



P.S.

THE LONGEST PERIOD OF TIME that anyone has gone without sleep is, apparently, eleven days—a world record set by an American in 1964. From the fourth day he experienced extreme hallucinations, a phenomenon that is common for anyone who approaches three days without sleep. Scientists like to call these hallucinations ‘dream intrusions’. Our mind needs to work hard during sleep to organise and file all the emotional and factual data we come across in life; if it doesn’t get the opportunity to do this while we are awake then performance can soon suffer and eventually dream intrusions will set in.

Yet the Bible focuses on the flip side of the coin when it uses the metaphor of sleep for spiritual teaching. It tells of the dangers of too much sleep rather than the risks of sleep deprivation. The point seems to be that, as far as human nature generally is concerned, it is more likely that we shall be lazy (being too easy on ourselves) than that we shall push ourselves too hard. While it might be valuable to have an exhortation about taking rest, it’s more likely that we shall need one about waking up and getting down to it!

The classic passage on all of this is the one from Proverbs:

“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a **little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding** of the hands to sleep: so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man” (6:6-11).

Along with Proverbs 6 there are countless other passages in the same book which focus on the evil of the sluggard and the perils of laziness.

To sit down, put your feet up and have a coffee—or even better, a lie in—is in the West one of life’s most precious pleasures. Yet how easy it is to stay there longer than is strictly necessary, crossing that boundary where rest and recuperation become indulgence and even laziness.

It is one of the areas of life where the conscience must play a key role. There is no one to tell us where the dividing line lies, no right and wrong answer to the question of how hard we

Folding the hands

should push ourselves. With the Lord Jesus himself we see a delicate balancing. It was right for him to come apart into a desert place to rest with his disciples as the pressures mounted, but it was also right for him to rise up a great while before day, and deprive himself of the sleep he could so easily have justified, so that he could pray to his Father.

So how much sleep do we need? One wag answered the question this way: “Six hours for a man, seven hours for a woman, and eight hours for a fool!” But it was of greater comedy value than it was real help; I certainly seem to have problems if I try to manage on six hours for any length of time. Yet while there are no right or absolute answers, there are real questions. They remain, and it is important to ask them. Jesus did not cruise through his ministry. He worked hard, and he exhausted himself to serve the Lord. A hard day’s ministry would have been a fine excuse for a full night’s sleep, probably even more so than a hard day at work; but Jesus needed to talk to his Father, so he prioritised. We may sometimes be too soft on ourselves, and it’s always wise to review habits and routines. Although it is true that his ministry took place over a particularly intense and concentrated three-year period whereas most of us must sustain discipleship for much longer, the fact remains that he is our prime example.

When did we last put ourselves out physically for God? It can quickly become all too much of a pattern to excuse ourselves from meetings or other activities because of tiredness. The same can be true of prayers and readings and other enterprises which ought to be routine. We can make room for the extra fifteen minutes or so that it takes if we so choose. We can get up that bit earlier in the morning and have a few minutes meditation over breakfast, if not some active Bible reading.

To know one’s own body—in terms of how hard one can push and when one must stop—is an important skill. Our bodies have been given to us by God with all their inherent potential and limitation, and it is worthwhile to think about how we best dedicate them to His service. There is a time to fold one’s hands and sleep, yet we are primarily to be children of the day who should be alert and ready to serve. Though we cannot prescribe for others, we must examine ourselves.

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