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## When the Innocent Suffer

### Psalm 44

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A couple of weeks ago Ashley, Jayme and I went to Chicago while Patti and Bobbi were on the Esprit tour, and while we were there we went to one of our favorite places, the Chicago Art Museum. This summer they were featuring the paintings by 19<sup>th</sup> century French impressionist painter George Seurat. When you first enter the area that's dedicated to his work, you are greeted by a number of paintings by an impressionist painter whose name you'd recognize that had influenced Seurat in his techniques and his paintings. But once you move past there, you then begin to see these paintings that are fairly small, which are illustrations of his experimenting with different techniques, different color, different light. One of the things about Seurat that was unique was that he didn't use normal painting strokes, but just the end of the brush. It was more like a dash, and his paintings were a series of these little dashes, as he experimented with different colors and different ways that affected the light. As we walked down this hall we kept seeing these small paintings, and many of them didn't seem to make sense. It just looked like each was a part of a painting; there wasn't enough there to make a lot of sense. After we saw dozens of these it became somewhat monotonous, and we were trying to figure out, *What's the point? I don't get it.*

Let's imagine that this evening you get a phone call and a friend of yours comes over and tells you her story. For the last several years she has tried everything to cultivate her walk with God. She reads the Scriptures, she spends time in prayer, she serves in a ministry, she's in a context of community with other believers. She seems to be doing everything that one should do. But as she tells her story, it's a series of disappointments and discouragements—one trial after another, one crisis after another—and it just doesn't seem to be working. So you enter into this discussion and you talk about all the things you think are necessary in order to experience God's blessing and God's favor. The problem is, she seems to be doing all those things. She comes to church and she hears the preacher say that we need to trust God and by faith take steps of faith. And she does. But every time she takes a step of faith it seems like God doesn't step with her. She kind of crashes and burns. She is at wit's end and she's wondering, *What's wrong? Why isn't it working?* What are you going to tell her?

That's what the psalmists are wrestling with in Psalm 44: How do we respond to that? Psalm 44 is a psalm written by the sons of Korah, who were worship leaders in Israel. The little writing, the superscription, right above the psalm tells us a couple of important things. Number one, it tells us this is for the worship leader, which tells us this is a psalm that was meant to be part of the public worship of the congregation. It also is called a maskil, which is a Hebrew word that means instruction. That tells us this was part of the worship life of the people to instruct them—to teach them something they needed to understand. It's important to remember that as we go through this psalm.

Psalm 44 really is a psalm of a national lament. The nation is in peril and they're grieving. They're lamenting and they're crying out to God. The psalm goes back and forth between the singular and plural representing the voice of the people and the voice of the king himself.

Probably the best way to organize this psalm is to think of it in terms of past, present, future. The first eight verses are a look into the past. Then he deals with the present. Then there's a cry into the future.

Psalm 44 begins:

**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.** (vs. 1, \*NASB)

When you read through the Old Testament Law, one of the things you find is that the people were instructed—they were commanded—to regularly tell the stories of God. They were to tell the stories of God’s deliverance, God’s salvation, God’s faithfulness—to tell the stories of what God had done to rescue them and deliver them. For example, Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 9 specifically commands the people to tell their story to the next generation, that that generation will tell their story to the next generation. So hundreds of years later people would still know, *This is what God did; this is how God saved us; this is how God delivered us. We’ve got to trust Him.* That’s what verse 1 is referring to. They are familiar with the stories that have been handed down generation after generation. They know what God has done in the past.

Verse 2:

**You with Your own hand drove out the nations; then You planted them; You afflicted the peoples, then You spread them abroad.**

He’s talking about what we would read in the Book of Joshua when the nation entered the land of promise. The poetry here is such that every other line is consistent—meaning the first line is about the enemy; the next line is about the Hebrew people; the next line is about the enemy; the next line is about the Hebrew people.

So he’s saying in verse 2 that God drove out the nations from the land of promise. When he says “then You planted *them*” he means the Hebrew people. That is significant because when you go back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—the patriarchs—you see that these were men who did not possess the land. They did not stay in the land; they were never home. They were just looking forward to that day. They always lived in tents. They were nomads, pilgrims, sojourners—always moving about.

But when they entered the land of promise, the Book of Joshua, He planted them. They were home; no more moving—that’s what he says:

**You afflicted the peoples** [*again talking about the enemy*], **then You spread them abroad** [*talking about the Hebrew people again*].” (vs. 2b)

The term “spread them abroad” is a term used to describe a vine and the branches that would grow and spread out. In other words he said, “When we entered the land You planted them and You spread them out like a vine across the land.”

**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.** (vs. 3)

The psalmists are saying, “We know that they didn’t conquer the land because they were so good with the sword or because they were so good with a bow or because they were such a great army. They said, “They conquered the land, God, because of *You*—because of Your strength, because of Your faithfulness, because of Your presence. It was the light of Your presence that was the conquering force in the land.”

**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.**

(vs. 4-8)

In those verses I think he is recapturing the mindset he was in when they went to war. He's looking to the past, but he's saying, "We knew that it wasn't by our power. It wasn't by our bow and our sword that we would conquer. God, we knew it was *You* and Your sword and Your bow and Your power. And when we entered into this battle we knew that You would give us the victory and we would come back and together we would praise You and thank You forever. We knew that."

That little word "Selah" probably just means "Stop and think about this." This would be a good place to end the psalm and let's all go home. Because this first part of the psalm we *like*. It's very exciting; it's very encouraging.

The problem is, the rest of the psalm is not so encouraging. It's kind of dark and disturbing. The rest of the psalm you're not going to find on a greeting card anywhere. It's a hard message. Starting in verse 9, we get into the present. He's looking to the past and what he's saying is, "God, I know You can do it. You've done it in the past...lots of times."

**Yet [which is a strong Hebrew contrastive: *But now, 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.** (vs. 9-10a)

He's saying, "God, we went to war. And we believed that You would give the victory and we would come home and we would praise You. And we by faith went out into the battle, and You didn't come with us. We got beat; we got crushed." As a matter of fact, reading through the psalm, it's probably a series of defeats. He says, "We had to retreat; we had to turn and run. And the enemies collected our spoils; they've taken our stuff."

**You give us as sheep to be eaten and have scattered us among the nations.** [*meaning they have been captured. Many of the people had been taken away as prisoners of war. They're spread out among the nations now.*] **You sell Your people cheaply** [*we would say, "God, You sold us out. We trusted You, and You sold us out."*] **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.** (vs. 11-14)

The "byword" is the Hebrew word for a proverb—meaning they've become a proverbial statement. What he means by that is whenever these enemy nations went out and were soundly defeated, they would say, "Wow! We got Hebrewed. We got Israelized." They became a byword for getting booked, getting crushed. He is saying, "We're a laughing stock."

**All day long my dishonor is before me and my humiliation has overwhelmed me** [*this is the king talking*], **because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles, because of the presence of the enemy and the avenger.** (vs. 15-16)

Imagine what the king is going through. He stood before the people and he said, "You know, we've got to go and attack the enemy." And the people said, "The enemy is too strong; we can't beat them." And the king said, "You know, *God* will be our strength! God will be our bow. He will be our sword. Remember what He's done in the past. Remember these great stories of God's victory. God can do this—we just have to trust Him and step out by faith." The people rallied and they said, "We can do it!" So they stepped out by faith, and God didn't go with them. And they lost. Their friends and loved ones have been taken prisoners of war, and the king stands before his people and says, "I can't take this; I'm shamed. I'm humiliated." The people are angry with him and he says, "Now the enemies and avengers are among us"—meaning "these nations that we had defeated before are coming to avenge those victories. They're coming to avenge us." We find ourselves asking: What's happening here?

Well, let's think about that. We go back through the Old Testament history and we are reminded of these great stories of God's victory and God's faithfulness and God's deliverance. But we're also reminded there were times when Israel suffered significant defeats. Go back to the Book of Judges, the Book of Joshua, and Samuel. There were times when the nations *lost* their battle. We remember those and we remember it was because of sin. Whenever the nation harbored sin among them, they lost. They were defeated; they were crushed.

Remember in the Book of Joshua, everything was going fine. The Hebrew army went out to take on the people of Ai, whom they should have defeated easily; they didn't even take the whole army out. But they lost; they got crushed. They came back and they found out there was sin in the camp. They had to deal with Achan and his sin, and once that was dealt with they went out and won the battle.

There are several places in Samuel where Saul led the people into battle and they lost because of sin in the camp. So we say, "That's got to be what it is. There's sin in the camp. And all they have to do is recognize that and deal with their sin and once again they'll have victory."

We like that explanation because it's something we can grab hold of. It's something we can explain. It's something that makes sense: Okay, I get it. God couldn't bless sin, so all they have to do is deal with their sin and everything will be okay. Maybe that's the problem with our friend. All you have to do is find out what the sin is in your life and deal with it and everything will be okay. I mean, that's the problem, isn't it?

Verse 17:

**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...** (vs. 17-18)

Just as we understand this Old Testament pattern, that when there was sin in the camp the people were defeated, so do these people in Psalm 44 know this. They're familiar with the stories, and that's what they're saying, "We understand that if there were sin in our lives that would explain why we're being defeated." But they say, "We haven't done anything. We haven't strayed away from the covenant. We're walking in obedience. We've examined our hearts; our hearts are right. There's no sin in the camp here."

**Yet You have crushed us in a place of jackals** [*it's the idea of a city that's been destroyed by war and now it's unpopulated like a ghost town; all that live there are the jackals. Now the Hebrew people are hiding in these cities; that's all they have left.*] **and covered us with the shadow of death.** [*In the past it was the light of God's presence that brought the victory. Now all they feel is the shadow—the darkness of death.*] **If we had forgotten the name of our God or extended our hands to a strange god [meaning idolatry], would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart.** (vs. 19-21)

In other words, what they are saying is, "You know, we understand that you can't play games with God. We understand that if we were trying to hide some sin from God, or trying to rationalize or excuse something in our lives, God would know and God would be aware of that." So what they're saying is: "We're not stupid. We're not playing games with God. We're not hiding anything from God." He's really inviting God to look them over. They're being honest and authentic and sincere before God.

**But for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.** (vs. 22)

They say, “God, we’ve checked out our hearts. We’ve checked out our lives. The only thing we can figure out is we’re guilty of being Your people—that’s our crime. It’s for Your sake that these people hate us. They hate us because we’re Your people. We’re the sheep of Your pasture, and Your sheep are being slaughtered. That’s our crime.”

Starting in verse 23, he looks to the future after a very dismal report of the present:

**Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever.**

You can feel the frustration. You can feel the disappointment in the voice of the people. They’re saying, “God, wake up! Wake up!” It sounds very much like the disciples in the New Testament, when they’re in the boat on the Sea of Galilee in the midst of the great storm and they fear they will perish. Jesus is sleeping on the boat and they wake Him up and say, “Jesus, wake up! Don’t You care that we’re perishing?” That’s the same thing these people are saying, “God, wake up! You’re sleeping on the job. We’re dying here!”

**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.** (v. 24-25)

It’s a picture of total surrender—face down in the dirt. *I’m defeated; I give up.* He says, “That’s how our soul feels.”

**Rise up, be our help, and redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness.** (vs. 26)

These people aren’t bailing out. There’s nowhere else to turn, and they’re appealing to the lovingkindness of God to do something.

That’s the end of the psalm. Let’s go home and have a nice day. It really cheered us up, didn’t it? This is very unusual. Most of the psalms, when they go down, down, down...at the very end they swing back up. Psalm 44 has no swing—it just stays down there. And it leaves us with kind of a disturbed feeling in our hearts. What do we do with this? These are people that are desiring to walk in obedience. They are desiring to step out by faith and conquer the enemy. They believe they’re right with God. God seems to be sleeping on the job. They’re the sheep of His pasture, but the sheep are being slaughtered.

There is no place in the Bible where God proclaims a message of health, wealth and prosperity. It just isn’t in the Book. It’s in our hearts...but it’s not in this Book. As a matter of fact, the reality is that suffering sometimes is just the price we pay for loyalty to God in a world that is at war with Him. That is a message that Jesus spoke often. Jesus often said, “You know, if you’re going to follow Me, you need to know there’s a price tag. Because this isn’t a playground; this is a battleground. And this is a world that’s at war with Me. They hate Me; they’re going to hate you. They persecuted Me; they’re going to persecute you. I suffered for your sake; I’m going to ask you to suffer for Mine.” Sometimes there is no explanation other than we suffer for the sake of God and His plan and purpose. That’s what these people in Psalm 44 understand: “God, the only thing we’re guilty of is that we are Your people, and because of that these other people hate us. We’re suffering for the sake of Your name.”

In Romans chapter 8, Paul does a very good job of helping us process this psalm. Beginning in verse 31 of Romans 8:

**What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him**

**freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Rom. 8:31-35)**

Understand what he's saying here. He is *not* saying that if you trust Christ as Savior you will not go through these things. As a matter of fact, what he's saying is just the opposite: you can expect to go through these things. But in the *midst* of these things, "who can separate us from the love of Christ?" We can expect tribulation and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and peril and sword. Peter wrote in his letter that he would count it a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ.

**Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."**

(Rom. 8:36)

Sound familiar? It's a quote from Psalm 44. Basically, Paul is bringing the message from Psalm 44—that tension that we feel—and he's bringing it into Romans 8 and saying, "You know, sometimes we will suffer simply for the sake of Christ.

**But in all these things [meaning all of this suffering, all this persecution—all this stuff of Psalm 44] 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:37-39)**

Paul appeals to the same things the psalmists appeal to. When it's all said and done, it's an appeal to the lovingkindness of Christ Jesus. And on the basis of Christ and His salvation, he is convinced there is nothing the world can throw at us that can ever separate us from His love. But we may, for His name's sake, endure trial, tribulation, persecution, famine, nakedness—like sheep to the slaughter, sometimes for no other reason than because we are a follower of Christ.

But understand what often seems like defeat, in the end will be victory. We don't just conquer; we conquer *overwhelmingly*. It's very important to remember this is not heaven. This is not heaven; it is not supposed to be. This is not paradise. This is a war zone. And there is a price to be paid for following the One with whom the world is at war. Sometimes our suffering is for no other reason than for the cause of Christ, in ways we cannot explain or understand. But in the midst of that, we need to understand that *nothing* can separate us from the love of Christ.

One other passage: Hebrews chapter 11, often referred to as the "Faith Hall of Fame." We're very familiar with the first three-fourths of this chapter. And we *love* the first three-fourths of this chapter. We're not crazy about the last fourth.

Beginning in verse 32:

**And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection... (Heb. 11:32-35a)**

All of that by faith! We love that stuff! We love to hear by faith unimaginable things were done and people were delivered and saved.

**...and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.** (Heb. 11:35b-38)

Men and women of great faith. But they weren't delivered; they were imprisoned. They were tortured. They were sawn in two. They were persecuted.

**And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.** (Heb. 11:39-40)

What he means is they died. They were persecuted. They were put to death. They were tortured, believing that one day God would keep His promise and send the Messiah—that God Himself would become flesh and die and be the Savior of the world. They believed that, having never seen it realized. The writer of Hebrews is saying if they had that kind of faith and endured this kind of treatment with what *they* had, how much more should we endure? Because the promise has been fulfilled; the Messiah has come. We no longer look forward; we look back. He has come!

**Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** (Heb. 12:1-3)

He says, “The Savior has come; we have more than they had.” And so we fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith, and we run this race. And we endure.

The reality is, there is a price to be paid to be numbered among the people of God. And sometimes God calls us to suffer for His sake. We love to tell the stories of when God steps in with a miraculous deliverance. But what about the times when He doesn't?

What do you tell that friend that seems to be doing everything right, and everything is just falling apart? Or what if *you* are that friend? What if you are that friend...you feel the frustration, the pain, of the psalmist. You're trying to walk in obedience. You're trying to do everything right. You're trying to do what God has told you to do. You come to church and you hear the preacher say, “You've got to step out by faith; you've got to trust Him.” You do that, and God doesn't seem to go with you. And it's just one thing after another...and one thing after another.

We have to understand that God is a Sovereign God and He has a plan and a purpose beyond our understanding. Sometimes He just calls us to suffer for His sake, and sometimes that's all we're going to know. But whether it's peril, or tribulation, or temptation, or being sawn in two, or tortured, or imprisoned, or cancer, or the death of a child—whatever it is—in Christ Jesus we are not just conquerors; we are more than conquerors. We conquer overwhelmingly, and in the end the victory will be won.

We look at some of these things described in Hebrews 11 and we say, “You know, that just doesn’t happen anymore.” Yes it does. It happens all over the world. It’s happening today to Christians in the world. Do you realize more Christians were put to death for their faith in the 20th century than the previous 19 centuries combined? We just came out of the 20th century. There has never in the history of mankind been a century where more followers of Christ were put to death, than the one we just came out of. And the 21st century will only be worse. Every day, mostly in Muslim countries, there are people imprisoned and tortured in ways we can’t even talk about, and put to death simply because they are followers of Jesus Christ.

There is a price to be paid for loyalty to God in a world that’s at war with Him. Sometimes when we step out by faith God does the miraculous and He delivers us. Sometimes He doesn’t. Sometimes the prison gates are kicked open by angels, and sometimes we die in prison.

As we walked a little bit farther through the halls of the art museum, we finally came into a large room. There on the wall was this glorious masterpiece that George Seurat is known for world-wide (“Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte.”) And then it all started to make sense. What we saw in those little pictures were years and years and years of experimenting, trial and error, to get the look just right. But they were just a small glimpse of the bigger picture. He spent incredible amounts of time trying to get the water right, and that little painting was nothing but just a little square of the lake. And then a little bit of the grass. And then a little bit of somebody’s leg. Somebody’s purse. Somebody’s hat. He would labor and labor and labor on the smallest detail until he got it right. And finally he put it all on the big canvas. It took him two years to put it all on the big canvas, and that became his masterpiece. As we started to look at that, it all made sense. I now understood what I was looking at before that seemed to make no sense. Everything you see in the final painting masterpiece is actually in the original just a dash. It’s just a series of dashes that come together in different colors that ultimately create this shimmering effect that makes his painting so famous.

Everyone of those dashes is a life. It’s your life; it’s my life. And that’s pretty much all we can see—just a few dashes around us. That doesn’t make a lot of sense sometimes. Some of those dashes are bright and colorful. Some of the dashes aren’t. But together they make up a masterpiece. Your life and my life are just a part of this masterpiece that God is painting. We don’t see much but just our little area, and oftentimes it doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand why that one is bright and that one is dark, and this is this way, and this is that way.

But one day in God’s perfect timing He’s going to unveil the masterpiece, and we’ll see all of those dashes and colors in all of their glory. And we will know we weren’t defeated. We were conquerors. We were more than conquerors. There is nothing this world can throw at us that can ever separate us from the love of Christ. Sometimes that’s all we have. We’ve been called to suffer for His sake and we hold on. We wait for that glorious day when the masterpiece will be unveiled, and we will celebrate His masterpiece forever.

*Our Father, we’re thankful You’re a faithful God. Lord, there certainly is a part of us that wishes the story were a little different, that if we do everything right then everything just works out. We always want to be the bright, cheerful color. But, Lord, You’ve been clear in Your Word that it isn’t always that way. Lord, some are rescued and some are not. Some are set free and some are tortured. But through Jesus Christ we can all be conquerors—overwhelmingly conquerors—because of the unfailing love of Christ. We look forward to that day when the masterpiece will be unveiled forever. Lord, until that day...find us faithful. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

\*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.  
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