

NICK TUCKER



12 THINGS

GOD

CAN'T DO

... and how they can help you sleep at night

INTRODUCTION

“You’re in trouble.”

I wasn’t sure whether to believe her. Bitter experience has taught me that when someone tells me that I’m in trouble, I probably am. Yet a twinkle in her eye suggested that all was not entirely lost.

“Oh dear,” I said, “was it something I said?” (It normally is.)

“I nearly didn’t get here this morning,” she replied, at which point my heart rate dropped a bit. I was the guest preacher for a church weekend retreat, and I felt pretty sure that this member’s transport problems were unlikely to be my fault.

“It’s your fault,” she added.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that...” I had to know more.

It turns out that this lady had lost her husband several years ago. She had not slept through a single night since. That morning, though, she had not lain awake listening to the dawn chorus for hours as usual, but had woken to the sound of banging at her front door, which she eventually realised was the person who had come to drive her to

that day's meetings. She had not only slept through the night—she had overslept.

How, you might ask, could this have been my fault? She put her sleepiness down to the talks I had given the evening before. It's not unheard of for my talks to put people to sleep, but normally they wake up when I stop speaking. This time, though, was different. This time, the effect was (to my surprise, I'll admit) exactly what the title of the talk suggested should happen: *12 Things God Can't Do and How They Can Help You Sleep at Night*.

As you read this book of the same title, I'm hoping that you might have a similar experience. Knowing God better really should help us to sleep more soundly.

Don't believe me? Ask King David.

Psalms 3 begins with him describing a situation of appalling stress: "LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!" (v 1). It's so bad that the talk of the town is that "God will not deliver him" (v 2). David wrote this psalm whilst on the run from his son Absalom, who had led an apparently successful *coup d'état* to take the throne (see 2 Samuel 15 – 18). David escaped, but now had a target on his back.

But Psalm 3 holds a remarkable surprise: "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me" (v 5). To David, the amazing bit of that verse was probably the middle portion: "I wake again". After all, there were plenty of people trying to prevent that outcome.

For me though, I can't get over the fact that he *slept* at all.

Sleep is something we can normally only do when we feel safe. Apparently, on the first night in a new place, half your brain remains alert all night, vigilant to threats.¹ When you think about it, you realise what an act of trust falling asleep normally is. You are so vulnerable: you have no idea what's going on around you and you cannot look after yourself. When we face stress or threats, our bodies' "fight or flight" mechanisms make restful sleep feel like unicorn tears: hard to imagine and impossible to obtain.

So, if people are literally out for your blood, as they were for David's, sleep won't come easily. A soldier in enemy territory won't just lie down and sleep because it's bedtime. Only the watchful eye of a comrade keeping lookout makes sleeping a vaguely safe thing to do. But David slept through this period of terrible stress because he had someone better than a comrade watching over him: "You, LORD, are a shield around me" (v 3). Safe in that knowledge, David says that he will "not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side" (v 6). As the very next psalm puts it: "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8).

¹ "Night Watch in One Brain Hemisphere during Sleep Associated with the First-Night Effect in Humans", [https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(16\)30174-9](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(16)30174-9) (accessed 4 Oct 2021).

David knew just how powerful God is, and how faithful he is to his promises. And this book aims to give you the same confidence. I long to give you a glimpse of God's greatness that will change the way you see the world—and, yes, help you to sleep at night.

To think about God's greatness, we naturally tend to talk about what God *can* do. We, however, are going to consider twelve things that God *can't* do—and when you realise what God can't do, his greatness might just blow your mind.

To show you what I mean—and while we are on the subject of sleep—consider this: God can't sleep. That's a truth we find in Psalm 121. It's part of a series of psalms called the *Songs of Ascent* which were sung by pilgrims on the challenging, dangerous (and uphill) journey to Jerusalem. As they walked, they sang songs of praise to God to encourage and comfort each other:

*He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep. (v 3-4)*

God will never take his eye off the ball; he will never drift off and fail to watch over and take care of his people. His people can rest, because he won't. Victor Hugo, the author of *Les Misérables*, expressed the point beautifully:

*Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience
for the small ones; and when you have laboriously*

*accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.*²

We sleep because we need to sleep. But God doesn't. And that is an example of a truth that is going to underpin the rest of this book: God is not like us. If we can begin to grasp this, everything in the pages that follow will make a lot more sense.

We tend to see things from our own point of view. So, we often think about God as basically like us, just much, much, bigger. But one of the main things that God wants us to know is that he is not like anything in creation and we shouldn't think of him as if he were. Hence we sleep, but he doesn't.

One of my favourite passages in the whole Bible is Isaiah 40. It begins with an announcement that God is coming to rescue his people (v 1-5). But Israel's immediate circumstances look dire, and are about to get a whole lot worse. How can they be sure that rescue is coming?

*See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
he gathers the lambs in his arms*

² Victor Hugo, "To Savinien Lapointe. March, 1841" in *The Letters of Victor Hugo: From Exile, and After the Fall of the Empire*, ed. Paul Meurice (Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898), p 23.

*and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.*

(Isaiah 40:10-11)

Then, to help us to see how powerful this God who rules with his “mighty arm” really is, Isaiah asks, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?” (v 12). The answer to Isaiah’s question is obvious: it’s only God who can do this. He is uniquely able to do whatever he wants to do. Once you get a sense of what is at the end of God’s arm—a hand that can contain all the water in the universe—you don’t really need to worry that he won’t be able to save you.

This question-and-answer pattern is a device that Isaiah uses several times in chapter 40. If you have time, it’s worth reading the whole of Isaiah 40 and asking as you do, “What is God like?” Why not do that now, before you read on? So, what is the God of Isaiah 40 like? You might say that he’s strong and wise and good and inexhaustible, and you would be entirely right. But the answer Isaiah repeatedly gives to the question “What is God like?” is “He’s like no one else”. Time and again Isaiah drives the point home with questions that have the answer “no one”! “Whom did the LORD consult?” (v 14). No one. “With whom ... will you compare God?” (v 18). No one. “Who is [his] equal?” (v 25). No one. You get the point: God is incomparable.

He is incomparable in terms of scale; the universe is small enough relative to him that he can measure the heavens

with the span of his hand and weigh the dust of the earth on a little set of scales. He is incomparable in terms of knowledge; no one has ever had to teach him anything. He is also incomparably holy.

For the Israelites in the Old Testament, the sacrificial system in the temple served as a visible reminder of God's holiness. Animals were killed and burned on the altar on a daily basis. The message was clear: to come near to a holy God was a serious, costly, bloody business. Isaiah takes that image and puts it on steroids. He takes Lebanon—a place famous for its enormous cedar trees—and says, *Imagine you cut down all the trees in Lebanon and piled them on top of each other to make an altar fire to God.* It would be an inferno like none the world has ever seen. *But,* says Isaiah, *It wouldn't be enough. You could take all the animals in this bounteous country and sacrifice them and it wouldn't be enough.*

It's not that God has a monstrously overinflated ego. An image like the one above might tempt us to imagine him as being like opera star Jenny Lind in the film *The Greatest Showman*, whose insatiable desire for fame and adulation finds a voice as she sings, "All the glare of a thousand spotlights ... will never be enough". It is a simple matter of fact that if you sacrificed the entire universe to God, you would not exhaust the praise and glory that his holiness deserves. Jenny Lind's character has a deep need to be adored that cannot be fulfilled. God, by contrast, has no needs at all.

Our praise, our service, our devotion, our money—these are things which are good for us to offer God, but he doesn't *need* them. He's not short of money; he's not lacking in self-esteem. God made the universe by speaking—he does not then, in any sense, *need* our help. God is not short-staffed. He is entirely self-sufficient.

Whatever relationship we have with him, then, comes to us not because he needs us, but, amazingly, because he loves us. He blesses us, not because of what we do or can give, but because he wants to bless us.

Just let that sink in. God doesn't need you, but he loves you—and the more you get a sense of the extent of his power and glory and holiness, the more you realise that this is the only possible way that you could relate to him. God is so great that he would be entirely unknowable to us if he didn't actively make himself known. Wonderfully, he has done just this in a variety of ways. One of these ways is in revealing his name.

Names that make sense in one culture don't always make sense in another. My sister taught in Africa for a bit and one of the kids she taught was called Innocent Badger. That sounded funny to us back home as we received my sister's frequently hilarious emails describing her adventures. But we miss out if we allow the significance of names in the Bible to get similarly "lost in translation". They are incredibly meaningful, such that God often changes people's names as a way of shaping their identity. Abram becomes Abraham (the father of many nations). Simon

the fisherman becomes Peter (rock), on whom Jesus will build his church. God names lots of people in the Bible, but no one gets to name him. Instead, God reveals his own name: “I AM WHO I AM”, or just “I AM” (Yahweh) to his friends (Exodus 3:14).

What does this mean? It means that he is completely and perfectly independent. He exists for one reason and one reason only: because of who he is. No one and nothing else in existence can say that. I exist partly because of my parents, who exist partly because of their parents, and so on. I am not independent; I would not exist unless thousands and thousands of other people before me had met and had children. God though—well, God just “Is”.

Theologians who like to use Latin words describe this as God’s *aseity*, which basically means God’s “being from himself-ness” (I guess we can see why they prefer the Latin). Whatever language we use though, this is the most basic lesson without which we cannot understand God at all. He is self-existent. He is the uncreated Creator of all things. The creation would not exist without him, but he would exist without the creation. I don’t know about you, but I can find it hard to imagine the world without me. The evidence suggests, however, that it did a pretty good job of existing without me for most of its history. God, on the other hand, *has* to exist—that is part of the definition of who he is.

Quite a lot follows on from that, as we’ll see. But bear in mind the ultimate aim: to see the invisible God a bit

more clearly. When we do, it might change more than our sleeping patterns. The twelve things God can't do all express aspects of his nature and character which we can embrace with relief, celebrate with joy, worship with awe—and which, I trust, will help us sleep a little better.

INTERLUDE 1: THE GOD WHO SLEPT

Before we get into the twelve things God can't do, there's one more thing to say by way of introduction. Throughout this book, you'll find a number of interludes like this one, which wrestle with how, in the incarnation, God did the very things he cannot do.

Let's take the example with which we started: God does not sleep. It's an experience entirely alien to God's nature. But that makes one of the stories of Jesus that Matthew, Mark and Luke recount really quite puzzling.

The outline of the story might well be familiar to you. Jesus and his disciples are caught in a terrifying storm of the sort that sometimes sweeps down suddenly on Galilee. His companions, many of them skilled and experienced sailors, desperately demand of Jesus, the comparative landlubber, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” In response Jesus gets up and commands the wind and the waves to be silent and the storm is stilled.

There is a pattern, not obvious in English translation, to how Mark tells the story, which makes the calm match the storm (Mark 4:35-41). He depicts the windstorm as “mega” and the calm that follows also as “mega”. But there is a third “mega”, which describes the disciples’ response to Jesus’ actions.

They fear a “mega” fear, asking, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41). There is only one answer to their question, and that is why they were so afraid. In the Hebrew Scriptures only God commands the elements like that. The disciples end the story more afraid of having Jesus in the boat than they were at having an increasing quantity of the sea in there, because they believed themselves to be in the presence of the living God.

That’s not actually the puzzling bit of the story though. The head scratcher is that the disciples have to *wake Jesus up* to ask for his help, because “Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion” (Mark 4:38).

In this single event, we see Jesus from two perspec-

tives. On the one hand as a weary man, experiencing limitations like our own. On the other hand, he has the power and prerogatives of God himself. How can this be so? It comes down to what we see running right the way through the New Testament: Jesus is both God and man.

This collision of divinity and humanity in one person became the primary source of confusion and division in the early church. Although the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is fully divine and is to be worshipped along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, some intellectually rigorous people had a problem with accepting this. As we're about to see, some of the things that we know about God don't really fit with what we know about Jesus. In light of this,

a very impressive leader in the church, named Arius, refused to accept that Jesus could really be divine at all, but insisted that the Son was just the first and highest of all creatures.

His arguments, which divided the church for a generation, are an example of a danger that Christians have always faced: that of latching onto one biblical idea to the exclusion of all else. Starting with that one idea, they reach a set of conclusions that seem logical, but which contradict something else that Scripture says. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers, a lifelong opponent of the Arian teaching (he was known as "the hammer of the Arians"), pinned down the basic problem with the Arian approach in his book *De Trinitate*:

*All unbelief [in the Son as divine] is foolishness, for it takes such wisdom as its own finite perception can attain, and, measuring infinity by that petty scale, concludes that what it cannot understand must be impossible. Unbelief is the result of incapacity engaged in argument. Men are sure that an event never happened, because they have made up their minds that it could not happen.*³

That's fighting talk! But Hilary used strong words because the idea that Jesus is both God and man really matters. Indeed, our salva-

tion depends on it. We'll see why that is the case in a later chapter, but for now we note the point: Jesus is both one with us, able to share our limitations, whilst simultaneously being the God who cannot. In this mystery is hidden the depths of the gospel.

To grapple with the enormity of the gospel that saves us, we need to come to terms with the things that God cannot do. Only then will we really be able to contemplate just what God *has* done in procuring our salvation. To that end, interspersed between some of the chapters, will be short interludes examining how, in Jesus, God “overcame” these “inabilities” (if I can put it like that) in

³ Hilary of Poitiers, “On the Trinity,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. 9a, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. E. W. Watson et al., Second Series (Christian Literature Company, 1899), p 69. Emphasis mine.

12 THINGS GOD CAN'T DO

order to save us. We shall know the God who cannot
discover together that we sleep, but did sleep for us.
sleep best at night when we