

A Theology of Sleep

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Let us read again in the 4th Psalm, Psalm 4:8,

8 I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only
makest me dwell in safety.

One way to obey the sixth commandment is to sleep, to take our necessary sleep. One way to disobey the 6th commandment is to deprive ourselves of our necessary sleep. How can I prove that from this commandment? Well, if you look at Lord's Day 40 which we read together and Question 105, you'll see that what God requires includes this, "That neither in thoughts, nor words, nor gestures, much less in deeds, I dishonor, hate, wound, or kill my neighbor, by myself or by another; but that I lay aside all desire of revenge: also," here it is, "that I hurt not myself, nor wilfully expose myself to any danger." It's interesting in the Westminster standards in the Shorter Catechism, the 6th commandment we're told requires all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life. All lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, then it says the 6th commandment forbids the taking away of our own life or whatsoever tends thereunto. I'm going to argue this evening that taking the Bible's teaching as summarized in these catechisms requires us to pay a lot more attention than we usually do to the subject of sleep. It's quite remarkable, really, given that we spend just about 1/3 of our whole lives sleeping, that we hardly ever give any thought to it from a biblical, spiritual, theological viewpoint. Has the Bible nothing to say? Have we nothing to learn about 1/3 of our life for which we shall also give account to God?

Well, I'd like to take this moral principle that we hurt not ourselves, that we do nothing that tends towards our hurt but rather we use every lawful means to preserve and maintain our own lives and the lives of others, I'd like to take that biblical, moral principle and apply it to sleep, and really we have in our own day an epidemic of sleep deprivation. I'd like to give you some statistics about this. The National Institute of Health suggests that school-age children need at least 10 hours of sleep daily, teens need 9 to 10 hours, adults 7 to 8 hours, yet somewhere between 1/3 and 1/2 Americans are not getting that recommended sleep. The American Psychological Association reports that 40 million Americans suffer from over 70 different sleep disorders. Sixty percent of adults report having sleep problems a few nights a week or more. More than 40% of adults experience daytime sleepiness severe enough to interfere with their daily activities. Forty percent reported unintentionally falling asleep during the day at least once a week, and

4.7% reported nodding off or falling asleep while driving at least once in the preceding month. You can see there's an epidemic of sleeplessness, of sleep deprivation, of sleep problems that I want to show you this evening has theological roots.

I want to look, first of all, at the consequences of sleep deprivation and I do that to show you the seriousness of the issue. Secondly, we want to look at the causes of sleep deprivation, of sleeplessness. Thirdly, we'd like to look at the cure for sleep deprivation and some of these cures will be very practical every day, but really what I want to spend most of the time is on better theology. The cure for our sleeplessness, our epidemic of sleep deprivation is largely better theology. I want to give you 10 truths from Scripture that will help us do this and obey this commandment much better to God's glory and our own good.

First of all, let's just ponder some of the consequences of sleep deprivation. Why is this such a serious issue? Well, as I hope to show you, this has massive, wide, long and deep consequences that affect every single part of our lives. Again, I'm going to be reading a number of statistics here just to underline this sin because that's what it is in many cases.

Think, first of all, of the physical consequences. One week of sleeping fewer than 6 hours a night results in changes to more than 700 genes in our body. Just one night of sleep deprivation is linked with signs of brain tissue loss. Infection fighting antibodies and cells are reduced during periods when we don't get enough sleep. Sleeping fewer than 7 hours a night is associated with a tripled risk of coming down with a cold. It increases hunger, portion size, and is associated with high calorie, high carb foods with the resulting risk of obesity. Chronic sleep deprivation, which means less than 6 hours a night for an adult, is associated with skin aging, 4 times stroke risk for middle and older age people, 50% higher risk of colo-rectal cancers, high blood pressure, 48% higher chance of developing or dying from heart disease, and lower fertility rates. Big physical consequences.

Interestingly, recently there was research published about the impact of sleeplessness on athletes who, of course, are continually seeking physical advantage in their sports. Elite athletes, we're told, need to sleep more to improve their performance. Chronic sleep loss can result in a 30-40% reduction in glucose metabolism. Two days of sleep restriction can lead to a 3 times increase in lapses of attention and reaction times. Rested tennis players get a 42% boost in hitting accuracy. Maximum bench press drops 20 pounds after 4 days of restricted sleep. Sleep extension provides swimmers a 17% improvement in reaction time off the starting block. Football players drop 0.1 second off their 40 yard dash times by sleeping more. And you'll be stunned when you hear some of the sleeping times of the most elite athletes who have studied these things and have learned from them. Roger Federer sleeps 11-12 hours a night. Usain Bolt, 8-10. LeBron James, 12 hours. Michelle Wie, the golfer, 10-12 hours. And so on. These are people who have learned in a way what God has made them, without recognizing God most of them, but they've recognized how they have been created by God. They are honoring that created pattern in their bodies and they're benefiting from it.

But there are also intellectual consequences. This is not just affecting the body but also the mind. For example, sleep flushes dangerous proteins from our brains, improving mental health. It's commonly said sort of a common way by sleep scientists, when you're sleep deprived, you get a dirty brain. Sleep also allows the brain to consolidate and store the day's memories. Being exhausted zaps intellectual focus and renders us more forgetful. Chronic sleep deprivation in adolescents diminishes the brain's ability to learn new information. Big intellectual consequences. We need our minds, don't we? We need our minds if we're going to do anything profitable spiritually.

Thirdly, there are great emotional consequences. Sleep loss produces apathy, irritability, weepiness, impatience, anger, and flat responses. Sleep loss can cause psychological damage by reducing the chemicals associated with good moods and good behavior. People with insomnia are 10 times as likely to develop depression, and 17 times as likely to have significant anxiety. The lack of sleep affects the teenage brain in similar ways to the adult brain, only more so and can lead to emotional issues like depression and aggression. Great emotional consequences. We want spiritual feelings, don't we? We want spiritual emotions and maybe one of the reasons why we're not having them and experiencing them is because we're simply not sleeping enough.

But there are also societal consequences, not just consequences for ourselves personally but consequences for others and remember, this commandment, the 6th commandment is not just about ourselves, it's about others too. It's about preserving and maintaining our own life and our neighbors. Somebody said getting sleep is an act of loving your neighbor, keeping the 6th commandment. Public health experts say sleep is increasingly recognized as important to public health with sleep insufficiency linked to motor vehicle crashes, industrial disasters, and medical and other occupational errors. Getting 6 or fewer hours of sleep triples your risk of drowsy driving related accidents. Listen to this: the cognitive impairment that results from being awake for 24 hours is higher than the drink drive limit in all states. According to statistics, falling asleep while driving is responsible for at least 100,000 crashes, 71,000 injuries, and 1,550 deaths each year in the United States. Do you see how it's linked to the 6th commandment?

Young people in their teens and 20s are involved in more than half of the fall-asleep crashes on the nation's highways each year. In fact, some of the most publicized accidents and tragedies of recent years have been linked to sleep deprivation. Let me give you some of these names. Public inquiries have linked these and many more to sleep deprivation. Exxon Valdez. The Challenger Space Shuttle. The Metro-North train in New York and, as I've said, many others too. So you see, there are societal consequences. This isn't just a matter of personal preference, this impacts our society.

There are also financial consequences. Sleeplessness undermines creativity, problem solving ability and productivity. In fact, it's estimated to cost American businesses 63 billion dollars a year, and the worst costs arise from the fact that sleep deprivation causes safety lapses and contributes to other health issues. Even just ponder this: 32 billion dollars a year are spent on sleep meds, special mattresses, candles, sleep consultants and so on. Huge financial consequences.

There are also educational consequences. Sixty percent of grade school and high school children report that they are tired during the daytime, 15% admit to falling asleep in class. The United States has the highest number of sleep deprived students with 73% of 9 and 10 year olds and 80% of 13 to 14 year olds identified by their teachers as being adversely affected. Children who have more sleep achieve higher in math, science and reading.

All this is bad enough, isn't it, but it gets worse because there are moral consequences associated with sleep deprivation. Again, this is not Christians who have found this out, it's just scientists, psychologists observing behavior and they found these facts: a lack of sleep robs the fuel for self-control from the region of the brain responsible for self-control, whereas sleep restores these chemicals that fuel self-control. Studies found that a lack of sleep led to high levels of unethical behavior. There was an experiment that was conducted that tried to look at the likelihood of people cheating and then the statistics examined how long these people slept for. The difference between people cheating and not cheating was 22 minutes of more sleep for those who did not cheat. That's all. A pretty thin knife-edge, isn't it? Twenty-two minutes was the difference between people being enabled to resist the temptation to cheat or not.

A lack of sleep leads to deviant behavior at work because of decrease in self-control. Many of you will have heard of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who wrote "The Gulag Archipelago" and he said that sleeplessness was one of the 31 methods his captives used to break a prisoner's will. He said this, "Sleeplessness befogs the reason, undermines the will, and the human being ceases to be himself, to be his own I." Great moral consequences and as we'll see, let me just briefly touch on that here: there are spiritual consequences too.

Don Carson, a New Testament professor, wrote this, he says, "Doubt may be fostered by sleep deprivation. If you keep burning the candle at both ends, sooner or later you will indulge in more and more cynicism." We all know that, don't we? "And the line," says Carson, "between cynicism and doubt is a very thin one. If you're among those who become nasty, cynical or even full of doubt when you're missing your sleep, you are morally obliged to try to get the sleep you need. We are whole complicated beings, our physical existence is tied to our spiritual well-being, to our mental outlook, to our relationships with others including our relationship with God. Sometimes," says Carson, "the godliest thing you can do in the universe is get a good night's sleep. Not pray all night but sleep. Certainly not denying that there may be a place for praying all night, merely insisting that in the normal course of things, spiritual discipline obligates you, get the sleep your body needs."

Do you see how many consequences tied up with this important issue? Physical. Intellectual. Emotional. Societal. Financial. Educational. Moral. Spiritual. It's huge, isn't it?

Well, what causes this? I'm sure many of us here would have to plead guilty, put our hands up and say, "I've fallen into that. It's become a habit. It's become a way of life and, yeah, I recognize many of the consequences too." Maybe some of the young people here

are in great danger of this becoming a habit and a pattern of life or maybe you're seeing some things going wrong in your life mentally or emotionally or relationally and you can't figure out what's happening, and maybe it's just staring you in the face. This whole issue of sleep deprivation, we can't separate it off. "Well, I'll just neglect 1/3 of my life and ignore the way God has made me in this area and expect everything else to flourish." It's just not going to happen.

We want to know the causes of this, not least because if we know the causes, we can begin to address the cure. One of the causes is ignorance, isn't it? We don't know. We don't realize. We don't understand how tied up sleep is with all these other areas of our lives. We don't exactly get a course in school, do we, about how to sleep or the benefits of it and so, and yet, again, it's just this massive area of our life. So ignorance, which I hope is partly undone by this evening. The knowledge of these things is one of the best weapons, isn't it, to start putting it right.

But ignorance may not be sinful, the next certainly is and that's greed. Materialism. Selfish ambition which is perhaps the greatest cause of sleeplessness in our own day and in our own culture. People think, "Well, you know, I've got to spend 1/3 of my life asleep? I've got to spend basically 20 years of an average life asleep? Well, you know, if I could cut back in that area, if I could make 1/3 into 1/4 or 20 years into 15 years, I've just gained so many hours in which I can work harder and bring in more dollars and be more productive." And at the core of that is greed. Ambition. Covetousness. Materialism.

The third cause is workaholism, making work an idol, and we do, don't we? And we even idolize those who have made work an idol. It's one of the acceptable sins, isn't it, we think?

The fourth cause is in discipline. We may know some of these things or enough of these things to put things right but we just lack the will. We just let things drift. We know we should be doing certain things to fix this and, "Yeah, I just can't get to it." We can't maintain it. We lack the discipline, the self-control to change the patterns of our lives.

Stress is another great cause. Worry and anxiety. We've all know that surely, even some of the youngest ones here worried about a test the next day, worried about a relationship at school. Financial worries and so many other worries, worries, worries. It's so hard to get to sleep and we're awake into the early hours of the morning or are waking up very early in the morning.

Shift work. One in 5 American workers have sleep patterns disrupted by shift work which is very unnatural, of course, but often very necessary in many occupations today. Nothing sinful about that, it's just a fact of life, that somehow we have to adjust to a bit better than we usually do.

So you can see there are a number of causes. Some of them we can't be blamed for but some of them we can and involve repentance. If we have been falling into some of these things, if we are willfully ignorant, if we have been selfishly ambitious, if we have been a

workaholic, if we have been unnecessarily stressed out and worried without casting our cares upon God, then we've broken the 6th commandment and we need to repent. We need to say sorry. We need to confess and we need to seek the forgiveness and the wonderful thing about the Gospel is that even if 1/3 of our life has been characterized by sinful patterns and habits and motives and aims, that the blood of Christ can still cleanse from all sin and give us a fresh start, can wipe the record clean and therefore empower us to new obedience free from guilt about the past and rebuild for the future.

So we've seen the consequences, we've looked at some of the causes, now thirdly, let's come to the cures and there are some very practical things, just better practices that you don't basically need the Bible to learn this. If you go to any book about this, any website, go to WebMD, it's usually very common, standard, fair, better practices that we can learn from in order to benefit spiritually, keep this commandment better. Things like just going to bed at the same time every night, getting up at the same time the next day. Following the same routine pre-bed every evening. Not exercising too late at night. Not eating large meals, drinking caffeine, alcohol late at night. Minimizing noise, heat and light.

I mean, you can find all these things out, you don't need me to tell you that but what I would like to focus on is not so much better practice but better theology because I believe this is a theological problem that has theological solutions; that God has provided sufficient teaching in his word for us to learn from and put this right and reverse some of these consequences. If we can, you think of how this spreads, instead of this vicious circle it becomes a virtuous circle. Instead of bad consequences, we begin to get blessed consequences physically, intellectually, emotionally, societally, financially, educationally, morally, spiritually. It's massive. We can turn this 1/3 of our life around then the hopes are just tremendous.

So let me give you 10 truths very quickly, just bullet points really, that I believe will help cure this. The first is to learn that God has created us with a need for sleep. It's not just a byproduct. It's not just a result of the fall. He created us as limited, finite, frail creatures who need sleep as much as we need oxygen, as much as we need food and drink. So this is a need that we must recognize and really it's one of these differences that mark the distinction between the Creator and the creature. We sang in Psalm 121 about God, that he neither slumbers nor sleeps. He never takes a nap. He never dozes. He never closes eyes. He doesn't even blink. He needs no rest. It's incredible just to meditate on that for a while, to think of this being who has been from all eternity and will be to all eternity and not for one second has he ever slept, has he ever felt he needed to sleep. He's never been wearied.

Then there's us, the creatures. So different. So easily tired. Wearied. Exhausted. And we need to recognize our creature-hood and recognize the distinction between the Creator and the creature; to recognize that God is God and we are not. We are not God. God is sovereign and we are not sovereign, we are dependent creatures. We've been created to need sleep and if we try to go without, do you know what we're basically doing? As these consequences show, we're basically un-creating ourselves. We're causing ourselves to

disintegrate and break down in so many areas. So God has created us with a need for sleep.

Secondly, God gifts us sleep. Sleep is God's gift. That comes across in Psalm 4:8, "I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety." Also in verse 5 of the previous Psalm, "I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me." It's also mentioned in Psalm 127:1-2, "Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he gives his beloved sleep." It's a gift and should be received as a gift. It's not something to be endured. It's not something, "Oh, I've just got to get some sleep in so I can go on with life again." No, this is his gift. It's a present. It's part of his grace toward us.

John Bailey in an essay on sleep said this of this verse, "'He gives to his beloved sleep' may also be translated 'He gives unto his beloved in sleep.'" He gives to his beloved in sleep. "This translation," he says, "speaks not only of the blessedness of sleep itself but of the blessed things given through its agency." Sleep therefore not just being a gift but God gives many other things through this gift.

Thirdly, God uses sleep to remind us that we are unnecessary. He uses sleep to remind us we are unnecessary. You know what it's like, you go through your day, you're in the home, you're in the office, in the factory, in the yard, whatever, and it's just everything is so important, isn't it? You're just so needed. You know, the home would fall apart, the office would fall apart, the school would fall apart if it wasn't for you. You're so indispensable. You've got to be in control. Then sleep comes along and what happens? You're gone and the world still goes on and the house still stands, the factory keeps functioning, the school opens the next day. Sleep is recognizing, "I'm not needed." Even President Obama has to sleep. Perhaps maybe in the past at least, but perhaps still the American President, the most powerful man in the world with so much control, even he has to relinquish control every day, to let go, to give up trying to control and order and determine the course of this world and lie there as a little baby, as helpless, as useless, as unnecessary as a little baby. So us also. We need to be reminded we don't run the world. We don't even run our own life. God reminds us that we are dispensable. He doesn't need us and the world doesn't need us.

Fourthly, God calls us to trust him. Really that's the opposite side of that last point. It's really what Psalm 3 to 4 is all about. You re-read these Psalms, they are focused around this area of sleep and trust, trust, trust is everywhere, and sleep is a manifestation of that trust. When we close our eyes, we are entrusting ourselves and everything we have over to him. You know, in some ways you don't want to think about this too much. You think about this too much, going to sleep for example tonight, it's sort of mind-blowing, just letting go of everything, unless we are letting it go into the hands of God. Trusting him. Giving it over to him.

You know, the way a Christian sleeps should be different to the way a non-Christian sleeps. It should look different. There should be this handing over of everything to God, all my stresses, all my worries, all my anxieties, all my fears, all my hopes and dreams. Just hand them over to God. Commit them into his care. "My soul, my family, my church, my nation over to you. Good night." God calls us to trust him in this act of sleep. It's an intrinsically humble act if done in the right way. In a way, there's no greater act of trust in a natural sense, in unconsciousness. God calls us to trust him.

Fifthly, God will chastise us if we rebel. God will afflict us. He will discipline us and we've looked at some of the consequences there that are natural consequences if we rebel against his order and disobey this commandment. These things will naturally happen but if we are God's people, if we are Christians, if we are believers, there will be additional chastisement to natural consequences. There will be a spiritual element to it. An additional element to it.

John Piper, giving a lecture in 1995 said this, "A personal word to you younger men. I'm finishing my 15th year at Bethlehem and I just celebrated my 49th birthday," this was in 1995, "I've watched my body and my soul with some care over these years and noticed some changes. They are partly linked to changing circumstances but much is owing to a changing constitution. 1. I cannot eat as much without gaining unhealthful weight. My body doesn't metabolize the way it used to. Another is that I'm emotionally less resilient when I lose sleep. There were early days when I would work without regard to sleep and feel energized and motivated. The last 7 or 8 years, my threshold for despondency is much lower. For me, adequate sleep is not just a matter of staying healthy, it's a matter of staying in the ministry. It's irrational that my future should look bleaker when I get 4 or 5 hours sleep several nights in a row, but that's irrelevant. Those are the facts and I must live within the limits of facts. I commend," he says, "sufficient sleep to you for the sake of your proper assessment of God and his promises." Do you see what Piper is saying there? He's saying if we neglect this, we will be chastised and our ability to believe, to see God and to lay hold even of his promises.

Sixthly, God uses sleep to remind us of death. Death is frequently pictured in the New Testament and the Old Testament too as a falling asleep. We read that again and again, don't we, "And he fell asleep," meaning he died. Sleep is in many ways good practice for death. We will close our eyes and we will go and not come back. We will not open our eyes again in this world. And every time we close our eyes, we should be reminding ourselves of the time that we will close our eyes for the last time. We know not when, maybe that very night. We know not. But sleep should be used to remind us of our end, the time that these eyelids will close and they won't open in the same room. It reminds us of death.

Seventhly, sleep reminds us of hell. "Sleep reminds us of hell, how come?" Have you ever had a nightmare? Every time I awake from a nightmare, it's the first thought that comes into my mind, "This must be what hell is like. This must be what it means when it speaks of torment." That's what it's like, isn't it? And sleep when these nightmares and horrors take hold of you, it's uncontrollable, there's nothing you can do to stop it and it's

so crushing and twisting and disturbing and oppressing. It's torture, isn't it? Try as you might, you can't wake up until God wakes you up from it. Praise God when he does. But we should think of these nightmares as warnings, warnings that this is what hell will be like forever and we'll never be woken up from it. These horrors, these tortures, that oppression, that darkness, that weirdness, that awfulness, these horrors, God reminds us of hell through sleep.

Eighthly, God reminds us of the Savior through sleep because Jesus slept. We've looked recently at "Jesus wept," which is a profound statement but equally profound is "Jesus slept." God slept. He came into this world, took humanity weak and frail, needy, creaturely, that got exhausted and tired, worn out, and needed to rest, to close his eyes and sleep. It's remarkable. It draws him so close to us, doesn't it? He knows what it's like to be afflicted with this kind of infirmity. Here's a question: would Jesus have known insomnia? Would he have experienced sleeplessness? Well, could he have undergone the anticipation of all that lay ahead of him without anxiety, stress and worry? And yet without sin. It's a difficult question, isn't it? But "Jesus slept" is a profound statement and a reminder of his humanity which makes our salvation possible.

Ninthly, it's a reminder of our salvation. Not just our Savior but of our salvation because how does God picture salvation? He pictures it as rest. He says, "Come to me all you who labor, who are weary, who are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." The deepest sweetest rest possible in this world where we can lie calm, at peace, in total trust upon the bed of Christ's person and work and not contribute anything to our salvation. Go and look at your child sleeping tonight or your partner, your husband, your wife, or imagine it as you go to sleep. Look at them still, quiet, at rest. That's an illustration, that's a picture of how we're saved. God calls us away from all our wearied walk in life, all our sweat, all our tears, all our toil, all our labor, all our anxiety and worry about, "Will I get to heaven? Have I done enough?" And he says, "Stop! Rest in me. Quiet. Peace. Be still. Don't do anything but trust. Lean. Rest." It is a beautiful bed to lie on, the finished work of Jesus Christ who did all the labor, who did all the sweating and all the toiling, all the doing that was necessary to be done in order that you might rest in peace. "Come," he says, "and enjoy it."

And it reminds us ultimately and finally of heaven. The apostle says there remains a rest for the people of God. We look ahead, no, not to an eternal sleep. We don't know if there will be sleep in heaven but there will certainly be the rest of the refreshment unparalleled. Do you know what it's like maybe when you haven't slept well for many nights and then you get that 10 hour, that 11 hour, that 12 hour sleep or whatever, and you wake up? It feels so good and really heaven is portrayed as that. It's going to be a waking up and it's going to feel so good. It's going to feel so amazing, so refreshing, so invigorating constantly, continually, never wearying again. Truly he gives, he gives his beloved sleep. Rest. Peace. Quiet. Now and forever. Amen.

Let's pray.

O Lord, cure us of our disobedience to thy holy law in this beautiful moral principles, especially this one that we have studied this evening. Help us to be more obedient to laws and rules which thou hast designed for our good and thy glory. Teach us all that we need to learn. Give us a better theology of sleep that we might better live for thee in this world. And if there are those among us who are still without rest, still tossed to and fro, Lord, draw them to thyself. Give them that priceless peace and inner quiet through the Lord Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.