

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister Rev Ken McIntosh 13th September 2020

Psalm 44 Sharing in Christ's Sufferings

Psalm 44 is the first example of a *communal lament* we have seen in the Psalms. We have had several examples of *personal laments* where an individual expresses to God their sadness or distress in some situation. But this is the first time we have considered a Psalm of *communal lament*, where a group of people, indeed a whole nation led by the king, expresses to the Lord grief over a national tragedy.

We're not told anywhere what the occasion was, but it's likely to be after the nation of Israel had experienced a heavy defeat in battle. One example suggested is when the Edomites invaded the land in the days of David, before Joab and his brother Abishai eventually crushed the aggressors. But the initial defeat in war prompted a *communal lament* where the nation gathered before the Lord to pour out their hearts to him and pray for his deliverance.

The apostle Paul quotes verse 22 of this Psalm when writing to the Christians in Rome, warning them that loyalty to God will involve suffering in this world. And Paul's quote helps us to *understand the application* of the Psalm. Following Christ will inevitably involve suffering for his sake. The Psalm helps us to remember that we cannot always understand what the Lord is doing, especially when we suffer, but it encourages us to remain faithful to him in trouble and seek his face in prayer.

Today we look at the Psalm under four headings. In verses 1-3 we have **past blessings**. **Read verses 1-3**. The Psalm begins with the people recounting the blessings of the Lord in the past when he settled them into the land of Canaan. This is remembered because in the present crisis the enemy have tried to *take back* the promised land from God's people. But the nation first remembers that it was God who gave them the land. They had heard the story from their forefathers, how the Lord drove out the peoples living in Canaan with his own hand and *planted* their forefathers. How God crushed the people who lived there but caused his own people to flourish so that they filled the land.

But in verse 3 the nation remembers that all this was God's doing, not theirs. It was not their sword or might which had achieved this. It was the hand, the right hand of God. It was his arm, his shining face that had graciously settled them into the promised land, for he loved them.

Throughout, there is so called *anthropomorphic* language which speaks of God as if he were a man – so the people talk of the Lord's *hand*, his *right hand*, his *arm* and his *face*. And this all emphasises the personal involvement of God as he gave his people the land of Canaan.

These opening verses remind us of the importance of *teaching the younger generations* about the blessings of God to his people in the past. For how else can they know these things? Most importantly, we are to teach the next generation about the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation which comes through faith in him. This is the great privilege and responsibility of parents primarily, but also of churches.

The same verses remind us of the *grace* of God. Israel was not given the land because she was more numerous or powerful or lovely than other nations, but simply because the Lord chose them and set his love upon them. And this is something important for us to remember too. It is only by grace that we know God's blessings. There is nothing deserving about us that he should show us any favour. **Past blessings**.

Then in verses 4-8 we have **continued confidence**. [Read verses 4-8](#). It seems that the *king* leads his people in this next section. The king is saying to the Lord that he and his people know that *every* victory after the initial settling into Canaan has been given them by God. Nothing has changed. *You, O God, decree victories for Jacob*.

And the king testifies that he is there only to serve the Lord. He describes the Lord as “my King and my God” (4). It is only through God’s help that the people have kept the land and pushed back their enemies over the years. The king (whether it is David or some other) the king does not trust in his bow or sword. It is only God who gives us victory over the enemy. And that is why God is said to be the *boast* of the people. That is why the people praise the name of the Lord. He has continued to help them. And so there is an ongoing, a **continued confidence** in the Lord.

And this reminds us that our confidence must be in God each day. If we know it is by his grace that we are initially saved, then we also know that it is by grace that we are kept in the faith. Each victory comes from God. The Lord does not suddenly leave us to fend for ourselves after he has saved us. No, he remains with us. And we are dependent on him each day. We live for Christ in his strength alone. And so we praise the Lord as a lifestyle.

It was good to see people showing their appreciation for the NHS workers in the recent Thursday evening clap. But that surely ought to be a little reminder of the need to thank God each day for his constant help and grace. **Continued confidence**.

But then we come to the word *Selah* in the Psalm – probably a musical term indicating the need for a pause. For these first 8 verses are really an introduction to the *heart of the Psalm* which follows in the form of a lament. And so thirdly we come to the **present bewilderment** of verses 9-22. First, verses 9-16 express to God the people’s bewilderment at his apparent rejection of them. Then in verses 17-22 the people say to God that they have not forsaken him or done anything to incur his wrath. Why then have they suffered this defeat?

First, the Lord’s apparent rejection of his people. [Read verses 9-14](#). God, who showed favour and blessing to his people in the past has now apparently rejected them. He has given them over to their enemies. Their defeat has led to retreat, to plundering and slaughtering. Some have also been deported to other lands, presumably as slaves.

And it’s not as if the Lord *gained* in some way from the loss of his land or his people. He has not sold them off for some profit. But it seems that God has become so disinterested in his people that he simply wants them out of his sight.

And as a result, his people have been ridiculed and shamed. They have become a byword among the neighbouring lands. And the king who leads this national lament describes to the Lord how he feels this very keenly. [Read verses 15 and 16](#).

All this would have been understandable, perhaps, if Israel had abandoned the covenant and forsaken the Lord, going off to worship other gods. The people knew from Deuteronomy chapter 28 what to expect if this happened. They had been warned of the dire consequences of turning away from the Lord. But the trouble was, that this was *not* the case. [Read verses 17-22](#).

These are strongly felt and passionate words. The people, led by the king, protest to the Lord that they have *not* broken the terms of the covenant. They do not claim sinless perfection, but in terms of breaking the covenant - by mistreating one another or turning to other gods, Israel has not been guilty.

They are, perhaps, aware of times in their history when this unfaithfulness to God was the case, but they claim that such crimes cannot be laid at their door at present. It is not even that they have *outwardly* adhered to the covenant while in their hearts they are far from the Lord. The Lord knows their hearts. They have not broken the treaty and therefore the people cannot understand why the Lord has caused them such grief.

And the section ends with verse 22, which is a key verse. **Read verse 22 again.** This verse implies that it is because they are *God's people* and bear *his name* that they have for this reason become a particular target for the enemy. If they had not been the Lord's people they would not have been so violently treated by the enemy. But their identity has singled them out for particularly harsh treatment.

The same verse also implies that because they have *not* been unfaithful to God, their treatment has been even worse. Perhaps had they denied the name of the Lord under pressure, they would have not been treated so badly by the enemy! But because of their faithfulness to God, they have suffered for it 'big time'!

And so they are bewildered. They cannot understand why the Lord, who is sovereign, has so treated them. But then finally in verses 23-26 we have **future hope**. **Read verses 23-26.** These final verses are not simply a plea for God's help – they *are*, but they also expresses the people's hope in God. Yes, the Lord has given them over to their enemies. But by faith the people know that this cannot be the last word. And so the Psalm ends on a note of hope for it ends with that lovely phrase 'your unfailing love' – referring to the covenant love of the Lord.

The Lord cannot abandon the covenant. He is faithful. And so, however they interpret this defeat, it cannot mean that God has completely forsaken them. And so they express their hope in the Lord by continuing to pray to him and continuing to hope in him. **Read verse 23.** We are not to interpret this call as *irreverent*. But it is desperate. Of course the Lord neither slumbers nor does he sleep. And we're certainly not to interpret it in the same way that Elijah *taunted* the false gods of Baal on Mount Carmel.

But it is an earnest plea that the Lord would remember his people and remember the covenant. The people have nowhere else to turn. The king has said in verse 6 that he does not trust in his bow or his sword for victory. And there is no question that as a people they will turn to any other god. There is no one they can turn to. They can only turn and plead with the Lord. And this is what they do. Again we see in the Psalms how the people pour out their hearts to God. They tell it as it is. They do not pretend everything is fine – it's not.

And some see the final verse as echoing the call of Moses at the beginning of a new day's journey through the wilderness. "Rise up O God. Let your enemies be scattered and let those who hate you flee before you" (Numbers 10:35). **Read verse 26 again.** The nation are looking to a new day. They have just suffered a time of defeat. But now it's a new day and they are looking forward with hope to the Lord. And this sense of *hope* is a constant theme in both the Psalms and the Bible. With the Lord there is always hope. If we fail, if we struggle, if we know defeat, then we look to him and ask for his help and go forward in faith. The love of the Lord never fails, and his mercies are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness.

So how are we to interpret Psalm 44? Paul helps us in Romans 8 when he quotes verse 22. In context, the apostle Paul is warning the church that in the Christian life we will face various sufferings *that do not come because of our disobedience*. They come simply because we belong to Christ. And yet Paul's main application is that even in these troubles, nothing can separate us from God's unfailing love in Christ Jesus. Paul talks in Romans 8 about hardship, persecution, famine or nakedness. And the New Testament

teaches us that Christians can expect these things in our lives, times when it seems that the Lord has given us up to various enemies. But we must trust him. And we must remember the life of our Lord Jesus.

For the life of Christ was full of different sufferings that the Father sent his Son, even though he was perfect. Christ is called in Isaiah ‘the suffering Servant’. He was despised and rejected by men. And the New Testament warns us that his followers can expect to be treated in the same way.

So Paul talks in his letters about *sharing in the sufferings of Christ*. He tells the Philippian believers that it has been granted to them, not only to believe on Christ but also to suffer for him. And then we read in 1 Peter – [read 1 Peter 4:12-19](#). Now it is to such suffering as Christians that Psalm 44 points us.

You may have read in the Christian news that Prof. J. I. Packer died recently, back in July. I picked up a book last week containing some of the essays he had written. And I read the following in an essay entitled, ‘Taking the Holy Spirit seriously’. Towards the end Prof. Packer says, “As for suffering, by which I mean all forms of pain, frustration, and disappointment...the New Testament is consistent and emphatic in viewing this as the natural condition of Christians and churches as long as they are in the world. We follow Christ through humiliation here, sharing in his sufferings, and thus arrive at glorification with him hereafter. Afflictions achieve ‘an eternal glory that far outweighs them all’ (2 Corinthians 4:17), while the alternative is... ‘no cross, no crown’. Suffering is the Christian’s road home; no other road leads there. But the twentieth century West has come to think of life free from pain and trouble as virtually a natural human right, and Christian minds have been so swamped by this thinking that nowadays any pain and loss in a Christian’s life is felt to cast doubt on God’s goodness...But if we can learn to take the Holy Spirit seriously once more, he will convince us afresh of the naturalness of suffering in the Christian life.”

We’ve already mentioned Romans 8 and Paul’s teaching the Christians to expect suffering. But as we end, let’s remember his point in Romans 8 is that *in all these things*, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [Read Romans 8:18, 28, 35 – 39](#).

And so, just as we see the people in Psalm 44 working through their sufferings by seeking God and asking for his deliverance, this is to be our practice too. Our sufferings for Christ’s sake are not easily understood, but we know that God’s love for us is unailing. And so we persevere in him and pour out our hearts to him concerning our troubles. And we maintain the hope that nothing can separate us from God’s love in our Lord Jesus Christ.