

Psalm 44 – Like Sheep to the Slaughter

Does History Repeat?

Have you heard the saying, 'History repeats itself'? It's the idea that there's nothing really new. But that nature and people keep following the same patterns. For human beings, that can be a bad thing. If we don't learn from history, we are doomed to repeat the same mistakes.

But God is different. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. And that's a good thing because he is loving and faithful and fair. And so we should expect that the way God acted in the past will be the same today. But this presents a problem for the Psalmist. He starts by looking at the past and remembering God's love and power. But now God doesn't seem to be with them. Now they are suffering. And he calls on God not to forget them but to save them as he has done in the past.

1. God's Power and Love in the Past

The psalmist starts by praising God for his power and love in the past. After God rescued Israel out of Egypt he fought for them, and gave them the promised land.

*Psalm 44:1-2 We have heard it with our ears, O God;
our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago.
² With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our ancestors;
you crushed the peoples and made our ancestors flourish.*

God was with them and fought for them. Moses had defeated 2 kings east of the Jordan river. And when Joshua took leadership, he defeated a staggering 31 kings! No one could stand in their way, because God gave them the victory. Their victory was so complete that all the nations around were afraid of Israel. God planted them in their own land, and they flourished and spread out like a green tree.

On a side note, it's interesting that the Psalmist wasn't there when God fought for them in the past. How did he know God's character so well? It says 'We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestor have told us.' Their parents and grandparents handed it down to them from generation to generation. God's people have always had the responsibility of teaching their children about God's powerful acts of salvation. So they will never forget the steadfast love of the Lord. How are we going making sure the children in our lives know the stories of salvation? Not just of Egypt and Israel, but of how Jesus saved us and taught us about his love.

And they weren't saved because of anything they had done. It was not their own power or weapons. It was the might and power of God, which defeated the nations, because he loved them.

Psalm 44:3 It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them.

The psalm writer praises God for his love and power. He calls the Lord, 'my king and my God.'

It's the same for us. We didn't do anything to deserve our salvation. We were powerless and dead in our sin. But Jesus came to rescue us and defeat our enemies of sin and death. He fought for us and gave us victory through his death and resurrection. It was only God's love that made us his children. He saved us by his grace.

When things are going well in life, it's tempting to think it's because you are being obedient to God, or are a good person. But this psalm reminds us that it's got nothing to do with our goodness or power. It has everything to do with Jesus, who has done everything for our salvation. Therefore, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."¹

Because of this past salvation, you would expect that God would always fight for his people. But this is not what the Psalm says. He goes on to talk about their present suffering.

2. Their Present Suffering

The singer complains that God no longer goes out with their armies. In fact, God has given them over to their enemies and scattered them among the nations. They are going through great suffering. It's not just that their enemies defeated them, but that God himself has humbled them.

Psalm 44:9 But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies.

If it was just their enemies that were attacking them, it wouldn't be so bad. At least God would be on their side. It's true that their enemies were partly responsible for Israel's suffering. But he also knows very well that God is in control of all things. So God is ultimately responsible.

In the same way, for us, we have to understand that bad things are not just due to a fallen world, and the devil's attacks. While suffering comes from the devil, and it is horrible, at the same time we believe that God is in complete control of all things. So he is in control, even when we suffer. We don't know why this happens, it's natural to complain and question God when we go through suffering. As the psalmist does here:

Psalm 44:24 Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?

Instead of the glory of God's victory in defeating their enemies, now their faces are covered in shame. They are filled with disgrace because their enemies have defeated them. Why would God not act according to his love and faithfulness as he has done before?

We can have the same struggle in our lives. We know God has loved us and saved us. But bad things still happen to us. Why does God let them happen? Do you sometimes feel like God has rejected you and doesn't love you anymore? Despite the present suffering, the psalmist doesn't give up on God's love. He asks God to act according to his character. To be consistent to what he has revealed of himself in the past.

Now we don't know why God was doing this at the time, but we know that God is faithful to his character and his covenant. So we know that whatever he is doing, it is for his good purpose. The same is true for us as followers of Jesus. We don't always know why we go through suffering. But we know that God is working out his good purpose for our lives. Whether it's to humble us, and grow us in patience and trust in him. Or to help us to get rid of sin in our lives, or to make us hope in heaven. We need to trust that God is good and faithful. So he has some good purpose for every single thing we go through. But it's not wrong to go to God

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:31, quoting Jeremiah 9:24

and pour out your soul to him in times of trouble. The psalmist gives us a godly response to suffering. And that is to cling to God's love and faithfulness, while expressing our sorrow and crying out for help.

3. Their Innocence and Plea for Rescue

Their suffering is even harder to bear, because they feel that it is unjust. The psalm writer plainly says that they have not done anything to deserve this. He's not saying that they're not sinful. But that the current crisis is not a punishment from God.

Psalm 44:17 All this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant.

There were definitely times when the nation of Israel turned away from God and started worshiping idols. Beginning with Solomon, Israel went further and further away from God's commands. They started worshipping the gods of the other nations and disobeying his covenant. At that time God sent them prophets again and again, and warned them to turn back to him, or he would punish them. They didn't listen, so eventually he sent the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to defeat them and carry them away to foreign lands. That was definitely their fault.

But after that punishment, God promised to forgive them and bring them back to the promised land. Under the Persians, they were allowed to return to Palestine. They rebuilt the temple and started worshiping Yahweh, the one true God again. But then the Greeks conquered the Persians and took over Palestine as well. One of the most ruthless leaders was Antiochus Euphianes (215-164BC). The Jews were strict monotheists and called out the other nations for worshiping idols and for their corruption and immorality. The Greeks hated this and Antiochus thought that if he defeated the Jews and desecrated the temple, he could force them to stop worshiping God. This was some of the worst persecution the Jews ever faced. But through all this the Jews refused to stop worshiping God. So it wasn't for their punishment that they were going through this. But they suffered because Antiochus hated the Jewish God.

Psalm 44:22 Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

This is all the more reason why the psalmist cries out that God should help them. Because it's for his name's sake that they're suffering. It's his honour that is at stake. It doesn't make sense that God seems to have abandoned his people, and for no good reason.

Sometimes society will persecute us for no good reason, other than that we belong to Jesus. Sometimes society appreciates the church and what we do. But other times they hate Christians. They feel judged and want to get rid of all Christian views and values. They want to get rid of Scripture. They don't want any hint of Christian values influencing politics or society. And we have to bear that suffering for God's sake.

Innocent people suffering for God's sake. Where else have we heard this before? In the servant songs of Isaiah, we see a man who was innocent, but suffered for God's sake. He writes: 'we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...' (Isaiah 53:4-5).

In this way, the Israelites embodied the innocent servant, suffering for God's sake. Of course, we know that this ultimately pointed to Jesus, who was completely innocent. Yet he suffered for our sins and failures. So when we suffer unjustly, we need to look to Jesus. We have more insight than the Psalmist had.

Instead of seeing this as something strange God is doing, we can view it in light of God's great plan in Jesus. God has done this so that we can share in the sufferings of Christ. God is treating us like his beloved Son. And if we share in his sufferings, we will share with him in his resurrection too.

In fact, Paul says that it is normal for Christians to suffer unjustly. And he quotes this very Psalm:

Romans 8:35-37 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written:*

*“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*

³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

So we need to trust that through all things, good and bad, God is shaping us into the likeness of his Son. And that's exactly what Paul says earlier in Romans 8. The whole world is groaning with labour pains, waiting until the new creation is born. And we ourselves are groaning until we are made new in Christ. And for those who love God, all things work together for good, to make us into the likeness of his beloved Son.

When we go through hard times, we need to remember. We need to remember that God has saved us by his grace. We need to be absolutely convinced about his unfailing love. So we can be confident that he will save us again. So we can call on him to act according to his character. And we can be sure that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ.

A few generations after Jesus was raised, the Romans started a terrible persecution of Christians for several reasons. One reason was that they refused to worship and sacrifice to the Roman gods. They were given the choice to sacrifice or be killed. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was a disciple of the Apostle John. John had told him everything he saw and heard from Jesus. He taught him how Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us. And Polycarp was absolutely convinced of his unfailing love. At the age of 86, he was probably the last surviving person to have known an Apostle.

The Romans captured Polycarp and tried to get him to deny Jesus. The proconsul said, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, ‘Down with the Atheists!’” (They called Christians Atheists, because they refused to believe in the Roman gods). But Polycarp declared, “86 years have I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

May, with all God's people, have such confidence in God's unfailing love, that we gladly share in the sufferings of Christ. So that we can also share in his eternal joy.