

Peaceful Sleep in the Midst of Distress

Psalm 4

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!

You have given me relief when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

² *O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?*

How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah

³ *But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;*

the LORD hears when I call to him.

⁴ *Be angry, and do not sin;*

ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah

⁵ *Offer right sacrifices,*

and put your trust in the LORD.

⁶ *There are many who say, "Who will show us some good?"*

Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!"

⁷ *You have put more joy in my heart*

than they have when their grain and wine abound.

⁸ *In peace I will both lie down and sleep;*

for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

John Calvin famously described the psalms as “an anatomy of all parts of the human soul,” saying further, “The varied and resplendent riches which are contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words ... the greatness of [the Psalms] does not admit of being fully unfolded there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn ... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself.”

The Psalms show us the full range of human emotions, so we can lay our hearts open before the Lord. This summer, we will be exploring two major categories of psalms, psalms of lament and thanksgiving. The psalms of lament help us to deal with a full range of the darker side of our emotions – sadness, loneliness, anger, resentment, fear, worry, rejection, and more – while the psalms of thanksgiving give us language to give thanks to the Lord in all circumstances. Very often, we need to pour out our hearts in open and honest lament before we’re ready to really give thanks.

We’re calling this summer series, “Thankful Through Tears,” because that’s often the reality of our life experiences and that’s also the flow of the Psalms. So, for example, we’re going to start this summer by

looking at Psalms 4,5 & 6, which are laments, and then Psalm 8, which is a Psalm of Thanksgiving. (BTW, Psalm 7 is also a lament, but we looked at it two years ago when we went through the psalms from the life of David.) So, we get a series of laments, followed by thanksgiving. You'll also notice that, as a general pattern, the early part of Psalms is full of lament, whereas the later part of Psalms is more filled with thanksgiving and praise, so we have to pass through seasons of sorrow before we emerge into seasons of thankfulness and praise. So, while Psalms 4,5,6 & 7 are all laments, Psalms 100, 105, 106 & 108 are all Thanksgiving Psalms we'll be doing in August, toward the end of the summer.

Psalm 4 is a Psalm of David, a lament written in a time of distress. We don't know exactly what his life circumstance was when David wrote Psalm 4. Psalm 3 was written when David was fleeing from Absalom, and Psalm 7 was written in response to the accusations against David made by Cush the Benjaminite, during the time when David was fleeing from King Saul, earlier in his life. It seems like one of these two times – when David was either fleeing Saul or Absalom – is the most likely circumstance for Psalm 4, but we don't know for sure. Certainly, David had no shortage of enemies who attacked him without much cause.

You and I might not be fleeing from Saul or Absalom. We may not have people who desire to overthrow us and steal our throne. But we do have very real enemies. You probably have experienced being betrayed by someone you trusted. Even more relevant, as believers, we face harassment from the enemy of our souls, both enticing distraction and hostility from the world, and the constant grumbling and craving of our flesh. Any combination of these enemies can lead us into distress.

A. Praying to God, v. 1

The first thing David does in his distress is pray to the Lord. Oh, how much better off we would be if this were always our first response to a crisis!

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!

You have given me relief when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

David prays, "Answer me when I call." We could read this as David almost being pushy and demanding. Sometimes I can get a little irritated when I call someone and they never answer their phone. I know it's become a trend for certain people to almost never answer their phones. I can be tempted to think in my mind, "Would you answer me when I call? How hard is that?"

But David's plea is not born out of irritation, frustration or a sense of entitlement but out of desperation. He's crying to the Lord, "Answer me," because he knows he has no hope except in the Lord. Notice He doesn't really make a specific request of God beyond "Answer me" and "Be gracious to me and hear my prayer." He's trusting that if God will hear and will answer in grace, He will do what is best for David. He will act with love and wisdom.

And then David addresses God using a unique title. This is the only time in Scripture this title is used for God – "God of my righteousness" the ESV says, or "my righteous God" as the NIV translates it, or "God who maintains my right" is the New America Standard's footnoted alternate translation. In Psalm

7, David addresses the Lord, “O Righteous God,” but here he adds the personal possessive “my,” meaning either “my righteous God” or “God of my righteousness.” If we translate it as “my righteous God,” the emphasis is on the God who is righteous for me. He is the God who always does what is right, and He is my God, on my side. If it’s “God of my righteousness,” it’s the God who makes me righteous, or the God who is the source of all my righteousness. I’m not sure which translation is more accurate; certainly both are absolutely true:

1. God never fails to do what is right, for He is righteous, and in His righteousness, He always acts on behalf of His own people, a thought emphasized in verse 3.
2. And any righteousness we have comes not from ourselves but as a gift from God. God gives us – He imputes to us – His own perfect righteousness, and that perfect righteousness is the basis for our appeal to God for deliverance from our enemies.

When we plead to God for relief from distress, we can plead to Him knowing He is both our Righteous God and the God of our righteousness.

David’s appeal to God is not just based on who God is but also on what God has faithfully done for him in the past:

You have given me relief when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

The Hebrew behind “*You have given me relief when I was in distress*” speaks of being in a narrow place, squeezed, and having the Lord enlarge our place. So, “*You have enlarged my tight place.*” When we’re in distress, we often feel squeezed, as anxiety grips us and it can even feel hard to breathe. But God enlarges our space, widens our narrowness, allows us to breathe and rest in Him.

Yet notice that even though God is righteous and has made David righteous, and even though God has given David relief in the past, David still pleads for God to “be gracious” or to “have mercy” – in other words, David is pleading for undeserved favor, unmerited kindness. That’s always what we need from God whenever we need help. We never deserve His favor and kindness.

In this opening prayer, David ends by repeating what He began with, a desperate cry for God to hear him.

B. Pleading with Men, vv. 2-5

After David prays, he begins to plead with his enemies, those who are opposing him either by physical violence or by slander. But notice that he does not defend himself or engage them in debate or combat. Rather, in his pleading with them, he is actually preaching the Gospel to them, calling on them to repent and believe, to seek the Lord and turn from their sin. How different this is from the petty squabbling we see so often in our world:

² O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?

How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah

³ But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;

the LORD hears when I call to him.

I. Repent, vv. 2-3

David begins by asking these men how long they plan on attacking him unjustly, seeking to turn his honor into shame by loving empty/deceptive words and lies. Notice how insightfully he gets to the heart of their problem: They are seeking to turn David's honor or glory into shame. That is, they are attacking his position as God's anointed king, and seeking to tear him down. Why are they doing this? It is because they have loved vain words and sought after lies.

The world often attacks Christians. It loves to mock people of faith for their identity as believers, as children of God. Thus, the world seeks to turn our honor (being God's chosen children) into our shame (by mocking us for being religious/self-righteous, etc.). Why does the world do this? Because it loves vain words and has sought after lies.

"Vain words" or "vain things" refers to empty, meaningless, void nothing-ness. This is what the world loves, right? Celebrity. Fashion. Glamour. Entertainment. David's enemies loved power and status and manipulation. The word translated "lies" refers to that which is false and untrue. All of the promises the things of the world make are untrue. Money never made anyone happy, Power doesn't really make you strong in the ways that matter most. Sex is not the same thing as love. Illicit pleasure makes you feel good for a moment, but it makes you feel worse for far longer. It's all a bunch of nothingness build on a foundation of deception. That's all the world has, and because it values and treasures these things, it must attack, ridicule, and seek to destroy those who have real life, true joy, and actual peace.

David sees this very clearly, and he's calling on his enemies to repent of the emptiness and deception that has laid hold of their hearts and caused them to attack him for no good reason.

Then, after he calls them to reject emptiness and lies, he reminds them of the truth. It does no real good to turn away from lies unless we turn to the truth. So, what is the truth? The truth is that David belongs to the Lord, and when men attack David, they are attacking the Lord's chosen and beloved:

But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;

the LORD hears when I call to him.

Our confidence when we're attacked and in distress comes from remembering the Lord's love for us, given to us in Christ. The Lord has set apart all those who belong to Christ. Through Christ, God has made us His own and hears us when we call on Him.

2. Believe, vv. 4-5

Having called on his enemies to repent of their lies and having reminded them of the truth, David then calls on his enemies to believe in the Lord, so his plea turns from a message of repentance to a message of faith:

⁴ *Be angry, and do not sin;*

ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah

⁵ *Offer right sacrifices,*

and put your trust in the LORD.

Here, I don't think "be angry" is the best translation for the first word in verse 4. The NIV and the NASB both translate this word as "tremble" and the KJV says, "Stand in awe" and I think these are better translations. David is calling on these men to be overwhelmed, to be shaken in awe and wonder by God and to stop sinning so boldly and arrogantly. Then, he calls on them to meditate in their hearts on the truth of the Lord and to be silent, to cease from plotting, scheming, lying, slandering, and just to be silent before the Lord in holy awe and wonder, and in deep reflection on who God is.

When people are attacking us, we don't need to convince them of how good we are; they need to know how good God is. They don't need to be impressed by us; they need to be impressed by the Lord.

To "offer right sacrifices" is an Old Testament call to worship God rightly. "Put your trust in the Lord" is a call for sincere and life-changing faith in God. David is preaching the Gospel to his enemies, calling on them to call on the Lord. He's not seeking their destruction, but their salvation. This is truly loving your enemies!

This is what we need whether our struggle is against the world – which needs to repent and believe in the Lord – or against our own flesh, in discouragement and despair. We need to be willing to preach the Gospel lovingly to our neighbors, to the culture, or to ourselves.

C. Praise to God, vv. 6-8

Having prayed to God and pleaded with his enemies, David now turns to praise the Lord:

⁶ *There are many who say, "Who will show us some good?*

Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!"

⁷ *You have put more joy in my heart*

than they have when their grain and wine abound.

⁸ *In peace I will both lie down and sleep;*

for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

When we're in distress, it's tempting to look around us and wonder where we have anything good, but instead to always focus on the negative or the lack of goodness, on the problems and trials, on the enemies and discouragement. David knows that if he's going to find any good at all, it's going to have to come from the Lord.

I. For Light and Joy, vv. 6-7

“Lift up the light of your face upon us” is language that echoes the Aaronic blessing, the word of blessing from the priests to the people in worship:

*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.* (Numbers 6:24-26, ESV)

This blessing and David’s prayer are really focused on the Lord’s kind favor and regard, for the Lord to look on His people with love and kindness, with favor and goodness. It’s the opposite of having God turn His back on you in judgment and wrath, which is exactly what Jesus experienced on the cross for us. We can pray this prayer and receive this blessing from God because Jesus took our place and received the opposite on the cross.

And again, this prayer of praise is a reminder that all the true goodness we ever receive comes from the grace of God. It is also a reminder to us that the one and only thing we need is for God to look upon us with His loving favor, for Him to lift up the light of His face upon us. If God looks upon us with favor, lifting up the light of His face upon us, we can know that He is sovereign and orders all things for our good. We can know we are in His care. He never slumbers nor sleeps (Ps. 121), and He withholds no good thing from His own (Ps. 34).

Once David seeks God’s favor, he is immediately able to rejoice in God’s goodness:

*You have put more joy in my heart
than they have when their grain and wine abound.*

The greatest pleasures this world can offer – here represented as an abundance of grain and wine, a great harvest and a great harvest feast – are but passing in duration and superficial in their effect. They can only do so much for so long. They are powerless to address the deepest needs of our souls or to last longer than a season.

To know we are forgiven of all of our sins – past, present, and future – and to know that the God of the Universe loves us and has adopted us as His own dearly loved children, has reserved a place for us in His house forever, is with us always, and always looks upon us with perfect wisdom and fatherly care is something nothing in this world could ever begin to match. These joys are seen with the eyes of faith and they are the best, deepest and most lasting joys. David can be fleeing from his enemies in the desert wilderness of Judea, hungry and thirsty and exhausted, and knowing who God is and who he is in the Lord brings him more joy than the greatest harvest festival.

2. For Peace and Rest, v. 8

Reminded of the goodness of the Lord and His surpassing joy, David now has peace and is able to sleep:

*In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

When we're in distress, feeling squeezed by life, we can be tempted to just worry and worry and try to solve our own problems. We can try to enlarge our own place, to figure things out, and give ourselves rest. That usually doesn't work, does it?

Think about what David did – pray to the Lord, preach the Gospel, worship, rejoice, and rest. This is what we need to be doing: Intentionally seeking the Lord, rehearsing who He is and what He has done for us, preaching the Gospel to ourselves, worshipping the Lord, giving thanks to Him for His kindness and goodness, and resting in His secure keeping. In His peace alone, we can both lie down and sleep. He alone is the Lord and He alone makes us dwell in safety.