

PSALM 44

THE MEMORIES AND PRAYERS OF MARTYRS

This Psalm may be divided into four parts: a wistful look to days of old, when God marvelously worked on behalf of His people; a sad contrast in their present oppression; a profession of unfaltering national adherence to the Lord's covenant, notwithstanding all these ills; and a fervent cry to God, Who seems to be asleep when His martyred people need rescued.

The first part of this composition (verses 1-8) recalls the fact that shone so brightly in the historical past: namely, the continual exercise of Divine power, giving victory to the weakness of His covenant-people. And upon this fact, the Psalmist builds a prayer that the same law of His Providence would be fulfilled now, before his very own eyes. The bitter side of the retrospect forces itself into the consciousness of the writer of this composition; but here, Memory is the handmaid of Faith. The whole process of the Exodus and the subsequent conquest of Canaan is gathered up as one great "work" of God's hand (verse 1). The former inhabitants of the land were uprooted like old trees in order to give room for the planting of God's people in their place. The ascription of victory to the Lord in this wonderful work is made even more emphatic by the negatives in verse 3, for they take away all credit of the people's success in this matter from their own weapons or strength. The consciousness of our own weakness must accompany an adequate recognition of God's hand at work in our deliverances. The conceit of our own power too often blinds our vision of His working hand. But what moved His power? Indeed, it was no merit of man's! Rather, it was only the infinite free grace of the Lord's heart. "The light of thy face" (verse 3) is the symbol of God's loving regard. The deepest truth concerning His acts of favor is that they are the outcome of His own merciful nature! And so we see that the summary of Israel's history is contained in three simple thoughts: the positive assertion of God's power as the reason for their victories; the confirmatory negative, which dismisses any proud ideas of their own prowess; and the

Overview of the Psalm, adapted from Charles Spurgeon:

No other writer should be sought for as the author of any of the Psalms when David will suffice; and therefore, we do not wish to ascribe this sacred song to any except the great Psalmist. However, as we hardly know any period of his life which it would fairly describe, we feel compelled to look elsewhere. Some Israelite patriot who had fallen on evil times here sings, in mingled faith and sorrow, about his country's ancient glory and her present griefs. The Lord's people today will find it very helpful to sing this Psalm when the persecution of the Church is peculiarly severe.

Beginning in verse 1, the Lord's mighty works for Israel are rehearsed from history; and in remembrance of them, faith in the Lord is expressed (verses 4-8). Then the notes of complaint are heard (verses 9-16), the faithfulness of the people to their God is avowed (verses 17-22), and the Lord is entreated to interpose on their behalf (verses 23-26).

tracing of all the Lord's workings on their behalf to His unmerited grace.

In the second division (verses 9-16) of this Psalm, we learn that at the time when these words were written, the people of God were under some kind of defeat and dishonor. And their neighboring nations – such as the Edomites, the Ammonites, and other ancestral foes – were ready with their gibes and taunts. The more distant peoples made a proverb out of their tragedy, and nodded their heads over the Israelites in triumph and scorn. The poor Psalmist – in the middle of this ring of mockers – is covered with shame as he hears the babel of heartless jests at his nation's expense, and as he steals a glance at the fierce faces all around him.

The third section (verses 17-22) brings closely together professions of righteousness and complaints of suffering, and it closes with the assertion that these two are cause and effect. The sufferers, at this time, were a nation of martyrs; they were being persecuted and afflicted by the heathen because of their faithful adherence to the ways of Jehovah. The Psalmist asserts not only national abstinence from idolatry, but also a loyal adherence – in both heart and action – to the Lord's Covenant. "For thy sake," he cries out in the 22nd verse, "we are killed all the day!" Nevertheless, the sufferer's words should not be exaggerated into charges of injustice against God, nor into claims of absolute sinlessness. He knows that there had not been a general falling away from the Lord to account for these present national distresses. But he does not accuse God's perfect and all-wise government. He knows that he and his people were suffering as martyrs, and not being punished as criminals; however, he does not fling that fact down as an accusation of Providence, but only as the foundation of his prayers and pleadings for God's help.

These prayers and pleadings form the fourth portion of this Psalm (verses 23-26). It contains some very frank figurative language, describing the Lord as if He were asleep, forgetting His people. We know, from another of the Psalms, that "he that keepeth Israel slumbers not, nor sleeps." But sleep withdraws the mind from knowledge of and action in the physical world; and therefore, it is here figuratively attributed to God, when He seems to allow evil and wickedness to prevail without being put down. Hence the Psalmist beseeches Him to "awake" and "arise," and to smite flourishing evil into nothingness by some great act of judgment. Some commentators call these closing petitions commonplace, and indeed they are. Extreme need and agonies in a person's life cause

them to think of many other things before they even consider creativity and originality. And when sorrows are so commonplace and so similar to each other, the cries of sorrowful believers will be very much alike. Nevertheless, God is pleased with well-worn prayers which have been spoken by the lips of His sons and daughters!

Lord, we beseech You to do the same for us as You did for Your people of old, and win deliverances for us yet again in our own times! Amen.

