

A Community Lament - *Psalm 44*

August 5, 2018

Let us pray...

This morning, we are going to look at one of the most surprising and mysterious Psalms. The psalm divides into five stanzas and it ends quite abruptly. It is one of the many Psalms of Lament. The dictionary defines *lament* as: "feeling or expressing sorrow or grief". In our culture, we do not like to publicly express our emotions. We prefer to hide them, to distract ourselves from them, and sometimes we even pretend that they do not exist. We would rather bury ourselves in work, entertainment, or a big bowl of ice cream. We will do much to avoid the pain and heartache that we feel at times in life. The Psalms of lament take these emotions head on and spew raw emotion out there for all to see and hear and feel and touch and ponder over. We will spend a few weeks with some of the Psalms of lament because, first, they give us an example or a pattern of prayer for when we are in sorrow or grief and need to express that to God. But ultimately, the Psalms of lament point us away from ourselves and toward the one who alone can save us: God.

Today and for the next two weeks, we will study three different lament Psalms. Of the 150 Psalms in the Bible, roughly 40% are laments. Some of the laments are community laments and some are individual laments. Of course, you can find laments in other places in the Bible too. For example, in the book of Habakkuk, there is a long lament concerning the coming judgment of Israel. The book of Lamentations is one long lament. Go figure. And many places in the New Testament, there are laments. Perhaps the best New Testament

example is found in the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus offers a fairly long lament concerning what is soon to come.

As a whole, the Psalms of lament do more than voice sorrow and release pent-up emotions. Each Psalm offers a theology, a doxology, a form of worship. These Psalms are also exercises in remembering the past, the truth, and one's faith. As with all Psalms, the lament Psalms were frequently used in worship and on the way to worship. The Psalms of lament represent a journey of the soul, or the collective soul in the communal Psalms. As we will see, the Psalms of lament almost always follow a pattern. They usually begin with a remembrance of God's presence or actions in the past and then they offer a cry out to God in the present. This is often followed by a plea, asking God for help. Most Psalms then conclude with words about placing or pledging their trust in God along with some praise for God. I say 'usually' – but not today. As I said at the beginning, today's Psalm ends abruptly. We start today with the psalmist remembering God's work in the past as we read verses 1 through 3.

Psalm 44: 1-3:

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.

Most of us have probably heard stories of how God has done wonderful things in the past. The psalmist is thinking of the great stories of the Bible, the stories of the chosen people: the exodus from Egypt, the parting of the Red sea, the walls falling at Jericho, the conquest of the Promised Land. Maybe we also have read stories from the more recent past or have been to movies that tell of God's providential work in the world. Maybe we have Christian parents or relatives and grew up seeing our families do wonderful things for others in the name of God. Maybe we know someone who has miraculously survived an accident or has suddenly been found to be cancer-free. The psalmist is rejoicing in God's saving acts in the past.

Next, the psalmist talks about what God has done in his own lifetime. In both the first section and in this next one, covering verses 4 through 11, he is partly himself and also God of God's past actions on behalf of the people.

Psalm 44: 4-11:

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 forever. 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 gotten spoil. ¹¹ You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations.

You can probably think of great things God that has done in the past – perhaps even for you, or your friends. My mind is drawn to the many experiences that I have had on various mission trips. I have shared about a couple of those this summer. You might recall Brody sharing last fall about the miracles that he witnessed while out in the world serving God. Perhaps you have been a part of one yourself. We know that miracles certainly happened in the Bible and that they continue to happen in our world in this present age.

I ask you: have you ever been desperate, and cried out to God, and he has helped you? And perhaps you have been on the other end of the script. Sometimes the miracle does not come. Perhaps you have been a part of some situation or event where you sought and prayed for God's intervention. Can you recall times when you cried out to God and felt like God "*rejected*" you? We have all had those experiences, right? We can relate to the emotions that the psalmist was expressing. But now, in the third stanza, there is a huge change. We begin to learn what the psalm is all about as we read verses twelve through sixteen:

¹² You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.

¹³ You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us. ¹⁴ You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock 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.

Everything is going wrong and God seems to be nowhere to be seen. Some of the people have been hauled off into exile or slavery; the neighbors taunt those who remain. The Israelites are now a laughingstock. They are disgraced and filled with shame. We can't be sure of the exact historical background. But this may just be deliberate. I think this is God's intent with this Psalm – that we identify with the emotions, with what it is like to be a byword and a disgrace. If we knew the event, we might identify more with that.

To connect to these themes – abandonment, disgrace, shame, embarrassment – can you think of a time when things went really wrong in your life? Maybe it was a phone call at 4:00 AM. Maybe it was a knock on the door and you opened it to find the police standing there. Maybe it was a meeting that you were unexpectedly called into. Bad things happen. Can you recall a time when a bad thing happened to you? It is a time of questioning. Maybe you wonder the same thing I have at times: did this happen because I have done wrong and God is punishing me? It is a natural question to ponder. Hear this questioning in the Psalm as we read verses 17 through 22:

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. 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.

This stanza reminds me of the book of Job. Do you remember the story? Everything went wrong for Job. He lost his sons and daughters. He lost his sheep and cattle. He lost his home and barns. His body was covered in sores. His friends and even his wife encouraged him to just curse God and die. Like Job, the psalmist reminds God that they have been faithful, that they have not turned away. We too have been here. We are living out our faith in good ways and something bad happens. We question God, don't we? And with this, we come to the final stanza. Listen to verses 23 through 26:

²³ Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!

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.

The psalmist is *really* upset! The writer pleads with God and just cries out for pity and mercy and for an answer. It seems that God is not being fair. He has made promises and is not being faithful to them. God's actions, His works, do not match up with His words. Have you ever felt like that? I have. And I have begged and have pleaded with God and it seemed to make no difference. I feel as if God does not seem to be interested in my problems at all. I ask myself, where are God's promises of faithfulness now; ones like "I will never leave you nor forsake you"?

And that is the end of this Psalm. The ending of this psalm seems abrupt. It is. In our minds we expect it to have another stanza. Maybe something like:

*I called unto the Lord and he answered me
 I cried to him and he heard my voice
 He brought my feet up out of the pit
 He set them on a high rock
 The Lord is my strength and my high tower
 I will praise his name for evermore.*

But it doesn't. It just ends with, "*Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love*". The end. Hmmph.

Why does it end like this? I think part of the reason that the Psalm ends like this is so that we can identify with it, in that time when we are in the midst of our sorrow and pain. Part of the abrupt ending is to deliberately leave us with no answer or resolution. This forces us to look outside of the Psalm. The apostle Paul quotes Psalm 44 in Romans 8 and he explains some of its possible meaning to us. In Romans 8, verses 35 through 39, we get part of our answer.

³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor 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.

The psalmist is talking about a situation in which the outward circumstances have gone bad and God is not making them good again. God is allowing the people to be in their sorrow. Paul's answer to this situation is one that we don't expect. Paul tells us that it is okay for our outward circumstances to be bad because our inward circumstances are wonderful. Paul is interpreting Psalm 44 from within the context of the whole book of Psalms. Paul's main point in Romans is that the external problems cannot shake us because there is a victorious king that loves us intensely and forever.

Another possible answer is also found in Psalm 45. I encourage you to read the Psalm to find the answer that is found in Psalm 45. In some ways it is similar to the answer that Paul gives us, but with an Old Testament spin. Yes, the external situation looks bad and contains no answers. As we look beyond the Old Testament, we see the answer is found in God's covenant promise that His Anointed One will ultimately rule the nations and that as His bride we will one day forget all the hardship of former times as we rejoice in Christ's presence.

But if we stay with this Psalm and other Psalms of lament, we find a way to honestly connect to God. You see, God desires for us to come to Him like the psalmist comes to Him in today's Psalm. Like Psalm 44, our prayers can be words of hope uttered in urgency and also in the confidence that God can hear and can act in response. Our prayers can also be filled with raw emotion and energy. God can handle our anger and our candor. God desires that our prayers are real, offered up with real hope to a real God. Our prayers need to be open and honest communication with God. In that spirit, I invite you to bow your heads as we pray today.

O God, who is light in the darkness, we pray for those among us who in the night hours work their shifts, or those who labor in places where light is dim. Be for them and for us protection in the dark. O God, who is the bright morning star, we pray for those among us who grieve the loss of loved ones, the tarnishing of innocence, the failing of health, the flight of security. Be for them and for us a sure defense and the promise of a new day.

O God, who is sight to the blind, we pray for those among us whose eyes are clouded, who are blind in soul, mind, or body. Be for them and for us both courage and sight. O God, who is strength to the besieged, we pray for those among us who are beset by temptation, those who are in danger, those whose enemies are close and whose help seems far away. Be for them and for us a present fortress against our foes.

O God, who is salvation to the lost, we pray for those among us who have never found your way, or who, having found it, have strayed from your path. Be for them and for us the beacon that guides safely home to you. O God who is comfort to the fearful, we pray for those among us who live in fear of threats real or imagined, those whose lives are torn by war, those whose thoughts are confused by mental illness, those whose souls and bodies are ravaged by abuse. Be for them and for us consolation and surety against anxiety.

Give us wisdom, O God, to turn to you in times of stress, fear, and grief, in times of blindness, temptation, danger, and affliction. Grant us patience to wait for you, and courage to be strong in your might, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. It is the name that brings us hope and strength and promise. It is in that name

that we join our voices together, praying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray.
Hear us, O Lord as we pray, "Our Father who art..."