

1. Intro – when faith in God isn't 'working'...

Have you had times when it feels as though faith in God isn't working? I certainly have. In fact, if you haven't, then you've probably only been a Christian for a couple of weeks! It can be prayers that don't ever seem to be answered, problems or habits we can't overcome, even just missing a sense that God is with us. Psalm 4 - story about this...

2. The Psalmist's story...

Sitting in the dark, on the floor of his limewashed house, Eliam gazes up through the window slit at the full moon, high in the sky. He cannot sleep. His mind is busy, turning over the events of the day just gone and the worries of the day ahead. Anxiety feels tight in his chest.

He looks across at the bed where his wife Rizpah is sleeping. Their curly-headed little ones are cuddled up against her, taking up all the room. He remembers the worry in Rizpah's eyes when she saw the small amount of grain he brought home tonight and he caught her serving less to herself and more to the children when she thought he wasn't looking. It hurts his heart that she should have to do so, especially with another little one on the way.

In his mind he calls out to Yahweh, God of Israel, God of his fathers.

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress, be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

Eliam remembers the stories his mother taught him about Yahweh's faithfulness to Israel – the escape through the Red Sea, water from the rock, manna in the desert., He remembers his own stories - the terror when his first son's birth went awry and how Yahweh brought both Rizpah and the baby through with their lives. But now this endless drought! Three seasons it's been. Less and less grain available all the time! Grapes wrinkled on the vine. Even the olive trees are wilting.

And less and less work to be had for a field worker like Eliam. He'd had a troubling conversation with Hananiah the landowner today. As he handed Eliam the day's wages, Eliam had muttered as usual, Yahweh bless you. Hananiah had given a hard humourless laugh.

Yahweh! Where's Yahweh in this drought? He's been no good to us at all! All those promises yet no rain, no decent harvest! I'm going to try Baal and Ashtoreth from now

on. At least that's a straightforward transaction – provide the offerings and they owe you the result. None of this relying on faithfulness from a god who doesn't answer!

Yet relying on faithfulness is all Eliam knows how to do. Who would trade that for bargaining with a lifeless carving? How did Hananiah dare to turn his back on Yahweh?

How long, you people, shall my honour suffer shame?

How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? *Selah*

³ But know that the LORD has set apart the faithful for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.

Doesn't he? Yahweh I am yours, I am faithful to you – please hear me!

Eliam sits in silence a while longer. And then right there, on the dirt floor, he senses something shift within him and all at once he is certain. No, this is not a time to turn away, to give up, to sin against Yahweh with unfaithfulness! Hananiah would be better offering the right sacrifices to the right god, and trusting in him.

⁴ When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

⁵ Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.

After all, being in relationship with the God of Israel is not about choosing the god with the best success rate, who can provide all the outcomes, who is best at serving human beings! Somehow Eliam knows that is all the wrong way round. In fact, when it all comes down, he would rather have Yahweh than all the grain and new wine in the world!

⁶ There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!"

⁷ You have put gladness in my heart

more than when their grain and wine abound.

Somehow, crazy as it seems, given everything around him, Eliam feels glad. He feels glad to belong to God. His chest relaxes. Yes, he is helpless, he is utterly dependant on Yahweh, and with Yahweh he will stay, whether things are good or not. He still sees, he will still answer.

Eliam stands up, stretches then crawls over to the bed and eases himself carefully in amongst his family. He places his hand on Rizpah's round belly, he closes his eyes and gives in at last to sleep.

3. Looking deeper...

Likely story of Ps 4. Characters imagined but scenario - OT scholars. Closer look...

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress,
be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

Call to God - hear /answer! Not specific request, help/ contact. Memory of past help

How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?

How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?

No longer speaking to God –accusing those around –more directed to others than God.

‘People’ = implies rank / influence / leaders. More and more - turning away from God - seeking other ways to get what they want – relief. The Canaanite gods - sole job = look after harvest /weather. Request - offering. God not any help - what got to lose?

Psalmist tempted? – likely has a family to feed too.

But knows - no hope in idols.

NirV - *‘How long will you love what will certainly fail you? How long will you pray to statues of gods?’* Far from nothing to lose, - brings shame to psalmist on God’s behalf - takes honour from the only one who deserves it.

⁴When you are disturbed, do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

⁵Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the LORD.

Psalmist gives deserters advice. Remain faithful. Don’t let distress take you away from God but hold fast. Take the time to work through it with God, as you lie awake at night. Above all, cling to him, put your trust in him, this is when faith grows strong!

⁶There are many who say, “O that we might see some good!

Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!”

Other versions better - translate as a question –

⁶There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?

⁶Many people say, “Who will show us better times?”

⁶LORD, many are asking, “Who will make us successful?”

When faith in God does not seem to be working - tempting to look for something else.

Tide turning in his community, those in power have given up on God’s goodness /faithfulness. Perhaps new gods even seem to be working! Yet here is where the psalmist arrives –

⁷You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

Faith in God actually strengthened /deepened. God above outcomes everyone running after – good seasons / abundant crops. Glad even doing without these things. Knows peace of God, allows him to sleep - trust is complete. Sleep = worship.

4. Gifts from Psalm 4 -

Some gifts for us –helped me, maybe one /more = gift for you this morning...

This crisis happens in the Bible!

Very reassuring to know - Bible itself acknowledges that 'faith not working for me' crisis is a thing. Not just here, there are other psalms / books – look at Job.

I can know when I go through feelings, - not the first!

Not new evidence God doesn't exist / uninterested in me. Just Ups-downs - following Jesus in broken world.

Seeing people turn away has an effect and we can choose what it is

One way / other, seeing other people turn away has an effect. It prompts us to choose again. It may cause us, like psalmist, to double faith / determination to hold fast to God.

It may cause us to doubt, to feel uncertain. This can go two ways – we can let the anxiety grow unexamined and maybe start to drift away because facing this anxiety is uncomfortable. or we can allow worries to send us back to the Bible and prayer to examine what we believe and why more carefully. If we do this, we can still emerge more deeply aligned with God. Oswald Chambers – *“Always think through what you have easily believed. Your position is not really yours until you make it yours through suffering and study”*. The psalmist doubles down - chooses to make his trust really his.

God more often changes us than our circumstances

It doesn't seem anything spectacular here – not visible. Outward circumstances don't shift, no change in fortune, no vision / message. Simply change in psalmist himself, change brought about by bringing heart to God / asking for help. Also don't know how long process was or how often cycled. But change by the end is profound / deep. Myself - when open heart honestly to God / ask him to change emotions/ attitude/ desires, always steps in / does so.

Crisis can make our faith stronger

Very crisis that causes anxiety is the one which makes the psalmist stronger, if we choose. What would happen if year after year, the crops were abundant, and the stores were full? Would the Israelites continue to be grateful to God every year, to acknowledge his grace to them or would they begin to simply assume that all would be well, maybe even start to believe that they themselves were wonderful farmers and

didn't need God's help? When things don't 'work', our faith is stripped down and our trust is tested. We become stronger by using our faith. James Bryan Smith – (*Doubt is a gift of God to move us from trusting ourselves to trusting him.*)” It exposes our tendency to rely on ourselves. Yep – can testify to this one too.

The return of joy comes from God.

Really significant – ‘*You have put gladness in my heart*’. The gladness is put there by God!! Joy, gladness is never something we are left to drum up for ourselves. No-one ever felt real gladness because they thought they should! Our job is to ask, and to wait. And, maybe when we least expect it, joy will return. I have experienced this! Another psalm 51 – “Restore to me the joy of your salvation’ – speaks to God's ability to provide joy.

5. Reflecting / Responding...

So – the psalmist has yet to see the answers he would like, but he is determined to believe anyway. He lives out Ps 27 - *Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*

Where are you in your relationship with God right now?

Experiencing his joy and gladness?

Experiencing doubt /uncertainty, others turn away /feeling that faith isn't working for you?

Are you waiting, waiting?

Are you yet to really trust God no matter what?

Remember we are richer by far than the writer of Psalm 4! Not only promises of God, but demonstration of his love / power / forgiveness in his son Jesus! Presence of his Spirit in our lives every day to encourage / guide us! We have everything we need for the journey if we will just take hold of it.

Will you hold fast to God? Will you trust when things aren't working? Will you ask for his joy and wait to receive it? I pray that you will.