

Responding To Anxiety and Fear

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Psalm 4:1-8

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So on October 16th, 1555, bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were burned at the stake as heretics at Oxford University. You can actually go there and there's a spot on the ground and X that marks the spot where they were executed. What were their crimes? Two. The first one, they denied transubstantiation, which is that the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Jesus. They denied that, and for that they were executed. But two, they also denied that the Pope has divine authority over the church. So the night before his execution, Ridley's brother asked if he wanted him to come to the jail and stay up with him all night. But Ridley told him no. Then he paraphrased this verse, verse 8, "In peace, I will both lie down and sleep," I'm about to be executed, but I'm going to sleep in peace, "because you alone, oh Lord, make me dwell in safety."

Listen, if there is comfort in Psalm 4 for a man who is about to be burned at this stake, there is comfort in Psalm 4 for you and for me. Well, what do we know about this psalm before we jump into the details? Well take a look at the opening line, which is not verse 1 but it's above verse 1. It says, "To the choir master with stringed instruments, a Psalm of David." That is scripture. That is in the Bible. This means that we can confidently say that David wrote this song some 3000 years ago. There's no reason to doubt the genuineness of this title. Also, we know that this Psalm would've been sung with other worshipers in the tabernacle and it would've been accompanied by musical instruments. Now, what don't we know about this song, but scholars like to guess about?

Well, I said the words above verse 1 are scripture but when you compare these words to a verse like Habakkuk 3:19 it says that these words to the choir master with stringed instruments don't belong at the beginning of this Psalm but I think that they actually belong to the end of the Psalm before, at the end of Psalm 3. Which would also mean that the words that start right above verse 1 of Psalm 5 where it says, "To the choir master: for the flutes," that that would belong to the end of Psalm 4. Meaning that this song would've been sung in the tabernacle but with wind instruments like flutes. Also, the thing we don't know about this Psalm is why it was written. What's the historical background for why this Psalm was written? Because it doesn't tell us, we probably shouldn't speculate and just say that the original trouble that caused David to write this song is uncertain.

Whatever the trouble is, this Psalm is a prayer of confidence not in himself and not in his circumstances, that when people were running away from God, Psalm 4 is confident in God, in his faithfulness, in his presence, in the very midst of adversity. Which means that for us, this song is going to teach us how to overcome anxiety and fear. I know that's a bold statement for a

culture that says things like fear and anxiety can never be overcome, the best they could ever be is managed. But God's word has divine power. God is greater than all things in his ways will help us overcome anxiety and fear. Now, there's real trouble brewing in the background of this Psalm. Just like I know there's real trouble brewing in the background of many of our lives. Whether it's family or financial, whether it's here or around the world. I know we carry a lot of things that scramble our minds and burden our souls.

So how David dealt with the trouble that he and the people of Israel were facing and how he counsels others to deal with that trouble, it'll help all of us respond to the times that cause us to be anxious and fearful and it will help us help others too. You know that's one of my goals every single week that I preach. Every single week my goal is to help you help others with what we learn. Some of you are anxious and afraid and some of you aren't. Some will listen to this message therefore for personal encouragement, others should listen to this for ministry purposes. Those of you who aren't struggling with those things, you'll interact with someone who is, right? So your job today will be to learn how to help them with the truth that we see in Psalm 4 and whatever the historical circumstance was, anxiety and fear was closing in on David, adversity had hit ancient Israel. Anxiety and fear were growing in the people's hearts and everyone is going to respond to it in the ways that they think is best to respond.

David responds to fear with prayer. Verse one, "Answer me when I call, oh God of my righteousness. You have given me relief when I was in distress, be gracious to me and hear my prayer." Hear me, God, respond to me. There's a desperate sincerity in these words. He really needed help. As he's been in the past, David is in distress. You see that word, it means to be closed in, restricted, or confined. So like an animal surrounded by wolves in a forest or a victim surrounded by bad guys in a dark alley, David and the people of Israel were surrounded by some great difficulty. So he cries out to, notice, to God his righteousness to rescue him. Notice David isn't saying, God, respond to my prayer because I am righteous or respond to my prayer because you are righteous.

No, David's righteousness, his obedience, his holiness is not his own. All the good that David is, all the right that David does, he understands that's a gift from God. Because of that, David prays to God, notice, be gracious to me. See if God is going to respond to his prayers it's not because God has to. David knows this. God will respond to his prayers for help, not because he's forced to, not because he's obligated to because David has been such a great little boy. No, God owes David nothing. David knows every answered prayer is a generous gift of his grace. So he appeals to God based on his mercy. Notice what David is focused on. He's not focused on the stress; he's not focused on the trouble. He's not obsessed with what's causing anxiety and fear. No anxiety and fear is all around him and it's closing in on him. His focus is not on any of that. His focus is firmly fixed on the Lord.

So if that's the case, in the face of anxiety and fear, ***point #1), Depend on God Through Prayer. Point #1), Depend on God Through Prayer.*** See when trouble hit his life, David was shaken. Definitely he's in distress, but he wasn't moved. There was a solid rock, a firm foundation

underneath the house of his life so that when the wind and waves of trouble came crashing upon his life, unlike those around him who we'll see in a minute, David remained secure. His initial response wasn't to freak out, it wasn't to break down, it wasn't to get overwhelmed. His initial response wasn't to run and hide or serve idols. No, his initial response was to pray to the God he trusts in adversity. Why? Well take a look at the verse again. It says, "You have given me relief when I was in distress."

David needed strength for today, so what does he do? He reminds himself of the past. He remembers how God worked in his life many times before. He says, I'm surrounded by adversity again. Lord, I need you again. I'm back in this place just like I've been in the past. In the past you've helped me, you've rescued me, you've saved me. In the past you've given me room to breathe. So, oh Lord, please, I need it again. I need you again. He remembers God's protecting grace in the past and those memories, those realities strengthen David in the present. So in the words of Psalm 50:15, God says, "Call upon me in the day of trouble." Or Psalm 86:7, "In the day of my trouble, I call upon you, oh Lord." Now, why do we do that? Why would we depend on God through prayer in times of trouble? Because the truth of Psalm 9:9, "The Lord is a stronghold in times of trouble."

Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." He protects and strengthens his troubled people when we pray. So if that's the case, then let's say it with Psalm 77:2, "In the day of trouble, I seek the Lord." I know that's like a no duh point, right? Point number one, pray to God in adversity. But is it? I'm not sure how no duh this point really is. I think we know this point intellectually, but I'm afraid that's where this point tends to end, right? I mean, 21st century American Christians we're known for a lot of things, but being a praying people is typically not one of them. As a result, we are also not known for being strong and stable when trouble hits our lives.

We're known for doing a bunch of stuff and a bunch of really good stuff all over the world, but prayer is not one of them. Until things are out of our control, we don't tend to pray. Until then we tell God, by our lack of prayer, that we can handle this. Prayer just isn't that practical. I mean, it doesn't really fix things. We can get the results that we need from him in our homes, our jobs, our schools, whatever, we can get all of that in our lives without him. Got some techniques, got some things I learned on YouTube and I can put that together and that's how I'm going to get it. God, I don't need your help, got to move on. It's easy to think that prayer doesn't do anything, but we could not be any more wrong if we believe that. We would never admit it, but we would see it in our lives without prayer.

When prayer is the key that unlocks the treasures of peace, and security, and help, and mercy, and strength, and wisdom that we need from God in our times of trouble. Prayer is how God has chosen to remove the adversity from our lives, or it's how he gives us encouragement and hope to endure the adversity in our lives. Through the practice of prayer, through honest expressions of need, of trust, of dependence on him spoken directly to God, that's how he takes care of us. So is there adversity in your life? Do you pray about it? I mean, do you really pray longer than a few

seconds or a minute, but really pray? I mean, sit down, even kneel down and pour out your heart to your good shepherd. Do you unburden your soul to him? What mean by that is do you pray until your soul isn't burdened anymore?

1 Peter 5, "Cast some of your anxieties on him." If you know the verse, you know it says cast all your anxieties. Everything that makes you anxious, cast all your anxieties on him. Why? Because he cares for you. Do we really believe that? Do you remember past answers to prayer and work to motivate a present persistent trust in him because of that? Do you plead for him to be gracious to you, to reach down from his throne in heaven into your specific life and hear your prayers like we see in verse 1? Do you pray about it more than once? Do you pray about it every time the anxiety and fear hits your life? Do you pray about it daily? Do you pray about it with others? Do others pray about it for you? There's no magic voice; there's no magic vocabulary that you need to pray. Just pray.

Someone tells me I don't know how to pray. I'll ask, "Do you know how to talk?" Because that's really all prayer is. Prayer is talking to God like you're talking to a friend who just happens to be all powerful, all competent, and all loving, and can totally fix any issue that we have. Depend on God through prayer, when trouble, when adversity hits your life, no matter what that trouble and adversity might be. Now starting in verse 2, David is going to shift his focus now because he sees people all around him responding to whatever the trouble was in a very wrong way, in a way that will make things worse. So he starts to talk to them. Verse 2, "O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?" Now, whether he actually said this to people or it's a poetic device, I'm not exactly sure.

So whether in the song or in real life, or both I guess, David starts talking to men. This word refers to the upper echelons of society, the aristocrats, the nobles, the influencers, the ones with all the power and distinction in contrast to the common people. He starts by asking them some questions that we just read. Now it sounds like David is talking about personal attacks against him, right? It says there, "My honor turned into shame." However, in Hebrew, the word honor is normally translated glory. In Psalm 3:3, just one Psalm to the left, glory is another way to identify God. It's a title for God. In other words, I think glory or honor should be capitalized. David is asking these powerful people why are they dishonoring his God? Then David asked them a double question, and the second question he asked is key for understanding what I just said about where he says, "How long will you seek after lies?"

Now speaking lies that's in the Bible. But seeking lies, that's nowhere in the Bible except right here. Look all over. It's nowhere else but right here. So what's he saying? The word seek is used for seeking divine assistance or trying to get counsel from a deity. You couple that with the word lies being used of false gods in the Book of Amos, and we get the idea of what's really going on here. In the face of whatever trouble is causing anxiety and fear in Israel, the nobles have turned their backs on God and have turned to idols for help. Seeking the assistance of false gods, verse 2, they love vain words, a reference to the empty promises of safety that the idols cause the people, that the idols give.

In contrast to the dead idols, verse 3, the Lord hears when David cries out to him for help because he belongs to him by covenant. Verse 3, "But know that the Lord is set apart, the Godly for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him." Notice Lord is repeated twice. In the midst of the trouble that Israel is facing, David appeals to God and says, we're in covenant with you, we're in relationship with you. You're the loyal one. You're the faithful one. As of speaking to these nobles directly, he tells them to know this truth in contrast to the false hope from the false gods. He's certain that God will respond. The nobles, he's saying, you cannot be certain that these idols will respond. They won't. So David tells them what they should do in response to the trouble. Look at verse 4. "Be angry, and do not sin. Ponder in your own hearts on your beds and be silent."

Let's break that down. I think David's first piece of advice is fine, be angry about the trouble but don't sin in your anger. How? By turning to false gods. Don't do that. They should ponder. They should seriously think about what they're doing and the word translated in the ESV silent, that word means to express grief by wailing or mourning. In other words, he's saying be terrified by your rejection of God and the shame that you're heaping on his reputation by turning to false idols. Now, if these idolaters listened to David in verses 2, 3 & 4 the next thing that they would ask him would be something like, well, what should we do instead? So verse 5 comes in, "Offer, right sacrifices; and put your trust in the Lord." Instead of pagan rituals or hypocritical worship of God, he says offer right sacrifices. Do the right sacrifices that's taught in the Old Testament. Do those from a broken heart of true worship for God instead of trust in the idols to rescue. Verse 5 "Put your trust in the Lord." Only he can rescue us from the trouble that's causing our anxiety and fear. So he's saying, repent of the idolatry and put your trust in him. Great.

What about us? How does that help us? Well, when you're experiencing anxiety or fear, when the trouble is just too much for you to handle, when your heart feels like it's weighed down by a thousand-pound weight, we respond well to all of that when we, ***point #2), Resist All God Substitutes. Resist All God Substitutes.*** God Substitute is anything you turn to for help or relief instead of God when adversity inserts itself into your life, like the men in Psalm 4 did with these idols. So let's think about this. Jesus puts this simply, Luke 12:22, he says, "I tell you, do not be anxious about your life." Command straight up, do not be anxious. Well, how do I do that? Paul tells us. Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything." He repeats Jesus. But then he says, "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." What will the result be? He continues, in contrast to the anxiety, "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding," what will that do in our lives? It will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

So the answer to anxiety and fear is to pray and the result is peace from God that we don't understand. A peace that guards our souls as the turmoil is raging all around us and even is trying to rage inside of us. So we don't want fear, we don't want anxiety, we want protection. We want peace. This verse tells us how, the same thing that we saw in Psalm 4:1, we need to pray. But we don't pray, we go to our favorite substitute instead. I mean, we're too sophisticated for pieces of

wood, stone, or metal shaped into idols. Our idols are far more subtle. But we go to them for the very same things that the men in Psalm 4 went to the idols for.

When trouble hits, we turn to substances like sugar or alcohol or food or devices to calm us down and make us feel better in the moment. We turn to our careers or we turn to school and we just dig in to distract ourselves and dull the pain. We turn to entertainment or social media or just wicked depravity online and just check out while nothing of any substance is actually fixing our problems. We turn to relationships and we pour out our hearts to people but not to God when he's the one that can actually give us the help that we need. Look again at verse 3, "Be convinced. Know that the Lord has set apart the Godly for himself." If you're a Christian, you are one his godly ones who belongs to him. If as this verse says, God has set you apart for himself, he did that so that you would know him and be close to him forever.

The idea is if that's the case, then will he ignore you when you cry out to him for help? Of course not. Notice the confidence actually. Verse 3, "The Lord hears when I call to him." If you are his child, why would you not have the same kind of certainty in your heart? Jesus says, Matthew 7:11, if you being evil, respond when your kid cries out to you, how much more will your heavenly Father respond when you cry out to him? Do you believe that when trouble and pain hits our lives? I'm not sure that we do. But would we call a mechanic to fix our sprinklers? Would you call a doctor to replace your squeaky brakes? Would you call a food delivery service if you broke your legs? Hey, Uber, I broke my legs, can you help?

You probably wouldn't do that. Why? Because those substitutes can't what? They can't help you at all. It's the same thing for God substitutes. They're like Novocain, all they can do is dull the pain. They can't actually fix any problem in our lives. That's as dumb as preferring fool's gold to the real thing. Get that real gold out of my way, I want the fake stuff that's the best stuff. Stupid. We make this stupid decision all the time. You have no need for a substitute when you have the real thing in Christ. So why do we look to God substitutes to give us what only God can give us? Because sin makes us stupid that's why. I mean God substitutes suck. They suck all the help. They suck all the hope. They suck everything that God is doing in our lives right out of our lives. Why don't we look to God to give us the peace and the security and the help that only God can give us?

So if you're prone to run to God's substitutes instead of God himself, please take the advice of verses 4 and 5. Be angry about the trouble that you're in only if that trouble is out of your control or that trouble is sin against you. But don't go to a substitute. Consider the air of your ways if you do that, consider the boneheaded trade that you're making turning from the all-powerful, all-competent, all-loving God of the universe to a substitute that has no power, no competence, and doesn't love you at all. Be godly. Stay loyal to him instead of turning to a substitute. Don't pray or read your Bible or serve or give to a church to try to flatter and bribe God into acting on your behalf and fixing your problem. Repent of that idiocy and trust Jesus to be with you always and to give you the help you need when you need it.

Don't trust in the substitutes that cannot ever help you at all. At that, David ends this song by talking to God, his glory. Verse 6, "There are many who say, who will show us some good?" Answer, "Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord. You've put more joy in my heart than they have when they're grain and wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." Notice again, the word Lord is repeated. So again, he comes back to this idea that I'm in covenant relationship. I'm in relationship to this God who is always only faithful to his covenant. He is my true father. In the midst of their despair over the trouble they're facing, the people have become religious consumers. They're looking for any idol that promises, verse 6, to do them good.

They've turned to idols. So David says, verse 6, in contrast to that, lift up the light of your face upon us. Which means God be gracious to us. Do good to us. Be true to your covenant. Save us from this trouble in a way that all of Israel will see that you're real and those idols aren't. God's track record of faithfulness to David has resulted, verse 7, in far more joy than the happiness of those experienced by those who seek after idols. The best they can do is give earthly pleasure but can't fix anything. So verse 6, the God who was with David will do good well proving that he's active in their lives. Verse 7, God is David's source of joy. And verse 8, God is David's security. All of that, even though the trouble hasn't been fixed at all. The trouble is still there. But David has nothing to fear, he will sleep in safety.

The same can be true for us. When trouble hits, even the worst kinds of disappointment, betrayal, and pain, you respond well and can even overcome the anxiety and fear it causes when you, **point #3), Relax. Relax, God Is Watching Over You.** He really is. Calm your mind. Settle your heart. Extinguish the burnout with this truth. God is watching over me. Despite what's happening around me, despite what's happening inside of me, God is with me. He has not abandoned me. He never will. He is with me. He is here and he will never ever leave. So we couldn't be more wrong when we live in our trouble apart from him. See our trouble plus substitutes make us practical atheists, and the result is we get pessimistic, we get depressed, we fall for every claim of every substitute that can't possibly do us any good. Usually when we're angry about the trouble that we're in, we're really angry at God for allowing it into our lives in the first place, right?

We have to be done with this idea that adversity means God has stepped back from us or is punishing us. Unless we know the trouble that we're in is a direct result of our sin, that's different. You can hear this in our prayers in adversity. God, be with me. Or God be with this dear sister as she goes in for surgery. Was God not with them? Is God not with us? No it should be something like, God, help me see that you are with me in what I'm going through. God, help this dear sister trust that you are with her if her lying feelings tell her otherwise. See, Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him." That word encamps is used for a military encampment. You are surrounded by none other than the Lord. That's all. Just the all-powerful, all-competent, all-loving God of the universe. That doesn't mean that you will

never have trials, that we will never have trials. We will. It means that He is with us in all of them no matter what it is.

What kind of God leaves when things get hard? Not one worth following, right? A God that is worthy of worship is one who defends his people, who fights for his people, and certainly who never leaves his people. That is our God. That is the God of the Bible. He would never, ever, verse three, set you apart for himself, send his son to die for you, save you from your sins, adopt you into his family, reconcile you to himself, promise to return and take you to be with him forever, only to leave you hanging in your trials. I figured out all that other stuff for you, but you figured this one out. He didn't move heaven and earth to have you just to ignore you and your pain. I know this subject brings up a ton of issues, a ton of questions, so I asked our pastors about this, and on the back of the handout are 12 books on suffering, on pain and trouble and how to understand and respond well when trouble hits our lives.

I get extra time in this service because there's nothing after, but not even close to the amount of help that can be had from those books on the back. If we're honest, we want a God that would never let us go through trouble in the first place, right? Like heaven is here. But we know how wrong that would be for us to do with our kids, right? If you have kids, we know that our kids need adversity. They need to struggle. They need to persevere and endure and stick with it, or they want what? They won't grow. They won't change. They won't mature. So if we know this, why do we think it's good for our kids but it's not good for us if God knows that trouble is good for us. Because through that trouble, we grow and mature and change. Listen, all of us are afraid at times. All of us are anxious at times. All of us have, and do, and will respond to adversity in sinful ways.

David is helping us see that there's a better way. A better way that will either help us avoid anxiety and fear altogether, or a way that will help us get out of anxiety and fear when we find it in our hearts. David answers anxiety and fear, not with techniques, not with strategies. He answers anxiety and fear with a God of mercy, verse 6, who lifts up the light of his face upon his people by showing us compassion, by giving us help, by granting us the comfort that we need when our hearts are troubled, anxious, or fearful. A God, verse 7 of joy who gives us true and lasting joy even in our troubles, not the temporary substitutes that anyone can buy at a store. A God, verse 8 of peace who gives us calm and stability and safety so that trouble can be happening all around us. But instead of obsessing about, instead of turning to substitutes, instead of breaking down, we can, verse 8, we can sleep. We can relax knowing that He is watching over our lives for our good.

Our troubles can become like mountains in front of us that just block out the light, block out the goodness, block out the love of this God, but we don't have to let them. We can respond to trouble, respond to anxiety and fear by praying to this God. We can respond by trusting this God, not any substitute and we can respond by relaxing, resting, and the security that comes from being his. That is how we overcome anxiety and fear.

Now, as they come to a close, I want to end with this question. How can all of this even be possible for people who are so rebellious against this God of mercy, joy, and peace? Well, this was written by King David, but there was another king who responded when his people were in trouble. He trusted God perfectly. But like, verse 2, his glory was also turned into shame. He was rejected by people who, verse 2, loved vanity and sought after lies and substitutes instead of seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. In his distress, verse one, he was actually given no relief whatsoever.

Unlike the Godly, in verse 3, he was not heard when he cried out to God for help. Instead of lifting up the light of his face upon this king, verse 6, God hid his face from him and instead showed him fury, wrath, and contempt. Instead of joy and peace and God's presence, this king screamed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But when he did in the midst of that agony, verse 5, he offered the most right sacrifice that has ever been offered. Verse 8, this king slept the sleep of death for our eternal safety. It's only by his death that all of us who are anxious, all of us who are afraid, all of us who run to substitutes instead of this God who loves us, it is only in the death of this king that we can find forgiveness for our sins and the strength that we need to depend on God in our adversity, to resist all the God substitutes and to relax and rest, and even rejoice in the middle of our trials knowing that this God is watching over us.

Obviously, this king is Jesus. But it is only through Jesus that all the promises that we reveled in just now in Psalm 4 are realized. So if you're not his, none of those promises are yours right now. But they can be. You cry out to him for mercy and grace. Cry out to him to save your soul. Surrender your life to him. Give your life to him. Commit yourself to him, and he'll not only be with you forever, but he will be a very present help in every time of trouble you will ever face as he encircles your life, not just with eternal safety but this life safety as well. What an incredible Savior we have in all the times that cause us anxiety and fear. We're going to remember him right now as we take communion. But before we do, let's pray.

Jesus, others may often wonder what is it about Christianity just takes care of the future, the sweet buying, buying all of that, but what about this life? Well, do you suffer with anxiety? Are you perpetually afraid? If so, Jesus, you give help with that as well. We saw that in Psalm 4. We saw that in these truths that are only realized in a commitment to you. So please work these truths into each and every one of our hearts. You are so kind and so good to help us, not just with eternal life but to help us in this life as well. Give us the grace, give us the determination, give us the mercy that we need to trust in you in this life, not just for the next. Do this, please, for all of us for our good and your glory. Amen.