

## **Series FolkSongs of Faith**

### **This Message Intercession for Evildoers**

#### **Scripture Psalm 4**

In the previous message we thought about Psalm 3. We learned that David was threatened by many foes, and yet he maintained his trust in the LORD. Psalm 3 is linked to Psalm 4 in a couple of interesting ways. For example, there are references to “the Glorious One” in both Psalms. Last week David described the LORD as the “Glorious One” who “lifts up the head.” In Psalm 4 David is concerned about the ways ordinary men “dishonor the Glorious One” by turning to false gods.

In Psalm 3 David described how he could “lie down and sleep” because he was confident that the LORD would sustain him through the night. The closing verse in Psalm 4 is another affirmation of David’s confidence in the LORD. He stated again that He would be able to “lie down and sleep in peace” because the LORD made it possible for him to “dwell in safety.”

Psalm 3 is linked with Psalm 4 in one more way. In both Psalms David was in distress and cried out to God. However, the reasons for the distress are different. In Psalm 3 David had been rejected as king by his countrymen. He had fled Jerusalem and he was hiding in exile on the east side of the Jordan River. In Psalm 4, David was distressed because so many of his countrymen were turning from the LORD and pursuing the ways of evil. Psalm 4 is an appeal to God by the king on behalf of his countrymen.

#### **Read Psalm 4**

## Overview

Psalm 4 is not an easy Psalm to analyze. Translators of the Hebrew language do not agree on the interpretation of several phrases, nor on the historical context. For example, in the first verse David appeals to his “righteous God” because he is greatly concerned about something. Many commentators assume that this distress is the same as in Psalm 3, when David fled from Jerusalem and was hiding in exile, and this assumption forms the basis for their interpretation of Psalm 4.

However, it seems to me that verses 2 through 5 are inconsistent with this interpretation. In verse 2 David appeals to men to change their ways of thinking and acting. David wanted them to think seriously about what they were doing. In my opinion, verses 2-5 clarify the context and indicate the reason for David’s prayer. David was not calling on God because he was facing a personal calamity, but because he was deeply concerned about the spiritual condition of others.

Let me reread verse 1, giving you my expanded interpretation:

“Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. You have given me relief when I was distressed (on previous occasions); (now) be merciful to me (again) and hear my prayer (on behalf of others).”

I think this interpretation properly fits the context of the following verses and best helps us to understand the Psalm. Let’s see how this works out.

In verse 1 David appeals to “his righteous God.” It is better to say this phrase, “the God of righteousness.” The righteousness of God refers to the holiness of God and to the fact that His actions are always just and fair. David was confident about his relationship with the LORD. He knew that God would be faithful in taking care of him and in hearing his requests. He knew that God could be counted on to take correct action in all circumstances.

In this Psalm David was fulfilling the role of spiritual Shepherd, watching over the people of Israel just as he had watched over the sheep in his younger years. As part of his responsibility to the people, he was interceding for them. In our minds, we can picture the people of Israel like sheep going astray, and David wanted to get them back in the spiritual fold.

Verse 2 states His concern: the men in his kingdom were “dishonoring the Glorious One.” The men that David referred to were the influential members of society. They were the wealthy and powerful leaders of Israel. They might have been the ones who had risen up to oppose his kingship, but more significantly, they had put themselves in opposition to his God. These men had been pursuing what was vain and deceptive.

Scripture states that every person who turns away from the “Glorious One” is a spiritual fool. Such foolish people cannot recognize spiritual realities; they are easily deceived and continually seek their successes in the wrong direction. David’s question concerns “how long” such people would go on without waking up to the truth that God was in control; “how long” before they realized that it was folly to persist in rebellious actions.

The sovereignty of the LORD is mentioned in verse 3. Fools need to understand that they cannot reject the all powerful, Glorious One. They need to “know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself.” The words “set apart” have the meaning “to deal differently” or “to make a distinction.” David wanted the men in his kingdom to know that the LORD would respond to godly attitudes and behavior in a different way — a more favorable way — than He would respond to their foolish and deceived thoughts and actions.

David had confidence that “the LORD would hear when he called to him.” David included himself among those who have hearts inclined toward God and seek to please Him. Furthermore, David had confidence that his prayers for others were according to God’s will. David had had enough experiences with God to know that God was faithful. As he said in verse 1, God had given him relief in the times when he was previously distressed.

In the last part of verse 3 David presented himself as an example of the kind of person that God listens to. To many of the people who knew David well, this testimony in verse 3 might have seemed a little odd, because David had committed a number of heinous sins in his lifetime. David certainly wasn’t a perfect person, but he always sincerely repented of his mistakes and he made it obvious in his writings that, deep down in his soul, he wanted to please God.

He had been called by God to be the leader of the nation. God had helped him to become an incredibly successful warrior and national hero. Israel had peace and prosperity during David's reign. God had given incredible promises concerning David's descendants and the dynasty which would be established in his name forever. God had chosen to be the Friend of David, and had bestowed on him love and covenant blessings. All these things should have been recognized and appreciated by the people of Israel. They should have known that the LORD had made a distinction between David and the influential men who were leading Israel down the wrong pathway.

David wanted the citizens of his country to learn from the blessings he had received from the "Glorious One." Unfortunately, just the opposite was happening, which is why David was petitioning the LORD to change the situation. In verses 4 and 5, David presents several instructions which, if followed by his readers, would get them back on the proper spiritual path.

First, David recognized that the men were angry. They had strong feelings toward God and they were deliberately dishonoring Him. Anger is a dangerous character trait. Anger can cause people to do irrational actions. Angry people can easily lose control of themselves. Persistent anger changes into bitterness and hatred.

Strong feelings are not easily turned in the opposite direction, but this is what David indicated must happen. He said that the anger of people must not lead to sin. David instructed his readers to reflect on the consequences of their continued rebellion. He said that they should take time for quietness and reflection. He said, "When you are alone, and on your beds, search your hearts." This is an idiomatic way of saying, "Calm down, cool off, think rationally and logically." David wanted his readers to think about what they were doing and about the eventual outcome of their behavior. People who get all worked up over issues in their lives seldom think about the teaching of Scripture, which is to "be still and know that the LORD, He is God." In times of crisis, in the times when we get worked up and disturbed about the issues in our lives, these are actually the most important times when we most need to be silent and reflective.

The phrase which uses the word “anger” can also be translated “tremble in fear.” This is a good translation because the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (*Proverbs 1:7*). The person who is in awe of God, who recognizes God’s power and authority, will be a humble person. The phrase “search your hearts” is a synonym for meditation and reflection. If we allow ourselves to “be still” and become “humble” and to meditate on who God is, then our attitudes will change, and our minds will be cleared of all our anxieties and anger.

Verse 4 is a call to repentance. Simply defined, repentance is a change of direction. The person who is traveling the wrong direction must turn around in order to go the correct direction. If we are rebelling against God, going in the wrong spiritual direction away from Him, then we must repent and begin to move toward God.

A properly oriented attitude will lead to faith and obedience. Verse 5 has two more important exhortations, “Offer right sacrifices,” (actually it is better to say “offer the sacrifices of righteousness”), and “trust in the LORD.” The emphasis in this verse is on obedience — doing the right actions. Back in verse 2 the problem was disobedience which dishonored God. In order for the people to get back on spiritual track, they had to repent, and in order for them to stay on track, it was necessary for them to do what God required them to do.

Sacrifices of righteousness had been prescribed by God in the Law given to the Israelites. Such sacrifices required the Israelites to practice justice and mercy, to keep the Ten Commandments. The sacrifices also required confession of sins, the slaughter of animals, and worship of the one true God. The sacrifices of righteousness were the basis of fellowship between the people and God. However, God required more from the people than just following the rituals of the law. Outward obedience was necessary as an expression of faith in God but, in an ultimate sense, it was the inward attitude of submission that God most desired. David wanted the people in his kingdom to have a sincere wholehearted willingness to follow the ways of the LORD. He wanted the people to love and respect God and to draw near to Him, to obey Him and honor Him.

Verses 6 through 8 form the last section of this Psalm. Let's remember that this Psalm was written during a time of turmoil in Israel. David was not having the degree of influence over the people and affairs of the country as he would have liked, especially in the spiritual aspects. As has already been pointed out, many of the people were dishonoring God by turning to what was counterfeit and deceitful. It was a time of spiritual ignorance and confusion because "Many were asking, 'Who can show us any good?'" The question indicates that the people were not looking to the LORD for their blessing.

In this time of spiritual uncertainty, David prayed for the LORD's blessing. What was needed was for the LORD to reveal Himself to the people of Israel; to make His presence recognizable. The second part of verse 6 is a reference to the most famous and familiar blessing known by the Israelites. Back in Numbers, chapter 6, we read these words:

"The LORD had said to Moses, 'tell the priests (Aaron and his sons), This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: "'  
"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" ' " (*Numbers 6:22-26*).

In this blessing there is the threefold repetition of the divine name "Yahweh," translated "LORD," emphasizing that "the LORD" and only the LORD was the source of good things that the people wanted. The blessings required the LORD to turn His face to the people and to shine His face upon them. David did not need to quote all of the blessing. The readers of the Psalm would understand that he was asking the LORD to turn His attention to the nation of Israel, to reveal Himself in such a way that the benefits of the covenant relationship could be restored.

David himself had personal assurance of the LORD's presence, and because of that fact, he stated that "his heart was filled with greater joy than when there was an abundance of grain and new wine." All of us are happy and joyful when we have an abundance of material possessions, especially the resources which sustain our physical well-being, but David knew that deep-down-joy could only be found in the spiritual blessings of the LORD.

David knew that God had poured out blessings on him. God had been protecting him, had been gracious to him, and was giving him a peaceful serenity in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty. David earnestly wanted the people of Israel to experience the joy and confidence that he had rather than for them to continue in their wickedness and confusion.

Verse 8 is the expression of David's attitude and confidence. In place of the anxiety and vain pursuits of the people, David found rest; rest for his body and rest for his soul. David understood that this double contentment could only be found in the LORD, and he was concerned about others because he knew that their spiritual orientation was not correct. He also recognized that his ability to influence the spiritual attitudes of others was limited, and that only the LORD could bring about the needed spiritual changes. In this Psalm, David, the Shepherd of Israel, was appealing to his Shepherd in heaven, his "Gracious One," to help him nurture and comfort the flock of Israel.

Takeaways from Psalm 4:

1. A warning: It is easy to get side-tracked into the issues of life and to take our eyes off the One who provides our comfort and blessings.
2. The correction: We must "search our hearts" and change the direction of our lives and make sure our hearts are inclined toward God.
3. We must do what God wants us to do and to trust Him in every situation.
4. We must pray for each other so that none of us will go astray.

### *Appendix*

*The interpretation of this Psalm relates to a textual problem in the middle of verse 1. Many translations have the words "give me relief from my distress," and this leads to the interpretation that David is the individual who is in need of help and that he is praying for himself. However, the line in the Hebrew language is literally, "You have broadened me" or "You have made a spacious place for me," or "You have given me relief." It is my opinion that David is referring to previous times when God answered prayer and that these past experiences of the mercies of God form the basis of his present plea for help. In other Psalms David expressed a similar thought. For example, in Psalm 18 he wrote: "The LORD rescued me and brought me out into a spacious place" (see Psalm 18:19).*