

## **What Keeps You Awake at Night?**

Psalms 77

Dr. Michael Helms

July 16, 2017

When our son, John, was being recruited by the Marines, I met one of his recruiters in Albany, Georgia. He discovered I was a pastor and he extended to me a unique invitation.

He said, "Each year we take a group of educators to tour Parris Island. We give them a complete tour and show them everything we put the recruits through during their three months of training. Would you like to join us? Now you will not be able to visit with your son while you are there, but it will be cool for him to know that you are there during the same time he is at boot camp."

I was very excited. I planned the time away from church, and told my congregation I'd be away for a few days, and then there was a death in the church family. The woman who died had kept children in our nursery for many years. Her son was a member of the church and he asked me to conduct her funeral.

Honestly, I wanted to be on that bus going to Parris Island. I knew that others could do the job I had to do, but I also knew it was mine to do.

John knew I was coming, but I remembered what the recruiter said, "You won't get to see him anyway." There wasn't enough time to get word to him that I would not be with that group because we were only allowed to write letters.

The funeral was on Monday. About 4:30 A.M. Tuesday morning, I woke up from a dream. My mind was obviously on the trip I had missed and on my son. I dreamed that Tina and I visited the Marine base at Parris Island and we saw John. He saw us but he was trained not to speak and he walked right by us. I ran and caught up with him. He was thinner than when he left home but rock solid. I jogged with him down the trail and talked with him briefly and then the dream was over. It was difficult to get back to sleep.

Then, three days later, I received a call in my office from a woman in Thomasville, a city thirty-miles away. She was a school teacher and had been on the trip. She called to tell me that she had met my son at Parris Island. Two recruits from the entire base had been chosen to have a meal with the civilians and my son was one of them. As it turns out, another recruit was chosen but John talked him into giving him the slot because he knew I was going to be there. Only once he got to the meal, I wasn't there.

I have this picture the woman took of John that is in the dining room at home. When I see it, I am reminded of the deep disappointment I caused him that day. Even though I was helping others, it came at a cost. It was painful and caused me some sleepless nights thinking about how I'd let my son down.

What keeps you awake at night?

I once knew someone in another state that was trying to kick the smoking habit. Her doctor temporarily prescribed her a drug to curb her craving for nicotine, but one of the side effects of the medication was that it kept her from sleeping.

But she knew if she didn't stop smoking, one day she would be kept awake from the cancer drugs she'd need to fight away the disease caused from her smoking. So in addition to the drug to curb her nicotine, her doctor had to give her more medicine to help her go to sleep.

Five percent of women take some form of sleep medication and 3.1 percent of men. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/americans-are-getting-worse-at-taking-sleeping-pills/375935/>)

So, what's keeping you up at nights? It could be a newborn. If not, some of you remember those nights.

A child may toss and turn the nights before the new school year starts.

A teenager might have trouble sleeping before an important exam or sporting event.

Adults with teenagers may have trouble sleeping because they are adults with teenagers.

Adults might sleep poorly before an important business meeting or after an argument with a family member or close friend.

Sometimes when we are away from our comfortable beds we can't sleep.

If we've traveled across time zones we may have trouble sleeping.

Physical activity within a few hours of bedtime or illness can also cause insomnia.

There are other people who suffer from chronic insomnia and have long-term interruptions of sleep habits. The lives of these people are altered so severely that they usually seek medical attention for their sleeplessness.

There's another possibility for your insomnia, one you might not have thought about. God might be trying to get your attention.

Obviously, every instance of insomnia isn't God shaking you awake. But some of you haven't even given it much thought as you lay awake at night, that what you might need more than a sleep aid is to have a little talk with Jesus.

Our minds are amazing machines. When we sleep, we turn out the lights, but the switches, bells, and whistles in our brains continue to function. The mind continues to generate thoughts, ideas, concepts, and solve problems.

Haven't you ever gone to bed with an unresolved problem and then you woke up the next morning and knew the answer as soon as you woke up? How did that happen?

It happened because your mind continued to work while you were asleep. It's one of the reasons we do not sleep well at night after we've had an argument with our spouse, one of our children, or our parents. We cannot sleep because our minds continue to think about the conflict.

Haven't you had dreams before about things that happened during the day and the dream was so real that it woke you up?

When we were given the admonition in Ephesians 4:26 not to let the sun go down on our anger, this advice is for the good of the one who is angry and the one who receives it.

Trying to sleep while you are angry is like trying to rest while you are running. Anger eats up energy and occupies the mind, both of which you are trying to put in neutral when you sleep.

Here are some questions to take home with you:

Is God trying to get my attention when I can't sleep?

Does God want me to hear His voice in the still of the night?

Does God want me to be still and listen?

Clearly, the Psalmist believed that God was trying to get his attention as he tried to go to sleep. He said, "You kept my eyes from closing."

But why? Why did the Psalmist think that God kept him from sleeping?

In the first part of this Psalm, we learn that the Psalmist is troubled. He said his "soul refused to be comforted."

He remembers life as it used to be in Jerusalem. He remembers the day when the temple of God, which Solomon built, stood tall and mighty. No one thought it could ever be destroyed because it was the place where God resided.

He remembered Jerusalem, the city of David, a city built upon a hill, which seemed to be well fortified and secured from her enemies.

He remembered it as a place where the Jewish people lived a life free to worship Yahweh, the one true God; free to speak their Hebrew dialect; free to celebrate the Passover; free to teach the Shema (Hear, O Israel. The Lord Our God is One) and other important scriptures to their children.

However, as this Psalmist lay awake, he was not in his own bed. In fact, he was not even in his own country. He was in a foreign land. He was one of the thousands of Jews carried away from Jerusalem by the soldiers of King Nebuchadnezzar.

He was no longer allowed to speak the same language he was taught as a child. The food was strange. He had been separated from most of his friends, his family, and his homeland. He was a slave in this new land and his hope for the future was bleak. He remembered how things used to be and how they used to sing at night. Now he only sang laments. His songs had turned into questions.

He questioned God. He blamed God for his insomnia. It was God who kept him from closing his eyes.

Perhaps you've felt that way in the middle of the night as the hour hand gets closer to the morning and further away from midnight. If you are having trouble sleeping, chances are you have had a lament on your lips, too.

Sure, it could be that you just had too much caffeine too close to bed time; or you might be excited about the big game or perhaps the next day you have a job interview. Sometimes not being able to sleep is a one-time thing. Tomorrow night, sleep will come.

But if you are up quite often, something's bothering you. Are you worried? Are you afraid? If it's not physical, it could be that God's trying to get your attention.

Charles Colson was an attorney in the Nixon White House. Because of his involvement in the Watergate cover up, he was convicted and sent to prison.

In the midst of all that, he became a committed Christian. After he was paroled from prison, he had trouble falling asleep in his comfortable bed. One night, after he finally fell into a fitful sleep, he dreamed he was back in Maxwell Prison in Alabama. He awoke with a start.

He lay there in the dark, trying to go back to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come, and his mind returned to the prison. He remembered a conversation he'd had shortly before his release with an inmate named Archie. Archie had said, "You'll be out of here soon. What are you going to do for us?"

Colson responded, "I'll help in some way. I'll never forget this stinking place or you guys."

Archie shot back, "They all say that. I've seen big shots come and go. They all say the same thing. Then they get out and forget us fast. Ain't nobody cares about us. Nobody."

Colson insisted he would remember, to which Archie replied, "Bull."

(<https://verticallivingministries.com/tag/charles-w-colson-a-life-redeemed/>)

As it turned out, Colson found a way — as a result of that nighttime memory — to keep his word to Archie. He went on to found the Prison Fellowship Ministry, which has been a great spiritual help to thousands of inmates. That night, it seems apparent that God was calling for Colson's attention.

Why should this surprise us? God got the attention of a young teenage boy named Samuel who was a helper to Eli the Priest. Samuel tried to go to sleep but he kept hearing someone call out

his name. "Samuel, Samuel." Each time he'd get up and go to Eli the priest to say, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli would say, "I did not call. Go back and lie down." The third time this happened Eli told Samuel that the Lord was calling him. Samuel couldn't sleep because of God. He told Samuel to listen to God and should God call out his name again, he should answer, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Samuel found that was true and so did the Psalmist.

What eventually brought the Psalmist rest were the memories of his old life in Jerusalem. Rest came as the Psalmist allowed God to reshape his thought patterns.

Listen to the rest of the Psalm: "Then I thought, 'To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High.' I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds. Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among peoples. With your mighty arm you redeem your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. (10-15)

In the course of one night, nothing about the Psalmist's circumstances changed. The Psalmist found rest only after God showed the Psalmist that sleep and peace of mind can come even if the circumstances remain unchanged.

This happened as he remembered that God is the one who has the power to take care of those things which are out of our hands.

He remembered the times that God had helped him and His people in the past. He reaffirmed that God was a God of redemption. He held out hope that God could change his circumstances, even if he couldn't.

God used the Psalmist's sleeplessness to remind him that God's hand was still on his life.

Years ago, in Clarkesville, Georgia I used to visit a dear old saint in her 90's in the nursing home who had a saying that she repeated often, "When I get to where I can't sleep, I don't count sheep; I just talk to the Shepherd.

Next time you can't sleep, ask yourself, "Is God trying to get my attention? Does God want me to hear His voice in the still of the night? Does God want me to be still and listen?"

Remember, God himself is a chronic insomniac. Psalm 121 speaks of God as the one who neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4).

So, when you can't sleep, remember God is not sleeping either. So, if you can't sleep, the Lord is always there to keep you company.

When we cannot sleep, it could be that God is asking us to find a place for him in the comings and goings of your life. We ought to be at least open to that possibility.

I have no research to back this up, but I have heard of people falling asleep while saying their prayers and since so many people seem to fall asleep during preaching, you could replay my sermons and see if that helps.

Whatever the reason for your insomnia, God knows why you are awake. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 56: “You’ve kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless night. Each tear entered in your ledger, each ache written in your book.” Ps. 55:8 (The Message)

God knows why you can’t sleep. The question is: “Do you know?” What’s troubling you? What issue is causing you to toss and turn at night?

Could it be that God’s trying to tell you that there’s an issue in your life that’s not right, that you must get right before it tears up your life?

What issue is worrying you so much that you cannot sleep. Perhaps it's something that you can change. Perhaps you know you cannot do anything to change it, but you have not been willing to trust God and hand it over completely to him?

What decision have you been struggling with that has kept you up at night that you’ve not taken to God in prayer?

What area of ministry has God been leading you into but you have just held back?

Perhaps God’s awakened you at night and you’ve thought about these things, only to push them away. Perhaps today, in your awakened state, you will not push Him away, but listen to Him and do what He asks of you and go where He asks you to go.

Then tonight, perhaps sleep will come.

© Copyright 2017 by John Michael Helms