

Rest, Sleep, and the God Who Never Slumbers

CCEF 2024 | Jonathan D. Holmes

Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.

*Victor Hugo*¹

If you lie down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

Proverbs 3:24

Introduction:

Kelly Kopic: Sleep is a spiritual discipline that daily reminds us of our lack of control. Just as a king is not saved simply by the size of his army or a warrior by his strength alone (Ps. 33:16-18), so sleep reminds us daily that we can't rescue ourselves: we are never strong enough, we never know enough, we never can do enough to eliminate our vulnerability. And so *sleep is an act of faith*. It requires us to see our finitude as a good part of God's design for us.²

D.A. Carson: 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 get the sleep your body need.³

The Struggle to Sleep

¹ Akshay Rajkumar, "Sleepless Nights, Anxious Hearts, and the Lord Who Does Not Slumber," September 1, 2022, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://in.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/the-weary-soul-rejoices/sleepless-nights-anxious-hearts-and-the-lord-who-does-not-slumber/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

² Kelly M. Kopic, *You're Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 217.

³ Joe Carter, "How to Love God By Getting More Sleep," December 15, 2015, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-love-god-by-getting-more-sleep/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

What are some of the reasons we struggle to sleep?

- Physical
- Emotional
- Spiritual
 - *Courtney Reissig*: This has been one of the hardest lessons God has been teaching me lately. I need far more rest than I get. My lack of rest is more often owing to my failure to admit my finiteness than it is my hard work or busy schedule. I like getting things done, and often sleep—even though I enjoy it—feels like a nuisance, a hindrance to my productivity. But I need rest, even if I don’t want to admit it.⁴
 - *Tish Harrison Warren*: My willingness to sacrifice sleep also reveals less noble loves. I stay up later than I should, drowsy, collapsed on the couch, vaguely surfing the Internet, watching cute puppy videos. Or I stay up trying to squeeze more activity into the day, to pack it with as much productivity as possible. My disordered sleep reveals a disordered love, idols of entertainment or productivity.⁵
 - *Tish Harrison Warren*: In the nitty-gritty of my daily life, repentance for idolatry may look as pedestrian as shutting off my email an hour earlier or resisting that alluring clickbait to go to bed.⁶

A Theology of Sleep

1. Sleep affirms the character and nature of God

Daniel Doriani: The labor of creation did not “exhaust him or bind him” to the world. After his towering achievement, God chose to rest and assess. We should as well, for we too are more than our work.⁷

⁴ Courtney Reissig, “Let’s Celebrate Those Who Rest,” December 8, 2016, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-celebrate-those-who-rest/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

⁵ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016). 142.

⁶ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016). 143.

⁷ Daniel Doriani, “Now’s The Time for Rest,” May 25, 2020, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/nows-time-rest/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

2. Sleep reveals the reality of our humanity
 3. Sleep offers us a pathway to present rest
- *Physical*: ways that sleep “cleans out the brain” at night
 - Cleveland Clinic⁸ highlights three things in particular that happen when we sleep:
 - *Brain maintenance*. While you’re asleep, your brain reorganizes and catalogs memories and learned information. This is like a librarian sorting and shelving books at the end of the day. It makes accessing and using things you learn and remember easier and more efficient.
 - *Energy conservation and storage*. During the day, cells throughout your body use stockpiled resources to keep doing their jobs. While you’re asleep, your body uses less energy. That lets those cells resupply and stock up for the next day.
 - *Self-repair and recovery*. Being less active makes it easier for your body to heal injuries and repair issues that happened while you were awake. That’s also why being sick makes you feel more tired and need more rest.
 - *Emotional*: sleep can help us be more thoughtful and wiser in our responses and reactions
4. Sleep gives us a picture of future rest

Joe Deegan: If we believe God designed our bodies with utmost intentionality, then why did he design us to sleep? Any doctor or scientist could tell you the numerous benefits our bodies get from sleep. But God, the Creator, could’ve given us those benefits by any number of methods. So why did he choose sleep? Why did he create us to be functionally lifeless for a third of our lives? Could it be that in the daily cycle of sleeping and waking, God is reminding his children again and again that resurrection is not a tall tale but something woven through the fabric of his creation?⁹

⁸ “Sleep”, *ClevelandClinic.com*, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/body/12148-sleep-basics>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

⁹ Joe Deegan, “Reading Resurrection in the Book of Nature,” April 4, 2023, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reading-resurrection-nature/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

Hope When We Sleep

- He is working all things together for our good.
 - *Romans 8:28*: And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.
- He is completing the good work of redemption he began in us.
 - *Philippians 1:6*: And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.
- He is counseling you.
 - *Psalms 16:7-8*
I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
- He is sustaining you.
 - *Psalms 3:5*
I lay down and slept;
I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.
- He is keeping you safe.
 - *Psalms 4:8*: In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.
- He is keeping you.
 - *Psalms 121:3-5*
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.
- He is steadfastly loving us and giving us new morning mercies.
 - *Lamentations 3:22-24*
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”
- He is making intercession for us on our behalf.
 - *Hebrews 7:25*: Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.
- He is advocating for us before the Father.

- 1 John 2:1: My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Eugene Peterson: We go to sleep and God begins his work.¹⁰

Scottish pastor John Baillie: We wake up better men than when we went to sleep.¹¹

Help for a Season of Sleeplessness

1. Define some terms:

2. How many people struggle?

Cleveland Clinic: Both the acute and chronic forms of insomnia are very common. Roughly, 1 in 3 adults worldwide have insomnia symptoms, and about 10% of adults meet the criteria for insomnia disorder.

More info on insomnia from the Cleveland Clinic:

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/12119-insomnia>.

3. Why do they happen?

4. How can we help and care for those who struggle with sleeplessness?

- Encourage good sleep hygiene
- During the day
- Before you go to sleep

¹⁰ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016). 151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

- *Excursus*: REM and NON-REM sleep¹²

- After you wake up

- *Tish Harrison Warren*: The liturgy of my night—lock the doors, brush my teeth, get a glass of water, turn out the lights, pull back the covers, crawl into bed, curl up, close my eyes—is a repetitive, mundane, and good thing, through which I’ve learned to slow down, to let go of the day behind me, and go to sleep.¹³

- Reframe their sleeplessness in light of biblical truth
 - *Kelly Kapic*: There are various causes that wake us up in the middle of the night. The theological question isn’t how well you sleep or whether you wake up, but when you do wake up, to whom do you turn? Our worries and sorrows crush us if we are alone, but with God we find comfort and rest.¹⁴

 - *Stacey Reoach*: In the meantime, God has a purpose in our sleeplessness. He can use our weakness to make us dependent on him, showing us his love and care with each passing minute of the day. He can use our weariness to push us to lean on him as the all-sufficient, all-wise, and all-powerful God, and to know that when we are weak with sleeplessness, then we are strong in him.¹⁵

¹² “Sleep”, *ClevelandClinic.com*, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/body/12148-sleep-basics>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

¹³ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016), 142.

¹⁴ Kelly M. Kapic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 216.

¹⁵ Stacey Reoach, “When God Withholds Sleep: How To Handle Restless Nights,” July 23, 2020, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/when-god-withholds-sleep>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

Conclusion:

Mark 4:35-41: On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, *asleep on the cushion*. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Ben Gladd: The flow of the narrative is jarring, since we expect Jesus to be awake in such dire circumstances. His behavior is also perplexing. . . . You typically sleep because you’re, well, tired, and this passage mentions nothing of the sort. Why is Jesus asleep?¹⁶

Ben Gladd: What do we learn from this remarkable event in Jesus’s life? We learn that Jesus is fully human, and as a human, he slept soundly during an attack, demonstrating perfect trust in his Father. This is the deepest sleep anyone has ever enjoyed. But Jesus isn’t just any human; he slept like King David. We could even argue that Jesus slept better than King David because he possesses perfect trust in God in contrast to David’s imperfect faith.

Mark 14:32-42: And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, “*Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*” And he came and found them **sleeping**, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you **asleep**? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them **sleeping**, for their **eyes were very heavy**, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, “Are you still **sleeping** and **taking your rest**? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

¹⁶ Benjamin L. Gladd, “Sleep Like a King: Why Jesus Slept Before Calming the Storm,” August 16, 2024, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-slept-calming-storm/>. Accessed 20 August 2024.

Akshay Rajkumar: In his darkest hours, Jesus stayed awake in anguish so he can give sleep and rest to those he loves (Ps. 127:2) . . . He offered himself in perfect submission on his sleepless night, so we can always have the assurance of his perfect love in ours.¹⁷



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¹⁷ Akshay Rajkumar, “Sleepless Nights, Anxious Hearts, and the Lord Who Does Not Slumber,” September 1, 2022, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://in.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/the-weary-soul-rejoices/sleepless-nights-anxious-hearts-and-the-lord-who-does-not-slumber/>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

Appendix A

A liturgy for sleep:

*Louie Giglio:*¹⁸

Thoughts before falling asleep:
God, you will be working on it while I sleep.
I will awake to what you have done.
You do not need me, you use me.
I didn't have all the answers, but you do.
I can't, but you can.
I need sleep, you don't.
You do not sleep nor slumber.
I place all my fears in your hands.
My rest is my worship.
My God is able.

Anglican Compline Prayer:

Before the ending of the day,
Creator of the world, we pray
That you, with steadfast love, would keep
Your watch around us while we sleep.
From evil dreams defend our sight,
From fears and terrors of the night;
Tread underfoot our deadly foe
That we no sinful thought may know.
O Father, that we ask be done
Through Jesus Christ, your only Son;
And Holy Spirit, by whose breath
Our souls are raised to life from death.

¹⁸ https://www.instagram.com/p/C5pPfoBtC4p/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.