



Catalog No. 7242
 Psalm 4
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 December 31st, 2006

BE ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

The dawning of a New Year has a way of making us pause to reflect on the kind of lives we have been living, whether they have been good or evil, significant or aimless. Even this valley, which thrives on non-stop activity and seldom gives time for self-examination, slows its feverish pace for a few days to engage in that rare discipline called “reflection.”

This past week sharply magnified that process with the death of two world leaders in circumstances that could not have been more different. One lived his life with faith, simplicity and integrity. He never sought the office he was given, and his death brought a plethora of praise. The other rose to power as a torturer who raped his country’s wealth and murdered any and all who opposed him, for which he was executed. The sharp juxtaposition of these two lives makes us wonder how will we be remembered. The older I get the more sensitized I become to the wrongs and damage I have done to others, even for things I once thought were invested with good intentions. The words of T. S. Eliot ring so true:

Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age...
 And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
 Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
 Of things ill done and done to others’ harm
 Which once you took for exercise of virtue.¹

As I consider the years I have left to live for God and perhaps make a difference there is one thing I long for, and that is to learn how to pray. My favorite book in the Bible is the Psalms. I love the Psalms for several reasons. First, because they are short. With my attention deficit disorder, I can actually digest a Psalm. Second, they are honest. I detest “pancake” religion that consists of nothing but layers of fluff soaked in syrup. Fifty of the one hundred and fifty Psalms are lament poems that give voice to every tension of David’s soul. Third, they are Royal. “They allow us to hear the most intimate thoughts of Israel’s greatest king.”² Fourth, the Psalms are Messianic. David’s voice in these Psalms prepared our Lord for his life and ministry and gave him a voice to pray. So why would we go anywhere else to learn how to pray? And what greater legacy could we leave for the next generation than our prayers?

This morning I would like us to examine one of the opening psalms in the Psalter, Psalm 4, where David enters into one of the greatest gifts that prayer has to offer.

For the director of music. With stringed instruments.
 A psalm of David.

Answer me when I call to you,
 O my righteous God.
 Give me relief from my distress;
 be merciful to me and hear my prayer.

How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame?
 How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

Selah

Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;
 the LORD will hear when I call to him.

In your anger do not sin;
 when you are on your beds,
 search your hearts and be silent.

Selah

Offer right sacrifices
 and trust in the LORD.

Many are asking, “Who can show us any good?”
 Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD.
 You have filled my heart with greater joy
 than when their grain and new wine abound.
 I will lie down and sleep in peace,
 for you alone, O LORD,
 make me dwell in safety. (Psalm 4 NIV)

The Historical Crisis

Reading the Psalm, it is clear the king is facing a monumental crisis that calls into question his spiritual leadership of the nation. The exact nature of the crisis is a bit more difficult to discover, since David fails to mention the names of any specific enemies.³ But there are clues within the Psalm that can help us piece together the specifics of his distress. In verses 6-7 he says that the faithful are asking, “Who will show us any good?” The question is, What is the “good” that they are looking for?

In response to their request, David mentions grain and new wine abounding as the result of God’s gracious countenance once again shining upon them. This suggests that the crisis that David is confronting is a severe drought, with the resultant threat of widespread famine. Other illustrations in the Scriptures where the term “good” is used in parallel with God’s gift of “rain” and the resulting harvest that ensues confirm this interpretation.

Indeed, the LORD will give what is *good*,
 And our land will yield its *produce*. (Ps 85:12)

They do not say to themselves, “Let us fear the LORD our God,
 who gives *autumn and spring rains* in season,
 who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest.”
 Your wrongdoings have kept these away;
 your sins have deprived you of *good*. (Jer 5:24-25)

When Solomon dedicates the temple, he lists several different situations when the king, as God’s anointed, is invited to petition God for forgiveness on behalf of the nation.

When the heavens are shut up and there is *no rain*, because they have sinned against You, and they pray toward this place and confess Your name and turn from their sin when You afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of Your servants and of

Your people Israel, indeed, *teach them the good way in which they should walk. And send rain on Your land, which You have given Your people for an inheritance.* (1 Kgs 8:35-36 NASB)

When God answered the prayers of his king, not only would the people be healed from whatever affliction the Lord had brought on them, but the special relationship that the king had with God as his anointed would be confirmed. Faithfully answering the prayers of his king was God's way of elevating his anointed both in Israel and before the nations.

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD:

He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father.

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." (Ps 2:7,8)

In David's case, however, it seems as if his prayers had fallen on deaf ears. He called out to God for rain, and no rain was forthcoming. David, in obedience to God, prayed for the right thing ("rain"), the right way ("trust in God") and yet it seemed not to work. Worse yet, as a result of God's delay, many lost confidence in David's spiritual leadership and began to defect from his administration. Having lost confidence in the prayers of God's "son," they turned to the world's ways of idolatrous manipulation through false fertility gods such as Baal, the Canaanite deity of rain. Now, not only must David cope with his own personal stress of not being able to comprehend the mystery of God's ways that seemed to contradict his promises, as a public figure he must also endure his reputation being maligned by the stinging betrayal of those closest to him. What does God's servant-leader do with this kind of stress?

Consider our Lord, the greater Son of David, and how David's words prepared him to face his betrayal and mockery.

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matt 27:41-43)

By faith, we who trust in Christ are all adopted in Christ as "sons of God" (Gal 3:26) and, like the king, we too are invited to pray and intercede for God's people and the nations. In the New Covenant we are invited to pray not just for rain, but what rain symbolizes, the life of God's Holy Spirit pouring down from heaven (Joel 2:28-29). In the age of the Spirit we are encouraged to pray for "the salvation of all men," from our family members to kings and rulers, for "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:3-4). We pray too for a fresh supply of the Spirit to strengthen us, equip us and bear fruit for God. Yet, like David, we find that God sometimes appears silent and deaf to prayers. Over time we may question our calling and become susceptible to the powerful and influential who tempt us with pragmatic religion and manipulation. Perhaps "waiting" on God is the most difficult spiritual discipline to master.

David's psalm is instructive for us when we are faced with such situations. Confronted by the pain of failed prayer, fickle friends and a doubting populace, he goes through a deliberate, four-step process to re-orient his spiritual compass. First, he renews his trust in God through prayer; second, he courageously rebukes those who have lost faith in him; third, he gives a reflection to the faithful; and finally, he

gives voice to his renewed confidence in God. The prayer is shaped in a chiasmic abxb'a' structure. At the center (vs. 4-5) of the psalm is David's call to repentance.

A David's Address and Petition to God (1)

B David's Rebuke to the Faithless (2-3)

X Call to Repentance (4-5)

B' David's Reflection for the Faithful (6-7)

A' David's Confidence and Praise to God (8)

I. David's Address and Petition to God (4:1)

Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God.

Give me relief from my distress;

be merciful to me and hear my prayer. (Psalm 4:1)

In David's address and petition we can feel the depth of his disorientation and distress by the number of "I" morphemes ("I," "my," "me") he uses. Of the ten Hebrew words that make up the first verse, seven contain "I" morphemes. David is admittedly overwhelmed and self-consumed. The call for God to be attentive and to give him a fresh supply of grace⁴ comes from the depths of his being.

David describes both his distress and the relief he needs in spatial terms. "Distress" (*tzar*) speaks of the anguish that results from being hemmed in or trapped in a narrow place with no exit. It speaks of a restricting, claustrophobic experience. His request for God "to give relief" (*rachab*) is literally "make room for me" where he can breathe freely. The metaphor may have originated with Isaac, when he was trying to re-establish himself in the land by reopening the wells his father Abraham had dug. His first two attempts were met with fierce opposition by the Philistines, who insisted on claiming the water. Isaac reluctantly conceded, moved on and dug a third well. When no one quarreled over it, he named it *Rehoboth* ("roomy place") and proclaimed, "Now the LORD *has given us room (rachab)* and we will flourish in the land" (Gen 26:22). In like manner, David longs for psychological freedom to move about free from anxiety.

In the face of his distress, David falls back on his covenantal relationship with God as the basis and motive for his appeal. God is his "righteous God"; in other words, "He is the one who keeps his covenantal promises." God was pleased to commit himself to David. He chose him as his "son" (i.e. his king) according to free, gracious choice. David revels in this special relationship, calling it "my glory." So it is only right for David to ask God to publicly vindicate him, for God's reputation is on the line.

By the same token, it is just as important that David go nowhere else to address his pain. To go elsewhere for support and confidence in the midst of crisis would be for him to break covenant relationship with his God. It is not wrong for us to use "means," but our ultimate source of confidence and support must be God. Perhaps this year we can make the Lord our first line of defense in all things by praying to him before we seek comfort and relief from any other source.

In a string of seven imperatives, David now leads these idolaters in repentance through three steps designed to restore their relationship with God and his king.

II. David's Rebuke to the Faithless (4:2-3)

How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame?

How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Selah

Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;

the LORD will hear when I call to him. (4:2-3)

David's painful cry to God renews his confidence and fortifies his assailed spirit with courage to confront his enemies who are trampling his "glory" (i.e. his reputation as God's son) into the ground. The term "O men" is a reference to "those of elevated social rank and position in contrast to those of more humble station" (Ps 49:2; 62:9; Isa 2:9; 5:15). These are the rich and powerful in Israel, some of whom may have been in David's elite inner circle or cabinet. Because of their inability to wait on God to answer David's prayers for rain, they gave up on God and sought gods they could see and manipulate to get life.

It's often difficult for the wealthy and influential to wait patiently for God to act when needs seem to go unmet and they have no end of resources and connections they can enlist to manipulate change. I can easily identify here. The more resources I have, I find I am much quicker to rely on them to meet needs and solve problems instead of waiting on God in prayer. In utter dismay, David's "How long?" condemns their betrayal which has trampled the king's glory in the ground. Their misplaced affections are a lie that leads to a dead end called "emptiness."

With uncanny courage, David informs these rebels that absolutely nothing has changed in his relationship with God. "Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself," states the truth in the strongest covenantal language possible. The word "set apart" (*palab*) means to treat a person or group with such distinction and excellence that they become a public stage to display God's power and presence. As Elmer Martens explains,

Most of the seven occurrences of *plb* in the OT point not only to some distinctive dealing with a person or group but to a distinctive dealing revelatory of God's presence and power. Moses, following the incident of the golden calf, argues with God that God's failure to accompany his people will mean loss of the people's distinctive position. "What else (apart from your accompanying us) will distinguish (*palab*) me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exod 33:16). Israel is marked out as a people by the reality of God's presence with them.⁶

These defectors are to know in no uncertain terms that God's present silence in no way suggests that he does not hear David's prayers.

How did David have such confidence to know that he was indeed the "son of God," king of Israel? Bruce Waltke gives three crucial indications:

1. First there was the prophetic word of Samuel, the prophet. Somehow or other the word of that holy man came to him with such efficacious power that he believed it and risked everything on it. And in the same way the word of God comes to us in a moment of time with such conviction that we cannot escape it. We believe and respond, and we risk our entire life upon the moment when we once heard so clearly the voice of God setting us apart.
2. Secondly, there was the Spirit of God accompanying the prophetic word to David. Just think that if the anointing of the Spirit on David was enough to give his adherers and followers faith, how much more for us who live in the Messianic age of reality with our King, who was born of a virgin, Son of God in the fullest sense, who had the prophetic word of John the Baptist testifying to God's presence. What reason we have to be confident, therefore, in this age of prayer – know your King!
3. Thirdly, David did works of righteousness in the power of this Spirit. And so did Christ. As Peter told Cornelius in Caesarea,

You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached — how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:37-38)⁷

And I would add, we too have that same Spirit testifying within our hearts that we are indeed true sons. As Paul testifies, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Gal 4:6).

III. The Call to Repentance (4:4-5)

Tremble, and do not sin; [NASB]

when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

Selah

Offer right sacrifices

and trust in the LORD. (4:4-5)

With three pairs of imperatives, David now leads his defectors step by step into the process of repentance. The first two, "Tremble and do not sin,"⁸ put an abrupt halt to the path they are taking. The word "tremble" (*ragaz*) means to "shake or quake," and is often used in the context of some impending disaster, or the wrath of God (2 Sam 22:8; Ps 18:7; Amos 8:8). It is as if David is holding up a huge STOP sign, for if they don't change their way, they are about to go over a cliff!

In the second pair of imperatives David addresses their hearts. He resists the temptation of offering repentance that is too easy, emotionally based or ill conceived. It is all too common for preachers in the emotion of the moment to press for decisions that are ill founded or fail to count the cost. I am impressed that Jesus turned away more than a few eager followers (Matt 8:19-22). So David in his wisdom urges those who have slandered him to get off the public stage and get alone with God at night on their beds, when there are no distractions or competing voices; then they are to shut up for once and listen to God's voice speaking to their hearts. The "silence" he demands is a holy silence and stillness, like Aaron displayed after the death of his sons when they dishonored the Lord (Lev 10:1-3), or like the inhabitants of Canaan, who became as "motionless as stone" (Ex 15:16) when they heard what God did to the Egyptians at the Exodus.

Once they have returned to the Lord in the quietness of their hearts, the third pair of imperatives explains the "right" way they should express their renewed commitment to God. They are to offer "righteous sacrifices," which David defines by the second imperative, not in ritualistic but in relational terms. Whatever sacrifice they offer, it has significance to God only if it arises from their complete trust in the Lord. The term "trust" (*batach*) means to "put one's complete confidence in." It is used of newborns who lay limp at their mother's breast while nursing (Ps 22:9).

Thus David has brought his erring friends full circle in three steps: STOP, LISTEN, YIELD. Now he gives a reflection to the faithful.

IV. David's Reflection to the Faithful (4:6-7)

Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?"

Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD.

You have filled my heart with greater joy

than when their grain and new wine abound. (4:6-7)

David addresses the faithful who have been patiently waiting on God to give them the "good" rain to end the drought and bring them the harvest of their crops. Once more, David prays on their be-

half, but instead of a concluding “Amen,” he offers them a personal reflection. His insight is as surprising to us as it was to him, and in retrospect it is a superior gift than the one they are seeking. He confesses that this painful process of enduring the silence of God, the attack on his identity and the betrayal of his friends, has caused him to depend on God in new ways. Mysteriously, in that “dark night of the soul,” God’s presence penetrated deeper into his soul with more joy than when his blessings are visibly present. The words of St. John of the Cross come to mind:

When the breeze blew from the turret,
as I parted his hair,
it wounded my neck with its gentle hand,
suspending all my senses.
I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.⁹

St. John called it a “night more lovely than the dawn,” because it united him to the One he loved in a way the day could not. This is one of God’s purposes in delaying the answers to our prayers: He longs to give himself to us more than the blessings we seek.

V. David’s Confidence and Praise to God (4:8)

**I will lie down and sleep in peace,
for you alone, O LORD,
make me dwell in safety. (4:8)**

Having made his final petition on behalf of the nation, David is so confident in who God is and who he is as his son, that he is able to lie down and immediately fall asleep. No alcohol and no pills are needed. So while his foes are lying awake, being lectured by God in their hearts for their idolatrous ways, David sleeps undisturbed. The reason he has no anxiety is because of his resounding confidence that the Lord “alone” is his security. The term “security” comes from the same root as the verb “to trust” found in verse 5. It means “to be full of confidence” and thus, “feel safe.” What a glorious picture of a king under attack, unmoved by his opponents, then courageously leading them into repentance, while at the same time leading the faithful into a deeper, more substantial peace than any circumstance can bring about. As Isaiah proclaims, “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, Because he trusts in You” (Isa 26:3).

To me, the most amazing thing that this Psalm proclaims is that we don’t have to withdraw from ordinary life and flee to a monastery to experience the presence of God. Rather, the key is to draw near to God in the midst of the pain of rejection and the conflict of confrontation that life brings our way. As head of state, David didn’t have the option of fleeing to a private retreat for solitude and seclusion. Instead, he faithfully carried out his assigned duties and led God’s people in worship in the midst of a national crisis, and in a few lines of prayer the raging turmoil of his soul was transformed into peaceful sleep.

Perhaps this text was Paul’s inspiration for his word to the church in Philippi when he found himself in similar circumstances: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7 NIV). Paul wrote those words in prison while his life hung in the balance.

The prayer finds its final resting place in Jesus, who perhaps found David’s words echoing within his own heart during those final moments on the cross: “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.” And for us as a nation, the image is so timely and comforting as we stare in holy silence as former President Ford is laid to rest, a leader who placed his full confidence in Christ.

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 54.

² Bruce K. Waltke, “Psalms: Theology of,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:1102.

³ Waltke observes that of the fifty petition (“lament”) psalms in the Psalter, this is one of three that makes no mention of who the enemies are. I am indebted to Bruce for his exegesis on the background of this Psalm (Psalm 4 - unpublished notes) and for many of his insights over the years that have made the Psalms come alive for me. See Bruce K. Waltke, “Psalms: Theology of,” *NIDOTTE*, 4:1100-1115.

⁴ “Be merciful to me” is better translated “be gracious to me.”

⁵ Gerald Wilson, *Psalms* (NIVAC, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1:152.

⁶ E. A. Martens, “*plb*,” *NIDOTTE*, 3:620.

⁷ Waltke, Psalm 4 (unpublished notes).

⁸ “*Tremble* and do not sin” is the translation of the NASB, which seems better than the NIV’s “In your anger do not sin.” “The word means to quake or to quiver and it can mean this is regards to anger or it can mean this with respect to fear. It is the latter emotion that is normally in view and by the parallelism here it seems more correct not to go with the LXX which Paul picked up in Ephesians 4:26.” Waltke, Psalm 4 (unpublished notes).

⁹ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (trans. E. A. Peers: New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1990), 34.