

Psalm 4

3 Sunday of Easter, Year B
Night Prayer Saturday

This is a prayer of trust from a person who is oppressed on all sides. The title reads: 'To the leader. With stringed instruments. A Psalm* of David'. The similarities with Psalm 3 may account for these psalms being placed together in the Psalter. As we pray this psalm we might imagine Moses in the wilderness when the leaders of the people are grumbling against him (see, for example, Numbers 11:11-15), or Jesus as he stands before Pilate.

The psalmist trusts that God will intervene and see that justice is done in his regard. See the article 'Just' in the Introduction. The experience of Jesus shows us that we must not limit our hope to this life. Jesus placed his trust in God, and his prayer was heard, but only after he had gone through the unjust death that was inflicted upon him.

The psalmist is confident because God has helped him in the past by opening up a way for him, freeing him from being trapped, and giving him space in which to move and live. 'Space' is the first key symbol of the psalm. He prays that God will look favourably upon him. See the article 'Grace' in the Introduction. As we recall our own experiences we might meditate on the following:

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your left hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

– Psalm 139:8-10

In him we live and move and have our being.

– Acts 17:28

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

– Ephesians 3:18-19

**¹Answer me when I call,
O God, defender of my
just* cause.**

**You opened up a space
for me when I was
hemmed in.
Be gracious* to me, and
hear my prayer.**

Part One.

An impassioned plea for the conversion of those who are ranged against him.

**²How long, you leaders,
shall I be dishonoured
with shame?**

**How long will you love
falsehood, and seek after
lies?**

[Selah*]

**³Know this: YHWH* has
set apart the faithful*
one for himself; YHWH
hears me when I call to
him.**

**⁴Tremble with fear*
and stop sinning!**

**Ponder on your beds,
and be silent.**

[Selah*]

**⁵Offer right* sacrifices,
and put your trust* in
YHWH.**

People in positions of power are harassing the psalmist with empty and untrue accusations.

They should realise that God has a special relationship with one who is faithful (Hebrew *ḥasîd*, חֲסִיד) to God's covenant of love. See the article 'Kindness' (*ḥesed*) in the Introduction.

They shall be mine, says YHWH of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act.

– Malachi 3:17

He is calling upon YHWH. They should realise that God answers such cries.

Instead of 'tremble with fear' the Greek Septuagint has 'be angry' and this is the way Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 4:26 (see also the text from Augustine on page 20). The psalmist is warning his accusers to tremble with fear because of what sinning does to them. It breaks our communion with the Source of life.

For those with eyes to see, God's answer to the cry of his faithful ones is a revelation of God's presence and action in the world. Those who are harassing the psalmist should respond as to a theophany – with fear (see the article in the Introduction), which should cause them to cease sinning. Compare the following:

In my peril I called upon YHWH; I cried out for help to my God. From his temple he heard my cry, my scream for help pierced through to his presence him and he heard me. The mountains were shaken to their foundations, they shuddered at his terrible anger

– Psalm 18:6-7

They should take time when they are alone to reflect on what they are doing and cease their accusations.

There are seven imperatives in verses 3-5. Having appealed to his accusers to undergo conversion, the psalmist tells them to express this new found righteousness in the appropriate cultic sacrifice. His seventh and final appeal is for them to share his trust in YHWH. See the article 'Trust' in the Introduction.

Part Two.

The psalmist feels for those who are in danger of losing hope in God, and offers them his personal testimony. Like him we should learn to trust when in darkness.

There is a caution here. When we are in trouble, we are tempted to stop believing that God will be faithful to us. The experience of trial (darkness) tempts us to lose faith in the light.

There is also an element of praise in that the psalmist appreciates the fact that we know that there is no good (Hebrew *tōb*) apart from God's countenance smiling upon us. The image is frequent, and finds a beautiful expression in the priestly prayer:

May YHWH bless you and keep you.
 May YHWH make his face to shine upon you,
 and be gracious to you.
 May YHWH lift up his countenance upon you,
 and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:25-26

Not by their own sword did they win the land,
 nor did their own arm give them victory.
 It was your right hand, and your arm,
 and the light of your countenance,
 for you delighted in them.

– Psalm 44:3

YHWH, why do you cast me off?
 Why do you hide your face from me?

– Psalm 88:14

Amid the pain of false accusation, faith brings joy to the psalmist's 'heart' (see the article 'Heart' in the Introduction). Verse eight contains the second key symbol of the poem: sleep as a sign of trust. Compare the Sabbath theme of 'rest' in the Old Testament and in the Letter to the Hebrews. The psalm comes to a perfect resolution in peace (see the article 'Peace' in the Introduction) and trust. We think of the trust in the heart of Jesus as he faces crucifixion:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

‘Many people ask themselves, ‘Who is going to enjoy good, YHWH, if the light of your face does not shine upon us?’

‘You have put more gladness in my heart* than they have from abundance of grain and new wine

‘I lie down in peace* and sleep comes at once; for I live, placing all my trust* in you, YHWH.

Saint Augustine

In his Confessions (IX.4), Augustine tells of the effect that praying this psalm had upon him:

How I cried out to you, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those hymns of faith, those songs of a pious heart in which the spirit of pride can find no place! I was new to your love. I was a catechumen living at leisure in that country house with Alypius, a catechumen like myself, and my mother, who never left us ... How I cried to you when I read those psalms! How they set me on fire with love of you! I was burning to echo them to all the world, if only it were possible, so that they might vanquish human pride ...

When I read the fourth Psalm, how it moved me: *'When I called on you, listen to me, O God and grant redress. In time of trouble you have brought me relief. Have pity on me now and hear my prayer'* ...

I quivered with fear, yet at the same time, I was aglow with hope, rejoicing in your mercy, my Father ... when I read the message of your Holy Spirit: *'How long will you be slow of heart? How long will you love vanity, and seek after lies?'* ... For so long I had loved vanity, and followed a lie. How I wish that my cries could have been heard by those who still set their hearts on vanity and follow lies! ...

I read on: *"Be angry, and stop sinning."* This moved me deeply, my God, because by now I had learned to be angry with myself for my past, so that in the future I might sin no more. It was right that I should be angry in this way, for ... those who try to find joy in things outside themselves easily vanish away into emptiness. They waste themselves on the temporal pleasures of the visible world. Their minds are starved and they nibble at empty shadows. How I wish that they would tire of going hungry, and cry: *'Who will show us any good?'* And we would answer: *'The light of your countenance, O Lord, is lifted up upon us'*. For we are not the Light which enlightens every person, but we are enlightened by you, that we, who were formerly darkness, may be light in you.

How I wish that they could see the Eternal Light within us. Having tasted it myself, I gnashed my teeth that I could not show it to them. Their hearts looked out through their eyes on the world outside, away from you as they cried: *'Who will show us any good?'* But there, where I was angry with myself in my inmost heart, where I had been stung with remorse, where I had put to death my old self and offered it in 'sacrifice', where I had first resolved to renew my life and had *'placed my hope in you'*, it was there that you had begun to make me love you and had *'put gladness in my heart'*. It was my eyes that read these words but my soul that knew their meaning. They brought a cry to my lips and I wished no longer for the manifold riches of this earth, things on which I should waste time, only to be myself wasted by time; whereas in your eternal simplicity I possess true *'corn, and wine, and oil'*.

When I read the next verse a loud cry broke from my heart: *'In peace I will lie down and sleep!'* For who shall stand against us when the saying of Scripture comes true: *'Death is swallowed up in victory?'* For you do not change and in you we find the rest which banishes all labour. For there is no other beside you, and we need not struggle for other things which are not what you are, for *'You only, Lord, make me dwell in hope'*. These things I read, and there was fire in my heart ... I had snarled blindly and bitterly against the Scriptures, which are sweet with the honey of heaven and radiant with your light. And now I felt sick at heart over those who hate them.