

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Psalm 4 – A Song of Prayerful Trust

I wonder, do you ever get stressed? And what sorts of things cause you stress? For some of us, just getting out of bed in the morning can be stressful! In 1967, two mental health experts from the University of Washington did a study on the connection between significant life events and illness, and they compiled a chart of the major causes of stress. That chart, which contained 43 causes of stress in 1967, was updated to 55 causes in 2006. It appears we are finding more ways of feeling stressed.

What are the issues we feel stressed about? *Finances* can be a main source of stress – major purchases like a home or car, or loss of income, or increasing debt are all significant. *Work* is also a cause of stress, where we worry about getting and keeping a job, worry about new responsibilities, worry about demands, worry about changing conditions, worry about relationships with bosses and colleagues. *Family* is also a major cause of stress – arguments, separation, divorce, reconciliation, illness, death, a child moving out, a parent moving in. Then, there are also all sorts of *personal concerns*, or health, or relationships, where we feel we're not fully in control of what's going on, and that can lead to *fear*, which can lead to more stress, and that can lead to *uncertainty*, and when we're not certain, we're unable to predict, and that means even less control and even more stress! We can feel stressed just thinking about those sorts of things...

But, it's no bad thing to acknowledge that stress is a common human experience, and that we all feel it to a greater or lesser extent in various spheres of our life, at different times of our life. Of course, some stress can be helpful, because it motivates us to get things done; a tight deadline can be stressful but also beneficial, because it focuses the mind. But stress can become so great that we become paralysed by it.

Certainly the person who wrote Psalm 4 was experiencing some sort of stress. Note what he says in verse 1: 'Give me relief from my distress.' It's not exactly clear why he was in a situation of stress. He spends verses 2-5 of the psalm addressing others, and it may well be that other people were a major cause of stress (that would be true to life, wouldn't it?). In verse 7 he talks about other people's crops increasing, and it may well be that his weren't, and it's this that has caused the distress. Either way, it has a very human and contemporary feel to it.

In Psalm 3 too, the psalmist (David) was under pressure. In fact, there are all sorts of links between this psalm and Psalm 3. These are the only two psalms where the words of others follow the phrase 'many are saying' (3:2 and 4:6, with the identical phrase in the original). In 4:1, the psalmist says 'answer me', and in 3:4, we read that 'he answers me'. We have glory being turned to shame in 4:2, and we have that same theme in 3:3, where God is the glorious one who lifts up David's head. Then, we have the reference in 4:8 to 'I will lie down and sleep', which nicely matches 3:5 – 'I lie down and sleep'. In fact, it has often been thought that Psalms 3 and 4 form a pair, with Psalm 3 being a *morning* psalm (with its reference to waking up in 3:5) and Psalm 4 being an *evening* psalm (with its reference to lying down in 4:8).

That has suggested to some that Psalm 4 is also written (like Psalm 3) against the background of Absalom's rebellion against David, when David had to flee for his life. That would certainly fit the psalm, since David not only had to deal with enemies (his own son, in this case), but also the misguided attitudes of his would-be supporters. In times of stress it's hard enough to deal with your own problems let alone the problems of others!

We don't know for certain whether this was the background, and it doesn't really matter anyway. Whatever the background and details, here is a person, David maybe, under stress. And, by God's grace, the psalm comes down to us as God's word today, so that we might learn from it as we face times of stress.

So, we will look at the Psalm as 'a song of prayerful trust', and we see first of all that the psalmist begins with a call for mercy...

### 1. His call for mercy (4:1)

Take a look at verse 1: 'Answer me when I call to you'. Who is this call for mercy addressed to? The next line tells us: 'O my righteous God'. Not just God, but 'my *righteous* God', or 'God of my right'.

It might be worth pausing to ask: do *we* address God when we pray? *How* do we address God when we pray? Loving God? Gracious God? Holy God? Faithful God? Merciful God? Awesome God? Powerful God? Righteous God?

It's because God is the God of his right, the God who does what is right, who *makes* things right, that the psalmist can pray, 'Give me relief from my distress'. 'Distress' here has to do with being constrained and confined, and the psalmist asks for relief, for room to breathe.

What does he say in the last line? 'Be merciful to me and hear my prayer.' Here is biblical prayer, and its proper basis. Not that we're so great and so spiritual and so worthy that we can approach God. On what basis does he pray? On the basis that God is a righteous God, and has mercy on his people. He calls on God. Ultimately, he has no other source of hope. Ultimately, he has no other means of deliverance. Ultimately, he knows that the Lord will do what is right, and will show mercy. Here is a model for us, that as we go through life, with all its strain and stress, we put our trust in our God who does what is right, and who will show us mercy.

### 2. His counsel to others (4:2-5)

The psalmist not only speaks of his own trust in God, but encourages others to do the same. In verses 2-5, he addresses people with inappropriate attitudes of various sorts. He wants them to change their minds and their ways, for their own sakes apart from anything else. He might have different groups of people in mind. He certainly begins with the mockers, those who are sneering.

#### (a) The mockers (4:2-3)

The word for 'men' in verse 2 carries the sense of prominent men in high position. If this is written against the background of Absalom's uprising, this would make sense: leading officials in David's government have betrayed David, and are shaming him with their sneering and abuse. David is being treated as someone shameful. But, David says, 'Don't you realise that you are following a delusion?' (4:2b). Their words are empty and they seek falsehood, which could be false gods (as the NIV says), or lies in general. They are deceiving themselves.

How does he deal with that? He turns to God's attitude towards him, which is sometimes a good way to deal with the inappropriate criticism of others. Look at verse 3. The truth is that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself. This is not someone saying that they themselves are perfect; it's a statement of faith about *God's* commitment to his people. The Lord sets his people apart, and those people can be confident that the Lord will hear them. The Lord listens to those he has set apart.

Note what text says: the truth is that God has set us apart – *for himself* – that we might know him and enjoy him and find joy and peace in him. If someone faces distress at work, where does she turn? If someone finds himself suddenly bereaved, where does he turn? If a family faces a crisis, where do they turn? As those set apart by God, we are never alone, and we can know that the Lord will hear when we call to him.

### (b) The misguided (4:4-5)

If the psalm grows out of the situation of Absalom's rebellion, it may well be that some of David's friends want to see some violence. If so, David says they are misguided, and he counsels them to cool off, to be quiet and still before they do something they will regret (4:4). It may well be that in a situation of stress, the temptation is strong to defend or vindicate ourselves, to speak out too quickly, and the psalm reminds us not to sin in our anger, but to calm down, search our hearts, be silent.

But the phrase at the start of verse 4 could also be translated, 'tremble – not in anger, but in *fear* – and do not sin', in which case, David is still addressing his enemies, and encouraging them to search their hearts, in solitude, in the privacy of their beds, to acknowledge God and not entertain secret thoughts.

And so, he goes on verse 5 to say, 'offer true sacrifices and trust in the Lord'. It's not just simply offering sacrifices that makes people acceptable to God. They are to be offered in faith, with a humble heart. They are to be sacrifices which come from a faithful heart as God himself is faithful, ones where worship and life cohere, not offered by people who worship one way and live another way. Now, as the New Testament tells us, we offer to God the sacrifice of our praise (Hebrews 13:15-16); we bring not the sacrifice of dead animals, but of ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

And so, we come to the final section of the psalm...

### 3. His confidence in God (4:6-8)

It may be this the psalmist addresses a third group of people at the start of verse 6: 'Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?"' If we've had the *mockers* and the *misguided*, these are the *miserable*. They are the pessimists, and this is a cry of despair. We all know these sorts of people, the defeatists, always doubtful: the sky is falling and there's no hope; not only is the glass not half full, it's mostly empty, and the only light that's coming at the end of the tunnel is the light of an oncoming train! Or it may be they lack good things and don't know who to turn to. Or it may be they are asking

who to trust for good things, for blessings such as fruitfulness in harvest. Whatever the question, whatever the issue, whatever the need, the answer is found in blessing of the Lord.

What does the psalmist pray? Take a look at the second part of verse 6: 'Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord.' Those words are very similar to the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26, which God gave to Aaron to bless the people of Israel with. Here, the psalmist uses the words of the priestly blessing, asking God to shine on the people.

Then, in the closing verses comes his great statement of confidence in God (4:7-8). The psalmist has inner joy even if he has an empty stomach (see 4:7). It is the joy of his heart as he trusts in God which is more precious than any material blessing. He has more joy in God than others when their income doubles. When *their* circumstances are good, he says, they still haven't tasted the blessings I have in my distress. What gives us more joy: the wine overflowing in our home, or the joy of the Lord overflowing in our heart?

When the Psalm ends, he is still in distress. And yet, he is strangely at peace (4:8). What does he do? He lies down and sleeps. Whether it's an empty stomach, or mockers, or the misguided, or the miserable causing him stress, the psalmist is not going to lose any sleep. He will enjoy peace, *shalom*, the peace that the priestly blessing goes on to speak about – referring to the well-being of the whole person.

And it's the Lord alone who does this, he says; only the Lord counts, for the real security that matters is his fellowship with God. We read the psalm, and we see a person who had many troubles, who knew what it was to be stressed, but who was confident in God, and knew the peace of God, which passes all understanding, which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 17 August 2008.*