

Before I went into ministry I worked as a chef. It was long hours, hard work, and overall extremely stressful. Over the years this stress resulted in a range of issues for me, but most of all sleeplessness. Most nights lying in bed would be processing what I would be doing the next morning: what food, what recipes, in what order, and so on.

This would even then extend into strange dreams and even one night waking to find myself sitting up in bed attempting to make mash potato – pushing the mash through a sieve as was our practice...

Now I doubt many of you have had that specific situation happen, but I imagine many of you can relate. Having kids in and of itself is a commitment to losing sleep! When we had just found out my wife was pregnant with our first child, a friend with 4 kids just smiled and said, enjoy your sleep!

And now with two toddlers, I realise that advice was probably filled with emotional scars! But it's not just with kids! **Sometimes it's just the ability** to switch our minds off: whether it's recounting the stressful day we had or the anxious anticipation of an upcoming day, we're easily kept up!

Stress is common to most of us. In a 2016 survey, 75% of Australians said not only is a stress a daily occurrence, but that it affected their physical health. And how do Australians deal with their stress? A staggering 86% said TV or movies and less than half of those surveyed were willing to ask for help.

According to Beyond Blue, more than 1 in 4 Australians aged 16-85 have experienced an anxiety disorder and their statistics are 12 years old and I don't think it's gone down!

And so as I look at those numbers and reflect on our current experience in the coronavirus pandemic I imagine there are lots of stressed out, anxious people, and lots of sleepless nights!

Well enter Psalm 4. A Psalm that although having read before many times I'd never really given much thought. So unloved is this Psalm I bought a commentary on Psalms and it wasn't even addressed!

But in this Psalm we find our exact situation. It is often referred to as an evening prayer because as v.8 tells us, we find David finally able to get some good sleep having processed his distress. And it is an evening prayer that seems to be the **complement to Psalm 3**, a morning prayer according to v.5.

I commend reading and using these Psalms to bracket your day!

And this really is a great Psalm for us as David moves from anguish in v.1 to peace and sleep in v.8. Like so many of the Psalms, this one has a beautiful movement from distress to peace and is preserved to teach and guide us.

And vv.1-2 David begins with his prayer, crying out to God. *Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!*

Straight away we get a sense of David's passion and grief in this prayer. It is heartfelt and genuine. But as he cries to God and pleads with him to hear and answer him, David gives us his basis for prayer and there are 4. Firstly, David cries to *his* God. His prayer is the overflow of personal relationship.

This is not the robotic prayer of man who just wants the genie to grant his wishes. The second basis for his prayer is God's character: David cries to his God who is righteous. God is not obligated to do anything for him or us! And yet God's righteousness is expressed through his promises to his people.

And so although not obligated to and we are far from deserving, God is faithful to his people, to hear and answer us. And so prayer is the privilege of those whom God has brought into his covenant, those who have come to know him as the righteous God.

Thirdly, David prays because of what God has done before! The second sentence is a request in the NIV, but is better understood as a statement of fact as in the ESV. David is remembering God's faithfulness, *you have given me relief when I was in distress.*

God is in the business of hearing and answering prayer and David knows this, and has experienced this before. And the fourth basis for prayer, grace: *Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.*

Notice how David has this beautiful mix confidence with humility, anticipation without presumption. David is crying to the God he knows personally, whose character is good, and has a track record of faithfulness, and is the God of grace!

And so as David cries out to God for relief from his distress, he begins by pondering God himself. As one commentator said, "prayer is worship that is both intelligent and desperate."

And what David models here should be so true of us, as people who know **God through Jesus**. Hebrews 4, ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

God has brought us to know him, clearly demonstrated his character, and promised to hear our prayers: how foolish is it then that so often prayer is our 'last resort' and consumed simply by demands of God as if he doesn't know and doesn't care?

And so as David cries out to God in distress we are given insight into his context. David feels completely trapped and squeezed and under pressure. **He wants 'relief'** in v.1, or more literally he wants room. He's stressed out, anxious, and feeling claustrophobic...

And this is something I imagine most of us can relate to. And David longs that God will give him room to breath. And in v.2 we get a sense of why as David addresses a certain group. *O men how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?*

David's stress and anxiety in part is caused by those he lives amongst. He says his honour is being turned to shame. They discredit and slander him so that his reputation is tarnished. And it might even be that this is happening to David specifically because of his trust in God.

David says *his honour* or more literally *his glory* is being shamed. And in Psalm 3:5, David says that is it the LORD himself who is his glory. So it might be that David is being 'shamed' for being faithful to God.

He is at odds with his culture. We see this as David continues, *how long will you love vain words and seek after lies.* They have a completely different world-view to him.

Now it might be that Israel is in some particularly difficult situation. In v.6 people are searching for someone or something to provide for them and David mentions grain and wine in v.7. It might be a drought or some food shortage that is making people desperate.

And as David both models and promotes faithfulness to God, he is ridiculed and shamed for it. And I don't know about you but I think this is totally relatable. David's world is ours: part of his agony has been caused by living amongst those who have a completely different world-view and value system.

Isn't that being a Christian in Australia? A culture that loves vain words and seeks after lies? The idea here is that they are searching for meaning and answers for their situation by going anywhere and everywhere other than the true God.

A culture saturated in idolatry that ridicules any notion of faith, that scoffs at a prime minister who prays and goes to church, that wants religion out of our schools and community life? I'm sure many of you experience this. Mockery, isolation, and even abuse from friends, family, or colleagues.

And so what David says and prays in this Psalm for us – and there is a helpful ambiguity about this Psalm. Unlike Psalm 3, no specific event or situation is given as the context for Psalm 4.

But what we are told is more helpful. The heading for the Psalm, and we need to remember they are not added by translators but actually part of the Psalm. **It says:** *to the choirmaster with stringed instruments*. David's words were sung and memorised in the temple as part of corporate worship.

This Psalm is a model and guide so we too can move from distress to peace – something for all of God's people to know and learn from.

Because notice that as David prays in v.1, he then addresses people in vv.2-5, then returns to praying to God in vv.6-8. And the ambiguity continues in those middle verses. David begins praying in v.1 but then addresses those who are shaming him in v.2 and then gives his own counsel or advice in vv.3-5.

But it isn't totally clear whom he is speaking to. Is the counsel for those who reject David and God? Some suggest each verse has its own group such those who oppose David in vv.2-3 then those who support him in vv.4-5. Or is that David is counselling himself like the Psalmist of Ps 42?

And the answer? Yes! The ambiguity is so helpful because it reminds us, like the heading of the Psalm says, this is for God's people! This Psalm is given to correct our thinking, direct our discipleship, increase our faith and above all give us peace.

As we learn from the Psalm we are delivered from false pursuits that will further our agony as we too go through stress and anxiety. This is a Psalm for us – just as we heard in the second reading, Paul quotes v.4 in Ephesians 4 for instruction on how we ought to live as God's people.

So how should we respond to being under pressure, stressed out and anxious? Well David tells us what we need to know, be, and offer. So firstly, what we **need to know:** v.3 *But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.*

If David has in mind here those who are rejecting him and God the point is clear: God rules.

You need to repent and know that God decides who is king and God's king must be acknowledged. And this still reality today: If you are not yet a Christian God is calling you to respond to Jesus, who by his death and resurrection is king of kings and Lord of Lords.

But v.3 also has profound instruction for those within God's covenant community who face dishonour and shame. How shall we respond? *Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself.*

The *godly* are those who have received God's love, are part of his covenant community and then show God's love. That's us! Or should be us!

David is saying we need to let God's word and opinion reign supreme: we might be mocked, humiliated, slandered, and shamed, but we are those set apart, welcomed, and loved by God himself.

Your greatest ally against slander is to remember what God thinks of you, to hold on to what he has said about you. And it can be so debilitating to be shamed by others. But it is also so exhausting ground your honour and identity in what others think.

People might be impressed when you got that job or promotion, the new car or house but they quickly forget and it can all be taken away with that email that says you've made redundant.

Your friends might adore you but they might get other friends or worse, become consumed by their kids of grandkids and be so preoccupied it's as if they've forgotten you completely.

Do you treasure your identity, who you are in Christ? Do you strive to remember it? It's why Paul spends 3 chapters explaining what God has done for you and to you in Ephesians before telling you what to do. Whose opinion are you valuing? Who are you giving the most time and influence to?

God says in Isaiah 43, *this is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.*

Few things will give you more relief in stress than know who you are in Christ. **Then in v.4**, David moves from what we need to know to what we must be. *Be angry and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.*

When attacked, stressed, under pressure, or anxious, anger often follows. David may have in mind here those loyal to him or even himself. And v.4 helpfully shows that anger can be a right response. We should rightly be angry at injustice or when God and his people are shamed or scorned.

Anger is not to repressed or ignored but controlled. **Paul directly takes this** verse and applies to Christians in Ephesians 4 and says we need to deal rightly with our anger. Notice the command to be angry actually tells us that not all anger is sinful, but it can easily lead us to sin.

And we know this right? So often our anger leads to lash out. It enables our selfishness, promotes self-righteousness or even self-pity, causing us to be vindictive or passive aggressive in our treatment of others. To put it simply: anger can easily lead to sin!

And so how do we deal with our anger? How do we honour God in our anger and not sin? David tells us: slow down, calm down, and pipe down. Rather than act out we need to reflect. He tells us *to ponder in your own hearts on your beds and be silent.*

It's often as we head to bed our minds come alive. And rather than presume our thinking about a situation or person is automatically right, this is a call to reflect and self-examination.

As we reflect we must be silent! **Harry Truman** became US president in 1945. He took on a heavy burden following the death of Roosevelt and he plunged into his work at the expense of his marriage. When returning home to Missouri from Washington for Christmas, he was greeted by his wife with the words: "I guess you couldn't think of any more reasons to stay away. As far as I'm concerned you might have well stayed in Washington." And it was downhill from there.

When Truman returned to Washington on December 27th, he penned a letter in rage and mailed it by special delivery to his wife that night. The next morning he urgently called his daughter Margaret and instructed her to go to the post office to receive the letter and tells her, "It's an angry letter, I don't want her to see it, burn it."

Anger often leads to loose words we regret that hurt others and make things worse. And when Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 4, he also addresses our words. You heard it in the reading. He says deal with you anger v.26, then watch your words, v.29, ²⁹*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*

And so David says we respond rightly to our anger with self-examination and silence. And as we do that we won't be consumed by vengeance or self-vindication. Pausing and reflecting prevents sin by drawing us away from ourselves and look to what God says and calls us to!

Which is where David **goes in v.5** and the third response to feeling under pressure: *Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.*

As our focus is drawn away from ourselves and on to God we gain true perspective of what we should be doing and what is good for us regardless of our circumstances: it's trust and obedience.

Now this is not suggesting that we just have to suck it up and God is only interested in us getting on with the job regardless of how we are feeling or coping. David says in **Psalm 51** that his sacrifice is a broken Spirit, a broken and contrite heart that God will not despise.

Sacrifices and trust are about drawing near to God and his promises – to come to his promise of atonement and forgiveness. . And what could be better for us to do in our stress, anxiety, and anger? To gaze not at our circumstances or other people but at our gracious God.

To remember as Paul says in **Romans 8**, that if God has given us his son we can be absolutely sure he will not withhold any good from us. That he is with us and for us, working all things for our good and we have no reason to stop trusting him and living his way.

Because as we are drawn back to God in trust and obedience we find both true perspective and peace. That's why in v.6 David turns back to **God in prayer** with renewed focus and joy. And while David has changed those around him have not. v.6 *There are many who say, "Who will show us some good?"*

If there was a verse that adequately summarised what our society is doing right now it is probably this one. As we saw earlier, it seemed that perhaps Israel was facing drought or famine or some hardship that was causing people to long for relief.

And it has left people searching for hope and provision: who will show us some good? Isn't that most of the world right now? As pandemic continues, war, raising costs fill our news and our minds, many are searching for hope and relief.

And who can we trust? Government and the budget? Our jobs and income? Our safe neutral country? In a sense I think the pandemic has stripped away so much of our societies self-confidence that this really is the question on the lips of many. But Psalm 4 is showing it isn't a new question.

And so David answers this question by praying not for himself but for all: *Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!*⁷ *You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.*

As many long for better days, for grain and wine, David longs for God himself! Using the words of Numbers 6, David prays that God would bless them by lifting up the light of his face.

And he prays this so they will not have the temporary joy of a good crop but the eternal joy of knowing God himself! As **C.S Lewis** puts it, "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."

And David is so captured by that reality that he can pray for blessing for those who are the cause of his stress and shame. And so full of the joy that God alone gives, he can finally get **some sleep**.

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

And so the Psalm is complete from distress to peace and sleep at last – its such a sweet ending, a classic Disney tale of happily ever after until you stop and think about it. There is no suggestion that Israel took David's advice. No hint that David's shame and humiliation just disappeared.

We must be clear that peace of v.8 is not from calm and nice circumstances but from God himself. This is peace *in* distress. In fact David didn't even ask for God to change his circumstances but what we find as the Psalm ends is that David himself has changed. How does he get some sleep?

As he prays to God and calls all people to respond rightly to God, David himself has peace. His circumstances have caused him to cry out to God and gaze on God so that he might rest in God.

And the same is true for us. Jesus says in **John 16**,³³ *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

Peace *in* trouble. And this is so important for us to hear. How often are our prayers so consumed by asking God to change our circumstances but not us!

Prayer is not about bending God's will to ours but ours to his! And what David shows us is not meant to be unique! **Ralph Davis** says, "Don't think this is unusually heroic or utterly unreal; it's just what happens to the helpless believers who throw themselves upon the God who keeps them."

And so how's your sleep? How are you dealing with your stress and anxiety? Psalm 4 isn't a magic formula that if you're anxiously tossing and turning in bed and utter these words your head hits the pillow. But here we have a model of turning to God, being brought back to reality and finding peace.

And v.8 has a particular beauty for us as we live this side of the cross. In light of Jesus' victory over death and promise of resurrection for us as we trust him, death is described as sleep! And if we can trust the risen Jesus in the face of death then there is peace to be had as we cling to him in our stress.

Not the peace of good health or a vaccine but the peace of knowing the God who rules the world and loves you! Is that you? How have you responded? Have you been totally consumed with longing for a change in your circumstances or thrown yourself upon God to find peace in all circumstances?

And so it's worth asking is your response to the pandemic, war, or anything else that fills our news, doing that for you? Looking to Jesus, trusting Jesus, living for Jesus.

Many in David's day and our own are asking, "who will show us some good?" Psalm 4 and the Gospel are very clear there is only one answer to that question that satisfies: Jesus and Jesus alone.

Paul says in **Philippians 4**: ⁴ *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* ⁵ *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.* ⁶ *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* ⁷ *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Turn to Jesus, listen to him, gaze upon his work and promises, cry out to him and find peace.

Let's pray.