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# Psalm 4

## Meditation 1—Psalm 4.<sup>1-6</sup>

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### Invocation

<sup>1</sup>When I appeal to you, answer me,  
    Oh, my God, the one who vindicates me.  
Make me equal to the challenge before me.  
    Have compassion, and give heed to my plea.

### Disputation

<sup>2</sup>How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?  
    How long will you love falsehood  
        and seek after deception?  
<sup>3</sup>Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;  
    it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him.  
<sup>4</sup>Be agitated, but don't behave badly.  
    Examine yourselves in private.  
        Just be calm!  
<sup>5</sup>Offer approved sacrifices,  
    and put your trust in YHWH.

<sup>6</sup>Many might respond, “Who will show us any good?”  
    Oh, cast the light of Your presence upon us, YHWH! (author's translation).

Though difficult and susceptible to highly subjective conclusions, as one reads the Psalms one must be attuned to the possibility that any individual psalm might contain more than one voice and address more than one audience. As indicated in my meditations on Psalm 2, I believe that psalm to be an example of a psalm with multiple voices.<sup>1</sup> Identifying the various voices can assist the reader in their understanding and interpretation of many a psalm.

In my view, Psalm 4 represents an example of a psalm with multiple *audiences*. In verse 1, the Psalmist addresses God, appealing to Him for help in the face of challenging circumstances, the nature of which we only come to know in the following verses. We continue to hear the Psalmist's voice in verses 2-6.

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<sup>1</sup> I identify these voices as follows:

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|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> voice (vss. 1-2) | temple patrons/ temple priest or priests  |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> voice (vs. 3)    | rebellious nations as quoted by a group of priests or temple patrons  |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> voice (vss. 4-5) | temple patrons/ temple priest or priests  |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> voice (vs. 6)    | God, Himself, as quoted by a patron/ temple priest  |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> voice (vs. 7a)   | the chosen king or a priest representing him  |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> voice (vs. 7b-9) | God, Himself, as rehearsed by the king  |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> voice (10-12)    | temple patrons/ temple priest or priests (it should be noted that this 7 <sup>th</sup> voice addresses the rebellious nations directly) |

However, here, the audience is no longer God, but those who speak lies in an attempt to smear the Psalmist's reputation for their own ends. In verses 7-8, the Psalmist returns to addressing God directly.

In this meditation, we will focus on the critique and counsel that the Psalmist offers his detractors in verses 2-6. As critic, he makes known his detractors' reliance on lies and deception to besmirch his reputation (vs. 2). No doubt, the Psalmist is aware that he is not perfect and without fault. He is likely aware of very real character flaws that weaken him and his ability to influence and serve. But, even in these circumstances, the Psalmist's detractors may be wrong in attacking him. However, as is so often the case, those who seek to besmirch another's reputation seldom confine themselves to what is "true." Their zeal to destroy leads them to invention—the invention of additional and questionable flaws. They come to trust in lies and deceptions to tear down another and build themselves up.

As counsel/ warning, the Psalmist asserts that because he has shown fidelity to God, God will show fidelity to him.

"Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;  
it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him."

Attacking the Psalmist is tantamount to attacking God. God will respond in defense of the Psalmist and in opposition to his detractors. They would do well, then, to lay off.

The Psalmist understands that laying off may be galling for his detractors. But, he counsels, it is better to be a little vexed than be engaged in sin against the Psalmist and, through his association with God, God, Himself (vs. 4a). The Psalmist's detractors would do well to sincerely take a long, hard, and honest look at themselves (vs. 4b). Is it possible that their chaffing at the Psalmist actually reflects a private displeasure that they have with themselves? How often unhappiness with others is reflective of one's unhappiness with oneself! How often is focus on real or imagined faults of others really an attempt to forget or hide one's own troubling faults!

The Psalmist kindly reminds his detractors that no amount of focus on the real or imagined faults of others can ever truly satisfy internal self-doubts and self-criticism. Self-confidence can never come by tearing others down. In the face of obvious and inevitable personal weakness, they must learn to trust and turn to God. Only through honest introspection combined with trust in and reliance upon God, His strength, and His compassion will they find the self-confidence for which they so ardently long.

This is a little of what I find in the Psalmist's counsel/ warning to his detractors. It is counsel we all can and should live by. It is no use trying to feel good about ourselves by tearing others down. It is no use using lies and deceptions about others to hide the lies and deceptions we tell ourselves about ourselves. Personal introspection combined with trust in God and His fidelity to us is essential if we are to enjoy, honor, and serve others. True confidence, self-worth, and the capacity to be a blessing in the lives of others comes only through God and our reliance on Him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition: may 13, 2024*)

## Meditation 2—Psalm 4.<sup>1-6</sup>

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### Invocation

<sup>1</sup>When I appeal to you, answer me,  
    Oh, my God, the one who vindicates me.  
Make me equal to the challenge before me.  
    Have compassion, and give heed to my plea.

### Disputation

<sup>2</sup>How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?  
    How long will you love falsehood  
        and seek after deception?  
<sup>3</sup>Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;  
    it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him.  
<sup>4</sup>Be agitated, but don't behave badly.  
    Examine yourselves in private.  
        Just be calm!  
<sup>5</sup>Offer approved sacrifices,  
    and put your trust in YHWH.

<sup>6</sup>**Many might respond, “Who will show us any good?”**  
    Oh, cast the light of Your presence upon us, YHWH! (author's translation).

In our first meditation on Psalm 4.<sup>1-6</sup>, we suggested that the Psalmist addresses two different audiences. In verse 1, he addresses God and pleads for his help. In verses 2-6, the Psalmist addresses those who seek to smear his reputation. Here, he first challenges their smears, warning them that in attacking him, they are really in conflict with God (vs. 2-3). Then, in the spirit of goodwill, he offers them counsel (vs. 4-5). The Psalmist does not question their right to anger and frustration. They can be angry and frustrated if they want. But he counsels them to self-control and the avoidance of bad behavior as a result of frustration over others. He counsels them to engage in silent and honest self-examination. In addition to this “will worship,”<sup>1</sup> they should seek to reinvigorate their relationship with God.

This brings us to verse 6. This verse has and does cause major interpretive problems. Nearly all readers and interpreters feel its abruptness. The following represents my reading, but I am in no way dogmatic about it. Other reasonable solutions to this difficult verse exist and should be considered.

We begin with the first line.

“Many might respond, ‘Who will show us any good?’”

Here we continue to hear the Psalmist’s voice and his continuing disputation with his detractors. He has warned them about attacking him and has suggested that they look inward for truths about themselves. He has encouraged them to trust God. Now, he anticipates their objection. Perhaps he has even heard

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<sup>1</sup> See Colossians 2.<sup>23</sup>

murmurings of their objection.

The Psalmist detractors have no confidence that God will act in their life and respond to their attempts at self-improvement. They have no confidence that trusting God will make things any clearer or better for them—hence their reliance on themselves and personal attacks on others. The respondents’ skepticism—whether anticipated or expressed—might remind us of Jesus’ encounter with Pilate. After meeting with Jesus’ accusers, Pilate has additional questions for him. Is he a king? for example. Jesus answers that he is, indeed, a king, but not the kind of king this world knows. Those with discernment know who he is and what kind of king he truly is. To this Pilate responds,

“What is truth?”<sup>2</sup>

Like the Psalmist’s detractors in our reading of Psalm 4, Pilate is unsure, even agnostic about his, or anyone’s ability to discern “truth,” or things as they really are. This agnosticism when it comes to God’s engagement with people goes a long way in explaining the comfort with which the Psalmist’s enemies use lies and deceptions. This is just the sort of nihilism that exists in American society today and that has in the past few years allowed its political class to create their “alternative facts” so divorced from the realities of life and that do such harm to American society.

The skeptical response of the Psalmist’s detractors also brings to mind a tiny and well-known snippet of dialogue that passed between Nephi and his brothers, Laman and Lemuel. Nephi, observing their confusion and debate concerning the nature and meaning of their father, Lehi’s, dream, asked them “the cause their disputation.”

“And they said: ‘Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree, and also concerning the Gentiles.’

And I said unto them: ‘Have ye inquired of the Lord?’

And they said unto me: ‘We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us.’”<sup>3</sup>

Laman and Lemuel certainly questioned God’s ability or willingness to answer prayer and communicate meaning and understanding to them. But their response reveals an even more deeply rooted doubt. They questioned God’s ability or willingness to involve himself in their lives and engage with them for good.

In the Psalmist’s detractors’ “Who will show us any good?” I hear this same faithlessness, this same disbelief in God’s willing and beneficial influence in human affairs. I hear the same skepticism toward “truth claims” and thus the justification for all alternative facts they might use in their defamation of the Psalmist.

Now, the Psalmists, whoever they were, were no strangers to confusion over God and His dealings with them. They are honest and bold about this, not hesitating to question God. But, in the end, they remain firm in the belief that “God is faithful”<sup>4</sup> and participatory in human affairs—private and global.

In the next meditation, we will hear the Psalmist’s response to his accusers skepticism about God’s engagement with them. We will also hear him express his faith in God as he calls upon God to enlighten and engage both him and his detractors.

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<sup>2</sup> John 18.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Nephi 15.<sup>2-9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Corinthians 10.<sup>13</sup>

“Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: may 13, 2024)*

## Meditation 3—Psalm 4.<sup>1–6</sup>

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### Invocation

<sup>1</sup>When I appeal to you, answer me,  
    Oh, my God, the one who vindicates me.  
Make me equal to the challenge before me.  
    Have compassion, and give heed to my plea.

### Disputation

<sup>2</sup>How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?  
    How long will you love falsehood  
        and seek after deception?

<sup>3</sup>Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;  
    it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him.

<sup>4</sup>Be agitated, but don't behave badly.  
    Examine yourselves in private.  
        Just be calm!

<sup>5</sup>Offer approved sacrifices,  
    and put your trust in YHWH.

<sup>6</sup>Many might respond, “Who will show us any good?”  
**Oh, cast the light of Your presence upon us, YHWH!** (author's translation).

After pleading with God that He come to his aid against those who were smearing his reputation, the Psalmist directly addresses his detractors. He offers them several bits of counsel but his last and most important bit of counsel was, “put your trust in YHWH.”

In response to the Psalmist's counsel, we hear,

“Who will show us any good?”

It is not impossible or even unreasonable to hear in this line a question asked by an assembly of worshippers gathered at the temple. I accept the generally accepted assumption that this and many other Psalms were used in public worship at the temple. Some psalms may have been written primarily for such use in public temple worship. Some psalms' use in the temple was secondary to their original purposes and settings—purposes and settings that are often obscure. I take whatever use this Psalm might have had in Israel's temple worship as secondary to an original private experience.

I find the primary context of this psalm to be located in an individual's real-life experience. The original or primary context of this psalm involved a real (perhaps ritualistic?) attack upon someone's character (vs. 2). Its context is a real-life plea for help, a real defense that took the form of disputation, real counsel offered to the attackers, and the refusal of attackers to accept the counsel offered (vss. 2–6).

Those who were engaged in the smear campaign against the Psalmist responded to his counsel with the question, “Who will show us any good?”

As was so often the case in Nephi's relationship with his brothers, Laman and Lemuel, and the many admonitions he gave them, the Psalmist is confronted with the faithless doubt of his detractors. They are not inclined to take his advice. They are particularly doubtful about God's ability or willingness to engage with them in any meaningful way.

In Nephi's experiences with his brothers' doubt, Nephi informs us that he "was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts."<sup>1</sup> In the face of such stubborn hardness, one sometimes feels at a loss—a loss of words and a loss of explanations. One knows only to turn to God and plead for his intervention. This, it seems to me, is what we hear in the Psalmist's,

"Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!"

Now, we could read this line as a plea that the Psalmist's detractor's offer after confessing their skepticism. It is nice to think that at the very least the Psalmist was successful in convincing them to "try the experiment" (see Al. 34.<sup>4</sup>) that he proposed in verse 5. However, nowhere in the Psalter is there a report of an enemy voluntarily yielding to God and seeking repentance.

I am inclined, rather, to hear the Psalmist's voice in this line. In his "us," I hear the Psalmist pray as if he were his detractors. I hear him pray the prayer that he wishes/hopes the skeptics might take up. In this, the Psalmist plays the role of a kind of advocate for them. This sort of intercessory prayer is found elsewhere. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, often offers such prayers. Jeremiah 14.<sup>19-22</sup> offers one such example. Hear, Jeremiah prays,

"Hast thou utterly rejected Judah?  
Hath thy soul loathed Zion?  
Why hast thou smitten us,  
and there is no healing for us?  
We looked for peace, and there is no good;  
and for the time of healing, and behold trouble!  
We acknowledge, O LORD, our wickedness,  
and the iniquity of our fathers:  
for we have sinned against thee.  
Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake,  
do not disgrace the throne of thy glory:  
remember, break not thy covenant with us."

It should be clear that Jeremiah's "we," and "us" and "our" are his words. But he is speaking for his people, as if he were them. He is praying as he wishes they would pray. He is undoubtedly hopeful that his intercessory prayer will produce a positive response from both the nation and its God. He would be disappointed on both counts. The people refused to repent, and God rebuffed Jeremiah's attempt to play intercessor between people and God.

"Though Moses and Samuel stood before me,  
yet my mind could not be toward this people:  
cast them out of my sight,  
and let them go forth."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Nephi 15.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jereremiah 15.<sup>1</sup>

This back and forth between Jeremiah and God demonstrates the intercessory nature of Jeremiah's prayer.

In offering his own intercessory prayer in 6b, the Psalmist seems to have invoked the spirit found in the great high priestly blessing found in Numbers.

"The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:  
The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:  
The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."<sup>3</sup>

The Psalmist believes that God acts in people's lives. In this instance, he believes that his detractors could discern his innocence in whatever charge they have brought against him rather than rely on lies or "alternative facts." He believes that his detractors could engage in self-reflection and, with God's help, discern their true selves and how they could find a sense of personal worth and value in the eyes of God. Though his detractors doubt his assertions, he does not give up on them. More importantly, he does not give up on God's willingness and ability to engage in individuals' lives. Turning advocate for those who prosecute him, the Psalmist prays as he wishes and hopes they might do for that enlightenment which comes only and most powerfully from God Himself.

Thus, in the Psalmist's plea that God "cast the light of your presence upon us," the Psalmist acts the part of not only advocate but evangelist. Through his plea, he preaches good news. He concludes his testimony of the good news about God in his confession found in the final two verses of this psalm. It is to those two verses that we turn in the next meditation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 13, 2024)

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 6.<sup>24-26</sup>

## Meditation 4—Psalm 4.<sup>7-8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>You bring me a deep-rooted joy,  
a joy greater than that induced by an abundant grain harvest or supply of new wine.

<sup>8</sup>Completely at peace, I will lie down and fall fast asleep;  
for only You, YHWH, allow me to rest securely (author's translation).

In this psalm we have seen that the Psalmist is under attack, his reputation smeared by accusers. He defends himself against their attacks and charitably offers them godly counsel. They doubt the truth and efficacy of his counsel. But their doubt does not cause the Psalmist to loose heart or faith in God. His accusers' doubt, rather, leads him to take up the mantle of advocate and to pray in their behalf, or offer a prayer that he wishes/ hopes they might offer.

“Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!”

But the Psalmist does not stop there. Turning his face away from his doubtful accusers and toward God, the Psalmist offers a prayer. This prayer is, however, more than praise and thanks directed at God. It is additional affirming testimony directed at his doubtful accusers.

In a day when food is almost incomprehensibly available on row after row of shelves in thousands upon thousands of grocery stores; when meals are ready to eat right out of pre-packaged containers; when food is handed to us through fast food windows or by waiters and waitresses in restaurants, we may find it difficult to appreciate the sentiment the Psalmist expresses when he testifies,

“You bring me a deep-rooted joy,  
a joy greater than that induced by an abundant grain harvest or supply of new wine.”

So, this testimony requires us to use our imagination to recall the past. Imagine that there are no grocery stores, or food preparation factories or restaurants. Imagine that all your food comes from your own and a few neighbor's fields. Imagine, next, that it is harvest time. Imagine that what and even whether you eat in November and December and January and February and March depends on the quality of the harvest. Harvest time truly is a matter of health or sickness, life or death—as it is today, of course, though our distance from the process and our easy access to food makes us feel safe from the realities of food insecurity and its ultimate danger: starvation.

Imagine, then, how happy and how relieved and how secure you feel when the harvest comes in in sufficient quantities and qualities that you are assured of food security necessary to survival. Imagine the joy of knowing that you can survive another winter.

Maybe you can consider the relief you felt in, say, the spring and early summer of 2020 when you found enough food on shelves emptied because of COVID 19 to carry you through the week. Or, maybe you can recall the relief you felt when you finally found the baby formula that had previously been near impossible to obtain. These modern examples can, at least, approximate the feelings of relief that ancient agrarian societies felt when harvests came in plentiful—of course, there are still parts of the world, to the western world's shame, where people live in such uncertainty, experience food shortage, and die of starvation.

It is the Psalmist's testimony that the relief and joy and security that God brings into life is even greater

than the relief and joy and security of a plentiful harvest. Indeed, there is no security like the security God brings into the life of one who chooses to let Him enter the sacred spaces of their soul. I don't know about you, but the Psalmist's testimony, born through personal prayer, greatly increases my yearning for God. It makes me want to partake of Him. Be filled with and by Him. He is, after all, as He, Himself, said,

"that bread of life.... This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever..."<sup>1</sup>

Surely the Psalmist discovered what Lehi and Nephi later discovered: that God's loving presence is "most sweet above all,"<sup>2</sup> "precious above all,"<sup>3</sup> and "desirable above all."<sup>4</sup> He discovered what Paul later discovered: that "in all things he [has] the preeminence."<sup>5</sup> Yes, the Psalmist discovered what Jesus later asserted: that there is "one pearl of great price."<sup>6</sup> that is to be valued above all, and one kingdom for which we should seek above any other.

"Therefore take no thought, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or, 'What shall we drink?' or, 'Wherewithal shall we be clothed?' (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."<sup>7</sup>

Here's hoping that the Psalmist's detractors, heard his witness, accepted his witness, and lived his witness in their own lives. Here's hoping, too, that we hear, accept, and live his witness that God brings the greatest joys and the greatest securities this world has known or can know.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 13, 2024)

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<sup>1</sup> See John 6.<sup>48-51</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 1 Nephi 8.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 1 Nephi 11.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> 1 Nephi 8.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 1.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 13.<sup>45-46</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6.<sup>31-33</sup>

## Meditation 5—Psalm 4.<sup>7-8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>You bring me a deep-rooted joy,  
a joy greater than that induced by an abundant grain harvest or supply of new wine.

<sup>8</sup>Completely at peace, I will lie down and fall fast asleep;  
for only You, YHWH, allow me to rest securely (author's translation).

Psalm 4 concludes with more of the Psalmist's continuing witness about God and the wisdom in putting one's faith in Him. His witness, borne ages ago to those who sought to demean him and smear his reputation, has entered the ears of generation after generation for thousands of years until, finally, it has reached our ears. How thankful we are for the Psalmist's witness of God and his example of enduring faith in God!

We have all experienced sleepless nights due to uncertainty and worry. So, the Psalmist's witness that in God we can overcome the dread of uncertainty and worry is welcome news—not that life is carefree, but that God gives us strength and comfort to handle life's cares and find peaceful sleep even in the midst of them. In the previous lines, the Psalmist had us consider the security that comes with an abundant harvest. We might, then, think of the peaceful sleep that the Psalmist envisions as that which the ancient villagers had as a consequence of an abundant harvest and the knowledge that there would be enough food for their needs.

But the sleep of which the Psalmist speaks here seems specific to this entire Psalm and relates to the Psalmist's experience of being under attack by those who would demean and smear his reputation. Indeed, it seems specific to the series of laments found in Psalms 3-7, which we read as if they address the same trial brought on by accusation.

In this reading, we understand the Psalmist to be agitated by his enemy's assault. His agitation has caused sleepless nights. He comes to the sacred temple precincts with the intent of spending the night in prayer and supplication—some refer to this nocturnal stay in the temple as "incubation." We hear this nighttime supplication throughout Psalms 3-7.<sup>1</sup> But there comes a time when the Psalmist senses that God has heard his prayers and will come to his aid.

Perhaps this assurance comes through the quiet and private whisper of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it comes through priestly oracle. Perhaps it comes through his confidence in ordinance and ritual. However it comes, it leaves the Psalmist in such peace that he can sleep peacefully. He sleeps peacefully in the knowledge that when morning breaks, the Lord will provide the defense that the Psalmist so desperately needs in the face of his enemy's sustained assault.

Daily life can sometimes feel like an assault. Worries of all sorts assault our senses. We worry about our families. We worry about our health. We worry about our finances. We worry about tomorrow. All these, and more worrying assaults can weaken our confidence that we possess the wherewithal to endure and even surmount the challenges that we face. They can weaken our sense of personal capability and worth. And, of course, Satan, the ultimate adversary and accuser, is often there to magnify feelings of discouragement, incapability, and worthlessness.

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<sup>1</sup> See 3.<sup>5</sup>, 5.<sup>3</sup>, and 6.<sup>6</sup>. See, too, our first introductory meditation for Psalm 3.

It is the Psalmist's witness that at such times, we must go in search of God. We must go wherever it is we think we will find Him, lay our worries before Him, and put our faith and confidence in not only His power to help, but in His absolute willingness and pleasure in being present in our lives and act as our help and stay. In seeking and knocking and asking, we will find Him, Hear him, and experience the peace that only He can bring. We will find peace such that we can go to bed and rest peacefully knowing that God will be with us at morning's first light and accompany us throughout the challenges that come in the light of every new day.

With this in mind, the words of Lamentations come to mind. We end this meditation with them.

"This I recall to my mind,  
therefore have I hope.  
It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed,  
because his compassions fail not.  
They are new every morning:  
great is thy faithfulness."<sup>2</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 13, 2024)

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<sup>2</sup> Lamentations 3.<sup>21-23</sup>