

Israel's Hymnal
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PSALM FOUR

[Pss 4:1] Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness; Thou hast set me at large when I was in distress: Have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer.

[Pss 4:2] O ye sons of men, how long shall my glory be turned into dishonor? [How long] will ye love vanity, and seek after falsehood? Selah

[Pss 4:3] But know that Jehovah hath set apart for himself him that is godly: Jehovah will hear when I call unto him.

[Pss 4:4] Stand in awe, and sin not: Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah

[Pss 4:5] Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, And put your trust in Jehovah.

[Pss 4:6] Many there are that say, Who will show us any good? Jehovah, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us.

[Pss 4:7] Thou hast put gladness in my heart, More than they have when their grain and their new wine are increased.

[Pss 4:8] In peace will I both lay me down and sleep; For thou, Jehovah, alone makest me dwell in safety.

- I. Prayer for continued mercies (vs. 1).
- II. Address to the sons of men (vs. 2).
- III. Wise counsel to the sons of men (vss. 3-5).
- IV. Prayer and praise (vss. 6,7).
- V. Reposing in confidence (vs. 8).

Psalm 4 is a companion of the preceding one which is entitled "A Morning Prayer Of Trust In God." The heading of the fourth Psalm in the Revised Version is an "Evening Prayer Of Trust In God." The contents of each of these psalms shows that they are closely related. As we saw in the study of Psalm 3, King David prayed the petition in the morning because of the fact that God had marvelously protected him from all dangers, which were threatening on every hand. From verse 8 we see that Psalm 4 is an evening prayer of King David's just before he retired. It is most highly probable that these two petitions were uttered when the crisis which had come upon David was at its height.

As was noted in the last exposition, II Samuel, chapters 12 to 15, must be studied in order to appreciate these two psalms. The correctness of this statement may be seen by the fact that, in order for us to understand any poem or hymn, we must understand the occasion of the author's composing the same. It is impossible for one to put into poetical form all the details connected with the event which the poem or hymn is to commemorate. This principal obtains with reference to the Psalms, especially these two.

I. Prayer for continued mercies

"Answer me when I call,
O God of my righteousness;
Thou hast set me at large when I was in distress;
Have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer" (vs. 1).

David addressed the Lord as the "God of my righteousness." This phrase may be interpreted as David's affirmation that his standards of righteousness were all derived from God. Or it may be understood as the king's claim that he was innocent on this occasion and that God was championing his cause. We may not be positive as to which idea is the one to be understood. Both are correct. One should certainly be sure that one's standards of ethics and morals have God for their author. Of course, we recognize that God's standards of morals and righteousness are set forth in the Word. We should also be certain that our conduct is in perfect accord with God's righteous standards as set forth in His revelation. When one is assured of that fact, one can call the Lord the "God of my righteousness."

It is a wonderful thing to have dealings with God constantly--to know the Lord experientially. The more we trust Him, the more we walk with Him by faith, day by day--the clearer our conceptions of His ways with men will be to us. If we have walked with Him and have had personal dealings with Him in the past, we can use these experiences to draw upon for strength in time of distress. This David did on the occasion about which we are studying. He therefore said, "Thou hast set me at large when I was in distress." Thus he here alluded to some experience which he had had in the past--a difficult situation--out of which God had delivered him when he called upon Him. In praying it is a great aid to our faith to recall some past experience, some difficult situation, out of which the Lord has delivered us in answer to earnest prayer. Thus in our praying our faith will rise to higher levels and greater heights, and we can with boldness ask for assistance in the present situation.

The last line of this verse "Have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer," is quite significant. David realized that it was in God that he lived, moved, and had his continual being. Moreover, he was conscious of the fact that he had sinned and that he did not deserve God's mercy, but he knew that the Lord was merciful and did extend His loving-kindness to those who in faith come to Him; therefore, without pleading any merit of his own case, he asked the Lord to extend mercy and to hear his petition. Let us also come to Him always in the same spirit.

II. Address to the sons of men

"O ye sons of men, how long shall my glory be turned into dishonor?
How long will ye love vanity, and seek after falsehood" (vs. 2).

The psalmist addressed his enemies as the "sons of men" and asked them how long his glory would be turned into dishonor. In other words, he inquired of his enemies how long would they continue the fight against him. How long would he, the sovereign of the realm, be in disgrace, hiding in foreign territory?

Moreover, he asked them "How long will ye love vanity, and seek after falsehood?" David was certain that the Lord would not reject him as He had done Saul before him. He was confident that his present situation was only temporary, and that the Lord would, when He had finished His purposes in allowing this coup d'état to occur, would restore him to the kingdom. He therefore considered their rebellion as a vain thing in their striving after falsehood and error.

The answer to this question, we find from a study of the Scriptures in general. Everyone is confident that Absalom's rebellion was permitted of the Lord and used as punishment and chastisement to David for his sins. But how long would the Lord continue to punish him for his wrongdoing? Wisdom answers the question by the affirmation that the Lord never does anything that is unnecessary; thus when He had finished His chastisement of David and had accomplished His purpose in permitting the rebellion, He would then stop it and restore David to the kingdom. Whenever God punishes us for our wrongs, He will not give us any unnecessary strokes of chastisement. Any sane parent will punish a child for wrongdoing, but he will not give one stroke more than he feels is necessary to bring about the correction. Thus it is with the Lord.

III. Wise counsel to the sons of men

"But know that Jehovah hath set apart for himself him that is godly:
 Jehovah will hear when I call unto him.
 Stand in awe, and sin not:
 Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still.
 Offer the sacrifices of righteousness,
 And put your trust in Jehovah" (vss. 3-5).

The first statement of these verses is an exhortation to the sons of men regarding their recognizing the fact that God sets apart for Himself the one who is godly. The psalmist wished his enemies to know assuredly that fact. The Lord has a plan and a purpose for every one of His children. In the words of the New Testament, those who are saved are created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works which God afore-prepared that they should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10). The Lord has a definite plan for every man's life. If one will yield himself to the Lord to be used in God's number one plan, all will be well and good. But how many are willing to accept God's first plan for their lives? The answer is very, very few. He therefore has a second plan, or a third, or a fourth, or even a fifth scheme for every man's life. If we will not take His best, He will use us in a secondary and in a less honorable plan. This is seen from various passages of scripture which I cannot now mention. Let us accept nothing but His number one plan for our lives, which is His best.

But the psalmist says that "Jehovah hath set apart for himself him that is godly." Are we godly? Have we any righteousness of our own? Was the psalmist talking about his own godliness? A glance at the Hebrew text gives us the answer to these questions. The word that is rendered "godly" means one who has obtained favor. There is therefore no suggestion as to human merit or goodness; but those to whom the Lord extends mercy are those who enter into covenant relationship with Him by virtue of sacrifice. This is seen very clearly in Psalm 50:5.

"Gather my saints together unto me,
Those that have made a covenant by sacrifice."

The word in the first line rendered "saints" is our word in the plural number. But who are these saints? The second line, which is parallel with the first, gives this information. They are those who enter into covenant with God by sacrifice. David was in covenant relationship with God by virtue of the sacrifices which God required of Israel. We today are the Lord's "godly ones" because we have entered into covenant relationship with Him by virtue of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary nineteen hundred years ago.

Let us, therefore, who realize these facts, recognize that we are not to live to please ourselves and to serve selfish interests. On the other hand, let us realize that we were bought with a price and that we should therefore offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service. From one angle God needs us. He is calling for volunteers who will render whole-hearted obedience. He has committed to His people the Word of reconciliation and is using them as ambassadors in pleading with the world to be reconciled to Himself through the Lord Jesus (II Cor. 5:20-21).

We have but one life to live. It will soon be over. Only the things that are done for Christ, His people, and the world will be counted worthwhile. All other things are dross, that will perish. Let us therefore know that we who are godly through our covenant relationship with the Lord by virtue of Christ's sacrifice have been set apart to Him in His service, to forward His plans and purposes among men.

In the second line of verse 3, David expressed the conviction that God would hear when he called. This conviction was borne upon his mind by the infallible Word of God and His promises. Let us not, however, think that, just as soon as David cried, the Lord heard and brought the deliverance instantly. He hears every prayer that is sent for an honest, conscientious heart. He plans to overrule and to work things around so as to bring the deliverance, but oftentimes for our own good He allows us to continue to pray for the thing which He eventually will bring about. That this statement is correct may be seen from our Lord's exhortation that men should pray everywhere and should not faint. Our Lord spoke the parable of the unrighteous judge and the importunate widow to the Apostles, "to the end that they (His disciples) ought always to pray, and not to faint ..." (Luke 18:1). If we are confident that a certain thing is in accordance with the will of God, let us continue to pray for it and not to faint. In our praying let us always imply--but better, express--that we want the thing for which we are praying provided it is His will. The spirit of true prayer is expressed in these words, "Not my will but thine be done."

To the sons of men, his enemies, David exhorted, "Stand in awe, and sin not: Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." By these exhortations David meant that his enemies should stop and cease their opposition, realizing that they, in opposing him and his regime, were opposing God. They were therefore to stop in holy awe and not to sin. In their opposition to him and his government, they were sinning. Moreover, he urged them to think over their situation as they lay on their beds at night, when they would be apart from others and would not be under their influence or affected by mob psychology. In other words, they were in the quietness of the night hours to consider the situation as it had developed and their part in it. He therefore urged them to be still and stop-- stop the rebellion. On the other hand, he advised, "Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, And put your trust in Jehovah." Doubtless many of those who had engaged in the rebellion thought that in doing so they were rendering service to the Lord.

In this they were mistaken. It is true that God used their impulsiveness and their wickedness in punishing David, but God could have chastened him in some other way.

The Lord, however, uses various means and methods in accomplishing His purposes. But the king advised them to cease their rebellion and to offer sacrifices of righteousness, instead of engaging in the violence of revolution. What did he mean by the sacrifices of righteousness? He could have been speaking of righteous acts and deeds in terms of the sacrifices with which all were familiar. In their revolution they were, as they thought, rendering sacrificial service to God. David interpreted their acts as unrighteousness. Hence the exhortation that they should offer the sacrifices of righteousness--turn right about face and act and live righteously. On the other hand, the expression, "sacrifices of righteousness," might have this meaning: You cease your evil, wicked ways and live righteous lives. Then engage in the regular ceremonial worship as prescribed by the law. Thus they, living right and offering their sacrifices, would be offering sacrifices of righteousness. In view of all the facts it is likely that both ideas are expressed in this exhortation. His enemies were also entreated to put their trust in Jehovah. One cannot afford to trust men who seldom can carry out the promises that they made and execute the plans which they devised. It is far better to trust God who works all things according to His will and who delivers those who trust in Him.

IV. Prayer and praise

"Many there are that say, Who will show us any good?
Jehovah, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us.
Thou hast put gladness in my heart,
More than they have when their grain and their new wine are increased" (vss. 6, 7).

David knew the thoughts and the general opinions of many of his contemporaries. He therefore said that there were many who looked upon the situation with doubt and who said, "Who will show us any good?" These people lacked faith.

They did not understand God's Word. Nor did they understand His dealings with men. It was all together possible that they did not understand that God intervenes providentially in answer to prayer and delivers those who trust in Him and those who call upon Him. They may have come to the conclusion that, under their present situation, God would not be merciful and would not assist. Then, looking at the human side, they asked this question. They saw no one on the political horizon who would come to the aid of David and would assist in restoring him to the throne and in bringing order out of chaos. It is altogether possible, and even probable, that David cast his eyes about toward the surrounding nations and saw no human aid from any source. He therefore prayed, "Jehovah, lift up the light of thy countenance upon us." This petition is parallel with the first line of this verse and may be considered as an answer to the question, "Who will show us any good?" His answer is that Jehovah is the one who will do this and therefore he prays for this divine intervention. He then declares in verse 7, "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, More than they have when their grain and their new wine are increased."

To what does he refer in this verse? Did God put the assurance in his heart that He at the proper time would reverse the situation, would restore David to the throne, and would establish an orderly

government again? It seems that this is probably the thought to be conveyed. In answer to the psalmist's petition for divine intervention, the Lord gave him the assurance in his own soul and then put joy and gladness in his heart in anticipation of the realization of the promise of divine assistance. This gladness and joy were of a higher type and far exceeded the joy and the gladness which men have when they harvest large crops. Spiritual realities are of a higher nature and by far transcend all joys and pleasures that are derived from human efforts and relations with others.

V. Reposing in confidence

"In peace will I both lay me down and sleep;
For thou, Jehovah, alone makest me dwell in safety" (vs. 8).

Having the assurance in his heart that God would, in due time, adjust all things and restore him to his position, the psalmist declared that he would both lie down and would sleep. The burden was lifted. He had nothing to worry about. There was nothing that could disquiet his spirit so that he could not rest. Thus like an innocent child, free from all care, he could lie down with perfect assurance that God would carry out His promise in every particular and would also protect him from the dangers that might arise while he was unconscious in sleep. That this is the meaning of our verse is evident from the last line which reads, "For thou, Jehovah, alone makest me dwell in safety." The Lord is the one who works all things together for the good of those who love Him and who are called according to His purpose. Nothing can come to a child of God except that which is permitted. Even though the Lord does allow certain experiences to come into our lives which are not according to His first plan, but rather according to a subordinate scheme, He does make His people dwell in confidence and in safety and protects them. Let us therefore pillow our heads on the promises of God that He will work out all our problems for us to His glory and honor and to our good.