

Theology of Sleep

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I certainly haven't covered every aspect of a typical day, but we have talked about everything morning routines, to how we should prioritize our schedules, to how we think about work, and entertainment, and reading, and music.

And today I want to address something we do every single day, but it's not something that we think that much about. and that is sleep. Unfortunately, we often think of sleep as a necessary evil.

It's just something we know we must do, but we don't really want to. It's just something we try to squeeze in between work and entertainment and our never-ending to-do lists. In fact, sometimes you'll hear people brag about how little sleep they get as though it's a badge of honor.

It can feel like a waste of time, which is why you'll hear people say things like, I'll sleep when I'm dead. But no matter how hard we try to fight it, our bodies obviously demand sleep. Without it, we eventually break down mentally, emotionally, physically, and even spiritually. Sleep deprivation affects everything. It destroys our ability to make decisions. It trashes our immune systems. It can even be fatal. I was reading the other day how heart attacks spike 24% the day after we switch over to daylight's savings time.

Perhaps we should write our congressman about that. But sleep is more than a biological necessity. It also has profound theological implications. It communicates something about our relationship to God, our creator and sustainer. Believe it or not, when we go to bed at night, we are effectively saying, Lord, I'm not in control. I'm not invincible. I'm not all-powerful.

[2 : 1 6] But I trust you to keep the world turning without me. I trust you to sustain me through the night. I can rest because I know you'll keep working. Of course, God designed us to sleep. So unsurprisingly, sleep has all kinds of practical benefits, which we'll talk about. Again, it affects everything throughout our days. So I want to essentially answer three questions. First, why do we sleep?

Second, how does sleep affect us, our health, our thinking, our spiritual lives? And third, how do we apply biblical wisdom to sleep? And we'll start at the beginning with a creation story in Genesis.

Genesis. The first time we read of anyone sleeping is in Genesis 2, verse 21. But I'll begin reading at verse 18. The Lord God also said, it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make for him a suitable helper. And out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would name each one. And whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the livestock, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam, no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the area with flesh. And from the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man, he made a woman and brought her to him. So God created the first man along with all of the animals. He then paraded those animals in front of Adam as if to say, look, Adam, you don't have an equal here. You don't have a suitable companion.

Then the Lord put Adam into a deep sleep, used Adam's rib to create the first woman, Adam's wife. Now, the first thing we should probably notice about this is that all of this happens before Adam sins.

All of this happens before the fall, which tells us sleep isn't necessarily a consequence of the fall. Now, like everything else, sin certainly changed the nature of sleep. We get tired much more quickly, I presume. We sometimes struggle to fall asleep or to stay asleep. But sleep itself, here we see, existed before sin. So perhaps we can put out of our minds any notion that sleep is a punishment.

[5 : 15] No, here it is when the world was still sinless and perfect. And the second thing to notice is what happens when Adam is asleep. Well, clearly, Adam is not pacing up and down the garden thinking, what am I going to do? I need a wife.

He's not lying awake in the grass, anxiously developing a plan for the next day. No, he's not doing anything at all. He's asleep. God, on the other hand, is working.

God is solving the problem all on his own. Now, we might argue that Adam was involved and that God used Adam's rib to create Eve, but at the same time, Adam is entirely passive here. God is actively working while Adam is sound asleep.

Well, that points to really an all-important theme throughout Scripture. Yes, we're called to work. In fact, we're called to work very diligently, but we are not the ultimate builders of our lives.

God is. Listen to what Solomon writes in Psalm 127. Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.

[6 : 38] Unless the Lord protects the city, its watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for bread to eat, for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Yes, the builders should build. Yes, the watchmen should stand guard. But it's ultimately God who builds the house and protects the city. So if we have this mindset that says, I need to stay up later, I need to get up earlier, and I need to ultimately sacrifice sleep to get everything done that needs to be done, well, there's something biblically and theologically inaccurate about that.

Anxiously toiling to the degree that we neglect sleep ignores the precious reality that God is in control of our lives, and he is in control of every outcome.

Not only that, but it ignores the fact that God designed us to need sleep, right? And he offers us sleep as a gift. Solomon says he gives sleep to his beloved.

In other words, he gives sleep to those he loves. Again, sleep is not a punishment. It's a good thing. And thinking back to the creation account in Genesis, God patterns this for us, doesn't he?

[8 : 03] He builds rest right into the created order by working six days and resting on the seventh. Genesis 2, Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array, and by the seventh day, God had finished the work he had been doing, and so on that day, he rested from all his work.

Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, set it apart, because on that day, he rested from all the work of creation that he had accomplished. So God himself models the goodness of rest, and that means rest or sleep is not necessarily an act of laziness.

It's not a waste of time. It's a good thing. And for finite human beings, it's a necessary thing. But again, sleep is more than just a physical or biological necessity.

Just think about what sleep represents in our relationship to God. Let me read Psalm 3. This is David writing, and he says, O Lord, how my foes have increased!

How many rise up against me! Many say of me, God will not deliver him. But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts my head.

[9 : 33] To the Lord I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep. I wake again, for the Lord sustains me.

I will not fear the myriads. Set against me on every side. Arise, O Lord, save me, O my God. Strike all my enemies on the jaw.

Break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord. May your blessing be on your people. Now you'll notice that reference to sleep in verse 5, but consider the larger context of this psalm.

David's on the run. He's in hiding. His enemies are trying to find him and kill him. So if anyone in this world has a reason to stay awake all night, it's David.

Even if he didn't stay awake, because he was worrying or maybe watching for his enemies to show up, he might have stayed up simply to strategize.

[10 : 35] What should I do next? I've got to figure out a plan. Clearly, this psalm shows he has a lot on his mind, right? And yet, he's not worried.

He's not staying up all night to keep watch or to strategize. Why? He says in verse 3, You, O Lord, are a shield around me. So he says, I lie down and sleep.

I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. He writes something similar in the next psalm, Psalm 4.8. He says, I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

You see, every time we close our eyes and drift off to sleep, we are making a subtle acknowledgement that we're not in control. David says, You alone, O Lord.

Our concerns will never be solved by staying awake all night in anxiety or fear. But we don't have to stay awake.

[11 : 46] We don't have to solve everything. As Psalm 121 says, God will not allow your foot to slip. Your protector will not slumber. Behold, the protector of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

We don't have to be active 24-7. We don't have to be vigilant, if you will, 24-7. We don't have to micromanage every detail of our lives because God is our protector who neither slumbers nor sleeps.

Did Adam have to figure out his companionship problem in the garden? Did he have to stay awake all night thinking about it? No. No. He slept while God continued working for his good.

Charles Spurgeon once said, God gave us night to shut down our earthly business and rest. He draws the curtain, puts out the candle, and bids us rest in his care.

Do you see how sleep is really an act of humility? It expresses a dependence on our sovereign God.

[12 : 57] We are surrendering control to the one who never sleeps, who never grows weary. It's an act of trust in his care for us. Now, of course, we want to approach this with a biblical balance.

We can't just say sleep is good and leave it at that because the Bible does offer us warnings concerning the extremes that we might take. On the one hand, we might go to the extreme of anxiously overworking where we neglect sleep.

And on the other hand, we might fall into laziness where perhaps we sleep too much. Well, I've already read from Psalm 127, but let me read verse 2 again.

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for bread to eat, for he gives sleep to his beloved. Now, to be clear, Solomon is not condemning hard work.

He's warning against work that is driven by anxiety and self-reliance. You see, rising early, staying up late, working and working without sufficient rest, this all reveals a heart that's not trusting in God to provide.

[14 : 16] Clearly, we need sleep and God wants us to sleep. He gives sleep to his beloved. So, Solomon expresses a concern that we're not sleeping and perhaps overworking in some sense or another because we refuse to let go and let God, as they say.

Think about the Sabbath principle throughout Scripture. It's right there in the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20, verses 8 through 10 say, Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God on which you must not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant or livestock, nor the foreigner within your gates.

For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, but on the seventh day he rested. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.

Now, the Sabbath day is really a subject for another time, but why did God build a day of rest into creation? Why did he model this for us?

[15 : 33] Why does he command us to set apart a day wherein we stop working? Is it because he doesn't want us to work at all? Well, obviously not because he made the rest of the week for working.

Does he want us to be lazy? No, of course not. God has built rest into his creation because first of all, we need rest.

And second, he wants us to trust him. He wants us to rely on him. Perhaps this was most clearly seen when God was providing the Israelites with manna in the wilderness.

He gave them exactly one day's worth of manna each day except for the Sabbath, the day before the Sabbath. They could collect enough for two days. In other words, God was providing for them with rest in mind.

He wanted them to rest, and as they did rest, he proved to them how he would continue to provide for them. They didn't have to be anxious, and they didn't have to be self-reliant.

[16 : 41] Our endless striving without rest will get us nowhere. Now, the other extreme is laziness.

Proverbs 6, verses 9 through 11. How long will you lie there, O slacker? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber in need, like a bandit.

Of course, Proverbs is not condemning sleep. It's a matter of too much sleep, or perhaps better yet, a love of sleep to the neglect of our responsibilities.

The problem comes when we choose laziness over diligence, which is a pretty natural temptation when we are, in fact, trusting in the providence of God. We might be inclined to think, well, God will take care of me.

I don't have to do anything, do I? That's pretty fatalistic and incorrect. As Wayne Grudem says in his systematic theology, simply to say that we are trusting in God instead of acting responsibly is sheer laziness and is a distortion of the doctrine of providence.

[18 : 00] Again, Psalm 127 shows that while we should not be anxiously overworking, we do, in fact, have work to do.

The builder still builds. The watchman still stands guard even though it is the Lord alone who produces the results. So, like with many other things, balance is really important.

We have to consider the whole counsel of God and avoid the extremes. God made it pretty clear from the beginning that life is a rhythm of work and rest, work and rest, work and sleep.

We work, we sleep. We work, we sleep. We need a healthy balance of both in our lives. Now, as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, it's only natural that we should look to Him for examples, right?

So, let's consider what Jesus Himself shows us about sleep and you can probably guess an instance I'm going to turn to. If you want to follow along, turn over to Mark 4.

[19 : 09] Mark 4. The story is also found in Matthew 8 and I believe it's Luke 8. So, in Mark 4, starting at verse 35, Mark writes, When that evening came, He said to His disciples, Let us cross to the other side.

After they had dismissed the crowd, they took Jesus with them since He was already in the boat and there were other boats with Him. Soon a violent windstorm came up and the waves were breaking over the boat so that it was being swamped.

But Jesus was in the stern sleeping on the cushion. So, they woke Him and said, Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing? Then Jesus got up and rebuked the wind and the sea.

Silence, He commanded. Be still. And the wind died down and it was perfectly calm. Why are you so afraid? He asked. Do you still have no faith?

Overwhelmed with fear, they asked one another, Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey Him? Now, this is an incredible moment for several reasons.

[20 : 25] Perhaps the first is that Jesus fell asleep. Now, truthfully, that shouldn't surprise us, but man, it can be so easy to forget about the Lord's full humanity when we're reading through the Gospels and we're seeing miracle after miracle all of these extraordinary things He was doing, but Jesus was, in fact, fully human.

So, after a day of preaching and ministry, He is physically tired. He's not pretending to sleep just to make a point. He's genuinely exhausted.

In John 4, there's a detail that says, Jesus, weary from His journey, sat down by the well. He was tired. But more to the point, He didn't resist sleep.

Now, in His divinity, He knew the storm was coming and He knew His disciples would panic, but He also knew that He would need, He also knew that He would need to be the one to take care of this situation, and yet, He's curled up in the stern and goes to sleep.

And what does this teach us? Well, first, Jesus knew everything has its time and place. He didn't need to stay awake until the storm arrived.

[21 : 48] He could deal with the storm when it was time to deal with the storm. And the same is true with us. We certainly have things to do, but we don't necessarily have to sacrifice sleep to do it.

Second, Jesus could sleep because He trusted in God the Father. and this is the primary lesson Jesus teaches His disciples on this occasion.

Why are you so afraid, He asked. Do you still have no faith? We don't have to be restless or anxious. We don't have to deprive ourselves of much-needed sleep.

We can rest because we know God is in control. And third, Jesus shows us by example that sleep is good and necessary.

And frankly, that should be enough for us. Now, I'll admit that I've always struggled to go to bed at a decent time. And there is research to suggest that people have these internal clocks that vary from person to person, so maybe it comes quite naturally.

[23 : 00] But as I've reflected on this and I've really examined myself, I have to confess that part of it at least, is my mindset. You see, I have things that I want to get done each day.

I may have a project to finish or a book to read or maybe it's a Sunday school to prepare for. I mean, there are things that I need to get done and they're usually good things, but they're not necessarily reasons to sacrifice sleep.

And without consciously thinking about it, I approach sleep with this kind of finality. You know, once I go to bed, that's it. After I'm asleep, I can't get anything else done.

It's over. Can anyone relate to that at all? That's pretty short-sighted, isn't it? Let me show you what I mean.

So let's think for a moment about how the Bible presents death. Obviously, there's much more finality to death than sleep.

[24 : 07] So what does the Bible say about death? Well, in the Old Testament, for example, when a king would die, it says he rested or he slept with his fathers.

In the New Testament, Paul uses similar language when he writes in 1 Thessalonians 4, brothers, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep.

And he goes on to make it quite clear that he's not really talking about sleep, he's talking about death. Now, why do the authors of the Bible do this? Why do they talk about death as though it's merely sleep?

Well, let's keep reading. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul says, brothers, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death so that you will not grieve like the rest who are without hope.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we also believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

[25 : 12] by the word of the Lord we declare to you that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep for the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a loud command with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first.

And after that, we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord. Do you see?

There's a resurrection coming. Of course, death feels very final. I don't know that anything in this life feels more permanent, more final than death, but it's not actually.

There's a, there's the hope of the resurrection and that's why Paul can talk about death as though it's nothing more than falling asleep. Don't worry, he says, because those who have died in Christ will actually wake up.

So with that in mind, it seems terribly silly to cling to the end of the day refusing to go to sleep because it feels final.

[26 : 29] I need a little more time. I need to get this thing done. I can imagine Paul asking in response to that, what are you talking about? tomorrow is a whole new day.

And by the way, it's coming whether you like it or not, so you might as well be rested and refreshed when it does. Lamentations 3, God's mercies never fail.

They are new when? Every morning. Even death isn't final for the believer. Sleep is certainly not final.

just as the resurrection follows death a new morning with new mercies follow a night's sleep. It might also be helpful to consider a principle taught in the book of Hebrews.

So in Hebrews chapter 4, the author is essentially expounding upon Psalm 95. He's attempting to show that God's people have this promise of rest and he suggests that we can already enter this rest, though the fullness of that rest is yet to come.

[27 : 43] And in verse 9 he says, there remains then a Sabbath rest for the people of God. Then in verse 11 he says, let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following the same pattern of disobedience.

rest. So notice how rest is held up by the author of Hebrews as not only a good thing but as the ultimate thing, right?

This is what Christians are striving for. This is what the Christian hopes for. We rest in Christ now and we look forward to a day when we can rest in him forevermore.

And when that day comes, all of our sorrows, all of our burdens, all of our griefs, all of our troubles, everything that causes us to groan in this sinful fallen world will become a thing of the past.

It will be removed forever. And the author of Hebrews illustrates that to us by calling it rest. So heaven is likened to rest.

[28 : 56] Well, that's a pretty far cry from how we so often think about rest, particularly sleep. Who has time for it? I have other, perhaps better things to do.

The last thing I want to do right now is sleep. While I'm not suggesting sleep is the same as heaven, though sometimes it feels pretty good, there are enough similarities for the author of Hebrews to refer to heaven itself as rest.

rest. What are the similarities? Well, as I've said, sleep is an act of humility and trust, an act of faith.

When we sleep, we relinquish control, trusting that God will sustain us through the night. Similarly, it's our trust in the Lord that leads us to our eternal rest.

God has designed sleep to give our bodies restoration, and renewal. What is heaven but our final and ultimate restoration?

[30 : 05] Both sleep and heaven mark a transition from labor to peace. When we climb in bed at night, we're leaving behind our chores and we're retiring from the day's work, and when we enter into paradise with Christ, every earthly toil and struggle comes to an end.

we enter into eternal rest and peace. And I would say both sleep and heaven reflect that Sabbath principle of the Bible.

As I've said, sleep and rest were built into creation. God himself modeled this rhythm of work followed by rest, and heaven is the ultimate fulfillment of the Sabbath, as the book of Hebrews shows us.

So I guess we could say that a good night's sleep actually reflects something of the gospel. Now going beyond what the Bible says about sleep, I've also looked into some of the science of sleep, and I'll share with you just a little bit of what I've read.

I don't think any of this will come as a surprise, but it certainly reaffirms what the Bible really teaches us about the importance of rest. So first of all, when we sleep, our bodies are doing much more than merely lying there.

[31 : 28] Our bodies actually go into repair mode. We regenerate cells and tissue. Our bodies balance hormones that control things like hunger and stress and metabolism.

Sleep strengthens our immune systems to fight off illness. I mentioned how heart attacks spike after we lose an hour of sleep in the spring because of daylight savings times.

Well, the reverse happens in the fall. When we gain an hour, the day after the time change, in the fall, the heart attacks drop by 21%. That's how powerful and beneficial sleep is.

Just one hour can have a measurable impact on our health. good sleep also lowers stress, particularly the hormones that regulate stress and it also regulates blood pressure.

That's why people who get seven to nine hours of sleep consistently have a significantly lower risk of developing cardiovascular disease. So if you've ever felt guilty about prioritizing sleep, don't.

[32 : 43] this is God's design for restoring our bodies and keeping us healthy. Prioritizing sleep is really a matter of stewarding our bodies well.

Sleep also has a profound impact on our thinking and our memory. Without sleep, our brains don't work like they're supposed to.

It's pretty interesting. During sleep, our brains are actually organizing and storing information. It's called memory consolidation.

So while we're sleeping, our brains are actually sorting through everything you experienced that day, everything you learned that day, and essentially filing it away for later use.

things like But if we don't get enough sleep, well, it's kind of like forgetting to hit the save button after you've typed up a whole document on the computer.

[33 : 44] You lose that information. Your brain doesn't process it, doesn't save it like it's supposed to. It doesn't have a chance to fully process it. This, by the way, is why it doesn't pay for a student, let's say, to pull an all-nighter to study.

Because your brain needs a healthy amount of sleep to actually absorb and process the things you're learning. Science also shows that sleep deprivation slows reaction times.

It impairs our judgment. In fact, someone who is awake for 20 hours, something like 20 hours straight, can be just as mentally impaired as someone who is legally drunk.

Now, in the long term, sleep deprivation has been linked to severe cognitive decline. It's been linked to dementia. You see, the brain has a natural process of flushing out toxins when we sleep, including those that are associated with Alzheimer's disease.

So, when we don't get enough sleep, those toxins build up and the risk of memory loss increases over time. So, if you want to keep your mind sharp, you need consistently good sleep.

[35 : 02] Now, one more thing science shows us is that a lack of sleep causes our brains to process emotions differently. So, when we're sleep deprived, the part of our brain responsible for emotional responses kind of goes into overdrive.

it makes us way more reactive, way more anxious, way more prone to negative thinking. So, we find ourselves overreacting to minor things and struggling to really keep a handle on our emotions.

And making matters worse, this all becomes a vicious cycle after a while, a lack of sleep, and those mental health issues it causes kind of feed into one another.

For example, a lack of sleep causes anxiety. And anxiety makes it hard to sleep, and on and on it goes. So, at some point, we have to break that cycle, if possible.

How? Well, in the case of anxiety, Philippians 4, be anxious for nothing. But instead, in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.

[36 : 18] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds. Let it go. In humility and trust, lay it at the Lord's feet.

Climb into bed, and God willing, drift off to sleep. Let yourself do nothing but rest while trusting that God is in control. people. Psalm 139, 14 says, I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Marvelous are your works, and I know this very well. The Lord knew what He was doing when He created our bodies, and He knows what He's doing when He commands us to rest.

Right? So, let me wrap this up with just a few practical suggestions. First, keep a regular sleep schedule.

Our bodies were created with these circadian rhythms, and these rhythms work best when we're consistent. Just as God designed the days and the nights to be consistent, be consistent with your sleep.

[37 : 37] Second, create a bedtime routine. You know, do things. We've talked about screens. Limit screen time. You know, a good hour or more before bed.

Read the Bible or something else that might be calming. Spend time in prayer, casting your anxieties on the Lord before you try to go to sleep with them. You know, do common sense things.

Dim the lights. Perhaps, I've heard it suggested, reorganize your bedroom for the distinct purpose of being a sanctuary of rest. Not an extension of the living room.

Not another place to consume entertainment, but a place that is specifically for rest. In other words, do everything you can to prepare yourself for rest. Third, perhaps we need to change our daytime practices to support sleep at night.

Move your schedule around so you can get enough sleep. Perhaps exercise is good. Avoid caffeine if necessary. The idea is to move sleep up a few notches on your list of priorities.

[38 : 52] Again, if it's necessary for you. Lastly, have faith in God. When the disciples woke Jesus in their panic, what did He say?

Do you still have no faith? I can almost picture Him saying, you know, if you had the faith you should have, perhaps you would have been sound asleep right along with me.

Trust that God's in control. trust that you will find new mercies every morning. Trust His design for our human bodies. Trust Him when He says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Let's pray. Father, You are the creator and sustainer of all things, and we praise You for Your wisdom in designing us to need both work and rest.

We often resist the gift of sleep, whether it's because of anxious toil or misplaced priorities or perhaps simple neglect, but we thank You for Your kindness in giving us sleep as a means of refreshment and renewal.

[40 : 15] We thank You for the new mercies that come every morning, and we thank You most of all for the deeper spiritual rest we find in Christ.

So please help us to embrace sleep with humility and with faith, knowing that You never sleep, You never slumber, and that we can rest securely in Your care always.

And it's in Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.