

## Commentary on the Psalms

### Psalm 4:

#### An evening prayer of confidence in God



*Note: Most of the commentaries of the psalms of the Psalter that are being posted to the site were taken from the talks of Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. The commentaries were specifically concerned with the psalms used in Lauds (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer) in the Psalter used under the Roman Rite. This leaves out a large number of psalms that deserve some treatment. Where possible the papal commentaries will be supplemented by other commentaries, primarily Benedictine*



When I call, answer me, O God of justice;  
from anguish you released me, have mercy  
and hear me!  
O men, how long will your hearts be closed,  
will you love what is futile and seek what is  
false?

It is the Lord who grants favors to those whom he loves;  
the Lord hears me whenever I call him.

Fear him; do not sin; ponder on your bed and be still  
Make justice your sacrifice, and trust in the Lord.

"What can bring us happiness?" many say.  
Lift up the light of your face on us, O Lord.  
You have put into my heart a greater joy  
than they have from abundance of corn and new wine.

I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once  
for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.



Anybody who wants to write a theology of the everyday life, or wants to practice such a theology, will find a starting point in Psalm 3, verse 6: "I lie down to rest and I sleep. I wake, for the Lord upholds me." Nothing is more basic in our life than this daily lying down, surrendering, giving in, accepting the fact that without rest we are unable to continue with the business of life. We might be able to push ourselves for a while longer, take a cup of coffee, and another one - and yet at some point we have to give in and stop and let rest do the rest. Sleep as a necessary way to recuperate from exhaustion can be considered as a physio-

logical law. But anyone who thinks a little more deeply and searches for meaning, especially a Christian who sees even the daily things of life in the light of the Easter candle (the light of Christ), is forced to consider this fact as part of the general mystery of life - the daily lying down and rising. This "law" seen in the light of the resurrection is to him then a manifestation of the simple fact that God loves him first, that man is not only born in the power of God's *agapê*, but that this same *agapê* continues to uphold him all through his life. The immediate practical conclusion from this fact is that we shouldn't allow ourselves simply to drift into another day, but that we greet the new day as a gift of God's love, and that means as a wide open space for creative living in "the power of the resurrection," as Saint Paul calls it, or in the power of God's love for us, as we would put it in our present context.



Now, Psalm 4 continues on the same line and is an important practical contribution to our basic problem - how to live our daily life in God's *agapê* by praying the psalms. However, I have to warn you that Psalm 4 is bound to remain foreign to us as long as we don't read it carefully, referring again and again to the original Hebrew text to get the various shades of meaning. Psalm 4 is one of those psalms which are not sung at the high points of spiritual exaltation, but it begins "in the valley." It supposes the ordinary situation of man, who finds himself alone, in an inner anguish which is heightened by the skeptical, sophisticated attitude of those

around him. The psalm itself then lifts him up and establishes in him the "peace of Christ," as we call it, so that he is able to lie down and go to sleep. Psalm 4 is evidently an evening prayer, and it is used as that by the Western Church at Compline, the last prayer of the day.



The psalm opens with an invocation: "When I call, answer me, God of my justice." At the latter expression we hesitate: "God of my justice?" The translation of the Hebrew word *sedek* or *sedekah* by the term "justice" presents one of the greatest difficulties for us to a right understanding of what is meant by it in Hebrew. It has come to us through the Greek Septuagint and through the Latin Vulgate. To us it is always associated with the idea of retributive justice, with righteousness, and self-righteousness at that. The original Hebrew term is not a juridical one in our modern narrow sense, something corresponding to the requirements of the law of strict equity, but it belongs rather to the field of love, of compassion, of the *agapê*. To be good to the poor and to the underprivileged, the orphans and widows, is an essential manifestation of *sedek*. The meaning of this invocation at the beginning of Psalm 4 is, therefore, by no means the uttering of a claim: "Hurry up, God, fulfill my petition. You owe it to me in justice because I am so good, I keep your commandments and, at times, I do even more and give more into the collection than I have to." No, the "God of my justice" is rather the God who understands me, who has compassion for me and, therefore, is with me, who has drawn me into the range of his kindness. When I call him, he answers me. This does not necessarily mean he jumps immediately to my help, bringing about some drastic change for the better in my present need. It only asks for a "hearing," for an inner closeness; and this means that the anguish or anxiety of the psalmist is gone already and has given room to inner freedom, or has opened the wide spaces of confidence and hope: "From anguish you released me

into wide open spaces; grant me graciously to hear my prayer."

We have to stop for a moment at the word "prayer," which is the translation of the Hebrew *thephilla*. Again it is of utmost importance for us Gentiles that we don't allow our often narrow idea of prayer to serve as the equivalent of the original Jewish term. What I mean is this: to us, prayer usually means either our presenting God with our needs for the purpose of petitioning him for help, or it means an outpouring from the heart, an expression of our feelings (or emotion). For this kind of prayer the Jewish language uses other terms. The Hebrew word *thephilla* is derived from the root *phallal* which means "to judge," and the process "judging" is not considered first of all as pinning down the guilty for the purpose of punishment. It means rather - and this is the primary function of the judge in the Old Testament - to settle a quarrel, not by smoothing it over by a false compromise, but by bringing into the confusion of the accusing parties a new element from above, from the realm of the divine *sedekah* or from God's truth, so that this divine element may permeate man's entire being and enter into all the crannies of our consciousness and transform division into unity, bitterness into meekness, and hatred into love. I emphasize this point because it is the key to the understanding of Jewish worship, and thus of the worship of the Church or of the New Testament, which is the fulfillment of the Old. The Church will always be the New Israel, certainly "new" but still "Israel" (which means "fighter with God"). [See *Genesis 32.29*]

Prayer, in the sense of *thephilla* (the word used here), consists then in an ever repeated receiving of, and penetration by, divine truths which are given to us by God, that they may transform us through our openness to them and our cooperation with them. Only if we understand this essential character of Jewish as well as of Christian worship - that it means God's being present to us, to transform us through his saving power again and again, to restore and to enrich us by a life and a light that are not the product of our own nature in feelings and emotions and needs - can it ever be right to arrange for worship at certain hours of the day and at certain days within the course of the seasons and in set formulas, without waiting for the moment when people feel the urge to pray. However, such "prayer" would be quite superfluous, because ideas and feelings which rise from within don't need expression in words, and certainly not in words that are predetermined. Even feelings are often expressed better by silence. They can only be hindered or lim-



ited by words. The liturgy is not the expression of truth or thoughts or feelings that we have already, but the communication on the part of our heavenly Father of riches he wants to share with us. It is precisely the absence in us of the urge to pray which most clearly proves our need to receive this transformation in the power of God's word and of God's power. (See Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Genesis* [London, 1959] pp. 347-348.)

The *thephilla*, therefore, is a process, not a static entity. It runs through various stages, and the most basic of these stages is inner concentration, the establishing of the right intention. One has to seek one's depth. It is in this sense that I see the meaning of verse 3 of our psalm: "O men, how long will your hearts be closed, will you love what is futile and seek what is false?" One has to remember here that the meaning of "O men" is the translation of the Hebrew *bene ish* and not *bene adam*. The latter would mean man in general, as members of the human race, while the Hebrew *bene ish* is more specifically "men of renown," or "men of rank," as Father Dahood translates in the Anchor Bible. Their trouble is - and this situation has not changed since the days of the psalmist - that they feel superior to this whole business of prayer. They smile at the effort, the attitude of a man who addresses himself to God with the expectation of being heard and receiving help "from above." Their attitude exasperates the psalmist: How long will you continue to turn what is (my) glory into insult and mockery, while you keep on putting your trust in inanities (pagan idols) and lies (human fables and myths)?



Simply remembering this situation he finds all around him is an incentive to the psalmist to realize his own situation, and so he continues in verse 4: "It is the Lord who grants favors to those whom he loves: the Lord hears me whenever I call him." In the Hebrew text it is rather "Take heed!" or "You should know!" Yahweh sorts out the one who is devoted to him (in Hebrew *chasid*), the one who is at the same time the object as well as the reflection of God's *agapê*. The psalmist is fully conscious of this fact in his own case. He is sure that this relation with his God assures him of a hearing whenever he lifts up his voice to him, just as a child is sure that his mother will react to his cry. It is necessary for me to point out again that precisely because of this intimate union of God's *chesed* (*agapê*) with God's *chasid* (his chosen one or "darling"), the hearing of a cry on the part of Yahweh does not mean that Yahweh immediately and visibly "helps" his child. What makes the child happy and content is the certainty of his clinging to Yahweh as his Father. "The Lord hears whenever I call him" does not mean: I have only to ask him, and I get immediately what I want.



No, the necessary preparation for *thephilla* prayer is: "Fear him, do not sin; ponder on your bed and be still." The first step: "Fear him" stands for the Hebrew term *ragaz*, which means a violent inner emotion, an interior shake-up. The first thing that has to take place in the heart of the *bene ish* - the people of rank - is a kind of spiritual earthquake, an inner trembling (as in "Quakers" or "Shakers"), which shakes that foundation of their superiority feelings and their false security. We will perhaps be reminded of the "compunction of heart" which shook the Pharisees and Scribes at hearing the message of the killing of the Prince of Life (see Acts 2.37). It opens the hearts and introduces a basic willingness to change. Open your hearts to the thought of God's infinite majesty. Have the courage to confront the divine reality with the uncertainty and weakness of your own attitudes and deeds. This confrontation will make you realize the extent of your own shallowness, superficiality, light-mindedness and wantonness. The second step is to stop drifting along on the surface of life. Realize your responsibility, which cannot possibly be responsibility to yourself, but is to God as the only perfect judge of your actions. I remind you of what we said about the same Hebrew term as it

occurs in Psalm 1, not meaning sin in general but this specific fault of "rambling" along without depth, without direction, without anchor. This you should "ponder on your bed," that is, admit it when you are alone far from the influence of the public, in the hiddenness of your chamber, in the depth of your heart; "and be still" in the quiet of the night, when man is not torn in various directions of action but has the possibility of "dwelling with himself."

Out of this inner attitude of humble openness, responsibility and inner silence, true worship rises: "Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord." The translation of the sacrificial terminology of the Old Testament suffers very often from a lack of acquaintance with it on the part of the Gentile world. We tend to think of sacrifice as a total thing. The Hebrew term *zebach* that is used here does not mean "make justice your sacrifice," but offer *zebach*, a definite kind of sacrifice, which more often is called "peace-offering." These are meal offerings which end in the common eating of parts of the sacrificial animal by the group or family, as opposed to holocausts or total offerings at which the whole animal is burnt upon the altar. The peace-offerings celebrate the unity and well-being of all the members of the group, which is really the last aim of the entire Torah, namely justice.

The happy communion of a group in the sharing of the good things of life and in trust in Yahweh's eternal mercy brings to mind "the many," the *rabim*, whose acquaintance we have made in Psalm 3. "What can bring us happiness?" many say. Lift up the light of your face on us, O Lord." The prayer of the many is concerned only with material things, while *thephilla* prayer rises beyond this level to that of the manifestation, the becoming present of Yahweh's inner goodness that radiates from his "face," from the expression of his love for us. Yahweh's face is the Torah. To know it, to mull it over, to make it one's own by acting according to it, is the happiness of the *zadik*.

Verse 8 says it: "You have put into my heart a greater joy than they have from abundance of corn and new wine." The joy that the many are seeking outside, in their material circumstances, has been given to the psalmist in the heart, and this interior joy that is derived from the inner encounter with God's loving presence is infinitely greater than the joy of the harvest, which indeed is the climax of human joy in the realm of nature, or of this earth.

Now the inner process of the *thephilla* has reached its height. From the low valley of the call, through the dispute with "men

of rank," transcending the material expectations of the many, the psalmist has reached complete abandonment to God's love. Now he enters into the night. In antiquity night was considered a time when, under the protection of darkness, all devils, spirits as well as humans and beasts of prey, were loose. The psalmist enters it in complete peace: "I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." The first line could be paraphrased as meaning: I shall lie down in peace with all the people around me and I shall sleep, for you, Yahweh, protect me like a wall and fill me interiorly with trust, and give me "security all around." One could not state more emphatically and comprehensibly what peace means for the one who realizes the he is being loved by Yahweh.

As mentioned in the beginning, the Church uses this psalm as part of Compline, the prayer which one offers before retiring at night, and there is indeed no better way to give to the most humble occurrences of our daily life - and to go to bed is as universal and basic today as it was three thousand years ago - a depth of meaning which transforms the very weakness of our human condition into an act of worship.

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