

A Few Thoughts for the Hunkered-Down

Tuesday, June 23, 2020

Some Thoughts About Sleep

The sleep of the laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of the rich man permits him no sleep. —Ecclesiastes 5:12

It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved. —Psalm 127:2

I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety. —Psalm 4:8

How are you sleeping these days? If you are like most people, not as well as you once did. The stress and disruption of the recent months has taken its toll upon our sleep habits. We are not sleeping as well as we should, and this is a tough problem to tackle with any success. Insomnia is a difficult problem to address, and as I speak to our recent sleeplessness, I want to be careful to stress that it defies easy solution, and inability to sleep should not be seen as a bad reflection upon our walk of faith. Having said all that, there are a few biblical passages on sleep which offer (as always) some fascinating insight. May they be a blessing.

Solomon offers insight on sleep and its amusing contradictions. One can well imagine that during one long sleepless night he got to thinking. Perhaps his inability to sleep was caused by indigestion after too much feasting and rich food, or by worries over all his kingly projects and responsibilities, or by concerns of preserving his great wealth and many assets. His bleary-eyed ponderings probably set him to thinking of the bone-tired common laborer who fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. All that wealth and success and he had only cheated himself out of a good night's sleep! It is noteworthy that we are an increasingly white-collar world, where physical labor has no part in many of our jobs. This liberation from manual labor is generally seen as a blessing, but there is catch!

We may not think of ourselves as wealthy, but we are, and how many of our anxieties are rooted in thoughts of preserving our wealth and assets? Two repair bills in one week have set me to worrying these past few days. Shame on me! That's what I get for being wealthy.

In another word from Solomon (Psalm 127 is attributed to him) we find the wise King scolding the hyper-active worker/worrier, and thanking God for the gift of sleep. *He [God] gives sleep to his beloved.* Apparently, he did not hesitate to confess his own foibles and failures in hopes that others might be spared sleeplessness. After many

years of feverish empire-building activity Solomon had eaten enough of *the bread of anxious toil*. To this day I regularly find myself working extra hard “to get ahead on this project,” as if that will give me the peace which I desire. Too often I have been a connoisseur of anxious-bread. I have tasted its many flavors and can concur with Solomon that it does not enhance one’s sleep experience. Achievement and activity are not the key to a good night’s sleep, and they may in fact, be the problem.

I will point out that we must not moralize about sleeplessness, as if it were some spiritual failure. Solomon is not scolding us for sleeplessness, but is urging us to be thankful for the good night sleep we do get, and to see it as a gift. If you are sleeping well these days, have you thanked God for that lovely present?

The sweetest word about sleep comes from David in Psalm 4. David celebrated the joy of a restful sleep as a gift from God. *For you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety*. Two words in that brief saying speak volumes. He speaks of safety! We love safety and spend tremendous resource and energy on making our world a safer place. David was concerned about safety too, but unlike us, he put his trust in God to achieve that blissful state. A few weeks back in a sermon on John 10, I mentioned that we may speak frequently of salvation and a person being saved, but spend too little time meditating upon the fact that in Christ I am not only saved, but I am safe! Amen! Let us meditate upon that a little more. We like being safe and a sense of safety enhances the sleep experience.

David rejoiced in being safe because of God’s watchful care, and he adds a descriptive which makes all the difference: *you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety*. David was something of an odd duck in his day, for while most of his countrymen believed in the God of Israel, nearly all of them hedged their bets by keeping spiritual allegiances to other gods and idols. In contrast this faithlessness, David was a fierce monotheist. If I want to sleep better, I had better start jettisoning some of my idols. You see, although I confess faith in one God, I also believe in luck, my own smarts, the stock market, American currency, and the list goes on. These gods are not always reliable, so I become anxious and they keep me up at night. David firmly asserted his faith in one God and one God only. We would all do well to tell all those other gods that they are not trustworthy and we do not believe in them, and then give praise and trust to the One True God. That’s a mattress we can sleep on!

And speaking of mattresses—did David sleep on a king size?

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O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and in rest we shall be saved, and in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: by the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. —J.W.Suter