

Psalm 4: Finding Sleep on Sleepless Nights

by Edwin Crozier

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PM Assembly

Introduction:

Have you ever had a sleepless night? I'm not talking about a night when you had too much caffeine or if you suffer from restless leg syndrome. I'm talking about a night of anxiety. A night when problems were pressing down on you. Perhaps enemies had attacked you in some way. Perhaps you were struggling in your finances. Maybe there was family trouble brewing. Maybe it was church trouble. Perhaps someone had wronged you in some way. Or perhaps you had done wrong in some way. And so you tossed and turned. You played your anxiety, your anger, your fear, your sadness over and over again through your mind. You tried drinking warm milk, deep breathing, and counting sheep, but nothing helped. If so, then you know where David was in **Psalm 4**.

Psalm 4 is an evening prayer. Most believe it is a follow-up to **Psalm 3**, written during the same difficult trial of Absalom's rebellion. That is certainly possible, and there are some similarities that makes me believe it is highly probable. Some think David is writing this on behalf of the Levites who were set apart as God's tribe (see **Psalm 4:3**) in the face of the other Jews who might put them down for not having their own land and riches. Some see the advice given as words to the enemies regarding how to repent. Some see it as advice given to the faithful regarding how to behave in the face of the opponents. Some see it as a mixture. In reality, I have a hard time nailing down exactly how to lay out this psalm and how to determine exactly who is speaking and to whom all the way through. But what I cannot miss is the final statement: "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety" (**Psalm 4:8**, ESV). What a contrast with "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent" (**Psalm 4:4**, ESV). Here is someone whose mind is filled while lying in bed. They are pondering in anger and trembling. They are not able to sleep. And yet, the message of this psalm brings sleep to the psalmist. What can we learn from this psalm? We can learn four steps to find sleep on those sleepless nights.

Discussion:

I. Count your blessings, not sheep (vs. 1).

- A. No doubt, David is praying to God. And that is an important part of getting sleep on sleepless nights. I don't want to overlook that. However, I think it is more important to notice the basis upon which David turns to God in this difficult and stressful time. "You have given me relief when I was in distress" (ESV). David is not saying he is already relieved from this present distress. He is remembering the relief God has given him from other distresses.
- B. If indeed David is writing this during Absalom's rebellion, I can think of a number of distressing situations God had relieved David from—dealing with lions and bears while keeping the sheep, the battle with Goliath, Saul's attacks, battles with Philistines, and more.
- C. Many people recommend counting sheep when you want to sleep. I guess the hope is if you go through the trouble of visualizing sheep, it will take your mind off whatever struggle is keeping you awake and the monotony will lead you into slumber. However, what helps me more is remembering how God has taken care of me in the past. Very few of us are facing our very first stressful situation this week. And God has brought us through all the others. Count your deliverances. And go beyond that. Count your present blessings. Sure, you may have enemies that are attacking, but right now you are still breathing, you've had food to eat today, clothes to wear, you're surrounded by friends and brethren who are ready to support you. Recognize these things and remember that God is not picking on you.

II. Focus on God, not men (vss. 2-3).

- A. David had a choice; he could either focus on the men who were shaming him by seeking after lies and vain words about him, or he could focus on God who had set him apart. Certainly, if he focused on the men, he would have reason to stay awake, hashing and rehashing the lies and stories told about him. He could replay conversations in his mind between him and these people, thinking of newer and better ways to respond to them. He could envision getting them back for their lies. But all of this would lead to more stress and anxiety. Or he could focus on God and the blessing he had from Him. He could imagine the protection that God affords, separating him from the rest of the world as His specially chosen one. He could envision his conversation with God, knowing that God hears him when he calls.

- B. We have this same choice. Let's face it; people will hear lies about us, especially if we are part of God's chosen. The worldly cannot stand such a separation. They want to claim there is no difference, but there is. When we are set apart for God, the enemy takes notice. He is a roaring lion and he is seeking to devour us (**1 Peter 5:8**). He will unleash any and every form of stress and attack he can. We can either choose to focus on that. Or we can focus on the God who has set us apart. We can focus on the God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (**Ephesians 1:3-14**) and who has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (**Colossians 1:13**). We can remember that He hears when we call. We can talk to Him.

III. Trust in the Lord, not yourself (vss. 4-5).

- A. Now we come to the tough part. David may be speaking to the men who are lying about him in these verses or it is possible that his attention has turned to his own companions explaining how they should respond in the face of the opponents. In either case, the message for us today is the same. Tremble, or be angry, but do not sin. Rather, instead of stepping out on your own to try to solve these problem, keep it between you and God as you ponder on your beds. And then let God deal with it.
- B. Too many sleepless nights are spent pondering how we can stick it to those who have stuck it to us. They are spent going over the ways we can get back at the ones who have gotten us. We rehearse the reasons all their treatment is unfair. We build up hatred in our own minds. All this does is lead to sin in our own lives. Paul takes this statement further in **Ephesians 4:26-27**, explaining that this approach to our struggles is giving an opportunity to the devil. It opens a door for him to drive wedges in our relationships here on earth, and in our relationship with God.
- C. Rather than figuring out how we can get even or deal with the trouble, we need to trust in the Lord. That starts with offering the right sacrifices. I guess it is possible that this refers to the Old Testament animal sacrifices that were part of their covenant walk with Jehovah. However, it makes more sense to me to go along with **Psalms 51:17**. The right sacrifices for God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. It is the recognition that part of the reason we face struggles is our own sins. Rather than lying on our beds playing the victimized martyr, we need to see our own part and turn to God with our own brokenness, trusting Him to fix the mess we've gotten ourselves into. Trust the Lord; He will take care of you.

IV. Find your joy above, not below (vss. 6-7).

- A. Finally, there are many who sit and wonder where any good is going to come from. They can see the dark side of every situation. They count and recount all the bad things that have happened to them. The response to that is for the Lord to let His face shine on us. This hearkens back to the priestly blessing with which Aaron was to bless Israel in **Numbers 6:24-26**. But we see the real problem highlighted in **vs. 7**.
- B. What keeps us awake is a mistaken sense of blessing. Far too often, our sights are set too low. We don't have all the grain and wine that those around us have, so we lie awake frustrated with life. But David grasped something that so often eludes us. Earthly blessings are pretty useless. It is the joy of relationship with God that provides true blessing. Maybe we don't have all the worldly goods that some others have. Maybe we don't drive nice cars, live in fancy houses, eat out at restaurants all the time, wear the designer clothes. But we have God. We have all that is in Him. As Paul said in **Colossians 3:1-4**, we need to seek what is above, not fixate on what is below. As Jesus explains in **Matthew 6:19-21**, when we have the sleepless nights, we need to ask where our treasure is. Too often, we are lying awake worried about procuring or protecting an earthly treasure that means little in the grand scheme of things. Sleep comes to those who find joy in what is above and can rest in peace because they know that is being protected by God (**1 Peter 1:4-5**).

Conclusion:

Don't misunderstand. This psalm doesn't mean there will never be stress. In fact, it demonstrates there absolutely will. There will be enemies. There will be trials. There will be struggles. But what it also means is that in the face of all of these, we can lie down and sleep in peace. We don't have to toss and turn in our beds because of the stress. Rather, we can find sleep because of our relationship with God who will bring us safely through whatever we face. Just remember, whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger by the grace of God. And whatever kills us, just sends us to the presence of God. So, either way, we're in good hands that can protect us while we sleep.