



Bible Study
Biblical Theology of Psalms
Lesson 4: Psalm 4

INTRODUCTION

Summary Statement:

Psalm 4 unites the covenant community of Israel around shared faith in God.

Outline

1. 1 David's Call
2. 2-5 David's Charge
3. 6-8 David's Confidence

OBSERVATION

Psalm 4 was written by David. The superscription ascribes it to him, but doesn't give any information about the occasion. Some place it with Psalm 3 and the rebellion of Absalom. Others suggest it was written when David was fleeing Saul, or during famine, or even some other time. We can't be certain, but the Psalm fits the time around Absalom's rebellion best. Though we are not certain of the occasion, the Psalm is from David to those opposing his kingship.

The Psalm is directed to the chief musician, or choirmaster, as some translations have it. We can't be certain about this person or all his functions. The word in the original does have the idea of supervisor, so it must have been one responsible for the singing and musical accompaniment. The word *neginoth* refers to stringed instruments, like a harp. This Psalm was sung as a part of tabernacle/temple worship with musical accompaniment. The Psalm has further musical directions with the two *selah*'s in verses 2 and 4.

Some categorize this Psalm as a lament, but it doesn't seem to entirely fit the lament conventions. David does petition God and express confidence in God. He also exhorts to faith in him.

Walk Through Psalm 4

Verse 1 begins the Psalm with David calling out to God. Appeals to God's righteousness refer to his faithfulness to his word in dealing with his people. This address reveals the ground of David's confidence.

The first verse provides a good example of the use of imagery in the Psalms. The English

translation is not as immediately obvious, but the word for distress means a tight space and the word for enlarged means a wide, or open space. The use of such imagery communicates truth, but also brings us into the experience through our feelings. We have all probably experienced being in a tight, confined space. We have experienced the frustration, fear, and anxiety of such a tight space. We also know the experience of coming out into the open again and the relief and freedom we felt. These terms are commonly used together to indicate distress and relief.

David prays for mercy and reflects the last phrase of the covenant blessing on Israel given in Numbers 6:25. Psalm 4 also has other phrases reminiscent of that blessing.

Verses 2-5 begin with David addressing the “sons of men.” He is referring to the people of Israel and especially the leaders, which the phrase denotes. David’s language in verse 6 includes him in the group, further indicating he is addressing his fellow Israelites.

The people of Israel has opposed David as king and shamed his glory, or honor. The word for glory literally means heavy and it can have quite a range of meaning. Here, it refers to David’s place as God’s anointed king (Psalm 3:3). In this context, the vanity and lies they loved and sought were most likely their seeking covenant benefits, or blessings, outside of covenant faithfulness.

The word for godly in verse 3 is often translated “saints.” It has the overtones, though, of one in faithful covenant relation with God. The word is used of the Messiah in Psalm 16:10, where he is the “Holy One.” The covenant faithfulness aspect is furthered in the verse by reference to being “set apart.” This explains David’s confidence the Lord will hear him, similar to the expression in Psalm 3:4.

The word for awe in verse 4 has a range of meaning, including trembling in anger or fright. Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 4:26 and takes the meaning as anger. He uses the imagery of the sun going down, which is consistent with David’s use of being upon your bed. The verse charges the searching of hearts and not sinning out of anger. The phrase “be still” is used elsewhere to mean wait patiently on the Lord to perform his will (Psalm 46:10).

Verse 5 admonishes them to offer right sacrifices. He refers to the material of the sacrifice as well as the heart condition in presenting the sacrifice. David urged them to be faithful and put their confidence in God.

Verses 6-8 have David addressing God again. He states many were disheartened and discontented because of unfulfilled expectations. David prayed more of the covenant blessing from Numbers 6:24-26. The light of God’s countenance speaks of his favor and help shown to his people.

David’s grateful praise expresses joy exceeding the joy over physical blessings, such as at harvest time when grain and wine increased. Since his joy wasn’t rooted in those physical blessings, the lack of those blessings did not diminish his joy.

He ends the Psalm stating he will lay down and sleep, like in Psalm 3:5. His confidence was in God and God's faithfulness to his own promises. Ultimately, it wasn't David who would end the crisis, but God.

INTERPRETATION

God's Righteousness

Psalm 4 puts God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, as the foundation of David's joy and confidence in the midst of troubles. The Psalm has various covenantal references (1, 2, 3, 5, 6). David trusted God despite the circumstances. Through faith, David had assurance of God's hearing his prayers (1, 3). Verse 1 shows confidence through God's past pattern of faithfulness. David therefore had joy of heart (7), peaceful sleep (8), and future hope (8).

Help for the Discontented

Unfulfilled expectations, difficult circumstances, and strong emotional responses provide ample opportunity for sin. The people shamed David (2). This was more than personal insult. David's glory pointed to his position as God's anointed, covenant king. Shaming and opposing David meant the people of Israel were actually opposing God. They chased vanity and lies (2), looking for other ways instead of patiently waiting for God. Their hopelessness actually expressed unbelief rather than faith (6).

The answer for all this was for them to examine themselves and wait patiently for God (4). They were to do works of righteousness with full confidence in God (5). They weren't to try to bring about what God had promised, but rather they were to serve him as he requires and hope in him.

The Messianic Hope

When David referred to "my glory" (2) and the fact he was "set apart ... godly" (3), he acknowledged his position as God's anointed, covenant king. He was able to rebuke those of Israel who opposed and objected to his kingship as actually opposing God and his covenant. David knew he was a figure of the true Anointed King to come, but he found himself at odds with many in Israel who were unbelieving.

In this Psalm, David attempted reconciliation. He sought to unity them together in faith and trust in God to bring the Messiah to Israel. This does correspond with events in the Absalom rebellion where he tried to reconcile the people after the death of Absalom in 2 Samuel 19.

David expressed confidence in God hearing his prayers, his confidence was because of God's covenant with him and with Israel. We can read this together with God's hearing and answering David's prayers in Psalm 3:4 and 2:6. Psalm 2:6 particularly gives God's answer as his determination to install his King on his holy hill in Zion. So, David's hope was not in himself, his military prowess, diplomatic acumen, or anything else within him. His hope was in God, who promised to raise up a seed after David to establish his throne and kingdom forever (2 Samuel 7:8-17).

The final expression of David's hope and confidence is depicted by peaceful sleep. The Lord will cause him to dwell in safety. This refers to the coming kingdom of the Messiah and echoes the promise of God's covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:8-17). This promise predates David, as it was given in the law (Deuteronomy 33:28). This promise is also echoed in the prophets (Jeremiah 23:6; 32:37; Ezekiel 34:25-28; 38:8, 14; Hosea 2:18; Micah 7:14). This promise will be fulfilled through the Messiah, the Son of David, reigning over David's kingdom as promised in God's covenant with David.

APPLICATION

What does Psalm 4 say to today?

1. Psalm 4 should help us understand how we also live in expectation of the coming of Christ. David is writing to those who are looking for his coming. We are not waiting his first coming, but rather we are waiting for his second coming, his return. We are in similar circumstances of expectation, though we have even more confirmations and reason to hope.
2. Psalm 4 speaks to us in the midst of distressing circumstances and points us to confidence in God's promises. We must refrain from sinning through discontent or impatience. We are to call on God and patiently wait for him. We are to have confidence and fully trust in God, knowing he will bring all his word to pass. We are not to seek shortcuts or some way of trying to have now what only God will give and only in his time.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This series is a study in biblical theology of the book of Psalms. Each lesson typically covers one Psalm. This PDF is provided for personal study, small group study, or use in a church class. Unless otherwise noted, all lessons have been prepared by Jeff Short, the pastor of Harmony Baptist Church.

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