning to ask, “Is that you, Lord? Is there something you want to say to me?” Sometimes there is. Sometimes there is a sin to confess; sometimes there is a need to pray for; sometimes there is a Scripture to read. Sometimes in the middle of the night – for me at least – even a brief time in the Scriptures can be especially nourishing.

In other words, we shouldn’t see occasional sleeplessness as a curse but as a gift. Chronic insomnia is another thing, but occasional sleeplessness can be a gift from God. Even though you might prefer that God speak to us at a more convenient time, it may just be that God (for His own reasons) might want to speak to us in the night. Hearing the voice of God is priceless. Scripture is full of examples of people hearing the voice of God in the middle of the night. David actually looked forward to the “night watches” when he could meditate on God’s truth and listen to the voice of God (e.g., Psalm 63:6). I would encourage us each to listen to the voice of God when sleep leaves us.

God continues His good work in our lives even when we sleep. For starters there is the basic work God does of restoring our strength and refreshing us through sleep. On the one hand sleep is an expression of “common grace” that all people everywhere experience; just as God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust, He gives sleep to everybody. But those who confess faith in Christ should acknowledge that God is the One who gives this common grace. It’s very appropriate for our morning prayers to include thanksgiving for the sleep we just received. And just like all gifts, we need to appreciate the sleep God has given and not grumble about the sleep He hasn’t given.

But then there’s the prospect of God doing something more when we sleep: sometimes God communicates to His people (and others) through dreams. I don’t know if that sounds weird to you or not, but the Scriptures contain dozens of accounts of God speaking to people through dreams. If we take the Scriptures as the authority not only for our doctrine, but for our experience of God, it seems to me that we have to be open to the possibility that God might communicate to us through dreams. As a matter of fact, many of *you* have told me about dreams that you’ve had. Some of them have been quite significant for you or for somebody else.

Discerning the significance of a dream obviously isn’t an exact science (but what is in our walk with God?). I always encourage people to pay attention to dreams to see whether God might be saying something. As for me, I don’t dream a lot. And sometimes when I dream it’s something goofy that I can’t imagine has any spiritual significance. But there have been occasions when I’ve had a dream that has prompted me to pray or to pay attention to some issue in my life. When we filter our dreams through the grid of Scripture they can be one more way that God continues His good work in our lives.

Conclusion. Let me simply say in conclusion that the goal of our lives is not to get a “good night’s sleep.” Our goal is to please God and experience God in every area of life. That certainly includes experiencing God in the context of sleep. My encouragement to you (and to myself) is to pay attention to your habits of sleep. There’s no need to become preoccupied or paranoid about sleep. But it does make sense to pay attention to our habits of sleep. When you experience sweet, satisfying sleep, thank God. When you have troubles sleeping, listen for the voice of God and anything He might want to impress upon you. In this way we seek to experience God in all of life – even in relation to sleep.