



AN INVITATION TO PRAY¹

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Psalm 4

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Background and Context

We do not know much with certainty about the background or context of Psalm 4. Unlike the header to Psalm 3, which specifies that it was written when David had fled from Absalom, the header to Psalm 4 simply says:

**For the choir director; on stringed instruments.
A Psalm of David.**

Psalm 4 was meant to be sung in accompaniment with musical instruments, and its author is David. That much seems clear. But some who have studied Psalm 4 closely find other clues to the setting of its composition.

Leaning heavily on the fact that the word translated “good” in verse 6 is sometimes clearly used for “rain,” some believe that Psalm 4 was written at a time of drought. The king of Israel had gone before the Lord and asked for rain, but none came. Frustrated, the courtly nobility around the king advocated that sacrifices and prayers be made to other gods besides Yahweh. The king wrote Psalm 4 in response to God and to the nobility at this time of testing, drought, and frustration.

Others believe that Psalm 4 was written at some time when David was in exile – forced away from his home and loved ones by Absalom or perhaps by Saul, giving Psalm 4 the exact same context as Psalm 3. The fact that this psalm comes in the Psalter when it does – i.e. just after Psalm 3 – lends some credence to this possibility. These interpreters see Psalm 4 as coupled with Psalm 3, just like Psalm 2 is with Psalm 1.

As we read through Psalm 4 (NASB), we can sense the validity of both points of view:

**Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
Thou hast relieved me in my distress;
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.
O sons of men, how long will my honor become a reproach?
How long will you love what is worthless and aim at deception? [Selah]
But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself
The Lord hears when I call to Him.
Tremble, and do not sin;
Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. [Selah]
Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,
And trust in the Lord.
Many are saying, “Who will show us any good?”
Lift up the light of Thy countenance upon us, O Lord.
Thou hast put gladness in my heart,
More than when their grain and new wine abound.
In peace I will both lie down and sleep,
For Thou alone, O Lord, dost make me to dwell in safety.²**

In both cases, there are hints from the vocabulary or the context of the Psalm which make both interpretations possible. My own inclination is to see Psalm 4 as being written at very nearly the same time as Psalm 3, i.e. when David had fled from Jerusalem because of the rebellion of Absalom.

But the context may not matter much when it comes to applying Psalm 4 to our lives today, because in either case, God has given us a picture of how to pray, to order our inward being, in times of anxiety, stress, or persecution. He reveals the freedom

we have when we place our hearts before him in prayer. The two most probable contexts for Psalm 4 will provide us with examples and pictures that will help fill out and apply the truths found in this psalm.

The life of prayer

Psalm 4 opens with an interesting cry. Notice its combination of confident declaration of what God has done in the past as well as its sense of urgency about the present:

**Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
Thou hast relieved me in my distress;
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.**

We have a present tense call to God for help, a recognition that God has come to David’s relief in the past, and then another present tense call for help. At first, I found this confusing. But as I reflected over several weeks on this psalm, it became clear to me that the wavering tension found in this verse is a very precise and freeing picture of how I stand before my God. David moves from call to help to statement of fact and faith and back again rapidly and freely because he knows that he is free in his conversation with God. He doesn’t have to be “correct,” he has to be true.

In reflecting on this I found that I do not have this sense of freedom in my conversations with God. Instead, I have fallen into the habit of appearing good before God, of trying to say hard things in the “right way.” I have allowed myself to be ignorant or indecisive before God, but not agitated, frustrated, or impatient. This psalm has begun to give me some of that freedom. But we need to look more closely at David’s words before drawing out this application too far.

First, David calls God the “God of my righteousness.” This phrase means that David’s God is the one who is responsible for the vindication of David. David’s God is David’s savior and redeemer. It is God who steps in and acts to defend, protect, and, in the end, make David righteous. The phrase does not somehow mean that David has stored up enough righteousness or goodness in his spiritual bank account so that God is now free to be his God. The English translations don’t make this point very clear until we get to the second part of the verse:

Thou hast relieved me in my distress;

Literally, David says that God has “enlarged” him, i.e. placed him in a wide-open space, when he was in trouble. The idea here is that troubles close in on one. We use the phrase “boxed in” or “fenced in” or “cornered” sometimes in the same way. But the phrase is used in an unusual way here. Typically, some particular part of the body or psyche accompanies this phrase. One’s mouth is “opened wide” to speak (Ps 35:21) or the heart is made “large enough” so that God’s commands can be obeyed (Ps 119:32). Here, though, David simply says that God has “enlarged” him.

So, David’s prayer begins with a recognition that God is helper and savior, the one who acts to vindicate and make righteous. God does this by making David “big enough” whenever David approaches God in prayer, constantly crying out to be heard. Martin Luther was fascinated by the emotional and spiritual sequence of this prayer. He said:

Therefore the prayer leads to answer, the answer to righteousness, the righteousness to tribulation, the tribulation to consolation...Note carefully, that the end of this verse is not in the "enlargement," so that we may know that for us the end does not consist in this life, but that we must ask and pray for mercy at all times and until death...If we will thus look at [this verse] in the right way, there will not only be prescribed for us the finest way to praise the Lord, but the whole basis for living and praying is here embraced.³

I suspect that for many of you, this seems like no big deal. Some of you have had this kind of freedom in prayer for years. If so, please pray for me as I speak for a moment to those who, like me, need to learn this truth. Put simply, Psalm 4 gives us the freedom to be honest before the Lord. For some, like me, we need to understand the freedom we have to say whatever we wish to God: to complain, to express anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty; to shout for joy or sing; to cry or pout. Freedom of speech with God is fundamental to the psalms, and we will see the theme played out again and again in Psalm 4.

The Daily Temptation of Idolatry

Psalm 4:2 transitions to David speaking with the "sons of men":

**O sons of men, how long will my honor become a reproach?
How long will you love what is worthless and aim at deception? [Selah]**

Who were these "sons of men" and what is David's message to them? In David's life, these men were probably among the nobility or leaders of the ruling families of Israel. The phrase "sons of men" is translated in the Anchor Bible as "O men of rank."⁴ If the context of Psalm 4 is a time of drought during which God has refused to give rain despite the prayers of the king, then these men would be the high ranking leaders in Jerusalem. If the context is exile, then these men would probably be the faithful followers of David, men like Joab or Abishai, the son of Zeruah.

In either case, the problem that David has is twofold. First, his reputation has been ruined. Second, the high-ranking men around him are sinning in response. It may even be that these men are causing the ruin of David's reputation. If we think back to the two most likely contexts for Psalm 4, the picture now becomes clearer.

In a time of drought, David has prayed that God would provide rain, and God has not given it. This is problematic in and of itself, because as the Lord's anointed, the King could reasonably expect mercy and provision from God. Tired of waiting for Yahweh's provision, the leaders of Jerusalem have begun advocating that other gods be sought out who might do what Yahweh has refused to do. Perhaps Baal will provide rain and refreshment to the land! David points out to them that it is not only faithless to the covenant to seek out other gods, but that it brings dishonor to him personally as Yahweh's anointed one. David points out to them that they are engaged in vanity, in seeking out something worthlessly. They are deceived and seeking out deception.

In the second scenario, picture David in flight from Jerusalem. It is evening and the men are pitching their tents. David, exhausted and frustrated, overhears some of his faithful followers plotting revenge against Absalom or Saul. His heart breaks. Yes, things are bad, but this is not the way to make them right. God, not David's revenge-driven friends and followers, will vindicate him. It is useless to struggle against the will of God who has thrown him into exile. His honor, his kingship and all the glory of his power in Jerusalem, is in ruins. This is exceedingly painful. But to plot vengeance against his very own son? This is not only madness but vanity, for God is the one who will vindicate him.

In either situation, there are some general principles to observe. The first is so obvious that David doesn't even have to say it: he cares about his reputation and assumes that it is good and right to do so. The Hebrew word, which is translated as "re-

proach" in the NASB, is *kelimma*. The idea of *kelimma* is public damage or ruin to one's reputation or status. Whatever has happened that caused David to write this psalm, it includes public ridicule and humiliation. He is disgraced. What should be a source of respect and admiration has become a public joke or disgrace. It should be what President Clinton experiences in our society today for his scandalous and very public misconduct. It is a mark of how depraved American society is that there is no *kelimma* for rulers who misbehave. I don't know how we can restore a sense of shame to a society once it has been lost. Like many other social conditions, we probably need to start with our own hearts individually, asking God for forgiveness and renewed purity, and then stepping back to watch our sovereign Lord act.

The second observation is that David knows that idolatry must play no role in the restoration of his honor or reputation. To seek out Baal for rain, or to plot militarily against Absalom or Saul is to engage in idolatry. In the first case, the idolatry is obvious. The second might require more explanation. David confronts the men around him with loving what is worthless and aiming at deception. Interestingly, the Hebrew word which the NASB translates as "worthless," is the same word that is translated as "vain" in Psalm 2:1.

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?

Psalm 2 goes on to explain that the pagan nations are in trouble because they will not submit to the rule of God's anointed one. That is the primary operating principal of idolatry. Anytime I take matters that belong to God into my own hands, I disobey the First Commandment. And David makes us see in Psalm 4 that to turn to man for help when it is God's responsibility to deliver or vindicate is idolatry. But we do this so often! I believe that this is the fuel that feeds the fire of legislation in this country. Recently, there have been several incidents reported in the news about tragic deaths and accidents at amusement parks. It was fascinating to see how many seconds it took before the media began reporting the cries for government oversight and legislation in this area. How quick we are to turn to human institutions for protection! How automatically we assume that the power of man is adequate to protect us from the dangers of life and death! How foolish we are.

The Storm before the Calm

No one knows for sure what the little word *selah* means, which is found throughout the psalms. It certainly seems to contain the notion of a pause. But what pauses? Is it a place for voices to pause while instruments continue to play when the psalms are sung? Is it a place for silence altogether between choruses or verses? Often it appears that there is a pause in the tone or content of the psalm. The appearance of *selah* here at the end of Psalm 4:2 does appear to indicate a pause or change in David's tone. Psalm 4:2 has a note of desperation and confrontation in it. But after the *selah*, there is serenity in the assertions that are made:

[Selah]

But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself

The Lord hears when I call to Him.

Tremble, and do not sin;

Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. [Selah]

Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,

And trust in the Lord.

When we come to Psalm 4:3-5 we reach the center of the psalm's dynamic. Still speaking to the companions around him, the "sons of men," David makes some startling claims. First he states the basis for the restoration of his ruined reputation: God has set him apart for Himself. The result of this distinction is that God hears his prayers.

Let's go back to the two most likely contexts for Psalm 4 again. In the drought context, these verses mark the reassertion of

David's confidence in his role as God's holy one. The king has been set aside by the Lord and hears his prayers. Therefore, the high-ranking men are reminded that the appropriate response to the drought is not idolatry, but submission to the Lord by trusting in his anointed one. Trust in God's ability to act, says David. Pour out your anxiety about the drought to God on your bed and after that be quiet. Do not engage in idolatrous sacrifices, but rather worship God with integrity and trust him.

In the exile scenario, we can see David before his loyal but over-anxious followers. He reminds them of who he is – a man set apart by God for himself. God hears his prayers. They need to trust that God will act, will vindicate the one he has set apart for himself. There is nothing wrong with being agitated or concerned, but the best thing they can do in this awful struggle against Absalom (or Saul) is to pour out their concerns in prayer on their beds before God and then silently wait for him to act. It will only make things worse to plot and scheme, for this would be idolatry.

In verse 3, David makes one of the most audacious claims any man can make. He not only calls himself godly, but he insists that the people around realize (that they know) that God has set David apart for himself. When David makes a statement like this I am overwhelmed. Either this is confidence and boastfulness on an unprecedented level, or the deepest and profoundest of truths. Can you imagine saying these words yourself? Think back to a time when things were especially difficult for you, when your very reputation (everything that was good, right, and honorable about you) had been called (perhaps with some justification) into question. You approach one of those involved in all of the turmoil swirling around you and say, "Excuse me, I want you to know something. God, the creator of the entire universe, has set me apart as something special. He has put his very own distinguishing mark upon me. He listens to me when I pray to him. Just wanted you to know."

This kind of confidence comes from deep inner communion with God. David found this in the midst of trouble, on his bed before his Lord. He offers the same approach to us:

**Tremble, and do not sin;
Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. [Selah]**

The Revised Standard Version translates the first part of verse 4 in a way that some of you might recognize:

Be angry, but sin not.

Paul quotes these words in Ephesians 4,

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil (4:26-27, RSV).

Most of my life, I have understood these words in Ephesians to mean that having a divine or righteous anger is not sinful. Anger at sin, but not the sinner, is fine. Just don't let that anger lead you into sin. In fact, don't end your day with any of that anger still in your heart. Fix the relationship in which there is anger as promptly as possible.

While I think there is much truth in this interpretation, I also think that Paul has taken David's words from Psalm 4 in a particularly focused or applied way. What David is communicating in Psalm 4 is how we should respond to the temptation we face every day to take our lives into our own hands. He is instructing us in handling idolatry. First we are to realize who we are, for like David, we have been set apart by God in Christ. This distinction allows us to face the turmoil in our hearts in a refreshingly ironic way. When we tempted by idolatry, David invites us into stillness. We are commanded to take the temptation to idolatry up into our bedrooms, close the door, and pour out all the emotion, drama, and tension in our hearts to God. Then we should be still. It would not be unfair to say that David is telling us to "shut up," except that this kind of stillness happens without having to be told.

Ephesians 4:26 is probably most helpful to those who struggle with anger. Anger is one way of taking matters into our own hands, and Paul selects this one temptation as the one to warn and remind the Ephesians against. If you are someone who finds yourself in a state of anger (be it the quiet, smoldering type or the violently explosive type), then you would do well to practice the rhythm and process of Psalm 4. Take advantage of the acceptance and mercy found in God's forgiveness. Remember his deliverance of you in the past. Pour out your angry heart to him in prayer. Remember, you agitation is not too difficult or too big for God.

One of the reasons that in the end I think David's exile from Jerusalem in the days of Absalom's rebellion is the context of Psalm 4 is the echo that verse 4 finds in 2 Samuel 18:33. When the moment seemed right, David sent out an army against the forces of Absalom. David had given strict orders that Absalom himself was not to be harmed. But Joab took matters into his own hands and made sure that this rebellious threat to David's throne was taken care of once and for all. Runners are dispatched to inform David of the news of his army's victory and in the highly dramatized narrative David learns that Absalom is dead. Do you remember David's reaction? The text says:

And the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam 18:33)

The Hebrew word which the RSV here translates as "deeply moved" is the same word we have in Psalm 4:4 for "tremble." But look at the other parallel. David retreated into his chamber just like Psalm 4:4 says, "Meditate in your heart upon your bed."

We are talking about very profound emotional expression here. This is deep agony and loss. David is crying out in anguish. Some medieval commentators made parallels between the story of David and Absalom and the story of Jesus and Judas. When Jesus struggled in deep prayer agony in Gethsemane, just before Judas betrayed him, this too was the kind of anguish that God welcomes, invites, indeed commands for us to bring to him in prayer.

I find this tremendously freeing. The God of the universe invites my emotional reaction to life in prayer. It is the prelude to stillness of heart when God freely moves in to cleanse and change me. I am usually so busy trying to clean up my act before I appear before God that I have no honesty of emotion left by the time I get to prayer. I get everything all neatly arranged and theologically correct first, then I talk to the Lord. But it's too late by then. My real concerns and agonies are stuffed down in my heart and covered up by masks and appearances.⁵

God must find all this somewhat amusing. Here is this little boy, covered with dirt and muck. His has a black eye and big cuts on his knees and elbows. His face has dirt all over it. So before going in to see his father, he spits on his hands and rubs his face. All this does is spread the mess out more evenly around his entire face. But the boy is completely deceived because he cannot see himself. He thinks that by spitting on his hands and wiping his face he is making himself more presentable because he is somehow covering up the mess. This is what it is like to be dishonest with God in prayer. If we try to make ourselves look better by our own efforts, then we just make things worse. Better to go and tell the Father that we know we are a mess; that we don't like being a mess; that we are frustrated and even angry about being a mess. But we are a mess, and we know that we are totally unable to clean ourselves up.

David then presents us with a mystery – the mystery of quiet stillness:

Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. [Selah]

After the wavering of emotion and resolution of verse 1, this part of verse 4 struck me most powerfully as I considered the dynamics in Psalm 4. What a blessed thing this is—this calm after the

storm. The Hebrew word which the NASB translates as “still” is *damam*, the same word that the writer of Joshua used to describe the sun which stood still at God’s command for Joshua as the Israelites slaughtered the confederation of southern kings in their conquest of the Promised Land. It seems to be a waiting, meditative silence, one that waits while God works. That is what is promised to us. If we will pour out our hearts to the Lord in prayer, he will give us silence, in which he works in miraculous ways.

Then, and only then, do we come to the command in Psalm 4 which implies any kind of traditional religious performance or action:

**Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,
And trust in the Lord.**

The only other time that this phrase is used in the Old Testament that I could find is in Psalm 51. This is David’s great psalm of confession after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of his good friend Uriah the Hittite. The usage of the phrase occurs at the end of Psalm 51, after the insights David has gained into God’s grace and forgiveness; after his realization that the true sacrifice God requires is that of a broken and confessing heart. Then the ritual performance of sacrifice becomes a reasonable act of worship. But, as David learned from God and then revealed in Psalm 51, the sacrifice that God wants is our broken and sorrowful hearts. In Psalm 4, David’s “sacrifice of righteousness” explores more deeply how we get to the point of being able to offer the sacrifice at all. He finds that the time for sacrifice comes only after he has struggled long in prayer and after God has given him profound, healing insights – that is, after God has enlarged him.

A New Perspective

In verses 6-8, David returns to his meditations before the Lord. He is finished speaking to the “sons of men.” He ponders the significance of what he has said, and what the Lord has showed him about prayer and the temptation to idolatry. His musing gives him a new perspective on some of the deepest concerns of life: What is material blessing for? How can I be happy? How can we be secure? Using wonderful images, David says,

**Many are saying, “Who will show us any good?”
Lift up the light of Thy countenance upon us, O Lord.
Thou hast put gladness in my heart,
More than when their grain and new wine abound.
In peace I will both lie down and sleep,
For Thou alone, O Lord, dost make me to dwell in safety.**

These verses contain the best evidence for thinking that the historical context for Psalm 4 is a period of drought and unanswered prayer. Some OT scholars think the Hebrew word translated as “good” in verse 6 is used as a synonym for “rain” in Deuteronomy 28:12, Jeremiah 5:25; 17:6, and Psalm 85:13.⁶ And, the reference to agricultural abundance certainly makes more sense in this context than in the more military context of exile from either Absalom or Saul.

Whatever the correct immediate historical context, we can see the contrast that David is making. Those around him are asking where good things come from. The addition of the word “any” before good in verse 6 is unwarranted. (Note that “any” is in italics in the NASB, indicating that the translators are adding the word to the translation even though it is not actually present in the original text. The RSV translation, “There are many who say, ‘O that we might see some good!’” is a little better.) The question on the table is, where does good come from? Who gives it? To whom can we turn when we need the good things in life? David has no doubt as to the answer – it comes from the light of God’s face shining upon us.

There reminds me of a debate I hear in some Christian circles about mysticism. Actually, it’s not much of a debate, for the word “mysticism” is almost always used as a criticism, and is meant to

show evidence of a lack of rationality and mental stability. I want to say clearly right here and now that I love mysticism. The word of God is full of mysteries and images that appeal to much more than the puny faculties of man’s mere reason. For those of you who want to hold on to rationality alone and deny the vitality of mysticism, you had better stay away from the Psalms. Look at what David has just said. Men around him, intelligent men, leaders in the world of his day, are wondering what the source of good is. We don’t know for sure if they are wondering about when rain will come so that crops will grow; or if a particular military strategy will restore their king to his throne; or how some other earthy, pragmatic issue will be resolved. David’s response is certainly not rational in the usual sense: “Let the light of God’s face shine upon you, then you will have good!”

In the Middle Ages, the version of the Bible that was used most often had this verse as:

Stamped [or sealed] upon us is the light of your face, Lord.

The Latin word used to describe how the mark of the light of God’s face rests upon us is the same as the word used to describe how images were placed on coins. I appreciated this image because it gave me a new, pictorial way to understand the way God appears to others in my life. We are like coins that has God’s image stamped upon them, as obvious as the image of Thomas Jefferson on a nickel or Abraham Lincoln on a penny. Sin has marred the image. It is as if someone had placed the coin on a train track and let the train run over it. Have you ever seen a coin that has undergone that treatment? The results are unpredictable, but you can bet that the image is no longer clear. Sometimes it is unrecognizable. But usually it is just grossly distorted: stretched, scratched, out of proportion. That’s how the image of God in us appears most often to those around us. But in Psalm 4, David says that the effect of God’s brilliant, shining face upon us is obvious to others when we turn to God for all good things. After the long struggle of prayer and the difficult interactions of daily life with the “sons of men” who would have us run to idolatry, to take all matters into our own hands, if we will but turn our marred faces towards God’s face, then his radiance will shine upon us, giving light to all around.

Verse 8 makes another incredible claim:

**Thou hast put gladness in my heart,
More than when their grain and new wine abound.**

With the light of God’s countenance upon us, we can experience a kind of happiness that is unexpectedly profound. I was moved by this claim when I pondered the joy that I have seen when people deeply enjoy the basic sustenance of life, for that is what David is referring to when he mentions the abounding of grain and new wine. When our third child, Jeremy, was born he did not flourish. Betsy, my wife, was unable, despite heroic efforts, to supply enough nourishment for Jeremy through breastfeeding. Finally, we decided that some kind of supplement was necessary. I will never forget watching Jeremy latch onto that first bottle. The intensity of his receptiveness to the nourishment in that bottle was almost tangible. His whole body was attentive, tuned in, plugged in, turned on. If he had been older, he would surely have had expressions of happiness to share. For Jeremy, grain and wine were abounding.

Yet David knows an even deeper gladness, an even deeper reception of inner joy. I have to leave David to this one, for I cannot claim much in the way of personal experience to share here. In fact, I was shamed by this verse. I think that the kind of gladness that David is talking about is exciting and energizing. Do I really experience this often when God turns the light of his countenance on me? Do I really rejoice more in heart than do pagans who enjoy the good things this life has to offer? As I pondered this, I was led back to prayer, and there I remain, seeking out the gift of God in a new area of my life.

Finally, we come to verse 9 and the last claim that David

makes at the end of his meditation on what God does with us in prayer:

**In peace I will both lie down and sleep,
For Thou alone, O Lord, dost make me to dwell in safety.**

David realizes that ultimate peace, the kind that can make him lie down and rest securely, comes uniquely from our magnificent Lord. Picture David in the Judean wilderness. While in exile from Absalom, it was always possible that an army would be sent out to destroy him. Day and night, his life was in danger. Yet he could sleep securely. My family just finished reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* together. At the very beginning of the book, Tom and his friend Huck Finn are secret witnesses to a murder. In the background of all the wonderful, boyish adventures of the book, the figure of the murderer, Injun Joe, looms, increasing the tension and drama in Mark Twain's account of quiet country life along the Mississippi River. It isn't until Injun Joe has died that both Tom and Huck can really sleep securely. Twain describes how Tom felt when Injun Joe was found dead in the cave that Tom had just escaped from:

Tom was touched, for he knew by his own experience how this wretch had suffered. His pity was moved, but nevertheless, he felt an abounding sense of relief and security, now, which revealed to him in a degree which he had not fully appreciated before how vast a weight of dread had been lying upon him.⁷

The good news that David gives us is that we don't have to wait until the "death of Injun Joe" before we can know true, lasting security. The reason for this is simple: it is God alone who provides the security. It does not come from the world of men and is not created by man. It is a gift from God, and we are most likely to realize it after much prayer; while battling bitter tribulation and the betrayal of friends; and in the face of a thousand temptations to worship ourselves as idols, taking fate into our own hands.

Augustine Applies Psalm 4

In closing, I want to share with you a little gift from God that he made for me over 1500 years ago in Italy. It's not every day that one of your heroes speaks directly to you – especially when he has been dead for fifteen centuries. But that is exactly what happened to me as I was reading through Augustine's commentary on Psalm 4. Through one of the translator's footnotes I came upon an extended example of how Augustine had used Psalm 4 in prayer at one of the many important turning points in his life. The situation was this:

Augustine, at about age 35, had been involved in a cult group called the Manicheans for many years. He had gradually become disenchanted with the group's teachings and had found, at nearly the same time, renewed interest in Christianity, through the sermons of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, and in the teachings of Plato, through the writings of Cicero and others. Professionally, he was increasingly frustrated. As Professor of Rhetoric in Milan, which at this time was the capital of the western part of the Roman Empire, he had found that even at the empire's nerve center he had to put up with the antics of students and bored aristocratic children. He was sick, primarily with extended bouts of toothache, which could reduce him to absolute silence, as the pain caused by speaking was too great. He also suffered some sort of disease in his chest. Not a great situation for one whose professional duty was to make, as well as to teach about making, speeches.⁸

Spurred on by the Neoplatonic ideal of living a philosopher's life of retreat from the world in exploration of wisdom, Augustine, with family and some friends, bought an estate in Cassiacum, a town at the foot of the Italian Alps. Here Augustine

would abandon his profession and his cult, and Psalm 4 was instrumental in his setting aside of Manicheanism. Listen to his words:

My God, how I cried to you when I read the Psalms of David, songs of faith, utterances of devotion which allow no pride of spirit to enter in...How I cried out to you in those Psalms, and how they kindled my love for you! I was fired by an enthusiasm to recite them, were it possible, to the entire world in protest against the pride of the human race. Yet they are being sung in all the world and 'there is none who can hide himself from your heat' (Psalm 18:7). What vehement and bitter anger I felt against the Manichees...As I read the fourth Psalm during that period of contemplation, I would have liked them to be somewhere nearby without me knowing they were there, watching my face and hearing my cries, to see what that Psalm had done to me.

He prayed through Psalm 4, applying every verse to his desire for complete freedom from the Manichees. He used the psalm to cry out in confession before God that he had been deceived and blinded by their errors.

So I figured, if Augustine used the psalms in prayer this way, maybe I ought to give it a try too. For those of you who already use Scripture this way, please forgive the enthusiasm of a newcomer. The experience was profound. There is something about using God's very own words as a guide in prayer. It somehow kept my prayer "on track" – always driving me to confess deeper and deeper things to God, revealing more and more of my heart to him. In addition, it gave me incredible freedom to express my wavering, imperfect thoughts and emotions – those same thoughts and emotions that I typically try to clean up before approaching God.

I do not offer what I have done as a prayer recipe for you to follow. According to my notes, it took me several days to pray through Psalm 4, and I wrote everything out. In this, I do not think I was simply copying Augustine, but was doing what I always do – for I love to write, even though it is slow and cumbersome. Someday, I would like to move beyond writing, to verbal or silent meditation on the Scriptures that are fully memorized in my heart. But this is a place in prayer that I am a long way from even though I long to get there some day.

I know of two issues that were resolved through that time of prayer in Psalm 4. One had to do with a feeling that I had been cheated in a situation at work. The other had to do with increasing my sensitivity to what it means to have one's reputation wrongly and viciously attacked. What a dilemma this is! To respond to slander against your reputation is almost certainly to risk the sin of pride and idolatry. And yet, reputation is precious, and we are commanded to protect our neighbor's reputation in the Ten Commandments.

I don't know what you will find if you take one of the psalms and read them out before the Lord, applying each verse to some situation or problem that you face. I found compassion and peace, longing and heartache, a renewed sense that living in this world is transitory and temporary. I felt tremendous freedom by entering into the structure of the psalm. I felt humbled and yet glorified by how much God cares about his holy ones, whom he has set aside for himself. In many places I saw myself as a hiker along a low line of hills, knowing that there were peaks and hidden valleys of unbelievable beauty that I would love to see, but might never get to. Beyond the mountains, though, the sun was rising, and that sunrise will be truly glorious in that day when I am lifted out valleys and mountain paths and am face to face with the Lord, the one who alone, uniquely, makes me dwell securely. Make that day soon, Lord. Maranatha.

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