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Sleep

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Sleep

When we were infants, we slept whenever we had the inclination to do so. As children, we might not have appreciated being told to take time for mid-day naps, but probably benefited from such rests. As adults, the amount of sleep we typically require for normal health varies widely among us, but we do not proceed through a busy day without some sleep at night, or by taking time for brief pauses of inactivity and near unconsciousness. Sleep is not at all a "waste of time," but a necessary and valuable part of life. By reflecting on some of the gifts and graces of sleep, we might come to appreciate a significant part of our lives that is largely outside our active control.

We do not put ourselves to sleep in the same manner as we choose to sit or stand or walk. Rather, we try to arrange our schedule and environment so that sleep might take place. Similarly, we do not directly heal our bodies, physically or emotionally, nor do we restore our energy. While we sleep, healing of mind, body, and spirit graciously occurs. Our lives of thinking, of making decisions, and acting, depends upon regular periods that involve no conscious thoughts, choices, or actions. All that we do is made possible by doing nothing.

If life were like a construction job, we would only receive benefits from our hours of activity. Homeowners who hire workers to renovate their kitchens do not pay them to come to the house and sleep. But God gives to his beloved in sleep as well as in times of work, recreation, and conscious reflection. God does not need any one of us, or all of humanity together, to be constantly active in order for the world to continue as a fitting place for us to live. That we require sleep is one more clear indication that we are not on earth as hired hands whose responsibility is primarily to accomplish a certain amount of work within a specified amount of time. The purpose of life is to love, and we cannot love without times of inactivity and unconsciousness.

Sleep and relating with God in prayer are closely allied, as both require that we let go of conscious control. The more we try to force either sleep or prayer, the less likely we are to slumber or to have a quality interaction with God. Sleep comes upon us when we "look the other way." And the more we follow inspirations in prayer rather than focus on ourselves and our agenda, we often find ourselves in communion with God. We learn through experience what leads to restful sleep, and also what leads to satisfactory prayer.

Experiences of rest, sleep, and prayer have much in common. Peaceful rest – when we are not focused on our thoughts - might not be sleep, but is quite restorative, and is often accompanied with an awareness of or openness to, God. Quiet prayer, like sleep, usually results in a sense of peace that heals life's hurts, and restores depleted energy. As we cannot sleep if we are overly anxious, or do not sleep well if we have strong, unresolved feelings, we might recall that prayer is an excellent means of preparing for sleep. If we first honestly and prayerfully consider the events and thoughts that have caught our attention and impacted our feelings during the day, we can let go of them, and sleep will definitely be more restful and restorative. Often, in the very act of praying quietly, we might find that we have fallen asleep.

We have been created with a capacity and a need for prayer, rest, and, of course, sleep.