

5-7-2000

## Psalm 4: To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David.

Walter E. Keller  
*Valparaiso University*

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### Recommended Citation

Keller, Walter E., "Psalm 4: To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David." (2000). *Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms*. 7.  
<https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms/7>

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**Psalm 4**  
**To the leader: with stringed instruments.**  
**A Psalm of David.**  
(NRSV)

**V. 1**

**<sup>1</sup> Answer me (listen to me) when I call, O God of my right!**

In verse 1 the Psalmist addresses God in a prayer for vindication. The Psalmist's appeal is to the God of my rights; that is, to the God who is my defense attorney and argues on my behalf to secure those rights of which my adversaries seek to deprive me.

**You gave me room when I was in distress.  
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.**

The Psalmist recalls a time from the past when God indeed had freed him, as it were, from the limited space of a confinement, perhaps of a prison cell. He was probably speaking, not of a literal prison confinement, but metaphorically. As once he had been helped in the past, so now he prays to God for help once more in his present distress.

**Vv. 2-4**

**<sup>2</sup> How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?**

In verses 2-4 the Psalmist addresses his adversaries who are bringing false accusations against him in court. "You people" translates the Hebrew expression "sons of man," which may also be translated "O you people of rank and power." The Psalmist's honor suffers shame, because he is being insulted; his accusers deliberately speak lies and slanders in order too defame him.

**<sup>2b</sup> How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?    *Selah***

Vain words and lies are synonymous. There is no way of knowing to what these expressions refer. The language reflects a court trial in which the accused Psalmist denies the charges that are brought against him, affirms his innocence, and counter-accuses his adversaries of being liars.

**<sup>3</sup> But know (just remember!) that the LORD (Yahweh) has set apart (favored)  
the faithful (those who are loyal) for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.**

The Psalmist is still addressing his accusers. He wants them to reckon seriously with the fact that the LORD has chosen the faithful for Himself as His People. Among these he numbers himself. The basis for his confidence, therefore, is that God has promised good to His people, and that he is one of God's loyal people.

**<sup>4a</sup> When you are disturbed, do not sin;**

**or (Be deeply moved by anger, and) do not sin;**

**<sup>4b</sup> ponder it on your beds, and be silent**

***Selah***

This is a hard verse to interpret. Though other interpretations have been offered, I take this verse to be a continuation of the Psalmist's appeal to his adversaries. In verse 4a the verb means to be excited or to be deeply moved, either in fear or in anger. Given that he continues to address his adversaries, I think it speaks of fear here. The Psalmist is in effect saying to his accusers, "Be moved by fear (of the LORD) and do not continue in your sin of falsely accusing me!" Then in verse 4b the Psalmist continues his appeal to his adversaries to think about what he has said, and moreover to deliberate about it in the privacy of their own bed-chambers, undistracted by the malicious influence of their fellow conspirators. When he says, "Be silent," that could mean either that they should shut up with their false accusations, or it could mean simply to remain inactive, that is, to do nothing. Thus it is a fervent appeal to them, in the fear of God, to reconsider their ill chosen path of bringing him to court.

The alternative interpretation, however, is given by the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament (in about 200 B.C.) from the Hebrew into Greek. There the passage is taken as a command to be angry and not to sin. This would then have to mean something like, "If you are angry, do not sin," or "Do not let your anger lead you into sin." This is also the sense in which St. Paul, who often followed the Septuagint, took it in Ephesians 4:26, where it is a part of a list of moral exhortations he draws up for his readers. His gloss upon this verse is that we should not let the sun go down upon our anger. In other words, we are to set a limit to our anger against one another. If that is to be the meaning also of the Hebrew of this verse, then it would be an address which the Psalmist makes to himself. He is angry at his accusers, and he is telling himself to curb his anger, lest it get the better of him.

#### **Vv. 5-8**

**<sup>5</sup> Offer right (the appropriate) sacrifices,  
and put your trust in the LORD.**

In verses 5-8 the Psalmist addresses the congregation of the faithful, urging them to be faithful in their worship of the LORD. His personal testimony serves as an example of how faithful God is to his own in showing them goodness. The Psalmist does not put an either/or between sacrifices and trust. It is of course easy to offer routine sacrifices and forget the weightier matter or faith, namely, to trust in the LORD. And there is also that spirit abroad which says that, if you trust in the LORD in your heart, you do not need to offer external sacrifices. The Psalmist holds to the ideal of worship: both the external sacrifices and the inner trust in the LORD.

For the Psalmist the sacrifices were often animal sacrifices, as prescribed by the Law of the LORD. Accordingly, he would bring an ox, or a sheep, or a goat, or a dove, or a pigeon, to the altar, where a priest would kill it and burn it. In this way it was a sacrifice offered to God.

**<sup>6</sup> There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!  
Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!"**

Here there is a recognition that the Psalmist is not alone in his feelings of distress. It is probably universal among human beings that they desire good and prosperous times. Many even turn to the LORD in hope that He will help them. The shining face is a figure for looking with kindness or for showing a friendly disposition. The answer to this prayer is the familiar benediction of Numbers 6:24-26.

**7 You have put gladness in my heart  
more than when their grain and wine abound.**

The Lord has answered the Psalmist's prayers of verse 1. He for one has seen the goodness of the LORD, for his heart has been filled with joy and gladness. The Psalm is not clear whether this was because the false accusers dropped their charges, or whether the Psalmist was given a transcendent joy that surpassed, and therefore was independent of, the outcome of the trial.

The depth of the Psalmist's joy could be measured; it was greater than the joy an agricultural community could feel at a bountiful harvest of grain for bread and grapes for wine.

If in verse 2 the Psalmist addresses "you people of rank and power," it is possible that he was a poorer man who was being oppressed by wealthier men who rejoiced in *their* abundant grain and wine. Then we would have a classic exultation of the materially poor over the materially rich in their greater spiritual riches. They might have the joy of a material harvest, but I have a surpassing spiritual joy from the LORD.

**8 I will both lie down and sleep in peace;  
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.**

There is a hint of the ritual here in which the person asking for God's help spends the night in the Temple, expecting to receive on the following morning a favorable reply to his prayer of complaint.

Peace is shalom, the well-being and wholeness that comes from having it all together again. It is the counterfoil to the inner distress and the social brokenness the Psalmist suffered when he was being defamed and his reputation was being smeared.

This verse can be excerpted from the Psalm and used as a bedtime blessing. We can sleep in peace, because this benediction for Christians is completed by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians (4:7): the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

**Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 4:**

Lord, you consoled your Son in his anguish and released him from the darkness of the grave. Turn your face toward us, that we may sleep in your peace and rise in your light; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**A Final Reflection:**

The courtroom setting might at first seem to distance us from this Psalm, since this is not a primary setting for our life. But there is perhaps another reason for feeling some distance between that court room and us. Recall that Jesus was falsely accused and harassed by a court in his day. Then think of

Jesus praying this Psalm. He is in fact the faithful one of verse 3, whom God has set apart for himself, and whom God in fact heard, as evidenced in his resurrection from the dead. Then verse 8 is an echo of Jesus final word, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” Because Jesus innocently suffered and died, his death was for our sins. And because he died for our sins, no court can successfully accuse believers in him any longer. When others, or our own conscience, or the devil himself accuse us of being sinners and try to drive us to despair, we can counter-attack with verses 2-3. They lie. If God is for us, who can successfully be against us? The truth is that nothing can now any longer drive a wedge between the LORD and his faithful ones. That is the surpassing peace for which the appropriate word is shalom, the shalom of verse 8.

We now have a joy far greater than the joy of verse 7, the joy of an abundant harvest of grain for bread and grapes for wine. Our joy is in what God gives us through the bread and wine – his own body given for us and his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins, life and salvation.

### Nuggets

But, you say, a dead man experiences corruption, and becomes dust and ashes. And what then, beloved hearers? For this very reason we ought to rejoice. For when a man is about to rebuild an old and tottering house, he first sends out its occupants, then tears it down and rebuilds anew a more splendid one. This occasions no grief to the occupants, but rather joy; for they do not think of the demolition which they see, but of the house which is to come, though not yet seen. When God is about to do a similar work, he destroys our body, and removes the soul (which was dwelling in it) as from some house, that he may build it anew and more splendidly, and again bring the soul into it with greater glory. Let us not, therefore, regard the tearing down, but the splendor which is to succeed.

From a sermon of John Chrysostome (344 – 407)

Sin the best news there is... Because with sin, there is a way out.... You can't repent of confusion or psychological flaws inflicted by your parents – you're stuck with them. But you can repent of sin. Sin and repentance are the only grounds for hope and joy, the grounds for reconciled, joyful relationships.

John Alexander, as reported in *Context*, March 1, 2000

*Walter E. Keller*

May 7, 2000 – **The Third Sunday of Easter**