

# This Downy Sleep<sup>1</sup>

Acts 3:12-19 | Psalm 4 | 1 John 3:1-7 | Luke 24:36b-48

## PSALM 4

<sup>1</sup> Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness; you set me at liberty when I was in trouble; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. <sup>2</sup> How long will you nobles dishonour my glory; how long will you love vain things and seek after falsehood? <sup>3</sup> But know that the Lord has shown me his marvellous kindness; when I call upon the Lord, he will hear me. <sup>4</sup> Stand in awe, and sin not; commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. <sup>5</sup> Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and put your trust in the Lord. <sup>6</sup> There are many that say, 'Who will show us any good?' Lord, lift up the light of your countenance upon us. <sup>7</sup> You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their corn and wine and oil increase. <sup>8</sup> In peace I will lie down and sleep, for it is you Lord, only, who make me dwell in safety.

## INTRODUCTION

In Act 2, scene 2, moments after murdering his king and looking down to see blood on his hands, Macbeth anxiously speaks to his wife. Imagining that he had heard two men in another room, as though, even in their sleep, they knew what he'd done, he says:

Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more!  
Macbeth does murder sleep," the innocent sleep,  
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast.<sup>2</sup>

It is one of Shakespeare's most well-known speeches in one of his darkest plays. Macbeth contemplates the safety, and yet the vulnerability, of sleep. Consider the metaphor: "Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care." A ravell'd sleeve, a tangled mess of thread, is his way of describing the unceasing complexity and messiness of life, like looking at a twisted pile of yarn with no visible end. For Shakespeare, sleep is a marker of how one copes with this life. Disturbed and anxious sleep, too little or broken, indicates an uneasy, restless mind. Macbeth spends the rest of the play slowly going mad from his lack of sleep.<sup>3</sup> The easy sleep of a peaceful mind, however, is like the satisfaction of a warm bath after a hard day or the main course of a marvellous feast, comforting and sweet.

In our Psalm this morning, we find a poet who shares Shakespeare's view of sleep. How one experiences slumber can, in fact, be a good indicator of a person's inner peace. Indeed, Psalm 4 is a bedtime Psalm, a Psalm on which one might meditate at the end of the night. And here is what we learn from it: *A peaceful mind comes from trusting in the Lord's mercy. A peaceful mind comes from trusting in the Lord's mercy.* Let's briefly look at how the poet arrives at this conclusion.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit, and look on death itself!" Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.3.76-77.

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.2.32-37. By murdering the king in his sleep, he has, ironically, 'murdered sleep' itself. There is some irony here as the act of sleeping, itself, looks like death.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 3.2.21-23.

## 1. PLEADING

The opening of the Psalm is a direct plea to God, asking him to listen. The poet cries out to God in a fashion similar to that of several other Psalms we have recently seen, but with an inherent and stated trust. *“Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness.”*<sup>4</sup> He has no problem invoking the righteousness of God, boldly trusting that God will make good on his covenantal promises to protect his people.<sup>5</sup> The poet is experiencing a time of distress to be sure—*“I was in trouble,”* as the second and third lines indicate a remembrance of past rescue and a present need for God’s lovingkindness. *“Hear my prayer,”* the Psalmist adds, throwing himself on the mercy of God, expressing his need for compassion in that moment, and yet his confidence that his God is one who stoops down to show mercy to his people in need.

## 2. PROVOCATION

Having called out to God, in the next four verses, the Psalmist strangely turns to address his adversaries, the probable cause of his distress. In fact, he speaks to them provocatively in a kind of warning. So great his is confidence in God, he can offer pointed advice to those who stand against him. *“How long will you nobles dishonour my glory; how long will you love vain things and seek after falsehood?”*<sup>6</sup> He is needling them a little: ‘Aren’t you tired of tormenting me yet, of turning what is good in my life to shame?’ He’s tired of their falsehoods and wonders how they aren’t weary from all their opposition.

But no sooner has the question left the Psalmist’s mouth than he returns to his certainty, his trust in the Lord’s protection of his people. *“But know that the Lord has shown me his marvellous kindness; when I call upon the Lord, he will hear me.”*<sup>7</sup> The Psalmist has no doubt that God will show him kindness, will show him mercy. And so, he advises: *“Stand in awe, and sin not,”* he begins. That first command is quite direct, a little less obscure in other translations: *“Be angry, and do not sin.”*<sup>8</sup> The sense of it is this: ‘You can be angry at me all day long, but sinning against me is sinning against the God who protects me, so be very careful.’ He continues advising: *“Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.”*<sup>9</sup> He introduces the theme of sleep here. These adversaries might find comfort in their beds, a good night’s sleep, if they just quieted down a bit. And then he adds: *“Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and put your trust in the Lord.”*<sup>10</sup> Knowing that they are in the wrong, they should make the offerings of repentance and trust in God. It’s beautiful, provocative, poetic counsel: calm down, turn away from your anger, repent.<sup>11</sup> You’ll sleep better.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ps 4:1. This is the first of four imperatives in this opening verse.

<sup>5</sup> The promised protection of God is a frequent theme in the Old Testament. See, for example, Deut 31:6, Deut 33:12, Ps 32:7, Ps 46:1, Isa 41:10, Isa 45:2, Isa 54:17.

<sup>6</sup> Ps 4:2.

<sup>7</sup> Ps 4:3.

<sup>8</sup> Ps 4:4 (NRSVA).

<sup>9</sup> Ps 4:4.

<sup>10</sup> Ps 4:4-5.

<sup>11</sup> These ideas are expressed in the Church of England’s baptismal vows: ‘Calm down, reject the devil and all rebellion against God, renounce the deceit and corruption of evil, repent of your sins, and trust in God.’ See The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 353.

### 3. PRAYER

Having advised his enemies, the Psalmist then turns back to God in prayer. He ponders, for a moment, a general hypothetical: *“Who will show us any good?”*<sup>12</sup> Whether he imagines it is sceptics or his supporters who are wondering, the Psalmist returns to his trust, his confidence, in God. In his present time of trouble, he asks God to make his mercy evident to everyone. And the phrase he uses—*“lift up the light of your countenance upon us”*—is an allusion to the Aaronic benediction: *“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”*<sup>13</sup> God has always promised to bless and protect his people. And the Psalmist recalls this, praying that the people might also remember, and see, and know that God is merciful. And this is cause for great joy, greater joy than the most marvellous of feasts—whether an actual feast or the Shakespearian analogical feast of restful sleep. The Psalmist concludes on this very idea: *“In peace I will lie down and sleep, for it is you Lord, only, who make me dwell in safety.”*<sup>14</sup> *Only* is an important word there. The Psalmist’s confidence is not in his defence, his own righteousness, his own abilities to secure and protect himself. His confident trust is in God alone, in God’s mercy alone.

### 4. PEACE

Friends, I wonder if we are so fortunate? How do we sleep at night? Do we have the Psalmist’s confidence in God’s mercy? Or are we a bit more like the adversaries, like Macbeth, anxious, tormented by guilt, and every bit as tired when we rise in the morning as when we went to bed? The issue may be the temperature of your room, the comfort of your pillows, the softness of your bed—but it may be that the real problem is a lack of inner peace. That’s what the Psalmist had and what Macbeth never regained: *“In peace I will lie down.”* It is worth us pondering, including the causes. There is a powerful connection between mental health and sleep, with the emotions most disruptive being failure, regret, disconnection, and fear.<sup>15</sup> In other words, sin, the evil and wicked thoughts and words and deeds that we have and speak and do, against God and against other people, can be a major cause. Anxiety about life, frustration, feelings of remorse, uncertainty in God’s provision—these are the things that keep us awake. And so, it only makes sense that the Psalmist concludes that confidence in God is the solution. Therapy and sleeping medications can help a lot, but only God can give true inner peace—a spiritual solution to the problems of anxiety and frustration and guilt. *A peaceful mind comes from trusting in the Lord’s mercy.* Do you and I trust in the Lord’s mercy?

We should. And this Psalm is an important reminder to us. The Lord is merciful. Whether it is sin from which we need to repent and turn back, or placing our anxieties and cares upon him, confident that he cares for his people, our trust must be in him. And I know it is not easy. Stress and worry, fear and anxiety, guilt and regret, these are powerful concerns and emotions and burdens. But so much more powerful is God. So much more merciful is God. And nowhere is this mercy more exemplified than in the gospel. This is how the Apostle Peter put it:

---

<sup>12</sup> Ps 4:6.

<sup>13</sup> Ps 4:6, Num 6:24-26.

<sup>14</sup> Ps 4:8.

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Del Pozo, “How Your Emotions Can Affect Your Sleep,” in *Psychology Today*, August 26, 2023. See [psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/being-awake-better/202308/how-your-emotions-can-affect-your-sleep](https://psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/being-awake-better/202308/how-your-emotions-can-affect-your-sleep). See also Eric Suni and Alex Dimitriu, “Anxiety and Sleep,” *Sleep Foundation*, November 16, 2023. See [sleepfoundation.org/mental-health/anxiety-and-sleep](https://sleepfoundation.org/mental-health/anxiety-and-sleep).

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...<sup>16</sup>

God has already shown us mercy, giving us hope, perfectly demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, we can sleep confidently, trusting in his mercy, trusting in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the picture of that mercy, and so gain true inner peace. Maybe you have never considered this, or maybe it has been a while since you gave it much thought? Maybe today is the day that you give yourself fully, trusting completely in God's mercy? Inner peace, true peace, is within our grasp. *A peaceful mind comes from trusting in the Lord's mercy.*

### CONCLUSION

Just 74 years after Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was first published, another poet, Katharina Amalia Dorothea von Schlegel was born, most likely in northern Germany. Little is known about her, though it seems she may have been a Lutheran nun. Her most well-known poem, "*Stille, mein Wille; dein Jesus hilft siegen*," was later set to a hymn by the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. The English lyrics of the poem remind us of the fundamental truth of Psalm 4:

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;  
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.  
Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
in every change He faithful will remain.<sup>17</sup>

God is faithful even in our darkest, most sleepless nights. May we always rely on his mercy.

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, may we see your mercy, and put our trust in you, in the death and resurrection of your Son. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

---

<sup>16</sup> 1 Pet 1:3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Katharina Amalia Dorothea von Schlegel, "*Stille, mein Wille; dein Jesus hilft siegen*," (trans. Jane Borthwick), 1752.