

CALL and RESPONSE

Psalm 4

Layne Lebo

January 17, 2021

The Psalms, more than any other portion of the Scriptures, give us a clear picture of the dialogue between people and God—interaction that for this series, we’ve titled, *Call and Response*. The Psalms are designed to be read personally, not objectively, and they’ve long been viewed as the church’s prayer book. Last week as we explored Psalm 23, I encouraged us to view ourselves as the sheep, sharing our hearts with Jesus, our Good Shepherd. Today, and throughout our study of Psalms, I encourage you to place yourself and your circumstances before God through the words of the Psalmist.

The psalm we’re looking at today is Psalm 4, but I’ll also be reading Psalm 3, because it appears these psalms are a couplet. The heading above Psalm 3 reads, “*A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.*” I’ll unpack David’s flight from Absalom in a few moments, but first, I encourage you to claim these words for yourself as I read Psalm 3 and 4.

Psalm 3

LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!

² Many are saying of me, “God will not deliver him.”

³ But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

⁴ I call out to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain.

⁵ I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.

⁶ I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.

⁷ Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.

⁸ From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.

Psalm 4

¹ Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

² How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

³ Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

⁴ Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

⁵ Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD.

⁶ Many, LORD, are asking, “Who will bring us prosperity?” Let the light of your face shine on us.

⁷ Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.

⁸ In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Like many of the Psalms, those words are filled with emotion. David calls out to God and demands a response. In fact, David demands a lot from God in these verses. His tone isn't the submissive, meek, timid, not wanting to interrupt God kind of prayer many of us pray. Listen to some of the words and phrases he uses, *“Arise, Lord! Deliver me! Strike my enemies on the jaw and break the teeth of the wicked. Answer me when I call to you. Give me relief from my distress. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer. Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy.”* David calls out to God and he expects a response.

To better understand David's context and to help us more effectively apply insights from this psalm to our lives, I'd like to share what was happening in David's life at the time he wrote this psalm. If you'd like to read more details about David's life—including the events I'll be referring to, I encourage you to read the books 1 & 2 Samuel from the Old Testament.

In the wake of Israel's 1st King, Saul's disobedience of God and his failures as king, the young shepherd boy David was anointed by the Prophet Samuel as Israel's next king. David was anointed king at a young age, but his pathway to the throne wasn't a quick or direct route. For approximately 10 years David was in and around Saul's palace. During this time he soothed the king's mood swings with his harp playing; he won a great military victory for Israel by defeating the Philistine giant Goliath; and, he grew very close to King Saul's son, Jonathan. David then spent more than 5 years as a fugitive, running from a jealous King Saul, who wouldn't accept that God's time for him was finished and that David would be his successor. The best estimates are that David was anointed king when he was a pre-teen or early teen and became king at the

age of 30. After waiting over 15 years to become king, David experienced great success when he finally assumed the throne: Israel flourished and David was a highly respected warrior and leader. However, in the midst of his successful reign as king, David sinned grievously against God, against the nation of Israel and against a woman named Bathsheba and her husband—a friend of David’s—Uriah. Like a rock dropped in the middle of a quiet pond, the effects of David’s sin sent ripples across his kingdom—the effects of which he and his family would deal with until his death. The ripples were many, but one of the most notable was a breach in David’s relationship with his sons, whom he failed to nurture or to hold accountable for their actions. Tension between David and his sons grew, culminating in the betrayal of his son Absalom, who planned a coup attempt to unseat his father as king so he might assume the throne of Israel.

We read about Absalom’s conspiracy in 2 Samuel chapter 15. It’s difficult in a few minutes to adequately describe the impact this had on David, but I’ll read a few passages from 2 Samuel 15 to try and help us tap into what David must have been feeling.

I’ll begin with verses 13 & 14 and then read verses 30 & 31...

A messenger came and told David, “The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom.” Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, “Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us and put the city to the sword.” 2 Samuel 15:13 & 14

But David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads too and were weeping as they went up. Now David had been told, “Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.” So David prayed, “LORD, turn Ahithophel’s counsel into foolishness.” 2 Samuel 15:30 & 31

Imagine David, an established and successful king, being forced to leave his palace like a criminal, fearing for his life, because his own son was seeking to have him killed so he could take over the kingdom. And it had to be doubly painful for David that some of his closest friends and advisors—like Ahithophel—had shifted their support to his son. David was distraught—the kingdom was under siege and his life was in jeopardy—because his son was trying to overthrow him. It’s in this context that David cries out to God with these words recorded in Psalm 3.

Psalm 3

LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!

² Many are saying of me, “God will not deliver him.”

³ But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

⁴ I call out to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain.

⁵ I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.

⁶ I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.

⁷ Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.

⁸ From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people.

David is desperate. In his desperation he calls out to God, expecting Him to respond, because his life and his kingdom are hanging in the balance. Now let’s turn our focus toward Psalm 4, keeping King David’s circumstances as a backdrop.

In his commentary on the Psalms, Charles Spurgeon points out that Psalm 3 is known as “A Morning Psalm,” and that Psalm 4 could be viewed as “An Evening Psalm.” We might envision David calling out to God in the early morning with the words of Psalm 3 and praying Psalm 4 as he prepared to retire to bed at night. In verse 1 David pleads with God. In verses 2-5 he appears to be speaking to his enemies—those who have betrayed him. And in verses 6-8, David concludes the psalm by contrasting the peace, comfort and safety he has with God, as opposed to his enemies. Listen to the words of Psalm 4 again...

Psalm 4

¹ Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

² How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

³ Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

⁴ Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.

⁵ Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD.

⁶ Many, LORD, are asking, “Who will bring us prosperity?” Let the light of your face shine on us.

⁷ Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound.

⁸ In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.

In verse 1 David says, *“Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.”* David knew God well and he wasn’t shy about making it clear to God what He wanted. We tend to be passive in our prayers, but throughout the New Testament we’re instructed to approach God boldly in prayer—knowing He loves and wants his best for his lives. I find great comfort in Jesus’ words describing our Heavenly Father’s desire to answer our prayers, in Matthew chapter 7.

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:7-11

When we trust God’s goodness and his love for us, we can pray with confidence and assurance. We also gain confidence through what we’ve seen God do in answer to our prayers in the past. It doesn’t come through very clearly in the NIV translation, but it was David’s pattern in his prayers to remind God how He has answered his prayers in the past. The MESSAGE Paraphrase of Psalm 4 verse 1 says, *“When I call, give me answers. God, take my side! Once, in a tight place, you gave me room; Now I’m in trouble again: grace me! hear me!”*

In verses 2-5 David says, *“How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him. Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD.”* In these verses David transitions from speaking directly to God to challenging his enemies. He asks how long they will turn against him (David) and against God. He claims that his place as king is based on God placing him there and he is confident God hears and answers his prayers. And he calls his enemies to turn away from sin and to turn toward God. David’s

language toward his enemies can be hard to read because it's unfiltered, but his ultimate desire was that his enemies would know the joy of relationship with God.

In verses 6-8 David turns his focus back to God and what he wants God to do for Him. He writes, *"Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety."* David uses some beautiful word pictures here. *"Let the light of your face shine on us."* There is nothing like the smile of God and his favor resting on us to brighten our day and to assure us that we're pleasing God. Next David says, *"Fill my heart with joy as when the grain and new wine abound."* Years when the harvest was good—when grain was plentiful and new wine was abundant—were times of great joy for Israel. David asks God to fill his heart with that kind of joy. And David concludes this psalm with the words, *"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety."* We can rest in peace when we know the Lord is with us, allowing us to sleep in safety. This is a verse Greta and I taught our kids to pray when they were young. Many kids find it a challenge to sleep at night as they struggle with doubts and fears, but God allows us to lie down and sleep in peace, knowing he provides us with safety. And as those of us who are adults know, it's not just children who need to sense Jesus' peace and safety at night and throughout the day.

As we head into our time of response in singing, I want us to focus on the 3 word pictures David shares at the end of this psalm:

- The light of his face shining upon us
- Our hearts filled with joy as they would be at an abundant harvest
- Lying down and sleeping in peace as God allows us to dwell in safety

Which of those word pictures do you most need to claim from God for yourself today? I invite you as we sing together to call out to God asking Him to provide for you at your point of need today.