

Thank God for Bedtime



Geoff Robson

What God says about our sleep and why it matters more than you think

Sleep. It seems an unlikely topic for a Christian book, doesn't it?

Yet we all need to sleep, and we spend a fair proportion of our lives doing just that (or, for some of us, trying to do just that).

What's more, when we carefully read the Bible we discover that God actually cares about our sleep and has quite a bit to say about it.

In this engaging, practical and strikingly gospel-centred book, Geoff Robson offers a 'theology of sleep' that is full of wise and helpful Christian insights for all of us.

A book on sleep!? You've got to be kidding? I use books to put me to sleep. But not this one; I couldn't put it down. Geoff Robson has written a fascinating study of something we all do daily but rarely think about in a Christian context. Read this book to understand God's gift of sleep.

J. Mack Stiles

Pastor, Erbil International Baptist Church, Iraq

Author, *Marks of the Messenger*



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I've often said that if you want to write a successful book, pick a topic no-one has written on, especially in the Christian world. I think Geoff has just done that in his excellent book on sleep. It's a wonderfully deceptive book as you are lured through the world of sleep and dreams, finding yourself thinking afresh on the character of God and the heart of the gospel. In a world where anxiety and depression are at epidemic levels, this is a timely pastoral resource. I can't wait until I preach a sermon or three on sleep and can steal Geoff's insights for the good of my congregation.

Ray Galea

Lead Pastor, Multicultural Bible Ministry, Rooty Hill NSW

If you've never considered how God designed our sleep for his purposes, then this is the book for you. Geoff Robson has written a stimulating and thought-provoking book on how we use one third of our lives. It is filled with rich biblical and theological wisdom and intriguing scientific insights that will help you sleep for the glory of Christ.

Richard Chin

AFES National Director, Australia

A book on sleep!?! You've got to be kidding? I use books to put me to sleep. But not this one; I couldn't put it down. Geoff Robson has written a fascinating study of something we all do daily but rarely think about in a Christian context. Read this book to understand God's gift of sleep.

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Thank God for Bedtime is an intriguing book. I had not thought much about a theology of sleep, but Geoff Robson's book has been an eye-opener (as well as encouraging eye-closure)! With a firm commitment to the truth of God's word, Geoff canvasses the rich biblical and theological dimensions of sleep for God's people, mining both scientific research and human experience, to provide the reader with a profound appreciation of the importance of sleep for our physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Easy to read and well researched, it was a joy to appreciate God's good gift of sleep.

Dr Glenn Davies

Anglican Archbishop of Sydney

One of the things to love about the Bible is that while the knowledge it contains is not exhaustive, it is sufficient. There is enough truth within its pages to provide wisdom on every aspect of contemporary life—even sleep. Geoff Robson demonstrates this to be the case, not by rushing off to practical ideas and pastoral care, but by first establishing the theological foundations that enable those ideas and that care to become life-giving. It is God's desire to "give to his beloved sleep", and this valuable book provides hope that this can still be possible.

Paul Windsor

International Programme Director, Langham Preaching

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For Liz

My bride

My best friend

God's greatest earthly gift to me

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep.
—Solomon, Psalm 127:1-2

“And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”
—Jesus, Mark 13:37

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Introduction

Full disclosure: I didn't decide to write a book about sleep because I've mastered it.

I'm not really an eight-hours-a-night kind of guy. You know the type—out like a light on the stroke of 10 pm, then awake and as fresh as a daisy at 6 am with Bible open. I'm kind of a night owl, even though, for some reason, I can't shake the strange feeling that it would better to be a morning person. It doesn't help that my wife is even 'worse' than I am. Liz usually slows down in the late afternoon, gets her second wind around 9 pm, and can (and often does) happily press on past midnight. So we tend to stay up late finishing off the day's work, squeezing in a child-free conversation, generally pottering around, or maybe even watching one more episode of whatever has taken our fancy on Netflix.

Truth be told, I'm also kind of a worrier—prone to lying in bed pondering life and disobeying Matthew 6:25—"do not be anxious about your life"—when I should be sleeping. Depending on what kind of day or week it's been, the inner monologue of my anxieties can start up in earnest when the lights go out. It can be anything, from "How will I ever get that talk written?" or "What if I sleep through my alarm?", right through to "How will we ever have enough money for our old age?" or "What if I die in a freak hot air ballooning accident?"

Then there are the children. I'm the father of a teenage daughter who has clearly inherited her mother's love of the wee small hours, so she likes to sit up late with us whenever we allow it (too often), delaying our own bedtime. But I'm also the father of a slightly loopy preschooler who wakes with the sparrows and bellows a single word over and over: "Dadda!"

Even as a little child, I could never really take sleep for granted. Starting with my first serious attack at age two, I was in and out of hospital with severe asthma for the next several years. My paediatrician, dear old Dr McGill, decided that even at home I couldn't get by without being dragged from my bed and strapped to the nebulizer in the middle of every night. My own personal iron lung would thunder away, approximately the size and volume of a small lawnmower, making even a gentle doze impossible. As I sat there huffing and puffing (or at least trying to), I resigned myself to being the only person I knew (apart from Mum or Dad) awake at this ridiculous hour. I have no idea what that unholy night-time ritual did to my poor parents, but I know that, for me, it established a complex and uneasy relationship with my bed. Broken sleep was entirely normal.

The next challenge to sleep was slightly more trivial: sport. Not my own athletic pursuits, of which there were none, but those of others. Dad instilled such a love of watching any kind of televised sporting contest that no event, regardless of time zone, was ever beyond the question, "Should we get up for that?" Early in our marriage, I tried to teach Liz about the joys of waking up at 2.30 am to watch some men on the other side of the world kicking, throwing or hitting a ball. She looked at me like I'd just invited her to run off and join the circus. But to me, crawling out of bed for the big game just made sense.

So I've been trained to think of sleep as something to be sacrificed—whether for the sake of health, entertainment or responsibility.

Maybe that's why I find sleep so fascinating. I love it, I know I need more of it, and I possess the skills to execute it. I mean, I'm hardly the most gifted person, but I can manage to lie there and do literally nothing for several hours. Yet as fascinating and enjoyable as it is, it's always been a challenge. Mercifully, I've never suffered through genuine insomnia or any other serious condition that causes sleeplessness. But I feel like I've never quite nailed sleep. I struggle to make it a high priority, and often watch it slip through my fingers.

How could something so simple possibly get this complicated?

These aren't the only reasons that sleep intrigues me. For example, why did God, who could certainly have created us without the need for sleep, decide that it was a good idea for humans to spend a third of their lives unconscious? What does it mean that Jesus, the God-man, needed to sleep? What, if anything, do our dreams have to do with our spiritual lives? How is it that, on the one hand, I wake up every morning knowing that hours have passed, yet at the same time it can feel like the passing of just a moment? Why does my bed sometimes feel like a bucketful of rusty nails when I'm trying to fall asleep, only to be as cosy as a cloud of feathers when it's time to get up in the morning? Why are there 'morning people' and 'night people'?

We'll return to some of these questions later. But perhaps the thing that intrigues me most about sleep is this: it's the greatest unifying factor in human history.

Think about it: every single one of us spends more of our

lives sleeping than doing any other single thing. That's true for you and me. It's true for the rich and powerful, and it's true for the poor and forgotten. It's true today, and it was true two thousand years ago. It transcends every human distinction and governs the rhythm of life in every culture on earth. If time as currency is the great human leveller—24 hours a day, no exceptions—then sleep is the universal bill to be paid every day. As each minute ticks past, our need for the pillow inevitably increases. You may be able to put off paying that speeding fine or the electricity bill, but not the Sandman.

Sleep, then, is so ubiquitous that we barely even notice it enough to stop and think about it. We can all complain when we don't get enough of it (I've managed it several times in this introduction already), and you can probably identify with some of the nagging concerns I've already shared. But how often do we *really* stop and think about sleep?

Much more to the point, I'd wager that most of us haven't taken the time to deeply consider what God says about our sleep.

This came home to me a few years ago during a conversation with a ministry trainee on our staff team. The topic of sleep came up in conversation, so I asked whether he'd spent much time developing a theology of sleep. He laughed. Then he realized I was being serious. So he said, "Well, I hardly think you need a theology of sleep. I mean, what is there to say?" And, over the past few months, whenever I've mentioned to a friend that I'm writing a book about sleep, something like this has been the most common reaction. 'Really? The theology of sleep? Okay. I've never really thought about reading a book on that.'

On one level, you can hardly blame people for reacting this

way. Sure, we understand the need to develop a theology of work, or marriage, or singing in church, or watching movies, or travel, or caring for the environment, because these are all things that we *do*. But when you sleep, you literally just lie there. The whole point of sleep is to *stop* doing. And the mere fact that we all have to sleep doesn't make it interesting. What's next, a Christian book about going to the bathroom? Couldn't our theological thinking be better spent elsewhere?

Before I talk you out of reading this book, I hope you're already convinced that Christians need to think theologically about everything in life—that we should “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), including our thoughts about sleep. I hope you're persuaded that Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper was right when he said: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”¹

Kuyper's famous dictum reminds us that the sovereignty of Christ extends to our sleeping hours just as much as to our waking hours. So yes, the great unifying human experience of sleep, the activity on which we spend a third of our lives, deserves some proper theological thought.

There is also the fact that the Bible is packed with insights and commands that centre on sleep—either directly addressing the topic or using sleep as a powerful metaphor for other crucial aspects of the Christian life. By learning what the Bible says about sleep, we will learn a great deal about God, and about ourselves. We will learn about why we're here, how God relates to us, and how we can live a life that glorifies him.

1 Quoted in Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Plan for the World*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2012, p. 243.

And we won't just learn about our life; we'll also learn about our death.

Let me be straight with you: I don't pretend that this book will offer a quick fix for anyone who has significant problems sleeping, although the practical tips and advice may well help, as may the very process of taking time to seriously contemplate your sleep.

My main aim is more a long-term one. By helping you to think deeply and theologically about your sleep, and by attempting to paint this part of our lives onto a bigger canvas—the canvas of God's character and his plans and purposes for our lives—my hope is that this book will help with the kind of big picture rethinking that can change your experience of sleep, one step at a time. Having had the privilege of pondering this topic deeply, I am still very much a work in progress. You'll probably be the same for some time. But remember, God's word doesn't have to do its work overnight to still be doing real work.

So whether you've mastered your sleeping patterns for years or you share my complicated relationship with the blanket, whether you're sleep-deprived or sleep-indulgent, or whether you're a morning person or a night person, let's open the Bible and see what God says about the hours of 'nothing' that we'll all do tonight—and every night for the rest of our lives. Let's explore what thinking about sleep teaches us about how we spend our waking hours, and about the God that we serve during those waking hours. Let's go to bed tonight having given our sleep over to the marvellous lordship of Christ. Let's figure out how we can sleep well, to the glory of God.

1

He who keeps you will not slumber

When was the last time you stayed up all night?

Maybe it was just for fun. You and some friends suddenly noticed it was 4 am, and someone had the bright idea to stay up and watch the sun rise (apparently that's some people's idea of a good time). Perhaps, far less happily, you were forced to stay awake because of something like illness, or because you were nursing a sick loved one. Or maybe you were a new parent and it was all the baby's fault. And, of course, many of us will be all too familiar with the dreaded 'all-nighter' as part of our studies—maybe a last-ditch strategy to overcome some fearful and long-ignored assignment.

I still remember the first time I had to pull an all-nighter. It was my second year at university, and I was hit with a photography assignment that was way beyond me, so I left it until the last possible minute. The day before it was due, I shared my woes with my best friend—how the project was due the next day, and how I knew I'd be up all night. He very kindly offered to drive me to campus, about an hour away, so I could submit my work. In return, I offered to take him to a movie on the way home. Turns out I didn't really think that one through.

Halfway through *Crimson Tide*, I was snoring happily and enjoying a lovely nap, until an on-screen explosion shocked me awake. Once my arms had stopped flailing and I'd finished my loud, confused snort, I pretended no-one noticed—and my friend pretended he wasn't with me.

As unpleasant as it was, that all-nighter gave me a sense of achievement. I'd pushed myself beyond my usual limits. I'd squeezed everything I could out of those 24 hours. I'd broken a normally unbreakable barrier.

For just one night, I'd conquered sleep.

But let's be honest: it was a pretty sad 'conquest', as exposed by my embarrassing nanna nap in the cinema. I'd delayed the inevitable for about half a day, but sleep still had its way with me.

And so it is with us all. Even if you claim to need only 4-5 hours a night (and the experts would disagree with you there, as we'll see soon enough), you still need those hours each day. And every all-nighter ends more or less the way mine ended: with an inevitable (sometimes dramatic) crash into sleep.

The current Guinness World Record for the number of days without sleep is eleven, held by American Randy Gardner. And it may be a record that's never broken, since the Guinness team is now convinced that sleep deprivation poses too many health risks and will no longer accept submissions in the category.²

2 Let that sit with you for a minute: this is the organization that has welcomed record attempts for walking on the wing of a plane, balancing a car on your head, jumping from a height of 135,000 feet and breaking the sound barrier while you free-fall to earth, or holding live rattlesnakes in your mouth. But they've decided that sleep deprivation is too dangerous.

In one sense, eleven days with no sleep is an impressive record: it's miles beyond what the rest of us will ever accomplish. Yet viewed in another way, it's a sad indictment on humanity's unbreakable limitations. In the big scheme of things, two weeks isn't even a drop in the ocean, yet even that is way beyond the very best that any of us has managed.

All of this is simply meant to highlight a fundamental, often-overlooked difference between us and our Creator. There are many, of course: the Lord God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, perfectly holy, and perfectly loving, to name just a few of his attributes. But how about this one: God never sleeps.

God has been alert, fully functioning, and perfectly attentive for every single nanosecond of history. What's more, not sleeping has never caused him to become anything less than perfect for even a moment. I get grumpy and irritable when I have to wake up half an hour early; God has never slept, yet remains utterly flawless.

Stop and ponder that for just a moment longer: God. Never. Sleeps.³

For Bible-believing Christians, that may sound so obvious as to seem almost meaningless. If you've gotten to know the God of the Scriptures, the notion of that God falling asleep is kind of bizarre. Yet this aspect of God's character still deserves some close attention—mostly because God himself calls our attention to it.

We'll think more in the next chapter about what our need for sleep says about us. But right now, we're going to zero in on the simple yet astounding fact that God never sleeps, what

3 Except that, of course, Jesus slept. Don't worry; we'll get there eventually.

that says about him, and how all this relates to our sleep.

In particular, we're going to connect God's eternal wakefulness into the bigger category of God's sovereignty. Because God never sleeps, we can affirm that he is in complete control of every square inch of the universe and every moment of history. And, in the end, this wonderful reality connects directly to our thinking about our own sleep: because God is sovereign, we don't have to be.

In other words, you can sleep because God doesn't.

He does not grow faint

God himself makes much of the fact that he never sleeps when seeking to comfort his people through the prophet Isaiah. Consider these beautiful words from Isaiah 40:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases
strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their
strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. (vv. 28-31)

Chapter 40 marks a major turning point in Isaiah. For the first 39 chapters, much of the focus is on the sin of both Israel and the surrounding nations, bringing forth the righteous wrath of God. But in chapter 40, the tone changes suddenly and dramatically:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins. (vv. 1-2)

Throughout this opening chapter of the book's second main section, God proclaims multiple truths that are designed to deliver this comfort: forgiveness is possible; atonement for sin will be provided; God will bring his people home; his powerful word stands forever; God will come to his people and care for them, like a shepherd caring tenderly for his flock. Yet he remains totally beyond compare, in charge of every nation, every person and every particle in creation.

As the chapter nears its end, God reminds his people once again of his limitless power, and asks them some fairly pointed questions:

To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;

by the greatness of his might
and because he is strong in power,
not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”? (vv. 25-27)

Look again at the rhetorical question at the end of that passage. Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever allowed yourself to believe that God has lost interest in you, or that he isn't fully aware of your circumstances—that he's been neglecting you in some way? Have you ever felt disregarded by God, as if your way was “hidden from the LORD”? Verse 28 is God's response to anyone who feels like this:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.

God never disregards his people—not for a second—and our ways are never hidden from him. Why? Because he simply never gets tired. He never sleeps.

We may say we agree with this and understand this, but do we? When every task we set ourselves, every fibre of our being, is in some way tainted by our propensity to get worn out, how can we understand someone who literally never gets weary?

As a pastor to university students, I spend plenty of time around young people in their physical prime, and their energy levels put my middle-aged bones to shame. But I've

still witnessed them “faint and be weary” (especially around exam time). No matter how young or old we are, even our most energetic or productive days end the same way: with us lying motionless, clueless, unplugged, dead to the world, like sacks of sawdust. Think of the volume of good things that go undone because we simply run out of puff and have to rest.

But the Lord knows nothing of exhaustion. He knows no weakness. He doesn't take days off. He doesn't make grand plans but fail to follow through because he gets tired or overwhelmed. He may 'rest' in the sense that he completes a particular work (e.g. Gen 2:2-3), but he never rests because he's weary. He never sneaks off for a nap and asks the angels to keep an eye on things. He's never taken so much as a microsleep.

That means God doesn't miss important details of your life because he nodded off while you were praying. He is never too tired to comfort you, or to care for you, or to care for the farthest reaches of outer space. He is completely without that most fundamental of human limitations: fatigue. He simply stays awake, relentlessly doing good and being good to everyone and everything.

The same message of comfort is delivered in the heart-warming words of Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep. (vv. 1-4)

Sometimes, the best thing we can realize about ourselves is that we need help—and not only in the ‘I’ve reached the end of my tether and the collapse is coming’ sense. We need God’s help every single day. We literally can’t do a thing without him. The fact that we can make it through the day without asking for his help says less about our self-sufficiency than it does about his grace and kindness: he gives gifts even to the ungrateful and self-confident, providing the ability to function for another day. And God is able to give us the help that we need—whether we realize it or not—because he never slumbers or sleeps.

That’s surely why the comfort of Isaiah 40 ends where it does:

Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their
strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. (vv. 30-31)

It should be obvious, but any energy we can muster comes from God, the source of all life and energy. Think of the most high-octane, go-getting people you know. For one thing, they’re only the way they are because God makes them that way. But more than that, they’re not bullet-proof. They all run out of steam eventually. When I remember the truly energetic folk I’ve known, I quickly realize that few of them have stayed that way for long. Many have been laid low by chronic pain or illness, mental health challenges, changing seasons of life, or by the general trials of being a human. Weariness is normal.

The Hebrew word translated ‘faint’ (Isa 40:30) speaks of being restrained by our internal limitations, while the word translated ‘be weary’ addresses the external trials of life that drain even the best of us.⁴ Yet the Lord offers us hope. When we lift our eyes to the hills and look to him, there is the prospect of renewed strength—not endless strength, of course, but a divinely given strength to face life’s challenges. God isn’t just infinitely powerful; he’s also generous enough to give us the power we need to press on. He shares something of his boundless energy, if only we will turn to him.

What a truly wonderful thought. God is awake and ready to help whenever we need him. Customer help lines and stores close for the day, work colleagues go on holidays, and trusted friends don’t answer their phones. Even the most reliable person in your world, maybe a spouse or a child or a parent, needs to sleep. But not God. He is never off duty. His help and his strength are permanently available to those who look to him and wait for him.

God’s lack of sleep and his limitless power are also on display in Elijah’s famous confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal, a false god, in 1 Kings 18. Elijah—the lone remaining prophet of Yahweh—proposes a simple contest: two bulls are sacrificed and laid on piles of wood, then the prophets call on their respective deities to see who can come and consume the bull with fire. When Baal fails, despite the desperate and tragic pleadings of his people, Elijah engages in a little well-deserved mockery of the false prophets and their pitiful deity: “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must

4 Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, Leicester, 1993, p. 308.

be awakened” (1 Kgs 18:27).

The message is clear: what sort of god has to use the bathroom? What sort of god sleeps? Certainly not Yahweh. He is never too busy or too tired to hear the prayers of his people and respond.

“Why are you sleeping, O Lord?”

But what about those occasional parts of the Bible that suggest otherwise, or that almost depict God as being asleep? In Psalm 78, for instance, Asaph describes God defending his people in this way:

Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
like a strong man shouting because of wine.
And he put his adversaries to rout;
he put them to everlasting shame. (vv. 65-66)

The crucial point is that the Lord “awoke *as from* sleep”. He hadn’t actually dozed off; he was simply delaying his actions, withholding the vindication of his people, until the right moment. Taken alongside everything the Bible says, God was clearly awake and in control the whole time. A real God, unlike Baal, never sleeps.

Even more pointed and heart-wrenching, though, is the cry of Psalm 44. This psalm of lamentation looks back on “the days of old” (v. 1) when God acted to save his people, but reflects with sadness on the present day, where God is said to have “rejected” and “disgraced” his people, leaving them like “sheep to be slaughtered” (vv. 9, 22). The people of God feel so abandoned that they cry to the Lord in utter desperation:

Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?

Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!

Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

(vv. 23-24)

It's the cry of real pain that reflects life in a broken world, another way of expressing that familiar biblical refrain, "How long, O Lord?" It could even have been the inspiration for Bono's cry from the heart in U2's 1997 song, 'Wake Up Dead Man':

Jesus, Jesus help me

I'm alone in this world

And a [messed]⁵ up world it is too

Tell me, tell me the story

The one about eternity

And the way it's all gonna be

Wake up, wake up dead man

Wake up, wake up dead man.

Yes, this song should make us squirm, pressing its face up against the glass of heresy like it does. Yet like Psalm 44, it captures the pain of living in the last days, the desperate longing to see God intervene and fix his broken world, and the ache of waiting for eternity. As much as Bono pushes the boundaries, there is hope within his plea. For who really prays to a powerless man? Who yearns for an eternity that could never come to pass? Who calls on a dead deity to wake himself up?

So it is with the Sons of Korah in Psalm 44. They know

5 Word substituted for the sake of decorum.

that God can “awake” and come to the defence of his people in a moment, just as he fought for them in the days of old. He is never really asleep. He may not act in the ways that we expect (in fact, he rarely does), or he may delay acting. But he is still wide awake with hands on the steering wheel, ready and able to redirect the course of human history at any moment. The cries of the psalmists in Psalms 44 and 78 only make sense in the light of Isaiah 40, Psalm 121 and 1 Kings 18—not to mention the entire Bible.

So, in the end, God’s response to Bono, to the sons of Korah, and to us is clear: “Why do you say, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord’? Why do you say, ‘Wake up, dead man’? I don’t faint or grow weary. I don’t slumber or sleep. Look to me. Wait for me. Trust me. I will renew your strength. I will come to your rescue.”

Just how sovereign is he?

The reality that God never sleeps, then, comes to us as a subset of a wider biblical doctrine: the sovereignty of God. To fully understand what it means to say that God never sleeps, we need to shift our gaze a few degrees and examine what the Bible says about God’s sovereignty.

To say that God is ‘sovereign’ is simply to say that he is fully in charge. It’s not just that he’s the most powerful being in a universe full of powerful beings; rather, he has a kind of power and authority that means he “works *all things* according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:11), and nothing happens that is contrary to his will. Job summarizes it beautifully: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). I recommend a simple, two-step process

for grasping the extent of God's power:

Step 1: Take your current understanding of God's sovereignty and increase it.

Step 2: Repeat Step 1.

It's God's world, it's God's universe, and he rules over every single particle of it and every individual in it personally, intimately, directly and completely, every moment of every day.

There's really no other conclusion we can reach after even a brief survey of the Scriptures. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign over the casting of lots (Prov 16:33), which is a lot like the rolling of dice, so there really is no such thing as 'luck'. Even the tiniest and most insignificant creature lives and dies by God's direct will, and he keeps account of the smallest details of our physical condition (Matt 10:29-30). Yet he is equally able to direct and shape the decisions and the fate of the world's most powerful people (Prov 21:1) and of entire nations, which are "like a drop from a bucket" and "as the dust on the scales" to him (Isa 40:15).

God is even sovereign over whether or not people get tired and sleep (Ps 76:5; 1 Sam 26:12; Isa 29:10): "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me" (Ps 3:5). The only chance you have to get to sleep tonight and wake up tomorrow is if God sends you to sleep and wakes you. He's the one alarm clock that really matters.

The universe only holds together and continues to function moment by moment because God actively makes it so. As the writer to the Hebrews says, the Lord Jesus Christ "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3), while Paul says that "all things hold together" in Christ (Col 1:17). And you and I are certainly among the "things" held together by

the Lord's power: God himself "gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" and determines the "allotted periods and the boundaries of [our] dwelling place" (Acts 17:25-26)—so much so that Paul can conclude, "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Few parts of the Bible capture these humbling and wonderful realities more than Psalm 139. At his poetic best, David tells us that God knows every one of our words before we say them (v. 4); there is literally nowhere we can go to escape God's presence (vv. 7-12); God formed every part of us from the moment of our conception until today (v. 13); and the days that God "formed" for us have been "written" in his "book" before we lived even one of them (v. 16).

None of this should come as any surprise, since the human story started with Adam being formed from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). And when it came time for Eve to be created, God didn't ask for Adam's help or invite his creative input. In fact, it was quite the opposite: "the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man", took a rib from his body, and made a woman (Gen 2:21-22). Imagine waking up from a nap and finding that had happened to you. But this is the extent of God's power. He needs us to be awake to offer him a helping hand as much as he needed Adam to be awake for Eve's creation.

And God isn't just sovereign over our birth and our physical life, but over our new birth and our spiritual life. Jesus famously uses the imagery of being "born again"—"born of water and the Spirit"—to convey that we have just as much control over our spiritual birth as we had over our physical birth (John 3:1-6). As Paul tells us, the very faith that you place in Jesus is "not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not

a result of works, so that no-one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9). If you wake up tomorrow morning still trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, it’s because God has given you the gift of ongoing faith in Jesus.

The Bible is even unashamed to say that God is sovereign over both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ events. God himself says, “I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things” (Isa 45:7).

I live in Christchurch, New Zealand. Back in 2010 and 2011, we experienced a series of devastating earthquakes, the worst of which claimed 185 lives on 22 February 2011 (my son’s fourth birthday). In the face of the tragedy, the media turned to a small selection of church leaders to provide a spiritual perspective on what we were enduring. Sadly, on almost every occasion, these leaders missed a golden opportunity. Instead of speaking of Jesus and upholding the truth that God was intimately involved in everything taking place in our city—even if we didn’t understand why certain things were happening—the baseline response was to deny God’s sovereignty.

One spokesman put it this way: “We live on a dynamic, creating planet that’s doing its thing. For whatever reason, our forebears chose to build this city on this place. They didn’t know we were on this faultline. God doesn’t make bad things happen to good people. We make our own choices about what we do.”⁶

I understand why public spokespeople for Christianity

6 Adam Dudding, ‘God is in this, weeping with those who weep’, *Stuff*, 27 Feb 2011: www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-earthquake/4709342/God-is-in-this-weeping-with-those-who-weep

want to offer these kinds of bromides: they are socially acceptable, simpler than the alternative, much less likely to prompt awkward follow-up questions, and superficially comforting. But while it offers a measure of short-term relief, there's no long-term peace or hope to be found in removing God from his throne.

Once you've taken the time to think through the implications, what will really help you to sleep well at night: the possibility that our "dynamic, creating planet" could do something that takes poor old God by surprise? Or the sure and certain hope that, even though you'll never know the details of why everything happens the way it does, there's a good and loving God on the throne, sovereignly watching over his world and working all things together for the good of those who love him and "are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28)?

I'm not suggesting that all aspects of God's sovereignty are easy to understand. Having had to live through the earthquakes, not to mention the much more recent shock of a cold-blooded terrorist attack that killed 51 precious people in two Christchurch mosques, I can promise you that a high view of God's sovereignty doesn't numb the pain or provide cheap, easy answers. Life is painful. I know precisely why the psalmist asked God to rouse himself. Nor am I claiming to have said everything that could be said on this enormous topic. This is a book about sleep, not about God's sovereignty. But one thing is clear: the Bible's teaching on God's sovereignty isn't given to unsettle us, but to assure us.

The 39 Articles of Religion (the doctrinal summary used by Anglicans to summarize their beliefs) express this beautifully. In Article 17, we're told that "godly consideration of Predestination... is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable

comfort to godly persons”.⁷ The idea that God is sovereign is not meant for our confusion, but for our comfort. And what unspeakable comfort and peace it brings, if only we’ll allow it to do so.

We’ll never know all the answers to our questions about why events in God’s world unfold the way they do. But we know enough of who God is to know that he is good. In the end, all our questions find their answer at the foot of the cross: “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:31-32). Declaring that God is good, even in a seemingly chaotic world, is more than wishful thinking; it’s a historically-based, cross-centred trust in God’s character. The only thing better than knowing all the answers is knowing that God knows all the answers and that, somehow, through it all, he’s working for good.

These are some of the biggest mysteries that life can throw at us. In fact, they’re the kind of mysteries that can keep a thoughtful person awake at night! But who wants cheap, superficial answers to such questions? As far as I can see, the only real path to a good night’s sleep (apart from pretending these questions don’t matter) is to cultivate a heart and mind that have learned to trust God—a heart and mind that combine to declare, “God sent his Son to die for me. He paid the ultimate price to save me. He can be trusted.”

Even from this brief summary, you can probably join many of the dots on how God’s sovereignty offers sweet comfort and lets us get a good night’s sleep. But instead of drawing our own

7 The Articles of Religion, 1562. Available online: www.latimer.org.nz/who-are-we/the-39-articles/

conclusions, let's allow the infinitely greater authority of God's word to make the connections for us. Specifically, let's turn to two of the most beautiful, life-giving verses in all of Scripture.

God, the decisive worker

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the watchman stays awake in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives to his beloved sleep. (Ps 127:1-2)

Notice that these verses give no commands and contain no imperatives. They simply state, in terms that are simultaneously confronting and comforting, some key aspects of reality. And the great, overarching truth of these verses is that our work, in whatever area of life, is never the decisive factor.

God's work is always the decisive factor.

Given what we've already seen about God's absolute sovereignty, Solomon (the author of Psalm 127) isn't saying that there are some kinds of work that escape God's involvement, as though the builders of some particular house could find a corner of the world hidden from God's sight. Nor is he claiming that a house built by non-Christians will come crashing down as soon as it's finished because they didn't acknowledge God. To force these kinds of ideas on the Psalm's poetic expression of truth is to miss the forest for the trees.

Solomon is telling us, in poetic but no uncertain terms,

that the only purpose that ultimately matters is the Lord's. The only work that ultimately lasts is the Lord's. We may be involved in that work somehow, but the Lord's work and the Lord's will are what matter the most. All our efforts and all our stressed and sleepless nights will produce nothing lasting and nothing meaningful if God is not at work in us and through us. He may do something through us, but he doesn't need us. Humanity's best laid plans will come to nothing if God decides things will turn out differently.

The Lord Jesus drives home the same point, with a particular focus on gospel ministry and evangelism, in Mark 4:

And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how." (vv. 26-27)

Of all the burdens we might carry in this life, what burden could be greater than wanting to see the people around us escape the wrath of God? What burden could be heavier than longing to see our friends freed from the prospect of hell and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son? What burden could be greater than hoping our loved ones experience the joy of coming to know Jesus as Lord, Saviour and friend?

It's a burden that should drive us to prayer, and to sharing the good news about Jesus at every opportunity. Yet it is *not* a burden that should leave us feeling primarily responsible for anyone's salvation. Even here—especially here—God's work, not ours, is decisive.

In Jesus' brief parable, which builds on the longer 'Parable of the Sower' in Mark 4:2-8, the farmer does his part by scat-

tering the seed. But the most important part of the process happens while he's tucked up in bed. So it is with our evangelistic efforts. We're responsible for praying, and we're responsible for speaking the message of the cross as clearly, faithfully, persuasively and passionately as we can. But we're not responsible for the final outcome. We're not ultimately responsible for anyone's salvation. That lies totally in God's hands.

If I thought that my preaching, or my passion, or my persuasiveness, or my personality were the decisive factor in whether someone spent eternity in heaven or in hell, how would I ever sleep at night? That's true in two ways. One, the task would be so pressing that we could hardly spare a moment to rest. And two, if you're like me (i.e. not super-gifted at anything, especially evangelism), you'd beat yourself up for not being more effective. Which of us, if we've understood the realities of heaven and hell, and the difference that Jesus makes to a person's life, could ever get a good night's sleep?

But remember, God gives to his beloved sleep—even when it comes to the most important task in the world. We get to be part of God's work of growing his kingdom, but it doesn't ultimately depend on us. Thank God, it depends on him. We can sleep.

Planning without God in the picture

Before we return to Psalm 127, let's step back for just a minute to clarify something: there is nothing wrong, and much that's right, with planning. If you're going to build a house, I strongly suggest making some plans rather than throwing a pile of wood and nails on the ground and saying, "Okay God, do your thing". Hard work is good, and God has designed us

to be workers (more of that in chapter 5).

But there is much that is wrong with any planning that leaves the sovereign God out of the picture. There is much that is wrong with thinking, “If I get all my ducks in a row, everything will flow smoothly”. There is much that is wrong with dreaming of that mythical future time when the factory of life will simply crank out pleasant and predictable outcomes because you’ve worked hard enough and arranged everything just so.

James warns us about this in his New Testament letter:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (Jas 4:13-15)

There is probably no more famous example of this reality than the *Titanic*. It’s alleged that someone—possibly even the ship’s captain, Edward John Smith—claimed “God himself couldn’t sink this ship”. Whether those exact words are fact or (as is likely) urban myth, it was widely believed that the ship was practically unsinkable. Even as reports of the disaster started to arrive, the Vice President of the White Star Line released this statement: “We place absolute confidence in the *Titanic*. We believe that the boat is unsinkable.”⁸ The rest, as they say, is history—history that lies at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

8 See David Mikkelson, ‘The Unsinkable Titanic’, *Snopes*, 18 Dec 2005: www.snopes.com/fact-check/sinking-the-unsinkable/

Closer to home, I recall moving to Christchurch in 2010 and seeing TV advertisements that warned us to prepare our earthquake survival kit. When we asked locals about it, they understandably told us, “Don’t worry too much; if there’s a big one, it will be in Wellington or on the Alpine Fault”. No-one even knew the fault line that ruptured on 22 February was there. Think about that: in the 21st century, a major city was built on a fault line that *nobody knew existed*. Hundreds of thousands of people, going about their business, with absolutely no idea that their lives were about to change.

But we don’t need to paint on such a large, dramatic canvas to make the point. The same thing plays out in our personal lives. Think of the blood, sweat and tears you’ve put into some project that hasn’t come to fruition. Think of that disappointed feeling at the end of a day that just didn’t pan out. Think of the times you’ve eaten “the bread of anxious toil” or seen everything go pear-shaped for a friend. It happens all the time.

If you’re like me, these words will touch a raw nerve: “eating the bread of anxious toil”. Many’s the time when I’ve missed sleep to eat this stale, unsatisfying bread. “If I don’t get this done tonight, the book will never get finished. If I don’t wake up two hours early, the conference will be a failure. The talk won’t be good enough. The poor guy’s life will fall apart. The schedule will crumble. The family holiday will be a shambles.”

What would it be for you? “If I don’t finish this tonight... the boss or the client won’t be happy? If I don’t wake up at the crack of dawn... the budget won’t be met? The renovation will never get finished? My friend will be disappointed in me? The family will get angry with me?” On and on it goes.

The trick, of course, is that every now and then we either

have to miss some sleep to finish an important task, or it just makes sense to wake up early or stay up late. It might be wise, even godly, to forgo a little sleep once in a while.⁹

Most of us know the difference, right? We know the difference between an occasional late night or early morning because something important is on our plate or something urgent came up, and ignoring God's sovereign care and thinking the world (or our little corner of it) depends mostly on us.

It's living the difference that's hard.

Because God's work is decisive and ours is not, it is folly and vanity for us to stay awake longer than we should. All the extra effort in the world isn't going to push our project over the line of success unless God blesses our efforts and enables our work to succeed (whatever 'succeed' might mean in each situation). But it's hard to accept our limitations and leave things in God's hands.

Yet as hard as it is—and I may really be stretching the friendship to say it this way—staying up late may be worse than folly: it may be sinful. It may be a sinful attempt to wrest back the control that should gladly be relinquished into God's hands, a sinful denial of our God-given human limitations, and a sinful failure to trust God.

God's gift to his beloved

However, I doubt Solomon wrote the words of Psalm 127 primarily to make us feel guilty for not sleeping enough.

Instead, we must conclude that Solomon wrote these words

9 See Psalm 132:3-5 or Proverbs 6:1-5 (we'll return to these passages in chapter 5).

primarily to lift us up, to give us hope, to fix our eyes on the God who loves us, and to deliver us safely and peacefully into one of the greatest gifts that the Lord bestows: sleep.

Look again at the last phrase in our verses: “He gives to his beloved sleep.”

Could there be a better mantra to repeat to yourself at the end of a long day when your to-do list remains unfinished?

“He gives to his beloved sleep.”

Could there be a better mantra to recall when you feel you have no choice but to press on past your bedtime, when you’re setting the alarm for 4 am, when you’re tempted to feel indispensable, or when you’ve convinced yourself that you really have to finish [project x] right now because otherwise [terrible consequence y] will inevitably follow?

“He gives to his beloved sleep.”

Every day, God gives us the gift of being able to climb into bed and leave everything in his hands. Sleep is incredibly humbling—and therefore incredibly glorifying to the God who never sleeps. God does not expect us to be super-human. He expects us to work hard, and he graciously gives us responsibilities to meet (and a measure of energy to allow us to meet them). But our limitations are not a bug—some design flaw to be overcome with commitment and Red Bull. They are a God-given gift.

God has designed us to receive this daily dose of humility with thankfulness. He has designed us to be reminded, every single day, that he is in charge and we are not. What a waste if we don’t use our sleep in this way! What a waste if we merely go to our sleep feeling anxious about the next day, or the next

week.

Remember, God could just as easily have designed us to function without sleep. He could have created us to have fixed energy levels, or with some other ways of being refreshed. But he chose sleep. He chose to knock us out cold for a third of each day. And he didn't do it to annoy us. He did it to teach us. He did it to teach us that his work, not our work, is decisive.

But more than that, he did it because he loves us.

“He gives to his beloved sleep.”

Because all of the above is true, we can embrace sleep as a wonderful gift from the powerful, generous, never-sleeping God to his beloved children. The word ‘beloved’ suggests that God is speaking not just about all people everywhere, but about those who enjoy a special relationship with him—his saved and redeemed children. Yes, of course there's a sense in which God loves the whole world (e.g. John 3:16), but it's also common for God to express a particular kind of love for those he has saved. Throughout the Old Testament, the word ‘beloved’ is commonly used to describe God's unique love for his people,¹⁰ while in the New Testament, “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for *her*” (Eph 5:25).¹¹

Is your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his death and resurrection for your sins?

10 E.g. Deut 33:12; Ps 60:5, 108:6; Isa 5:1; Jer 12:7. Yes, some of these passages speak of judgement coming on Israel, but it's noteworthy that even in this context Israel is called God's ‘beloved’.

11 For more on the ways in which “God sets his affection on his chosen ones in a way in which he does not set his affection on others”, see Don Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, IVP, Leicester, 2000, pp. 19-21, 92-6.

Then you know God not just as the sovereign, never-sleeping Creator, but as your loving and generous heavenly Father. As he observes you sleeping, his ever-watchful gaze is also his ever-loving, infinitely generous gaze.

God doesn't resent you for what you failed to get done yesterday, or for what you will fail to get done tomorrow. Instead, he delights to relieve you of the bread of anxious toil at the end of each day. He delights to fill you with Jesus as "the bread of life" who will sustain and satisfy you. He delights to send you to your slumber with confidence that he loves you. He knocks us out, saying, "I love you, and I've got this".

Imagine that. Imagine your head hitting the pillow and you being able to glorify God with the day's final thoughts: "The world will carry on just fine without me for the next seven or eight hours. I can rest. I'm not needed. Only you are needed, Lord. You're in control, and you'll never make a mistake. Good night."

Actually, there's no need to imagine. You'll get a chance to do exactly this very soon. Another sleep is coming—because God loves you.

Sleep, beloved.