

WHEN FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS ARE UNREWARDED

PSALM 44

Main point: Our circumstances may change, but God's lovingkindness remains unchanged toward His people.

INTRODUCTION:

One of the reasons I'm growing in my love for the Psalms is because they bring to the surface the honest, hidden questions of my heart and soul about God, life, and faith in this world. Question: In a world ruled by a moral God, is it right to expect that virtue, faith, and faithfulness will be rewarded? Psalm 44 is a *maskil*, a teaching poem, about three things:

1. When faith and faithfulness are unrewarded
2. When your present circumstances don't line up with your past deliverances
3. When explanations aren't given, and God is silent

9/11 was a sudden, unexpected national crisis that served as a wakeup call for our nation. Such is the case here in Psalm 44. Judah has suffered a devastating defeat at the hand of a foreign oppressor, and this psalm was written by the "**sons of Korah**" as a national lament offered to God. Although the exact historical setting is cloudy, the heart of the problem is not. When there is a continuity of faith with the past, but it is not bringing corresponding benefits, can we still call upon God and trust in His sovereign care? When belief is maintained (*vv.4-8*), and conduct is conformed to what is believed, but it is only reaping a harvest of trouble (*vv.9-16*), why is this the case? What do you do when faith and faithfulness are unrewarded?

Here in Psalm 44, we witness a blending between a psalm of *victory* and *lament*. The swing between highs and lows, ups and downs, creates a puzzled tone in this psalm. Despite God's hand of personal intervention in the past, the psalmist looks at his current circumstances and says in essence, "What's going on? How come? Why are You not helping us now when You have helped us so powerfully in the past?" The reason you should pay attention now is that there will be times in your life when what you believe collides with experience, and God's help is delayed. What do you do?

OUTLINE:

This psalm can be sliced into three pieces like a pie and served to us like this:

- Verses 1-8—THE PAST reminds us of God's former acts of deliverance.
- Verses 9-22—THE PRESENT wrestles with the painful contrasts between then and now.
- Verses 23-26—THE FUTURE sets before us a prayer for help yet to come.

EXPOSITION:

A. THE PAST (vv.1-8)

The psalmist recalls victories from two periods: the distant past and the immediate past. In the first period, he recalls *the oral tradition* that passed from generation to generation. In the second period, he gives testimony to what he has seen in his own experience. Notice how what they had heard with their ears is contrasted with what they now see.

1. The distant past (vv.1-3)

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.

Storytelling is still the most powerful way of communication. This is what movies are, in a sense, but in the ancient day, this was the way *history was transmitted*. The disadvantages of embellishment or omitting details are apparent, but the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages. Imagine an old grandfather gathering the family together around the table and painting the vivid picture on the canvas of their minds of the way God worked in the past. His tone, his expressions, his eyes are so lit with intense reality that it grips your soul and puts you right on the scene. As you sit there, each syllable is like driving around mountain cliffs, and your heart pounds and hands sweat with each turn. This is how Jesus spoke when He preached, and the report was, "*Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks*" (John 7:46). It was pleasurable, intense, lively, and "authoritative" (Matt.7:29).

The main point of the transmitted history was the communication of *facts, not opinion*. The psalmist describes it as "**the work that You did in their days.**" Biblical history is about His story. It is about the way *God moved, intervened, and providentially orchestrated events to bring about His saving purpose in Christ*. And the better we can trace the footprints of God's work throughout history, the greater our confidence will be to call upon Him when our present circumstances don't make sense.

²You with Your own hand drove out the nations;
Then You planted them;
You afflicted the peoples,
Then You spread them abroad.
³For 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.

The psalmist recalls the source of Israel's success. The writer is making it clear beyond a doubt that the work of conquering Canaan and establishing Israel in it was the work of God alone. "**You with Your own hand...You planted...You afflicted...You spread...by Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence...You favored them.**" The Exodus is more than history; it is real history, and crucial to extracting theology. Michael P.V. Barrett explains, "Israel's way out of Egypt was a type of redemption. A type, very simply, is a picture of prophecy. In the Old Testament, God often used real people, real things, or real events to symbolize truths and point to spiritual realities. The Exodus from

Egypt as a whole...predicted vividly what Christ would do."¹ Israel's existence and identity were due to the work of God alone. And so is our salvation.

However, Israel had to fight to possess the land, and so do we. However, as we fight the spiritual fight and walk the way of faith, we know that the strength is not ours but God's.

As the psalmist looks back, he was reminded that the success of God's people was never because of secondary causes (strategy, intelligence, numbers, skill, etc.). It was only because of "**God's hand**"—which speaks of *His personal intervention*, "**God's arm**"—which points to *His personal strength*, and "**God's favor**," or smile. The same is true for you if you are a Christian. Just as God's love to Israel was free, unmerited, and amazing, and He gave them a land for which they did not labor, cities which they did not build, and vineyards which they did not plant (*Josh.24:13*), so has He for us. Everything that we are and have is a gift of undeserved kindness from God. It is God's amazing "*grace that had bought you safe thus far, and grace will lead you home*," as Newton wrote. It is "*grace that taught your heart to fear and grace your fears relieved*."² Dear friends, we can agree with Harriet Auber, who wrote,

Every virtue we possess, and every victory won,
Every thought of holiness, are His alone.³

To God be the glory! He looks first at the distant past, but then he moves to...

2. The immediate past (vv.4-8)

Some scholars suggest that this next section is an *antiphonal* part of the service, much like the responsive reading in today's church, where the pastor reads one part, and the congregation responds by reading the other part. This seems to explain the "**my and I**" personal pronouns versus the "**we and us**." The king is the speaker in verses 4 and 6, and the people respond in verses 5 and 7, with verse 8 being spoken as a united affirmation of faith.

The king—

⁴You are my King, O God;
Command victories for Jacob.

The people—

⁵Through You we will push back our adversaries;
Through Your name we will trample down those who rise up against us.

The king—

⁶For I will not trust in my bow,
Nor will my sword save me.

¹ Michael P.V. Barrett, *The Gospel of Exodus*, p.17

² John Newton, *Amazing Grace*

³ Harriet Auber, *Our Blest Redeemer, Ere He Breathed*

The people—

⁷ But You have saved us from our adversaries,
And You have put to shame those who hate us.

Everyone—

⁸ In God we have boasted all day long,
And we will give thanks to Your name forever. *Selah*.

The point: Our victory in the past was solely by God's grace, and our victory in the future is solely God's alone. So, we will not take the credit for anything in our lives, but instead, let us parade God's praise all day long, wherever we go. In secret thanksgiving and open praise, God and God alone is worthy of our praise.

What are you boasting in today? If you are a Christian, you have also experienced what those who came before us did. Not to the same degree, perhaps, but God works in our day as He worked in theirs. So, we join with the old congregation and say, "We will give thanks to Your name forever!"

The "**Selah**," which ends this section, is fitting because the psalmist is about to descend from the mountaintop of praise to the valley of despair.

B. THE PRESENT (vv.9-22)

Verse 9 begins with the words, "**Yet You...**" They are equivalent to the New Testament phrase, "*But now...*" In the New Testament, this phrase generally serves as a golden hinge upon which great truth swings. For example, in Romans 3:20, Paul explains that "*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight,*" and therefore, we should reject every attempt at self-salvation. But He continues, "*through the Law comes the knowledge of sin...*" that is, what the Law brings is *the knowledge of sin*, not *the forgiveness of sin*. Then Paul passes from his description of how the Law exposes our miserable condition to what God has done in providing a way of salvation through Jesus Christ in verse 21, "*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested...*" But here in this psalm, the swing is not from a sad past to a glorious present, but from a glorious past to a tragic present.

James Boice poses this question, "Is that what the people of God are to expect from the One who has been their champion in past days? This situation is so painful and puzzling, given the people's experience of God, that this second section seems to be searching desperately for an explanation."

Here are a couple of possible answers that the psalmist is wrestling with:

1. Perhaps since God sovereign, He is responsible for our defeat.

Note the repetition of the word, "You..." Six times, the psalmist concludes that God is behind the present defeat in their lives.

⁹ Yet You have rejected *us* and brought us to dishonor,
And do not go out with our armies.

¹⁰ You cause us to turn back from the adversary;
And those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves.

¹¹ You give us as sheep to be eaten

And have scattered us among the nations.
¹² You sell Your people cheaply,
And have not profited by their sale.
¹³ You make us a reproach to our neighbors,
A scoffing and a derision to those around us.
¹⁴ You make us a byword among the nations,
A laughingstock among the peoples.

The truth is, this is how many Christians within the church think of the circumstances of their lives. They agree with Joe Pagan, who says, "This is how God works...He looks the other way and allows our enemies to get the upper hand to teach us a lesson." The problem is that Joe Pagan doesn't *know God*, and God has revealed that He is too holy to approve evil and never looks the other way on anything. He doesn't sleep or slumber (*Ps.121:4*), and neither is He indifferent or impotent in the lives of His people.

Some in the church today agree with Sammy Secular, who says, "Well, the fact that this has happened proves that God is not in control, but we are." But the moment such an explanation is voiced in this way, we know that it is not right. We are not in control of our circumstances. So how do we explain the problems we face? We know that there are no accidents—so, is God responsible for our defeats and troubles?

As believers, we may not understand God's ways, but we know that God is actively working in our defeats and our victories, in our troubles and our triumphs (*Ps.103:19; Phil.2:13; Rom.8:28*). The right response on our part is to trust His heart even when we cannot trace His hand.

Another possible answer that the psalmist is wrestling with is...

2. Perhaps we are self-deceived, and God is judging us.

¹⁵ All-day long my dishonor is before me
And my humiliation has overwhelmed me,
¹⁶ Because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles,
Because of the presence of the enemy and the avenger.
¹⁷ All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You,
And we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant.
¹⁸ Our heart has not turned back,
And our steps have not deviated from Your way,
¹⁹ Yet You have crushed us in a place of jackals
And covered us with the shadow of death.
²⁰ If we had forgotten the name of our God
Or extended our hands to a strange god,
²¹ Would not God find this out?
For He knows the secrets of the heart.
²² But for Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Here is the situation. For centuries Israel had been taught that the reason for defeat was a sign of God's curse upon them (*Josh.7:12*). They had been taught that when they *obeyed God*, they would be blessed, and things would go well for them (*Deut.6-7*). But when they *disobeyed God*, they would be judged, and things would not go so well for them. But what do you do when you look back, and as far as you can tell, you've been faithful? You are not dealing falsely with the word. Your inward affections match your outward actions, and you are following God to the best of your ability.

Yet, you are suffering dishonor, humiliation, oppression. What is going on? That's what the psalmist expresses with honesty. In verse 17, he does not so much defend their integrity as much as express their expectation. "**All this has come**...but we have not committed apostasy or idolatry. We have not swerved, deviated, or declined in our commitment! Yet here we are crush, humbled, shattered, beat down, bruised up." Can you relate to this feeling at all? If not, you will some day, so pay attention, so you know what to do! Here is the point: suffering or hardship is not always the result of some sin in your life. Sometimes it's merely God's polishing tool getting you ready for blessing and heaven.

In verse 21, when the psalmist says, "**Would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart.**" He is not saying that if we had sinned, God would know about it (yes, God knows all things), but rather, he is saying, "*if we had done wrong, God would have revealed that to us.*" And this is how we argue about our circumstances. We say, "I asked the Lord to show me where I've gone wrong, and He hasn't shown me, so something else must be going on."

Verse 22 should be familiar to you because Paul quotes it in Romans 8:35-37 to explain that though he and other Christians had served faithfully, yet they were made to face death all day long, yet they would never be separated from God's love. The psalmist is arguing that they are faithful to God, but He has decided to make them suffer innocently.

So, what is the answer? Is *God responsible for our defeats because He is sovereign over all things?* Or, is the reason we are suffering trouble is that *we are self-deceived, and we are being punished for our sins?* No explanation is given in Psalm 44.

Here is a lesson that is given that we need to apply. The Christian life is not lived by explanations but by faith. Trust. Reliance. Belief.

D.L. Moody described three kinds of faith in Jesus Christ. "Struggling faith, which is like a man in deep water; clinging faith, which is like a man hanging to the side of a boat; and resting faith, which finds a man safely within the boat, and able to reach out with a hand to help someone else." What kind of faith do you have at the moment?

Oh for a faith that will be strong
When angry foes beset,
A faith that will stand fast until
The victory is met.
Though dark and long the battle rage,
I pray for faith sincere,
A faith that will stand out, unmoved,
A strength in time of fear.

A courage born of trust alone,
I know will see me through;
So Lord, I pray, Thou mayest now,
My feeble faith renew.⁴

⁴ John Caldwell Craig

Although no explanation is given, a prayer is offered, which seems to teach us that when faith and faithlessness seem unrewarded, pray to God. Boice says, "Get practical and rouse Him, if you must, with your prayers."

C. THE FUTURE (vv.23-26)

This prayer is offered as a model and helps us when our circumstances don't make sense. This is how sheep overcome.

²³ Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord?
Awake, do not reject us forever.

²⁴ Why do You hide Your face
And forget our affliction and our oppression?

²⁵ For our soul has sunk down into the dust;
Our body cleaves to the earth.

Suffering and divine action create an opportunity for the true Christian to practice *importunity in prayer*. Importunity means *urgent prayer, pressing solicitation, or pressing entreaty* that does not come out when things are sunny and comfortable. Remember, in the parable that Jesus told in Luke 18, it was when her opponent was harassing a poor widow that she pressed the unrighteous Judge to give her legal protection. And she was heard because of her importunity, or her urging (*Luke 18:8*). In an argument from the lesser to the greater, Jesus explains,

⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous Judge said; ⁷ now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

Now come up close and listen, dear friends. The psalmist understands that God does not sleep or slumber (*Ps. 121:4*), but he uses metaphoric language—"Arouse Yourself...awake..."—to explain *divine inaction*. And in doing so, he teaches us that *we are permitted to plead with God when His dealings are mysterious*. God is not bothered by His people's many requests.

Their hearts are as low as they can go, he feels. And you may feel the same today. Your trials have pushed you to the cliff. Your soul is on the edge. Are those feelings "*Christian*"? They are *real* in the Christian's heart! Can a true believer *thrust down into the dust* by circumstances and hit *rock bottom* even when he is faithful? Yes, and sometimes God allows us to taste the topsoil of life. Yes, we may be driven to the point of despair. Is there any hope for the Christian? Yes, there is! Stuart Townend expressed it wonderfully when he wrote,

There is a hope that burns within my heart,
That gives me strength for every passing day;
A glimpse of glory now revealed in meager part,
Yet drives all doubt away.
I stand in Christ with sins forgiven
And Christ in me the hope of heaven.
My highest calling and my deepest joy,
To make His will my home.

There is a hope that lifts my weary head;
A consolation strong against despair
That when the world has plunged me in its deepest pit,
I find the Savior there.
Through present sufferings, future's fear,
He whispers courage in my ear;
For I am safe in everlasting arms,
And they will lead me home.⁵

Here is another short but sweet prayer that is clear, comprehensive, simple, and urgent.

²⁶Rise up, be our help,
And redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.

You helped us in the past. You must help us now. But you are not helping us, even though we have done nothing to prohibit your helping us. So, help us. Not because we deserve it, but because of Your mercy's sake. Do you have the faith to pray this way? Eugene Peterson translates it this way:

Get up, GOD! Are you going to sleep all day?
Wake up! Don't you care what happens to us?
Why do you bury your face in the pillow?
Why pretend things are just fine with us?
And here we are—flat on our faces in the dirt,
held down with a boot on our necks.
Get up and come to our rescue.
If you love us so much, *Help us!*

CONCLUSION:

- God's deliverances in the past are meant to be passed on from generation to generation. Have you shared with your children what God has done for you?
- God lets us see and feel our weakness before He sends relief.
- Crisis reveals our commitment. A time of trouble is no time to deny, forget, or run from our duty to God and to His people. Stand firm and be faithful, and God will provide what you need in His timing.
- Means must be used but not relied on. We sow and water, but God must be trusted for the increase.
- Divine mercy makes a difference. Appeal to the Lord! Can He not deliver? Will He not help those who belong to Him? No situation is so bleak that it is beyond the redeeming power of God.

⁵ Stuart Townend, *There Is a Hope*

© September 14, 2020 The Church at South Mountain

You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction.

For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by The Church at South Mountain. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:

© The Church at South Mountain. Website: casm.org

While all reasonable attempts have been taken to trace the literary and biblical sources used by the author, due to the nature of some of the original materials (old audio/radio or live preaching events), some have been impossible to locate. Any information regarding the origin of any unreferenced statements or quotations is welcomed and will be included in the next revision of the study.