



Many of us were likely taught a bedtime prayer by our moms and dads. The one I remember the best went like this: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I shall die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." I remember praying that as a kid and kind of being freaked out. I mean, as a kid you never really think you're going to die when you go to sleep, but that prayer made it seem like a very real possibility! The whole bit about dying while I slept actually kept me awake. But as anxious as I got about the possibility of dying in my sleep, I eventually did go to sleep. I guess the choice wasn't whether or not to fall asleep, but how to fall asleep: would I fall asleep in trust or in fear? In hope or in despair?

Today is Easter. This is the day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This is a day of victory and triumph! You might wonder what in the world this has to do with sleeping. Well, you've probably noticed that our theme this year is, **Awaken**. What does it mean to awaken? To awaken you have to first be asleep. And when the Bible talks about sleep, it points to three different things. In other words, there's not one but three kinds of sleep, and with that there are three ways of being awakened.

Natural Sleep

First, there's the most obvious one and that's natural, physical sleep. This kind of sleep is good; it's a blessing; it's something we all need. Most of us will spend about a third of our lives sleeping. God is our Creator and he made us in such a way that we need sleep for our physical and emotional health. No one can deny that.

The very first time we read about sleep in the Bible we see it was induced by God. He put Adam into a deep sleep and then took one of his ribs and fashioned it into a woman (Gen. 2:21–22). I guess without sleep Adam would have never met Eve! The fact that she was created while he was asleep meant he could never take credit for her. He couldn't take the blame either! Remember after they ate the forbidden apple Adam said to God, "*The women YOU made gave it to me.*" But it's amazing to think that while we're sleeping, God is working. We need sleep because we're frail human beings, but God doesn't. The Bible says that God "*neither slumbers nor sleeps*" (Ps. 121:4).

Often in the Bible the ability to sleep isn't only a gift from God but it's an expression of our faith and trust in him. Psalm 4:8 says,

"In peace I will lay down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." Statistics show that Americans are among the world's leaders in sleep deprivation. The U.S. ranks among the top three most sleep-deprived nations in the world. Fifty to seventy million American adults have a sleep disorder of some kind. The primary cause of sleep deprivation among Americans is anxiety about finances. The results of this on our health are huge. People who sleep less also tend to die younger. Two out of five U.S. drivers have fallen asleep at the wheel. No wonder the manufacturing of drugs to treat insomnia is among the largest industries in the world. The writer of Ecclesiastes seemed to be speaking of us when he said, "*What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless*" (Ecc. 2:22–23).

In contrast to that, I can't help but think of Jesus. After a long day, he and his disciples climbed into a boat and set off for the other side of the lake. And then, all of a sudden, this massive, life-threatening storm hit. The disciples were in a panic. They thought it was all over. But what was Jesus doing? He was sleeping in the back of the boat! That's the sleep of faith. That's the sleep of one who trusted that his Father was at work even while he slept.

Sleep is a necessary part of our humanity and an expression of faith. But there is an exception to this. While natural sleep is a good thing, too much sleep is a bad thing. Proverbs 6:9–11 warns us about this: "*How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a thief, and scarcity like an armed man.*"

I had a friend in college who slept too much. He slept through classes, early morning football workouts and prayer meetings. He tried everything until finally we came up with a solution. Before he went to sleep, we tied his ankle to the bed post and then put two alarm clocks on the other's side of the room so when they went off he'd have to untie his ankle, get out of bed, walk to the other side of his bedroom and turn both alarms off! Don't laugh, it worked!

Spiritual/Moral Sleep

There's a second way the Bible talks about sleep that's not quite as obvious. The Bible also talks about spiritual or moral sleep. While natural sleep is generally a good thing, this kind of sleep

is a bad thing. When we sleep spiritually or morally, we fail to be alert, watchful and awake in all the right ways. Many people go through life spiritually and morally asleep. Actor Tim Allen put it this way: "How much of the day are you awake? You think, I gotta get the dry cleaning, I gotta get going... All of a sudden it's dinnertime... Then you read and go to bed, wake up, and it's the same all over. You're not awake, you're not living, you're not experiencing. We start early medicating ourselves. We start kids early on TV and video games... It's daunting how many possibilities there are in life for every one of us. But rather than face that I may be a failure or a success (I think both of them are terrifying) people find diversions."

But this isn't just about being awake to possibilities, it's being awake to God. Believe it or not, this is what *Star Wars* director George Lucas was trying to accomplish in his movie through what he called, The Force: He said, "I put the force in the movie to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people... I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. Not having enough interest in the mysteries of life to ask, 'Is there a God or is there not a God?' this is for me the worst thing that can happen. I think you should have an opinion about that. Or you should be saying, 'I'm looking. I'm very curious about this and am going to continue to look until I can find an answer, and if I can't find an answer then I'll die trying.'"

He's right. But even if you know the answer it's possible to be morally and spiritually asleep. Consider the disciples of Jesus. Right before his arrest, Jesus placed all but three of them on the lookout, telling them to sit while he goes off to pray in the Garden of Gethsemene. He then pulled Peter, James and John deeper into the garden. A few minutes later, he asked those three to keep watch while he went off to pray, but soon his praying was interrupted by their snoring. He came back, woke them up from their slumber and said to Peter, "*Simon, are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak*" (Mark 14:37–38). This happened three times! The whole point seems to be that if we're not spiritually awake we're vulnerable to temptation. Why? Because we're weak. We may want to do the right thing, but we fail. The spirit is weak but the flesh is ready for the weekend.

The apostle Paul picked up on this idea in the book of Romans. He wanted to encourage the believers there to live every day with their eyes wide open. He said, "*The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*

Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" (Romans 13:11b–14).

So while natural sleep is a gift of God, spiritual sleep is a danger. Every moment of every day we need to be awake. That means you're alert to temptation, you strip away sin and clothe yourself with Christ and you're ready for his return.

Sleep as a Metaphor for Death

There's a third way the Bible talks about sleep and this is the most important for today. The Bible uses sleep as a metaphor for death. Consider a story from the life of Jesus. In the gospel of Mark, Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, was a desperate man. He ran into the presence of Jesus, prostrated himself on the ground before him, and pleaded earnestly for Jesus to come and put his hand upon his little girl, who was at the point of death. Jesus responded and headed for Jairus' home, but on the way there, he ran into a woman who had been sick for 38 years. You can imagine Jairus' frustration as the Lord stops to heal her: "***Lord, we're running out of time.***" While Jesus was speaking, some men came and reported, "***The girl is dead. Why bother Jesus any more?***" But Jesus said, "***Don't be afraid. Just believe.***" When he finally arrived at the home, the professional mourners had gathered and were doing their thing. According to the custom of the day, they were ripping their garments, tearing their hair, and crying with loud shrieks. Jesus came in and announced, "***What's all the commotion about? She's not dead. She's asleep.***" Who is right? They're the professionals. They know what death is. She's not asleep. She's dead. But Jesus says, "***No, she's asleep.***"

I heard a story about a couple named Alfred and Geri Esposito. One day they were told their son, Freddy, had been killed in a collision with a tractor-trailer on a Pennsylvania highway. Freddy was supposed to be staying with his brother Chris, so when Chris got word of his brother's death, he raced home. Geri, the mother, relates what happened next: "He goes downstairs into his brother's apartment, and he saw something on the couch. Chris poked at the lump under the blankets, and his brother awoke. Chris screamed, 'You're dead! You're dead!' And Freddy counters, 'I'm sleeping!'" It turned out the whole thing was a mistake. The man who died was carrying Freddy's driver's license.

As crazy as that is, that's what Jesus was saying about this girl, except she really was dead! Why does Jesus say she's asleep? To most people, death is permanent; sleep is temporary. Death is the end of life; sleep is the reinvigoration of life. When you fall asleep, you expect to wake up. Jesus is saying that because of who he is, death is temporary. Jesus demonstrated his power over death as he walked into that 12-year-old girl's room and said to her, "***Little girl, I say to you, get up!***" The Bible says, "***Immediately, the girl stood up and began to walk around.***" It's

almost like Jesus is teaching us that you don't have to fear death any more than you fear falling asleep.

Jesus even understood this when it came to his own death. One of the prayers Jesus prayed while he was on the cross came from Psalm 31:5, *"Into your hands I commit my spirit."* Those same words were also the first prayer every Jewish mother taught her child before they went to sleep at night. When Jesus was about to die on the cross, he prayed that prayer as if he was falling asleep. And in a sense he was! His death was temporary! All four gospel accounts testify that on the third day he rose from the grave.

So when the New Testament writers talk about the death of a believer in Jesus Christ, they prefer to use this image of sleep. In 1 Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul is defending the resurrection of Jesus. Two times in that chapter he speaks of the death of believers as falling asleep. In verse 6 he says that after Jesus died he *"appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep."* In other words, some have already died. In verses 17–18 he says, *"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost."* But what Paul is saying in this chapter is that Christ has been raised, and they're not lost, and that means you don't have to fear death any more than you fear falling asleep.

So when you wake up tomorrow morning let me encourage you to think about three things. First, thank God for a good night's sleep and for waking you up to a new day in which you can walk with him and serve him. That's a simple pleasure we far too often take for granted. Second, ask God to keep you spiritually

and morally awake throughout the day; to keep you alert to any temptations that might come your way and to the promise that he could return at any moment. Third, trust God's promise that though one day you'll sleep the sleep of death, you'll wake up in the presence of God through the power of the resurrection. You can sleep in trust and not fear; hope and not despair. Because Jesus conquered death, you don't have to fear death any more than you fear falling asleep.

Maybe you're here today and you just don't have that confidence. On one occasion Jesus said to his friend Mary, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."* Then he asked her, *"Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25).

And that's the question I want to leave you with, "Do **you** believe this?" If you do believe it, you don't have to fear death any more than you fear falling asleep. But if you've never made that step of faith here is a simple prayer that Christians have used for centuries to take that step of faith: "Lord Jesus, I believe you're the Son of God. I believe you died on the cross for my sins and on the third day you rose from the dead. Please forgive my sins and give me the gift of eternal life. I ask you into my life and heart to be my Lord and Savior. I ask you to teach me to be spiritually awake and to live each day with my eyes wide open to you. Amen."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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