

## EXPERIENCING THE FULLNESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE (Volume 1: Psalms 1-10)

### Session #5: Psalm 4:

#### *Introductory Remarks:*

- Psalm 4 is to be generally classified as a lament psalm (individual lament). However, it has also been appropriately considered a psalm of confidence. As we have already seen, laments frequently contain a strong sense of confidence in God and words of trust, praise, and thanks to God for his presence and help.
- Whereas Psalm 3 seems to have been composed as a morning psalm (Psalm 3:5), Psalm 4 is often called an evening psalm because of the psalmist's confidence that he will be able to lie down and sleep in peace because of his confidence in God.
- There is no definite historical background stated nor that we can infer from the content of the psalm. Some have connected it to the background of Psalm 3 when David was fleeing from his son Absalom, but there is nothing in the psalm to suggest this. Both psalms have a strong note of confidence in God, but each suggests a different crisis being faced. In Psalm 4 it seems to be focused on false accusations being made against the psalmist. While it is not impossible to connect this type of behavior with the attacks David faced in Psalm 3, it is not necessary to speculate that this psalm has to be limited to that background.
- One other background is often cited for Psalm 4 and that has to do with the idea that it is a psalm that focuses on praying to God and not the pagan deities for agricultural blessing. This idea is often connected with the mention of such things as the grain and new wine in verse 7 as well as the offering of right sacrifices in verse 5. Then other aspects of the psalm are said to support this idea such as the cry of the many to "show us some good" being taken as a desire for good crops and the loving of vain words and seeking after lies in verse 2 being understood in the sense of "How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?" (as in the NIV). Other ideas of the psalm are said to support this thematic background to the psalm, but there is again no definite reason to see this as the primary emphasis of what the psalmist is saying. Certainly, an application to such a situation in the history of Israel would be appropriate, but the psalm is general enough to get beyond such a limited scope to many other situations as well.

## **Outline:**

- I. An appeal to God for relief from distress (Psalm 4:1-2)
  - A. *"Answer me...Be gracious to me...hear my prayer!"* (v. 1)
  - B. *"...O God of my righteousness!"* (v. 1)
  - C. *"You have given me relief when I was in distress."* (v. 1-2)
  
- II. An appeal to his enemies to humbly repent and trust in God (Psalm 4:2-5)
  - A. *"O men, how long...How long...?"* (v. 2)
  - B. *"...shall my honor be turned to shame...will you love vain words...seek after lies...Selah."* (v. 2)
  - C. *"But know...Be angry and do not sin...ponder in your own hearts...be silent (Selah)...offer right sacrifices...put your trust in the Lord..."* (vv. 3-5)
  
- III. A confident appeal to experience the fullness of God's presence (Psalm 4:6-8)
  - A. *"...many...Who will show us some good?"* (v. 6)
  - B. *"Lift up the light of your face upon us..."* (v. 6)
  - C. *"You have put more joy in my heart..."* (v. 7)
  - D. *"In peace...lie down and sleep...you alone...make me dwell in safety."* (v. 8)

## **An Appeal to God for Relief From Distress (Psalm 4:1-2)**

- *"Answer me...be gracious to me...hear my prayer!"* (v. 1) - The psalmist is once again very straightforward in his request. His cry for God to "answer me," "be gracious to me," and to "hear my prayer" are all connected with his desire to see God act on his behalf. To ask God to answer him is to ask him to do more than to simply reply verbally. It is a desire for him to grant what is being requested. "Be gracious to me" highlights the covenant love and loyalty of God and the basis for the psalmists relationship with God and his confidence that God will act on his behalf (it certainly calls to mind the self-revelation of God in Exodus 34:6-7 as is quite frequent in the psalms). This is an appeal to God's unmerited favor. The psalmist wants the God who has graciously entered into a personal relationship with him to show that grace and favor once again by granting his request. The final phrase, "hear my prayer," once again is more than just a desire for God to understand what he is saying. The psalmist once him to hear in the same sense that God calls upon his people to hear in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and other places ("Hear, O Israel..."). To hear God in Deuteronomy 4 is to take his truth to heart and to obey it.

When we call upon God to hear, we are not commanding him to do so, but we are still asking him to show his grace by acting on what we are praying for.

- *"...O God of my righteousness!"* (v. 1) - The one who is being addressed is the God who himself is righteous and acts righteously on behalf of his people. The question that is raised by the phrase is which aspect of God's righteousness is being spoken of in this instance. The NIV translation leads us toward emphasizing the character trait of righteousness that belongs to God ("O my righteous God..."). Other translations leave it as "O God of my righteousness" leading us to think more of righteousness bestowed upon the psalmist in one form or another. It could be emphasizing the righteousness God has given to David in the same sense as the righteous position granted before God in our justification ("O God who declares me innocent" NLT; see also Romans 3-4; Philippians 3; Galatians 3). Or perhaps it emphasizes the more general sense of God being the one who acts righteously to vindicate his children as the psalmist is asking him to do. What can we definitely say? No matter how we understand the particular emphasis of the phrase, it is certainly based on the righteous character of God and includes what God has done and promises to do for those he has declared righteous by faith. In Psalm 3:3 we saw David declaring that God was his "glory." Whatever glory he had was to be attributed to God alone. In this psalm it is God as his "righteousness." Whatever righteousness he can claim comes from God and this includes the prayer for God to act toward him in the favorable way that he is requesting in this psalm. This seems to be the emphasis of his appeal to "the God of my righteousness" in Psalm 4:1.
- *"You have given me relief when I was in distress."* (v. 1-2) - His appeal is for God to bring relief from his current situation and the distress that goes with it. The distress he is facing is at least partially described in verse 2: *"O men, how long will you turn my honor into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?" Selah.* "Honor" is the same term as that for "glory" in Psalm 3:3. In this verse it seems to be emphasizing his reputation or, we might say, the glorious position he has been granted by God. What is called honor or glory here is being attacked by his enemies. They want to destroy him and his reputation by bringing shame upon him instead of glory. These attacks seek to cause what the ESV calls "distress" in verse 1. This term can be used of a tight or restrictive place, or to be bound or closed in. On the other hand, the term for "relief" emphasizes the giving of space. It is a powerful picture of the way the attacks of others can make us feel. They can be so devastating as to make us feel as if we have no space to move around. That we are boxed in on all sides with no relief in sight. The psalmist is reminded in his current situation of the way God has acted to deliver him from this condition and has given him "room to breathe" so to speak. While some have

interpreted this as another request being made by the psalmist (as in the NIV, NLT), I believe the best way to understand the Hebrew here is to see it as the psalmist recalling past relief that God has granted to him (as in the ESV, NASB).

### ***An Appeal to His Enemies to Humbly Repent and Trust in God (Psalm 4:2-5)***

- *"O men, how long...How long..."* (v. 2) - In the "O men" of verse 2, many have seen the Hebrew as pointing to people of high rank as being the primary oppressors in this psalm (see Psalm 49:2; 62:9). This could very well be the case, but the clear emphasis is on David's address to these men asking them "how long" they will continue to turn away from God and attack his servant. "How long" is most frequently addressed to God in the psalms (see Psalm 13) as an expression of the psalmist's desire to finally be freed from his difficulties. Here it is addressed not to God, but to those who are doing the oppressing. This verse is the beginning of a warning and call to repentance directed toward these "men."
- *"...shall my honor be turned to shame...will you love vain words...seek after lies...Selah."* (v. 2) - As mentioned earlier, the attacks on the psalmist are personal. They are seeking to destroy his reputation and they are using "empty" words and lies to accomplish their task. This is an important contact point for us in this psalm. It is not an uncommon thing to be attacked verbally in our sinful world. This is one of the most common ways people seek to gain an advantage over others. This can be done openly when someone either distorts the truth or blatantly lies about someone else. It can also be done more subtly as when a person uses gossip and insinuation to seek to destroy another person's reputation. The first thing we must take from this is that such behavior has no place in the Christian's life (Ephesians 4:29-32; also the frequent warnings concerning gossip and other sins of the tongue in Proverbs). It is something to immediately repent of and that is what the psalmist is calling on his oppressors to do. The second thing we should take from this is the way the psalmist is shown handling such attacks. He takes them to the One who can do something about it, God. And he calls on the oppressors to repent and turn back to God themselves. His manner of correcting them implies that they are fellow Israelites and he is exhorting his countrymen to return to their God.
- *"But know...Be angry and do not sin...ponder in your own hearts...be silent (Selah)...offer right sacrifices...put your trust in the Lord..."* (vv. 3-5) - His first appeal to them is to "know" that God has set the godly apart for himself. What a beautiful way to think of God's gracious commitment to his people. We are set apart as his own. Thus the

oppressors are not just attacking David, they are attacking God. We see a similar truth in the New Testament where Saul's actions against the church are seen as attacks on Jesus Christ (Acts 9:4). Wrongful attacks on God's people are attacks on God. We should see this as one of the most comforting things as we go through situations where we are wrongfully being attacked and slandered. "If God is for us who can be against us" (see Romans 8:31-39).

The psalmist also instructs his oppressors to "be angry, but do not sin." This phrase is picked up and used by Paul in Ephesians 4:26 even though it may not be a direct quote of what we see in Psalm 4. The basic meaning of the term translated here as "be angry" is to "agitate," "be disturbed," or "to tremble." The main debate in this verse is whether it is being used to tell the oppressors to not let their agitation (anger) get the best of them so that they sin against God by the way they react to these feelings or is being used to positively tell the oppressors to "tremble" before God (as in the NIV, NASB) so that they do not sin further against him. The most common sense of the term would seem to favor the translation "tremble," but Ephesians 4:26 has strongly influenced the common interpretation found in many of our English versions (as in ESV, NLT). It is not impossible to see Paul using a similar phrase to make a different point in Ephesians 4:26 especially since it is not a direct quote of the verse. Either way, the verse indicates the caution that his necessary to avoid sinning against God under highly emotional circumstances.

The next instruction to the oppressors is to "ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah." This is a crucial step in dealing with sin in our lives. It is a contrast with the final expression of confidence in verse 8 that the psalmist is able to lie down and sleep in peace. When we are in sin, we should take whatever time we need to think about our sin and our lives from God's perfect perspective. We are to meditate on God's Word so that we can see our sin as it really is and humbly repent of it before God (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Psalm 51). And don't miss the call to "be silent." The sinful verbal attacks must stop and it must be replaced with silence before God. That is what the psalmist is calling on these men to do. Even the peace of sleep should be interrupted until we take care of our sin before God and, if possible, before others. Perhaps this is the source of Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:26 "do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." This may even make the connection between Psalm 4 and Paul's words even closer than simply the phrase "be angry and do not sin" (see also Matthew 5:21-26).

The final exhortation is "Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord." When we have taken the time to truly see our sin before God and to deal with that sin in the appropriate way, we are then ready to respond in full faith in God. This is also a call for true repentance. The oppressors are being called to present their sacrifices before the Lord as God had instructed, with a sincere heart commitment to God. Such an attitude of faith toward God was always necessary when the people brought their offerings and sacrifices to God (see Deuteronomy 33:19; Psalm 51:16-17; Isaiah 1:1-20). This repentant heart attitude is also the one we must have as we come to Jesus Christ for forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35).

### ***A Confident Appeal to Experience the Fullness of God's Presence (Psalm 4:6-8)***

- *"...many...Who will show us some good?"* (v. 6) - Just like in Psalm 3, we see that there are "many" who are represented in this verse. It could be that the "many" are the oppressors or it could be another group of his fellow Israelites who are beginning to wonder where they can find help for their situation. There seems to be a negative emphasis to this question such as "Where can we go to find some practical help for our troubles. We're not getting any from God right now." If that is the case, then we have an attitude that we have to be very careful of adopting. It is a type of pragmatism that sees God's favor as always needing to include a timely answer to our current problems. If he doesn't provide the desired "good" answer then we are tempted to look elsewhere. God is alright as long as he gives me what I want when I want it. If we carefully examine our lives, we can often spot this attitude in our own hearts. We have to ask whether we are trusting in God himself or in some distorted idea of how and when God must act if we are to keep following him. The psalmist responds to this attitude with a strong emphasis on God's presence and his faithfulness to his people.
- *"Lift up the light of your face upon us!"* (v. 6) - What is the answer to the current dilemma? It is the presence of God and all of the blessing that goes along with it. Here we see a part of the benediction found in Numbers 6:24-26 used as a petition for God to show his blessing to his people. It is in the presence of God that we find fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11). And it is as we learn how to live with a constant awareness and appreciation of God's presence with us that we truly experience that joy (even in suffering - James 1:2-4)
- *"You have put more joy in my heart..."* (v. 7) - In contrast to those who wonder where they can find the good things they are looking for, the psalmist knows exactly where to

go. It is God himself who has filled his heart with joy. And this joy far surpasses the joy that simply revels in getting the "things" that we desire. This is the trap of the health and wealth gospel. It tends to lead to rejoicing primarily in the things we get from God ("when the grain and new wine abound") without a constant rejoicing in God himself even if I don't get what I currently want (Philippians 4:4-20). The psalmist has experienced this joy and it is greater than the distorted joy that only knows happiness when it gets what it wants when it wants it.

- *"In peace...lie down and sleep...you alone...make me dwell in safety."* (v. 8) - Since this joy is his, so is peace and security. Why? Because they are found in God as well. So even with these attacks and false accusations hanging over him, he can lie down and sleep in peace. The current circumstances may be overwhelming to one who does not look to God as their refuge (Psalm 2:12), but they are not greater than the one who "alone" makes us dwell in safety (Romans 8:18-39).