

Prayer

Gracious Father, touch us right at the heart of our intelligence and at the seat of our emotions. Do not leave us alone with our thoughts but help us as we agonise over difficult issues, or try to resolve problems for ourselves and those we love. Show us how life can be transformed by Your love, when we truly live our lives in partnership with You: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Possessions

Have a good look around your own church and consider what it possesses. Does this reflect the nature of Jesus Christ who you worship? If possible, go to your own church building and pray in it alone, asking the Lord to reveal to you what attitude you should have towards the building and the things within it. Ask the Lord to help you follow through what He says to you.

Meditation

When the ground we walk is hard,
grant us strength to endure the trial.

When the ground we walk is uneven,
grant us courage to walk straight.

When the ground we walk is filthy,
grant us wisdom as we take each step.

When the ground we walk is slippery,
grant us a hand to hold for safety.

When the ground we walk gives way beneath us,
grant us speed to pass through.

When the ground we walk is easy,
grant us faith to know it is not always so.

When the ground we walk is holy,
grant us humility in Your presence;

For we know our path will one day end with You.

Bible Study - Psalm 44:9-16

- ⁹ *Yet You have rejected and humbled us; You no longer go out with our armies.*
- ¹⁰ *You made us retreat before the enemy, and we have been plundered by those who hate us.*
- ¹¹ *You have made us like sheep to be slaughtered, and have scattered us among the nations.*
- ¹² *You have sold Your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale.*
- ¹³ *You have made us the taunt of our neighbours, 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 *My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame*
- ¹⁶ *at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, At the sight of the enemy and those who are bent on revenge.*

Review

Yesterday, we began to read Psalm 44 and discovered some of its problems as a psalm. It is a powerful piece of poetry, but it is also profoundly disturbing, speaking as it does of battle, war, and defeat for God's people. The early part of the psalm (44:1-8) nervously called on God to act as He had done in the past; clearly something was wrong for the people of Israel, and they were struggling to sustain the nation at a time of attack. Our passage today speaks of a sense of despair at a tragedy. God's people had been made to retreat and were humiliated (44:10) and exposed the nation in the eyes of others (44:11), and the psalmist speaks as if he is blaming God for not having been to battle with the people (44:9,12). What are we to make of all this? How can God's people, even quoting scripture, blame God for defeat in war?

It all seemed so simple in the early days of the people of Israel. The laws of Moses laid down a clear covenantal relationship between God and the people, whereby if the people of Israel were faithful, then God would bless them; and if they departed from His ways, then He would depart from them. This was all set out in the great book of the Law, Deuteronomy (in particular Deut.28, and also 29 and 30). Deuteronomy 28:1-14 sets out the blessings which would come to Israel from God if they were obedience to His covenant; and these were defeat of enemies in battle (Deut. 28:7), prosperity (28:8,11,12), pre-eminence (Deut. 28:13,14), holiness (Deut. 28:9), and public honour as God's people (Deut. 28:10). Then, Deuteronomy 28:15 onwards describes the curses which would come on God's people for disobedience and abandonment of the covenant; national disaster and panic (28:20), pestilence, disease and famine (28:21-24), defeat by enemies (28:25,26), illness, subservience and slavery (28:27ff). The chapter then goes on to speak prophetically about the eventual failure of Israel and her subsequent subservience to a foreign nation (28:47ff) and further trials and tribulations which would end with the dispersion of Israel throughout the world (28:64ff).

Frankly, most of our passage today reads like a tragic repeat of the curses of Deuteronomy. Israel had failed and they were reaping the rewards of not having done what was right before God. However, although we can look back and comment on the failures of Israel with the benefit of hindsight, the troubled journey of the people of Israel in Old Testament times was real and puzzling to those who endured it, and although we can read about the spiritual lessons of it all in this scripture, it was life and death to those who lived in ancient times.

Psalm 44 represents a critical point in the journey of God's people. If, indeed, the blessings of God in terms of having 'the good life' were simply a matter of doing what was right according to Deuteronomy 28, and the troubles of a cursed life were simply the result of not having done what God had told them, then religion was a mechanical exercise based upon the human ability to obey God. God wanted His people to understand their relationship with him in deeper ways than that, however, and somehow, God had to draw His people towards an understanding of the deeper things of faith. And you will find that nearly every great revelation of God in the Old Testament happened after something had gone wrong for God's people, and he had to act to save them out of their troubles.

We can at least observe that many of the phrases which are found in this passage remind us of other scriptures with a far more telling and important message. The phrase 'sheep to be slaughtered' makes us think of Isaiah's famous prophecy about the suffering servant (Isaiah 53:7), and the graphic descriptions of shame in verses 13 to 15 remind us again of Isaiah (Isaiah 52:13-15) and the suffering of Christ, before and on the Cross (Mark 15:16-20 etc. see also Psalm 22:6-8,16-18). This, of course, is no accident. Psalm 44 may well have been a psalm which God used to challenge His people, before he could bring about change.

Going Deeper

It is not easy to examine a passage such as this, but by looking further at what was going on in Israel which might be reflected in this psalm, we will gradually understand it more. Indeed, unless we all come to understand our faith as something which through Christ will stand firm in the midst of failure, then we fail to grasp the full nature of the redemption which God has won for us, because our salvation comes through suffering.

Submission or defeat

In the first 8 verses of Psalm 44, the history of God's gracious dealings with His people is nervously rehearsed, and the king confesses that it is only by the Lord's strength that the people and the Kingdom can be kept safe (44:1-3). But now, it seems that something has happened which has shamed Israel and her king; 'You have rejected and humbled us' (44:9). And then comes the complaint 'You no longer go out with our armies!' (44:10), and this is quite a sharp complaint against God. For many years, the 'Ark of the Covenant' was taken into battle as a symbol of God's presence (e.g. 1 Sam 4:3, 14:18f.), and it was indeed a powerful unifying factor when Israel went to war. The Ark symbolised the very dwelling place of God; yet the beginning of verse 9 makes it quite clear that whatever symbols and artefacts of faith were taken to battle, it was as if God himself had not attended the fight, because all had been lost, and the army had been 'plundered' (44:10).

More than that, it was as if the whole weight of the curses in Deuteronomy had come to pass on God's people. Nearly all the predictions of this great book of the Law were fulfilled in the results of the battle, and as we have seen above, the people were scattered (vv10,11) and became a laughing stock (v13,14). The kind of mockery which the Israelites feared when defeated in battle was this; neighbours and enemies of the people of Israel would say, what kind of a God would abandon His people in their time of need? These were the primitive beliefs of the people of those days, and the shame they felt ran very deep; 'You have made us a byword among the nations, the people shake their heads at us ...' (44:14).

Then, just as there was in the first eight verses of the Psalm, a point comes in our passage when the 'voice' of the psalm changes from that of a general prayer of complaint against God because of what has happened, to a more personal tone; as if the king has returned after defeat and bemoans; 'my disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame' (44:15). Defeat is compounded by loss of confidence, worrying about what others will think, and the disgrace of the whole nation.

Finding meaning in suffering and defeat

What does all this mean? In the next section of this tragic psalm, the serious questions are asked about what went wrong spiritually as well as practically, and there is the hint of an answer to the agonising questions raised by this torrid defeat (which we will see tomorrow) but here, there is only loss and tragedy. We all know that there are times when, in the midst of tragedy, we are left asking 'why?' with very little to help us move on. The central section of Psalm 44 reflects this exactly, but it is not just a reflection of national tragedy in a vacuum. There were indeed such times in the life of God's people.

The Bible records that Israel was defeated even with the ark of the Covenant present in the time of Samuel (1 Sam 4:3f.), and later, Israel's first king Saul was killed in battle (1 Sam 31). Later on in the history of God's people, kings were defeated at a time when the worship of God was in fact at a very low ebb, such as in the time of King Ahab (Isaiah 7 – see 2 Kings 16:1-20), or when Judah was invaded by Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt during the reign of the evil King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon (2 Chronicles 12:9f.). In these cases, everyone knew what had happened; the kings had not consulted God, and they had acted upon their own will and instincts. Defeat in war was their punishment. It was far more difficult however, to work out why defeat in battle also happened when 'good' kings such as Josiah (2 Chron. 34,35) reigned. He was killed by the Egyptian king Pharaoh Neco a little while after he had instituted major religious reforms at the Temple in Jerusalem, prompted by the discovery of the lost book of Deuteronomy (2 Chron 34:14).

In the grand scheme of things, God had to begin to teach His people that He was not a puppet to human success and had to be understood on a far bigger scale than as a god who managed aspects of mere human success. Most of the Old Testament from the end of Chronicles onwards, including the writings (especially Job and Ecclesiastes) and all the major prophets, strive to explain how God encompasses failure within His plan for humanity, even to the point of the suffering and death of His own servant (Isaiah 53) and Son (Daniel 7&8). It was only by travelling this journey that the full message of God could be revealed.

Application

I have looked at this passage from many different angles, and I am not convinced that we can or should pretend to find in it anything other than sorrow and anguish at the loss and distress of the people of Israel at this point of defeat. Through hindsight, we now know that through this and other failures, God revealed his intention to save His people through the Messiah. This salvation is a privilege we have through no merit of our own, but because due to the passage of time, we live in an age when the Gospel has been proclaimed and we have heard it and responded to it. However, the ancient people of Israel struggled to understand suffering, and in the same way that we sit and mourn with someone who has lost a loved one in tragic circumstances, I believe we are asked by this Psalm to stand back from judgement and do our best to understand something of the pain of what they felt when they could not understand what God was doing to them.

Shame and disgrace can be overcome if it is shared, but when it is hidden and enclosed, it becomes a cancer of the soul, perhaps this is one message of the tragic Psalm 44. At least national mourning in defeat is shared and brought before the Lord in public agony. One of the most extraordinary things about the people of Israel and the Old Testament in general is that it is largely a story of failure, but one from which God brought out the great and powerful truths of liberation. Think of it like this; whoever heard of a nation publicising its failures, least of all in a sacred hymn? But because the people of Israel did this, they showed the rest of us that we need to address our failures, and this is essential if we are ever to hear the voice of God speaking to us about redemption.

It is insulting to foist on this Psalm our own solutions to the problems God's people faced so many centuries ago. Tomorrow we shall see how they themselves began the process of working their way through this catastrophe.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. I have discussed this passage without trying to offer any solutions to the problems raised by the text. Do you think that the text does in fact offer some hope? How?
2. What parts of this passage can you empathise with most fully?
3. Recount and share times when there has been a sense of national mourning, and consider what this has done for your nation as a whole.

Discipleship

The Christian church today exhibits many features of failure, and would do well to learn a few lessons from the psalms. I have been to many meetings at various church levels where there has clearly been something very wrong, but people are unwilling to accept this and deal with it under the assumption that God has it all under control. However, it is part of essential humanity that we need to learn through our failures and thence grow in faith, and we can only do this =if we are open about this. Ask yourself the important question, are you willing to face up to your own failures and learn from them?

Final Prayer

O Lord, when troubles are too much for us to bear, give us friends who will stand by us. When we lose someone we really love, lead us through the mists of doubt and uncertainty even though we do not know what to do or where to go. Then when we are ready, shine Your light on our pathway again, and help us walk with deeper trust. AMEN