

WHAT DOES SCIENCE AND THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT NIGHTMARES?©

By Pastor Greg Hooker

Whether you watched the movie or not, most everyone remembers the 1984 film, 'Nightmare on Elm Street', in which a disfigured serial killer ('Freddie Kruger' played by Robert Englund) uses a glove equipped with razor-sharp knives to slaughter his victims in their dreams. Freddie was a crazed killer bent on invading the dreams of those in their sleep and, as my mother use to say, 'scared the living day lights out of them'!

While this fictional movie epitomized the extent of nightmares, many suffer from vivid and frightening dreams. According to WebMD; between 2% and 8% of adults experience nightmares on a regular basis. Interesting enough, children experience them more often than adults. So what exactly are nightmares? We are going to approach this subject in a two-fold way: 1) Nightmares and Science, and 2) Nightmares and the Bible.

I. NIGHTMARES AND SCIENCE

According to WebMd, nightmares are 'bad' dreams that are so disturbing and vivid they shake you awake from sleep. When a person experiences a nightmare they often wake up sweating, confused, frightened, heart pounding and disoriented. Quite often the sufferer has a hard time going back to sleep.

Nightmares occur during REM, or Rapid Eye Movement sleep. This is when we are in our deepest mode of slumber, occurring greatest toward early morning. They are brought on by images and emotions we have stored up in our brains. We have no control over this and during our REM sleep; our brains pull these images up and jumble them together as dreams and nightmares. While these are impulsive and involuntary; there are certain factors that can increase their frequency:

1) Eating Prior To Going To Bed

Most of you can relate to eating a couple of chili dogs, French fries and a large milk shake just before going to bed. The results are usually unpleasant to say the least! Food intake prior to sleep increases metabolism and activity in the brain and is most always a formula for disaster – lookout nightmares, here they come!

2) Use Of Medications

Certain medications can increase the likelihood for nightmares, such as antidepressants and narcotics. Even some blood pressure medications can produce these results.

3) Withdrawal From Medications And Substances

Nightmares can also be triggered by withdrawing from certain medications, including alcohol and tranquilizers. Should a person experience these effects, they should talk with their doctor immediately. Quite often nightmares can be controlled with a simple change in one's medications.

4) Sleep Deprivation

Another thing that can cause nightmares is that of depriving oneself of sufficient sleep. The Good Lord designed our bodies to require a certain amount of rest and when we rebel against this requirement, our bodies suffer and nightmares can be produced.

5) Psychological Factors

Additionally, there are certain psychological triggers that induce nightmares in adults. For instance, anxiety and depression can cause unwanted nightmares. Again, PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has been discovered to cause vivid dreams. Moreover, sleep apnea, restless leg syndrome and even genetics may factor in with nightmares.

Another psychological factor that often encourages nightmares is stress. Let's be honest, life can get pretty hectic and demanding at times. A fight or argument with someone can trigger some of the most horrific nightmares a person can experience.

Needless to say, watching a horror movie prior to crawling into bed is a formula for a whooper of a bad dream. When I was a young teenager I would spend the night at my friend's house and together we would watch the all-time classic, 'The Twilight Zone' – dodododododododo (still gives me the creeps!). I can remember going to bed after some of these horror specials and dreaming – not of happy thoughts with bunny rabbits frolicking in meadows of green grass and butter cups – but thoughts of dead people rising from the graves with hideous, deformed bodies, haunted houses with malevolent spirits and moon-lit nights in a spooky graveyard! It has now been 40 years since I watched Twilight Zone, but I still have memories emerge from time to time of a hand reaching out of the ground to grab my leg – dodododododododo!

Once I remember my parents taking me to a drive in movie (remember those?) to see Don Knotts in the 1966 comedy/horror film, 'The Ghost And Mr. Chicken'. Luther Heggs (Don Knotts) spent a night in a haunted mansion. Now folks, even though this was part comedy, for a young kid in his impressionable years, I had nightmares for months after that thing. Even today, I would probably laugh if I saw it again, but would go to bed and snuggle closer than normal to my dear wife!

I said all of that to illustrate this: there are many, many factors that cause dreams and nightmares. If you are experiencing them on a regular basis, be sure to look at your living habits – you may just find

something bringing on these unwanted reveries. Talk to your doctor about your medications, or lack thereof.

II. NIGHTMARES AND THE BIBLE

We have looked at the scientific and medical causes of nightmares; now let's consider what the Bible has to say about them. Is there any spiritual significance to these disturbing events occurring during our visits to never never land? Are they caused by evil and malicious spirits invading our thoughts during our slumber?

1) Dreams Are Common Throughout The Scriptures.

In fact, God often used them to communicate His message to the Prophets. For examples: God spoke to Abimelech in chapter 20 of the book of Genesis, giving stern warning that Abraham and Sarah were married and he best not touch her. Again, in chapter 37 of Genesis, Jacob was informed that his brothers would be servants to him in the land of Egypt. Later, in Genesis 40-41, the Lord spoke to Jacob once more concerning Pharaoh. The Lord or His angel appeared to others in the Bible, including Gideon (Judges 7), Solomon (1 Kings 3), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2), Mary (Matthew 1), Joseph (Matthew 2), and Pilate's wife (Matthew 27). Most, if not all of these occurrences were simple dreams, rather than nightmares. Thus it seems that God doesn't speak through nightmares.

2) False Assumptions About Dreams & Nightmares.

Some well-meaning Christians reason that Satan or demons slither into the sub consciousness of an individual during sleep and have a wild party per say, projecting gruesome and ugly images upon the projector screen of one's mind. While this seems to be a logical assumption at first glance, given the nature of some of these dreams, however; upon closer examination of the Bible the Scriptures simply do not support that theory. Nowhere in the Bible do we see examples of demonic forces occupying the minds of God's people causing dreams, or nightmares (it's a different set of circumstances for the non-believer). In fact, we are expressly taught in the Word of God, that it is not possible for an evil spirit to dwell in the mind of the believer. We are bought with a price and kept by the indwelling Spirit of God and it is impossible for Satan and God's Spirit to coincide with each other.

Most likely, God designed our minds to deal with our daily concerns and fears during the sleep cycle through the means of dreams. Even animals have their own types of dreams. My Golden Retriever, 'Copper', has more dreams and nightmares than I ever thought about having. He's run many a mile, barking, growling and crying at Lord only knows what. Again, he is simply remembering bits and pieces of memories, calling them up randomly and piecing them together in a topsy-turvy fantasy.

3) Dreams & Prophesying

Although they have been around since the dawn of mankind, in the past few years I have seen a surge of those claiming to have had dreams as divine oracles of God. Most of which do not line up with the

inspired, written, Word of the Lord. I live within a few miles of a dozen fortune tellers, soothe sayers, and interpreters of dreams and most all of them claim to be in direct contact with God. For a price they will read your fortunes and interpret your dreams and laugh their way to the bank. Notice what the Scriptures say in Jeremiah 23:23:

"Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD." (see also Jeremiah 23:25).

I am here to go on record; if someone claims to have 'heard a new revelation' from the Lord through a dream, or any other divination, avoid it like the plague! This includes astrology, palm reading, tarot cards, horoscopes, tea leaves and any other mumbo jumbo that is organized and run by evil forces! Satan is a mastermind at delving and inserting half-truths into the 'minds' and 'thoughts' of weary and often well-meaning people. He will offer you a small morsel of truth and mix it with a devilish lie and formulate a concoction that is able to send your soul to Hell, or at best, cause you to travel a road of misery and destruction!

But you say, 'Didn't God use dreams to communicate His Word to people in the Bible?' The answer is yes! Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the Lord often appeared to individuals through visions and dreams. That brings up another question, 'Why did God communicate through dreams then and doesn't now?'

We have to understand that during Bible times, the Lord was using the mode of dreams to deliver the Old and New Testament Scriptures to Godly men and women to be recorded for the posterity of mankind. In other words, the Bible came about largely from the Lord speaking through dreams and the recipient's writing them down – for example: The book of Revelation was given to the Apostle John while he was banished to the Isle of Patmos.

Be that as it were, we are no longer in need of 'new revelations', or 'divine oracles' because we have the complete, inspired, Word of God – the Bible. Can God still influence us through dreams? Sure He can – after all, God can do whatever He pleases! But the dispensation of God speaking through His Prophets for the sole reason of providing His Word to us via the Bible, is complete, finished and nothing to be added to or taken away.

If you believe God has spoken, or influenced you in some way through a dream, or vision, it should remain private – a matter between you and the Lord. To claim your dream is a 'word from the Lord' and to assert you can interpret dreams is to say you are still adding to the Scriptures (God's Word). Be very, very careful because the Lord has issued this warning, *"For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book"* (Rev. 22:18-19).

III. NIGHTMARES AND THEIR CURES

a) It is only common sense to evaluate our lives from a medical standpoint.

Watch your diet, exercise, take only medications that are necessary, get plenty of good rest and visit your physician on a regular basis. Simply changing these habits may be all that is necessary to eliminate bad dreams, or nightmares.

b) Read and meditate on the Word of God daily.

While it is natural and essential to dream (in fact, scientists say that a human will die without having them), as Christians; we have several tools to aid us in overcoming, or at least lessening nightmares.

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee” (Isaiah 26:3). Just as filling one’s mind with horrifying images from a movie or TV program produces negative sleep disorders; filling our minds with the sweetness of the Words of Christ will bring about a positive peace – peace during our waking hours and peace as we dream.

Before you go to bed read a chapter or two from the book of Psalms. Meditate on them and ask the Lord to show you how to apply His Words to your life. Let the Holy Spirit infuse your heart and soul with words of comfort, joy and peace. The Apostle Paul penned these words, *“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things”* (Philippians 4:8).

c) In addition to reading the Scriptures and letting the Lord speak to your heart and fill your mind with His Word; we should pray.

I have made it a habit as I get into bed and lay my head upon my pillow, to begin praying. This time is usually reserved for my family – for the Lord to keep them safe from harm, to encourage them to live a decent life, to help them to honor Christ in their lives and to supply all their needs.

CONCLUSION

Dreams and nightmares can cause many restless nights and play heavily upon one’s health, but with the proper health habits, prayer and Bible Study, a better night’s sleep can be attained. Let me add a word of caution in closing: please be careful in attributing your bad dreams and nightmares to the Devil – yes he influences and entices you during the course of your day, but there is no indication from the Scriptures that he invades your mind, producing nightmares. The Holy Spirit has taken up permanent residence in your heart, how then; can God and Satan coincide together in the same vessel, or house? I suppose it’s only human nature to blame Satan for every negative thing in our lives – ‘The Devil made me do it’. I think we often use that excuse as a way to get ourselves off the hook, rather than admit and accept our own consequences for doing wrong, but the fact is; we most often bring our troubles on

ourselves without his help. Blaming him is a tactic we employed when we were children, 'But mom! It was Billy's fault!'