



Psalm 44 - National Lament and Prayer for Help

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Maskil.

Introduction

This is a hymn for when the people of God as a whole have suffered some great calamity at the hands of their enemies and are seeking God's help. The calamity is particularly painful, since God has chosen his people, given them a special place, and favoured them over their enemies in the past.

The corporate focus is not impersonal, however; each member of the congregation identifies with the whole people, using the singular 'I' (v.4, v.6 and v.15). When the worshipping congregation sings this, they do more than simply present the request to God; they remind themselves of their privileged standing with God, of the obligation to faith and holiness that is laid upon them, and of God's unfailing loyalty to his purpose for his people. Similar psalms include Psalms 74, 77, 79, 80, and 83. In some cases, the cause for the calamity is mysterious, as here; in others, it is acknowledged as due to the people's unfaithfulness.

The Korahites were Levites from the family of Kohath and were descended from Korah. By David's time it seems they served in the musical aspect of the temple worship (2 Chronicles 20:19). Korah led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses during the wilderness days of the Exodus (Numbers Chapter 16). God judged Korah and his leaders and they all died, but the sons of Korah remained. Perhaps they were so grateful for this mercy that they became notable in Israel for praising God.

Psalm 44:1-8 - We Have Heard What You Did for Us in the Past

The song opens by recounting the ways God has favoured his people over the Gentiles in the past: he drove out the nations from Canaan and planted his own people there (v.2); and after that he saved them from their foes (v.7). The people recognise that God's special provision, not their own abilities, was responsible for

their well-being (v.3 and v.6), and that they should boast in God and give thanks to his name forever (v.8).

- 1 We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:
- 2 you with your own hand drove out the nations,
but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples,
but them you set free;
- 3 for not by their own sword did they win the land,
nor did their own arm give them victory;
but your right hand, and your arm,
and the light of your countenance,
for you delighted in them.

Psalm 44:1-3

Our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days. The psalmist received a special legacy from his ancestors, from their elder generation. Those ancestors were careful to tell them what God did in generations past: <<*Therefore you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears*>> (2 Samuel 7:22), and: <<*There is no one like you, O Lord, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears*>> (1 Chronicles 17:20).

You with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted. Those of the elder generation told the psalmist of the great work God did when he drove out the Canaanites and planted Israel in the land promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

For not by their own sword did they win the land, but your right hand, and your arm. In reading the story of the conquest in the days of Joshua, there were times when Israel did nothing, God alone did the work: <<*I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not*>>

laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant>> (Joshua 24:12-13). There were other times when Israel had to fight, but their fighting would have accomplished nothing without the right hand of God supporting them.

And the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them. This was more important than and prior to having the right hand or arm of the Lord for them. It was more important to have the face and favour of God for them. It should be noted that these were battles and conquests that happened long before the generation immediately before the time of the psalmist. The ancestors of v.1 spoke not only of what they personally had experienced of God, but they also taught them what God did many generations before.

- 4 You are my King and my God;
you command victories for Jacob.
- 5 Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down our assailants.
- 6 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 confusion those who hate us.
- 8 In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name for ever. Selah

Psalm 44:4-8

You are my King and my God; you command victories for Jacob. The psalmist received a gift from his ancestors, telling of God's great work in the past. There was a price for that gift; it made the psalmist dissatisfied with any sense that God was not doing the same works in his own day. Therefore he prayed that God would command victories for Jacob in the present, not only in the stories of the past.

Through you we push down our foes. The prayer was prayed with faith. With confidence, the psalmist anticipated the answers to his prayers as if already done.

For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. Speaking on behalf of Israel, the psalmist assured God that their faith was in God and his power, not in their own strength or skill. And God shows his people they are right to think in this way: ***<<Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them – not by bow, sword***

or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the Lord their God, will save them>> (Hosea 1:7 NIV).

But you have saved us from our foes. This implies thanks for past victories. The psalmist did not speak as if God had done nothing like this before in his own generation.

In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name for ever. It may be supposed that this praise was both for what God had done in both the distant and recent past and in anticipation for what God would do in answer to the present prayer. It is right to boast in the Lord: <<*My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad*>> (Psalm 34:2), <<*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'*>> (1 Corinthians 1:30-31), and: <<*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord*>> (2 Corinthians 10:17).

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. A pause is appropriate here as the hymn moves from a high point to a low one.

Psalm 44:9-16 - But Now You Have Rejected Us

In light of this past (vv.1-8), the current situation is unintelligible. God has apparently rejected and disgraced his people (v.9), no longer giving them success against their foes; he has given them over to be slaughtered and allowed the unbelieving nations to taunt them (v.13).

- ⁹ Yet you have rejected us and abased us,
and have not gone out with our armies.
- ¹⁰ You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have taken spoil for themselves.
- ¹¹ You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.
- ¹² You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.
- ¹³ You have made us the taunt of our neighbours,
the derision and scorn of those around us.

- 14 You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughing-stock among the peoples.
- 15 All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face
- 16 at the words of the taunters and revilers,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

Psalm 44:9-16

Yet you have rejected us and abased us. The psalmist now stated their great present need. They felt that God did not fight for Israel and therefore they were without hope in battle: <<*For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?*>> (Psalm 43:2). The key to prevailing over their enemies was to first prevail with God.

You have made us like sheep for slaughter. The psalmist understood that for Israel, as a covenant nation, victory or defeat was in the hand of the Lord. Therefore, if there were defeated, scattered, sold into slavery, made a reproach or derision, it was because God's hand was behind it in some way: <<*I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down by your enemies; your foes shall rule over you, and you shall flee though no one pursues you*>> (Leviticus 26:17). Notice the repletion of the word you.

You have scattered us among the nations; you have made us a byword among the nations. The theme of this psalm reveals a time of great national disaster but the period of history it represents is hotly disputed among theologians and commentators. Some place it as early as the time of David, others to one of the great national exiles; Calvin claims it fits best to the times of the Maccabees. There is no real consensus but the content reveals a nation in turmoil, just as God had told them at the time of the exodus: <<*And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste*>> (Leviticus 26:33).

All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face. The psalmist was brought low, and not only because of the defeat and disgrace suffered from their enemies. Worse was the sense that it was because God had abandoned Israel, or perhaps was against them.

Psalm 44:17-22 - But We Have Not Forsaken You

The pain of the situation is especially sharp because the community cannot discover what unfaithfulness of theirs could have brought on the calamity. They claim not to have forgotten God, or to have been false to his covenant (v.17); they acknowledge that if they had done so, God would know it and would be right to discipline them. The community is not claiming absolute sinlessness. The OT recognises that the pious commit sins, even grievous ones, and it makes provision for them without calling such people 'wicked'. However, it tends to reserve terms like 'unfaithfulness' or 'wickedness' for the actual turning of the heart's fundamental loyalty away from God, as in idolatry: <<*If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart*>> (vv.20-21), or in persecution of the godly: <<*So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgement comes forth perverted*>> (Habakkuk 1:4).

- 17 All this has come upon us,
yet we have not forgotten you,
or 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 haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness.

Psalm 44:17-19

All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you. The psalmist felt duty bound to tell God that despite the feeling they had been forsaken, they had not departed from God: <<*I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant, for I do not forget your commandments*>> (Psalm 119:176). They remembered him and remained faithful to his covenant. The mention of the covenant was of special purpose. Under the Old Covenant, known as the Mosaic or Sinai Covenant, God promised to bless an obedient Israel and curse a disobedient Israel, as in Deuteronomy Chapter 28. The psalmist implied that God must now be faithful to his part of the covenant because Israel had been faithful to their part.

Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way. Without claiming sinless perfection, the psalmist insisted that as a whole, Israel was still committed to God in heart and in conduct (our steps). This might be called an honest, anti-penitential psalm. Several Psalms are deep with a sense of personal sinfulness and contrition. In Psalm 44 there is a sense that the psalmist

honestly, and not self-righteously, makes the case that their present distress was not due to unaddressed sin or rebellion.

Yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness. In firm but polite protest, the psalmist insisted that Israel's faithfulness to God had been answered by disaster sent by God.

The haunt of jackals would be a place of ruins, as confirmed in: <<*Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches*>> (Isaiah 34:13), and: <<*I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals; and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitant*>> (Jeremiah 9:11).

20 If we had forgotten the name of our God,
or spread out our hands to a strange god,
21 would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.
22 Because of you we are being killed all day long,
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Psalm 44:20-22

If we had forgotten the name of our God. The psalmist continued to insist that Israel had remained faithful. They had remembered the Lord and had not prayed to idols, i.e. spread out our hands to a strange god. If they had, God would know and there was no use in denying it, for he knows the secrets of the heart: <<*But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'*>> (1 Samuel 16:7), <<*then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, forgive, act, and render to all whose hearts you know – according to all their ways, for only you know what is in every human heart*>> (1 Kings 8:39), <<*Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord, how much more human hearts!*>> (Proverbs 15:11), and: <<*I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings*>> (Jeremiah 17:10).

Would not God discover this? This means that as far as the psalmist was concerned, in his day there was no Achan moment as in Joshua Chapter 7, where calamity came to the people of God because of hidden sin. They had sincerely sought God for just such an understanding.

Because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter describes God's people suffering death at the hands of those who oppose

God; in Romans 8:36, Paul uses this verse to remind believers that God's people have always had to face such situations, yet they must not conclude that they are thereby separated from the love of Christ.

Psalm 44:23-26 - Therefore Come Now to Help Us

To remember God's history with his people emboldens the community to pray for his aid in the present. The language of vv.23-24 uses bold imagery, as if God were asleep, as confirmed by: <<**Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defence, for my cause, my God and my Lord!**>> (Psalm 35:23), or forgetful; even though the faithful know that this is imagery, they also have canonical warrant for boldly appealing to God to keep his word. The last word is a request for God to redeem (refer to the comment made on Psalm 25:22), for the sake of his steadfast love – a request that God is sure to honour.

23 Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not cast us off for ever!

24 Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

25 For we sink down to the dust;

our bodies cling to the ground.

26 Rise up, come to our help.

Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

Psalm 44:23-26

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off for ever!

The psalmist had the depth of relationship with God to speak this freely, and God had the love and grace to not only hear it, but also to record such a prayer in his word. The psalmist openly spoke his feeling that God had forsaken and forgotten a faithful Israel: <<**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?**>> (Psalm 22:1).

Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

In times of trial and testing it often seems as though God is absent: <<**He said: I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness**>> (Deuteronomy 32:20), <<**How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me?**>> (Psalm 13:1), and: <<**Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour**>> (Isaiah 45:15). Yet the command is clear enough: <<**Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the**

Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you>>
(Deuteronomy 31:6).

For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. In body and soul Israel was at the crisis point and in the dust of shame and defeat: <<*My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to your word>>* (Psalm 119:25).

Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. The psalmist has stated Israel's problem as clearly and strongly as possible. One might expect him to be angry with God or to lose hope. Instead the psalm leaves him trusting God even in his pain and disappointment. He made his final appeal not on the basis of what Israel deserved, but for the sake of God's mercy: <<*You will rise up and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to favour it; the appointed time has come>>* (Psalm 102:13).