

SLEEP'S SERMON: WHAT SLEEP TELLS US ABOUT OURSELVES, OUR GOD, AND THE GOSPEL

by Brian Allred

WHEN MY CHILDREN were very young, my wife and I routinely read one particular book to them before bedtime. The book is called *Goodnight Moon*, and it features a bunny who says goodnight to just about everything in sight before finally settling into bed.¹ Interestingly, an updated version of the book has recently appeared, but it's written for adults. It's called—get this—*Goodnight Smartphone*.² It includes content like this: *Goodnight kittens / goodnight emails unwritten / goodnight clocks / goodnight inbox . . . / goodnight worrying about weight loss / goodnight demanding boss / goodnight test for which I need to cram / goodnight Instagram*.

This newer edition might seem playfully trivial but saying goodnight to the duties and demands of our wakeful hours is actually critically important for all of us. Sleep is a universal human need, as necessary as breathing. But the invention of electricity and the light bulb has enabled us to routinely neglect essential hours of sleep in favor of continued work and physical and mental activity. According to one Oxford professor, people get between one and two hours less sleep per night than they did 60 years ago.³ One-third of adults in the U.S. report that they usually get less than the amount of sleep recommended.⁴ While how much sleep a person needs is impacted by several factors including age, genetics, and activity levels, most people reading this need between 7–9 hours a night on average.⁵ Despite what you

1. Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd (ill.), *Goodnight Moon* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1947).

2. Arianna Huffington, *Goodnight Smartphone*, 2016. Available only as an audiobook, it can be downloaded for free at <https://www.amazon.com/Goodnight-Smartphone-Arianna-Huffington/dp/B01MSNORQD>.

3. James Gallagher, "'Arrogance' of Ignoring Need for Sleep," May 12, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-27286872>.

4. "CDC – Sleep Home Page – Sleep and Sleep Disorders," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019), <https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/index.html>.

5. Eric Suni, "How Much Sleep Do We Really Need?," National Sleep Foundation (OneCare Media, LLC., 2019), <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need>. The National Sleep Foundation guidelines advise that healthy adults between

might want to tell yourself, it is unlikely that you belong to the group of people who are not negatively affected by regularly getting less. And despite what you also might want to tell yourself, consuming caffeine cannot adequately compensate for lack of quality sleep.

But should any of this concern Christians particularly? Well, consider that we spend a good deal of life sleeping, and the quality of that sleep—or lack of it—significantly impacts our waking hours that are to be lived in service to the Lord. One pediatric sleep doctor insists: “There’s nothing in our daily lives that isn’t negatively affected by sleep deprivation, and no one is immune to sleep deprivation’s negative effects.”⁶ Fair enough, but isn’t this topic more appropriately addressed in a physician’s office than in a theological journal? The answer to that question is no. And the reason the answer is no is because sleep is God’s idea. God could have fashioned us in such a way that we didn’t require sleep, but he didn’t. Why? Why did God design us to spend one-third of our existence in an unconscious state, unproductive, and virtually dead to the world?

Admittedly, there is mystery that surrounds sleep, but the Bible is not silent on the topic. We read that the Lord caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam in the Garden of Eden (notably this occurs *before* the fall⁷), during which time the Lord removed one of Adam’s ribs and fashioned from it a woman (Gen. 2:21–22). Sleep plays a role in God declaring his covenant promises to Abram (Gen. 15:12–21) and Jacob (Gen. 28:11–17). The stories of Samson, Elijah, and Jonah include important references to sleep as they unfold. We learn that Jesus slept (Mark 4:38), as did his disciples (though at a time they should have remained awake, Matt. 26:40). Sleep is mentioned on numerous occasions in the Psalms. In Psalm 3:1–5, David declares:

O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, “There is no salvation for him in God.” But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me.

In Psalm 4:8, David asserts: “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” We read in Psalm 127:2: “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

Through the occasional references to sleep in the Scriptures, we can derive some key insights for developing a biblical perspective about sleep. We also discover that

18–64 years old get 7–9 hours of sleep per 24 hours, with children and teens needing even more. The recommended amount for pre-school children between 3–5 years old is 10–13 hours, 9–11 hours for school-aged children between 6–13 years old, and 8–10 hours for teens between 14 and 17.

6. Whitney Roban, “Your Employees Are Exhausted, and Here’s Why,” Thrive Global, December 4, 2016, <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/your-employees-are-exhausted-and-here-s-why/>.

7. This implies that sleep is not something we experience as a result of the fall.

sleep preaches a message that we would be wise to hear because it teaches us important things about ourselves, our God, and the gospel. Whether our current sleep patterns are healthy or not,⁸ we all need to hear sleep's sermon and the truths that sleep summons us to embrace. We'll consider three (and I'll try not to put you to sleep).

Sleep Is a Summons to Humble Ourselves

Sleep is a summons to humble ourselves by confronting us with the fact that *we are limited*. Our need for sleep reminds us of our creaturely limitations and weaknesses daily and calls us to embrace the fact that we are human, not superhuman. As finite creatures, we can only resist the requirement of sleep for so long. But while we can't escape the need for sleep altogether, we can, and often do resist this summons to humble ourselves by reducing the length of time we regularly give to sleep. Indeed, we can endure reductions in the duration of our sleep for fairly long stretches—not just days, but weeks, months, and even years. But—and this is important—we can't do that without suffering an assortment of negative consequences associated with chronic sleep deprivation. Research has shown that reduced sleep duration is linked to 7 of the 15 leading causes of death in the U.S., namely cardiovascular disease, cancer, strokes, accidents, diabetes, septicemia, and high blood pressure.⁹

In fact, lack of sleep has been shown to increase the overall risk of premature mortality. A recent review of various surveys concluded that individuals who slept for less than six hours each night had a tenfold greater risk of premature mortality than those who obtained 7 to 9 hours of sleep.¹⁰ In addition, sleep loss can adversely affect components of the immune system critical to resisting pathogens and has been shown to predict increased susceptibility to upper respiratory tract infections.¹¹ And since sleep plays a pivotal role in metabolism, sufficient sleep is vital for

8. Given the importance of sleep and the negative impact sleep deprivation can have, establishing healthy sleep patterns is a worthy and warranted consideration. For helpful suggestions, see "Healthy Sleep Habits and Good Sleep Hygiene," Sleep Education (American Academy of Sleep Medicine, February 9, 2017), <http://sleepeducation.org/essentials-in-sleep/healthy-sleep-habits>. Steps to improve the quality of sleep can include: keeping a consistent sleep schedule, getting to bed early enough for adequate sleep, establishing a bedtime routine, turning off electrical devices at least 30 minutes before bedtime, not eating large meals or consuming caffeine late in the evening, and engaging in physical activity during the day. For some people, poor sleep quality is connected to biological factors, such as sleep apnea. Those experiencing prolonged trouble related to quality sleep should see a doctor. It should also be acknowledged that it is possible to sleep too much. When this is the result of apathy and laziness, confession and repentance are in order. However, too much sleep may also be an indicator of underlying physical or psychological health problems (for example, depression) and may warrant a visit to a health professional.

9. Vijay Chattu et al., "The Global Problem of Insufficient Sleep and Its Serious Public Health Implications," *Healthcare* 7, no. 1 (December 20, 2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6473877/>.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

maintaining a healthy weight. Various studies have shown links between insufficient sleep and obesity, likely due to the body's demand for increased caloric intake in attempts to sustain additional wakefulness.¹²

The adverse effects of sleep loss are not only physical but psychological as well. Reduced sleep is linked to problems related to mood, including depression, anxiety, and irritability.¹³ There is evidence that insufficient sleep impairs cognitive processes such as reasoning, planning, and problem-solving.¹⁴ The National Sleep Foundation claims that the cognitive impairments on driving from being awake for twenty-four hours straight are comparable to those produced by alcohol intoxication.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, a number of studies have shown that inadequate sleep increases the likelihood of daytime accidents and critical mistakes in the workplace.¹⁶

We must not be deceived into thinking that God will supernaturally override these negative consequences if our habitual neglect of sleep is done in service to him. He doesn't.¹⁷ Why would he? If we're honest, pride and arrogance often fuel, at least in part, our disregard for sleep, and God opposes the proud.¹⁸ Far from God overriding negative consequences, those who routinely neglect sleep will likely suffer spiritual consequences in addition to the physical and psychological ones. Common experience teaches us that it's far more difficult to resist temptation, exercise loving patience, and control our anger when we're short on sleep. This has led D. A. Carson to conclude:

Sometimes the godliest thing you can do in the universe is get a good night's sleep—not pray all night, but sleep. I'm certainly not denying that there may be a place for praying all night; I'm merely insisting that in the normal course of things, spiritual discipline obligates you to get the sleep your body needs.¹⁹

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. "Driving While Drowsy Can Be As Dangerous as Driving While Drunk – National Sleep Foundation," National Sleep Foundation (OneCare Media, 2019), <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/drowsy-driving-vs-drunk-driving-how-similar-are-they>.

16. Vijay Chattu et al., "The Global Problem of Insufficient Sleep and Its Serious Implications," *Healthcare* 7, no. 1 (December 20, 2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6473877/>.

17. This is not to deny that he could, only that he ordinarily doesn't.

18. Proverbs 29:23; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5.

19. D.A. Carson, *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 147. On the flip side, when we get the sleep we need, common experience teaches us that our strength and resolve to walk with God, serve others, and advance the kingdom for another day are renewed with increased vigor. Furthermore, with adequate sleep, the mind is often cleared so we can make better decisions, validating the wisdom of the request to "let me sleep on it."

Sleep reminds us that we have limits, and it summons us to humble ourselves daily by embracing those limits. But additionally, sleep is a summons to humble ourselves by embracing the fact that *we are dependent*. We cannot get the sleep we need by a mere act of the will. Every insomniac knows this all too well. Like every other need we have, sleep is provided as a gift of God. The psalmist acknowledges this in Psalm 127:2: “he gives to his beloved sleep.” Commenting on this verse, Charles Spurgeon remarked: “We think that we lay our heads upon our pillows, and compose our bodies in a peaceful posture, and that, therefore, we naturally and necessarily sleep. But it is not so. Sleep is the gift of God.”²⁰

But sleep confronts us with our dependence not just for sleep itself but for provision more broadly. We are unable to use every hour of *any day*, let alone every hour of *every day*, in an effort to gather all we need to survive. I cannot keep my affairs in order, my possessions secure, or my loved ones safe while I'm idle and oblivious to the world for about eight hours every day. I have to depend on God for that. With this in mind, we should consider the possibility that neglect of sleep may not only be an indicator of pride and arrogance—it may also indicate an underlying fear born out of functional atheism that we only have ourselves to depend upon.

A third way sleep summons us to humble ourselves is by reminding us that *we are expendable*. The sun rises, the sun sets, and the world keeps spinning without our help. God doesn't need us to keep things running or to carry out his purposes for the universe. So, sleep preaches a sermon that summons us to humble ourselves by confronting us with the truth that we are limited, dependent, and expendable. Indeed, we're creatures, not the Creator. Perhaps Charles Spurgeon summed it up best by saying: “God gave us sleep to remind us we're not him.”²¹ In fact, sleep's summons to humble ourselves should lead us to fix our gaze on him who is our Creator.

Sleep Is a Summons to Honor the Lord

While sleep confronts us with our creaturely limits, dependence, and expendability, it is designed to direct us to the God who is unlimited and never grows weary or sleeps. As Psalm 121:4 declares: “Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” The Psalm goes on in verses 5–6 to reinforce the truth that this God is the Keeper of sleepers: “The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.” This echoes what David says in Psalm 3:5: “I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.” In part, God's covenant faithfulness is manifested by his keeping watch over and sustaining the sleeping creatures he has made. So, rather than neglecting needed sleep out of a pride and arrogance that boasts of our own strength and ability, sleep

20. Charles Spurgeon, “The Peculiar Sleep of the Beloved,” *The Spurgeon Center and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (New Park Street Pulpit Volume 1, March 4, 1885)*, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-peculiar-sleep-of-the-beloved-2/#flipbook/>.

21. Quoted in J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt, *Ministry Mantras: Language for Cultivating Kingdom Culture* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016).

summons us to honor the Lord as our *ultimate power* and limitless Creator and keeper.

In addition, instead of neglecting sleep out of fear, sleep summons us to honor the Lord by depending on him as our *ultimate provider*. Because he is not only powerful but loving and merciful, we can trust him to look after our concerns and loved ones while we sleep. He never takes a shift off but watches over us night and day, seven days a week. Honoring the Lord by looking to him as our ultimate provider delivers us from the vanity and anxious toil of trying to supply everything we need by our own hands and enables us to accept his gift of sleep.

Sleep summons us to honor the Lord not only as our ultimate power and provider but also as our *ultimate protector*. David confesses in Psalm 4:8: “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.” Trusting God as his protector who kept him safe is what allowed David—and what allows us—to lie down and sleep “in peace.”

Sleep’s sermon is telling you that someone other than you is your ultimate caregiver: your power, your provider, your protector. For this reason, our sleep patterns say a great deal about our theology—what we really believe about God and where we’re placing our trust. This is why David Murray asserts: “Few things are as theological as sleep. Show me your sleep pattern, and I’ll show you your theology.”²² Who do you trust to provide for you and protect you? What—or who—enables you to sleep in peace?

We can also ask, on the other hand, what robs us of sleep? What keeps you awake? To be fair, there are times when we won’t get as much sleep as we need or as much as we’d like—for example, during seasons of high demand at work or stages of family life that involve caring for infants and toddlers. But we should not accept these periods as the norm. And if we’re honest, it’s often not necessity that leads to sleep deprivation but our idols. As Murray also notes, what we do instead of sleep—the things for which we will routinely sacrifice sleep—can shine a spotlight on our idols.²³ Things such as financial gain, ambition, work reputation, academic success, exercise, entertainment, sports, gaming, and romance are not uncommon reasons why we give up needed sleep. Of course, there’s a place for prioritizing some of these things over sleep on occasion. It’s worth noting that sleep itself can become an idol if we’ll never sacrifice *anything* for it. But when our pursuits lead to chronic sleep deprivation, those pursuits are likely revealing our idols. Do your sleep patterns express your trust in the Lord, or do they reveal the idols of your heart? Are you honoring the Lord as your power, provider, and protector in your sleep? Believing that our God is powerfully in control and trusting him to provide for us and protect us, including when we are at our most vulnerable, is how we honor the Lord in our sleep.

22. David Murray, *Reset* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 54.

23. *Ibid.*, 55.

Sleep Is a Summons to Hope in the Gospel

Sleep's sermon is a summons to humble ourselves, to honor the Lord, and finally, to hope in the gospel. How is sleep a summons to hope in the gospel? Consider that the Scriptures often use the language of sleep to refer to death. We see this in Psalm 13:3 where David pleads: "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." In the New Testament, the apostle Paul uses the language of sleep to refer to death (see 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). Jesus himself makes this connection between sleep and death in striking ways. Before raising Lazarus from the dead, we hear Jesus say in John 11:11–13: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him: "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.

On another occasion, Jesus dismisses mourners present at the death of a 12-year-old girl, saying: "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. And the report of this went through all that district (Matt. 9:24–26). It is apparent that the girl had, in fact, died, and Jesus performed a miracle by raising her from the dead. Otherwise, this is hardly an act worth reporting (or recording) if he had simply been successful in waking her up from a sickness-induced nap.

But we should not miss the important implications these passages have for how we think about sleep. Unless we're ready to accept that Jesus simply lied about the true condition of these dead people—an unacceptable conclusion for those committed to upholding the sinlessness of Jesus and its implications for our redemption—we must infer that there is something deeply analogous between sleep and death which renders his language entirely appropriate rather than false and deceptive.

Even from our perspective, we readily sense something analogous: dead people can often appear as if they're asleep. But our Lord's use of language connecting sleep and death likely goes beyond the mere similarity of outward appearance. Perhaps the analogy most in view for the one who is the Resurrection and the Life is that death, like sleep, is not final. Just as our bodies awaken from sleep, so our bodies will awaken from death at the resurrection.²⁴ This biblical association is part of sleep's sermon: the mystery of sleep helps us trust God in the mystery of death—an ethereal realm from which we awaken to renewed life as a gift of God's grace and goodness.²⁵ There is hope beyond the grave. Again, remember David's words in

24. Notice how the sleep language in John 11, 1 Corinthians 15, and 1Thessalonians 4 is in the context of passages particularly concerned with the doctrine of bodily resurrection.

25. This is not to suggest, as some have, that physical death is followed by a period of sleep-like, unconscious existence until the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns, a teaching known as soul sleep. Passages such as Luke 16: 19–25, Philippians 1:21–23, 2 Corinthians 5:8, and Revelation 6:9–11 paint a clear picture of conscious awareness in a state of provisional blessedness between death and the resurrection of the body. For a refutation of

Psalm 3:5: “I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.” Because of how sleep mirrors death, Christians can alter David’s words and confidently assert because of our hope in the gospel: “I lay down in death and I arose again, for the LORD saved me.”

But this hope rests on the work of Jesus our Savior, who on one dramatic occasion we’re told was sleeping through a storm. This not only models for us the peace and trust in the Father reflected in the psalms but confirms the reality of the incarnation. Jesus shared fully in our humanity—extending even to our need for sleep. As a result, he is our sympathetic high priest (Heb. 4:15). But even more, he took on our flesh so he could sleep the sleep of death in our place to render the payment necessary to atone for our sins. Afterward, he was raised from the dead and promised that all who look to him in faith will share in his resurrection and will awaken to new life.

In his grace, God grants the gift of sleep not just to believers but also to unbelievers (and even our animals). But only those who trust in Jesus and give their hearts to him—crucified on the cross and risen from the sleep of death—will awaken to everlasting glory when he returns. In anticipation of that great day, let us respond to sleep’s sermon as it summons us to humble ourselves by embracing our limits and getting the sleep we need. Let us respond to sleep’s sermon as it summons us to honor the Lord by looking to him as our power, provider, and protector so we can sleep in peaceful dependence on him. And let us respond to sleep’s sermon as it summons us to hope in the gospel²⁶ by confidently trusting that just as we rise from our sleep to new mercies every morning because of the grace of our God in this life, so we will rise from death to new and everlasting life in the age to come through Christ Jesus our Lord.

soul sleep, see John Calvin, *Psychpannychia*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:414–90.

26. Incidentally, humbling ourselves in the face of our limits, honoring the Lord as our power, provider, and protector, and hoping in the gospel and the promise of future rest are the same things we are summoned to embrace on the Lord’s Day. An important difference between sleep and Sabbath, however, it seems to me, is that we are invited to embrace these things on the Lord’s Day not out of biological necessity as is the case with sleep, but out of a sustained, voluntary decision to delight in our spiritual rest as a conscious and active expression of worship.