

Praying through Perplexing Providence
Hope in Hesed

Psalm 44

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To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah.

44 *O God, we have heard with our ears,
our fathers have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:*

² *you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;*

³ *for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm save them,
but your right hand and your arm,
and the light of your face,
for you delighted in them.*

⁴ *You are my King, O God;
ordain salvation for Jacob!*

⁵ *Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down those who rise up against us.*

⁶ *For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.*

⁷ *But you have saved us from our foes
and have put to shame those who hate us.*

⁸ *In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah*

⁹ *But you have rejected us and disgraced us
and have not gone out with our armies.*

¹⁰ *You have made us turn back from the foe,
and those who hate us have gotten spoil.*

¹¹ *You have made us like sheep for slaughter
and have scattered us among the nations.*

¹² *You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.*

¹³ *You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,*

the derision and scorn of those around us.
*14 You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.*
*15 All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face*
*16 at the sound of the taunter and reviler,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.*
*17 All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant.*
*18 Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way;*
*19 yet you have broken us in the place of jackals
and covered us with the shadow of death.*
*20 If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
21 would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.*
*22 Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*
*23 Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!*
*24 Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?*
*25 For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.*
*26 Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

God's Good Providence Orders Everything, But . . .

We have some good songs about our confidence in God's providence. Last week, Bruce Fiol referenced one of these: "He's got the whole world in His hands." Another is "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." But if we're honest, there are times in our lives personally or in the lives of God's people around the world when the confident assertions of our joyful songs are rocked, violently shaken by the real experiences of life. It reminds me of one of my favorite movies, *Shadowlands*, based on the real-life relationship between C.S. Lewis and his wife, Joy Davidman Lewis. Joy was dying of cancer when she and Jack Lewis were married.

Her cancer went into remission and they enjoyed about a year and a half cancer-free together before the cancer returned and claimed her life in 1960, at the age of 45.

C.S. Lewis' marriage was a trial for him for a number of reasons. Not only did it take Joy nearly dying of cancer to cause him to see how much he loved her, and not only did he soon lose her to cancer, but Joy had been divorced from an abusive alcoholic husband, and their marriage caused a scandal among some of Lewis' friends, including JRR Tolkien, who strongly objected to their relationship.

In the movie, *Shadowlands*, after Joy dies, C.S. Lewis goes into deep grief, something which is powerfully explored in his great book, *A Grief Observed*, a book so deeply personal and revealing that he had it published under a pseudonym during his life.

In the movie, Anthony Hopkins plays C.S. Lewis brilliantly, and he has a conversation with his brother, Warnie, at their desks, and Lewis admits, "I'm so afraid... of never seeing her again. Of thinking that suffering is just suffering after all. No cause. No purpose. - No pattern."

Warnie, helpless, responds, "I don't know what to tell you."

And Jack says, "Nothing. There's nothing to say. I know that now. I've just come up against a bit of experience. Experience is a brutal teacher. But you learn. My God, you learn."

C.S. Lewis didn't lose his faith in God and His goodness when Joy died, but he was shaken deeply before he emerged with a stronger and humbler faith.

In Psalm 44, we find the Sons of Korah deeply shaken by massive national defeat and humiliation. The people of God are feeling abandoned by the Lord, as their armies are suffering defeats and they are suffering shame and disgrace by their enemies.

I. Remembering Our History, vv. 1-3

The Psalm begins with the Sons of Korah remembering the goodness and power of God on behalf of His people in their history:

*O God, we have heard with our ears,
our fathers have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:
2 you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,*

*but them you set free;
3 for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm save them,
but your right hand and your arm,
and the light of your face,
for you delighted in them.*

The Sons of Korah here are remembering the history of the conquest of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, as recorded in that book. We don't know the date or circumstances of the writing of Psalm 44, but this history as well as its placement within the second book of the Psalms both favor an early date, maybe as early as during the time of the Judges, perhaps when Israel was being oppressed by the Philistines during the days of Samson or leading up to the kingship of Saul. It could also have been written much, much later, after the return to the land from the Babylonian exile, but such a late date seems unlikely given where this sits within the Book of Psalms and also the brief history that focuses exclusively on the conquest of Canaan and not on any of the later victories under the kings.

The exact date and circumstances of when Psalm 44 was written are not that important, or else God would have made it clearer to us. What is vitally important in this section is the way the Sons of Korah remember their nation's history before the Lord. They are not engaged in hero-worship, as we can be so tempted to do. They're not focused on how great Joshua was as a leader or how great Caleb's faith was or how obedient that conquest generation was to follow the ways of the Lord. No, in recalling their history before the Lord, they are focused exclusively on how faithful God was and on how God gave them the victory over their enemies and the conquest of the land.

The Sons of Korah look back on the history of the generation that entered and conquered Canaan, and their conclusion was the same as that found in the Book of Joshua: *"Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass."* – Joshua 21:45, ESV Dale Ralph Davis' excellent commentary on Joshua is called *No Falling Words*, based on this verse. God's good promises for His people do not fail; they do not fall to the ground.

Too many times, our study of church history or of Biblical history is either completely neglected – we don't know our own history – or else it is little more than mere hero-worship, idolizing the great men and women of the past and celebrating the "good old days" when faithful men and women bravely accomplished great things for the Lord.

Neither of these two approaches is helpful. We must know our own history, to see God's hand at work fulfilling His promises and leading His people forward by His faithfulness. We must not think that the keys to victory were found in Joshua's faith or David's courage or Martin Luther's boldness or John Calvin's keen Scriptural insights or William Carey's passion but we must see these all as gifts from God to His people in the church and acknowledge that any and all progress the Gospel has made in this world comes from the hand of the Lord alone! And why? Because of God's delight in His people –

*not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm save them,
but your right hand and your arm,
and the light of your face,
for you delighted in them.*

II. Confessing God's Promises & Provisions, vv. 4-8

We must also understand and confess that the same God and the same good promises of God that were made to the past generations of God's people are with us today. That's what we find the Sons of Korah confessing before the Lord in verses 4-8:

*⁴ You are my King, O God;
ordain salvation for Jacob!
⁵ Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down those who rise up against us.
⁶ For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.
⁷ But you have saved us from our foes
and have put to shame those who hate us.
⁸ In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah*

It's not enough to confess that God was with previous generations of believers, that He was their God and led them to victory. We must believe and confess openly that God is our God and that He is the source and cause of all of our victories in life, just as surely as He was for past generations.

The Serenity Prayer, originally written by German theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, is one of the most famous prayers in the world, but it can be a bit misleading:

**God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can, and
Wisdom to know the difference.**

The misleading part of this is the idea that we have power, on our own, to change certain things, if only God would give us the courage. The truth is that everything good in our lives is given by God and every victory we ever experience over any enemy – doubt, sin, worldliness, fear, anxiety, anger, whatever – all come from God and His grace.

Yes, we are called to be responsible and to take responsibility for our actions and the things God has called us to do, but we should not think that any positive results we see come from our hands. Remember what we learned earlier in I Corinthians together? *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”* – I Corinthians 3:6-7, ESV. It’s not that Paul didn’t plant or that Apollos didn’t water, but they acknowledged openly that God alone gave the growth.

The Bible tells us clearly and repeatedly that salvation belongs to the Lord and that the battle belongs to the Lord and that we should trust in Him and not in ourselves. So, then, what happens when we are trusting in the Lord and looking to Him for salvation, for victory in the battle, but we face defeat and humiliation instead? That’s the surprising and dark, but realistic turn, that comes in Psalm 44 with the first word of verse 9, “But . . . “

III. Honestly Confessing Our Condition, vv. 9-16

- 9 But you have rejected us and disgraced us
and have not gone out with our armies.
10 You have made us turn back from the foe,
and those who hate us have gotten spoil.
11 You have made us like sheep for slaughter
and have scattered us among the nations.
12 You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.
13 You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.
14 You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples.
15 All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face*

*16 at the sound of the taunter and reviler,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.*

Notice the unflinching, unapologetic confidence in the full sovereignty of God over their circumstances, both in times of victory and in times of defeat and disgrace. The Sons of Korah do not sugar-coat their situation nor do they look to anyone else but the Lord as the cause of their suffering and their disastrous defeats. The subject of verses 9-14 is clearly and unmistakably the Lord, and the Sons of Korah go directly to the source and pour out their lament before the Lord:

- *you have rejected us and disgraced us*
- *You have made us turn back from the foe*
- *You have made us like sheep for slaughter*
- *You have sold your people for a trifle*
- *You have made us the taunt of our neighbors*
- *You have made us a byword among the nations,*

This is not faithless grumbling and complaining; this is faithful lamenting, and there's a world of difference. What we do with our broken hearts when we are suffering greatly makes a huge difference. Grumbling and complaining is fueled by doubt, distrusts God, and grumbles about Him, often kept silently within ourselves or else expressed to other people in terms of life not being fair or our not understanding why certain things happen, etc.

Lament goes to God with a rock-solid certainty of faith that everything that comes into our lives comes through His Fatherly hands. Lament pours out our hearts in trust before God, asking Why or asking How Long – but never Why in a doubting sense, as if we're not sure if God is involved or now, but rather asking Why as in "Lord, what are Your purposes in this, for I know you are in control and You must have purposes for this that I cannot see, so why? What am I supposed to learn?"

So this kind of praying might strike us as shockingly bold-faced or even inappropriate, but it's not. God gives us repeated examples of this kind of praying, both by individuals wrestling with personal tragedy and by people on behalf of the whole community of God's people – so, individual lament and communal lament. As long as life is hard and we suffer and we don't understand, we need the language to be able to lament in faith before the Lord.

IV. Professing our Perplexity, vv. 17-22

In this particular time of national disgrace and defeat, Sons of Korah are especially perplexed because there doesn't seem to be any reason rooted in their sin or

disloyalty. So often in Scripture, we read of God's people being faithless to His covenant and running after idols, and then God would give them into the hands of their enemies to humble them and turn their hearts. This cycle happened so often throughout Israel's history, but that's not what was happening here. Rather, the Sons of Korah tell the Lord . . .

- 17 All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant.*
- 18 Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way;*
- 19 yet you have broken us in the place of jackals
and covered us with the shadow of death.*
- 20 If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,*
- 21 would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.*
- 22 Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*

These verses are what make many Bible scholars believe that this Psalm must have been written after the return from exile into Babylon, for this is the only clear extended period of time when the people of God never went astray after idols, never spread out their hands to a foreign god. But it is possible that this could have been during some time in the period of the Judges, much of which we don't know that much about, especially when the Philistines were dominant over the Israelites for so long.

For us, the takeaway value is knowing that God sometimes gives His people into the hands of their enemies for unclear reasons and not because they were sinful. Church history is full of these times for God's people. The Great Persecution was a time from 303 to 313 AD when thousands of Christians in the Roman Empire were slaughtered in an attempt to exterminate Christianity from the whole Roman Empire. Over 12000 years later, the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in France in 1572 saw the slaughter of as many as 30,000 French Protestant Huguenots. During the 1950s in Communist China, Chairman Mao's campaign against Christians led the the deaths of as many as 250,000 Christians and the forced imprisonment of tens of thousands in re-education through labor camps. North Korea was a rich Christian center, and a very large Presbyterian seminary was in Pyongyang before the rise of the Communists in 1950 saw the wholesale slaughter and imprisonment of every known Christian in the country.

None of these times of intense persecution and massive loss of life were due to sin on the part of God's people. In fact, many of these Christians were very faithful, far more faithful than many of us modern American Christians today who live in relative ease and luxury.

On a much smaller scale, in the lives of our own missionaries whom we support, we have recently seen very perplexing providences. Haiti is a country that was finally being deeply and significantly impacted by the Gospel in recent years, after such deep darkness under the curse of Voodoo; then, we saw violent political unrest keep our mission team from being able to go and serve, followed by the cold-blooded murder of Pastor Jean-Jacob Paul, which has rocked the ministry to its core. Jacob and Carol Lee in Uganda have been through the most stressful, frustrating, and anxious season in their ministry since the Covid outbreak began last year, and just as they made plans to travel back to the States for visitation and encouragement, the government in Uganda has now issues a strict nationwide lock-down for the next 45 days as cases rise. Just a couple of days ago, Jacob and Carol got word of an American missionary who died of Covid, as the new Indian variant strain is hitting the country hard.

Suffering and hardship in the personal lives of God's people or in the ministry of God's church in the world is often not the result of direct sin or faithlessness, but it always comes from the hand of God according to His good purposes.

V. Crying Out and Claiming God's Character, vv. 23-26

And this is where Psalm 44 leads us, through the pain of perplexing providence to a plea for mercy and deliverance rooted in the good character of God.

- 23 Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!*
- 24 Why do you hide your face?
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?*
- 25 For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.*
- 26 Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

The Sons of Korah are bold and direct and urgent in their pleading with the Lord. At this point, we should be reminded that this is a "Maskil," which is a Psalm of Instruction, so God is teaching us how to lament and how to plead with Him through this Psalm, and the language is strong, urgent, and clear.

The heart of their problem is that God has rejected them and hidden His face from them. This is the very opposite of the Aaronic blessing, the covenant blessing that

the priests of Aaron's line pronounced on the people at the conclusion of their assembled worship times. We find this in Numbers 6:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

²⁷ "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

– Num. 6:22-27, ESV

All the evidence they see is that the Lord is not blessing them or keeping them, that He is not making His face shine upon them; instead, He is hiding His face from them and letting them be trampled underfoot by their enemies.

And so they plead directly and boldly for God to act:

Rise up; come to our help!

Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love! - v. 26

And in the final word of this final verse, we get the foundation, the grounding of their strong and bold plea. They ask the Lord to rise up and come to their help and to redeem them, not for their sake, but for the sake of His steadfast love.

"Steadfast love" is just one word in Hebrew, one of the most powerful, if not the single most powerful word, in the Hebrew Bible: *Hesed*. R.C. Sproul was once asked what he thought was the most important word in the Bible, and he said it was "but," and we've seen in several places, especially in Paul but also in the Psalms, where "but now" or "But God" are the hinge phrases of the whole passage. Even in Psalm 4, "But," at the beginning of verse 9 is an incredibly powerful and significant word, as it is the hinge that turns this Psalm toward such powerful lament.

But that word at the beginning of verse 9, which marks the turn from a strong theological foundation to a dark present condition, does not have the final word in Psalm 44. No, Psalm 44 ends with a plea for redemption, for rescue, a plea made strong beyond our comprehension by being rooted in "for the sake of your *hesed*."

The Sons of Korah are pleading with God: You must act now! You must come to our rescue! You must redeem us! Why? For the sake of Your *hesed*.

What could be so powerful that it could strengthen the Sons of Korah to make such a sure and strong plea in the face of such dire circumstances and such overwhelming defeat and humiliation. *Hesed* is God's covenantal commitment to love His people as His own, His committed loyal love to those whom He has taken as His own by covenant. To plea for God to redeem "for the sake of Your *hesed*" is to plea for God to act in accordance with His very heart for His own.

I've referred to this powerful little Hebrew word before in our studies of the Psalms, including two weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 42-43, which says

*"By day the LORD commands **his steadfast love**,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life."*

In his wonderful little book, *Indescribable: Hesed and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness*, Michael Card explains how *hesed* defies summarization and definition by mere words, and in Part Three of his book, he explains how *hesed* is ultimately, finally defined not by words but by a Person, as *hesed* was incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

Hesed is covenant loyalty, it is undeserved mercy, it is tender compassion and lovingkindness, it is solid truth and unwavering commitment, it is righteous and it is gracious, it is the heart of who God is toward His people, and it is embodied perfectly in nothing and no one less than the Lord Jesus Himself, the Word of God made flesh, the *hesed* of God made man.

So, the final plea of Psalm 44 –

*Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

is nothing less than a plea for Jesus to come and do for God's people what only He could do, for He is the redeemer who comes to the help of His people by rescuing us from the deepest shame and to the most devastating defeat, which is not a military defeat on a battlefield or a cultural defeat or even the loss of our lives for the sake of His name, but the defeat we suffered because of our sin and at the hands of the enemy of our souls, the accuser of the brethren, who brought us into deep bondage and lifelong slavery. Jesus came as the embodiment of God's *hesed* to deliver us:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

– Hebrews 2:14-18, ESV

So, the next time we're feeling overwhelmed by circumstances beyond our control and beyond our understanding, let's remember what Jesus came to do and what freedom and redemption He accomplished for us. Hebrews 6:19-20 tells us "*We have this [hope] as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf.*" – Heb 6:19-20, ESV

The one who came to embody the *hesed* of God went to the cross to make full satisfaction for our sins and sits now as God's right hand as the anchor for our souls. In the perplexing providences, as we lament before the Lord, let's cling to Him, for He is the steadfast love of the Lord who has redeemed us from sin and death!