

This communal lament follows the personal lament of Psalms 42-43 even as the Church, the Body of Christ, follows in the steps of her Lord. Key words and themes unite these Korah psalms. All three psalms refer to God's "saving acts" or "deliverances" (Ps 44:4; cf. 42:5, 11; 43:5) and all three are committed to "confessing" or "praising" his name (Ps 44:8; cf. 42:5, 11; 43:5). The experience of being rejected or cast off is a shared theme (Ps 44:9,23; cf. Ps 43:2), along with becoming a reproach (Ps 44:13; cf. Ps 42:10) and being forgotten and ignored by God (Ps 44:24; cf. Ps 42:9). The word "oppression" is a rare word in the Psalms and it is used only here in these three psalms (Ps 44:24; 42:9; 43:2). There is also a shared reference to the unfaithful "nations" that are driven out by God (Ps 44:2; cf. 43:1) and the theme of God's face knits the psalms together (Ps 44:3; cf. Ps 42:5, 11; Ps 43:5 - "the deliverance of my face").

These verbal links point to their shared theological correspondence. If Psalms 42-43 line up with Jesus' expectation of the cross and his feelings of being God-forsaken, then the communal lament of Psalm 44 lines up with the persecuted Church. If Jesus' experience at the base of Mount Hermon echoes Psalms 42-43, then his commendation of Peter, "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18), echoes Psalm 44 and forms a bridge leading from Christ to his Church.

The apostle Paul affirmed this correspondence when he quoted from Psalm 44 in Romans 8. He was drawing on the full meaning of the psalm when he referenced the line, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Ps 44:22; Rom 8:36). It was not a case of proof-texting, but of promise-fulfillment. The apostle referenced Psalm 44 as he made his case that nothing shall separate Christ's followers "from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). For Paul to say, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us," answers decisively the anguished longing of Psalm 44.

The Story Heard

*We have heard it with our ears, O God;
our ancestors have told us
what you did in their days,
in days long ago.
With your hand you drove out the nations
and planted our ancestors;
you crushed the peoples
and made our ancestors flourish.
It was not by their sword that they won the land,
nor did their arm bring them victory;
it was your right hand, your arm,
and the light of your face, for you loved them.*

You are my King and my God,

*who decrees victories for Jacob.
Through you we push back our enemies;
through your name we trample our foes
I will put no trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me victory;
but you give us victory over our enemies,
you put our adversaries to shame.
In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever.*

Psalm 44:1-8

The psalmist celebrates Israel's exodus from slavery in Egypt and the victorious conquest of Canaan as an act of God for which the people can take no credit. God alone drove out the nations and planted the people of God in the land. This true story of God's strength and power and love has been passed down from generation to generation. It has been impressed on the mind of the people from the time they were children (Deut 6:7). The story has been recounted in worship and in the course of daily life. The message is deeply ingrained in the life of Israel:

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath [covenant] he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments” (Deut 7:6-9).

It is because of this salvation story that the psalmist is able to address God directly and personally. The confession, “You are my King and my God,” declares a definite relationship unique to the people of Israel. “Israel's prayer consists in the utterance of ‘you,’ addressed to a named, known, addressable, reachable You.”¹ When the psalmist shifts to the first person singular and writes, “I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory,” he appears to be speaking either as the king or for the king. He bows before the one whom he addresses as “my King and my God.” His disavowal of any reliance on his own military power prefigures the “saving acts” that have nothing to do with the weapons of war and everything to do with the saving grace of God. This powerful praise section sets in bold relief the depths of corporate lament inexplicably experienced by the people of God. We cannot use the first eight verses of Psalm 44 without the rest of the psalm.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The Psalms as Prayer,” in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 37.

But Now!

*But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.
You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale.
You have made us a reproach to our neighbors,
the scorn and derision of those around us.
You have made us a byword among the nations;
the peoples shake their heads at us.
I live in disgrace all day long,
and my face is covered with shame
at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me,
because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.*

Psalm 44:9-16

Unexpectedly the tone shifts radically from high praise to devastating lament. Instead of a recital of blessings, the psalmist offers a painful litany of despair. The people of God have experienced a catastrophic reversal. The blessed are now cursed. The once victorious are vanquished. Those who conquered are now conquered. The joy of human flourishing is replaced by rejection, humiliation, and disgrace. They have been plundered, devoured, scattered, and reviled. Their enemies make their lives miserable and are out for revenge. As in the first section, the lament turns personal. The king, speaking on behalf of the people of God, says, “I live in disgrace all day long, and my face is covered with shame. . .” (Ps 44:15).

The psalmist credits God with both the blessing and the curse. It is the Lord who gives and takes away, but the psalmist does not seem as ready as Job to praise the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). “With harsh and pointed language, the psalmist leaves no doubt that the cause of Israel’s suffering and disgrace is God himself. The emphatic litany of ‘You!’ (44:9-14) . . . is all directed to God.”² The psalmist’s tone borders on the accusatory. Make no mistake, there is anger and pain that lies behind this “because of you” lament.³ This is not a cool accounting of the facts as much as a bewildered, heart-rending plea for understanding in the face of experiences that are both inexplicable and irreconcilable. “God has rejected and humbled his people. He has caused them to retreat and be plundered. God gave them up and scattered them. He sold them for no personal profit and made them a reproach and a byword among the nations.”⁴

We cannot help but identify these feelings and this lament with the experience of the persecuted church today. As difficult as this psalm may be it needs to shape our understanding and be part of

² Wilson, Psalms, vol 1. 686.

³ Wilcock, Psalms, 160.

⁴ Wilson, Psalms, vol.1, 686.

the liturgy of all our churches because believers today experience what the psalmist is describing. Psalm 44 puts words to the reproach and disgrace experienced by believers throughout the world. The U. S. State Department's 2017 International Religious Freedom Report causes us to line up Psalm 44 with the persecution faced by our brothers and sisters in Christ in North Korea. State sponsored persecution punishes believers through arrest, torture, imprisonment, and sometimes execution. The report indicates that once Christians are imprisoned, they are typically sent to political prison camps where they are "treated with extraordinary cruelty."⁵ Christians in many other countries, including China, Eritrea, Iran, and Russia face constant harassment and persecution.

Somalia iman Mahad Birik hated Christians with a passion, but an encounter with an American missionary in a Mogadishu tea house changed the course of his life. He discovered the grace of Christ. His conversion to Christ shocked and angered his family. They disowned him and for a time he felt utterly alone and contemplated suicide. "I thought, 'If this is God's plan for me, I'd rather die,'" he recalled, "At the same time, I never doubted my decision to become a Christ. I didn't hide my faith." In time he was befriended by other Somalia believers, but he was repeatedly arrested for evangelizing. When it became too dangerous for him to live in Somalia, he led a Somali fellowship of believers in Nairobi, Kenya. In 2014 an al-Shabab leader issued a fatwa, an Islamic legal decree, against him and offered a reward for his murder. "I ask God, 'Why? What's your plan?' Mahad Birik explains. 'Have you called me to be killed by my own people?'" Mahad Birik's life echoes the passion of Psalm 44. In spite of all the reproach, reviling, and disgrace he has experienced, "his hope rests in eternity with Christ and his goal is to see as many of his Somali brothers and sisters as possible enter His kingdom."⁶

Deep Darkness

*All this came upon us,
though we had not forgotten you;
we had not been false to your covenant.
Our hearts had not turned back;
our feet had not strayed from your path.
But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;
you covered us with deep darkness.
If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
would not God have discovered it,
since he knows the secrets of the heart?
Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sleep to be slaughtered.*

Psalm 44:17-22

The Lord sets before the people a blessing and a curse (Deut 11:26f). God's blessing belonged to

⁵ Quoted in The Weekly, May 2017

⁶ "Fugitive for Christ," in The Voice of the Martyrs, May, 2017, 6-7.

those who obeyed “the commands of the Lord your God” and his curse came down on those who disobeyed God’s commands and turned away from him. This longstanding conviction and binary logic is being challenged by the psalmist’s plea for God’s deliverance. Speaking on behalf of the people of God, the psalmist claims that they had not forgotten God, nor had they born false witness to the covenant. Wilson concludes, “This is no pretension of absolute sinlessness but honest affirmation of their commitment to covenant relationship with God and their ongoing intention to remain faithful.”⁷ They were inwardly and outwardly committed to the Lord God, but it was as if their lives were under God’s curse.

Psalm 44 represents a shift in understanding of how the people of God exist in the world. Instead of being land-holding conquerors, they are gospel-living missionaries marked by the cross. The description of suffering (Ps 44:9-22) is a type, prefiguring the Christian life. Imbedded in the experience of Israel is the future experience of the cruciform Church. The Christ for culture strategy changes from establishing a called out people set apart from the world to sending a called out people into the world with the gospel of grace.

In an effort to preserve the identity of the people of God, the Israelites were instructed to form their own culture.⁸ Through diet, clothing, language, ritual, and the law, God separated out a people for himself. The purpose of this apparent “Christ against culture” position was to preserve the identify of Yahweh’s people so that they might fulfill their God-given purpose. God chose to make a great nation out of an enslaved people. He redeemed them from bondage and set them apart to be a holy people. Yahweh honored the promise he made to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). God chose one nation among the nations to deliver the message that Yahweh was the God of all creation and the Lord of history. Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon obeying God's specific command to destroy the nations that occupied the promised land. Under no circumstance was Israel to accommodate herself to the surrounding cultures. These idolatrous and degenerate cultures were a serious threat to her relationship to the Lord and the message of Moses made this clear.

“Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut 7:2-6).

Israel and the church were *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God to all the nations, but their respective strategies are polar opposites. The church is

⁷ Wilson, Psalms, vol. 1, 688. See Ps 7:3-9; 18:20-24; 26:1-12 for examples of personal pleas of innocence.

⁸ Webster, Living in Tension,

commanded to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Joshua’s conquest strategy was necessary in his day and Jesus’ great commission strategy is necessary in our day. The power of the cross, which refuses to rely on violence and coercion, replaces political and military aggression.

The apostle Paul underscores this shift in strategy and draws on Psalm 44 in Romans 8 to explain “our present sufferings” and what it means to be “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom 8:18, 37). Paul quotes his pivotal line from Psalm 44:22, “Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” The psalmist had no idea when he wrote this psalm that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he was affirming a radical new form of “blessing” that would mark the people of God. His courageous faith was pledging fidelity to God in spite of deep feelings of abandonment and reproach. “The ‘yet’ that begins this statement gives the whole a similar flavor to Job’s reply to his friends: ‘Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face’ (Job 13:15).”⁹

What is truly remarkable is that Jesus’ Prayer Book describes the state of the Church in a hostile world long before the people of God understood the strategy of the cross. The psalmist’s lament foreshadows the apostolic strategy for how the Church is to relate to the world. Peter writes, “For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering. . . . To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. . . . But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Pet 2:19,21; 4:13,14).

Awake, Lord!

*Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?
We are brought down to the dust;
our bodies cling to the ground.
Rise up and help us;
rescue us because of your unfailing love.*
Psalm 44:23-26

We ought to credit the psalmist with the courage of his convictions. Since God is sovereign over all, the psalmist has no one else to go to but God. He skips the wear and tare of second guessing and secondary causes. He refuses to blame a host of potential forces. He does not conger up false guilt and blame himself or others, nor does he distract himself with false idols and false hope. Calvin observed, “that when the faithful represent God as the author of their calamities, it is not in the way of murmuring against him, but that they may with greater confidence seek relief, as it

⁹Wilson, Psalms, vol. 1, 693.

were, from the same hand that smote and wounded them. . . .If we expect a remedy from God for our miseries, we must believe that they befall us not by fortune or mere chance, but that they are inflicted upon us properly by his hand.”¹⁰ In the previous section, the psalmist challenged God for “doing things one would not have thought God did (sleep, reject, hide the face, ignore).” But now he challenges God to “do things that one would not have thought God needed to do (get up, wake up, rise up).”¹¹

Faith in Yahweh lies behind this pointed challenge. The psalmist demonstrates a faith sufficient for failure. In this regard he finds a kindred spirit in Job. Like Job, the force of his lament comes from the depths of his soul and his undying trust in God. Like a hammer, his challenge shatters excuses, explanations, and overtures of pity. He shares Job’s resolves, “Oh, that I might have my request, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut me off! Then I would still have this consolation—my joy in unrelenting pain—that I had not denied the words of the Holy One” (Job 6:8-10). When the psalmist prayed, “*Yet for your sake* we face death all day long,” we know beyond a shadow of doubt that he’s firmly in Yahweh’s camp no matter what. Derek Kidner writes, “The psalm does not develop it [Ps 44:22], but it implies the revolutionary thought that suffering may be a battle-scar rather than a punishment; the price of loyalty in a world which is at war with God.”¹² The apparent hiddenness of God is not the final word. The last word of the psalm frames the entire psalm. Everything depends on “the steadfast love” of the Lord and always will. The apostle agrees, “nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39).

¹⁰ Calvin, Psalms, 159.

¹¹ Goldingay, Psalms, 47.

¹² Kidner, Psalms, 170.