

Prayer

Lord of all history and Lord of all time, save Your people now from being so limited and self focussed that they fail to understand the eternal plan of Salvation and the glories of Your revelation throughout history and throughout the world. Open up our eyes to the breadth and glory of Your eternal work, Lord God, so that we come to appreciate the fullness of Your Majesty and Glory; we praise You, Lord God, our Creator and Redeemer: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Possessions

Pray to the Lord today about the unequal division of wealth within this world by which many people have very little, but a few people control vast resources and amass extraordinary wealth and personal possessions. Pray that God will move powerfully amongst all his people to seek equality and justice for all, and an equitable sharing of the world's resources.

Meditation

When life is hard and difficult, O Lord,
draw me closer to the throne of grace:

When life feels meaningless and has no purpose,
draw me closer to the empty Cross:

When life is full of unresolved riddles,
draw me closer to the path of life:

When life is full of uncertainty and doubt,
draw me closer to Your Word of Truth:

When life is unbelievably busy with no respite,
draw me closer to your comforting side:

When life is threatened by circumstance or health,
draw me closer to the healing balm of Christ:

There are no trite answers to the troubles of life;
But there again; Your will, Lord, not mine.

Bible Study - Psalm 44:1-8

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. A maskil.

¹ *O God, we have heard with our ears,
our fathers have told us
what deeds you did in their days,
in days long ago.*

² *With your hand you drove out the
nations
and planted our fathers;
you crushed the peoples
and made our fathers 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 delighted in them.

⁴ *You are my King and my God;
command victory for Jacob!*

⁵ *Through you we push back our
enemies;
through your name we trample our
assailants.*

⁶ *I do not trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me
victory;*

⁷ *but you give us victory over our
enemies,
you put our enemies to shame.*

⁸ *In God we have made our boast all
day long,
and we will praise your name for
ever.* *Selah*

Review

If you read the first eight verses of Psalm 44 by themselves, you might easily think of the psalm as a rather mild and even encouraging song, though perhaps rather militaristic. The theme appears to be one of acceptance that 'the battle belongs to the Lord' (Proverbs 21:31), and the Lord is acknowledged as the warrior who fights for His people. Reading it today, we can find parts of the psalm which are congenial to Christian faith, in particular the notion that God is in command of all history and that we are depended upon Him for all the perils of this life, as well as its goodness.

However, we have had to split this psalm into three for the purpose of study, and if (as I must ask) you read through the rest of Psalm 44, you will find that after these first eight verses, the Psalm diverts immediately into a tragic and heartrending poem. Something has gone disastrously wrong, and it is clear from some of verses 9 to 16 (tomorrow's section of the Psalm) that a battle has been fought and lost, which has resulted in destruction, pillage and disgrace, and the Lord's people have borne the brunt of this onslaught, from whom, it does not make clear. The final verses 17 to 26 (which we will study the day after tomorrow) agonise over the situation and question what God is doing with His people. The whole psalm concludes with a heartrending cry for help; 'rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love' (v26), and with such an end, we are left asking, 'What is going on?' Certainly, it is a great challenge for us to try and interpret this psalm and make some kind of sense of it for today.

Once we have understood this overall theme to Psalm 44, we realise that there is an air of anxiety about our opening verses. They represent only the preliminary thoughts of the psalmist concerning the far bigger problem of the defeat of God's people in war. We shall look at the details of this defeat when we come to the verses which describe it in the next couple of days, but in the meantime, we will concentrate on the verses we have read today, and they are far from easy to understand.

Many people today including the general Christian reader, finds two things (amongst others) quite difficult about the Old Testament. Firstly the issue of warfare and God's assumed involvement in it in before the time of Jesus, and secondly, the 'taking of the land' of Canaan by Israel when they came there from Egypt under the leadership of Joshua. One of the reasons we may find this difficult is because a state of intermittent terrorist warfare exists in Israel today because of continued problems over land. Whatever you think about what is happening, it is an uncomfortable subject.

The only way to handle this and give honour to Scripture is to put aside our concerns, initially, in the interest of looking at this ancient text to see what it is saying from the point of view of people of very different times to our own. When we have done that, we may find that despite our misgivings, it holds lessons for us about God which were unexpected yet important, and we must walk the path of study, guided by the Holy Spirit, in order to find it. It should be obvious to Christians that the psalm may have special meaning and significance for us in terms of the spiritual battles we fight against our enemy Satan, and they could help us understand something of what Jesus went through as He fought against the devil to secure the Kingdom of God. Jesus, of course, won his battle, but we, His followers, find victory harder to achieve and sometimes discover that the enemy has tripped us up. Such an interpretation of such texts may be said to be 'spiritualised', but what's wrong with that? All we must do is make sure that we do not 'over-spiritualise' the text and ensure that what we say about it starts from its genuine Old Testament background.

Going Deeper

It is not easy to simply go through these verses one by one and try to identify some piece of spiritual wisdom here or there. Our main problem with psalms such as this is with how to get our heads around everything that is said. What is clear, however, is that in the face of extreme circumstances, this psalm shows that some of God's people, at least, turned back to their God and the history of His help 'in ages past', and it gave them strength to face their foes.

Committed to God's Word?

It is very common for Christians to dismiss parts of the Old Testament such as this without giving them further thought, because of a natural sense of incredulity and injustice when looking at what the Old Testament says about war. However, it really does not say much about our commitment to God's Word if we are not prepared to dwell on such passages and see what they have to say to us, particularly by spiritual interpretation. Our understanding of the God of

love and justice we know through Christ today will be immeasurably enriched if we will learn lessons from how our God has dealt with His people in past times who, through no fault of their own, experienced a very different life and culture to ours. It is all there for us to read.

A battle lost, a nation in mourning, and a king in trouble.

Some scholars, focussing on the sense of lost battle which pervades the whole of Psalm 44, believe that it was written during the Maccabean revolt of the Jews against the Greek culture of their ruler Antiochus IV, circa 160-150 B.C. Alternatively, the Psalm may well have come from an earlier time and reflect battles from the times of the ancient kings of Israel and Judah, and as such, it would have been able to teach the Maccabean Jews of the second century BC some invaluable lessons about dependence upon God.

One way of trying to sort this out is to look at the words used in the Psalm, and scholars tell us that the word for 'God' used in this Psalm make it almost certain that it did indeed come from the time of Israelite and Judean Monarchy, perhaps before the eighth century B.C. and within a few generations of the lives of David and Solomon. For this reason, it is possible this psalm was written at a time of national disaster for the Jews, such as that under the reign of the Judean King Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:3ff) when God's people were under threat of invasion by the Moabites and Ammonites. Another possibility comes from Amos chapter 1 in which Amos reports that God's people have been abducted after defeat in battle by the Philistines (Amos 1:6) and Phoenicians (Amos 1:9). What we have to remember is that in those days, nobody had what we would call 'secure boundaries'. Every society lived under constant threat from its neighbours, and possession of land meant life if you had it, and death if you did not. There were no food agencies from the UN to hand out bags of food to your children if your land had been laid waste by marauding nomadic bandits! Without land you had no food, and without food, you died.

The general circumstances of the use of this psalm might unfold like this. In those days, a King who lost battles was a king in trouble. In the face of either defeat or potential defeat, he would go to the Temple and appeal to his God for help, and in order to make his appeal, his prayer to God, a priest would hand him the scroll with what we call Psalm 44. But it is difficult to be sure whose 'voice' is speaking throughout the verses of the psalm we have read today. Most of it is addressed to God as a prayer, affirming, nervously, the gracious and glorious activities of God in the past. Verses 1 to 5 might be said by a priest on behalf of a king, or the words could be said by people generally who were praying, nervously awaiting news of battle. All of their lives would have been at stake. Then, in verse 6, the language of the psalm changes, and it uses the 'first person' form of address; 'I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory ...' So at this point it really does sound like the voice either of a warrior or of a king.

The appeal to the past and the future.

Some suggest that these words could be the words of a Temple liturgy or the preserved words of the great King David who himself endured every possible battle situation as he created and defended the great nation of Israel. The appeal, however, is clear, and in the midst of this life and death situation the King's hope is in God alone. The words of the opening of Psalm 44 recount the military history of Israel's 'victorious' past (44:2,3) which have been passed down from one generation to another (44:1). This is what the king needs to hear, because his prayer is that without God's action now, the people of Israel and the Kingdom are in peril. God alone can now save His people.

The core message of this psalm is that God's faithfulness in the past is the reason for our confidence in his support for the future. How important it is to know that God has been victorious in the past, because unless we have remembrance of His actions to save us in the past, how can we have confidence for the future? In this psalm, the king or warrior says 'I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but You give us victory!' (44:6,7). Without such confidence, spiritual battles against the enemy Satan, are impossible, for example. The Christian can draw inspiration from what Jesus has done by defeating Satan in the wilderness and on the Cross, and also the great victories of those who have fought evil and won in the name of Scripture, missionary enterprise, evangelism, and much more.

To put it into context, if you were an aid worker staring down the barrel of a gun in lawless Baghdad today, you might just say a prayer that God comes to your rescue and miraculously jams their guns! You have heard others tell stories of miraculous escapes, and it is only by

such means that, as far as you can see it, you can escape a fate worse than death. There is no exact analogy here, but we must remember that extreme circumstances of life and death expose the barest bones of a person's faith, and it is a little cursory for those of us who do not experience the same to call such faith 'immature'.

As we look further at Psalm 44 in the next few days we will find that this Psalm edges towards a mature understanding of how God does indeed save His people, but back in the days of the Monarchy, some Kings turned to God when things became rough, and some did not. See, by way of contrast, for example, Isaiah's disgust at the actions of King Ahaz who would not even ask God for 'a word' of guidance when his kingdom was threatened by invasion (Isaiah chapters 7&8). The Book of Psalms reflects every aspect of the ancient life of God's people, and we should expect it to encompass war, in poems which talk about both victory and defeat. Surely, that must be so if it is to properly reflect the life of the ancient people of Israel.

Application

It is fascinating that Psalm 44 is headed by the superscription 'a maskil'. This word is a little contentious, but most scholars reckon that it means something to do with 'teaching'. In other words, this Psalm has lessons for us. How easy it was for a King of Israel or Judah, when things did not go well, to say 'God has abandoned us, forget Him'. Some did. Others went to the Temple and used a Psalm such as this to reflect and begin the process of calling on God to act faithfully for His people's salvation. I know what sort of a leader I would prefer.

There is a personal challenge in all this, which is to return to our historic faith at times of trouble, and appeal to the Lord to act for us out of His faithfulness. It may not be easy, as the world today begs us to be angry with anything that gets in our way in times of distress, including God. This, of course, is a slippery slope which boosts society's industries of therapy and counselling. Scripture says that at times of trouble we are advised to firstly turn to the Lord in prayer.

There is also a challenge for the Church of God. For two hundred years, things have not gone well for the academic theology that underpins the principles and workings of our main stream churches, under siege from secular philosophy. Yet the only answer that many theologians have is to abandon what has gone before and seek new ways to find God, as if the human quest for God was the sum total of what the Christian church is about!. Psalm 44 indicates a different approach starting in reflection on the saving work of the One in whom we have believed. He is the one who has held His church together against all spiritual odds in the past, and He will continue to do so, whatever happens to the church in the West. God help us learn the lessons of His Word.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you still find it hard to accept those parts of the Bible that talk about God being at war with His people? Can you express this more fully with reference to scripture?
2. Is it easier to read this Psalm personally, without reference to Israel's past? What does that do to the Psalm?
3. What enemies dose the Church have today?

Discipleship

What situations have you faced of life or death? Some have been there in childbirth or illness, some have had perilous accidents, and others have had unspeakable adventures which have gone horribly wrong in a world which is not as safe as we would like to think. If you have a testimony of God's faithfulness during times of extreme stress, perhaps of life or death, then do not refrain from testifying to it. By hearing each other's stories, we are given the courage to bear real life ourselves.

Final Prayer

At the end of a day, when good things have happened and the worst has been overcome, may we rest in the knowledge that You have been our guide, Lord Jesus. Then, in full confidence of Your love and power, lead us into tomorrow with faith and without fear. AMEN