

Praying in the Tight Places of Life

Psalm 4

Life has many discouragements. You take a new job only to find out it's not what you thought it would be. You head off to college only to find yourself battling loneliness and self-discipline. Little disappointments can descend on you like rain: your car won't start, your water heater goes out, and your cat runs away. Antifa sets up an autonomous zone in your neighborhood. Such flurries of disappointment create phrases like, *What else can go wrong?* or *What did I do to deserve this?* Life has many disappointments, and we never get used to them. The person who says, *Quit whining!* is standing in between disappointments.

Often it seems like the very thing that should have brought joy has teeth, and it bites. In Psalm 4 life's disappointments give birth to lament and lament to the confidence of faith.

The Psalter begins on a high note of praise. The LORD knows the way of the righteous, and the world has been given to the Messiah to rule (Psalm 1&2).ⁱ We easily forget that the world the Messiah rules is at the moment raging against him. David was enthroned (Ps. 2), only to experience the rebellion of Absalom in Psalm 3 and character assassination in Psalm 4. It's not clear if the trouble in Psalm 3 and 4 is the same trouble, but we do know that if David woke up praying in Psalm 3 (:5), he went to bed praying in Psalm 4 (:8).

The background of Psalm 4ⁱⁱ is left intentionally vague to address the common human experience of irrational brooding on past wrongs and present trials, especially with the approach of night. The psalm is concerned with inward peace in distracting situations.ⁱⁱⁱ There is no indication in the psalm that the psalmist's accusers go away or cease their accusations. The psalm instructs us in the key to joy in the middle of life's disappointments and discouragements.

1. We must remember the LORD who answers prayer (1-3)

You can hear the urgency in David's prayer. The explosive abruptness of the psalmist's plea gives us pause. We may be tempted to think how dare someone storm into the presence of God and say, *Answer me when I call*. Perhaps we think that way because we feel God is reluctant to answer prayer. Or based on past experience, we pray and nothing happens, or the very thing we prayed against happens.

A. We must remember his character

It seems we often pray with the focus upon ourselves, and we are likely either too

formal or too casual in our praying. We must be relational. Biblical praying is based on the character of God and has God as its focus. Dale Ralph Davis said, *Biblical prayer seems to ponder God a good deal more than we are prone to do.*^{iv}

We need to remember the LORD when we pray.

I kind of doubt one of David's kids had to make an appointment to see the king. I also kind of doubt that everybody approached the king like one of kids was free to do. The amazing thing is that God gives us the freedom to pray at all. In fact, he invites us to interrupt the universe and burst into the throne room and cry out to him. That we get to pray should make us feel loved by the Father.

The psalmist knows the truth. He understands that his righteous status is because God has given him a right standing and will vindicate him against all who oppose him (1a). The psalmist understands that the foundation of prayer is the grace of God (1c). Many today are approaching God on the basis of their rightness and what they feel they deserve—entitlement praying. The psalmist knew he had no righteousness of his own and stood in need of what he could never deserve.

The psalmist recalled the past act of God in his life. The LORD has given him relief when he was in distress. *Distress* (tsar) is a tight place. *Relief* (rachab) is to give room. The psalmist had been in many tight places, and God always made a way for him.

We must remember the LORD in our praying.

B. Remember the Covenant

In verses 2-3, the psalmist addresses his accusers. We don't know if his opponents are present as he prays or as he composes this psalm. Is he in the presence of both God and his accusers? Is he reminding himself of the LORD's character by addressing his accusers? Is he talking to God about his accusers as though he is addressing them, so that there is a bit of preaching in his lament? Whatever the case, his exhortation is based on what he has already said is true of God (cf. v1).

The psalmist has been unjustly accused. He identifies his accusers by the designation, *O men* (bene iys) (2). The evidence supports this as a designation for influential, power brokers, distinct from common people (cf. 14:2; 69:9 *bene adam*). These influencers have attacked his character (*honor to shame*) and did so with words of no substance (*vain words*) that were complete fabrications (*lies*). We don't know background of this, but we do, possibly, know the sting of it.

The rhetorical question of verse 2 shows the psalmist's understanding of God's character and his accusers' lack of understanding of the same. The most useless

thing in the world is to accuse someone God has justified (Rom 8:33).

The psalmist further wants his accusers to *know the LORD has set apart the godly for himself* (3). This covenant language. The *godly* (*hacid*) are those who have experienced the LORD's steadfast love (*hesed*). They are accusing one who is loved by God and, therefore, *godly*.

His accusers should know that the LORD does not treat the *godly* like he treats everybody else. He has *set them apart* (*palah*) *for himself*. This is rich language in the OT. The OT shows that God treats Israel differently than the nations to whom he is not bound in covenant. It recalls Israel in Egypt. The LORD made a distinction between his people and the Egyptians: the plague of flies (Ex 8:22), the plague on the livestock (Ex. 9:4), the death of the firstborn (Ex. 11:7). This became the basis of Moses' plea after the golden calf for the LORD to go with them, *Is it not in your going with us that we are distinct?* (Ex. 33:16). The LORD will not abandon his people to the wicked. The distinct thing about God's people is God.

C. Remember brings confidence in prayer

When his opponents discredited the psalmist, they were discrediting one on whom God has set his affection. On the basis of the Father's love and affection that had been set on the psalmist, he says, *The LORD hears when I call to him!* (3).

In our praying, we must remember the LORD to whom we pray.

Sometimes you know that your largest need is that God will not allow the wrong done to you to become poison in your soul. Settling the score or being publicly exonerated may do nothing to heal the rot growing in your soul. You know it is deadly, and you are powerless to rid yourself of it. You cry out to God to give you relief from your distress.

Remember the LORD. On the basis of His covenant with you, he will answer your prayer.

2. We must cultivate the humility of trust in the LORD (4-5)

The psalmist continues his address to his accusers by calling on them to put away their sinful anger and put their trust in the LORD. This is a good exhortation for us to cultivate the humility of trust as we live in a world that constantly offers disappointment and discouragement.

The psalmist confronts the sinful anger of his opponents. *Anger* (*ragaz*) refers to a range of strong emotions—anger, rage, fear, awe, trembling. Some translations render it *tremble*. Paul reads this text as *anger* in Ephesians 4:26-27 when he says, *Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no*

opportunity to the devil.

It seems every time these texts are read, we are quick to come to the defense of anger. We try to distinguish between holy anger (aka. righteous indignation) and sinful anger. Obviously, anger in and of itself is not sinful, but the point of the texts is that it does not stay that way long. This is why Paul says, *Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.* Anger is destructive.

The psalmist is exhorting his opponents to deal with their anger and don't let it become a sinful stronghold in their lives. Their anger led to their false accusations regarding the psalmist. They let the sun set on their anger and brooded on it in their beds and hatched a slanderous scheme.

The psalmist calls on them to *ponder in their own hearts on their beds, and be silent.* Rather than nursing their thoughtless anger, they should *ponder in their hearts in silence.* *Ponder in your heart* is an idiomatic expression for *say on your hearts.* It is the exact same wording as Psalm 14:1, the fool *says in his heart.* The heart in the OT is not the seat of emotions, but the center of reflective thinking. It is in the heart that one plans and deliberates. The psalmist counsels them to use their time to reflect deeply on their actions and the consequences of them in light of the covenant faithfulness of the LORD (cf. v3).

They need to consider the disparity between their confession and their devotion by bringing together their ritual and their faith. *Right* or *righteous* sacrifices are those in reflect *trust* in the LORD (5). Obviously, they had been going through the motions of covenantal rituals with seething anger and lying schemes hatching in their minds.

Anger is our attempt to be powerful, to be in control, to exert our will. We live in an angry society. Today anger is being promoted and justified. A grievance culture has developed, a culture that does not want resolution but power. Our grievance, our desire to be offended, has led to the justification of false accusations. The grievance culture has led to the cancel culture and it is totally inconsistent with trust in the LORD. This is exactly what was going on in this psalm. There was an attempt to cancel the psalmist by empty, lying words being hurled against him.

His response was to call on his accusers to get their worship and the belief aligned. If the LORD is the God of heaven and earth, the judge of all the earth, you cannot accomplish his will with your wrath (Jas 1:20).

We must remember the LORD and cultivate the humility of trust.

3. We must find our deepest satisfaction in the LORD (6-8)

The psalmist made his plea based on the character of the LORD and cultivated the humility of trust in the LORD, which led to the soaring of his satisfaction in God.

Here he moves from addressing his opponents back to a prayer that expresses his satisfaction in God. He shows his opponents' lack of trust in the LORD by quoting what many of them were saying, *Who will show us some good?*

The *many* had equated good with an abundance of *grain and wine*. The totality of their religion was based on material prosperity. Perhaps, part of their complaint against the king was based in a perception that they were not prospering according to their expectations.

They had equated the presence of God solely with of personal prosperity. Unlike Job, the psalmist's opponents did not understand that the LORD is worth holding on to even in the midst of trouble and strife. Job held to the LORD not because of the personal benefit he received but because the LORD is God.

When health and wealth are the telltale signs of true religion, several outcomes are possible. Some are prone to equate God's presence and blessing with an absence of hardship. There is no indication that the outward circumstances of the psalmist changed. Many have an over-realized eschatology. This drives prosperity teaching. So when believers suffer in some way, the explanation is they don't have enough faith. Still others when experiencing trouble or pain or suffering conclude that they are either being punished for some unknown sin or that God is distant, removed, and unloving. For some money, power, and prestige are things they turn to provide a barrier against disappointment. Things or people or position provide them with a sense of security and satisfaction. For them worship is not done in faith but to bend the will of God to their will.

Studies have been done regarding the happiness of people and why some people are chronically unhappy. Happiness, as long as the most basic needs are met, is not based on income level. The rich are not happier and generally more satisfied in life than the non-rich. Yet, so many people are chasing the iron bunny. This is what happens at a dog track. A mechanical bunny gives the dogs something to chase.^v They never catch it. This is the approach of people who are seeking their deepest satisfaction in life in material things.

If the basis of your well-being is rooted in material things and physical well-being, disappointment and discouragement are attackers waiting around the corner. Where will you find good in your life?

The psalmist answers those who pursue ultimate good in finite things by recalling the priestly blessing of Numbers 6, *Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!*

God's face is a synonym for his presence. Nothing will ever satisfy the human longing but the manifest presence of the LORD.

The psalmist's settled joy in the *light of the face of God* far exceeded the shallow hopes and joys of his accusers. He has joy in his *heart*. Remember *heart* in the OT is not the seat of emotions but the center of reflective thinking that commands emotive responses. To be Piperesque, their problem was not that they wanted too much but that they wanted too little. They were much too easily satisfied.

There was a settled-ness about psalmist's joy. It was the constant in his life, the ongoing reality of his soul that enabled him in the face of doubters and accusers to sleep soundly. While they were up plotting their way to fame and fortune, the psalmist had found that the LORD alone satisfies all of his longing. One of keys to this psalm is the use of word pairs—the same word or root used twice. They are used throughout the psalm. There are 7 of them.^{vi} One example is that the word *safety* (v8) is the same root as *trust* (5). In a world of discouragement and disappointment, the only safe place is trust in the LORD, even if the world opposes you.

One of the mercies of a pandemic is it teaches us the temporary nature of things in this world. Not that we shouldn't know that from our other experiences, but we have the ability to live in the delusion that somehow unlike everybody else, we will find ultimate happiness and eternal life in the manifestly temporary stuff of this life. Our youth lies to us and tells us we will live forever and that we have plenty of time. As we age, we see ourselves weaken. What do you do with that?

You do with it what Paul did. You *don't lose heart. Though our outer man is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but things that are unseen are eternal* (2 Cor. 4:16-18). I'm not weakening, I'm being renewed day by day. I'm shedding weakness. Paul went on to say, *We...believe, and so were...speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence* (2 Cor. 4:13-14).

There it is, the same thing the psalmist said in verse 6, *Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!*

Friend there is nothing you need in this world or in the next world more than Jesus. He, God the Son, took on flesh and lived a perfect life, died for our sins, and was raised on the third day to give the forgiveness of sins and life eternal to those who repent and believe.

ⁱ Dale Ralph Davis, *the way of the righteous in the muck of life: Psalm 1-12*, 51.

ⁱⁱ Some commentators see it as connected to Psalm 3—David's flight from Absalom. Others see the background as Israelites who turn away from YHWH to fertility cults. Still other commentators read the psalm as having an unspecified background.

ⁱⁱⁱ Derek Kidner, *TOTC: Psalms 1-72*,

^{iv} Davis, 52.

^v This ideal came to my attention in the book, *Younger Next Year*.

^{vi} One of the outstanding features of the psalm is its repeated use of the same words or words derived from the same root (call/call *qara* vv1,3; righteous/right *tsedeq* vv1,5; hear/hears *shama* vv1,3; hearts/in my heart *lebab/leb labe* vv4,7; bed/lie down *mishkab/shakab* vv4,8; trust/safety *batach/betach* vv5,8; many/abound *rab/rabab* vv6,7). The double words could be used to structure the psalm: the Lord who answers prayer (1-3); Trust in the Lord (4-5); a prayer of confidence (6-7); rest in peace (8). (See Craige in Word)