
The Pilgrim's Answered Prayers

Psalm 4⁵

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Parents often say to children, "Answer me when I speak to you." But most of us would be a bit shocked by a child who said that to a parent. David, the king of Israel and a fellow pilgrim seems to speak this way. "Answer me when I call." That seems at first a bit bold, a bit brash.

Psalm 3 was the morning Psalm. This is the evening Psalm. They are connected on their situation and in their setting.

The Psalms were written during the rebellion led by David's son, Absalom. One of the most difficult things a parent can experience is the open, defiant rebellion of a son or daughter. David was going through that. His favorite son, the one he simply could not say no to, had a long history of sin and evil. Now, he has won the loyalty of many of the people including counselors in David's own court. Some of the army has gone over to following him. David has now fled from his capital city. He has both been cursed and blessed on the way. It is hard to imagine how dark these hours were. All of us as pilgrims will experience difficult and dark days. What does your praying sound like in times like this?

The setting for Psalm 3 and 4 is the morning and evening sacrifice. While these sacrifices were taking place in the Temple, Jewish people often would pause to ponder and to pray. Some of the Psalms were composed during or for these times. Morning and evening prayers were times of engaging God in the flow of life. They provided reminders that the pilgrim's life is lived in God's world under His eye and hand. And that is a good thing.

This is the struggle that sometimes exposes our bad thinking. We are in difficult, dark place. We know that we can talk to God. We know that the sacrifice of Jesus has opened the throne room of heaven. We are there. But it feels like God is absent or not listening. All we can hear are the voices of those who are hurting us. Sometimes those who are hurting us are ones we love deeply, maybe even idolatrously. So then where is God in all this pain? What does answered prayer mean in this particular trouble with these particular hurts?

This lovely evening Psalm prepares us for the night. It will allow the pilgrim's heart to be at ease. It will bring peace to your heart. So as the sun sets on another troubling day, let's hear and hope from this sweet, sweet song.

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When We Turn to the Lord**(v. 1)**

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!

Pilgrims will know the quiet peace of the Lord when we turn to Him.

Our Relationship

In trouble, even deep trouble, pilgrims turn their eyes to God. We call to the Lord. The coming of evening reminds us that God has an ear to our prayers. So what we have expressed here is reflects a desire not a demand. It is a well grounded expectation that God will respond to us. He is not hiding. But He does require that we come. Prayer then is not engaging a program but a person in a relationship. Even your right standing with God as a forgiven pilgrim comes from Him.

Our Reason

The reason we turn the Lord is that He has come to our aid when we needed Him. He brought relief in our need. So confident praying in trouble comes from having prayed in trouble before. We have experienced God's moving for us. Should we turn to Him because He has said to? Yes. We should believe what He says. Faith will be strengthened through our experiences with God. So God has helped in the past. And He will help now.

Our Request

Our prayers then are opened by appealing to His poise towards us. O be gracious to us! Praying this way reflects the movement of our soul. We are moving towards a person whose ear is towards us. He is inclined to hear us.

We understand how this is. It is very difficult to approach someone with whom we have little relationship. It is even harder when we don't expect the person cares for us or will listen to us. In marriages this destroys communication. Couples will simply stop talking to each other if one senses the other does not care or is not inclined to listen. We will stop talking to God if we think He is not interested or does not want to listen to us. But the pilgrim knows this is not so - God is gracious, loving and wants to hear us.

All of this expresses our humility before God. We come with confidence. We come humbly. These are not at odds. They are two of the wings on which our prayers soar.

When We Confront our Adversaries

(v. 2-7)

The pilgrim now turns to deal with those who have challenged him. He has appealed to God to answer. Now he confronts the people who have brought the trouble to his life.

About their Lies

(v. 2-3)

² O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? Selah
³ But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.

The Psalmist *denounces* how the wicked treat pilgrims (v.2). He challenges the wicked through questions. “How long will you continue to pursue your sin?” There is no denial of the sin available. They have tried to ruin David’s reputation. They love words that are empty and foolish. They have sought what they think are truths which actually are lies because they want to destroy him. The lies they find are used to try to bring David shame.

So, pause. Yes, that is probably what *selah* means. It is intended to be a musical interlude. Not necessarily silence. But the singer and listener are to pause here and think about that. When spoken to the wicked, it is the pregnant pause after the clear indictment. You attack. You hate. You lie. Now, *think on your sins*.

In contrast the Psalmist *declares* how God treats pilgrims (v. 3). The Lord sets us apart for Himself. This wonderful phrase is about how God sets His heart on us and His gaze on us so that He hears us. He listens to us with His eyes and His heart.

The implication for the wicked is clear. It is the *godly* who are the focus of God’s loving listening. The ungodly are still the focus of God’s listening – but it is the stern countenance of a judge who is weighing their crimes in an indictment.

Pilgrims then are to take heart from both. God’s ear is listening. The ungodly are building the case against themselves for God to eventually deal with them. But the godly are set apart for the Lord’s loving attention. Be encouraged then in the darkness and difficulties to speak to the Lord. He is the God who listens.

About their Anger

(v. 4-5)

⁴ Be angry, and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah
⁵ Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.

The Psalmist *deals* with those who are angry. This is an interesting challenge. At first it appears to be ironic: go ahead, be angry since you are, but just don’t sin. Paul quotes this text in Ephesians 4:26, “²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...” He understands this text to be calling for righteous anger. Righteous anger does not sin in its experience or expression. Maybe his adversaries have a just grievance. Maybe they have a holy reason to be angry. But they are not responding rightly. They are sinning in their anger. Just anger does not sanctify unholy deeds. But unholy words and deeds may corrupt a just cause.

So he calls on his adversaries, on the Absalom led rebels, to go to their homes and think about what is going on. The noise of their hearts and mouths needs to be stilled. Paul's application of these words is "not to allow the sun go down on your wrath..." Reflection and repentance are then being counseled here. At the time of the evening sacrifice, when the sun goes down, let your heart be still and quiet.

He warns his adversaries against blind passion. He counsels them to quiet conversation with their own hearts and to solitary meditation in order that they may not endanger their own salvation. To commune with one's own heart is to think alone by one's self. The bed or resting-place points to a condition of mind that is favorable to quiet contemplation. [Adapted from (Keil & Delitzsch, 1996, pp. Vol. 5, p.68)

In the night time, as we go to our beds, we are so prone to rehearse the evils of the day. We can think too much on all the things that were said or done against us. Instead, we must in those moments quiet our hearts with godly forgiveness and with Godward faith (v. 5). In the Old Testament sacrifices were both a way of acknowledging one's own sin and forgiving the sins of others. Forgiven and forgiving are closely intertwined.

Rehearsing the wrongs against us over and over again tends to amplify them and exaggerate them. It will inscribe them on our thoughts. Instead we are to confess our own faults as well as to forgive others. We will do this if we trust in the Lord. We must believe that He will right wrongs and bring justice and mercy in His own time and way. When faith rises, anger and aggravation will sink.

Pilgrims will often have trials. We are on a hard way in a horrible place. Sin dogs our heels. Sinners mouth against us. Adversaries oppose us because of who we are. We will be shamed and slandered and sinned against. But we will trust in the Lord. Faith will rise in our hearts as we feed on the Word of the King. What He says to us sustains our souls. We will believe His promises. We will rest in His providences. We will trust in His purposes. Absalom like people will rise up against the King. And we will suffer.

Our great King, our Anointed One, has walked this path before us. He has borne our sorrows and carried our griefs. He was misunderstood, misrepresented, slandered, lied about, falsely accused and finally unjustly executed. He suffered a sacrificial substitutionary death for those who were still His enemies and one day would be His pilgrim sons and daughters. Yet he opened not His mouth. He did not strike back. He did not speak evil. He patiently bore it all to learn what hard obedience was really like. He knows our sorrows. He knows our sufferings.

This is the song of forgiveness and faith. His pilgrim feet were worn. His pilgrim hands were torn. His pilgrim brow was gashed. His pilgrim side was pierced. His pilgrim life was poured out. But He rose as King, victorious over sin and death and Satan. And so will we, so will we.

About their Skepticism**(v. 6-7)**

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

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

The Psalmist *disputes* those who question the goodness of the Lord. The Psalmist now speaks to the Lord about some who are skeptical. They are meant to hear these words. David catches their cynical disbelief with delicious irony. Maybe these are people who are following him. Maybe they are shattered by the terrible darkness and difficulty. Maybe they are struggling to reconcile who God is with what is going on. Pilgrims sometimes say things like this. "I don't understand. Where is all the good that God promised? Come on God, You need to do something about this..."

Ah I love this. He exclaims to the Lord but to their ears. He rejoices in the joy of the Lord so that they will hear and be convicted and convinced. God fills the pilgrim's heart with joy. It is not situational happiness. It is not just happy because all is well. It is not the swelling satisfaction that comes when everything is going great. It is the deep inner joy that fills the heart even when the situation seems dreadful.

Just a word about a Christian's joy. Joy is not just feeling happy on the inside that makes us smiling on the outside. I don't see that in the Bible and certainly not in New Testament people. They weren't always "happy". But they did have a flooding and fulsome sense of contentment and satisfaction with God no matter what. Recently sitting in a foreign country confronted by state security officials and police under pointed and pressuring questioning my heart was filled with a profound calm that rushed like wine through my soul. It was peace with passion. The outer trouble brought stunning inner clarity and calm. A pilgrim sat in a foreign land in a foreign world under the fierce gaze of the PSB and all is well. This is the joy that God puts in our hearts in troubles.

When We are Answered by the Lord**(v. 8)**

⁸ In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

The Psalmist now receives the answer to his prayer.

Its Result

He can lie down and go to sleep. He is at rest. Pilgrims in troubles does not toss and turn. Having appealed to God and addressed the adversaries, we will have the peace of God. And we can sleep. Maybe some of you have never had sleepless nights when the troubles of the day troubled the night. But most of us have. Praise God for the times when surrounded by His care we could sleep in His peace.

Its Reason

Why can he sleep in peace? Because he lives in safety. He abides, dwells, tents in the protection of God. The peace of God fills his heart because the God of peace protects his life.

Calvin sums this up so well for us.

We see how earthly men, after they have despised the grace of God, and plunged themselves over head and ears in transitory pleasures, are so far from being satisfied with them, that the very abundance of them inflames their desires the more; and thus, in the midst of their fulness, a secret uneasiness renders their minds uncomfortable. Never, therefore, shall we obtain undisturbed peace and solid joy until the favour of God shine upon us. And although the faithful also desire and seek after their worldly comforts, yet they do not pursue them with immoderate and irregular ardour; but can patiently bear to be deprived of them, provided they know themselves to be the objects of the divine care. (Calvin & Anderson, 2010, pp. Vol. 1, P. 49)

Reflect and Respond

WE ARE PILGRIMS ON THE WAY. Sometimes the path is one of pain. The path of trouble may be caused by people. This is not a time for accusations, anger or scorn. It is the time for forgiveness and faith.

OUR SOUL SPEAKS AND SINGS DURING TIMES LIKE THAT. What is it saying? Who is it speaking to? Do the words running through our hearts and minds reflect trust and rest in our God?

AUDIT YOUR PRAYING over the last months. Inspect most carefully what you asked for when things were difficult. What did you expect from God?

GOD ANSWERED YOUR PRAYER. He brought relief. Did you recognize it? Did you receive it? Did you relish it? Or did you miss it because what God gave was not what you expected or wanted? Was the fierce joy drowned in worry, fretfulness, distrust, doubt or anger? Or did it well up in your soul with sharp clarity and sweet comfort?

At the end of each day, pilgrim sons and daughters of the King must pitch their tent, make their beds and lie down to sleep. May we all lie down in peace protected by our King.

The road is long and hard and the journey is weary. But beloved, all is well, all is well.