

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 4,

Psalm 4 – A Historical Approach

20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to this deep dive, this deep dive into Psalm 4. I mean, you've probably heard the Psalm before, but we're going to explore it, explore it in a way, in a way that most people don't. We're going to look for the secrets by understanding the world, the world in which it was written. You know, think about ancient kings and desperate prayers for rain.

It's just wild. Yeah. Context is really key when it comes to these ancient texts.

You know, it's like trying to get a joke without knowing the cultural references. You're just going to miss some of the humor. Exactly.

Exactly. And speaking of context, let's talk about the elephant in the room: who actually wrote this Psalm? Now, our source material today argues for King David, but a lot of modern scholars would totally disagree.

Yeah, that's right. It seems like there's often debate about the authorship of biblical texts, and Psalm 4 is no exception. Some scholars point to linguistic details or historical inconsistencies as evidence that it was composed later.

Okay. So while the traditional view says that David wrote this Psalm, it's important to know that there are other perspectives out there, but for our deep dive today, let's just stick with the idea that David is the author. What can we learn from that perspective? Well, consider the line that addresses high-born men who have turned the author's glory into shame.

You know, this detail makes a lot more sense if we're talking about a king, someone like David, who's facing a leadership crisis. It makes you think that he's being deserted by those closest to him, those in positions of power. That's fascinating.

That's fascinating. It really adds a new layer of complexity to the whole situation. And you know, there's another detail, another detail that points to this idea of a king in crisis: the mention of grain and new wine.

You know, this might just seem like a simple request for food, but you have to remember in the ancient Near East, they believed that kings were responsible for rain and harvests. Wait, so if there was a drought, they basically thought it was the king's fault? Not fault, exactly. But they were seen as intermediaries between the gods and the people, responsible for the land's prosperity.

You know, a drought would definitely reflect badly on the king's ability to intercede with the divine. It's like, imagine the pressure on a leader when their people are starving, and they believe you're the reason why. Wow.

That's intense. That's intense. Suddenly those verses about grain and wine, they take on a whole new meaning.

It's not just about food anymore. It's about David's authority being challenged. Exactly.

And you start to see, you start to see how intertwined leadership and faith were back then. Okay. So we're getting a clearer picture of what's going on here, but tell me more about this crisis that David's dealing with.

What else is going on? Okay. Well, Psalm 4. Psalm 4 is considered a lament, a cry for help when you're in trouble. And when we dig into the historical context, we see there are actually three layers of crisis happening all at the same time.

Three. Okay. I'm hooked.

Tell me more. What's the first layer? Well, the first layer, the most obvious one, is the drought. You know, the people are begging for good, a word that's often used poetically to refer to rain and a good harvest.

And when you combine this with the ancient belief that kings were responsible for prosperity, the drought becomes like a direct threat to David's legitimacy as a king. It's like, he's not just dealing with a natural disaster. He's dealing with a PR nightmare on top of it.

Exactly. Exactly. And this leads us to the second layer of crisis, which we've already kind of touched on, which is the challenge to David's authority.

You know, in the ancient Near East, kings weren't just political figures. They were almost like magical figures. You know, people believed they had a direct link to the gods.

It's interesting how different cultures viewed their leaders. You know, I wonder if other ancient civilizations had similar beliefs. Oh, absolutely.

Absolutely. We have records, records of Assyrian kings who would brag about how the storm god liked them. And so it would rain a lot during their reign.

And Egyptian pharaohs claimed to produce grain because they were so loved by the grain god. You know, they really believed their words carried weight in the divine realm. So in this context, in this context, a drought in David's kingdom is a big deal.

It's not just bad weather. It's a sign. It's a sign that maybe he's lost favor with the gods.

And if he's lost favor with the gods, well, that makes him a pretty shaky king. Yeah, you got it. And to make matters worse, it seems like some of his people are actually turning to other gods for help.

Remember the verse about loving delusions and seeking false gods? Right. So they're basically hedging their bets like, hey, maybe these other gods can do a better job with this whole rain situation. Precisely.

Precisely. And that brings us to the third layer of crisis, the agonizing silence, the agonizing silence of unanswered prayers. Okay.

Tell me more about that. I'm all ears. All right.

So in the ancient world, kings weren't just expected to pray. They were expected to have these, like, super powerful prayers, prayers that got instant results. And we see this in other cultures too, where kings just expected their words to have this direct impact, a direct impact on the divine realm.

So David's praying for rain, but the drought just keeps going. This isn't just frustrating for him personally. It's like undermining his authority for all his people.

They're probably like, if this guy can't even get the gods to send us some rain, what good is he? Right. Right. And the psalm itself, it highlights this agonizing wait for an answer.

It uses the phrase how long over and over again, like emphasizing the fact that David's prayers aren't working. I think we can all relate to that feeling, right? That's how long God feels when you're going through a tough time, and it feels like your prayers are just hitting a wall. It's something that transcends time and culture for sure.

Absolutely. Absolutely. And it really speaks to the power of the Psalms, you know, their ability to express these very raw human emotions that resonate with us even thousands of years later.

So to recap, we've got these three layers of crisis. You've got this devastating drought, you've got people challenging David's authority, and you've got this whole struggle with unanswered prayers. It's like he's being hit from every side.

But what does David do about it? How does he respond to all of this pressure? That's where it gets really interesting, because despite all of these crises, David doesn't resort to like these desperate measures. You know, he doesn't try to appease angry gods or manipulate the situation. He just doubles down.

He doubles down on his faith in the one true God, Yahweh. And he keeps using that specific name, I Am. Right.

It seems significant. It is. It is.

You see, I Am isn't just a title. It's God's personal name, a covenant name, a name that represents this really deep, intimate relationship between God and his people. It's a name that carries a lot of weight, a name that speaks of promises and faithfulness.

So David, even with everything he's facing, is choosing to lean into this relationship with God, this I Am. It's like he's saying, even though everything's falling apart around me, this is where I find my strength. That's a powerful way to put it.

That's a powerful way to put it. And it's like a reminder, a reminder that even in the middle of a crisis, even when it feels like your prayers aren't being answered, you can find comfort,

find comfort by clinging to the I Am, the God who's always with us. That's a beautiful thought.

So we see David leaning into this relationship with God, but what about his people? What about his people? How does he address them? How does he address them in the midst of this whole crisis? That's a great question. That's a great question. And that's where we'll pick things up in part two of our deep dive.

It's really fascinating, you know, how David chooses to address his people in this song. He doesn't try to downplay the crisis or just offer these empty reassurances. He actually invites them to join him in lament, to acknowledge the pain and uncertainty they're all going through.

So he's not trying to be like a cheer-up king, pretending everything is fine when it obviously isn't. He's real with them about what's going on. Exactly.

Exactly. And there's something, there's something powerful in that, in that honesty. It's like he's saying, Hey, look, I'm hurting too.

Okay. I don't have all the answers, but let's turn to God together. Let's find hope in him.

It's like this communal cry for help, you know, a shared experience of vulnerability and faith. Yeah. Yeah.

And this idea, this idea of communal lament, it's something we often miss in our modern way of understanding faith. We tend to think of prayer as this private thing, an individual thing. But here David's showing us, showing us how prayer can be this shared experience, you know, a way to unite people in their shared need.

It's so true. It's so true. It's like, when we go through hard times, we tend to isolate ourselves instead of reaching out to our communities, you know, our communities of faith. We try to carry our burdens alone, but maybe we're not meant to do that.

Maybe we're meant to bear each other's burdens, not just in practical ways, but also through prayer and lament together. Exactly. Exactly.

There's vulnerability and strength in communal lament that we often miss out on when we try to go it alone. You know, it's in that shared space, that shared space of vulnerability, that we can really connect with each other and with God. I love that.

I love that. It's like a reminder, a reminder that we're not alone in our struggles. There's something comforting, comforting in knowing that others have walked this path before us, you know, that they've cried out to God in their pain and they've found comfort in his presence.

Absolutely. Absolutely. And speaking of finding solace in God's presence, remember how David keeps using the name I Am? Right.

Right. It seems like more than just a name; it's a declaration of something deeper, something more profound. It is.

It is. You see, I Am, it represents, it represents God's personal covenant, his covenant relationship with his people. It's a name that speaks of promises and faithfulness and unwavering presence.

So David is using this name to remind his people, and maybe even himself, that their hope isn't in him, you know, their king. It's in the I Am. It's in the God who is always with them no matter what they're facing.

You got it. You've hit the nail on the head. It's a powerful statement, a powerful statement of faith.

And it ties back. It ties back to that idea of communal lament. You know, they're not turning to any God.

They're turning to the God who has made a covenant with them, the God who's promised to be with them always. And it's interesting, it's interesting how you translated that one phrase in Psalm 4. It really sheds more light on this whole thing. You used highborn men instead of just men.

Can you tell us a little more about that choice? Sure. Sure. The Hebrew word there is *benesh*.

It literally means sons of man. But it's not just any man. It's a term for people with high status, nobility, or leadership.

So it's not just like the average person on the street turning away from David. These are people in power, people who were probably his close advisors or friends. Exactly.

Exactly. And this is important. This distinction is crucial because it adds another layer of betrayal to the story.

You know, it's one thing to have ordinary people doubting your leadership. But when your inner circle starts leaving... That's a whole other thing. That's like a punch to the gut.

You know, like you've been abandoned by the people you trusted the most. And you could feel it. You can feel that betrayal in the Psalm.

David's obviously hurt and angry. But he doesn't lash out or seek revenge. He just turns to God.

The one. The one who will never abandon him. It's like a reminder that even when the people closest to us let us down, we can always find refuge in God.

He's the constant one. The one who will never leave us or forsake us. You know, it's amazing how much depth you find in these ancient texts.

When you take the time to really understand the language. And the culture. And the historical context.

It's like a whole new world opens up. Absolutely. So we've talked about David's response to all this.

His call to communal lament and his unwavering faith in I Am. But there's one more part of the song that's really interesting. The ending.

Yeah, the ending. The ending is really striking. What about it stands out to you? Well, it's just so it's just so unexpected.

You know, here's David in the middle of all this turmoil, the drought, the rebellion, the unanswered prayers. And what does he do? He falls asleep. It is.

It is unexpected. But I think that's what makes it so powerful. Yeah.

You know, it's like this visual representation of his total trust in God. Even with all the chaos and uncertainty around him, David can find peace to rest, knowing that God is in control. It's like he's saying, I've done everything I can.

I've cried out to God. I've put my trust in him. Now I'm going to rest.

I'm going to rest in his peace. You know, it's a profound statement of faith. It makes me wonder: do we ever allow ourselves that same level of surrender? Do we ever really rest in the storm, trusting that God is working even when we can't see it? That's a great question.

A great question. And I think it's one we all need to wrestle with. You know, we live in a world, a world that values busyness and control.

It's hard to just let go, surrender to the unknown. But that's exactly what David is inviting us to do in Psalm 4. You know, he's inviting us to find peace in the middle of the storm, to rest knowing that we're held by the I Am, the God who never slumbers or sleeps. That's a beautiful image, a beautiful image to hold on to, especially when we're going through tough times.

So we've seen David's response to crisis, his call to communal lament, his unwavering faith in I Am, and ultimately his surrender to God's peace. But there's one more layer here to unpack, one that connects this ancient Psalm to our lives today. What's that? Well, it's the fact that the Psalm never actually says whether the drought ended.

Or if David's people came back to him. That's interesting. That's interesting.

So we're left with this open question: what happened next? Exactly. Exactly. And I think, I think there's a powerful lesson in that, in that ambiguity.

It's like, it's like the Psalm's inviting us, inviting us to think about what it means to keep the faith, even when you don't see the results right away. You know, when the drought just keeps going, when the answers to your prayers just seem lost. It's deep.

That's really deep. You know, we always want things to be neat and tidy. We want a clear sign that everything's back to how it was.

But that's not always how life is. Or faith. So we're left, we're left with this image of David sleeping peacefully, trusting God, even though we don't know what happened.

It's like, it's like the Psalm is saying faith isn't about knowing all the answers. It's about trusting God, even when you don't know what's going to happen. And that's something we can all relate to.

Right. We all go through tough times. We face challenges.

We have doubts. We cry out to God. With that, the "how long question just echoes in our hearts.

And sometimes, sometimes the answer isn't this big, sudden change. It's not like the rain just starts pouring or everything magically gets better. Sometimes the answer is just the peace.

The peace that comes from knowing we're held by the I am. Even when we don't know what's coming next. David's example.

It's like a reminder that faith isn't about trying to force God's hand or demand that things go a certain way. It's about surrendering, surrendering to his will. Trust that he's working even when we can't see it, and find peace in his presence.

Even in the middle of the storm. It's about choosing to rest. Even when the storms are raging all around, just like David.

Exactly. And you know, it's interesting. This Psalm was probably meant to be sung by a whole group of people, which adds another layer to this idea of communal faith.

You know, faith in the face of uncertainty. What do you mean? Well, imagine, imagine a group of people gather together. Their voices all blend in as one.

Crying out to God, their shared pain and their shared longing. They're not singing about a victory from the past. They're singing right in the middle of their struggle, expressing their trust in God, even though they don't know the future.

It's like, it's like they're standing up to despair together, refusing to let fear and uncertainty win. And that's a powerful image for us today. Don't you think? We live in a world that feels so chaotic, so unpredictable.

It's easy to get caught up in fear and anxiety. But Psalm 4 is like an invitation, an invitation to join that ancient chorus, to raise our voices with those who came before us, to declare our trust in the I Am, the God who is always with us, no matter what we're going through. That's beautiful.

So as we wrap up our deep dive into Psalm 4, what's one last thought? One last thought we can leave our listeners with, something they can take with them as they go back out into the world, maybe with this ancient song in their hearts. I would say, I would say, think about the droughts in your own life. The things that make you feel empty, desperate for answers.

And in those moments, how can you, like David, choose to rely on your relationship with I Am? How can you find that peace, that peace in his presence, even when everything around you feels like a storm? Those are good questions. It's a challenge, isn't it? To go beyond just praying for a better world, to actually have that same trust in God that David had, even when the answers seem so far away. It is a challenge, but it's a challenge worth taking on, you know, because it's in those moments, those moments when we surrender, when we choose to rest in God's presence, even when we don't understand.

That's when we discover a peace, a hope that nothing else in the world can give us. What a beautiful takeaway. Thank you for joining me on this deep dive into Psalm 4. It's been an amazing journey.

The pleasure was all mine. And to all our listeners out there, thanks for diving deep with us. Until next time, may you find peace in the presence of the I Am.

No matter what storms you may face.