

Psalm 4

I. “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!”

Once again, the Lord’s anointed is in distress. Remember, this is the *king* who prays. The one in distress is the one to whom God made this promise: “You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” And yet for all this, the royal son of Yahweh finds himself once again in distress. The Hebrew word for “distress” could be translated more literally “in a *tight* place,” “in *narrow* straights,” “*hemmed in* on every side.” The same word is used in Numbers 22:26 –

- ✓ Numbers 22:26 (cf. Job 41:15; Prov. 23:27) — Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a *narrow place*, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.

The psalmist remembers that in previous times when he was in a tight place, God gave him “relief.” The Hebrew word for relief literally refers to something that’s been *enlarged, widened, broadened, opened*. So when the psalmist was in a tight place, hemmed in on every side, God brought him out into a wide place of openness. Psalm 18 says:

- ✓ Psalm 18:6, 19 — In my *distress* I called upon the LORD... He brought me out into a *broad place*.

When the king was in distress, God gave him relief. And now the king is in distress again. But what is it now? What is it this time? “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!” Here’s our first clue as to why the king is in distress. What does he mean by the “God *of my righteousness*”? Psalm 24 says:

- ✓ Psalm 24:3–5 (cf. 37:1, 5–6) — Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will *receive* blessing from the LORD and *righteousness* from the God *of his salvation*.

In the Psalms, the righteousness that we *receive* from the Lord is really God’s *faithfulness* to His covenant – to His promise to save, and reward, and bless those who trust in Him and walk in His ways. So here in Psalm 4 when the psalmist prays: “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness,” it’s as though he’s really saying this: “O God of my righteousness, declare for all to hear the *rightness* of my cause!” “O God of my righteousness... display for all to see the *rightness* of my ways!” We’ll see as we go on that his point really seems to be this: “Vindicate before all the people my trust in You... show that my trust in you is not misplaced!”

The king cries out *boldly* because of God’s covenant *promise* (Psalm 2): “Answer me when I call, O God of my *righteousness*!” But he also cries out in humility because God’s covenant promise is wholly *undeserved*: “Be *gracious* to me and hear my prayer.” And now just when we expect to hear his prayer to the LORD, the psalmist suddenly turns to address, not the Lord, but someone else.

II. “O sons of men, how long shall *my glory* be turned into shame?”

Just in the last chapter, the psalmist prayed:

✓ Psalm 3:3 — But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, *my glory*, and the lifter of my head.

YAHWEH is the psalmist’s glory because Yahweh is the one who lifts his head – who provides, and leads, and delivers, and saves (cf. Psalm 62:7).^{*} As the psalmist’s glory, YAHWEH is the one on whom he *depends*, and in whom he *trusts*. As the psalmist’s glory, YAHWEH is the one he is always counting on.

✓ Psalm 62:7 — On God rests my salvation and *my glory*; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

But there were those who would turn the psalmist’s “glory” into “shame.” The idea seems to be that there were people who mocked the psalmist’s confidence in God. They argued that his trust was misplaced, and that he would ultimately be disappointed. We’ll see in a minute that they also argued that all the *evidence* only proved their point.

And who were these people who would turn the psalmist’s glory into shame? “*O sons of men, how long shall my glory be turned into shame?*” In two other places in the Psalms, “sons of men” are specifically men of rank and high degree.[†] So it seems like the king is being opposed by some of the highest placed and most influential people in the covenant community. Those who should have been supporting the king in his reliance upon God, those who should have been helping to lead the people into the same kind of trust and dependence upon God, are actually undermining and questioning, and even mocking the king’s confidence in God. Some are suggesting that God isn’t enough, and that it’s time to take other measures. Maybe it’s time to make an alliance with a foreign nation? Maybe it’s time to turn to a foreign god? So the psalmist goes on to ask this question:

III. “How long will you love what is worthless[‡] and seek after lies?” Selah

How long will you love what is vain, and empty, and useless? It’s as though the Psalmist is saying to all the high men of rank, “Right back at you! You would turn my glory into shame, but

^{*} In every other place in the Psalms where the phrase “my glory” appears, the sense of glory seems to be “soul,” “life,” or “innermost being” (7:5; 16:9; 30:12; 57:8; 108:1). I do not think it likely that the Hebrew “kabod” refers in any of these instances to one’s “honor” or “reputation.” (contra many versions and commentators) The following passage also lends support to our interpretation of Psalm 4:2 especially in light of “my glory” being turned into “shame.” Psalm 106:19–21 (NASB; cf. Jer. 2:11) - They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a molten image. Thus they *exchanged their glory* for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt.

[†] Psalm 49:2 — ... both low [lit. “sons of Adam”] and high [lit. “sons of men”], rich and poor...; Psalm 62:9 — Those of low estate [lit. “sons of Adam”] are but a breath; those of high estate [lit. “sons of men”] are a delusion.

[‡] The Hebrew word for worthless refers everywhere else to that which is vain, empty, and useless. It almost always has reference to a situation where one spends his labor, toil, and strength to no effect (Lev. 26:16, 20; Job 39:16; Psa. 2:1; 73:13; Isa. 49:4; 65:23; Jer. 51:58; Hab. 2:13). The only exceptions to this are Jer. 51:34 where Israel is compared to an “empty vessel” and Jer. 30:7 (see above). This makes it highly unlikely to me that here in Psalm 4 the Psalmist would be referring to “vain words” (ESV) that the “sons of men” are speaking against him. Our understanding of “my glory” in the first half of this verse also supports this conclusion (see previous footnote).

it's really **you** who are choosing what is worthless. It's really **you** who are putting your trust in vanity and emptiness." Isaiah uses this same word when he condemns Israel's hope in Egypt:

- ✓ Isaiah 30:6-7 — They carry their riches... and their treasures... to a people that *cannot profit them*. Egypt's help is *worthless* and *empty*.

"How long will you love what is worthless and seek after *lies*[§]?" The point here isn't the *telling* of lies, but rather *seeking after* lies – seeking after those things that are empty and false.

- ✓ Psalm 62:9 — Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a *delusion [lie]*; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.

So the psalmist's second question is the same as the first: "How long will you seek after a mere delusion – an empty mirage that makes all sorts of promises, but can never ultimately deliver on those promises?"

- ✓ Psalm 40:4 (cf. Amos 2:4) — Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who *go astray after a lie* [false god]!

Once again, "Right back at you! You would turn my glory into shame, but it's really **you** who are choosing what is worthless. It's really **you** who are putting your trust in vanity and emptiness. It's really **you** who are pursuing a delusion." So who's right – the king, or the other rulers and men of rank? Who will win the argument? And on what *grounds* is the argument to be won? The psalmist answers simply:

IV. "But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him."

The answer for the psalmist is not necessarily in the "evidence" – it's not in what's visible right now to our human eyes – but in the given word and promise of God. The psalmist exhorts all the rulers, all the important people and men of rank to acknowledge, to confess from the heart, to "**know** that the LORD [YAHWEH] has set apart the faithful for himself." Outside of *this* verse, the Hebrew word for "set apart" is used *only* in Exodus. Three times it refers to the *distinction* that God will make between Israel and Egypt – so that when Egypt is plagued, Israel will not be plagued (Exod. 8:22; 9:4; 11:7). One time it refers to the *distinction* between Israel and "every other people on the face of the earth" as God accompanies His people through the wilderness (Exod. 33:16). And so the psalmist's point here is to remind all the men of rank of YAHWEH's *covenant* – of how in His infinite kindness, the LORD has "**set apart**" the people of the covenant "**for Himself**." The emphasis isn't so much on the "faithful," but on the LORD's sovereign and gracious choice to **set apart** the faithful for Himself.

[§] Almost everywhere else that this Hebrew word is used it is paired with a verb meaning to "utter" or "speak." This makes it clear that the point is *telling* lies. In the *only* two instances (apart from Psalm 4) where one goes *after* a lie, the "lie" clearly refers to the emptiness, and futility, and worthlessness of false gods (Ps. 40:4; Amos 2:4; cf. Ps. 62:9; Jer. 16:19-20 is also instructive although it uses a different Hebrew word for "lie"). Since, in Psalm 4, the "sons of men" are *seeking after* lies, it seems most likely that we should understand these "lies" to be false gods (cf. NIV; rather than the telling of lies). Our understanding of "what is worthless" in the last clause also supports this conclusion (see previous footnote).

It's on *this* ground that the psalmist can conclude with such wonderful, exhilarating confidence: "The LORD hears when I call to Him." Whatever else men may say, however else things may look, "the LORD hears when I call to Him." How do I know this? It's not necessarily because of what I can see right now with my human eyes, but rather because of YAHWEH's *covenant*. Therefore I say to all you men of rank and high degree: **KNOW** this – the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself. Therefore, my trust in Him can never be misplaced. Therefore, I will never have cause to regret placing my hope and confidence in Him. Therefore, "the LORD hears when I call to Him." **Know this**, not just in your heads, but from the bottom of your hearts confess it to be true. "Know" is an imperative. It's in the form of a command. **Know this!** And now the psalmist explains exactly what he means by the first imperative with four more imperatives. "When I say 'know this,' what do I mean?"

V. "Tremble, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD."

If the LORD has so freely and graciously set apart those who are faithful to the covenant for Himself, then where does that leave those who are unfaithful – those who would turn the psalmist's glory into shame, those who would love what is worthless and seek after lies, those who would put their *trust* in someone or something *other* than YAHWEH? The psalmist assumes that just asking this question should lead to trembling – the kind of trembling that keeps us from sin. Just asking this question should lead us to serious soul-searching (pondering in our own hearts on our beds) – the kind of soul-searching that shuts our mouths and leaves us silent and speechless before the holy, covenant-keeping God, whose *name* is YAHWEH.

You see, this question of what or whom we trust is not just a matter of our own feelings of security, or our own experiences of comfort and blessing. To trust in anything or anyone other than YAHWEH is sin, and can only lead to more sin. To trust in anything or anyone other than YAHWEH is a violation of YAHWEH's covenant, and so it's a denial of *His* glory and of *His* wondrous grace. So instead of sinning in this way, the king counsels all the rulers and men of rank to "Offer *right* sacrifices, and put your *trust* in the LORD." Don't sacrifice to the LORD while at the same time you sacrifice to a foreign god. Don't just go through the motions of "religion" and "worship" while all the time you're putting your trust in someone or something other than the LORD! Instead, let *all* of your "religion" and *all* of your "worship" be only the sincere expression of a humble and wholehearted *trust* in YAHWEH.

In verse 1, the psalmist cried out to the LORD: "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!" But then just when we expected to find out what his prayer was, he turned to address the "sons of men" who would turn his glory into shame, loving what is worthless and seeking after lies. Only now does the king turn back again to the LORD, though we still don't find out exactly what his *prayer* will be – not *yet*.

VI. "There are many who say, 'Who will show us some good?'"

The people who mocked the king's confidence in God... the people who argued that his trust was misplaced... the people who suggested that YAHWEH wasn't enough, and that it was time

to take other measures... the people who suggested an alliance with a foreign nation, or sacrificing to a foreign god – they were all motivated by one thought: “Who will show us some good?” For one reason or another the covenant people were not experiencing the blessing and the prosperity that they had expected. (cf. VanGemen) One very likely scenario is that there was a drought, and the crops were now failing. But when the rains don’t fall and the crops are obviously failing, isn’t it time to look around for *other* help? Isn’t that proof enough that the king’s trust in YAHWEH is misplaced – that at least for this time, it hasn’t really “*worked*”?

The king knows what people are thinking. The king knows what the men of rank and influence are saying. He knows what the circumstances might *seem* to prove. And so he prays:

VII. “Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!”

When the people are asking, “Who will show us some good?” the king knows that in spite of what the circumstances may seem to say, there is only one who can show them any true *good*. Only one. When all the important men of rank mock the king’s confidence in YAHWEH, and argue that his trust is misplaced; when they challenge the king by pointing to the dismal circumstances and then ask him, “Who will show us some good?”, the king’s answer is to pray: “Lift up the light of *your* face upon us, **O LORD!**” When others would turn his glory into shame, when others would love what is worthless, and seek after lies, the king calls to mind these verses from Numbers chapter six:

- ✓ Numbers 6:22–27 — The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, **The LORD [YAHWEH]** bless you and keep you; **the LORD [YAHWEH]** make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; **the LORD [YAHWEH]** lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put *my name* upon the people of Israel, and I will *bless* them.”

So now when the king prays: “Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD,” he’s just crying to the LORD to pour out on His people the *full* blessings of the covenant. He’s crying out to **the LORD** to “show them good” – but not primarily for the sake of the blessings themselves. Rather, his heart is that it might be clear to all that his *trust in the LORD* is not misplaced. And we know this is true because of what the king says next:

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

The king has just *prayed* for *the grain and the wine*. The king has just asked that God would restore to His people *all* the blessings of the covenant. But at the end of the day, it’s not the grain and the wine that truly gives him joy and makes his heart happy. No! “**YOU** have put more joy in my heart than they have when **their** grain and wine abound.” It’s not the grain and wine that I want, O LORD, it’s you – the one *from whom* all good blessings flow. It’s not my own vindication that I want, O LORD, but Yours; for in the vindication of your anointed king *who trusts in you* is the vindication of your own holy and wonderful name – Your covenant name, “YAHWEH.” “They” desire only the blessings (“Who will show *us* some good?”). But I would desire above everything else the one who is the *source* of every blessing, and the *wellspring* of

all good. And so the king ends his prayer with this beautiful expression of exclusive, undivided loyalty and trust:

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

“There are many who are saying, ‘Who will show us some good.’” And so they look around for the highest bidder. They move around constantly to what appears to be the next big thing – the next promise of security, and blessing, and fulfillment. They’re like the double-minded man in James, unstable in all their ways. And so, inevitably, they end up loving what is worthless and seeking after lies and delusions.

But as for me, “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for *you ALONE, O LORD*, make me dwell in safety.” In chapter three the king described how he “lay down and slept” even when he was surrounded by “many thousands of people.” (3:5-6) But this sleep is different. In chapter three the king could know a certain peace and safety even when he was being attacked by his enemies. But the peace and safety here in chapter four is different. This is the peace and safety that results from the *full* outpouring of all God’s covenant blessings. This is the sleep that is the result of God’s *answer* to the king’s prayer. God says in Ezekiel:

- ✓ Ezekiel 34:25–26 — “I will make with them a covenant of *peace* and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell [in *safety*] in the wilderness and *sleep* in the woods. And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing.

This is a sleep, and a peace and safety that the king does not *now* enjoy, but that he knows he *will* – whether sooner or later – because he knows that “the LORD has set apart the faithful for Himself.” (v. 3) He knows that the LORD will answer when He calls, He will be gracious to him and hear his prayer (v. 1).

Conclusion

Sometimes we can understand even the question of “trust” in a me-centered, me-focused way. “Trust” can so easily become an issue of what God will do for *me* ideally *now*, hopefully at least *soon*, or even if it means we’re disappointed – *at least one day*. But the true goal of trust is not to change the circumstances, or to *get* a certain blessing, but rather to be able to say with the psalmist: “*You* have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.” *Can* we say that with the psalmist? Because that’s when we’ll be able to experience the *absence* of God’s promised blessings in the present, and *still* say with absolute conviction to those who would mock us for a trust that’s misplaced: “How long will *you* love what is worthless and seek after lies? But *know* that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. Tremble, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.” It’s only when we’ve come to see that the goal of all trust is the *ONE in WHOM* we trust – it’s only then that we’ll be able to speak with such wonderful confidence of YAHWEH’s *answer* to all our prayers: “In peace I *will* both lie down and sleep; for *you alone, O LORD*, make me dwell in safety.”

When others ask, or when our own hearts question, “Who will show us some good,” may our hearts always respond with this simple prayer: “Lift up the light of *your* face upon us, *O LORD!*” To you alone, O LORD, will I look – You alone.

This was the *king’s* prayer. But in so far as the people were all wrapped up with the king, any prayer that the king prayed for himself was ultimately a prayer on *behalf* of, and for the *sake* of *all* His people. ** When we can grasp that these words are first of all the words of the LORD’s anointed (Psalm 2), and when we understand that today the LORD’s anointed is David’s greater Son, *our* Lord Jesus Christ, then we can be filled with all the more boldness, and confidence, and joy as we pray Psalm 4. Because we know that this prayer is empowered by Him, and made effective in Him – indeed that even the words we pray have been given to us by Him.

Psalm 4 — TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A PSALM OF DAVID.

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!

sons of men, how long shall my glory be turned into shame? How long will you love what is worthless and seek after lies?

But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. Tremble, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.

Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.

There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?”

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

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

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

** That the prayer of the king was also the prayer of his people can also be seen by the simple fact that it’s included in the book of Psalms. Additionally, there are the liturgical notations for its corporate use in the temple worship (cf. the psalm “title”: “To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments”; and the insertion of “Selah” [vv. 2, 4]).