

Are We Accountable for Dreams?

Compiled by Paul R. Blake

Recently, I was asked the following Bible question: “Do you know of an article or ... sermon about dreams and thoughts and whether we are morally responsible for their content?” Here is my answer:

We are not responsible for dreams. They come involuntarily from our subconscious, and we have no power over that part of our being. Just as we cannot control the fact that we are tempted, so it is that we have no power over our thoughts when asleep. Where there is no power of self-determination or possibility of control, there is no accountability. What we can control is what we do with temptations or dreams. If we give in to temptation or act upon our dreams, we err. If we dwell on the temptation or dream, strengthening its power, we increase our risk of erring. But to have the dream is no more of a sin than to face a temptation. What makes it good or bad is what we do with them. We become stronger by every successful rejection of temptation or disallowance of a dream.

Some of the things that happen in our dreams may help us become more self-aware of our deepest longings, conflicts, and fears; feelings that might tempt us when awake, but are quickly put aside as we resist the temptation to engage the behaviors those feelings would precipitate. Intimacy, anger, and violence often occur abruptly and uninvited in dreams. It is unknown how much we are capable of fully regulating behavior in dreams. Some of the ascetic “church fathers” thought we are responsible for what we do in dreams, but the scriptures nowhere indicate that this is true.

“Dreams are generally things that “happen to us,” not things we consciously choose to do. Many years ago, Augustine, seeking to live a morally perfect life, was worried about some of the actions he carried out in dreams. For somebody who devoted his life to celibacy, his dreams of fornication worried him. In his Confessions (Book X; Chapter 30), he writes to God. He wrote of his ability to overcome such thoughts and behaviors from his life before his conversion. But he declares that in dreams he seems to have no control over committing the acts that he avoided during the day when he was awake. He asked “am I not myself during sleep?” In trying to solve the problem, he drew a distinction between “happenings” and “actions.” Dreams are “happenings.” Augustine was not carrying out the action of the sin, but was rather undergoing an experience which happened to him without choice or will on his part. When we sleep, our will sleeps with us, removing free moral agency or self-determination from dreaming; and therefore, we cannot be morally responsible for what happens in our dreams. As a result, the notion of sin or moral responsibility cannot be applied to our dreams. According to Augustine, only actions are morally evaluable. He was committed to the claim that all events that occur in dreams are non-actions (Flanagan).”

We need to understand that dreams are something that happens to us when we are asleep, and we have no control over them. We do not choose what we are going to dream or what we are going to do in a dream. Often dreams make no sense when we think back over them since they involve a series of totally unconnected events and places. They sometimes involve real people, places and events in our lives but usually what happens in the dream has little relationship with reality. Dreams are simply a natural phenomenon, part of our psychological makeup.

On the other hand they do have something to do with our real person, especially when they involve people or places we have known. At some level, dreams are a limited reflection of our subconscious.

For any act to have moral significance, whether sinful or righteous, we must be aware of what we are doing and we must freely choose to do it. This is the case with most of our actions. There are some actions, however, even while we are awake that lack moral significance. For

example, we may sneeze during the communion or we may become distracted by a screaming child when in prayer through no fault of our own. We were not being disrespectful to God even though we lost our concentration, because it was an involuntary, not deliberate, reaction. Similarly, while asleep we may snore or talk or even walk. In all these cases there is no moral fault because we are not in control of what we are doing.

While asleep we cannot be consciously aware of what we are doing, nor can we freely choose to do or not do something. Even though the dream may seem real at the time, and we may seem to be in control and to be acting knowingly and willingly, when we wake up we realize that we were not acting at all. It was only a dream. There can be no guilt or merit for what we did or did not do in a dream. If in the dream we did something that in a waking state would have been a sin, we are not guilty of a sin, even though we may have a certain sense of shame or remorse for even having dreamed it.

Let's test this. Do we believe that God will credit us with a work of righteousness that we did while dreaming? In the dream, if we did something righteous work, there is no reward.

The scriptures are abundantly clear in this matter. Obedience must be from the heart, activating the will (Rom. 6:16-18). Likewise, Jesus and James said that sin originates in the heart, activating the will. Paul, Jesus, and James did not say that we obey or disobey from the unconscious heart or the sub-conscious mind.

Nonetheless, dreams do reveal to some extent where our heart is in real life. Thus if we find ourselves frequently dreaming of committing certain sins, it is likely that we have been bearing with that temptation when awake. While we are not responsible for what we do in dreams, we are responsible for what we think about and desire when we are awake (Flader).

If we are troubled by our dreams, we should pray about them to the Lord, asking for His blessing and protection as we sleep. Since what we dream appears to be beyond our control, beseech the One Who has the power to control all things.

(Source material from: *Wrongdoing in Dreams*, Flanagan and Springett, 2000: p.18; pp. 179-183; and from *The Morality of Dreams*, John Flader. 4/8/14).

Right Dog on the Wrong Track

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

Whether or not you reach your chosen destination depends on two things: 1) moving forward; 2) keeping on the right path. You cannot stand still on the right path. Neither will it avail to be the swiftest, brightest dog on the wrong race track! The entire book of Hebrews warns that standing still leads to drifting away (Heb. 2:1). Obviously, if you are on the broad way, it doesn't matter how fast or efficiently you are working, you are headed toward destruction. (From Oscar C. Miles)