

Psalm 44- "When Experience Doesn't Meet Expectations"

- 1 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.
- 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.
- 4 You are my King and my God,
who decrees [c] victories for Jacob.
- 5 Through you we push back our enemies;
through your name we trample our foes.
- 6 I put no trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me victory;
- 7 but you give us victory over our enemies,
you put our adversaries to shame.
- 8 In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever.

-Psalm 44:1-8

I remember when I was growing up, every Sunday after church my family would go to my grandparents' house for Sunday lunch. For many of us—myself included—we don't do that anymore. We fight the masses at Longhorn or Texas Roadhouse, but we rarely find our way to those family dinners at home. For me, Sunday lunch at my grandparents' house was one of the highlights of the week. Not only was the food amazing, but the fellowship was even better. You see, I come from a family of ministers. My mom is a worship pastor, and before he passed away a few years ago my grandad was a worship and associate pastor. So naturally, at those Sunday lunches, there would be discussion of the service we had just gotten out of, and stories of what God had done in the past. Often, it would not just be our family at these lunches, but other members of the congregation. Around that lunch table I learned a lot of things: what it meant to be a part of my family, what it meant to be a minister of the gospel, and what it meant to follow God faithfully.

When I arrived at The First Church, I was greeted with a similar experience of telling stories and sharing experiences from the past. One thing I am thankful for is that we truly are a "congregation for every generation," and we as a church have an amazing legacy of faith that has been passed down throughout generations. I love hearing the stories that we tell from the past. I love getting to hear about the Oak Street Youth Choir, or Sunday night services with guest speakers like Dr. Terry Trammel. I love hearing about how we came to our current location from Oak Street, or even about the earliest stories of our church with A.B. Crumpler and the revival that broke out on the courthouse steps. One of my favorite stories actually comes from the book *Old Time Power* by Dr. Vinson Synan, where he tells the story

of our denomination. He writes about how when Crumpler would preach, his voice was so powerful that farmers would be in their fields miles away, hear the message, drop to their knees, and surrender their life to Jesus. I love those stories!

Stories like that matter! They matter to you and they matter to me! Why? Because it means we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. What God is doing in Goldsboro and through his church did not start with us and by the grace of God it will not end with us either! We are a part of a much larger story of faithfulness stretching for over one hundred years, and today so much of our identity and culture as a people and a church is built by the stories that we tell. This is a reality that was true for the writer of Psalm 44 as well. We do not know exactly who he is, or when he is writing but we do have several strong theories that we will get to later today.

Psalm 44 opens with the first eight verses that we read earlier describing something known as the “salvation history” of Israel. All that is, is a fancy way of saying the chronicling of times throughout history where God saved his people or moved on their behalf to bring them into the promised land. And for the writer of Psalm 44, so much of his identity and understanding of God is wrapped up in this history. For the Israelites, the stories they told about God mattered. They had been given a mandate to pass them down to the next generation so that they might not forget what God had done for them. For the writer of Psalm 44, his identity as an Israelite was wrapped in the fact that he was one of God’s chosen people and that God would fight for him. That brings us to our first point today which is:

Our past experiences with God, shape our present expectations of God.

This is a fact that is as true of God as it is anyone or anything else. The fact that our experiences shape our expectations applies to things as trivial as where we should eat dinner or what we expect out of our sports teams. For example, I am an NC State fan. This upcoming football season we will play ECU the first game of the year, and right now I know that we will either lose the game, or just barely squeak by with a win. How do I know this? Because I have been watching NC State football long enough to know that Dave Doeren is going to want to win 14-10 and not open up the playbook on offense! Should NC State beat ECU pretty handily? Yes! But my past experience will not allow me to expect that.

When it comes to decisions like where we are going to eat dinner, experience plays a vital role in shaping our expectations as well. I love Mexican food! I don’t know if you have noticed, but we have quite a few Mexican Restaurants in Goldsboro. I know if I try to name them all I’m going to miss a few, but some of my favorites are Mezcalito, Dos Marias, Chipotle, or if Pastor Tyler and I are feeling brave we might even try Taco Bell. One area where my wife and I are different is that I could eat Mexican food just about every day. Marissa on the other hand cannot. But for me, it’s not about eating the best Mexican food I can possibly get in Goldsboro every day, it’s about embracing the variety that is out there and accepting each restaurant for what it is. For me, Chipotle is the restaurant that I go to the most. It’s not the greatest Mexican food in the world. Some might even say that it isn’t Mexican food at all, but for me it is fast, relatively healthy, and decently cheap. It is what it is, and I love it. I have a lot of experience with Chipotle so I know what to expect and I am very rarely let down. But if you had never been to Chipotle before and I told you, Chipotle is the best Mexican food you will ever have, you would be pretty disappointed when you go try it. Why? Because what I told you about chipotle gave you expectations that were not met by the experience you actually had there.

Please understand this today, our expectations are built on our past experience, but for those who have not had an experience of their own yet, the story we tell them will shape their expectations. It might be that way with Chipotle, but it is definitely that way with God.

The stories we tell about God matter.

They matter for you. The way you talk about God will inform your faith when you have nothing else to cling to. They matter for your friends that don't know him. The stories you tell them about God will determine if they are willing to give him a shot. They especially matter for your children. The way you talk about God to your children WILL shape how they see him more than any other thing in their life. That's why it matters that you share your faith with your kids. That's why it matters that you tell them what God has done for you. If you're here and you're thinking, "my kids are grown, I've done my part, I already shared my faith with them," your job is not done. You still have a story to share with the next generation and if you think they don't need it or don't want to hear it you are absolutely wrong! Your voice and your story matters! Share it!

There are so many stories that I remember my family sharing with me growing up that shaped the way I view God even until this day. I won't get into all of them, but one in particular that I remember. I remember my great-grandmother telling me about how she had rheumatoid arthritis in her hands and was healed in an Oral Roberts service. She's gone to be with Jesus now, but why does it matter? Because all those years later, her great grandson still believes that we serve God who heals, not just because I read about it in a book, but because the faith to believe for it has been passed down through my own family and now I've seen it in my own life! I still pray for the sick to be healed because I've seen it for myself and I know without a shadow of a doubt that we serve a God who is still healing the sick both through modern medicine and in ways we cannot understand or explain!

For the writer of Psalm 44, the first eight verses where he is praising God for what he has done, comes directly from the stories he has been told by his ancestors. Right off the bat we get a big indication of this in verse one when he says, "We have heard it with our ears, Oh God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days. Days long ago." (Psalm 44:1 NIV) Here's what we can learn from this statement, all the things he mentions God doing in the first eight verses, pushing back enemies and trampling foes, securing victory for Israel, these are things the writer has heard about, but has not yet seen for himself.

You have to remember where Israel is in their history at this point. They have been in the promised land for a while and they have not yet been sent into exile. They've had their issues, they've had their civil wars, splitting into two kingdoms—Israel in the North and Judah in the south, but for the most part things have gone relatively well. They have heard about God bringing them into the promised land and triumphing over their enemies, but they have not yet seen it for themselves. Which brings us to our next point:

What do you do when your experience does not meet your expectations?

- 9 But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
- 10 You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
- 11 You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.

12 You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale.

13 You have made us a reproach to our neighbors,
the scorn and derision of those around us.

14 You have made us a byword among the nations;
the peoples shake their heads at us.

15 I live in disgrace all day long,
and my face is covered with shame

16 at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me,
because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.

-Psalm 44:9-16

As we have continued to read Psalm 44, what started as praise in the first eight verses, has now turned to lament in the next eight. Interestingly enough, Psalm 44 is the first corporate lament in the Psalter. What does that mean? This is the first time in the book of Psalms that a Psalm is written as a corporate complaint and a corporate cry for help. As I said earlier, while we do not know for certain who the writer of Psalm 44 is or when exactly it was written, one popular theory is that it was written for the people of Judah during the Assyrian Invasion. If you know anything about the history of the people of Israel, you know that in the Old Testament following the reign of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was split into two nations—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament we see the story of each of these kingdoms as they try to navigate what it means to be the Lord's chosen people as now two separate nations.

If Psalm 44 was in fact written during the Assyrian Invasion of Judah, that means that the nation of Israel would have already been in exile. Unlike the kingdom of Israel, the people of Judah had kept their covenant with the Lord until later in history. This would explain why Israel was taken into exile first. At this point in history, Hezekiah would be the king of Judah. Hezekiah was a good king. He tore down the high places where people had been worshiping false gods and encouraged the people to return to the Lord and keep the covenant. But at this point the Assyrians, who had already sent Israel into Exile, began to invade Judah, and everything that the people of Judah had heard about God was being called into question. The things they had heard were in line with the first eight verses of Psalm 44; that God would help them to defeat their enemies and maintain victory for his people. However, what they are now seeing is the reality of the second eight verses of Psalm 44: they are being forced to retreat as they are being destroyed by their enemies and have become a disgrace. What they had been told about God all their life is not lining up with what they are seeing right now, and they don't even know why!

What do you do when that happens? When what you have been taught to believe about God is in direct contrast with what you are experiencing in your life right now. What do you do when you hear about how God is a provider, but bills you cannot pay are stacking up on your counter? What do you do when you hear that God is a healer, but people you love are sick and dying? What do you've been taught that God hears your prayers, but when you pray it feels like you are just screaming into the void? What do you do when what you have heard about God and your experience of him are totally different? That's exactly the position that the writer of Psalm 44 is in. He's been told his whole life that God would fight for him, because he is a part of God's chosen people, but now that trouble has come God's help is noticeably

absent. In this moment everything he is experiencing goes against everything he has been taught and he can't help but ask "Why?"

Have you ever asked God "why" before? It's really an interesting question, because in order to ask him why we have to first admit that we don't know. Some of you may be fortunate enough to not be in many situations that you cannot understand or explain with your own logic or reason, but sooner or later for all of us, we will find ourselves in a situation where we have to ask God "why." Why is my family member sick? Why is my heart broken? Why has my son or daughter walked away from you? These are the "whys" we ask God. For the writer of Psalm 44 he asks God why he is punishing him or why He's seemingly so unconcerned with coming to his rescue.

- 17** All this came upon us,
though we had not forgotten you;
we had not been false to your covenant.
18 Our hearts had not turned back;
our feet had not strayed from your path.
19 But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;
you covered us over with deep darkness.
- 20** If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
21 would not God have discovered it,
since he knows the secrets of the heart?
22 Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

By this point in the Psalm, the writer has established that he has heard of God's greatness and power poured out in the past, that he is not experiencing that right now, and that he does not understand why he is going through what he is going through. Essentially this section is a plea of innocence. In other words, he's saying that not only does he not understand why he is going through this hardship, but that he does not deserve it. It's one thing to ask "why," it's another thing to ask "why" knowing that you do not deserve the suffering you are enduring, and for the writer of Psalm 44 he does not deserve the pain that he is feeling right now.

You have to remember the context, in the southern kingdom of Judah, they have for the most part done a good job of keeping God's covenant. They have seen Israel taken off to exile for breaking the covenant so they have done their best to do a better job of keeping it. They currently have a good king, but yet at this moment it seems as if they are facing the same fate of their neighbors to the north. Throughout the entirety of the Old Testament the overarching rules are pretty simple for the people of Israel and Judah—if they keep their covenant then they will be blessed and be able to remain in the promised land. That is the general rule, BUT in this instance that is not what is happening. This is not life as usual, this is an anomaly. This is not how it's supposed to go. I wonder if there is anyone reading this today who right now their life is not going how it's supposed to go? You've done the things you are supposed to do. You've showed up at church every Sunday. You've given in the offering. You've volunteered when the church needed help. You made sure your kids are in church. But things are still not going the way that they are supposed to go. One reason why I love the book of Psalms so much is it shows us that when things don't go the way they are supposed to go, it is okay to express your frustrations to God.

The writer of Psalm 44, has done what he's supposed to do, he's honored God and kept His covenant, but yet his people are still being destroyed and he doesn't know why and it's frustrating. One of the more frustrating things in life is to search for an answer that you may never find. As people, when things do not go how they are supposed to go, we are designed to want an answer and to want it right now. But even when we do not know why bad things are happening to us we still have to decide how we are going to respond. One of the greatest tests of your faith is seeing how you respond when you don't get the answer you want, or don't even get an answer at all.

That's where Psalm 44:22 comes into play, "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." When I was younger and I would read that verse, I would spend the majority of my time focusing on the second part where it says we are "as sheep to be slaughtered," but as I was studying it again in preparation for this message I found myself drawn to the first few words, "Yet for your sake." What the writer is essentially saying is that the only reason he can come up with for why he is facing such unfair suffering is for the sake of the Lord; meaning that the struggle he is caught up in right now is part of God's plan and to struggle for God is part of what it means to be His chosen people. The only thing the writer can think of as to why he is facing the terrible realities of invasion and defeat is that it is part of what God is asking of his people in this season. So in this moment of pain, anguish, and confusion, the writer has now made up his mind that "I don't know why this is happening, and I definitely don't deserve it, but what I know for sure is that somehow somehow this is a part of God's plan for my life." That could mean that God is going to step in on his behalf, or that could mean that he will end his days suffering for God, but either way, God will get his glory.

The writer of Psalm 44 closes out his Psalm by saying this:

23 Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?

Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

24 Why do you hide your face

and forget our misery and oppression?

25 We are brought down to the dust;

our bodies cling to the ground.

26 Rise up and help us;

rescue us because of your unfailing love.

-Psalm 44:23-26

Psalm 44 closes with a prayer for help and an appeal to the unfailing love of God. But why? Because in the midst of pain and suffering that the writer of Psalm 44 is facing, he has decided that even though he might not understand what's going on, or feel as if he deserves it, he still knows that God loves him, is in control, and can make a difference. In the midst of so much uncertainty and unknown, the Psalmist has two things that he knows for certain:

1. God is in control, and
2. The love of God will never fail

Over 700 years later the Apostle Paul is going to be writing to a group of persecuted Christians in Rome. As he is writing to them he is reminded of Psalm 44:22—"Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered," and he is going to use this verse to encourage them in the midst of their suffering.

31 What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? **32** He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? **33** Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. **34** Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. **35** 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. **38** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 8:31-39

Isn't that something? All of those years later, Paul is going to remind a group of persecuted Christians, that suffering is actually a part of what it means to be God's chosen people. While their current struggle may be uncalled for, unfair, and unfamiliar to them, it is not unfamiliar to God or his people who have come before them. Throughout history God's people have faced persecution, turmoil, and unrest, while struggling because of their religious beliefs and affiliations. Yet Paul reminds this group of suffering Christians in Rome that in the midst of their persecution, when so much is uncertain, they still have a reason to celebrate because of two things:

1. The work of God in them, and
2. The Love of God for them.

So often in our lives when bad things happen, when things do not go how they are supposed to go, we are left to ask "why?" knowing that we do not deserve the hardship we are facing. But when we don't get the answer we want, we can still be comforted by knowing that like the persecuted church in Rome, and the writer of Psalm 44, God is at work in us, and nothing can separate us from the love God has for us. We might not get our answer as to why this is happening, or how long we have to endure it, but we do get Jesus, and **Jesus Is the Answer.**

Because of Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross, we have:

- His Spirit living and working in us.
- His blood that has washed over us

- His love that will never be separated from us.

That does not mean that we no longer will face suffering or hardships that are unfair and unexplainable, but it does mean that when we do, we don't have to do it alone because He is with us. We might not have the answers but we do have Jesus, and **when we have Jesus, we have everything you need.**