

Perplexing Providences

Psalm 44

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Turn in your Bibles, or you can look on your screen. I'm going to be reading from Psalm 44. It's a psalm that some years ago I was thinking about, particularly as I was going through some difficult times and experiencing difficulties in life. And I found great comfort in this psalm. So let's give attention to God's word.

O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old: you with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted; you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free; for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm save them, but your right hand and your arm, and the light of your face, for you delighted in them.

You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob! Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down those who rise up against us. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who hate us. In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah.

But you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies. You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have gotten spoil. You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them. You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face at the sound of the taunter and reviler, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way; yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart. Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly clings to the ground. Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love! [ESV]

What a psalm. I don't know if you've taken this psalm and prayed through it at some time. But it is so raw. It's so vulnerable. It's so honest. And so I want us to think about that this morning.

Brian Kelso is a Presbyterian pastor who lives in Florida, and he has had a heart for many years for the Haitian people, a people who have been ravaged by hurricanes, and earthquakes, and all manner of terrible things. In August of 2010, he took a trip—there's many trips he has taken. He took a trip there. And after returning from Haiti, he was back in his home church, and he was ministering. And when he finished ministering and preaching that evening, he found that he'd spiked this horrible fever. He went to the nearest ER and immediately was placed in the intensive care unit. And the doctors labored to save his life, and they discovered what he had was a terrible case of malaria. His vital organs shut down. He was placed on life support. Thankfully, he survived and responded to treatment well. He had both portions of his feet amputated.

He asked himself in the midst of all that, "God, what is going on?" He'd been to Haiti a hundred times or more. He'd known of no one who had contracted malaria. So why that one malaria infected mosquito? Why him? Why now in the midst of all this ministry that he was doing? And months later when he returned to the pulpit, he was talking to his congregation, and he told them, "Honestly, I was in a very dark place. I did not know where I was. But I felt alone. But I have to tell you I did not feel the Lord's presence." That's honesty from a pastor. Could you handle that?

You see, I think Brian Kelso was opening up his heart as a window through which we see the reality of what faith looks like when we're in the mist of struggle, when in the midst of affliction. And I think what he does—he really mirrors in many ways what the psalmist in Psalm 44 describes for us. Because here's the psalmist. He's feeling defeated. He's feeling abandoned by God. He's living in the midst of some situations that he simply doesn't understand. And you and I, we go through difficult things in life. We experience suffering, affliction, hardship, what I call severe providences. And we simply try to make sense of it, but we can't make sense of it. So what do we do?

And so what the psalmist allows us to do—he gives us words. He gives us language. He gives us a framework for us to express our faith, real genuine faith, honest vulnerable faith in the midst of heartache and brokenness and affliction that we don't understand. You see, this is what faith looks like, at least one picture of what faith looks like when you want to lament to a holy God, when you're trying to figure out why God has sent this your way, whatever it might be, when you're trying to figure it out because there are no easy answers. The older I get, the longer I've walked with Jesus, the more I understand that there's not that many easy answers.

And so look with me. I want to look at this psalm under three headings. First, remembering God's past victories, and secondly lamenting the present disgrace, and thirdly imploring our covenant God. So first of all is remembering God's past victories. He's going to open up his heart. The psalmist is going to open up his heart. He's going to talk about this affliction that he's undergoing, the things that he simply doesn't understand. He's going to complain before God. But before he does that, do you know what he does in verses 1 through 8? He recalls and remembers God's past victories and God's redemptive work. That's where he begins. What a good place to begin for us because that's not naturally where I want to go. Let me just start with a complaint. But no.

He goes back in verses 1 and 2. He talks about God driving out the Canaanites, and God planting Israel in the promised land of Canaan. And he speaks generally in those two verses, but you can fill in the particular details. Perhaps he's thinking about God's sovereign power at work in delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, taking them through the Red Sea, feeding them manna and quail, directing them in the desert, and finally taking them across the Jordan River into the promised land after seeing the walls of Jericho come down. They saw God's mighty hand at work. That was in the distant past, as he recalls that. But there's also in verse 7 something in the recent past. He says, "You have saved us from our foes." He's talking about foes in the present. "And have put to shame those who hate us." What a good place to begin

when there are things that you are experiencing that you just don't understand. You're trying to make sense of it. Go back to the things that you know are true. Recall the redemptive acts of God.

And in verse 3—as you recall them, verse 3 tells us, "For not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arms save them." It's very clear, Lord, as you have done these things in the past, you have done these glorious acts, these glorious works of redemption. And we didn't do it. It's not our strength. It's not our sword. It's not our might. We didn't accomplish it. But you accomplished it, O God. You see, what he was trying to remember in the midst of the hardship, he's thinking about God. It's not that Israel had a great army. It's that they had a great God. And I need to remember that. I have a great God who has done these great acts all throughout history.

But notice something else in verse 1 before I move on, that the works and the victories of God were told to them, to him. He says, "Our fathers told us." Don't skip that too quickly. What he's saying is the past victories of God that come to mind were told to him and told to the people of God by a former generation. Their faith in God was the result of their spiritual fathers and mothers speaking to them and passing on the works of God, the redemptive history of God, and they pass it on to that generation. So be careful, my dear friends as you live in the present, even when it's hard as if the past doesn't matter, as if the testimony of our spiritual fathers and mothers doesn't make any difference. And for those of you who are young, don't despise or minimize what your parents teach you. But how about you ask your parents, even today, "Tell me about the redemptive work of God in your life. Tell me about it. I need to know it." Pass that on, moms and dads.

In terms of the hymn, "Tell me the old, old story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love." Go. Let's tell one another. Let's ask one another. Tell me how God is at work in your life. Tell me of the good work and acts that He is doing by His grace in your life. Why? Why do you want to know it? It's not just a story that belongs to them. It's so that it becomes your story so that you get caught up, and your story becomes part of that redemptive story of God and what God is doing, so that it becomes your song, too, so that that historical faith becomes your present contemporary faith.

I met a schoolteacher teaching history and passing around the classroom with all of the students a facsimile of the Declaration of Independence. So the student would take that facsimile, look at it, say, "Yeah, that's very nice." And they would pass it on to another student, you know, until they got to one student by the name of Marcos, a first generation American. His parents emigrated to the United States. Now, Marcos got a hold of the Declaration of Independence, and he's kind of studying this thing. He's looking at it. He's studying it. He sees all of these names at the bottom. And before he gives it to the other person, he takes out his pen, and he writes his name underneath the other signers as if to say, "This is not their story. It's my story, too."

That's where we need to begin, brothers and sisters. As you think even in the midst of the affliction, and suffering, and heartache, and all the terrible things that go on, the tragedies that go on in life that we simply can't make sense of—none of us have been able to make sense of this pandemic. And you do, "Lord, where do I go?" Well, you go back to the redemptive acts of God, and you remember that it's by God's power that you're here today. It's by God's accomplished work in Christ Jesus and the work He's doing by His Spirit that you are here, that God continues to unfold His redemptive story in your life and in my life. That's where we go back to.

And that's why in verse 8, he boasts. He says, "In God, we have boasted continually. We'll give thanks to your name forever." A little boasting is appropriate, people of God. Of course, boast in the Lord. But no sooner does he write that in verse 8 about boasting in the Lord—you come to verse 9. There's this transition, "But." In the past, God, you've given us victory. We've seen your redemptive works. "But now," he says, "you have rejected us and disgraced us." That is bold. You ever said to God, "God, you

disgraced me"? And here's the psalmist putting it into words. It's almost as if he says, "Look. I don't understand it, God. I don't understand what's going on. There's a disconnect between what I've heard, between what I believe and what I've seen you do in the past and what I am presently experiencing. I'm experiencing defeat and misery, and I simply don't know how to make sense of this."

And this leads us to the second point where we see he's lamenting the present disgrace. In verses 9 to 22, he lays out the suffering. He lays out the misery. Emotionally, you see him just open up his heart with all that misery that has overcome the people of God. In verses 9 to 16, what he does is he expresses his lament before God.

Verses 9 through 11, we see one of them. He laments the military defeat. He says, "You haven't gone out with our armies. The enemy has gotten spoils from us. We've been slaughtered like sheep." In verse 12, another lament. You know, they've been taken off. They've been slaughtered. They've been taken off as prisoners, taken away as prisoners. And he says, "You sold us for a trifle." You just sold us away. Aren't we your treasured possession? Aren't we the delight of your heart? Aren't we your chosen people? And you just sold us for a few bucks. We seem to have no value to you, O God."

And then the third lament in verses 13 to 16. He says, "Look what they've done. The people have made us objects of ridicule and scorn. They're talking about us. They're laughing at us. We feel humiliated, disgraced, and covered with shame." You see, what he's saying is, "Look. On one hand, we understand that you are powerful, that you're a redeeming God, that you're a God who has provided for your people throughout generations. But look at what is happening now. There seems to be a contradiction." And doesn't it happen in your faith and in my faith, that sometimes our creed collides with our experience. We just don't know what to do.

But it gets worse. He offers a complaint to God. In verse 11, he says, "The people of God were scattered, carried off as prisoners of war. They were exiled." Now, if you were to go back to Deuteronomy 28:25, there you see their curses of disobedience to the covenant. And one of the curses was that if God's people were unfaithful and sinful idolators, that they would be sent off as an exile. But this is precisely where we find the problem. See, in verses 17 and 18, "All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you. We have not been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way." You see, what he's saying to God in this prayer, he says, "We've not forgotten you, God. I would understand if we had forgotten you. We've not broken the covenant. There's no blatant sin, O God." He's not saying—by saying this in these verses, he's not saying that he's sinless. He's just saying that they were practicing true religion, that they were faithful as a people. And he supports this claim by noting that if they indeed were suffering as punishment intended by God for some idolatry or faithlessness, in verse 21, he says, "God would've told us, though. God would have discovered it to us. God knows our heart. He knows it. He would've told us." He says that's not the case. There is no apparent reason for this reversal, for this defeat in war. There is no apparent reason that we can discern for this suffering that we're experiencing. "We have been faithful to the covenant, God. But you have not brought blessing, but you have brought this disaster."

How do you resolve that tension? How do you resolve that in your Christian life? Let me just give you a few thoughts to kind of—some boundaries for us as we try to think through that. Remember this, that suffering with the affliction that we go through is not necessarily because we have sinned. Not all of that is because we have sinned, because we've done something wrong. Remember the man who was born blind in John 9. The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, so that he was born blind?" And Jesus answered, "Neither, that the works of God might be displayed in him."

You know, sometimes we do suffer the consequences of other people's sins, of wrongdoing, or other things that go on in the world. But we just need to remember this when we go through affliction

and hardship and suffering, that it's not punishment from God. Do you ever feel that way, though, that God is punishing you? And you just need to hear that again. You are not—if you are in Christ Jesus, you are not being punished for your sin. Why? Because all the punishment that your sin deserved has fallen on Jesus Christ. He was crushed for our transgression. He was bruised for our iniquity. Divine justice was satisfied fully at the cross. All our sins have been completely paid for at the cross. There is nothing left for us to pay. It is finished. The debt has been paid.

So you remember that because in your moments of weakness, you will think, "Okay. What did I do wrong? God is getting me." Oh, no. If He wanted to punish you, He'd do it properly.

And the other thing that I have to remember is that the suffering, the affliction, the hardship that I'm going through isn't the result of God not being in control. He is sovereignly in control of all things. And the psalmist portrays for us an understanding of the sovereignty of God that includes even these painful circumstances, and he recognizes that God is—yes. It's not the case that God shot the arrow at them. And God didn't put the chains on the Israelites and pull them out into exile and to another country. But look at verse 9. Look at that word, "You." "But you have rejected us and disgraced us." Verse 10, "You have made us turn back from the foe." Verse 11, "You have made us like sheep for the slaughter." Verse 12, "You have sold your"—"You, O God. You have done that."

What do we do with that? God is sovereign in all things. He has decreed all that comes to pass. When in the mist of suffering, affliction, hardship, pain, and sorrow, and you know God is in it somehow. You ever try to remove the tension, try to resolve the tension? Some people have tried to resolve that tension by denying in the first place that God is all powerful. Do you remember—some of you may remember years ago Rabbi Kushner wrote that book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. And he wrote that book in part because his 14-year-old son died to a genetic disease. And he was wrestling with God's role in suffering and concluded that God is not to blame because He's not able to control all the factors in our lives. God doesn't have all authority and all power. Therefore, He can't control all things. But that's not what the Bible teaches at all.

Other people try to resolve the tension by saying, "Well, you know what? God doesn't know all things. He lacks knowledge in some areas." And this particular view is fostered by those who hold open theism. Have you ever heard of that? But there's a version of open theism that says that God does not know the future because the future is caused by our free will choices. And since our free will has not yet caused the future, God can't know what the future is. Therefore, He cannot be responsible for what's happening. I'll use a biblical word that means that's excrement. Rubbish. God knows all things and is in control of all things. And He's not the author of sin, obviously. But He has decreed whatsoever comes to pass. And this is what makes it hard for us.

But there's something else we need to keep in mind as we think about suffering. No, it's not because of our sin. It's not punishment. But suffering is, at times, for God's sake. Look at verse 22. "For your sake, we are killed all the day long." "On your account, we're facing death. We're facing suffering." It's almost as if he's saying, "It's because we're your people. And we're hated by the world because we are your people. We are disgraced. And the people around us, our enemies, they count us as sheep to be slaughtered. They don't care about us."

Helen Roseveare, an English medical missionary to the Congo in Africa in the 1950's and beyond, was instrumental in establishing a training school for nurse evangelists, transformed a maternity and leprosy center into a hospital. And then in 1964, the civil war broke out in the Congo, and all the medical facilities they'd established were destroyed. She along with ten other missionaries were imprisoned. And she attempted an escape, and she was caught. And then she wrote this. "They found me, dragged me to my feet, struck me over my head and shoulders, flung me on the ground, kicked me, dragged me to my

feet only to strike me again. The sickening searing pain of a broken tooth, a mouthful of sticky blood, my glasses gone, beyond sense, numbed with horror and fear, unknown fear." Why? Because she belonged to Jesus. She was counted as sheep to be slaughtered.

And, you know, you go read that glorious chapter 8 of Romans. And Paul is talking there and writing to those who are struggling in their walk with the Lord. Remember what he writes? "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" He says, "Who's going to separate you from the love of Christ? Tribulation, distress, persecution, danger, the sword." And do you know how he answers the question in Romans 8:35? He quotes Psalm 44:22. "For your sake, we are killed all the day long, and we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." Well, that's very comforting, Paul. See, what he's doing, he's saying, "Look. You who are struggling and suffering in affliction and wrestling, look. You will never be separated from the love of Christ. This love is real. It's unbreakable. It's irreversible. But I understand this. So is your suffering is real, also." And he puts together this strange combination that's so hard for me to do, the inseparable love of God in Christ Jesus and the severe suffering that we go through at times in this world. But that's where he takes us.

So what do you do with that? Which takes me to my last point, our need to implore our covenant God in verses 23 to 26. So in the midst of this affliction and misery, he looks back to God's saving work in the past. And then he honestly looks at the present, his present distress and disgrace. But he also looks forward. He faces God before the face of God. And he goes, and he prays in verses 23 to 26. And he concludes with this bold prayer. Try it out this afternoon. "Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?" I'd love for you to raise your hand and ask each one of you if you ever pray that. "Do not reject us forever! Why do you hide your face?" I mean, this is a bold and insistent prayer, especially coming from the nation whose prophet Elijah taunted the prophets of Baal saying that, "Perhaps your god is sleeping. Speak a little louder. Maybe he'll wake up." Is the psalmist being irreverent? He knows that God's not asleep. He knows that. But this is the cry of faith when you lament, and you try to live in that tension, and you know God is sovereign, and you know that He's good, but you can't explain things because you're left in a position of saying, "Well, God, your ways are higher than my ways. Your thoughts are not like my thoughts. I don't understand." This is what the cry of faith does.

But why would anybody do this? Well, I ask the question, where else would you go? Who else are you going to pray to? Who else has the words of life? And do you remember in John 6 when Jesus says some very hard things, and people leave Him. And then He turns to the disciples and says, "Are you going to leave me, too?" And Peter says, "You alone have the words of life. Where else can we go? To whom else do we pray?"

See, what he does is he faces God in prayer and honestly reveals his heart and says something so bold. He concludes by looking at the character of God. He says, "This is sure. I know this." He says in verse 26, "Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love." There you go, brothers and sisters. Here is the gospel. Here's the good news in the midst of the suffering and the affliction and the turmoil and trial. It's the steadfast love of God. And you know it translates that Hebrew word "hesed." This is where he places his hope. This is his trump card in the face of perplexing providences and these inexplicable things that happen in life. He says, "Okay. God, I know this about you, that you are loyal, that you are merciful, that you are unfailing, that you have pledged yourself, that you've committed your love." In the words of Ralph David (sic), "You have given to us a love that has crazy glue spread all over it."

This is where he goes. He goes to the self-declared character of God the Lord, of God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He goes to the God who cannot change. My circumstances change. My emotions change. But God cannot un-hesed Himself. Never. That's where I need to go. That's where we need to go.

Every Christmas, Kim and I and our kids put a thousand-piece puzzle together. There's great satisfaction, you know, when you got the edge around, and you're starting to put all the pieces together. And it's great. You know, I remember one year, we were doing a puzzle, and the last piece was gone. The world was coming to an end. It was just terrible. Why? Because when you take one piece, you put it together to the next piece, and you see it all completed, it gives us so much satisfaction. And we say, "Lord, I want to put all the pieces in your governance of the world. I want to put them all together, and I want to understand them." And God says, "Oh, really?" And what do you do when you don't have the pieces to put together.

I sometimes think that in the midst of the suffering, the affliction, what God calls us to do is really to lay hold of hesed. For God to un-hesed Himself, you know what would have to happen? The ascendant exalted reigning Lord Jesus would have to come down from the right hand of God in humiliation. The resurrection would need to be undone. His death on the cross would never have happened. His perfect life for us gone. There would be no incarnation. That's what would have to happen for God to stop being steadfast in His love and His grace to you. And that will never happen.

I may not understand the circumstances in which God in His providence brings me, but I understand that He has demonstrated His hesed in His Son, in Jesus whom He gave. And that is where we see the hesed of God so gloriously with His Son nailed to the cross. And there at the cross, He took everything that separated us from God, all the punishment we deserved. And there at the cross, we find our forgiveness, our reconciliation. We've been given His righteousness so that we're now clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We are declared not guilty. We are deeply, profoundly loved by God.

So remember that in the midst of the hardships. But I need to go back. I need to go back, like the psalmist teaches me, to the redemptive works of God in Christ. I need to go back to the cross and remember Jesus who could've said, you know, "I never sinned. I don't deserve this," like we sometimes want to whisper in our own hearts. And yet, though He didn't deserve it, He was the sheep led to the slaughter. He was the one who was never false to the covenant, whose heart had never turned back from God, who never departed from God's way. But He suffered in our place. He experienced the darkness. He experienced the Father turning His face away so that we would have the light of the countenance of God upon us.

Can you remember that next time you go through hardships? That God will not un-hesed Himself. He's given us Jesus. I think that maybe the affliction and the perplexing providences, maybe it's meant to cause me to lean into Jesus a lot more than I do. God is wiser than I. He knows that I'm hesitant. I think of what the Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and share in his sufferings." Oh, yeah. Bring it on. "That I may share in his sufferings becoming like him in his death." Wow. Now, that's fellowship because that word "share" means that I might have fellowship with Jesus in the suffering.

Helen Roseveare, what she experienced was even worse. At one point, she said, "Beaten and bruised, terrified and tormented, alone. I felt at last God had failed me. Surely, he could have stepped in earlier. Surely, things need not have gone that far." And she says the Lord saying to her, "20 years ago, you asked me for the privilege of serving as a missionary. Don't you want it? These are not your sufferings. These are mine." And after sensing that, she wrote,

"God met with me with outstretched arms of love. It was an unbelievable experience, so totally, utterly loved by him. His comfort was so complete. And suddenly I knew. I knew that his love was sufficient. He did love me. He didn't take away the pain. He didn't take away the cruelty or the mutilation. It was all there. But it was altogether different because now it was with him,

for him, and in him."

That's where we need to go, in Christ. Let's pray.

Lord, we have no rest for our soul. We have no satisfaction unless it's in you, Jesus. And we thank you that though we don't understand much of what goes on in the world, even things that happen to us—we'd like to know, and maybe one day we will understand. But we know that you understand, and we can rest in you. We know that you have a heart of steadfast love and faithfulness toward us. Lord, remind us no matter what situation we find ourselves in—if it's not today that we're experiencing this affliction, but maybe in the days to come, remind us that you will never un-hesed yourself. You are faithful. You're good. You're loving. You're wise. You are for us, your people. Help us to hear the music of the gospel in the valley of despair. In Jesus's name. Amen.