

The Christian Experience of Dark Providence

Psalm 44:1-26

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Turn with me to the forty-fourth psalm as we continue to work our way through the second book of the Psalms, from Psalm 42 all the way to Psalm 72. I do need to pause and say that tonight our brother Ed Bowman is here with us. And I don't mean to embarrass you, Ed, but he's right up front, and I know that many of you are going to want to give him the right hand of fellowship and welcome him back after a long struggle with his treatments for cancer. And we're encouraged by the reports that we've heard, and it's just encouraging to look on your face, my brother. And how appropriate that you would be here as we look at Psalm 44 tonight.

Now, the last couple of weeks we've been looking at Psalms 42 and 43 that form a complex of an expression of spiritual experience. And Derek Kidner calls that collection of Psalms 42 and 43 "one of the most sadly beautiful in the Psalter." But when you move from Psalm 43 to Psalm 44, you don't get much relief. Now, when we move to Psalm 45 the tone will be different. But we've actually taken a step further down into the valley as we move from Psalms 42 and 43 into Psalm 44.

We've said all along that the Psalms teach us about Christian experience, and they address the hard side of Christian experience. The reason that we sang Psalm 44, that second version to that minor tune which Dr. Wymond wrote this weekend, was because you won't find any hymns that address that kind of material. It's very difficult, isn't it, to put our own words to the difficult experiences that we're undergoing? God has provided us words for those experiences, and those words are found for us in the Psalms. And so once again, we find this Psalm dealing with aspects of our experience-- struggles, pain, weakness, difficulties, tragedy, a sense of God's forsaking us--these things that are part of Christian experience, and showing us the way through them and how to respond in those experiences. So before we come to hear God's word read and explained tonight, let's look to Him in prayer to ask for His aid and help.

Our Lord and our God, we do bow before You. And as we enter into the pit, into the dungeon of the difficulty recorded here in Psalm 44, we pray that You would open our eyes to see Your truth for our lives in those dark providences that we

ourselves must face and traverse in faith. We ask, O Lord, that You would give us a believing heart, a trusting heart that would be enabled by the grace of Your Holy Spirit to continue to pray to and to love You, to rest in You even when the lights have gone out. We ask, O God, tonight that as we read the Psalm and as we hear it proclaimed that our hearts would be made tender for our brothers and sisters who are going through dark providences, that our hearts would be made strong and believing for the trials which we must face ourselves or perhaps the trials which we are facing this very night. And we ask, O God, that you would be glorified in this--that even when all our questions cannot be answered we would find our rest in You. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

The forty-fourth Psalm, this is God's word:

For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah. O God, we have heard with our ears, Our fathers have told us the work that You did in their days, in the days of old. You with Your own hand drove out the nations; then You planted them; You afflicted the peoples, then You spread them abroad. For by their own sword they did not possess the land, and their own arm did not save them, but Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence, for You favored them. You are my King, O God; command victories for Jacob. Through You we will push back our adversaries; through Your name we will trample down those who rise up against us. For I will not trust in my bow, nor will my sword save me. But You have saved us from our adversaries, and You have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted all day long, And we will give thanks to Your name forever. Selah. Yet You have rejected us and brought us to dishonor, and do not go out with our armies. You cause us to turn back from the adversary; and those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves. You give us as sheep to be eaten and have scattered us among the nations. You sell Your people cheaply, and have not profited by their sale. You make us a reproach to our neighbors, a scoffing and a derision to those around us. You make us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. All day long my dishonor is before me and my humiliation has overwhelmed me, because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles, because of the presence of the enemy and the avenger. All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, and we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, and our steps have not deviated from Your way, yet You have crushed us in a place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God Or extended our hands to a strange god, would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart. But for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever. Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression? For our soul has sunk down into the dust; our body cleaves to the earth. Rise up, be our help, and redeem us for the

sake of Your lovingkindness.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it.

Israel always sang after battles. Israel sang songs of victory after great victories that had been wrought by the Lord. Psalm 98 is one of those Psalms where Israel, the sons of Korah, calls upon Israel to sing to the Lord a new song for He has done wonderful things. But Israel didn't just sing after battles of victory; Israel sang in defeat too. This song is a song that Israel sang in the wake of defeat. And it has something to say to us about our experience in this world in the face of dark providences, and it has something to teach us about Christ's experience in this world, in the face of dark providences. And His experience, in turn, informs us of how we are to look at our own experiences. Israel sings this song as a song of mourning in defeat and a song of prayer and supplication to God.

You know there are secular alternatives. We Southerners of all people ought to understand that we've been singing songs of defeat for 140 years. There are even secular versions, pop versions, you remember. Some of you are old enough to remember the pop group Steely Dan who sang Deacon Blues: "They've got a name for the winners of the world, but I want a name when I lose. They call Alabama 'the Crimson Tide,' call me 'Deacon Blues.'" That's their own version of a song of defeat. They wanted a song to sing when things weren't going well, when they'd lost, when everything was down. This song is a song of defeat, but it's also a song of trust in the Lord, and it provides us a guide to Christian experience in the midst of dark and inexplicable providences.

I'd like you to see several things about the song before we launch into it. First of all, you can detect pretty quickly three or four parts to this song. The first eight verses, if you detached the rest of the Psalm, if you took off verses 9-26, the first eight verses could be a song of victory. It could be a Psalm sung by Israel in the wake of a tremendous victory won by the Lord their God. And so that's the first section of the Psalm in which the Psalmist--the children of Israel--go back and sing thanksgiving to God for the victories that He has provided for them in the past. Then when you get to the second section, from verses 9-16, the scene dramatically changes. That's why we couldn't sing the second half of this Psalm to "Immortal Invisible God Only Wise." You can't sing "we were slaughtered and killed and crushed in the great field": you can't do that to "Immortal Invisible God Only Wise." You've got to have something in the minor key, and so Dr. Wymond has provided that for us. Isn't it amazing, though, how in one psalm the tone can completely shift from a victorious, confident trust in God to being humbled to the dust? And you begin to see that in verses 9 to 16 as Israel recounts this shameful defeat that they've experienced in battle.

Then, from verses 17 through 26, we have a long complaint. And I want to suggest that that complaint has two parts. And the first part of that complaint is a

question. and the second part of that complaint is a prayer. The first part of that complaint you see in verses 17 to 22. And it's basically the question "why?" You see, there's a reason why Israel sang in defeat, because Israel knew that she needed to know what God was doing. And so she asks "Why, Lord, what are you doing?" And then in verses 23 to 26, having asked that question why and not having gotten an answer, she prays to the Lord for help anyway.

Those are the four parts of the Psalm. Now let me show you one other thing. You'll notice that this Psalm shifts from the singular to the plural on two or three occasions. For instance, look at verse four. Verse four is in the singular. We've been singing in the plural from verses one to three, and you get to verse four and suddenly it's "You are my King, O God. Command victories for Jacob." It may well be that this psalm was sung antiphonally with the king singing the singular portions and the army or the whole assembled people of God in this service of worship and mourning responding to him. And so when you move from plural to singular and back again and back again and back again in this song, you're seeing the song sung antiphonally from the leader to the people, from the people to the leader. And we get the picture from this that the whole of Israel is involved in this soul searching, from the highest in its leadership to the very humblest. Let's walk through the four parts of the Psalm together then tonight.

I. God gets the glory in all "our successes"

First, let's look at verses 1 through 8 where the Psalmist celebrates God as the One who has given victory to Israel in the past. The Psalm begins by looking back. Now remember the whole psalm is a song of defeat, and the positive tones of verses 1 through 8 need to be read in that light. It's not that things started off well and then went downhill. From the very first verse, the Psalmist here is singing about a crushing defeat, and so the optimism or the confidence or the praise and the thanksgiving of the first eight verses need to be read for what they are. The Psalmist is stoking himself up; he is talking himself into trusting God in the most improbable of circumstances. He is having to force himself to go back and remember what God has done in the past because what God is doing now is inexplicable and frankly depressing. And so he has to go back and anchor himself in something that God has done in the past. And so, in the first four verses we get this remembrance: "O God, we have heard with our ears, Our fathers have told us the work that You did in their days, In the days of old. You with Your own hand drove out the nations." And so the song begins in verses 1 through 4 by recounting what? God driving out the Canaanites, and God planting Israel in the promised land of Canaan. They're remembering what God has done; not what they have done, not what they have accomplished through their own might and strength, but what God has done in their experience. They're remembering past victory. You know it's the same thing in the Marine Corp Hymn. How does the Marine Corp Hymn start? "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli..." What's it all about? It's about helping men be ready to

fight. How do they start off? By remembering what their forbearers have done in the past. Well, this is even more directed, not so much at the forbearers, but at God. The fight now is enabled as the people of God look to the past and remember what God has done. So it begins by remembering past victory.

Now, you see this from verse 4 all the way down to verse 8, as the king first leads them in a prayer that God would give them victory, you see here a call to wartime living. The Psalmist, because he has experienced defeat, is under no delusion that he is not at war. He knows he's at war. He knows very well that he's at war; he just got his clock cleaned. So you don't have to talk him into believing that he's at war.

And this psalm helps to remind us that we ourselves are at war and are at need of God's help. His prayer in verse 4 is: "You are my King, O God; command victories for Jacob." This psalm is a psalm of Christian experience, and by the way, that's proven by something that we're going to see later tonight in Romans chapter 8. We're being reminded here to live with a wartime mentality. We are at war with the world and the flesh and the devil. And our battle is not with human rulers and leaders and nations, but with powers and principalities, with rulers in the heavenly places. That's the war that we're involved with. It involves a battle against sin inside of us, a battle against temptation outside of us impinging upon us, a battle with the opposition of the world, a battle with the false desires of our hearts. It's a comprehensive battle, internal and external. We're in the middle of that battle, and this psalm reminds us of that. And it reminds us, by the way, that God is the One who gives victory. In all those battles, it is not our means; it's not our personal resources. Those things are not the things that bring victory.

One of the reasons that you can tell, in the midst of the hard questions, that the heart of the psalmist is right is the way that he starts this psalm off. It's not that Israel had a great army; It's that they had a great God. That's why they're in Canaan. That's why they'd won these victories in the past. And he is unabashed in his proclamation of that truth. God gets the glory for all the past successes of Israel. And so God gets the glory for all the successes in our lives. If we had been more than conquerors in some day past, it's not because of our greatness; it's because of God's greatness. And so this Psalm begins by pointing to God as the One who gives victory and God who is the One who has indeed provided victory in the past in order that we might remember that in the midst of present difficulties.

II. Christians sometimes experience dark providences.

Look secondly at verses 9 through 16, where now the psalmist is experiencing a shameful defeat: "Yet You have rejected us and brought us to dishonor, and do not go out with our armies. You cause us to turn back from the adversary; and those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves" and on and on and on. This

is a description of a crushing defeat, but it's a description of a crushing defeat that's very interesting, isn't it? Because the focus of this is not so much on the defeat, as on God having been the author of that defeat. You have done this; You have done this; You have done this. In Psalm 44, we have on the national and corporate levels, the same kind of struggle that Job had on the individual level. Now think about this for a moment. Job's struggle is not that he wonders whether God is out of control or whether his life is out of God's control. Job does not spend time from Job 3 to Job 41 questioning whether God is in control. He does not spend time from Job 3 to Job 41 wondering if God is sovereign. Job's struggle from Job 3 to Job 41 is precisely that he knows that God is sovereign, and he feels as if God is against him, even though he loves God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength, and he doesn't understand what is going on. And that is exactly what is going on here. Don't you see it in the language of verses 9 to 16? "You've done this God: You've destroyed us; You've crushed us; You've sold us cheaply. At least, O Lord, if you're going to send us to slavery you could have gotten some money for us." The Psalmist is speaking about dark providence here; those times when it seems as if God Himself is against or has forgotten us. And Christians experience those dark providences too.

Take your hymnals out and turn to the back of the hymnal where the Confession of Faith is recorded. Look to page 858, and look at the bottom of the page, right hand corner, chapter 8 on "Assurance of Grace in Salvation," section 4. "True believers may have the assurance of their salvation in various ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the spirit, by some sudden or vehement temptation, or by God's withdrawing the light of His countenance and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light." And that is exactly what Israel as a nation is experiencing, and it is that that is troubling them even more than the victory, even more than the defeat at the hands of their enemies.

III. Christians are not guaranteed answers to God's secret will.

In verses 17 through 22, they respond to this, and they ask "Why Lord? We've been faithful, and we've still been slaughtered. Why?" Notice what they say: "All this has come upon us, but we have not forgotten You, And we have not dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, And our steps have not deviated from Your way, yet You have crushed us." The children of Israel are not claiming to be sinlessly perfect. You understand that. They even intimate that when they talk about God knowing our hearts later on. They know that they can't fool God. If they had, in fact, been following another way, it would have made no sense for them to protest that they had not been because God knows their hearts. So the fact that they here corporately confess - "Lord we haven't been going after idols; we haven't been seeking after other gods. We haven't been rejecting the way of Your covenant. We've been faithfully trying to follow you.

We've sought You. We've prayed to You. We've prayed this thing through, and we've been crushed by You," - indicates to us that though they are not perfect, certainly not sinlessly perfect, yet they are indeed sincere in this particular protest to God. They have been faithful to him, relatively speaking. And yet, they've experienced this dark providence. And you know what? They don't get an answer. There's no answer here. There are some hints, aren't there? "For your sake, O Lord, we've been slaughtered." I wonder if some of you have found yourselves in just this circumstance. Maybe you're a godly Christian, and you've been seeking to honor the Lord in your marriage, and it's a difficult marriage. And you've come home one day, faithfully resting on the Lord for years, seeking to serve your spouse, and you've been met at the doors with these words: "I'm leaving." Maybe you're a faithful gospel minister. It's a true story: forty years in the ministry, looking forward in a few months to retirement with his wife. And just a few months before that retirement, she contracts cancer, and the doctor says, "She has two to three months to live. Set your house in order." Looking forward to retirement, everything's opening up, finally we're going to be able to spend all that time together that we've looked forward to; gone. Or maybe you're a seminary student, and you're serving in the church, and you're seeking to prepare to serve for the Lord, and cancer is the word from the mouth of your physician. Or maybe you're a Christian, an elder, a Sunday School teacher, and your pastor has been killed in a tragic automobile accident, and six years later your granddaughter is killed in an automobile accident, and three years later your grandson is killed in an automobile accident. Lord, what are You doing? And there's no answer.

That's where the Psalmist is.

But I want to say one thing, my friends: it is vitally important for you to understand that Jesus Himself prays the prayer "Why" and receives no answer. When you have no answer, you are not in a deeper pit than your Lord Himself was. For when He cries, "My God My God, why have You forsaken Me?" and there is no answer, He is, in fact, in a place that you have never been and never will be. How do you put together the sinless Son of God, who has come on a mission of redemption asking, "Why" at the climactic point of the act of redemption? How do you put all those things together? You can't see to the bottom of that truth. And yet He prays, "Why?" And He doesn't just pray it to be in community with David in Psalm 22; He prays it because it is true. Why?

And it's vital for you to remember when you have no answers that your Savior has been in a deeper pit than you will ever, ever be. And it's also so important for you to remember that the Apostle Paul will go right to this Psalm in the midst of that glorious passage in Romans 8. You remember when he's talking about "all things working together for good for those who are called according to God's purpose, for those who love God"? You remember what he says? Turn with me to Romans 8. He's encouraging the Romans in the midst of their persecution, and he says this in verse 35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Just as it is written: 'For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things, we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." Calvin says this: "Lest the severity of the cross should dismay us, let us always have present to our view this condition of the church: that as we are adopted in Christ, we are appointed to the slaughter."

What did we sing tonight? "Jesus, I my cross have taken." Do we mean that? When you're adopted into the Master's family, you must be prepared to go the Master's way. And the Master's way is the way of the cross, and so when we are adopted into this family, we are adopted to experience the same persecutions and the same trials and losses and crosses that our Master had to endure when He lived here for us.

We're guaranteed no answer, but there is this word for your sake. You know, just this week a friend was telling me about the testimony of a health professional who's working for one of our doctors in this congregation. I'm not going to divulge any of the names for sake of sparing embarrassment, but one of our congregation members has been going through cancer treatment. And the doctor with whom she has been working has a part-time help-professional working with him who had come back out of service after a short period of not working in that health profession, and that person is working part-time. And that person said, you know, it has been worth it if the only thing I ever get to see is the way that person has gone through this treatment for cancer. I don't know what God is doing in the life of that person, but I know that God has been glorified in that person in her suffering. "For Thy sake" - that's the only hint we get in this Psalm - "For Thy sake."

I don't know what God's purposes are in your life. Chances are, you don't know what God's purposes are in your life, but you do know that He will get glory from you. He will get glory, and you will revel in His getting glory in you.

IV. Christians apply to the Lord in prayer as if they were attempting to wake the dead.

The Psalmist ends pretty boldly: Wake up, Lord! Help, Lord! Wake up! "Don't reject us forever" (verses 23 to 26). That's a fairly bold prayer, especially in light of the fact that it's coming from the nation whose prophet Elijah had once said to the prophets of Baal "perhaps your god is sleeping. Speak a little bit louder; maybe he'll wake up." And he boasted, "the Lord our God, the Lord of Israel, He slumbers not nor sleeps." But the Psalmist says, Wake up! Is it irreverent?

Was it irreverent when Jesus said to His disciples, let me tell you how to pray. You need to pray to God like you're an importunate widow, and He's an unjust

judge. That's how you need to pray to God. And you need to beat His door down until He answers you, until He answers you not because He cares about you, but because He's worn out by your praying. Was that irreverent of Jesus to say when He told that story? No. He's teaching us that Christians are to apply to the Lord in prayer as if we were trying to wake the dead. And that's exactly what the Psalmist is doing here: "Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever."

You see, the very fact that the Psalmist is going to the Lord in prayer after what he has described in verses 9-16 is a proof of his faith in the prayer answering God of Israel. But the way in which he does it is to assail the very gates of heaven.

You know how this psalm basically breaks down? Let me give you an outline of the logic of this psalm. Lord, You helped us in the past; we need Your help now, but You're not helping us now. Indeed, it seems as if You have abandoned us even though we have been faithful to You. So help us, please. That's the logic of this psalm! The believer is experiencing what feels like the rejection of God, and here's his response: Lord, don't reject me. Help me now, please, like You have in the past. And how does he end? Look at the 26th verse: "Redeem us for the sake of Thy lovingkindness." Ok, you've got one thing that you can claim of God, and you go to Him in prayer. What's it going to be? Well, in Psalm 51, when David didn't have a hope, he asked for God to hear his prayer because of His lovingkindness - not David's lovingkindness but because of God's lovingkindness. And how does this Psalm end? "Remember us, O God, because of Your lovingkindness."

Now, bear that in mind, and turn back with me to Romans 8. Paul has just quoted this Psalm in verse 36: "For Your sake, we are being put to death all day long. We are being considered as sheep to be slaughtered." And then he says, "that in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us; for I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

That's where we go. That's where we go when the lights go out. That's where we go when we feel like sheep being led to slaughter. We go to the lovingkindness, the love and grace of God shown to us certainly in Jesus Christ. Now, this Psalm shows us the Christian experience of a dark and inexplicable providence. And there are many, many here tonight who have been there and are there, and there are none of us who will not be there. When we're there, where do we go? To the past and God's victories and to the lovingkindness of God, our only hope. Let's pray.

O Lord, we're amazed at how You have anticipated the deepest questions of our souls in Your word. And You've already begun to answer them, not maybe in the

ways that we were expecting, but in better ways, more helpful ways. We need the faith to believe. You can supply that. We ask for it. Keep us trusting. Keep us clinging. Keep us holding on even in the valley of the shadow. And get glory out of it. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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