

## Prayer

When You prayed for Your disciples, Lord Jesus, You prayed they might be united in mission, service and love. But we have not walked Your pathways or responded to Your prayer, O Lord. As we all find our faith anew in the strange and dangerous world in which we live, may we discover again the truths of real discipleship according to Your Word and yet fresh for our age, and gain strength from the heritage of faith in which we stand. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Possessions

Towards the end of a week in which we have prayed about our possessions, pray to dedicate all you own to God, and do your best to pray specifically. If the Lord has given us this or that thing, then He has done so for a purpose, and we can affirm this in prayer. If we prevaricate about things, then we should ask, yet again, whether they are a part of God's plan for us.

## Meditation

Jesus walked to the house of a friend and healed a man:

Bless me Lord, when I go and visit my friends.

Jesus walked up a hill, taught a crowd and fed the hungry:

Bless me, Lord, as I walk through this world of suffering and sin.

Jesus walked away to be alone, and then came walking on the water!

Bless me, Lord, as I climb out of the boat and try to live my faith!

Jesus walked to Jerusalem to face His destiny in the will of God:

Bless me, Lord, as I strive to walk the path that you given me.

Jesus stumbled through Jerusalem as He went to Calvary:

Bless me, Lord, when I stumbled at the reality of Your call.

Jesus walked away from the tomb in the glory of the resurrection!

Bless me, Lord, as I endeavour to walk the path of new life.

Jesus walked to Emmaus and revealed Himself in the breaking of bread:

Bless me, Lord, as I go on my way, that I may find You with me.

## Bible Study - Psalm 44:17-26

<sup>17</sup> All this happened to us,  
though we had not forgotten you  
or been false to your covenant.

<sup>18</sup> Our hearts had not turned back;  
our feet had not strayed from your  
path.

<sup>19</sup> But you crushed us and made us a  
haunt for jackals  
and covered us over with deep  
darkness.

<sup>20</sup> If we had forgotten the name of our God  
or spread out our hands to a strange  
god,

<sup>21</sup> would not God have discovered it,  
since he knows the secrets of the  
heart?

<sup>22</sup> Yet for your sake we face death all day  
long;  
we are considered as sheep to be  
slaughtered.

<sup>23</sup> Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us  
forever.

<sup>24</sup> Why do you hide your face  
and forget our misery and  
oppression?

<sup>25</sup> We are brought down to the dust;  
our bodies cling to the ground.

<sup>26</sup> Rise up and help us;  
redeem us because of your unfailing  
love.

## Review

It would be wrong of me not to say that it has been hard to work through Psalm 44 over the last couple of days; but if we had not looked carefully at the earlier parts of this Psalm then we could easily do a complete injustice to it now. Without spending time with the psalmist as he considered the depths of national and personal despair in which God's people found themselves from time to time (44:1-16), we would quickly and thoughtlessly foist our own interpretations on this last part of the Psalm. It is too easy to take the words as they present in a superficial manner, such as 'covenant' (44:17), 'strayed from your path' (44:18), 'sheep to be slaughtered' (44:22, echoing 44:11), or fix on a phrase such as the entreaty at the end 'rise up and helps us, redeem us because of Your unfailing love' (44:26), and use it for our own purposes because it sounds good and relatively 'Christian'.

On my bookshelves, I came across a book for preachers in which an author had taken this last verse of Psalm 44, and without discussing any connection with the preceding verses developed a three point sermon on 'prayer', 'providence' and 'Covenant'; extolling the idea of Christian perfection as walking with the Lord according to His ways, and thus fulfilling our God given purpose in Jesus Christ. It sounds very grand and touches on some important themes of faith, but has nothing to do with the psalm. The end of Psalm 44 is about God's people recognising that despite the faithfulness of their Lord and their own loyalty, they have been defeated in battle and war. Astonishingly, they acknowledge God as the one behind everything that has happened to them including that defeat (44:19), but they refuse to accuse Him of unfaithfulness, preferring to believe that they must have done something wrong which they do not as yet know (44:20-22). Then they continue to call upon the Lord for salvation (44:23-26)! Now, that's faith!

I remain sad that many preachers cannot give the time even to read through a whole psalm, and I am equally sad that the church lectionary chops up psalms according to the 'nice bits' and fails to challenge the preacher to take of the awful but essential themes of suffering and redemption which make the Old Testament the theological groundwork for our understanding of the love of God in Christ. Half hour's reading of two of almost any commentaries would yield the full story of Psalm 44, which builds a profoundly human picture of God's people yearning to do His will, yet struggling with failure and stubbornly refusing to let go of the promises of God they have been given. Like Jacob at the river Jabbok (Gen 32:22), they will not let their Saviour go!

Psalm 44 has in fact reached its conclusion, and the profound integrity of its faith is amazing, if not disarming at times because of the frank way in which the writer addresses God. The psalm has brought us to a point of almost unbearable pathos because of the suffering of God's people, and the reading of it feels like encroaching on the private grief of the nation of Israel at some unknown and deeply humiliating battle; an event which was undoubtedly crucial to the lives and livelihoods of many thousands of Israelite or Judeans citizens, at the time. Over time, thorough saying great prayers such as these at times of national crisis, probably in the Temple at Jerusalem, they developed sufficient faith to withstand the terrible effects of the Babylonian exile and all that followed. This was the seedbed of Israel's hopes for a Messiah, found in Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Going Deeper

Psalm 44 is far more powerful than we might think, when read as a whole. The fact that it is rarely read in church means that few people understand it. We need to look at the final part of it in depth so that we get to grips with why it speaks so powerfully about faith in God (see above). Understanding context is vital, but it is vital because it helps us arrive at inspiring conclusions which help us as Christian disciples. This psalm is present in scripture because God has a purpose for it!

### A summary

The final verses of Psalm 44 make some things very clear. Firstly, the people of God and their King simply did not know what they had done wrong. Like Job, they insisted upon their innocence before God. They declared that they had not forgotten the sacred 'Covenant' (44:17)

and they continued to believe in the faithful love of God (44:26) which remained the basis of their faith together with the laws of Moses and the ancient stories of the forefathers. Moreover, the psalm shows that in the end, they had not forgotten God himself and thereby not broken the first and second of the ten commandments (44:20 and Exodus 20:3,4,5,6). They had persisted in their faith simply by the act of praying to God in their hour of distress, even though they could not hide their feelings that they had been deserted by Him (44:19,23).

The people saw everything as having happened at the hand of God; 'You crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness' (44:19). The reference to jackals in this verse is interesting because it is similar in form to the word for a war-torn wasteland used typically by Isaiah and Jeremiah (Is 34:13, 35:7; Jer 9:11,10:22, 49:33, 51:37 etc), and the word for 'deep darkness' at the end of verse 19 is the same as the one used in the famous expression 'the valley of the shadow of death' in Psalm 23:4. One wonders whether the individual or people who wrote this Psalm were familiar with Psalm 23, the famous psalm of David, and used it to help them understand what was happening to them in their distress; the word itself is rare and distinctive.

Further, when the writer of Psalm 44 describes the taunts and insults of others in these words; 'yet for Your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered' (44:22), this echoes the earlier similar phrase in verse 11 and reminds us of Isaiah 53:7 ('I'd like a lamb to the slaughter ...') and also Jeremiah 11:19 ('I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realise that they had plotted against me'). One wonders which passage influenced which, the theme is so powerful and common amongst the writings and the prophets! We must not forget however that this picture describes complete submission to the will of God, to the point of death. It was what the defeated warriors described in Psalm 44 felt, and what our Lord felt in His death.

How different from us today, we who will readily ascribe unpleasant or inexplicable things that happen as evil acts of Satan, before we have even considered that the purposes of God may ultimately be found behind everything, including the horrors of war, defeat and death. Our Kingdom task, as demonstrated clearly by this Psalm, is to assert the authority and supremacy of God in all things, so that Satan cannot use even the most difficult of experiences to put a knife between us and our Lord God. If the church today could grasp this concept, it could perhaps help its people grow in faith instead of stagnate, and see the inevitable consequences of decline.

### **The will of the people and the Covenant.**

There are two great themes in the conclusion of Psalm 44 that I have not as yet mentioned; the will of the people, and their Covenant relationship with God. Although the Psalm reaches its eventual conclusion with the anguished cry 'we are brought down ... rise up ... and redeem us' (44:25,26), there is a considerable strength of spirit which lies underneath this last part of the Psalm. Indeed, I believe this strength has been there all the way through this psalm, evidenced partly through the will of the King and the psalmist to seek out an answer to the dire problem in which they found themselves after the humiliation of loss in battle. It is now more consistently evident in almost every verse.

'Our hearts have not turned back' declares the Psalm (44:18); a bold statement of intent that came from the strong will of the King representing his people. 'Heart' in Hebrew thought represented the seat of decision making, that essential feature of the human soul which mediates between reason and emotion to decide upon a course of action. Here, the action of the heart is decisive and strong; despite having lost in battle they withstood the bitter feeling that they did not deserve this because they had kept their part of the Covenant relationship which bound them to God. Their hearts decided that they would not abandon God. They would seek to understand why they had failed and what had gone wrong, but did not and would not walk away from the God of their forefathers.

When the psalmist records his final thoughts about the terrible events that had unfolded (in verses 20 to 22), he accepts that although terrible things had happened, there must be some purpose of God that he could not yet fathom. He says that if the people had worshipped a

foreign god, then he could have understood the defeat (44:20), but he accepted that God knew everything (44:21). Finally, he said 'yet for Your sake we face death ...', in other words, whatever had happened God must have been in control in some way they did not understand.

## Application

All this evidence (and more) points to a strength of heart and soul amongst God's people that is worthy of our admiration. It is often said that Christian faith is inextricably linked to two things; God's grace, and our response by faith. In this Psalm we do not see the full evidence of God's gracious saving work (Jesus was yet to come), but we do see an example of a faithful and strong willed response to God in the face of adversity which is as commendable as anything you can find in the Old Testament. Also, we also see the other half of this 'balance' of faith in our passage, for God's 'Covenant' love for His people is strongly mentioned in verse 17; 'we have not ... been false to Your covenant'. In addition, the last verse contains an appeal to the Lord to save His people because of His 'unfailing love'; which means, because of the covenant of love that has bound God and His people from the days of Abraham onwards. So even though there is no direct connection between this psalm and the life and death of Jesus (with the possible exception of verse 22), the elements of Christian faith are to be found in this apparently most unpromising of Psalms.

In the Gospel of John, Thomas is troubled by faith in the risen Christ because he has not had the opportunity to see Jesus together with the other disciples. When Jesus finally shows himself to Thomas, Jesus utters these words: 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'. I always thought of these words as referring to later generations of Christians, including even myself. Indeed, I do believe this to be the case, but what Jesus said could mean more than this. Look closely, however, at the tense of the verb in what Jesus says, because it is in the past tense. Jesus is therefore blessing those in the past who have believed even though they have not seen Jesus. I would suggest that the poor, battle weary and despondent Israelites of Psalm 44 are prime candidates for that blessing of Christ, for despite the evidence of their suffering, they refused to be drawn away from trusting in the God in whom they had faith through Abraham's Covenant of love.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you see anger with God in this Psalm? Is it justified?
2. Discuss how easy it might be to have faith on God without the evidence of the life and death of Jesus Christ.
3. Which part of this Psalm most poignantly expresses the despair of believing in God yet not, apparently, observing Him in supporting action?

## Discipleship

Are you often tempted to ask God, 'where are you?' when it seems that His presence is somewhat lacking in a situation? You must realise that this happens to everyone, and all Christians feel confused at time about exactly what God is doing. What can you do to reinforce your faith and strengthen your ability to hold on when things are rough? One thing you could do is to learn this or another Psalm. Certainly, if you learned some of Psalm 44, its unusual theme and background would make it stand out in the memory!

## Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, You died to set people free from sin, You rose to give them New Life, You ascended to give Glory to the Father, and You sent Your Holy Spirit to shower your glorious gifts on us. May we never forget all You have done for us, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour:  
AMEN