

“Oh, what glories we discover not just in our God’s abilities but even in his perfect ‘cannots’. Enough indeed to help us know true safety—and sleep soundly. I pray that God will be pleased to expand and deepen and strengthen your vision of him in his precious cannots, and also draw dazzlingly close to you in love when you see what further excellencies he added in Christ.”

**DAVID MATHIS**, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; Author, *Habits of Grace*

“*12 Things God Can’t Do* is a wonderful example of why theology matters, why orthodox theology matters, and why having gifted theological teachers matters. The weightiness of content that we so desperately need to nourish us, sustain us, and, yes, help us sleep(!) is balanced by Nick’s lightness of touch and pastoral sensitivity. The result is theological exposition that is both relevant and richly affective. Highly recommended.”

**DAN STRANGE**, Director, Crosslands Forum; Author, *Making Faith Magnetic*

“Finally, a book that prides itself on putting you to sleep! *12 Things God Can’t Do* is deeply peace-bringing and faith-building. Nick Tucker has an extraordinary gift for making profound truths about the nature of God accessible for ordinary people. This book will give you a greater understanding of the God of the universe and leave you captivated afresh by his perfect character. I wholeheartedly commend it to you.”

**PHIL KNOX**, Head of Mission to Young Adults, Evangelical Alliance; Author, *Story Bearer*

“This is a beautiful book that simultaneously blows your mind and warms your heart! Each chapter creatively and biblically reveals something awesome about God, exploring the Creator/creature distinction to draw the reader into a greater understanding of his character and nature. This book will change you—how you live and how you love. With the turn of each page, your trust in God will grow, and your love for him will increase as you gaze upon his majesty.”

**MEL LACY**, Executive Director, Growing Young Disciples

“*12 Things God Can't Do* fed my soul and blessed my heart in more ways than I could have imagined. By focusing our minds on the very things God can't do, Nick Tucker shows how Scripture speaks to reassure us and to renew a living faith. God really is not like us, and because of that, we find rest for our souls and even more reason to rejoice in our Maker. I can't think of a believer who would not be hugely rewarded by a careful reading of this excellent book.”

**NEIL POWELL**, Pastor, City Church Birmingham

“This beguiling book is more important than its modest size would suggest and has a TARDIS-like quality. The whimsical title will draw you into what becomes a much bigger, more encompassing and more significant journey. It offers a reliable and engaging crash course in apologetics, but then takes you on a breathtaking tour of the doctrines of God, of Jesus and of our humanity, and grips these vital truths in a fascinating theological/historical/philosophical framework. It is a book that improves its readers by not simply teaching us how to think properly but showing how thinking properly about God is foundational to understanding our own identity and how to serve, love and enjoy the one for whom we were made. Everyone should read this.”

**RICHARD CUNNINGHAM**, Director, UCCF: The Christian Unions

“This book is an astonishing achievement. One of the most daunting subjects for the Christian is understanding something of the nature of the triune God. Christians throughout the ages have wrestled with questions like: *Does God really know everything, and, if so, what does that do to free will? Can God change his mind? Does God suffer?* Nick Tucker tackles twelve of the most complex questions people have asked about God and addresses them in a way that is biblically faithful and informed by the best minds in Christian tradition. Rich in theological truths and brimming with helpful illustrations, this is a book that I will recommend to anyone wanting to know God more deeply. I only wish this book had been in print when I was younger!”

**SEULGI L. BYUN**, Chair and Associate Professor, Department of Biblical and Religious Studies and Philosophy, Grove City College

“I strongly commend this work. We need books on the great teachings of the Bible in an accessible format. Dr Tucker gives us an introduction to Christian beliefs about God which is engaging, clear and applied. I hope that it is widely used in churches.”

**PETER JENSEN**, Former Archbishop of Sydney; Former Principal of Moore Theological College



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GOD

CAN'T DO

NICK TUCKER

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*In memoriam*  
*Michael John Ovey*





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# INTRODUCTION

**“Y**ou’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.

Psalm 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.<sup>1</sup> 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).

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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.*<sup>2</sup>

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*

---

<sup>2</sup> 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.