

## Songs for Sojourners: Covenant Contentment

Psalm 4

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### Introduction

The first four Psalms all have the same basic theme, they all introduce the book of Psalms with the choice between two ways of life – the blessed life, and the cursed life. There are two ways to live: the narrow way to life, and the wide way to destruction, a thick life and a thin life, a substantial life and a vain life. Essentially, these Psalms are posing the question – what makes for a happy life? What is a good life and how do you live one?

Each of these four Psalms, give the same answer in a few different ways. The happy life is found in covenant with God through Christ. Contentment, happiness, the good life comes through peace with God, and living under his lordship through Jesus Christ, within the covenant community of his people.

What these first few Psalms are doing is more or less functioning like an orientation to the book of Psalms as a whole. The Psalms as a whole are meant to point to the Christ. The term ‘Christ’ comes from the Greek word that translates the Hebrew term ‘Messiah.’ Christ and Messiah are synonyms – just from different languages. They both refer to “the anointed one.”

King David wrote a good chunk of the Psalms, but the book as a whole was compiled a long time after him. And by that time, David himself came to be seen as a picture, a sign pointing to someone like David, but even better than David, even more significant than David. He came to be seen as a dim shadow of the coming bigger and better David, the one that came to be called simply – the Messiah, the Christ.<sup>1</sup>

So, what the Psalms do – not every single one of them, and not all in exactly the same way, but taken as a whole – what the Psalms do is look back at David in order to look forward to the coming Christ, to help the reader hope in this coming savior.

What David was to the ancient people of Israel, this coming Christ, the man we know to be Jesus of Nazareth, will be on a bigger and grander scale.

The Psalms as a whole are meant to form the covenant community for worship under the Christ. The Psalms aren’t just about you and God. They are about you and God, but also the Christ, and the covenant community. And these first four Psalms help to lay out a big picture landscape of what it means to live life in that matrix. What does it mean to live for God *through* the Christ, *within* the covenant community?

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 4, is a reminder, a reminder to turn your heart back to Christ. Little by little we can drift, especially in hard times, and start hoping in other things for life, and peace, and happiness. But this Psalm reminds us that true and abiding contentment is available to you today, even in the middle of hard circumstances. And at the same time warning us, that if we can’t find contentment in Christ in the hard circumstances, then the good circumstances that we’re longing for – if they come – won’t satisfy us either.

It’s a reminder, but it’s also an invitation. This Psalm, I’ll argue, is basically left open ended. It basically says, “there’s two ways to live, for God, or against him, the thick life, or the thin life, as for me – says David – I lay down and sleep in the peace and contentment that only God can give.” Then the question hangs open, “what about you?” Will you be like “the many” always looking for the next new thing, the next sure-fire technique to find happiness? Or will you be like David, and rest content in the Lord?

So, here’s my plan for this morning. First, I’m going to give you a high-level overview of what’s going on in this text, to see some of the characters involved and who’s saying what. And in that, I’ll work through the text and

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<sup>1</sup> See Ezekiel 34:23, “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” Ezekiel prophesied hundreds of years after David, but saw him as a picture of the coming Messiah.

highlight a few key details that you need to notice. Then I'll circle back through to highlight three principles that we see here for living the thick life, the life of covenant contentment.

Pray with me.

## Overview

One helpful way to approach a Psalm is to ask, "who is saying what to whom?" Sometimes it's obvious, but it's almost always helpful to start with this question. And sometimes, like in this Psalm, the answer is different for different verses. In verse 1, David is talking directly to God about his problems, past and present. But then in verses 2 through 5 David is talking directly to his opponents. Then in a third section, in 6, 7, and 8 David turns back directly to God.

So, who is saying what to who. But then, the next question to ask should be "where does Jesus fit into this?" Or, "how does Jesus relate to these words?" It might be to him, or about him, but often, like in this case, David is acting as a miniature version of Jesus. So, in this Psalm David is speaking as the covenant king of Israel – the anointed king. So, when we apply this in the Christian era, we should read this as the words of Christ, our covenant king.

Then third, we need to ask, "where do I fit into this?" We need to ask this question eventually. You should see yourself in the Psalms somehow. But it's not always simple, and it's not always in the same way.

Here, in this Psalm, I would argue that Jesus steps into David's spot as the speaker, and we are the "O men" from verse 2 that Jesus is speaking to. So, to put it more directly, verses 2 through 5 are Jesus rebuking, or at least warning, and calling us out. Then verses 6 through 8 are Jesus inviting us in to share in his covenant peace.

Ok, here's the high level overview. In verse 1, David is praying for help, it's basically the introduction, he's just saying he's in trouble, and he needs God's help. Simple enough.

Then in verse 2, he lays out his trouble. We don't get exactly what the issue is, but from the clues in the text we can see that the nobles of Israel, at least a good chunk of them are starting to defect from David. 'O men' there in verse 2 could mean something like noblemen, it's not just the generic term for humans – you might have a footnote in your Bible saying, "men of rank" would be a decent translation.

On top of these defecting nobles, or probably driving their defection, it seems like there is some kind of national difficulty going on. From verses 6 and 7, it seems plausible that there is some kind of widespread famine going on.

And this is leading the people to get a little antsy, and the nobles are starting to talk out loud about possibly replacing the king, getting a new king.

If God and his anointed king aren't getting the job done – if they can't feed us – maybe we should find a new king, and some new gods.

So, when David says in verse 3, "know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself," this is primarily a warning. He's warning them that they are turning away from God's king is to turn away from the one true God.

So, for us, it's important that we put ourselves in here in the right way. We shouldn't primarily see ourselves as the speaker in this Psalm. There are some verses in here that are super helpful to pray in isolation, but taken as a whole, we should see ourselves as the recipients of this warning.

Psalm 1 is a more or less open invitation to all people to choose the path of life – to trust in the Christ. Psalm two is a sharp warning to those who reject the Christ to stop rejecting him – it goes bad for you in the end. Psalm 3 is an encouragement to those on the path of life to hold on in hard times. And Psalm 4 is a warning to those on the path who are tempted to drift in the face of difficulty.

We're the audience here. This is directed at us.

In our day to day lives, maybe it's not a famine, but our problems, big and small, can tempt us to turn away from Christ in subtle ways. We aren't quite getting everything we want out of life, so instead of turning to

Christ, being content in what he's given us, and obeying him, we start looking for life and fulfillment in other things – work, family, vacations, movies, whatever. So, instead of honoring Christ as the source and substance of our lives, we shame him by looking for life and fullness in other things.

So, he says to us “how long will you love vain words and seek after lies?” You know these things never follow through on their promises. When will you turn back to the real life? The thick life? The life of covenant contentment?

Then, when he says, “know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself” again, verse 3. The “godly” isn't a generic class of people. It's a man. It's Jesus. He's saying, know that Jesus, the godly one, is the Way the Truth and the Life – no one comes to the Father except through him. So, if you turn away from Jesus and to vain words and lies, you turn away from God. The only way to God is through covenant with Jesus.

This is why, in the next two verses, he basically gives a call to repentance. And again, we are the audience, especially in those moments when we're drifting from Christ.

Verse four starts out, “be angry and do not sin.” This is an interesting phrase. The word translated “be angry” gets translated different ways in different versions. At its most basic it just means ‘to shake.’ So, some versions translate it “tremble” and some translate it “be afraid.” ‘Get worked up’ might not be a bad way to put it.

When you realize that you've been drifting from Christ in your heart, you should get worked up about that. This isn't some trivial thing that David is talking about. When we let our hearts drift from Christ to other things, we're playing with deadly serious things.

Then he rounds out verse 4 saying, “ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.” Basically, this should keep you up at night, this isn't some small issue to be taken care of later on.

Again, these aren't David's enemies – he talked to the enemies in Psalm 2. These are David's cabinet members, his nobles. So, this is primarily a warning to Christians that are drifting.

So, for many, hopefully this is just a preemptive warning and a reminder. But for some, this text should be a wakeup call. Maybe you were serious about pursuing the Lord back in High School. But then college rolled around, you got married, started a job, started having some kids, you're moving up in your career, and you're still here. You never walked away, you're still following Jesus. But you've just grown cold towards the Lord.

Now, when difficulty comes, how you handle it is almost indistinguishable from someone who knows nothing of Christ. The hopes and comforts of the world are basically your hopes and comforts. Prayer is an afterthought. The peace of Christ is a spiritual abstraction. God's providence is hardly any comfort to you at all. Distraction, or food, or complaining, or blaming, tend to be how you handle difficulty.

Today he's calling you to wake up – to “be angry and do not sin.” This text is the rumble strip on the side of a mountain road. Wake up before you fall off the cliff!

Next, he gives us gospel hope. Verse 4 – what we just looked at – is more or less ‘repent’ and verse 5 is ‘believe.’

Verse 5 says, “Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.”

In the Old Covenant, the Old Testament, the sacrifices were visceral and visual signs pointing forward to the promised deliverer. From Adam to Christ sacrificial blood pointed to the need for a substitute, for blood to be shed for our sins. Repentance alone doesn't take away sin – someone has to die for sin. Before Christ, the blood of animals pointed forward to him. And now, since the real thing has come, the real saving blood has been spilled, the Lord's supper, points us back to Jesus' shed blood and broken body in our place.

And this is important to notice. The sacrifice is only meaningful for those who trust the Lord. Even for the Old Testament Israelite, the sacrifice was just a sign, it was faith – it was trust in the Lord – that made it meaningful.

The call of verse 4 and 5 then could be summed up this way: turn away from sin, from whatever it is that has captured the affections of your heart, and trust in Christ, trust in his shed blood for you.

Then, in verses 6-8 he turns back to addressing the Lord directly.

So, if you look at the text there, you'll see two sentences in quotations. So, quotes in the Bible are hard, because neither Hebrew nor Greek have quotation marks. So, there's usually a bit of interpretation involved in deciding where quotes end. Usually, they have some kind of verbal marker on the front end like this, "there are many who say..." obviously whatever comes next is some kind of quote. But where does it end? There's some interpretation there.

And, interestingly in this case, most translations end the quote after "some good." So, it's there are many who say, "who will show us some good?" End quote. Then David prays in his own words, "Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!"

In fact, of 22 English versions that I compared it with, only one other version included the second sentence in the quote. Four or five just didn't have quotes at all, and the rest had quotes only around the question, that first sentence.

Grammatically, I get why the ESV includes both sentences. Both sentences in verse 6 use the plural pronoun 'us' then 7 and 8 uses the singular. So, there's a case to be made for how the ESV renders it, but it just seems to cut against the grain of the rest of the Psalm. The whole problem is that these people are turning away from the Lord and the Lord's anointed to find good. They are looking for happiness, for the good life apart from God and apart from his Christ. So, it doesn't seem to make sense that they would be praying for the Lord to shine his face on them.

No, it seems like the problem of verse 6 is that many are turning away from God, away from Christ, and looking around for a replacement God to meet their needs, to solve their problem. But then, after referencing what the many are saying, David prays for God's covenant mercy for his nation, using the language and imagery of the priestly covenant blessing from Numbers 6. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

David prays this covenant blessing over his people, because he wants God to solve their problem, but above all he knows that what they need is to see and be satisfied by the face of God.

At bottom, the chief blessings of God's covenant with his people – both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is this – not stuff, not ease, not comfort, not security – it's God. That we would find peace, grace, and life in the light of God's face – whether the barns are full or not.

Then he gets to verse 7, "you have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." Now, again, this is likely not talking about an entitled nation looking for more grain and more wine, but this is probably in the context of some kind of famine.

So, this verse is a king thinking about the very real needs of a very hungry people, and yet recognizing that the true life, the true fullness that they're longing for is available now – even in the middle of this famine.

David ends with this – "In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." In the middle of national distress and with the threat of a coup rising daily, that is covenant contentment.

## **Applications**

So, I want to give you three main application points from this text. How do I actually live the life of covenant contentment? It comes down to three things.

First, Covenant Confidence.

Second, Covenant Godliness.

And third, Covenant Gratitude.

Ok, first, covenant confidence – look again at verse 1. "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!" I just want you to notice the shape of this. What David is doing is asking for help in his current trouble – both the defecting nobles and the famine – but in the middle of it, he mentions the fact that God has rescued him from troubles in the past. So, he's

grounding his hope for present and future mercy on the past mercy he has already experienced. This is so important.

From cover to cover, one of the most common instructions that God gives us is the command to remember. We need to remember the great historic redemptive acts of God. Creation, the Exodus, above all the cross and resurrection. But we also need to remember the historic ways that God has worked for us in our own lives.

First and foremost, for the Christian, you need to remember that God saved you in the first place. He opened your heart to believe. He brought you into the right place at the right time to hear the right word to surrender your life to Christ. He saved you.

But on top of that, we need to remember the ways that God has answered our prayers in the past. It's too easy to pray for something, maybe a new job, maybe health, or good test results, academic or medical. And then God gives us what we asked him for, but then the next time we get into a tight spot we act like we've never seen God answer a prayer before. We need to learn to *remember*. "You have delivered me before – please deliver me again"

Charles Spurgeon, commenting on this verse says, "It is not to be imagined that he who has helped us in six troubles will leave us in the seventh. God does nothing by halves, and he will never cease to help us until we cease to need." The more we notice, and remember the ways that God has answered prayers for us in the past, the more confidence and peace we will have when the next trial rolls around. I don't know how God will rescue me through this, or how God will help me. But one thing I do know, the God who rescued me before can rescue me again.

Second, covenant godliness.

The big issue of this Psalm is what these nobles, these men of rank, are going to do with David. Are they going to honor him as king? Or shame him, and look for a different king. This is why, what David is saying in verse three is so important. Remember, 'the godly' there isn't a generic, it's just David. He's saying, don't forget, O men, that God has set his covenant on David. So, to turn from David is to turn from God and to turn from his covenant.

In Biblical covenants, one of the most important features is what's called a covenant head, or a covenant king. And this head functions as the intermediary between God, and the covenant people. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David are the major Old Testament examples of covenant heads. If the head was doing well and pleasing God, then the whole covenant people were blessed.

If the head was doing poorly, then the whole covenant people were cursed. This is why the book of Kings can trace the decline and exile of the Old Testament people just through the kings. As the kings got more and more wicked, the covenant people suffered more and more from God's judgement.

In this Psalm, so long as David is faithful to God, he acts as a covenant mediator between you and God, and the nation is blessed in David. But, the problem with David, and with all his sons after him, is that none of them could live up to God's holy law.

Which is where Jesus comes in. Fully God, and fully man, and not only man, but a Son of David, he comes in as a new and final covenant head. So, as long as Jesus is obedient and pleasing to God, all those who are "in Christ" are secure in God's blessing. And he is always obedient and pleasing to God.

This covenant idea is what the whole concept of Justification rests on. If you are in Christ, then his obedience is obedience as your representative – in your place. If you are in Christ, then his suffering and death is your suffering and death to pay the penalty of your sin.

This is why the New Testament is so full of “in Christ” language. We are redeemed in Christ,<sup>2</sup> we have been brought near in Christ,<sup>3</sup> we are a new creation in Christ,<sup>4</sup> we are chosen in Christ<sup>5</sup> and we are adopted as sons and daughters in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

At root this is covenant language. We are blessed in Christ. Psalm one teaches us that we are blessed in the blessed man. And Psalm 4 teaches us that we are godly in the godly one.

Essentially this Psalm holds out what we could call “covenant godliness” as one of the keys to the thick life.

There are two halves to covenant godliness, and we need to notice this too. Because it isn’t just, honor Christ, and trust God. But in the middle there, there’s a real call to change your ways, and live in obedience.

There is the status side of covenant godliness – we are godly in the godly one. But there is also a call to a practical side of covenant godliness – we are called to live in obedience to our covenant king. And that’s baked right in to honoring Christ as king. You can’t honor him as king, you can’t believe in Jesus as your lord and savior and ignore what he tells you about how to live.

This is why it is so important to distinguish, but not separate the objective side and the subjective side of salvation.

On the objective side we are justified – declared righteous – because of Christ’s perfect righteousness and death in our place. On the subjective side we are sanctified – made righteous – by the Holy Spirit’s work in us.

Again, because of Christ’s objective work *for* us, we are adopted into God’s family. And because of the Holy Spirit’s work *in* us we are made little by little to live, and love, and act, and talk like sons and daughters of God.

Because of Christ’s work *for* us we are set apart as holy. Because of the Holy Spirit’s work *in* us we are made more and more holy day by day.

So, the thick life, the rich life, the deep life, flows out of covenant godliness.

So, we have covenant confidence, covenant godliness, and last, covenant gratitude.

Covenant gratitude is the posture that sees all of life as a given life, as a received life, not just as random events, or even just what you by your skill were able to make happen, but as something from God.

So, this works really on both ends of experience.

If things are going well, if it’s a season of abundance, and everything is playing out how you hoped it would, then you can receive that as a gift. Often, if we’re not practicing covenant gratitude, when our plans work out, or things are going well, we just take that as how things are supposed to work out.

We just presume that this is what we deserve, or at least expect. So, your dream comes true – you finish school, you get the job, your family vacation goes well, whatever – and instead of savoring that as a gift from God, as something received, often we just kind of take it for granted and move on to the next thing. We are so used to being angsty about the next thing that we don’t even really know how to receive the gifts God has already given us with gratitude.

But then, this works on the other end too. When things aren’t going well, or when things are outright broken and falling apart, covenant gratitude helps us to a) delight in the small but good things that God has given us, and b) remember that even these evil circumstances aren’t coming at us randomly – even these are subject to God’s sovereign providence. Not from him, he is never the author of evil, but in his sovereign love for you, his sovereign wisdom, and his sovereign goodness, he has chosen to allow this into your life. We don’t always know why, or what God is up to, but covenant gratitude reminds us that in all its ups and downs, this is the life that God has chosen to give to you – you who he loves enough to take on flesh and die for you.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:24, Ephesians 1:7

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:13

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 1:4

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 3:26

And that's the situation that we see David in in this Psalm – this is covenant gratitude in the middle of hard circumstances. In the middle of this famine, David can sit down and eat his small portion of stale bread, and his little sip of bad wine, and rejoice in these things as gifts from God.

Whenever we base our satisfaction on our circumstances *more* will never be enough. But when we can simply rest in the life, and the things that God has given us, not in themselves, but as gifts, as something received, even the little we have is more than we need to be content.

## **Conclusion**

There's a reason that this is all covenant, covenant, covenant. These aren't just like generic spiritual principles. These are comforts and blessings for those who are in Christ. If you have been grafted into Christ through repentance and faith, if you've been, like Paul says, baptized into Christ, then these comforts are yours. You have the privilege of living a life marked by covenant confidence, covenant godliness, and covenant gratitude.

So, here's the basic idea. A covenant is an agreement between two parties. You don't gradually ease your way into a covenant. You don't slowly become a Christian. There can be a process, certainly a process of learning, considering, weighing. Absolutely, there is a process involved in leading up to the threshold. But eventually there has to be a moment of decision. A moment where you say, ok, I'm surrendering myself to Christ. I'm no longer going to try to be my own savior and lord, and from now on I'm turning my soul and my life over to Christ as my savior and lord.

So where are you? Have you accepted Christ's covenant offer? Have you surrendered your life to Christ? Are you still just exploring? That's ok. It's ok to be wherever you are, it's just important to know where you are. You've either embraced the covenant, or you haven't yet. Where are you? If you're not sure where you are, I'd be happy to talk to you after the service.

All it takes is repentance – surrender to his lordship, and faith – surrender to him as savior. Being a part of Christ's covenant means being a part of Christ's covenant people, the Bible knows nothing of a churchless Christianity. We would love to welcome you in.

## **Lord's Supper**

Ok, today we are going to be observing the Lord's Supper. This is a covenant celebration. When we take the cup, you'll hear me quote Jesus saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood." So, when we take this meal, what we are celebrating is all of these covenant blessings that we have been talking about. When we take the bread and the cup, we are reminding ourselves of the tight spot that Jesus got us out of. We were in distress, we needed rescue, and he gave his own body and blood to save us – to rescue us.

And it reminds us of covenant godliness. Our justification before God is not about us, but about this man, who lived a perfect life, and died in my place for me. And it refreshes us – in the meal the Holy Spirit feeds our spirits to sanctify us, and form us to be more like Christ.

And it reminds us of covenant gratitude. We receive this meal, we receive Christ's body and blood the same way we receive everything else. We didn't earn this. Christ gave himself for us, and we receive, simply, humbly.

So, this is a covenant meal. The consistent picture of what it means to join Christ's covenant in the New Testament is faith, followed by baptism, followed by church membership. And the consistent practice of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament follows the same pattern. People believe, then are baptized, then join a church, then participate in the Supper.

So, we ask that if that isn't yet true of you yet, respectfully, we ask that you would abstain from this meal.

If you haven't yet received Christ by faith, instead of taking the cracker and the juice, we invite you to take Christ, to receive him by faith.

If you haven't yet been baptized by immersion following your profession of faith, everything that this meal represents is already yours – if you've accepted Christ by faith – but we ask that you would abstain from this sign for now, and accept Christ's first sign of baptism.

And if you're not living in covenant community with a local church, a part of what it means to receive the body of Christ is to be joined to his people – this is not a me and Jesus meal, this is an *us* and Jesus meal, so again, we would ask that you would abstain until you find a local church to join yourself to. Doesn't have to be us – if you're visiting from another church, please, feel more than welcome to partake with us, but a part of what this meal represents is a sharing together in the covenant body of Christ.

In this meal, we remember, we feed, and we proclaim. We remember Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins. We feed on Christ by faith to be nourished and strengthened. And we proclaim his death until he comes. The king will come again.

So, please, pray with me, and then the servers will pass out the elements.

### **Prayer**

Lord, thank you for this text, for this reminder of your covenant comforts in the middle of hard times. Please help us Lord.

Please help us to live lives of covenant confidence – to remember all the ways that you have worked to rescue us – in the big picture salvation ways, and also in the little ways, the work and family, and life ways. Help us to remember your past mercies in our present needs.

Help us to live lives of covenant godliness, resting in your finished work for us, and cooperating with your present work in us.

Help us to live lives of covenant gratitude, to receive the life that you have given us. To rejoice in the good times over all that you have given us, and to take heart in the hard times, clinging to your kindness even in the scraps.

Lord Jesus, we lift up this meal that we are about to partake in. We lift up this bread to you, asking that you would bless it to us as a participation in your body broken for us.

And we lift up this juice, asking that you would bless it to us as a participation in your blood shed for us. Jesus in all these things we look to you. We love you, we trust you. And its in your mighty name that we pray.

Amen.