



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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## SLEEP

Sleep may not seem like it has a lot to do with the spiritual life. It is after all just a natural part of human life, something we must all do for a while each day whether we like it or not. Were the spiritual life lived by the spirit alone, apart from the body, then sleep would indeed be irrelevant. But it is not: Christian life is to be lived body and soul, and we will be saved to live in heaven body and soul. We live to God not just in the mind but in the flesh as well. And we strive with all our being to serve God, the flesh as well as the spirit.

Some Christians (those having some control of their schedules) are tempted to indulge in more sleep than the body needs. This tends to produce sloth and negligence. It is an easy trap to fall into, since our circadian rhythm tends to have us sleep a little later each day. To rise when the alarm goes off is an effort for many of us: our bodies tell us we need a bit (or a lot) more sleep, the bed is warm and cozy, and our will is a little less potent when we are just waking up. But to give in to this temptation is to embrace a life in which we are ruled not by the spirit but by the flesh, not by the highest part of our nature but by the lowest. We end up serving the flesh, living for the satisfaction of our bodily desires. We may find ourselves unable to get up on our own: the flesh asserts itself against the spirit. Then it is not merely that the spirit is willing and the flesh weak, but that the flesh is stronger than the spirit. This temptation also manifests itself in another way: when we don't get as much sleep as we think we deserve, we think we are justified in being grouchy and difficult. The demands of the flesh assert themselves against our desire to live virtuously.

As Christians we would rather be serving God than the flesh. Our desire is to live the spiritual life with our

bodies cooperating in Christian life, helping us to pray and love God every moment of the day. To achieve this ideal of the integration of body and soul in the spiritual life, some discipline in sleep is needed. We cannot allow our lives to be dominated by our desire for sleep any more than we could allow the desire for food to determine everything else. On the weekend or on vacation, there is generally no harm with sleeping in. But as a regular habit, it is likely to be harmful to Christian life. It is often part of a general pattern of undisciplined Christian life, where our prayers get said irregularly, our self-examinations are rare, even our Sunday worship may become a hit or miss prospect. Discipline in getting up in the morning may not solve all the other problems, but it is a step in the right direction. It is the beginning of discipline (or for some, an advanced step!), where we assert our will to cooperate with grace, in order to live as Christians whatever the cost to the body.

This does not mean that virtue is the equivalent of not getting much sleep. Things are not so simple! There are also those who do not get enough sleep; and this is not good for the Christian life either. These people rush from one thing to the next, with so many things to do that they do not take time to sleep. The lack takes its toll on the body, either in illness and debility or else in peevishness and ill humor. Usually this is a sign of an attempt at self-salvation. Our frenzied activity is aimed at making ourselves worthy of God. Our goodness is our own accomplishment. Thus we really do not have time to sleep: we have much to do to merit heaven!

Sometimes this leads to difficulties going to sleep. We get so tense about everything we are doing and will have to do on the morrow that we simply cannot go to sleep. We lie there thinking about everything that has to get done. We go over it in our mind. We may begin to get nervous about something that we know will be difficult, or some personal encounter that will likely be unpleasant. Then we begin to think how late it is, and how tired we are going to be if we don't get to sleep immediately. And that makes it even harder to get to sleep.

Then we learn that we cannot by our own effort go to sleep. This is a humbling realization. For it seems as though we ought to be able to do something as simple as that. Our inability shows us that we cannot live by ourselves, that we need Another, that we have been made to live in dependence upon our Maker. "It is but lost labor that ye haste to rise up early, and so late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness; for so he giveth his beloved sleep." (Psalm 127) Sleep is a gift from God. On those nights when we are beyond tired and yet still feel enough tension to remain awake: then we know what a wondrous gift it is, that sweet refreshment which comes to us from a merciful Father.

For us to overcome this kind of insomnia, we need to learn to relax into God's loving arms. Since we cannot put ourselves to sleep

by any positive act, trying harder will not help. Rather, we need to learn to trust God. We will never do this very well so long as we insist on earning our salvation, rather than accepting it as His free and undeserved gift. He has accomplished all that needs to be done: He died on the Cross and rose from the dead. We can add nothing to that. It is ours if we believe. We need do nothing more and nothing less. Believing in the efficacy of Christ's accomplishment of our salvation will lead us to depend on God. Our Christian actions will be aimed at loving God back, at living up to His incredible generosity, not at earning enough merit to be worthy of Him.

All of this is related to going to sleep. To let ourselves go (which is what is needed in going to sleep) we must be able to trust, to let go of our works and our control of our lives. It is good practice for Christian life. And conversely, a Christian life well lived is a good preparation for a sound sleep. Our ability to let ourselves go into His arms each night is practice for heaven. Only those will be found in heaven who are willing to depend entirely on God. Similarly, we prepare to die: for then, too, in our weakness, we will need to simply relax and trust God for the journey through death into the life He has made for us hereafter.

Sometimes we have trouble going to sleep not because of tension but because of fear. We may be afraid because of our guilt: being dimly aware that we are not all right with God and with the world and yet unable to rectify it ourselves. We may fear by reason of our inadequacy: knowing (also dimly) that we are insufficient unto ourselves, and fearing the necessary dependence on others. We may fear the unknown within us: having a sense that there may be evils lurking beneath the surface of consciousness that will interfere with the kind of life we would like to live. These fears are often subtle and unexpressed. But they can still be quite real, and effective at keeping us from sleep.

The antidote is the love of God. We need first to examine ourselves for the source of fear. If there is unconfessed sin with its residue of guilt, we must confess and receive God's forgiveness. If we are afraid of dependence or the unknown within us, we must share our fear with God, in order to allow Him to bear its burden and free us from it. We are afraid because we have not given ourselves entirely to Him. We try to live on our own strength and we fail. We ought to give up the futile attempt and abandon ourselves to Him, depending on His love. This appears risky: we don't like the prospect of being so radically dependent upon someone else, even God. But it is the way to be delivered from fear; it is the way of life.

We may be kept from sleep by tension or fear; there is a third form of spiritually based insomnia. Sometimes we cannot go to sleep because we have been offended and we have not forgiven the one who sinned against us. This may happen because the other has not asked forgiveness, or it may be that we have not faced our need to forgive.

Or, in the case of anger between husband and wife, it may have occurred only a short time before bed. Nursing anger or a wound makes it hard to go to sleep. Thus we are admonished, "Let not the sun go down on thy wrath." (Ephesians 4:26) This is the way we are made, and it is for our good. We are forced to face our need to forgive -- not just our need to seek forgiveness for our own sins, but our Christian responsibility to take the initiative and forgive the one who sins against us. Otherwise sleep eludes us. When we find ourselves in such straits, the answer is simple: forgive from the heart. This is not always easy, but the prospect of lying awake half the night is an incentive to get on with it!

We sometimes experience a rather different problem: sleep during prayer. There are times, especially during meditation, that we have trouble staying awake. If this happens constantly, we might consider finding another time of day for the prayer. But on an occasional basis, it happens to all of us. We usually respond by getting upset with ourselves: how unseemly to fall asleep (or close to it) when we are praying to God! We feel a little guilty and try to stay awake. This is not very satisfactory for the prayer: we end up paying more attention to staying awake than to praying.

If we are so tired on occasion that we cannot avoid dozing off, we need not feel guilty about it: God does not demand of us what we cannot do. It serves to remind us just how dependent we are on His grace: we cannot even stay awake to pray without it. At the same time there is "sacred slumber." At least when we sleep we are not opposing the will of God. Sometimes we need the time of rest before we can get into our regular prayers, as a kind of decompression, allowing ourselves to quiet down enough to be with God. Thus retreat leaders will often encourage the retreatants to nap a bit. It helps to keep things in perspective, and to recall that prayer is not to accomplish something, some human activity, but to dispose us to God. Our sleep can do that as well.

Even when we fall asleep in the middle of meditation, we need not feel that we are thwarting the Holy Spirit. He can work through the sleep if He wishes to. We should not sell Him short. It is humiliating for us, showing the weakness of our flesh (as when the three apostles slept in the Garden of Gethsemane after Jesus had asked them to watch with Him). We will certainly not want to sleep during our prayers. But neither should we upset ourselves if it happens once in a while.

Christian life is sacramental. Thus it must involve the body. Our sleep is a vital part of our Christian life. Our successes and difficulties in sleep can help us understand our strengths and weaknesses in spiritual terms, and so to grow in our dependence on God.