

# Give Me Relief from My Distress

## Psalm 4

Unlike in Psalm 3, we are not given any particular life situation out of which David wrote this Psalm. From the Psalm itself, we know that David was experiencing anxiety.

The situation in which he found himself was “stressful”, and he sought relief from his God. David experienced anxiety. And he worked through that anxiety in a way that exalted the faithfulness of his covenant LORD.

Everyone here experiences anxiety. We all have to deal with stress. The causes of stress, and the degree of stress, may be very different from person to person. But there is no such thing as a “stress free” life.

Psalm 4 is for everyone who faces stress. Psalm 4 lays the foundation to finding true peace and joy. But Psalm 4 is not a 7 step guide to inner peace. You will not find any encouragement to take long walks, get regular exercise, eat more healthy, talk to counselors... or any number of other solutions to lowering your blood pressure.

Psalm 4 does not condemn these things. It simply does not see them as the keys to peace.

It is likely true that this Psalm was purposely placed after Psalm 3. There are subtle thematic connections between the Psalms. Both Psalms speak of the psalmist’s confident rest.

**Psalm 3:5** <sup>5</sup> I lay down and slept; I woke again,  
**Psalm 4:8** In peace I will both lie down and sleep;

It is very likely that Psalm 3 was used in morning worship because the psalmist speaks of his waking up in the morning. Psalm 4 was probably used in some form of evening worship as David speaks of lying down and sleeping in peace.

In Psalm 3 David’s enemies are increasing in number and strength. David’s victory is to maintain his faith in the face of their challenges that God has left him.

In Psalm 4, David still has foes. They are the ones, in part, who are causing his distress. But rather than call upon God to defeat them, David will speak to them more directly.

In fact, the core of the Psalm is David’s calling his foes to repentance and faith. He calls them out of an attitude of unbelief.

This call to repentance and faith is sandwiched between two prayers.

In verse 1, we see David simply crying out to God for relief from his distress.

And in vv. 6-8, we see David displaying a prayer of confidence in his God.

Before walking through the content of this Psalm, let’s look briefly at the introductory title.

**ESV Psalm 4:1** TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS. A PSALM OF DAVID.

This psalm was written by king David, but it was given to the Choirmaster specifically to be sung with stringed instruments.

There are 55 psalms that have the heading: to the choirmaster. Psalm 5 has this title, but instead of “with stringed instruments” it has “for the flutes.”

We can learn from this that music played an important role in formal worship. So much so that when formal worship occurred at the Temple, there was someone appointed to direct that worship.

We also can learn that different psalms fit better with different instruments. There was an attempt to have the music enhance the mood of the psalm.

What we do not have are any specifics as to the music used during this time. We do not have any examples of what sort of music the choirmaster composed for this psalm.

I find it absolutely wonderful that Psalm 4 was written and put to music more than 3,000 years ago for God’s people to sing. And God’s people have been drawing strength from this psalm ever since.

It ought to encourage you that for more than 3000 years God’s children have been dealing with their stress by singing this psalm.

Read Psalm 4:1.

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!

Verse 1 is purposely compact!

David’s cry to God is to be our cry to God.  
“Answer me when I call”

Are you experiencing stress and anxiety today?  
The most important thing that you can do is to call upon God for relief.

It is in prayer that we cast all our anxieties upon our God, looking to Him for some form of relief.

It is not so much the practice of prayer, as much as the action of taking our stress to the God of Universe who has called us to be His children. It is good to develop a habit of quiet meditation upon God. But that is not the point here. In this simple verse, David has problems, and he asks God to give him relief. It is that simple.

It is important to see that in verse 1, David does not yet have the answer that he seeks. He is simply asking.

I know that many of you have asked God for relief, and it only seems that God has heaped on more stress. Other psalms deal with this issue: Psalm 13 begins, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” God’s timing of giving relief is according to His perfect wisdom. What He wants from us is our

asking. And yes, we will often have to wait for relief – often for long amounts of time – like the watchman waits through the night.

But waiting upon God for His answer is not the focus in Psalm 4.

The focus is on the reason why David is confident that his prayer would indeed be heard, and given a favorable answer.

David's confidence flows out of two foundational truths. Both of these truths are squashed together in the simple phrase "God of my righteousness."

Commentators take this phrase in one of two ways.

The first is that David believes his God to be righteous. "My righteous God!"

In Hebrew part of being righteous is to be faithful to keep your word.

David has confidence that God will answer his prayer because God has promised to hear David's prayer.

We know this specifically from Psalm 2 – Ask of me and I will give the nations to you.

And it is an implied promise of Psalm 1 – Delight in my law and you will be a flourishing and fruitful tree.

Why should you have confidence that God will hear your prayers?

Because you come to Him as your Father, through faith in Jesus Christ.

God's character has not changed. He is your righteous God! That means He will be faithful to you.

You cannot call upon Him in faith and have Him drop the ball.

It is against His character to ever be "unfaithful" to his children.

The second way that "God of my righteousness" can be taken is that God is the One who makes David righteous.

The Hebrew words means "faithful" but it means more than faithful. It also means "rightness". It is the quality of being right and doing right in all things.

Of course, God is righteous. He always does what is right.

But here, David says, "You are the God of MY righteousness."

David believes that God will hear him because God has made him righteous.

It must be remembered that our English word "justification" is really the word "righteousness".

Futado translates this phrase, "Who declares me innocent!" or "Who vindicates me."

We might even say, "The God who justifies me!" or "The God of my justification."

I am convinced that poetry is often left somewhat ambiguous. Our minds are purposely supposed to be drawn to both possibilities.

But both fit nicely in the overall theme of the Psalm.

Our confidence that God will hear our prayers and give us a favorable response is grounded in the character of our God. He is faithful and will not fail to keep His word.

And our confidence that God will hear our prayers and give us a favorable response is grounded in His declaring us to be righteous. Apart from this, we could have no assurance that His holy wrath would not crush us.

Brothers and sisters, through faith in Christ, you have a Faithful God who has declared you righteous. Because of this, you can have confidence that God will answer your prayers and give relief to your distress.

In the second phrase, David says to his God,

You have given me relief  
when I was in distress.

The ESV, along with most translations, take this as a sort of interlude to the prayer. David is remembering the times in the past where God has helped him through stressful situations. And God's past faithfulness encourages David to trust God again for his present anxiety. This obviously has good application for us. Scripture often exhorts us to look back to previous answered prayers to give us confidence.

But I favor slightly the translation of the NIV.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Psalm 4:1** Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer.

The Hebrew grammar allows for this translation. Taken this way, this becomes the primary request of the entire psalm. And to be honest, this is the heart of our prayers as well.

There is something to be said for the natural flow of the prayer, when taken this way. I do not know the nuances of Hebrew Grammar well enough to have a strong opinion, but I lean slightly with the NIV.

Even if the ESV is right, it does not change the fact that this the heart of what David desires – relief from his distress.

In verse 1, the Psalmist is simply laying down his request. And the essence of that request is that God would give him relief from his distress.

The final phrase of verse 1 is clear enough.

Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

In prayers for relief from our anxieties, we are asking the LORD to be merciful, or gracious to us. We are asking Him to take pity on us. We want God to have compassion on our weakness. We are asking Him to care about our problem.

And He most certainly does care.

One implication to this short prayer is that stress is not something that we can simply remove on our own. If it was, then there would not be any need to pray to God for relief. Those who have had some degree of success in mastering their own stress may fall into the trap of disdaining others who are still struggling deeply with anxiety.

It is almost like there is something wrong if you have not mastered all your stress. God does not command us to "be stress free."

God commands us to take our anxiety to Him, asking Him to take pity on us to relieve the distress.

It would be easy to skip down to vv 7-8.

**Psalm 4:7-8** <sup>7</sup> You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. <sup>8</sup> In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

But instead, the Psalmist leaves off his prayer and begins preaching. The Psalmist addresses “men”.

Read Psalm 4:2-5.

2        O men,  
              how long shall my honor be turned into shame?  
              How long will you  
                  love vain words  
                  and  
                  seek after lies?

Selah

Who are these men?

They are obviously people who are contributing to David’s distress. Whatever life-difficulty David is experiencing, these men are telling David that he should feel shame over it. And they do not believe that David will ever be lifted out of the pit of his troubles.

The promises of God to David, and to us as God’s people, are that we will be honored with Christ. Those who find their refuge in the Son, will not be put to shame. But when we are dealing with the anxieties of life, this is exactly what comes to mind. “What have I done to be taken so low?”

And in our humble situation, there are always those who will stick an extra jab into our soul. In one way or another, they refuse to believe that God will lift us up out of our distress.

These men love “vain words”. This means words that will not prove true. They also are said to “seek after lies”.

In the context, I believe that these men no longer believe that God’s promises to David will come true. They may even benefit from David’s being taken low. They may even want it to be true.

But the truth is that God will be faithful to raise David up. Just as he will be faithful to raise up all who hope in Christ. It is the unbelieving words of these men that will prove vain.

God will never leave nor forsake His people.  
God has promised honor to you.  
And He will be faithful to keep that promise.

David is calling unbelievers around him to reflect upon their unbelief. Unbelievers do not believe that all of God’s promises will be fulfilled to His Son – our Lord Jesus Christ. The psalm is a call to unbelievers to realize that it is their unbelief that must change.

In verse 3, David expresses his confidence that the LORD will indeed hear his prayer and give him relief.

3                     But

know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.

David's confidence is in the fact that the LORD has "set apart the godly for himself."

The Hebrew word for godly is "Hasid".

The root of this word is "Hesed".

Hesed is a word used to describe God's loyal covenant love.

When used to describe an individual, it refers to their being loyal to God's covenant.

This means that the person is relying upon God's covenant promises to him and seeking to follow God's covenant demands.

In the NT, we are members of the New Covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ. We are set apart to God through our belief in Jesus Christ.

The godly are those who are in right relationship with God through the Covenant.

The ungodly are those who refuse to believe and set themselves up as independent of God.

The point then is that David is challenging these men to become godly. David wants them to repent of their unbelieving hearts.

They too could enjoy the assurance that God would hear their prayers as well.

David wants these unbelievers to come to faith.

He continues to exhort them in verse 4.

4 Be angry,  
and do not sin;  
ponder in your own hearts on your beds,  
and be silent.

Selah

Understanding David's words rightly are confused by Paul's use of this statement in Ephesians 4.

**Ephesians 4:26** <sup>26</sup> Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

In Ephesians, Paul is speaking to believers, and he is encouraging them to not let their anger lead them to speak harsh words to their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

But Paul's context is nothing like the context of Psalm 4. David is calling unbelievers to repentance and faith. And being overcome by feelings of anger is not really the issue in Psalm 4.

What is the issue is that these unbelievers have no fear of God.

They do not tremble before God. And because they do not tremble before God, they are leading lives of sin.

Two other translations bring this out more clearly:

<sup>KJV</sup> **Psalm 4:4** Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.  
Selah.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Psalm 4:4** Tremble, and do not sin; Meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.

The Hebrew word is “ragaz”, and its basic meaning is to tremble with fear.

David wants these men to have a healthy “fear of the LORD”. Rather than using their troubles as an excuse for their unbelief, he wants them to tremble before the LORD.

And he wants them from this position of awe to turn from their sinful attitude of unbelief.

Gerald Wilson writes:

“The majority of times this word appears in the Old Testament it means “to shake, tremble” usually in response to some fearful stimulus. The earth shakes with an earthquake or at the awesome presence of Yahweh. Humans also acknowledge their vulnerability in the presence of almighty God by trembling. The word captures a sense of instability.” Wilson 156.

David wants these unbelieving men to come to grips with the LORD of the Universe.

Allen Ross also captures the sense well.

“In the Psalm, David was calling his enemies to be shaken to the core so that they would stop sinning... What they were to do was to think carefully about their sins and let quiet, sober reflection cause them to change their ways.” Ross 236.

Charles Spurgeon also sees the verse in this way:

“How many reverse this counsel and sin but tremble not.” Spurgeon 39.

The second half of the verse then makes perfect sense.

ponder in your own hearts on your beds,  
and be silent.

Selah

David exhorts them to think about the path of unbelief that they are living.

Think about the path that you are on. It is not a good one.

You are arrogantly living your life as if the Covenant LORD does not exist.

You need to change your thinking.

The Covenant LORD does exist, and you should tremble before him.

And you should sit before him in silence, like Job does when God shows up to him.

David’s deep concern for these unbelieving men, and his purposely addressing them in a Psalm intended for worship, most likely means that these men are in the Covenant community.

Just because you come to Church. Just because you have been baptized. Just because you sing this Psalm, does not mean that you have a believing heart.

There may be some here today who do not truly believe in God as “The God of my righteousness”. God is using this psalm to call you to repentance and faith.

It is significant that David does not call them to some outward expression of faith. They were already engaged in these. Instead, he calls them to inwardly tremble before the LORD in silence, in the quietness of their own home, on their own bed.

I would challenge you to do the same today.

Do you tremble before your Holy God?  
Are you clinging to Him as your righteousness?  
Are you continuing to call out to Him for relief?

It is only when you inwardly and sincerely are putting your trust in the LORD that you will be able to worship God correctly.

True worship flows out of our faith.  
And this is not something we do once. As Christians, we do it over and over and over again throughout our entire lives.

I have been a Christian for 40 years. And I am still calling myself out of unbelief, into an attitude of crying out to my God to relieve my stress.

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

I am often asked how it is that OT saints were saved.  
It is often thought that in the OT people were saved by “keeping the sacrificial laws”, but in the NT we are saved by faith in Christ.

This psalm makes clear that the OT saint was not saved by the literal offering of sacrifices.  
They were saved as they “trembled before the LORD” and “put their trust in the LORD”.

The sacrifices of animals were only outward means to express their hope that God would send a perfect sacrifice in the form of the Messiah.

So, OT saints are saved by faith just like us. They looked forward to the perfect sacrifice, and we look back upon the cross. But repentance and faith have always been the means of our hope of being relieved from our sin, and all our anxieties.

In verse 6, Paul is not so much calling men to repentance, as he is addressing the attitude of unbelief.

6        There are many who say,  
              "Who will show us some good?  
              Lift up the light of your face upon us,  
  O LORD!"

The psalmists opening phrase: “There are many who say,” brings to our minds a common way of looking at life’s trials.

Even if we are calling upon God, we can struggle with this attitude.

The attitude is described by a simple question: Who will show us some good?

It is a very depressed sort of attitude.  
God does not seem to be answering his prayer for relief.  
And trials just keep pouring in.

There is some question as to whether the second part of verse 6 is a continuation of the unbelieving attitude or David’s response to the unbelieving attitude. Look closely at where the quotation ends.



The ESV sees it as part of the unbelieving attitude. If this is right then the people are praying the right prayer, but they have very little hope that God will answer.

This attitude turns our relationship with God into “What can God do for me today?”  
If Yahweh does not give me what I want, then maybe some other god will.

This certainly rings true in our experience. We go on praying, but in our hearts we wonder if God will ever hear us.

But the Christian Standard Bible takes it as David’s response, and our response.

<sup>CSB</sup> **Psalm 4:6** Many are saying, “Who can show us anything good?” Look on us with favor, LORD.

The struggle to keep believing and trusting in God’s loving face to shine upon us in the midst of our distress is real.

Either way, the psalmist admits that our choosing to believe occurs in the presence of unbelieving thoughts and feelings. I hope you see that the LORD understands your struggle to believe. Jesus displays God’s heart when he is not critical of the man who cries, “I believe, help my unbelief.”

The psalmist does not come to the peace of the final two verses without a struggle.

<sup>7</sup> You have put more joy in my heart  
than they have when their grain and wine abound.

There is a decided change in attitude in the final two verses. Joy and Peace flood into the heart of David. In verse 7, we see that the true source of Joy comes from the LORD.

Joy is not found in having relief from the distressing circumstances in which we live.

God is able to give you more joy, in the midst of your distress, than if he took away every distress immediately.

The tenses of the verbs make it sound as if David has replaced all of his stress with joy.

And it is possible that David may have come to the point of experiencing joy.

But it is also possible that this is a statement of faith, accepting that God is the giver of joy, and as God’s child, David too will experience this joy.

And the Hebrew grammar is broad enough that it is also possible to take this verse as a prayer: Give me greater joy than when their grain and wine abound.

I can testify to all three occurring in my life.

Sometimes the Spirit of God has flooded me with Joy in the moment of praise. It is a wonderful feeling. Other times, I have experienced the Spirit giving me tremendous faith that the Joy is mine, even while I am still stressed out.

And very often, I am simply continuing to lay hold of God as the One who will give me greater joy.

All three are acceptable responses to this verse.

All three are acceptable responses to the words of our Lord and Savior – Jesus Christ.

**John 15:11** <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

**John 16:24** <sup>24</sup> Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. God does not call us to misery, even though we are constantly dealing with the stresses of life.

And it is entirely appropriate to pray that God would increase our joy.

In verse 1, we thought that the prayer was simply to take away the distressing situation. Now we see that the prayer is slightly different. What is needed is joy!

It is a joy that is wrapped up in our relationship with Jesus Christ. And it is a joy that only He can give. And we may have to wait for Him to give it.

“David prays not only for God’s smile, but also for the joy that comes from experiencing the smile, not only for joy, but for the superabundant joy that exceeds even the joy of an abundant harvest.” Futado 41.

Regardless of where you are, you are called to believe that God is the giver of joy, and that He has promised this joy to all who put their trust in him, and that it is good for us to keep on asking for God to bestow His joy upon us.

As we look to God for joy, we can rest in His peace, a peace that passes understanding.

<sup>8</sup> In peace  
I will both lie down and sleep;  
for you alone, O LORD,  
make me dwell in safety.

David knows that whatever the distress that plagues his soul, he can lie down and sleep in security. This security is not based on the assurance that the distress will be gone in the morning. Even if it were, there would be a new anxiety to take its place.

If God showed you all the things that could go wrong with your life all at once, you would surely be overwhelmed. The things that are stressing you are only tip of the iceberg. I do not say this to frighten you more. I say this because peace in this life is not found in your gaining control of all the stressors in your life. Peace is found in knowing the LORD. No matter what tomorrow brings, your Covenant LORD assures you that you can lie down and sleep tonight.

“Yahweh alone is the true source of safety and shalom.” Wilson 159.

Our security is bound up with the knowledge that our Sovereign and Good LORD is ruling over our lives.

At the core of our faith in Jesus Christ is that He is LORD. Jesus Christ, being fully God, and LORD over you is able to promise you peace. Jesus has the right to give His peace to all who place their faith in Him.

**John 14:27** <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

**John 16:33** <sup>33</sup> I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Brothers and sisters, you will have reasons to stress every day of your life.

You might even say that they are “new every morning”.

Make a practice of calling upon the LORD to relieve your distress.

But also make a practice of asking Him for joy, more joy than if every stress was taken away.

And, as you wait for his joy, lie down and sleep, knowing that the One who died to remove the curse that stood against you, is also your Loving and Compassionate Lord.

Amen.