

Psalm 4: The Peace of God

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[0 : 0 0] So I wonder what keeps you up at night. What are the intrusive thoughts that put a stopper in your sleep when day ends and finally in the silence the barriers of busy activity come down?

What are the night terrors that grip you? What makes you restless and anxious? We are restless people living in a restless culture, aren't we? Often when people ask us how we are, our first response is to say we're busy and I confess I'm guilty of that. And the thing is, most of us are frequently very busy. Life is just full of stuff that keeps us constantly on our toes, work, family, even church. And life is full of things which make us anxious. We worry about our families and those that we have a responsibility for. We worry about our work commitments. In a cost of living crisis, we might be worrying about how we're going to pay the bills or how we're going to stay warm this winter. And life constantly throws up scenarios, doesn't it, which induce anxiety and worry and uncertainty. For a Christian, there might be the added restless worry if we feel that we're failing to follow Jesus as we feel we ought to. Or worry about how to be a Christian in our workplace and in a culture that makes it less and less comfortable to be bold about following Jesus.

As restless people in a restless world, where will we find peace? Now the answer that I'm going to say is naturally God. Augustine of Hippo expressed this wonderfully clearly and poetically when he said, God, you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.

And now we might be able to recognize that very well in theory, but how does that actually pan out in practice? How do we find our rest in God when we feel battered by the winds of circumstance and tossed by the waves of a restless culture and swallowed up by insurmountable anxiety and stress?

As we look at the fourth Psalm, I hope we can learn from King David's example what it looks like to know the peace of God which surpasses understanding and how in Christ that peace is experienced in the often busy and stressful life of the Christian. And so whether you're coming to the Psalm as someone who knows Jesus or as someone who's maybe a little bit more skeptical about him, what I hope we're going to see is that Christ really does offer the gift of peace in a world that rarely lets us have any.

[2 : 5 7] So there's three big things that King David, the author of the Psalm, is thinking about as he reflects on the peace that is found in God, being confident in Christ, living life in the Lord, and being able to sleep in what the Bible calls shalom. And those are our three points that we're going to unpack as we dive into the details of Psalm 4. Something that's essential to peace is confidence. Politics in Westminster, for example, has been turbulent during the last few months because of a lack of confidence into successive prime ministers. Or to use another example, if you're about to get on a flight and whilst you're going through the gate and you catch one of the flight attendants saying to one of their colleagues that there's something wrong with the plane, you're not going to be super confident about getting on that plane and you're not going to be particularly at peace for the duration of the flight. Every shake is going to startle you. Where we have no confidence, we will have no peace.

But the Christian can have confidence in God. He's not going to break his promises and he always comes through. He never fails and he is never absent. Nothing happens outside of his control.

And it's why King David begins Psalm 4 with a prayer. Answer me when I call to you my righteous God. One of the great privileges of the Christian life is the way in which we can speak to the very God who made the universe. Our righteous God is there. He listens and he responds to the words of those who he knows. And David comes to him because he's in a tight place. It's not the only time that we can pray, but it is a comfort to know that in the midst of trouble and anxiety, we can pray. And David says, give me relief from my distress. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer. What's interesting about these words of prayer is that there is an underlying confidence to them. We see this actually when we look at different translations.

For example, another translation puts the third line of verse one like this. You have given me relief when I was in distress. The focus is on God's past provision.

And so the point I want to make is that David has confidence in coming to God in prayer that God will follow through if he asks him for help. He knows God and that's why he comes to him in prayer.

[5 : 46] Prayer is such a core part of the Christian experience. So often I think we're tempted to be like Maria in the sound of music as she sings, I have confidence in me, only to find out later that we've been kidding ourselves. I know for myself that if I were to put my primary confidence in me, pretty soon I'd be struggling. I can't bear that weight and neither can you. But the Christian can have confidence in Christ and he's a much more reliable foundation for confidence than we, or anything else for that matter, can ever be. We need Christ because our culture is frankly determined to undermine confidence in everything and pull the rug out from beneath our feet.

And this is hardly a new thing. This is what David actually was wrestling against. Verse two, how long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? The phrase that's translated there, you people, it indicates not enemies that are out there, but actually enemies from within God's people. Those who really ought to have been striving alongside their king and on the same page. It's hard enough when those outside the church give you grief for following Jesus. How much harder when it's those within the family of God who are making following Jesus difficult. And our culture is one that is calling everything into question.

Can you be sure that God is real? Can you be sure that the Bible is true? Can you be sure that following the Bible's morality is moral? Can you be sure that gender is fixed?

Our culture in some ways is kind of defined by its systematic attempts to demolish everything that might give us some certainty or some confidence in who we are and why we're here. It's a free-for-all and it can infect the church as well. Sowing seeds of doubt and crisis, just as the serpent did in the garden all those years ago. Like David, we might wonder, why are we being shamed? Why are the delusions of our culture seemingly of more worth than what God has said? Why does the spirit of the age sometimes feel more powerful than the spirit of God? Why are false gods and lies on the ascendant even within the church? Can we have confidence? Well, yes, we can. Verse 3 expresses David's confidence.

Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself. The Lord hears when I call to him. So the psalm begins in prayer, but a prayer to God has opened out into a dialogue of sorts with those who would have David lose his confidence in God. But David knows who he is. He is a faithful servant set apart by God and God hears him when he calls to him in prayer. And the Christian today can have the same confidence. When we are in Christ, we can have confidence that God knows us and loves us and is for us.

[9 : 17] Not because of how we feel, because feelings are fleeting and frequently deceptive, but because God has declared it. He has declared it most forcefully in Christ's resurrection from the dead. As Paul wrote, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith, but Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our faith and hope and confidence. And we can say with Paul that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We can have confidence because we have evidence of Christ's work in history.

We have the testimony of his word, which is true. And in both these things, we can confidently know that, as Paul says, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in our transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved.

If you're a Christian, this is who you are. Nothing, absolutely nothing can take that away. Nothing can take away Christ.

And our life in Christ is more than an identity. It is a completely changed way of life. This is us onto our second point. Paul helpfully sums up the change that comes in his letter to the Galatians.

In Galatians chapter 2, I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Christ dwells in every believer. And so our lives, if we're in Christ, are different to everyone else's. Because we know God through his Son. Now as the sound progresses, David's continuing the dialogue with those who are trying to shame him. What he's trying to do is he's trying to remind them of what life in the Lord is like. He's urging them to come back to living in the way that God wants them to live.

[11 : 42] Now, it's worth saying up front that how we live does not make us right with God. Our good deeds cannot save us from our sin. But for those of us who know God, it's important that we learn to live for him and become more like him by putting sin to death and doing things which are good and right. It's part of what it looks like to live the Christian life. And those who were pouring shame on David, they used to live for God. And David is trying to call them back because David's confidence has not been shaken. Despite their love for delusions and false gods, David knows that he has been set apart by and loved by the one true God. It's out of confidence that David reminds them that life in the Lord is so much better than their life without foundations. Which is why in verse 4 he says, tremble and do not sin. When you're on your bed, search your hearts and be silent.

This is actually a verse that Paul picks up on in his letter to the Ephesians. Speaking to new believers, he's explaining to them what it looks like to live for Christ. And he chooses this verse to help explain himself. He says, in your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are angry and do not give the devil a foothold. The word translated variously, tremble or be angry can mean anything from quarreling to trembling or feeling disturbed in ourselves. Given the way Paul understands it, it seems to be that David is saying when you're feeling angry or frustrated, disturbed or disquiet, don't let this be an opportunity for sin. Sin creeps in in those moments of disquiet when our soul is not at peace. But David's saying, do not sin. Instead, he's urging his critics to search their hearts in the stillness of the night when no one is around and anagastic, meditation takes hold as you lie in your bed. Be still and be silent. Do not sin. Don't let the devil get a foothold. Because anger and frustration and disquiet that lead to sin is not a fulfilling way of life. It's not peaceful. In fact, it's a life of war with ourselves. James tells us in his letter, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death. The way out of that kind of miserable, sinful cycle is Christ, as Paul puts it. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the spirit gives life because of righteousness. But David doesn't just counsel these folks to stillness in the night and fleeing from sin. If that was all that the Christian life was about, we might as well head off into the wild and become monks and live lives of silent contemplation, away from the world, away from everyone.

But actually, following Christ is so much richer than that, isn't it? It is holistic. We were made to live, not to hide away, and to live a life of sacrifice and faith. Now, that's the point that David makes in the next verse. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord. In the Old Testament, sacrifices were at the heart of following God. Now that Christ has come, well, he is our sacrifice, and so we put our faith in him, trusting that he has covered our wrongs and our transgressions, trusting that he is the sacrifice that makes it possible for us to have a relationship with God.

But there is also a sense in the New Testament in which the sacrificial model kind of continues. And this is the point that Paul makes in Romans 12. And it looks like this, therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

[16 : 34] Paul and David, as we're hopefully seeing, are on the same page when it comes to understanding life in the Lord. They're saying, don't conform to the fruitless thinking of this world, and this culture that rips out the foundations and puts back nothing in their place.

Build your life on Christ, and offer your whole life as a sacrifice to him because he offered his life as a sacrifice for you. A sacrificial life is a life that recognizes that you are not your own.

You were bought with a price. You have been loved and known by God, and Jesus died for you. And the Christian life, as a life of sacrifice, is not a life of soulless duty and miserable responsibility.

That would be a gross mischaracterization. The sacrificial nature of the Christian life is because we recognize that Jesus is worth giving our life to.

Our life is not our own, and that's good. It's freeing, in fact. If we trust in him, it is Christ who now lives in us, through his Holy Spirit.

[17 : 58] And whatever the world might offer, it's always going to ring hollow in comparison to that. But that's not how society views things.

Many, Lord, are asking, who will bring us prosperity? That's what David says in verse 6. And I think that captures humanity throughout the ages. We began with prayer.

We then entered into a dialogue with those who no longer see the point of God. Well, now in our last point, we return to prayer again. David has tried to show his critics that following God really is much better than anything that they can come up with.

And as he comes back to God, he reveals the question which lies at the heart of why they no longer want him. Who will make us successful?

Who's going to help us achieve great things? Who will bring us wealth, comfort, security? What they don't realize is that they can strive all they want.

[19 : 04] They will never find peace. Not the kind of peace that God offers. Not what the Old Testament calls shalom. And we all want peace, don't we?

And we surely want world peace. Never more so than on a day like today, as churches and people around the country remember the dead from war.

So we want world peace. And we also want inner peace within ourselves. A kind of existential peace within our own minds and souls. But this is impossible to achieve on our own.

No amount of introspection or meditation or whatever your route is your favorite route to pursue that is going to bring us peace. The plot of every Disney and DreamWorks movie may be that we need to discover ourselves and find peace by carving out our own identity according to our own rules.

But here in the real world, we'll find no route to peace within us. Because of sin, we're always going to be broken and at war with ourselves.

[20 : 18] Peace will only come when we are known by God. Peace comes through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And it's captured in the Old Testament by this idea of shalom. It's what's translated peace here in verse 8. It is the gift of God when we are his people.

It is a peace with him and consequently a peace with ourselves that we have when we are in Christ. And Christ himself is our peace.

He is our Prince of Peace. And shalom ultimately, when we take the whole Bible into account, is actually that world peace that everyone is hoping for.

When Jesus returns and brings his new creation into being, when sin and death have been destroyed, then we will have eternal peace.

[21 : 18] Then we will have shalom. And in Christ right now, we already experience something of that eternal peace.

And we're going to know it in its fullness when Jesus comes again. But we do know it now in part as he lives in us. And it's a peace that conveys God's blessing upon us and his powerful, wonderful love.

Quoting from the blessing that the priests used to say over all the Israelites and which Christians still use today, especially at baptisms for children and new believers, as they're welcomed into the covenant family of God.

Well, David asks God, let the light of your face shine upon us. It conveys this idea of God's love, his favor, his blessing.

And it comes through faith in Christ. There is no greater joy. Being in Christ is better than the greatest success we could ever imagine for ourselves.

[22 : 29] And that's what David wants to get across in verse seven. Fill my heart with joy, he says to God, when their grain and new wine abound. Ambition, dreams, hope.

they always let us down in the end. To take money is just one example. The studies conclude that more money doesn't actually make anyone happier or feel more fulfilled.

You'd be richer, sure, but poorer in many other ways. But David knows that God can fill his heart with joy when those around him rejoice in their success and their money and those things that they have set their hearts and their dreams upon.

They can follow their dreams. David is content not to. And we can be content not to as well. Again, how many movies have we seen or TV shows that revolve around a character who needs to be pushed to follow their dreams and become the person they always knew that they could be?

Of course, most of these stories end before the character realizes that they don't feel any more fulfilled. We don't actually get to see them 10, 20, 30 years down the line.

[23 : 50] And what about those people who never have the opportunities to pursue their dream? Now, culture wouldn't say it out loud, but the implication is that you haven't actually been able to be fulfilled.

But here's the thing. If you know Christ, no matter what happens to you, you have peace and fulfillment in him.

When tragedy strikes, you never lose Christ. When sorrow eats away at you, you still have Christ.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And so, when we go to our beds and our minds are teeming with worries and anxieties, with ambitions unpursued and dreams unrealized, with frustrations and disquiet, remember you have Christ.

David ends Psalm 4 like this, in peace, I will lie down and sleep. For you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

[25 : 05] We don't have to be like Macbeth stalking the corridors of his castle saying, sleep no more. Macbeth doth murder sleep. No, we can lie down knowing that God loves us.

Knowing that in the dark we are watched over. And knowing that we have peace, shalom, in Christ.

It's more than a feeling. Feelings are fleeting. It is a fact. In Christ, we have peace and can be at peace.

We might not always feel it, but the peace of God is always upon us. To finish, Paul put it like this when he wrote to the Philippians.

The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

[26 : 09] And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As we go to sleep tonight, I hope that all of us will draw great comfort from the peace of Christ that rests on us and the light of God that shines on us, knowing that one day we will enter into that perfect, eternal peace.

Amen. Amen. Amen.