

More Than Conquerors

Psalm 44

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So, here we are this morning in Psalm 44 and working through another Psalm whose heartbeat is suffering. Perhaps you have heard the old saying, *"You are either going into a storm or in the middle of one or are coming out of one."* There's a lot of truth to that. Here's the deal: *Suffering is one of the universal languages of life.*

In the Bible, we learn that Job was fluent in that language of suffering. He said this, *"As sure as the sparks fly upward, so is man born into trouble."* Seventeenth-century English historian John Selden put it this way, *"Pleasure is the intermission of pain."* Perhaps you are in that intermission period right now where life could not be better for you. On the other hand, most of us are not.

Do you remember what Jesus said about trouble, don't you? He said, *"In this life, you might have trouble, or was it, possibly could have trouble, or did He say, perhaps you will have some trouble."* No, He said, *"In this life you will have trouble."* It's going to happen. You can count on it. So, if you live long enough, unfortunately you're going to learn how to speak the language of suffering. You're going to experience suffering in some form and to some degree. I know I sound like a *Debbie Downer*, but this is just life lived in a world broken by sin. Let's pray and get to work on Psalm 44.

Before we get into Psalm 44, let me tell you where we are going. Remember the title of the sermon series: *Psalms: Songs for Sojourners*. Most of these Psalms are songs. Some are poetic prayers meant for worship, much like a liturgy. They help people pray when the pain is so great they have no words.

In the latter part of the book of Psalms, we will see more Psalms of praise. All of the Psalms have to some degree a prophetic trajectory that points to their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The Psalms range from lament to praise and cover almost all of the human emotional experiences. John Calvin said that *the Psalms are the anatomy of the human soul*.

Last Sunday we covered Psalm 42 and 43. They are an individual lament. This morning we will cover Psalm 44, and it is a corporate lament. Then in Psalm 45, we will see the remedy for the lament is the coming of the King. Psalm 46 has an apocalyptic vibe. It declares the power of God to protect His people now and until the end. Finally, Psalms 47-49 are celebration Psalms.

Now, let's get into Psalm 44. Psalm 44 speaks directly to the experience of suffering when we don't understand why we are suffering. Now, here's the distinction of the suffering in Psalm 44. God's people are suffering because they are being attacked by God's enemies. They are being persecuted, and they can't understand why it is happening.

Psalm 44 is one of the most honest prayers about suffering in the Bible. Unlike many psalms of lament, this one contains no obvious confession of sin. Instead, the prayer expresses confusion about why God's people are suffering. Obviously, Israel was never perfect, but in this case it seems they had remained faithful to God, and yet they were being crushed under the weight of their suffering. It was so bad they felt like they were suffocating under the affliction.

Okay, now here is what this psalm teaches believers. It teaches that faithful people sometimes suffer deeply. Remember, God's silence is not God's absence. The pressure of the suffering in this Psalm is great. As a matter of fact, when we get to the end of Psalm 44, it seems to have no resolution or clear confession of faith.

Here's what we are going to learn about Psalm 44. It finds its resolution in Romans 8:31-39. The Apostle Paul understood that Psalm 44 was pointing beyond Israel's experience to the church's experience as they waited for Christ's return. Friends, our hope rests not in our circumstances or our obedience but in God's covenant love fulfilled in Jesus Christ's sinless life, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. Listen, the gospel does not

promise freedom from suffering. It promises God's faithfulness in suffering, with the ultimate victory coming in Jesus Christ.

Here's the main idea of Psalm 44 and Romans 8:31-39: *Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, by faith we can be confident that all of our suffering is part of God's plan and purpose for our lives even when it comes at the hands of God's enemies.*

Now, let me press pause right here because for some of you, your mind is jamming gears right now. You may be thinking that the suffering you are going through doesn't feel like part of God's plan and purpose at all. Perhaps it has lasted a long time, and as we saw in Psalm 42 and 43, you just go from one painful event to another. It is dark. It is painful, and you are ready for it to end. I get it. Sometimes when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, it is a long, difficult, dark journey. Suffering is painful, but remember what I said: *By faith, not by feeling, we can be confident.*

We are going to work through Psalm 44 and Romans 8:31-39. Psalm 44 doesn't give a clear *reason* for God's people's suffering, nor does it give a clear *resolution* to their suffering at the end. Since it doesn't have a clear resolution, we need to consider the Apostle Paul's quotation of Psalm 44:22 in Romans 8:36. I have four points to help us walk through Psalm 44 and Romans 8:31-39.

I. Remembering God's Past Faithfulness Strengthens Our Faith (vv. 1-8)

Verses 1-3 revisit Israel's salvation experience in the past. It is a poetic retelling of Israel's exodus from Egypt and conquest of the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy, Moses commanded them to regularly revisit the Exodus story as their salvation experience to strengthen their faith. For Israel to thrive as a nation also depended on them revisiting and retelling these stories regularly through festivals, celebrations, and the Passover so they could pass their faith along to future generations.

Psalm 44 sounds like a hymn or liturgy. Listen to v. 1 again:

*O God, we have heard with our ears,
our fathers have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:*

The people sang or recited, "*We have heard with our ears, our father has told us.*" One generation passes along faith to another. Verses 1-8 are the command of Deuteronomy 6 put in a Psalm.

Remembering God's past faithfulness is one way we can strengthen present faith. When we praise God for His grace in the past, our faith is restored for the struggles of the present. Listen to the confession of faith in v. 4:

*You are my King, O God;
ordain salvation for Jacob [Israel]!*

Remembering God's past faithfulness reorients our faith to where it should be. Look at vv. 6-8 and we will hear faith's reorientation:

*For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.
⁷ But you have saved us from our foes
and have put to shame those who hate us.
⁸ In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah*

It is not uncommon for us to struggle with the temptation to trust in our own ability, plans, schemes, and wisdom to make life work. So, here's the deal: Remembering and reciting God's past faithfulness helps us fight against misplacing our faith. Israel was reminded to only trust and boast in God for what He has done for them.

The New Testament equivalent to v. 8 is found in Galatians 6:14,

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

We can look back at all that the Bible teaches us in the stories in the Old Testament, the Prophets, and the Law, *but the primary place Christians look to strengthen our faith is the cross of Christ*. You see, even while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Before we knew we needed to be saved, Jesus died in our place on the cross to pay our debt of sin. Then He was buried and rose victorious over death on the third day.

This is what we do every Sunday. We gather to remember our great salvation in Jesus Christ. We praise Him for all that He has done for us and what He continues to do for us as our Advocate before the Father. We read Scripture together, sing songs, pray prayers, and hear the Word of God preached to remind us, and remind one another, of our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ. This act of worship is a means of grace not only to strengthen our faith but to refill us with God's Holy Spirit so that we can live life in this broken world. So, we are already applying vv. 1-8 as we have gathered this morning.

Now, up to this point, Psalm 44 sounds very encouraging, but it is about to take a turn, and if we are not careful and do not navigate the stormy waters of vv. 9-22, we will make shipwreck of our faith.

II. The Confusion of Current Struggles Attacks Our Faith (vv. 9-22)

In vv. 9-22, we hear the confusion of God's people, and they make their confusion and complaint known to God for their dilemma. Are you ready? Here's the million-dollar question they are asking God:

"Why has all of this happened to us? Why have You changed from the God of marvelous grace vv. 1-8 to allowing us to be disgraced?"

They are confused, and their hearts are broken. Their faith is being assaulted because of the trials and persecution they are experiencing. Suffering to this degree makes faith a challenge. They can find no reason for their struggles.

For some of us, suffering and struggles strengthen our faith, but for most of us, suffering and struggle strip us of our faith. If we are not careful, we will break down under the pressure of suffering and persecution.

Suddenly everything changed, so v. 9 begins with, *"But You have rejected us..."* The God who once gave victory now appears absent. So, the psalmist brings his complaint directly to God and lays out their pain. In v. 10, he says we've been defeated in battle. Then in v. 11, he compares Israel to sheep that are being slaughtered. Next, v. 12 pictures them being sold cheaply. Verse 13 says the surrounding nations mocked and scorned them. Verse 14 says that because of their defeat, they have become a proverb for what defeat looks like. The closest modern saying I could think of to illustrate this is, *"Everything was going great, and then it all went south."* *"It went South"* refers to how the North defeated the South in the Civil War. So, saying *"It went South"* refers to losing, defeat, or failure. Verses 15-16 speak of how the enemy continually humiliated them. Listen, for them, every area of life had collapsed, and yet they continued praying and making their complaint known to God. Believe it or not, the right kind of complaint is a lament of the loss and pain that is still an expression of faith in God.

Next, in vv. 17-22, the prayer of complaint and confusion intensifies. The psalmist gives reasons for his question of: *"Why has this happened?"*

First, let's consider vv. 17-21:

*All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant.*

¹⁸ *Our heart has not turned back,*

nor have our steps departed from your way;

¹⁹ *yet you have broken us in the place of jackals*

and covered us with the shadow of death.
²⁰ *If we had forgotten the name of our God*
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
²¹ *would not God discover this?*
For he knows the secrets of the heart.

They've got questions, but they are not getting any answers. They want to know why God allowed them to be defeated by their enemy. They want to know why it seems God has hidden His face from His people. In essence, they were saying:

"After all, Lord, we have not turned to false gods. We've been faithful. Why are we suffering so badly if we have been faithful?"

Here's what I think is going on and why they are saying what they are saying. I mean, who in the world would declare their sinlessness before God? I don't think they are proclaiming their sinlessness. I think what they are saying is that as far as they know, they have kept covenant faithfulness. They haven't abandoned God for other gods. They haven't even pretended they had secret sins. They are saying, "*We have followed the covenant.*" We have strived to love you with all of our hearts, soul, mind, and strength. We have confessed our sins according to the covenant. And yet, Lord, as v. 22 says:

Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Now, if you know very much about your Bible, you will recognize v. 22. The Apostle Paul quotes it in Romans 8:36. Circle v. 22, and we are going to come back to it in a moment because v. 22 is the key to understanding Psalm 44. Right now we need to wrap up vv. 23-26.

III. God's Silence in Our Struggles Attacks Our Faith (vv. 23-26)

Now, I covered this point to some degree last Sunday. I said that God's silence does not mean that God is absent. What do you do when God's silence is deafening? Most of us struggle with our faith. You can hear this in the psalmist's struggle in the last four verses of Psalm 44:

Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!
²⁴ *Why do you hide your face?*
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
²⁵ *For our soul is bowed down to the dust;*
our belly clings to the ground.
²⁶ *Rise up; come to our help!*
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!

When you hear these verses, you understand that they didn't know how to process the persecution that was happening to them. They simply didn't have a category for it. As far as they knew, they hadn't changed, but they thought God had. The persecution and defeat had destroyed their paradigm for how to relate to God. It was crumbling before their eyes.

So, let's think about it: Perhaps they believed that God owed them. Perhaps they believed their righteousness meant they would always achieve victory. Perhaps they were learning that a relationship with God is not based on a transaction that says, "*If I am good, then I deserve not to suffer. I deserve only good things.*" This may be the case because the Jews had practiced this for many years.

Here's what I think: I don't think self-righteousness is the reason for their persecution and suffering in Psalm 44. So, we don't really see a clear reason for their persecution and suffering in Psalm 44, and as a result we don't see a resolution to their lament.

This is how Psalm 44 is different than most all Psalms of lament. All Psalms of lament contain a complaint, but they will end in a confession of faith in God and give Him praise. But Psalm 44 doesn't really end that way. Psalm 44 just leaves us lying face down, crying in the dirt, begging God to wake up. There seems to be no resolution in Psalm 44.

However, there is a glimmer of resolution in the lament. Commentator Loren Crow observes,
*Psalm 44 provides a window into the vibrant faith of a community whose whole world was collapsing, and which had no alternative but to blame that collapse on God, but whose appeal is nonetheless to [the] One who cares.*¹

I think Loren Crow puts his finger on the pulse of faith in the midst of persecution and suffering here. While there is no clear resolution or confession of faith and praise of God, the people did call out to God to act. A vibrant faith in the middle of suffering and trial is sometimes raw, especially when it can understand why suffering has hit so hard. We simply cry out, "*Help me, Lord!*"

Let's bring resolution to Psalm 44. Let's set Psalm 44 in light of the cross of Christ.

IV. Christ's Cross Makes Us More Than Conquerors (Romans 8:31-39)

The Apostle Paul takes the darkest line of Psalm 44, v. 22, which says:

*Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
 we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*

And sets it in the light of Jesus' suffering, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, so that the glory of the cross of Christ shines into the darkness of our persecution and suffering.

Let's consider how Paul did this: In the letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul had been building a case for the suffering, persecuted church in Rome to stand firm in the gospel. Paul taught them that God had justified them, they had peace with God, they were alive to God, and had been released from slavery. Now, because of what Jesus Christ had done for them in His death and resurrection, God was eternally for them. Also, because of their union with Christ, there was now no condemnation for those in Christ. Because they had been born again, they had new life in the Spirit, they were adopted into God's family, and were His children. Finally, the God who saved us in Christ now secures us in Christ for His glory.²

If you're like me, when you hear this it all sounds amazing, but there is a question of suffering still remains. You might say:

"Paul, all that sounds really good, but what do we do with our persecution and suffering? You have not answered that question yet."

Then this is what Paul says in Romans 8:31-39. Look at these verses:

*What then shall we say 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 with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge
 against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is
 the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand*

¹ Loren Crow, *The Rhetoric of Psalm 44*, 104; Cf. D. J. Human, *Psalm 44: Why Do YOU Hide Your Face, O God?!*, 566-583.

² J. Josh Smith, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50*, 313.

of God, who indeed is interceding for us.³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded 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 sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What is "these things" in v. 31? This is the persecution and suffering for which we cannot explain why it is happening to us. This is the suffering of the persecuted church. This is the suffering that comes with simply belonging to Jesus. This is the persecution Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said in Matthew 5:10-12,

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake³, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Apostle Paul answers not one but two "million-dollar" questions. First: Why is this happening? Second: And if we are persecuted and suffer, does that mean we are separated from God?

Paul says that neither affliction, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor even being killed by the sword by the enemies of God will separate you from the love of God; *"that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Then he looks back in Psalm 44:22, and he quotes one of the hardest and darkest verses to deal with when God's faithful, innocent people suffer. He says in v. 36:

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

Why does Paul say it that way? It is because he wants us to see our suffering at the hands of God's enemies in light of Jesus' suffering and His death on the cross.

But he doesn't end it here. He goes on in v. 37 to show us how the cross of Christ and His resurrection from the dead transforms our suffering. Now, the resurrection is not explicitly mentioned, but it is implied because Jesus is alive and interceding for us before the Father in vv. 31-35. Look at what Paul says in v. 37:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him [Jesus] who loved us.

The phrase "more than conquerors" is a military term. Here's what it means. It is the picture of an army conquering another army in war and making its defeated enemy now serve them for its good.

Now, here's what this means for us. It means that because Christ suffered and died in your place and for your sin, was buried, and rose victoriously from the dead, He defeated the enemies of God: Death, hell, demons, and Satan. Now, any persecution, suffering, and trouble that these defeated enemies of the King bring upon God's people will serve God's good purposes in their lives. God makes all of your suffering, and even your sin, serve His

³ Whoa! "Righteousness' sake" that sounds a lot like v. 22 when it says, "Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long." He goes on to say "we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." When we are persecuted and slaughtered as God's sheep we are only walking in the steps of the Lamb of God who is the truly innocent Sufferer that was slain for the sins of the world (vv. 9-22). You've got to make that connection.

good and glorious purpose in your life. That's how God makes your suffering serve His glorious purposes for your joy. We believe He will do this by faith, not by our feelings.

So, the resolution of Psalm 44:22 is this. First, when we experience the "*these things*" of v. 22 and Romans 8:31, we remember that "*these things*" are the inevitable reality of life in a world broken by sin.

Second, we must remember and even preach to our hearts that when "*these things*" hit our lives, we are more than conquerors. God will make "*these things*" serve His glorious purpose in our lives.

Third, we must remember and preach to our hearts that "*these things*" never mean God has stopped loving us, or that we are separated from Him, or that He has forgotten us.

Listen, when it seems like the enemies of God are persecuting you and you are suffering for righteousness sake, you must reframe your pain. We must remember that the people of God, the church, are called to bear the cross of Christ. In Luke 9:23, Jesus says:

*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily
and follow me.*

Taking up your cross means to take up an instrument of execution and death. We are dying to ourselves for the sake of His righteousness. Our suffering in these things does not mean God is asleep or has forgotten us. If you think that, then you will do what I said about suffering last Sunday. You will run from the Father instead of to Him. Persecution is part of the Christian life, and Jesus said it will even come within your own family. Then at the conclusion of that sermon He told His disciples in Matthew 10:21-22,

*Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and
children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be
hated by all for my name's sake.*

If we reframe our pain, persecution, and suffering in light of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, God will show us that through the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, we can be confident that all of our suffering is part of God's plan to do something greater in our lives.