

Today

July/August 2024

refresh, refocus, renew

SLEEP AND DREAMS IN THE BIBLE

ALSO: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED

Dear Friends:

Sleep is an important part of human life, and the Bible mentions it many times. In the month of July, I have taken the opportunity to reflect on what the Bible says about sleep, as well as the dreams that often accompany sleep. Though we may think of sleep as “downtime,” with nothing much going on, we discover in the Bible that our sleep can reveal something about our trust in God. Moreover, dreams, though often confusing, are an important means that God used in the Bible to reveal and move forward his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ, who also needed to sleep. Reflecting on sleep and dreams in the Bible can help us better understand ourselves and give us comfort, knowing that God loves and cares for us always, even when we’re asleep.



As many teachers know, the best way to help students learn is to ask questions. In his ministry, Jesus, the master Teacher, asked his listeners more than 300 questions. In the month of August, Pastor Beth Fellingner explores many of the questions Jesus asked. Jesus’ questions challenge us still today to think carefully about living for and serving God in our daily lives. Focusing on Jesus’ questions can spur us on to live faithfully for the Lord who gives us new life.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God’s Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“Sleep and Dreams
in the Bible”
Kurt Selles**



**“Questions Jesus Asked”
Beth Fellingner**

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Sleep and Dreams in the Bible

july

Kurt Selles

The Bible mentions sleep many times throughout its pages. It also talks about dreams—and while they can often be confusing, there are times when God speaks to individuals in dreams (which can also include visions). When he does that, God often reveals something about his plan of salvation—pointing to the Savior, Jesus Christ, who became human like us and also needed sleep. In reflecting on sleep and dreams in the Bible, may we better understand who we are as God's creatures, knowing that his love for us continues always.

Kurt Selles is director of ReFrame Ministries, which publishes these devotions. Kurt has served as a missionary in Taiwan and China, and he has also taught missions. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.

Questions Jesus Asked

august

Beth Fellingner

Jesus posed more than 300 questions during his teaching ministry, and here we will look at 31. Jesus asked questions that were profound, curious, open-ended, and challenging. Jesus wanted us to think carefully about living for and serving God in this world. And he directly answered only a handful of the questions he asked. May these reflections on Jesus' questions spur us on to live faithfully for the Lord who came so that we can have life.

Pastor Beth Fellingner has more than 40 years of experience in pastoral ministry. She and her husband, Barry, have created a missional community in their neighborhood called the Ugly Couch Café, where they serve coffee at a blue picnic table in their front yard, pray with neighbors, and host faith gatherings on a weekly basis.

CREATIVE SLEEP

The LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh.
—Genesis 2:21

When God created the world, he built into his creatures the need for rest and sleep. Some creatures, like frogs, barely sleep at all; but others, like koalas, sleep over 20 hours a day. We humans spend about a quarter to a third of our lives sleeping. Without sleep, our bodies cannot restore and repair themselves.

In Genesis 2 we read of a particular occasion when God causes Adam, the father of humankind, "to fall into a deep sleep." God's purpose wasn't to trick or deceive Adam while he was sleeping. At this pivotal moment in history, God continued his creative work in order to bless Adam, all humanity, and all of creation. While Adam was asleep, God used one of his ribs to create a woman, who would be the mother of humankind. And

she was named Eve to reflect that (Genesis 3:20).

This story tells us much about the beginnings of human life. It shows God's creative power and his care for us as he brings us into the world he has made. We learn that we need God, we need each other, and we need the world God created for us. As we live in and take care of this world, we also need sleep. What's more, God used sleep in a special way to complete his creation. As you prepare for sleep today, give thanks for the blessings of rest and sleep—and for God's faithful sustenance and care.

Father, by your hand we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Thank you for sleep and for your care over us as we rest in you. Amen.

DREAMS OF PROMISE

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. —Genesis 15:12

I awoke this morning from a weirdly confusing dream. Scientists call the dreaming phase of sleep “rapid eye movement” (REM) sleep. In REM sleep our minds process and assimilate information from our day-to-day experiences. Sometimes, as we learn in the Bible, God uses REM sleep to communicate with people.

Our Bible reading today tells us about two of God’s messages to Abram. First, in a vision, God gives an astounding promise: he will make Abram the father of many descendants—as many as the stars in the sky (vv. 1-6)! Then, at sunset, Abram falls into “a deep sleep”—a dark hole of dreams in which God promises that he will inherit the land he is living in.

Though Abram may have been perplexed by these messages, he took God at his word,

and God “credited it to him as righteousness.” Later, as a sign of his promises, God also renamed Abram as Abraham, which means “father of multitudes” (Genesis 17:5).

Most of our dreams just leave us confused, but in this story sleep plays an outsized role in God’s promise to bless Abraham and all of humankind. God reveals his great love in a grand design that ultimately points to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Not every dream carries a message. But our dreams can remind us to trust the one who created us with the ability to dream.

Father God, even when we are asleep, we can be assured of your presence and promise in our lives. Help us to trust and rest in you. Amen.

A DREAM OF HEAVEN

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." —Genesis 28:16

In ancient times, most people didn't sleep with fluffy pillows as many of us do today. Instead they often slept with their heads propped on wood, bronze, or stone. In our reading today, we find Jacob traveling on foot to the land of Harran, and he uses a stone for a pillow.

The hardness of that pillow didn't seem to affect Jacob's sleep. He was exhausted, fleeing from his murderously angry brother after stealing their father's blessing. Jacob probably fell asleep quickly on this particular night, but then he drifted into a dream about heaven. In his dream, he saw angels ascending and descending a stairway that reached to the heavens, and God himself was there. After identifying himself as the God of his fathers, God promised to give Jacob countless descendants as

well as the land he was sleeping on. When Jacob awoke, he was frightened and amazed, and he promised to commit himself to the God of his fathers.

Today God speaks to our hearts through his Word and Spirit—and perhaps sometimes in our dreams. When we awake from a particularly vivid dream, we should remind ourselves that God sometimes reveals himself to us in peculiar ways. And, like Jacob, we can recommit ourselves to following and serving God in our everyday lives.

Thank you, God, for your Word and Spirit, and for your ability to speak to us through our dreams, which can remind us of your love and faithfulness. Amen.

JOSEPH THE DREAMER

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more.
—Genesis 37:5

Do you know anyone who likes to share about dreams over breakfast? Our dreams often have striking details and characters, but they can also be illogical and hard to follow.

Joseph, who was despised by his brothers, shared a dream with them—and “they hated him all the more.” That’s because his dream predicted they would all bow down to him. Joseph was his father’s favorite, and his brothers hated him so much that they wanted to get rid of him. Eventually they sold him into slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37:19-28).

Joseph’s story in the rest of Genesis reads like a gripping nightmare at times—but it has a happy ending. Joseph not only dreams but also interprets the dreams of others. And ultimately he rescues his entire family from starvation (Genesis 45-50).

Joseph’s story isn’t mainly about his dreams, though. It’s about God’s mysterious plan and way of working to save his people, despite all kinds of efforts to thwart him. Though we may often find God’s ways or methods surprising, we can take comfort from Joseph’s story, seeing that God rescues his people from calamity and the consequences of sin. What’s more, Joseph’s story points ahead to the story of Jesus, our Savior, who came to rescue us from sin and death, restoring us to full life with God.

Lord, sometimes our lives, like our dreams, can seem chaotic. But you, Lord, have our lives in your hands as you carefully guide us every step of the way. Amen.

PHARAOH'S DREAMS

Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do."

—Genesis 41:25

When I awake from a troubling dream, I usually breathe a sigh of relief, thankful that it was *only* a dream. But in ancient times people took their dreams very seriously and kept note of the details. For them, good dreams meant something positive, while bad dreams meant a person could face harm.

Pharaoh was disturbed when he awoke from two troubling dreams. The first dream was about seven thin cows that devoured seven fat cows. The second dream was about seven withered heads of grain that swallowed up seven healthy ones. Pharaoh consulted with all of his wise men, but they could not interpret these dreams. Then he heard that Joseph could interpret dreams. With God's help Joseph was able to tell Pharaoh that a great famine was coming and that

they should store up grain for food before the famine came.

Pharaoh's dreams were about deliverance, and these particular dreams remind us that God works not only through his children but also through people in our world who may not yet know him. Just as our sleep and our dreams remain a mystery to us, God's work in history can be mysterious. But God always works according to his wise plan. And there's one mystery in which we can always find comfort and assurance: God in his love will never leave us or forsake us.

Lord God, we take comfort in knowing that you love and care for us. And in all things you work for our good. Amen.

SLEEP OF EXHAUSTION

He lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

—1 Kings 19:5

Yesterday I mowed our overgrown lawn, cleaned our cluttered garage, and washed some of the filmy windows on our house. Physically exhausted at the end of the day, I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

In our reading for today, Elijah is exhausted and falls asleep under a bush in the wilderness. But Elijah isn't exhausted from doing chores. He has just had a dramatic confrontation with the priests of Baal (see 1 Kings 18:16-46), and now he is fleeing for his life from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Totally shattered—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—Elijah asks God to take his life.

Yet God doesn't answer his plea. Instead, through an angel, God provides Elijah with sustenance for the road ahead. Then, after some more restful, restorative sleep and more

food and drink from the angel, Elijah sets out on the journey ahead of him.

What can this extraordinary story teach us? We are reminded of our basic need for sleep and its restorative benefits. Even more importantly, we see that God tenderly cares for us, feeds us, and watches over us—even in our deepest, darkest moments. Though our own story may not be as dramatic as Elijah's, God will provide what we need so that we too can take up the journey ahead of us. In fact, God has already provided for us through his Son, Jesus, who invites us to come and rest in him (Matthew 11:28-30).

Lord, our only hope for true rest is in you. As you reach out to us, help us to come to you. Amen.

TROUBLE FALLING ASLEEP

That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him.
—Esther 6:1

Like many people, I occasionally have trouble falling asleep. When that happens, I often start counting backwards in Chinese from a thousand, hoping to fall asleep before reaching *yi* (“one”). That usually works, but if it doesn’t, I eventually get up and rummage through the fridge for something to eat.

King Xerxes of Persia had insomnia one night, so he called to his servants to read to him from the record of his reign. The king discovered that Mordecai, an exiled Jew living under his rule, had saved the king’s life without being rewarded. So the king ordered that Mordecai be honored throughout his kingdom. As we read more of this story, we discover that the king’s sleepless night plays a key role in the deliverance of the Jews

from being annihilated (Esther 2:19-8:14).

Here we can see God working behind the scenes to protect his people. Evil forces were arrayed against the Jews, but God used his captive, humble servants to touch the king’s heart and turn destruction away from his people. God uses Xerxes, Mordecai, and Esther to keep his promises “for such a time as this” (4:14).

Even in our moments of sleeplessness we can be assured that God is always working to keep his promises. We can always be assured of his love and care.

In our times of sleeplessness, Lord, help us to turn to you, trusting and resting in your sure and un-failing love. Amen.

DAY AND NIGHT, GOD SUSTAINS US

I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
—Psalm 3:5

Maybe you don't have difficulty falling asleep. But do you ever have trouble *staying* asleep? Sometimes I jolt awake in the middle of the night and begin mulling over things: a harsh word, a pressing obligation, a painful family situation, or some other upsetting circumstance. Daytime events can cause us to lose sleep at night.

In King David's case, he was beset by family troubles. We can read the sad account of his family's grief and struggle in 2 Samuel 13-18. Psalm 3 cuts to the heart of David's deep distress. His beloved son Absalom is leading a revolt against him, his enemies surround him, and God seems far away. Yet, as the psalm unfolds, we see that David's faith has not deserted him. He calls out to God, professing that the Lord is his shield and protec-

tion. David trusts in God's power and presence. Despite the circumstances David declares, "I lie down and sleep; I awake again, because the LORD sustains me."

Our own troubles and anxieties may not be like those of King David. And his words are no simple answer for sleepless nights. But they do point us to a deep confession: "The Lord sustains us." This isn't merely an attempt at positive thinking. It's the bedrock of our faith, night and day.

Father, in our tossing and turning, keep our faith in you strong, and help us to believe and say that you sustain us. Amen.

TURNING TO GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.
—Psalm 4:8

In my younger days I looked forward to falling into bed at night with the sigh, "Sleep at last!" I still look forward to sleeping, but now I don't always look forward to bedtime. Sometimes, as night falls, I begin brooding about disappointments, regrets, unsolved problems—and I fear taking my anxieties to bed.

In Psalm 4 it seems that King David may be brooding again about the rebellion of his son Absalom (Psalm 3; July 8)—not to mention his many other enemies. This psalm gives us a heightened sense of his desperation. We can almost see David twisting and turning, messing up the covers on his bed. Here again he calls out to God, pleading for mercy. In the middle of the psalm, though (v. 4), David offers some sound advice for such times of struggle in the darkness: searching

one's heart and asking for forgiveness for any sins one may have done.

Then, as often happens in the psalms, David moves from turmoil and agony toward trust. He does this by deliberately turning his mind toward God's faithfulness and provision.

David's struggles aren't fully resolved in this psalm. But in reaffirming his trust in God, he sees a way forward. He ends with a declaration about peaceful sleep, a complete letting go into God's faithfulness.

In all of our struggles, Lord, help us to cry out to you and in faith to turn to you in trust and gratitude for the gift of sleep. Amen.

GOD ASLEEP?!

Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
—Psalm 44:23

We all need sleep. Without it our bodies and minds can't function properly. Though we don't know why, God built sleep into what it means to be a human being.

But what about God—does God ever sleep? In Psalm 44, the psalmist asks if God is asleep and urges God to rouse himself. What?!

In another passage, the Bible assures us that God, who created the heavens and the earth, will “neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4).

But in Psalm 44 it seems that, to the psalmist and the people, God is silent. It *feels* to them like God is asleep. We don't know the circumstances of this lament, but we can see that God's people are in a desperate situation. They have been defeated by an enemy, and it seems that God has rejected them (vv. 5-11).

Yet the people feel innocent, saying they had not forgotten God or his promises (vv. 17-18). They remind God of his past faithfulness and urge him to show with power his steadfast, unflinching love for his covenant people.

Psalm 44 ends on a bleak note, without any clear declaration or assurance from God. Yet two things are clear in this psalm: God wants us to call out to him in our desperate times, and he takes it as a mark of trust and love when we do. God's answer may not be immediate or to our liking, but he knows what we need and when.

Father, you never sleep, and you are always faithful. Help us to trust in you as we wait for your answers to all our needs. Amen.

RESTING IN GOD

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day. . . .
—Psalm 91:5

Years ago, when we lived in Beijing, a thief broke in through our daughter's window at night. Though nothing much was taken, we felt vulnerable after our home had been violated. Our daughter even asked to have her window bricked up. Thankfully, stronger window bars and a watchdog solved the problem.

Psalm 91 assures us that "whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." All who trust in God will be protected by him. He will protect his children from their enemies, from those who lay traps to harm them. He will shelter and shield his children under his wings. The Lord himself makes this bold promise: "You will not fear the terror of night."

These are beautiful words of assurance. But does this mean nothing bad will ever hap-

pen to us? No. Because of sin's effects on the world, bad things sometimes happen to everyone. Jesus himself was attacked by the evil one, and this psalm even points ahead to our Lord's temptation in the wilderness (v. 11-12; see Matthew 4:6).

This psalm assures us that as we keep trusting and holding on to the Lord—no matter what troubles we face—he will deliver us. When we call his name, God will answer. He will show us his salvation.

Father, we don't understand how in all things you work for our good (Romans 8:28), but we know that you have shown us salvation in Jesus. Help us to trust in you always. Amen.

GOD SUSTAINS US

Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
—Psalm 121:4

I often feel sleepy around three o'clock in the afternoon. Sometimes I'm even tempted to put my head on my desk for a quick doze. But that's not a good idea. Getting up and walking around will usually help to wake me up again.

In Psalm 121 we are assured that God's watchful attention never lapses—not even for a quick nap. The setting of this psalm is the pilgrim's road to Jerusalem for a worship festival. Though dangers may lurk in the shadowy hills and turns along the roadway, the psalmist assures God's people that the Lord will watch over them.

Nothing will prevent God from watching over us, says the psalmist: nothing in the day or night and nothing from any direction, because God does not sleep.

How do God's people know this? God is the Creator of the universe, and nothing can distract or draw his attention away from his beloved creatures, especially his children.

The all-powerful God who steers the universe has promised to watch over us wherever the journey of life takes us. With the confidence of knowing this, we can serve him in the world each day. With God's people throughout the ages, we can say boldly, "[Our] help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."

We know, Father, that you are our Creator, and we say with confidence that our help is in you. Amen.

GOD GIVES SLEEP

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves.
—Psalm 127:2

Do you ever find yourself “burning the candle at both ends”—working day and night to get something done? While there may be times when we need to stay up late to meet a pressing deadline, losing sleep to get *everything* done may suggest a spiritual problem.

In Psalm 127, King Solomon of Israel offers some wisdom about work and sleep. Though it’s important to be productive, we need to be aware that if we focus only on our own efforts, we miss the bigger picture.

Instead of frantically trying to get everything done, we are encouraged to focus on God—and specifically on his blessings. Instead of agonizing over all that needs to be done, we should look to God for guidance in our daily tasks, seeking to please the Lord by admitting our dependence on him and rejoicing in his compassion. By

throwing off self-imposed false burdens, we are free to simply please our merciful God.

How we view rest can be a sign of our trust in God. The Lord wants to bless us with sleep, with rest, with renewal. Though there may be times when we lose sleep, if we put our trust in God and serve him with gratitude in all our tasks and challenges, we can enjoy the rest he gives.

Father, when we work without you at the center of our lives, we work in vain. Help us to look to you and to rest in you. Amen.

REFUSING SLEEP

"I will allow no sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the LORD. . . ."
—Psalm 132:4-5

What's the longest time you've ever gone without sleep? On long trips sometimes, I've stayed awake for more than 30 hours. Normally I can only stay awake for relatively short periods of time. Even dogged determination won't keep me awake after a certain point. So what should we make of King David's plan not to sleep?

After consolidating his rule over Israel, David built a fine palace for himself. Afterward, though, he felt guilty for not building a splendid house for God. In Psalm 132 we hear about David's determination to build a marvelous temple for God. Using exaggerated language, he declares that he will not rest until he has found the right place for God to dwell.

Though God is pleased with David's devotion, he doesn't allow him to build the temple,

saying that the task is for his son Solomon (see 2 Samuel 7).

Though it's wise to avoid making exaggerated "I will never . . ." statements, we do well to honor God and give him first place in our lives. God is the only source of true satisfaction and rest, and we need to honor him in all we think, say, and do—with our bodies as well as our minds. God also calls us to build: investing our time, talents, and treasure to work with him in building his church and kingdom. How? By worshiping and praying together, sharing each other's burdens, and bringing his good news to the world.

Lord, help us to please you and to join in building your church and kingdom at home and around the world. Amen.

SWEET REST

*When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down,
your sleep will be sweet.*
—Proverbs 3:24

Last night I slept well. I fell asleep quickly, got up only once, had pleasant dreams, and awoke refreshed and ready to greet the new day. As the writer of Proverbs might have said, it was a “sweet” night of sleep.

King Solomon, the author of the first part of Proverbs, advises his son that wisdom is found only in the Lord. The king urges his son to seek wisdom and understanding. Make them “an ornament to grace your neck,” he says. “They will be life for you.”

So, what constitutes wisdom? Wisdom here and throughout the Bible means discerning God’s design for how we should live in his world. This means trusting in God, following his commands for living, and seeking God’s guidance in all we do.

Does this mean that if we live according to God’s design, everything in our lives will go smoothly? And if we follow God well during the day, we’ll sleep sweetly at night? Not necessarily. The evil unleashed by human rebellion in the world continues to wreak havoc on us, on others, and on creation.

Still, we can trust God’s design for us and follow him in all of life’s circumstances. Then, even though our world may be chaotic and filled with threats, we can experience the sweetness of resting in God, both day and night, now and forever.

Father, you have made us for yourself, and only in you can we find true rest. Lead us, we pray, in your paths of rest now and always. Amen.

SQUANDERING GOD'S GIFTS

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?
—Proverbs 6:9

Years ago, when we lived in Taiwan, we awoke one morning to find a column of ants marching across our house, from one end to the other. Ants are truly amazing. They seem so driven, directed, and industrious. In fact, Proverbs describes them here as a model of organization and industry and as a spur against laziness.

This passage does not suggest that we must *always* be busy or that rest is unimportant. For human beings, both rest and work together reveal our identity as imagebearers of Creator God. As such, we have an innate desire—even need—to create flourishing.

What might that mean? Flourishing results from seeking to serve and honor God in all we do. In all our work, hobbies, rest, recreation, and more, we can nurture and be nurtured by life in this world God

has made—whether we are cooks, programmers, builders, medical workers, gardeners, maintenance workers, artists, teachers, drivers, farmers, and more. But if we squander our time and talents, we deny who we are and waste opportunities to serve God and others.

All of our daily work, at home and in the world, will not resemble ants marching in line. We are not ants. We are imagebearers of God, and the work and service we do will be creative and purposeful, punctuated by sabbath rest and refreshment, bringing glory to God and joy to creation.

Lord, help us to use all of the gifts and talents you have given us to bring you glory and to bless others. Amen.

SATISFACTION AND SLEEP

The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep.

—Ecclesiastes 5:12

Ecclesiastes connects sleep with a sense of peace and satisfaction in life. These blessings are linked with honest work and recognizing that all good things come from God, who provides what we need. The ability to accept and enjoy the life we have and to be happy in our work is a great gift from God. This brings us peace of heart so that we can sleep well, knowing we are always in God's care.

Ecclesiastes warns about the insatiable pursuit of wealth and its spiritual perils. Though it doesn't condemn wealth, this passage warns that it's better to have little and enjoy it than to have too much and be spoiled by it. Wealth and abundance are blessings from God, but pursuing wealth for its own sake shows a heart of greed and a lack of gratitude that will impoverish our lives and even

harm our souls. Directing our resources, pursuits, and passions toward God is far better.

Jesus draws from some of the wisdom here and helps us understand it more clearly when he says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? . . . Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:25-33).

Help us, Lord, to focus on living for you, seeking to put your kingdom first in our lives and in your world. Amen.

TROUBLING DREAMS

"I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me."
—Daniel 7:15

On occasions when I have visited places plagued with malaria, I have taken anti-malarial drugs. The lifesaving benefits of these medications certainly outweigh the side effects, but these pills can trigger vivid, bizarre, and even frightening dreams.

The prophet Daniel sometimes had strange dreams, but they weren't induced by medications (see Daniel 7-12). He received those dreams from the Lord, and they were given to assure God's people that the Lord will always care for them and that his kingdom will never be destroyed.

Like Daniel, many people have struggled to understand and interpret these dreams. And as Daniel himself said, the dreams left him "troubled," "exhausted," and even sick.

Beyond the question of interpretation, Daniel's dreams may lead us to wonder about the purpose of our own dreams. Sometimes our dreams may reveal or highlight a spiritual truth to us, though not in the same way as dreams in the Bible do. Most of our dreams, though, will remain a mysterious part of our inner lives.

Nonetheless, we can be assured that the one who created in us the ability to dream also knows and loves us completely. The Lord will never abandon us, even in our most troubling dreams.

Father, you have created us to dream. Please show your presence in all areas of our lives and keep us trusting in you always. Amen.

JOSEPH'S DREAM AND OBEDIENCE

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him. . . .
—Matthew 1:24

Have you ever dreamed that an angel commanded you to do something? I've had some serious dreams, but I've never had a dream where I awoke convinced that God had told me to do something.

Joseph had that kind of a dream, though. He had become engaged to a young woman named Mary, but then he discovered she was pregnant—and he knew that he wasn't the father. Being both a devout and decent man, Joseph decided to end the engagement quietly. In this way he was responding to the wisdom of his faith and the compassion in his heart. But he soon learned in a dream that God had a special plan for him. Before Joseph could act, an angel of the Lord *commanded* him to take Mary home as his wife. The angel said that her child was to be named Jesus

because he would save the people from their sins. When Joseph awoke, he obeyed what God had commanded, taking Mary as his wife.

Joseph also had some other dreams that revealed God's mysterious power (see Matthew 2). And in each case Joseph did as the Lord commanded.

Can God speak to us in the same way? Certainly he can, but God calls us in many ways, ordinary and extraordinary, to be obedient to his will in our daily lives. And when we trust and obey, as Joseph did, our obedience glorifies God and blesses the world.

Father, thank you for the mysterious and powerful ways you work in our world. Help us to obey and honor you, reflecting your glory. Amen.

JESUS AND SLEEP

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.

—Mark 4:38

There are some places—like on airplanes—where I find it impossible to sleep.

In our story today, though, we read that Jesus fell into a deep sleep on a small boat that was out on a lake—in the middle of a storm!

Though a cushion may have aided his sleep, this brief scene about Jesus' nap on a boat reveals two important truths about him. Like us, Jesus *needed* sleep. Too often when we read the stories of Jesus, we focus only on his divinity—that he is God. But this story also reminds us of Jesus' humanity—that he is human, just like us. To be our Savior, Jesus became like us in every way, except that he was without sin (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15). He became fully human so that he could pay the price of sin for us. But he also had to be fully God so that he could save us

from our estrangement with God.

In the boat, Jesus' disciples shook him awake, fearing that they would drown in the storm. Sitting up and perhaps rubbing his eyes, Jesus calmly rebuked the wind and the waves. "Then the wind died down and it was completely calm." Only God can do that.

Fully human and fully divine, only Jesus can rescue us. As he called his disciples to believe in him, so he calls us to trust him for forgiveness and for safe passage through the storms of life.

Jesus, Lord and Savior, thank you for your love and forgiveness. Please help us to trust you in the storms of life. Amen.

TRUE REST

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
—Matthew 11:28

Do you ever feel completely worn out? Health experts may advise remedies such as eating right, exercising regularly, and getting enough rest. To feel truly rested, many of us need seven to eight hours of sleep each night, and some of us may need even more. This is good advice, but sleep isn't the only rest we need. Jesus offers us true rest.

Jesus promises a kind of spiritual rest unrecognized by the world's physical health experts. As the Creator of the world and of all humanity, Jesus knows us. He knows our weaknesses, our brokenness, and our struggles. He knows what weighs us down and wearies our bodies and souls. He also knows exactly what kind of rest we need. No healthy sleep routine with adequate deep sleep, dream sleep, and light sleep will provide the spiritual

rest we need. Only Jesus can provide the rest that reaches to the depths of our souls.

Jesus invites all who are exhausted—weighed down by the cares, obligations, stresses, and problems of life—to come to him. He invites us simply to ground ourselves in him and to follow him every day. Though Jesus doesn't promise us an easy path, he assures us he is "gentle and humble in heart"—and only in and through him will we find true rest for our souls.

Jesus, our Savior and Lord, only in you can we find rest for our souls. Please provide the spiritual rest we need in you. Amen.

STAYING AWAKE

He returned to his disciples and found them sleeping.

—Matthew 26:40

After an exhausting day, have you still had more to do even though it was bedtime? And have you kept on, barely able to stay awake? That's the kind of day the disciples had when they went with Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane.

After telling his disciples to wait, Jesus went deeper into the garden to pray. Returning an hour later, he found Peter, James, and John fast asleep. Jesus scolded them and warned them to stay awake and alert. Yet, after going to pray and returning twice again, he found them sleeping. Why did Jesus take a rough tone with them? After all, they had become totally worn out physically, emotionally, and spiritually—not to mention having a cloud of danger and doom hanging over them.

Though Jesus rebuked the disciples' sleepiness, this scene

reveals more about his own situation. Overwhelmed with sorrow, Jesus was weighed down with the great burden of suffering he would soon face. But his confession—"My Father . . . not as I will but as you will" and "May your will be done"—resonates through the centuries to us today.

The disciples' powerlessness to stay awake only highlights Jesus' pain and suffering, which ends in his excruciating death on the cross. The suffering that Jesus shouldered for us brings us to our knees in humility and gratitude.

Lord, we are so weak. Only you had the will and ability to carry the burden of our sin. Help us to stay alert and share your love. Amen.

ASLEEP IN A CELL

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. —Acts 12:6

Sometimes we awake from a dream feeling relieved that it was only a dream. Other times we awake and wish the dream were real.

After being locked up in prison, Peter awoke when an angel came to free him, “but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.” Later he realized that a miracle had taken place and he was no longer in prison.

The book of Acts shows us what the early church suffered for preaching and teaching about Jesus. King Herod had executed James, one of Jesus’ disciples. Seeing that his actions pleased the Jews, Herod arrested Peter, the disciples’ leader, intending to try him in public (Acts 12:1-4). But God had other plans, as we see in Peter’s dramatic escape.

This surprising episode teaches us some important things. For example, we see the power of prayer. After Peter’s arrest, the church in Jerusalem prayed earnestly for him. God hears and answers the prayers of his people. We also see the passion and commitment of the early church to keep proclaiming the good news of Jesus, despite persecution. Their sharing of the love of Jesus changed the world, and our sharing of Jesus’ love can do that too.

Lord Jesus, you suffered for us. Help us to embrace the cost of following you and sharing your story with our world. Amen.

SLEEPING IN PUBLIC

The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.
—Acts 20:12

Have you ever fallen asleep in a public place, like during a long talk by a speaker or a preacher? Maybe your eyes began drooping, and your head started to nod. Then, despite your best efforts, you dozed off. Though falling asleep like that can be embarrassing, it's not usually fatal. But it was for Eutychus, who fell three stories from an open window to the ground.

What should we make of this strange story? Should we judge Paul for being insensitive to his audience? No, Paul was doing just as he was commanded, teaching the good news about Jesus everywhere. Should we criticize Eutychus for falling asleep in "church"? Probably not, since it was midnight and Paul had been talking "on and on." In fact, this story isn't mainly about Paul or Eutychus; it's about the power at the

center of the book of Acts, the resurrection of Jesus. The Greek name *Eutychus* means "fortunate," and Eutychus was fortunate that Paul was able to raise him from the dead. But Paul performed this miracle *only* through the power of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. This story and everything the apostles say and do in Acts points to the resurrection.

In Jesus' resurrection, God decisively defeated sin and death. The power of the resurrection of Jesus still resounds in the world today as we wait for Jesus' return and our eternal resurrection.

Father, through Jesus, you have defeated sin and death for our sake. Help us to live victoriously as we look forward to Jesus' return. Amen.

WAKE UP!

Do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake from your slumber. . . .

—Romans 13:11

I generally try to get between seven and eight hours of sleep each night. Often, though, I get less than that. And at those times when I'm a little "sleep deprived," I can be a bit grouchy. Maybe you're that way too. So why does Paul urge us to sleep less and not more?

Paul isn't talking about restful slumber here. He's talking about getting drowsy in our spiritual lives. After reminding us that love should be at the center of our hearts, Paul urges us to wake up from our spiritual sleepiness. He spurs us on to live with the commitment and vitality that we had when we first became believers in Jesus. Although we may not be guilty of the "big" sins Paul lists in this passage, we may well need to be reminded about treating our neighbors with love. In our attitudes and actions, it's easy

to treat the people around us—including those whom we love most—with less love than Jesus commands and they deserve.

I've been a Christian for a long time, but, sadly, I still need daily reminders to wake up from my spiritual slumber to love and obey God and to love and serve the people around me with the same urgent selfless love that God has shown me in Jesus. What about you?

Lord Jesus, wake us from our spiritual slumber to love you and others with the love you have shown to us. Amen.

ASLEEP IN JESUS

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
—1 Corinthians 15:20

Do you ever use euphemisms? Euphemisms are nice-sounding phrases that we use to talk about something harsh or difficult. For example, we may say “golden years” rather than “old age.” And many cultures describe dying in terms of “passing away.” Paul describes Christians who have died as being “asleep in Christ.”

The ancient Hebrews commonly used “sleep” as a euphemism for death. The accounts of Israel’s kings often end by saying “he slept with his fathers” or “rested with his ancestors” (see 1 Kings 2:10). In our reading for today, Paul uses “sleep” several times to describe death. And he does this in a new way in connection with believing in Christ. Apparently some people in the church at Corinth were questioning whether God had truly raised Jesus from the dead. But

of course God has done that, Paul says, adding that if God didn’t raise Jesus, then his followers would be the most pitiable of all people.

Indeed, Jesus is risen! And, as Paul describes it here, all who have died believing in Jesus are merely “asleep” in him. Because of Jesus’ victory over sin and the grave, death has been conquered. Paul describes death as “sleep” because death has been defeated!

Until Jesus returns, we will all die, but through his death and resurrection we have all been made alive in him. And one day he will raise our bodies again to live with him forever.

Thank you, Jesus, for conquering death so that we can live with you—body and soul—forever. Amen.

GOING WITHOUT SLEEP

I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep. . . .
—2 Corinthians 11:27

In these passages Paul describes many of his sufferings for the cause of Christ. In a way these litanies can sound like boasting, and Paul admits that. But his aim, he says, is to show his own weakness in comparison to Christ.

Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed his life forever (Acts 9). The Lord called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles—non-Jewish peoples—so Paul traveled to countless destinations, mostly walking, sometimes on a donkey or riding in a cart, and other times by ship. He spent many nights in unfamiliar and uncomfortable places—perhaps frequently on the cold, hard ground. Though sometimes he probably fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, he often went for long periods without enough sleep or without sleep at all. He also may

have spent many nights filled with anxiety about impending dangers or concerns for his fledgling churches.

But Paul refuses to boast or wallow in the hardships he faced. He says that if he is going to boast, he will boast only about Jesus, who suffered so much more for him. Paul counts it as a joy that he has had the opportunity to serve Jesus.

If we are tempted to wallow in our own loss of sleep and hardships, we too should remember and boast in Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you suffered on the cross and died for us. Help us, we pray, to bear our crosses as we seek to follow and serve you. Amen.

SLEEP AND ANGER

Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.

—Ephesians 4:26

Some good advice for getting regular rest includes having a consistent bedtime, engaging in a quiet activity before sleep, sleeping in a cool, dark room, and shutting off “blue lights” (our phones). The apostle Paul adds another timeless piece of wisdom: “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.”

In his letter to the Ephesians, after providing a deeply textured explanation of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, Paul describes how we should live daily in the light of God’s amazing grace. Among other things, Paul offers advice about dealing with anger. As creatures made in God’s image, we all have emotions, including anger (even Jesus got angry sometimes). Paul acknowledges anger and then urges us to deal with it in a godly way. He suggests that we deal with our anger quickly, per-

haps by beginning to forgive as we have been forgiven, as he says in Colossians 3:13. Why? Because unresolved anger destroys our relationships with God and with others and can devour us alive.

When we are angry, we should acknowledge this strong emotion, perhaps take some deep breaths, ask God to help us calm down, and then commit ourselves to taking timely steps to resolve our anger. We’ll sleep better if we do.

Father, your just wrath for our sin and rebellion against you has been satisfied in Jesus. Help us, we pray, to forgive others as you have forgiven us. Amen.

SOUL SLEEP?

We will be with the Lord forever.

—1 Thessalonians 4:17

What happens to our souls when we die? Across the ages, many people have offered ideas on our destiny after death. But what does the Bible say?

The Old Testament says that when we die, our bodies will return to the earth but that our souls will return to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7). And here in the New Testament the apostle Paul describes death for believers as being “asleep” in Christ (see also 1 Corinthians 15:20; July 26). Some Christians have suggested that when we die, we are in a state of “soul sleep”—but that may not be the best way to describe it. There’s also the promise from Jesus to the thief on the cross: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

In addition, the apostle Paul provides a promise in 1 Thessalonians 4, describing

one of the most striking scenes in the Bible about the Lord’s return. With the shout of the archangel and the blast of a trumpet, the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven. All who belong to Jesus will be raised from the dead, and the living will be gathered to him.

And here Paul supplies an indelible, eternal promise: “We will be with the Lord forever.” With this assurance we can be filled with hope and encourage one another.

Dear Jesus, although the unknown moment of our death is a reality for each of us, we give thanks that you will never leave or forsake us. Amen.

NIGHT TIME

Let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.
—1 Thessalonians 5:6

Where I live, the summer sun doesn't set until late in the evening. When our children were young, they would sometimes say at bedtime, "We can't go to bed yet. It's not dark out." They associated darkness with sleep. The apostle Paul does that too.

Paul contrasts day and night in two ways. First, people who reject Jesus or don't know him live in darkness. They are unaware of Jesus' promised second coming. And when he does return, Jesus will catch them off guard, "like a thief in the night." Second, and sadly, people who are without Jesus are "asleep," living in frustration and without hope. Christians, though, are awake in Jesus and should always walk by the light of the "Son."

How does Paul suggest we live in the light? He advises us to prepare for daily struggles

and be alert. Our daily battles with temptation and sin require faith in Jesus, and for our faith to grow we should spend time reading and reflecting on God's Word, letting it permeate the deepest reaches of our hearts. We should also be faithful in prayer, "praying always" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

As our lives orbit around Jesus, his love in us will shine out to the people around us, especially to those without Jesus. Growing in faith and love will develop our hope as we serve Jesus and eagerly await his return.

Lord, thank you for awakening our hearts and letting us live for you in your light. Please move us to share your light and life with people who don't know you. Amen.

SLEEP IN HEAVEN?

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”
—Revelation 21:4

Have you ever wondered if we will sleep in heaven?

We already know that all creatures need sleep and that God in his mysterious wisdom created in us the need for sleep. Further, we can assume that the need for sleep isn't because of sin.

So will we sleep in heaven? The Bible reveals that some basic things in human society, like marriage, will end when we are living in God's presence forever. But what about sleeping and other basic human functions that we might enjoy in this earthly life? We can say with certainty that if sleep is a problem in this life, it's the result of other challenges we face in our fallen world. But since the Bible doesn't actually tell us, we don't know if we will need sleep in heaven.

Although we have to live with that uncertainty now, we can live confidently with a sure and lasting promise. In heaven, when we live in the presence of the Lord, *all* that ails us now will be a thing of the past. Until then, our future hope should fill us with confidence as we trust and serve God by day and lie down to sleep at night.

Father, by your wisdom we have been fearfully and wonderfully made. Help us to trust you in all things, including our sleep, as we serve you and wait to be with you in heaven. Amen.



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