

As Sheep for the Slaughter

A Sermon on Psalm 44

by

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1. Introduction

2. The Dilemma of Making God Your Only Trust, Yet He Does Not Deliver (vv. 1-8).

a. *God's covenant love on display in past generations (vv. 1-3).*

i. As the psalmist begins his series of complaints against God's inactivity, he focuses in on the fact that God's actions have been well-known among His people from the beginning.

1. "O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us the work that You did in their days, in the days of old."

2. The report of God's faithfulness to intervene for His people has been passed down from generation to generation just as it should have been.

a. Currently though they are not seeing God work among them as He has in past generations.

b. At the heart of this recollection is a people who are distraught and confused over what God is doing among them.

3. How he forms his complaint is by showing a comparison between their fathers, who God intervened for, and themselves, who God is not intervening for.

ii. "You with Your own hand drove out the nations; then You planted them; You afflicted the peoples, then You spread them abroad. For by their own sword they did not possess the land and their own arm did not save them, but Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence, for You favored them."

1. This is an abbreviated history of God's work in bringing them into the Promised Land with Joshua.

- a. It was God who drove out the inhabitants of the land and planted the Israelites in it so that they would flourish and settle in every corner of it.
 - b. It was not by their own sword and might, but by the hand of the Father that they came into the Promised Land.
2. The reason why God had done all of this was simply because He favored them. In other words: it was pure, undeserved grace.
 - a. From start to finish, the only reason why the Israelites had success in conquest after conquest was due to God's unique favor upon them.
 - b. It was born out of His faithfulness to His covenant, and this becomes particularly important as we make our way through the psalm.
- b. *God's covenant love on display in their generation (vv. 4-8).*
 - i. Verse four is the main point of vv. 1-8, where the psalmist expresses that God is the very basis of all they rest their faith upon.
 1. To say that God is King is to acknowledge their allegiance belongs to Him and Him alone.
 - a. The psalmist will continue to display this in the following verses, but the major theme here is a recognition of God as the true Sovereign One over His people.
 - b. It is an explicit faith in the fact that God is the One who not only rules over all things, but as King, He controls all things, even the outcome of a battle.
 2. This is particularly why the psalmist then says to the Lord, "Command victory for Jacob."

- a. He reaffirms that the people all submit themselves to the Divine rule of God, and then makes a plea that God will act once again to deliver His people.
 - b. As the Sovereign One, they know it is well within God’s capabilities to bring them to victory—and yet their current circumstances are anything but victorious.
- ii. “Through You we will push back our adversaries; through Your name we will trample down those who rise up against us. For I will not trust in my bow, nor will my sword save me. But You have saved us from our adversaries, and you have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted all day long, and we will give thanks to Your name forever.”
- 1. The psalmist reiterates that just as their forefathers did not trust in weapons formed by human hands, they too shall not place their trust in them.
 - a. In other words: they believe with all of their being that human effort will not save them from the doom that is currently at hand.
 - b. If God does not go out before them in battle, they are utterly helpless—and yet they still must go out to battle.
 - 2. They shall take up the bow and the sword to fight against their enemies, but they do so with confidence, knowing that God has acted in the past, and knowing that He can yet again.
 - a. Notice in vv. 7-8 they reflect on how God has already been faithful to them.
 - b. And just as their forefathers boasted in the Lord, they too have boasted all day long in the mighty works of God.

3. The Dilemma of Making God Your Only Hope, Yet He has Afflicted You (vv. 9-16).

a. *God, the Sovereign One, afflicts them (vv. 9-12).*

i. “Yet You have rejected us and brought us to dishonor, and do not go out with our armies. You cause us to turn back from the adversary; and those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves. You give us as sheep to be eaten and have scattered us among the nations. You sell Your people cheaply, and have not profited by their sale.”

1. From this point forward, the mood of the psalm changes drastically.

a. The psalmist begins by saying that God has rejected them—and the word he uses in the Hebrew describes something that has become foul-smelling.

b. He is not merely saying that God has turned His back on them, but that the Israelites have become odious to Him, and God has put them to open shame.

2. Whereas earlier he said that God performed mighty deeds for their fathers and even them—at this point, they can only conclude that God has not gone out to battle for them.

a. Even though they do not rely upon their weapons for victory and place their trust in God to conquer their enemies, they find God has turned His back on them when they needed Him most.

b. This is particularly why I find the psalmist’s prayer to be brutally honest.

ii. Notice then in v. 10-12 that he continues to explain just how badly they were defeated by their enemies.

1. In v. 10 he says God caused them to flee in terror from the battlefield and, of course, to the victors go the spoil.

2. In v. 11 the psalmist says that God gave them over to their enemies as food, and scattered them among the nations.

- a. All of this describes the curses that are found in Deuteronomy 28 and following for those who have been disloyal to the covenant with God.
 - b. They've not only suffered an agonizing defeat, they were driven out from the Promised Land.
3. Then in v. 12, he accuses God of selling them at a discount rate—so much so that He has not even profited by their sale.
 - a. Picture it like a garage sale where you are just throwing stickers on things to try and get rid of them as quickly as possible.
 - b. They are of little value, and are discarded like useless trash—and the irony of it all is that God has described His people as a priceless jewel.
- b. *God, the Sovereign One, shames them (vv. 13-16).*
 - i. “You make us a reproach to our neighbors, a scoffing and a derision to those around us. You make us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. All day long my dishonor is before me and my humiliation has overwhelmed me, because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles, because of the presence of the enemy and the avenger.”
 1. Notice all of the ways the psalmist heaps up one after the next to say that God has utterly humiliated them.
 - a. They have become a reproach, a scoffing, a derision, a byword, and a laughingstock to their enemies.
 - b. All of these words are a way to describe that in every single way they have been treated as a thing of contempt and ridicule among their enemies.
 2. It is little wonder then why the psalmist simply states that this is his constant fixation, day and night.

- ii. Yet notice how he attributes all of this as God's responsibility.
 - 1. In other words—he doesn't avoid the unpleasant reality of God's sovereignty.
 - 2. This is where some of you might be getting a bit squeamish and uncomfortable in your seats because you know that this means God is not merely in charge of all the good stuff that comes our way, but all of the bad stuff too.
 - a. The sovereignty of God is an incredibly sobering reality because it necessitates that everything that happens to us in this life is from the hand of God Himself.
 - b. The book of Job is perhaps one of the finest examples of God bringing affliction upon a righteous man who did nothing to earn God's scorn.

4. The Dilemma of Making God Your Only Hope, Yet He has Sent You as Sheep to the Slaughter (vv. 17-22).

a. Israel has not forsaken their covenant obligations to God (vv. 17-19).

- i. "All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, and we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant."
 - 1. Once again, the psalmist frames their dilemma in light of the covenant that God has made with them.
 - a. Specifically, he has in mind what's called the Palestinian covenant, or more clearly, the covenant between God and Israel in Deuteronomy 28-30 before they came into the Promised Land.
 - b. God works through covenant in the Bible, and it's important for us to understand how these different covenants work because they will shape how you read the entire sections of the Bible.
 - 2. What the psalmist is referencing here is a series of promises that God has made with Israel, where if they uphold their obligations to the Palestinian covenant,

God will bless them, but if they are disobedient to that covenant, God will curse them.

- a. In Deuteronomy 28:1-14, God promises that if they remain faithful to worship God alone and obey all that He has commanded, He will make them a prosperous people.
 - b. Yet in Deuteronomy 28:15-68, there are a series of curses that are promised if they go after false gods and they are not faithful to obey God's commandments.
- ii. "Our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Your way, yet You have crushed us in a place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death."
1. For the psalmist, he can say with a clean conscience that they have fully devoted themselves to the Lord.
 - a. They have not acted as hypocrites; they have not tried to work their way around God's commandments.
 - b. They have, with a whole heart, poured their life into walking in God's ways—which is just another way of saying they have made it their entire life purpose to obey God.
 2. Even in spite of what seems to be a failure on God's part to uphold His end of the covenant, they are still found faithful to trust and obey God.
 - a. Remember, vv. 1-8 details their full devotion to God; here all of that comes to bear as the psalmist brings his complaints before God.
 - b. In response, he says that God has left them to die at the hands of their enemies.
- b. *Israel has not forsaken the Lord for false gods (vv. 20-22).*

- i. “If we had forgotten the name of our God or extended our hands to a strange god, would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart.”
 1. The psalmist again appeals to both their actions and their hearts before God to declare how they have not worshipped other gods.
 - a. First, he shows that even though God has not gone to battle for them and has actually caused them to be slaughtered and shamed—they still have not turned aside from following Him.
 - b. Secondly, the psalmist shows that even their hearts have remained pure before God.
 2. In each instance, the psalmist is highlighting God’s complete sovereignty yet again.
- ii. “But for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”
 1. We will return to the idea of being sent as sheep for the slaughter at the end, but for now, realize that there is an implicit reality on display here.
 - a. He is using cultic language, meaning that he is referring to the people being killed by their enemies as a sacrifice before God, just like a blameless lamb would be used for an offering.
 - b. They have been innocent sufferers, and God, in His sovereignty, has been pleased to send them to die for His own purposes.
 2. The implicit reality of suffering here, which is made explicit in New Testament, is that suffering isn’t seen as a punishment from God. It is merely the vehicle God uses to accomplish His will.
 - a. They do not understand God’s full purposes here, and yet they still resign themselves as sheep to be slaughtered for the sake of God.

b. In other words, they recognize they are martyrs for God's sake.

5. The Dilemma of Making God Your Only Hope, Yet He Seem to Have Forgotten You (vv. 23-26).

a. *God, the Sovereign One, slumbers and has forgotten them (vv. 23-24).*

i. "Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever. Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?"

1. The language of this section is reminiscent of Elijah's charge against the false gods in 1 Ki. 18, but here the psalmist uses it against God Himself.

2. The major difference is that the Israelites know that God never slumbers nor sleeps—but it does stress the reality of their affliction.

ii. He speaks of God hiding His face from them and forgetting their affliction and oppression, and this is similar to the cry of God's people when they were in Egypt.

1. In all of it we see that they are desperate for God to intervene as He has in the past, and save them.

2. They have resigned themselves as sheep to be slaughtered if indeed this is God's will—but they also know that God may just as easily be pleased to save them, and so they throw every bit of their desperation to the One they know can help.

a. They do not, in other words, reject God and despair—they appeal to the covenant God has made with them.

b. When suffering, hardship, and evil come our way, we ought to take up God's Word and ask Him to deliver us, yet we must do so with an awareness that He is the sovereign One.

b. *Man, the finite one, trusts once more in the covenant love of God (vv. 25-26).*

i. "For our soul has sunk down into the dust; our body cleaves to the earth."

1. The psalmist once again paints just how bleak their situation truly is. For just as man was taken from the dust of the earth, to the dust shall he return.

2. They have one foot in the grave currently and are merely waiting for that final breath to be drawn.
- ii. Yet from the reality of their impending death, springs hope once more in the Sovereign One.
 1. “Rise up, be our help, and redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.”
 2. All three of these terms speak of different aspects of salvation—but the most wonderful of the three is the word for “redeem” here.
 - a. It is the word: ransom. They are asking that God buy them back.
 - b. They are asking this on the exclusive basis of God’s covenant love—His *hesed*.

6. Conclusion: Romans 8:18-38

- a. When Paul quotes this psalm, he does so with an awareness of this idea of suffering set within the framework of the glories to come.
 - i. Back in vv. 18-25, Paul talks about the reality of human suffering in a broken and fallen world that is eagerly waiting for its redemption.
 - ii. Then in vv. 26-27, Paul says that in the same way this hope for glorification sustains us, the Spirit sustains us, for He knows precisely how to intercede on our behalf.
 - iii. In vv. 28 and following, we find that God also causes all things to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose.
 1. The “good” that God is working all things together for is explicit.
 2. Human suffering has a purpose that culminates in glory.
 - iv. Paul then moves to show us that our inheritance is so secure that no human and no amount of evil can separate us from the love of Christ
 1. Therefore, v. 36, we are confident martyrs being put to death all day long for His sake; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

2. But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.
- b. Nothing, in other words, can keep us from seeing God's final deliverance on display. Nothing can keep us from glory
 - i. In all of it, I must remind you once more of the dominant theme throughout this psalm and even what the apostle Paul highlights in Romans 8: God is the Sovereign One.
 1. The sovereignty of God is not something that provides us with fuel for the fodder when it comes to debate.
 2. The complete sovereignty of God is not even a matter of debate in Scripture—it is a matter of worship.
 - ii. The sovereignty of God is something that is supposed to bring us profound comfort and hope because it means that even in our darkest moments, God is actively working all things toward their proper end: our glorification and final salvation.

Small Group Questions:

1. How do we see the sovereignty of God in all things working towards our final salvation? How should this bring us hope in the midst of trials?
2. The psalmist lifts up their complete innocence in their suffering. This drastically differs from the one who is undergoing consequences to their sins. Explain how this is different and comes to bear in the midst of difficult times of chastening or suffering (submission to the Lord's discipline/submission to the Lord's will).
3. When everything seems to run contrary to the hope we have, how do we reorient our hearts and minds in the truth of God's Word so we not only persevere through trials, but do so well?