

Who will bring us prosperity?

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[0 : 00] We are continuing our journey this morning through the first dozen Psalms and considering the way of the righteous in the muck of life. And we find ourselves, just as we did in Psalm 3 last week, we find ourselves in Psalm 4 in a place of difficulty.

There's lots of different links between Psalm 3 and 4, some of them slightly less obvious in the English translation than in the Hebrew text. But nevertheless, there are more than enough links here to show us why the compiler of the book of Psalms would put these two together.

It's often suggested that Psalm 3 is here kind of early on in the collection to serve as a morning psalm. I wake again because the Lord sustains me. And then Psalm 4 here is the evening psalm, concluding in verse 8, In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

So the two psalms together both point us to how we should respond in difficult situations. And interestingly, both of them suggest that we should rest in such circumstances, rest secure in God's presence.

Both of these psalms are written for situations of some difficulty, but I think they're talking about different situations, not the same one. Psalm 3 has that superscription, the title, when David fled from his son Absalom.

[1 : 20] So we know the situation that was going on there for Psalm 3, but Psalm 4 doesn't have a historical marker like that. Some say maybe we should see the heading for Psalm 3 kind of as the heading for both.

And that situation could fit for Psalm 4 as well. But as we'll see as we go through, I don't think that's the most likely scenario that has caused David to write here.

But here's what we should see from the title to Psalm 4. What we should see is that this is a psalm for you and for me. Yes, there was a particular situation that moved a certain individual to write these particular words.

Yes, David was the king of Israel, and you and I are not. But you see in the heading here for Psalm 4, it tells us this is, For the director of music with stringed instruments, a psalm of David.

So there are instructions here that tell us that this psalm was part of the corporate worship of God's people. When they gathered together, they sang these psalms in praise of God.

[2 : 25] There's provision in this heading for all and sundry to come and to take the words of these psalms and to consider them their own. So we shouldn't blithely act as though we ourselves are David.

But God intended for his people to sing these words. And he intended that when they did so, they would mean what they were singing. When we sing this psalm together to close our service, we're not singing it out of historical interest, but because this should be our prayer too.

So what is it that David's praying? What are we invited to pray here? Well, we see as we turn to verse 1, we see a cry in time of need. David is in distress.

In fact, the word distress here in verse 1, this is the same word as foes in verse 1 of Psalm 3. That's one of the links between the two psalms. And in both cases, the word carries the sense of kind of pressing in.

So in Psalm 3, the foes are the ones who press hard on David, who cause him distress. And here it's not so much people pressing in as circumstances, the situation of his life that is pressing in on him.

[3 : 36] But the question when life is pressing in is always, how are you going to respond to it? Whether the problem arises from other people, from a particularly unfortunate set of circumstances, or whatever it is that causes you to feel hard pressed, the question is, how will you react?

Will you sit around feeling sorry for yourself? Will you get angry at life or angry with other people? Will you look for somebody to whom you can pour out your woes? Maybe your instinct is to turn to your friends and to go and complain and to seek out their sympathy, and doubtless they're to paint the situation in the most sympathetic light that we can.

Make the deeds of others or the circumstances that we're in, make them stretch those facts almost to breaking point to elicit the maximum possible sympathetic response.

But this is not what David did, is it? David doesn't lash out in anger. David doesn't turn to his friends for sympathy. David's first response in this time of distress is to come to his guard.

Answer me when I call to you, my righteous guard. And at face value, I guess those words, answer me, could come across as something of a demand.

[4 : 53] And maybe there is something that reflects the urgency here with which David comes to his guard. He really needs an answer. Answer me when I call to you, my God.

Lord, out of the goodness of your love. In your great mercy, turn to me. The cry, answer me, my God. It's not a demand, is it?

It is a cry for mercy. It is a call for help. So from David's cry of need, we're reminded that God should be our first recourse in time of trouble.

And then in verses 2 to 6, David here offers kind of warning and counsel, advice to third parties. He's been addressing God, and now it's as if he looks out at the assembled crowd and he speaks to them.

And it's not an encouraging address, is it? Verse 2, how long will you people turn my glory to shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?

[6 : 25] Most likely here, when David says, my glory, most likely that's a title for God himself. He's not talking about his own honor, but rather using my glory as a title for God.

Certainly Psalm 106 verse 20, that definitely uses the word glory in this way as a title for God. And this understanding of my glory as a reference to God, that seems to fit better with the second half of the verse than that David is concerned with his own honor and respect.

David's concern here in verse 2 is that the immortal God, the glorious one, is being turned to shame. So we have to ask, how is that taking place?

What is it that's going on that is turning God's glory to shame? And here we are into slightly more speculative territory. As I've said, we don't have a historical scenario given to us for this psalm.

But a few commentators suggest, and I'm inclined to agree with them, that most likely the fundamental difficulty here is agricultural. They're asking, verse 6, who will grant them prosperity?

[7 : 38] As the king of the land, David is going to feel hard-pressed when the drought and the famine close in. It is David's responsibility to make provision for his people.

And so here in verse 2, the issue is that in that time of famine, in that time of drought, in that feeling hard-pressed, in their distress, whatever that difficulty might be, what's happening is people are turning away from the true and living God, and instead they're loving delusions, vanities, as older translations have it.

They seek false gods. Romans chapter 1 reminds us that this has always been the behavior of the human race. Sinful people constantly turn away from the true God and seek after images.

Why? Well, the agricultural scenario maybe gives us a clue here. If you have your own God over here, who doesn't seem to be delivering on the plentiful grain and the fertile cattle that you need to survive, if your God is not providing that agricultural success, and then over here there's Baal, the fertility God, whose whole raison d'etre is to offer abundant crops, well, where will you turn?

But then verse 2 reminds us, Baal might be over here offering it, but Baal is a delusion. All he has to offer are lies. And in those terms, well, we today, we readily turn away from that, don't we?

[9 : 38] We're not inclined maybe to go and pray to other gods, not least because we're less concerned about the grain harvest and the number of sheep that are being produced than perhaps they were.

In those terms, we turn away from that kind of attitude. But what about verse 6? Who will bring us prosperity? Now that's a question we ask, isn't it?

And Gerald Wilson calls this the lure of a pragmatic faith. The core of the problem in this verse is that they understand religious worship and a relationship with God.

They understand it to be a matter of personal benefit. The focus of faith, for those who are so inclined, has this pragmatic, this practical edge. What's in it for me?

Show me the personal benefit. Show me how it helps me to believe what you say. And that is a very plausible trajectory for us, isn't it?

[10:42] We very easily go down that path. What's in it for me? What can I get out of it? And certainly we're often tempted, aren't we, to equate God's presence in our lives with experiences of personal benefit.

And as a result, when we experience pain and trouble, or when life just runs on with interminable sameness, when no good seems to come, when the prosperity isn't arriving, we sometimes conclude, don't we, that God is distant and removed and unknowable.

He's not working for us. And so we feel free, almost feel driven, to go and find out, well, what does work? And like the psalmist's opponents here, we can find ourselves seeking after a lie.

Not the ancient pagan fertility deities that challenged Israel's loyalty. That's not the lure for us, is it? But the things that we hope are going to fill that void and end that pain, the things that we think will work for us, money, power, sex, drugs, control, prestige, relationships, all of these are things that we turn to to give us that prosperity, to fill that void, to provide that barrier against the droughts and the famines that we experience in our lives.

But to those who are tempted to look elsewhere in his own day, and to those of us who are tempted to look elsewhere, in verses 3 to 5, David offers sound advice.

[12:26] He tells these people to know what they should have known all along. And remember, as always, this knowledge here is not abstract, theoretical knowledge, but knowledge that is acted out in their lives.

David says, God has set apart his faithful servant. Now what David's recalling here is that he has become king by the sovereign choice of God, not as a result of human decision.

God has set apart his faithful servant. That's what David's remembering about himself. And this is one of those things where what's true of David is not true of you and me.

We can't say, well look, God made me king, so why would I listen to you? But, this idea of the faithful servant, or the godly, as other translations have it, the root idea here is of the covenant one. The Hebrew word here is chasid, which comes from the same word as hesed. Hesed is one of the most important words in the Hebrew Bible. I can't remember whether I've talked to you guys about it before.

[13:34] Some of you, I'm sure, have heard it in other contexts. Hesed talks about God's unbreakable covenant love and commitment. Hesed talks about how God is committed to his people, how he has declared his covenant and that cannot be broken.

So, the faithful servant, the godly, the covenant one, that is the one who is loved by God and who loves him back. And so, yes, David is that covenant one, par excellence.

But we can still do the same thing here as David does, can't we? We can still stand in the face of the attack. We can still stand in whatever difficulty we're in and we can ask, well, what has God said about me?

What is God's covenant attitude towards me? David concludes, God made me king. I am his chosen one. What do we conclude?

Romans chapter 8, verse 32. He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

[14:49] Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus, who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? Friends, if we are uncondemned, chosen, prayed for, and loved, as these verses in Romans assert that we are, if those things are true of us, then can we not share David's confidence that the Lord hears when I call to him?

Should we not know that he is the only one who is worthy of our worship, whether we see visible prosperity or not? As Dale Ralph Davis puts it, if God has said to us in the words of Isaiah 43, verse 1, don't be afraid, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name. You are mine. If that is what God has said about us, then why would we listen to the blabberings of our enemies or the accusations of our own overly sensitive conscience? Whatever people may say of you, whatever you may say of yourself, as a believer in Christ, what you are is a beloved child of God.

[16:24] There is a scene in Aladdin, at least in the animated version. I haven't seen the new one. There is a scene where Princess Jasmine goes and she disguises herself and she sneaks out of the palace to get a flavor of real life out in the market.

And she gets in trouble with the guards who think that she is just another street rat. They view her as several steps below what they would scrape off the bottom of their sandals at the end of the day. That's their view of who she is. But what they think about who she is doesn't change who she actually is, does it?

She still is the princess. However she's disguised, however others view her, she still is the princess. However other people view you, however you view yourself, what you are, is a covenant child set apart by the Lord.

Those who are found in God, that is what you are. And therefore, in verses 4 and 5, David calls for repentance.

[17:41] When people have been tempted to look elsewhere, when people have gone and sacrificed to other gods, what they must do is return to the one true and living God. Tremble and do not sin.

When you are on your bed, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord. That's the translation in the new NIV that Duncan read for us earlier.

But some of you may well be looking down at the older NIV or the ESV and looking at verse 4 and reading something about anger rather than reading about trembling. So what's going on?

Well, the verb here is most straightforwardly translated as tremble. That's the root meaning, if you like. That's the way it's used most in the Old Testament. But there are places where we can be very confident that it's talking about anger.

And that's kind of a metaphorical use. The picture of trembling with rage. Like how if I say somebody turned green. Well, you need context to know whether that person was splashed with paint, was about to vomit, or was envious of somebody else.

[18:55] Tremble might mean shake, or it might mean anger. So it's reasonable to read it as anger here. But I think a command to tremble makes most sense given what follows.

I don't think this is trembling in anger, but trembling before God. Tremble before God, and therefore cease to sin. Stand in awe of God.

Abandon your wicked ways. And as you lie on your beds in the quiet of the night, be honest with yourself. Reflect upon your life, and do not sin. Return to God.

These verses, four and five, these are presumably addressed to people within God's own people, within the covenant community, within Israel, because they're exhorted in verse five, to come and to offer their sacrifices.

So in this scenario, where these people have been turning elsewhere in their desperation in this time of drought and famine, what they're called to here is repentance.

[19:58] To turn away from those other gods, to turn away from those empty vanities, and instead, tremble in terror. Tremble in terror at God's righteous anger because of their abandonment of Him.

Recognize the danger of the situation that they're in, and therefore, cease their sin and come instead to offer the proper sacrifices, trusting in the Lord.

In Psalm 3, remember we have that bit at the end, strike all my enemies on the jaw, break the teeth of the wicked. And we were talking about how when there are enemies, for there to be true deliverance, true safety, those enemies have to be no more.

And Psalm 3 kind of presents one option, that they will be struck on the jaw and their teeth will be broken, that they will be destroyed, that the enemies will be conquered and vanquished.

Psalm 4, if you like, offers the other option. There can be no more enemies because those who once were enemies repent and find forgiveness.

[21:15] They can come and offer the sacrifices of the righteous. They can come and trust in the Lord. They can tremble at God's anger and the possibility that He will come and strike them on the jaw and break their teeth.

They can tremble at that possibility and resolve not to sin and return to God Almighty. Having recognized their sin, what these people should do is come and offer these proper sacrifices in atonement for that sin with that proper attitude of trust in the Lord.

Verse 5. So after the cry of verse 1 and the warning and the counsel of verses 2 to 6, we come in verses 7 and 8 and we find joy and peace.

Here what David seems to do is he seems to contrast his own joy with the joy of the fickle, prosperity-seeking, fair-weather worshippers whom he has called to repentance in these preceding verses.

David recognizes that God fills his heart with joy joy. And the reason why he has that joy isn't directly specified here, but presumably we should take it as being derived from the knowledge and love of God himself.

[22 : 34] It's as God's face shines down upon him, verse 6. It is as God's presence is there that his heart is filled with joy.

Where other people find joy in their circumstances? Indeed, people may experience great rejoicing as their grain and their wine abound. Well, David's joy, he says, is greater.

He's not going to be tempted to jealousy at their abundance because he knows that even if there is not overflow from his own fields and his own vineyards, that still he knows the love of God.

Another bit of Romans for you this morning. Romans 15, verse 13. Paul prays, May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's this same idea, isn't it, that joy and peace and hope can overflow in the life of a believer because we are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, because we are granted that surpassing joy even in time of adversity.

[23 : 52] And as verse 8 says, David knows that God provides for him safety. He can lie down and sleep in peace. His complete and total, his supreme confidence in God is demonstrated in that final clause.

For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety. He knows he dwells in safety. And that same confidence is also demonstrated in the first part of the verse.

It doesn't come through quite so well in the translation, but the sense of the Hebrew here is that the lying down and the sleep are simultaneous. Where others, in verse 4, ought rightly to lie awake reflecting and repenting.

For David, he knows the provision of God Almighty. He knows with confidence that God makes him to dwell in safety.

And so it is right, it is proper that he is granted rest full of that joy that God gives him. Let's pray.

[25 : 10] Lord God, when we are hard pressed, when the circumstances of our lives close in, Lord, grant us that confidence that David had.

Grant us that confidence that you will make us to dwell in safety. Grant us that joy that even in the midst of difficult circumstances, even as others around us prosper and we are struggling.

Grant us that joy, that peace, that hope. Lord, we know that these things come only from you, that it is only in your house that we find true peace and prosperity and joy.

So guard us against an inclination to turn elsewhere, to go and to seek after those delusions and those lies.

Lord, we recognize the fickleness of our hearts. We recognize our inclination to look in these empty places.

[26 : 19] Lord, guard us, we ask, for the sake of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.