

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bed - the servant's need for rest

I hope you slept well last night! Waking and sleeping have become so much a part of the rhythm of our lives that, perhaps, we take them for granted. Today, I want us to think about the fact that sleep, or rest, is very much a part of the provision of a loving Creator God for His creation.

Last week, we thought about an episode in the life of the prophet, Elisha. The story is quickly told in 2 Kings 4:8-10: "Now it happened one day that Elisha went to Shunem, where there was a notable (or well-to-do) woman, and she constrained him to eat some food. So it was, as often as he passed by, that he turned in there to eat some food. And she said to her husband, 'Look now, I know that this is a holy man of God, who passes by us regularly. Please, let us make a small upper room on the wall; and let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there.'"

On those initial occasions when Elisha was welcomed into the home of this well-to-do woman and her husband, it quickly became obvious to this woman that Elisha was a man of God. Scripture does not tell us what Elisha had to say to this woman, but it is clear that his life must have spoken volumes. That must challenge all of us this morning as to how much our lives speak of God to those around us. The apostle Paul could write to those Christians living in the godless city of Corinth, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody" (2 Corinthians 3:2).

The expression 'a man of God' is often found in the Old Testament. For example, it is used to describe Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah and Elisha. Generally it describes one who was ready to stand for God in an evil day. Today, when the world more than ever seems bent on turning away from Christianity and opposing Christian standards, we need to be men and women of God.

The room provided by this well-to-do woman for Elisha was simply furnished but would lack nothing essential. So we read of a bed, a table, a chair and a lampstand. Last week, we thought about the table, and its lesson on the servant's need for food and clothing. Today, we will think about the bed and the servant's need for rest. In the next two talks, God willing, we will consider the candlestick: the servant's need for light and guidance, and the stool (a praying stool): the servant's need for communion.

The servant's need for rest.

It is surely significant that the first time in Scripture that we read of the word 'rest' is the fact that God rested after the six days of creation: "And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work" (Genesis 2:2). Thus was established the principle of six days of work followed by one day of rest: "Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it (or, set it apart), because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made" (Genesis 2:3).

Man was created by God on the sixth day of creation: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness' ... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him: male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:26-27). One consequence of our being made in the image and likeness of God is that, just as God rested after His work, so the pattern for us, too, is work followed by rest. That pattern was established by God for our wellbeing and we ignore it at our peril! Indeed, the psalmist describes sleep as one of God's gifts to us: "For so He gives His beloved sleep" (Psalm 127:2). Sleep is an essential part of our makeup. We now know that sleep is a period of rest and recovery for the body. Human beings and many animals need periods of sleep or they will die. Indeed, sleep deprivation is a well-known form of torture. No wonder the psalmist David writes, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, the keeping of the Sabbath was made the fourth commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it, you shall do no work...For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it". Christianity is characterised by the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. His resurrection

took place on the first day of the week, Sunday, not the Sabbath, Saturday. For the Christian, then, Sunday, or the Lord's day, the first day of the week, is the special day.

A few years ago, there was a slogan, "Keep Sunday special". Sadly, that seems to be little heard today and, for many, Sunday has become just another day of entertainment and amusement or of getting on with the jobs at home. But for the Christian, the principle of keeping one day in the week special, as a day of rest, a principle instituted by God, is still important. Indeed, during World War II, when pressures of work required some employees to work a seven day week, the health of many of them suffered as a consequence. It is a happy thing for the Christian to be able to keep Sunday as a time for giving to the Lord for His worship and for learning of Him. It can be a time for the Christian family to engage together in this.

While sleep is a vital part of our God-given makeup, it is important to realise that though we read in Scripture of God resting, never do we read of God sleeping! You may remember that Elijah once challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. Elijah would prepare his sacrifice and the prophets of Baal their sacrifice. The God who answered by fire would be recognised as the one, true God. The prophets of Baal spent all morning fruitlessly calling upon their god to answer them. I cannot but smile when I read of the way in which Elijah then mocks them: "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27). Elijah's confidence was in the God who was never too busy, who never sleeps. So the psalmist could rejoice in God who was always ready to help: "My help comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:1-4).

We can rejoice today in a God who is never too busy, who never sleeps, who is always there for us. He is only a prayer away, be it day or night. The psalmist might sleep, losing consciousness of the God who was continually looking after him, but when he awoke, it was to the realisation that God was still there! So he writes, "When I awake, I am still with You" (Psalm 139:18).

All of us experience times in life when there just don't seem to be enough hours in the day. The demands of the workplace, of home responsibilities and of Christian service come crowding in. Undoubtedly, the Lord will give special help for special occasions. So Paul could write, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). But it is important to recognise that these are special occasions and that, in the normal course of things, we make sure that we are getting adequate rest. We owe it to ourselves, to our families, to our fellow believers with whom we need to work in harmony and, above all, to the Lord. Paul reminds us that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). God's Holy Spirit deserves better than a body functioning badly because of lack of sleep.

None of us like to say 'No' when asked for help, particularly when it involves Christian service. We need to sort out our priorities – in our work, our family life, our church life and, yes, our need for proper rest. This may require our being ready to say 'No' to some of the demands upon our time. Of course, we will have carefully prayed about such decisions.

All of us will experience times when, through excitement or anxiety, we find it difficult to sleep. The sleep experts would tell us that we should not be too concerned at such times. So long as we are quietly lying down, our bodies are resting and undergoing necessary internal repairs. What are we to do when we can't just drop off to sleep? Are we to count sheep? The sleep experts would tell us that that can be counterproductive. The Christian has the great advantage of being able to hand over even his or her sleeplessness to God.

King David experienced many times of crisis and distress in his life. Several of his psalms were born out of such times. Psalms 3 and 4 were written at the time when David was forced to flee from his palace in Jerusalem because his son, Absalom, had usurped his throne. We can only just begin to imagine David's distress at such family disloyalty. Yet both psalms breathe an atmosphere of implicit trust in God.

Psalm 3 is a morning psalm and David writes: "I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid..." (verses 5-6). There can be no better way to start a day than in this spirit of thankfulness and confidence. But Psalm 4 is an evening psalm and David ends it: "I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety" (verse 8). It can be helpful to repeat that verse as we settle down to sleep and so begin to enjoy that same confidence that David enjoyed in his God. When Job was in deep affliction, and his three friends miserably failed to bring him any comfort, Elihu really spoke to him from God. He reminded Job of "God my Maker, who gives songs in the night" (Job 35:10). In his bereavement, and in his excruciating pain from his attack of boils, Job may well have spent many sleepless nights. I wonder whether Job had learned at such times that God "gives songs in the night"?

The Gospels tell us of times when the Lord Jesus, perfect God yet perfect Man, knew times in His busy life of service when He needed to withdraw from the bustle of life to enjoy communion with His Father, often on the mountains of Galilee (see Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28 and 11:1). In his lovely hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of mankind", JG Whittier captures the spirit of those occasions:

*O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love.*

There were times, too, when Jesus needed simply to rest. John tells us of a time when He visited Sychar in Samaria: "So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar ... Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well" (John 4:5-6). Mark tells us of a time when Jesus with His disciples sailed across the Sea of Galilee, late one evening: "And a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow" (Mark 4:37-38). Undoubtedly worn out from a busy day of service, the Lord must have been glad of an opportunity to sleep. But such was His total confidence in His Father's safe keeping that He was able to stay asleep when His disciples, several of whom would have been seasoned fishermen, were in fear of their lives because they thought that they were going to drown. Many years ago, when I was seriously ill in hospital, that picture of the Lord Jesus, totally asleep and in total confidence, really spoke peace to my heart.

Mark's Gospel gives us a picture of the Lord Jesus as the Perfect Servant. It's crammed full of action as the Lord Jesus met one human need after another. It's striking, therefore, that it is in this Gospel that we find Him recognising the need for busy disciples to rest. He knew His disciples through and through, just as He knows us through and through and knows exactly what we need. Mark tells us: "And he called the twelve to Him, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits ... So they went out and preached that people should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them...Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. And He said to them, 'Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat" (Mark 6:7-44).

We should take note of three things, if we want to know that same kind of rest.

1. They found a quiet place apart.

All of us need times when we can get away from the pressures of life. Wherever we go today, it is difficult to escape noise – traffic noise, the blare of car radios, even noise from other people's MP3 players! We do need to make times of quietness in our lives. JG Whittier's hymn goes on to pray:

*Drop Thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease:
Take from our lives the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.*

2. They were with Jesus.

Whatever our leisure pursuits might be, we all of us need to make times to be in the company of the Lord Jesus. It is there that, like His disciples, we can unburden to Him all that is in our hearts and share with Him all that has been occupying us.

3. It was to be for "a while".

We are left here to be servants of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus was deeply conscious of the fact that His time in this world was for service: "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4). So Paul could remind the young Christians at Thessalonica: "You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5:4-6).

That time of quietness with the Lord Jesus did not last too long. The multitudes followed on foot. It would have been all too easy for the disciples to have moaned about their disturbed break. In marvellous grace, Jesus used the

opportunity to teach the people for the remainder of that day, and then enlisted the help of His disciples in the feeding of the five thousand.

In his busy life, first as a shepherd, then as king, David could say, "The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:1-3). May each of us know the Lord in that same way!

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