

Psalm 4 - God thoughts

On your marks:

The Psalms are an amazing collection of poems, prayers and songs of praise and have been the staple diet of worship both for Jews as well as Christians for centuries. They give us words for all sorts of occasions and moods as we work out our faith in God in the rough and tumble of everyday life. Many children will never have come across this book and may be surprised to discover that, for example, as well as expressing thanks and delight in God, it is also OK to argue with God, express despair and depression, shout angrily about things that are wrong and even have doubts about God's love. All this is in the Psalms and a lot more. It is an important resource to help our children grow into a mature faith.

Get set:

Read through the psalm first before you work with your group. Look at different translations. The verses quoted in the outline below are from the CEV (Contemporary English Version). Any specific materials needed to step into this particular psalm are included in the instructions below. The outline includes: a key verse; a brief introduction; an idea for acting out the psalm; prompts to talk about the psalm; a craft idea; some new ways to retell the psalm; a suggestion for reflection on the psalm; and finally a focus for praying for others with this psalm.

Go!

Key verse: *Let your kindness, Lord, shine brightly on us (v. 6).*

Prayer is entering into a conversation with God. When we eavesdrop on David praying in this psalm, we also hear him talking to himself, as he questions his own feelings, reminds himself of what he already knows about God and wonders what is happening to him now. This is one of the ways that God uses our praying. As we make space to pause and think on God, God prompts our thoughts and moves us into new places of understanding, helping us to talk with ourselves about the things that matter. Rather than a voice 'out of the blue' answering our prayers, God speaks as a voice from within, opening up new possibilities. Psalm 4 is a good example of this, as David restates truths about God (vv. 1, 3, 8), asks questions (vv. 2, 6), gives advice (vv. 4, 5); and all this is alongside words of thanksgiving (vv. 1, 7) and trust (vv. 1, 6).

Act out the Psalm

Use the technique of 'sculpturing a Bible passage' to act out this Psalm. You will need at least one person for each verse. The idea is to turn the words of the psalm into a living sculpture in which each person decides on a mime and a final position that best illustrates the words in each verse. The eight or more individuals then take their positions in a line, left to right, to build up a living sculpture, verse by verse, each one ending in a final freeze frame for his or her verse, so that together they will express the whole psalm. Part of the fun and the learning in doing this is deciding on what mime and final position best suits each set of words and so it is good to talk about it together. Here are some suggestions for mimes for each verse:

Verse 1: point to the sky and then wrap arms around yourself; cover your head in your hands and shake your head and then release the hands wide in a gesture of freedom; kneel and reach out both hands in prayer (this being the final position).

Verse 2: shake your fist at 'people' around you; look down at something in your open hands with disgust and then point away towards something with disbelief (this last being the final position).

Verse 3: extend both hands towards the sky and then draw them in slowly and put come across your chest in a sign of love; bring hands together in a prayer position still close to your body (this being the final position).

Verse 4: point to people with urgency; then bring one hand up to your chin as if thinking (this being the final position).

Verse 5: bow your head low to the floor and then lift up your hands in worship (this being the final position).

Verse 6: drop your shoulders low and your head, shaking it with disbelief; suddenly straighten up and lift your head up to the sky beaming (this being the final position).

Verse 7: let your whole body 'smile' and move joyfully; mime eating grapes and drinking (this being the final position).

Verse 8: yawn delicately and then lie down and arrange yourself in a comfortable sleeping position peacefully (this being the final position).

Run the whole sequence through in order, with each actor then freezing on his or her final position until the whole psalm has been visualised in this way. The psalm ought to be accompanied by stringed instruments, so why not put on some peaceful guitar music to go alongside your drama?

Talk about the Psalm

David has been in a bad place (v. 1) but God has answered his prayers. However, this does not mean there is not more to pray about. David still feels 'got that' by others and he is angry about the fact that many still worship idols (v. 2).

Once again here is a pattern for honesty in our praying. By bringing out into the open what is on our hearts, God is not offended. On the contrary, it is God's way of helping us.

Do we really say how we feel when we pray? Or do we just use fine religious words?

David is confident of God's love for him and it makes him feel pity for those who do not know God. He longs that they too will discover God for themselves (vv. 3-5).

Is this sort of evangelistic zeal part of our praying for others?

David knows that answered prayer does not mean everything will then be rosy. He knows that there are people who will ask where the blessings are that we claim God gives. But rather than give up, he prays even more earnestly and remembers then how God has been good to him, bringing him harvest-like joy and a good night's rest. Maybe thinking honestly about what some have said has helped him to count his blessings and remember how God has answered him in the past.

Are we afraid to face uncomfortable questions about God in prayer? Unless we do face these questions, maybe will never find our way towards answers.

Craft the Psalm

I wonder what this psalm would look like if it were to be converted into colours. Here's another way of working with psalms. The moods within the psalm - doubts, questions and moments of elation - all lend themselves to being expressed by different colours within the one psalm. Try to capture this in a picture that you make of Psalm 4.

You will first need to decide on a shape for the psalm, within which you can put your colours. Maybe the shape of a candle, a perfume bottle, a rainbow, a praying hand or particular geometric shape?

Next decide where in the shape you will start turning the psalm's words into colour and where you'll end up.

Finally decide on what colours you will use; for example, what best expresses the strong confidence and gratitude of verse 1? What colours match the disappointment and anger of verse 2? What colours go with the confidence in verse 3? What should express the urgent evangelism and zeal of verses 4 and 5? Verse 6 is a question and then an answer, so how can that be caught in colour? Verse 7 is full of joyous celebration, while verse 8 brings the psalm to rest and quietness.

Release your artistic side to show your feelings about this psalm.

Retell the Psalm

1. Here is a version for younger children to work with:

After each line below there is a chorus for everyone to say together, namely:

Here I am, I'm praying, Lord; hear my prayer.

(N.B. Begin with this line also.)

1. You answer prayer; it's happened before...
2. No one cares about me and no one bothers with you...
3. I know you love me and you keep me safe...
4. I wish others knew you and stopped doing wrong...

5. Goodness comes from you; it's like a great celebration...
 6. I need not fear and can sleep in peace...
2. And here is a version to use with older or mixed age groups:

Strong, strong, strong -You're my God
Stress, stress, stress - You set me free
No respect - but you still care
So disloyal -but you're loyal to me

Safe, safe, safe - you're my God
Listen, listen, listen - you hear always
Tremble, tremble, tremble - think again
Change, change, change - change your ways

Good, good, good - God is good
Great, great, great - God shines bright
Joy, Joy, Joy - is my life with him
Peace, peace, peace - I can sleep at night

Reflect on the Psalm

On a base cloth in the standard outline for each of the psalms (the shape of an instrument such as a harp) place the following 3-D objects or pictures prayerfully and slowly, as each verse of the psalm is read.

Verse 1: put down a chain which is joined by a padlock; pause and then undo the padlock with a key and release the chain.

Verse 2: put down a loyalty card and then cut it in two, moving it with disdain slightly to one side.

Verse 3: put down a ring symbolising commitment and loyalty from God to us.

Verses 4 and 5: put down a heart shape.

Verse 6: put down a tea-light and light it

Verse 7: put down some grapes and bread.

Verse 8: put down a small piece of cloth and a tiny pillow (for example, from a doll's house) to represent a bed and sleep.

Pray for others with this Psalm

Pray for all those who find it hard to make time to pray; whose lives are so busy that they become stressed and anxious.

