

On the basis of God’s past covenant faithfulness to his people, when the church laments her innocent suffering, she can have every confidence that God will respond favorably to loyal yet desperate prayers for redemption. So let us boldly live according to the gospel of our justification by faith alone in Christ.

Introduction – Safe sermons are frustrating.

Background – Psalms 42/43 and 44 have a number of thematic connections that link them as the introductory psalms in Book 2 of the Psalter. They talk about profound confusion at God rejecting (43:2; 44:10, 23) and forgetting (42:9; 44:24) his covenant people, who are experiencing oppression (42:9; 43:2; 44:24) from the enemy (42:9; 43:2; 44:16).

I. A Communal Tragedy

A. In the past God saved our fathers and us from the enemy (vv. 1-8)

As a communal lament, this psalm begins as you would expect, with a testimony of God’s past faithfulness to his people. The idea is to establish up front that God has been good to Israel, and they have experienced God’s favor in military victory over their enemies. Not because Israel is strong, or because they were so confident in their own courage, but because God fought for them. And they express thanks and trust to God in delightful worship. So far so good. Safe landing. Except there is cultural dynamite here! You may have squirmed when it dawned on you that we’re talking about the Canaanite conquest. The psalmist is correctly interpreting what is recorded in the OT historical narratives (cf. Exo, Num, Dt, Josh, Jdg, Sam, Kgs). God really did lead and win the battles for Israel, but Israel fought hard and valiantly to secure victory. Those battles were not just in the days of old. The psalmist can put verses 3-5 together, which identify Israel’s soldiers still engaging in warfare and God still fighting to save his people. The psalmist encourages Israel to glory in victorious war and to boast in their God for battles fought and won in living memory. But if you don’t share the background assumption that the victors who wrote the history are the righteous ones and the losers are the wicked ones, then Psalm 44 starts off with a bang! So much of an explosion that the Bible’s view of the Canaanite conquest is now one of our culture’s primary objections to the morality of the biblical God, who is judged as something like a moral monster. I’ll try to explain a bit of the Bible’s answer to that objection in a moment.

B. But in the present God has handed us over to the enemy (vv. 9-16)

At this point in a standard lament psalm, we should expect the lament section. Now it seems God has rejected them and left them in disgrace. So thoroughly that the tables have dramatically turned in battle with Israel’s enemies (v. 9). Not only is the disgrace really, really bad, but the complaint that God has rejected them is even worse! Israel is in full retreat, and the haters are in full-plundering mode (v. 10). God’s people feel like they’re being carted off to the slaughterhouse to be formed into ground beef, and then shipped off to scattered meat markets (v. 11). It’s a gruesome image of the international slave trade of that day, and God has sold them out for pennies on the dollar (v. 12). All this adds up to abject disgrace. They would be better off dead!

II. An Undeserved Tragedy

A. Why? We have remembered you and not been false your covenant! (vv. 17-19)

Like Job’s three friends, you might expect a confession of sin to follow such a tale of woe. That is usually, almost always, the appropriate response in this sinful world. But if you believe like Job’s sincere counselors a confession of sin is *always* and *only* the right response, then you’re playing it

safe and playing it wrong. Because in Psalm 44, a teaching song, God's Word is training his people how to lament when it's not your fault. When together we have been true to God's covenant but disaster has still befallen us. Christians are not at all comfortable with pleading innocence. Like our justification doesn't actually *justify* us in his sight.

B. Why? We have been wholeheartedly loyal to you, our God! (vv. 20-21)

At this point another objection arises. The first was, "No way, *I'm* not justified." The second is "No way, *you're* not justified." It goes something like this: "Christians are a bunch of horrible sinners—see exhibits A-Z." When the objection is aimed at a group as a whole, we're talking about another aspect of the theology that undergirds justification. Let's call it collective justification because it applies to whole cultures, identity groups, and religions. The psalmist is not just claiming Israel has been outwardly faithful in its actions, but they have been inwardly loyal to God. Sometime Christians get confused about what being faithful to God's covenant requires. Covenant faithfulness is not about sinlessness but about loyal devotion to God alone. If you forsake all other gods and keep worshiping and following the Lord Jesus despite your many sins and failings, then God considers you a covenant keeper. Your justification through faith alone is based on your confession of faith flowing from a believing heart. But to the objector who is the enemy of God and his people, heart motives don't matter in the offending group because no matter what that group says or does, they can never be justified. Why? Because collective justification is all about treating groups as approved or condemned.

III. A Redeemed Tragedy

A. Rise up, O Lord, and save us for the sake of your covenant love (vv. 23-26)

For those who belong to God, the church of Jesus Christ, we have every right to sing lamentation and call on the Lord to save us on the basis of his *chesed*. *Chesed* is his steadfast love, his lovingkindness, his covenant faithfulness. You don't have to be sinless to plead with God to wake up and deliver you. You just have to be counted among the justified—living a life of covenant loyalty to Jesus, confessing and repenting of your sins, receiving his grace through forgiveness, and walking imperfectly but wholeheartedly with him alone. While God indefinitely delays redeeming us from our afflictions and oppression, whatever form these might take, we'll surely feel like God is asleep, like he has rejected us forever (v. 23), like he is hiding from us (v. 24), like our souls are lying helpless face down in the dust (v. 25). Still, if you're a Christian, take heart and keep on singing this communal lamentation. Because God promises to eventually give the cure to his justified people, which is salvation, approval, justification, covenant love.

B. Nevertheless, we are willing to be killed all day long for your sake (v. 22; cf. Rom 8:35-39)

What if we keep on waiting, keep on lamenting, and we start to die off, one by one, or less likely all together? Then what? Was it all for nothing? Now we handle the final explosive truth in this psalm. If we were to play it safe, we might say, "Don't worry, God will come through sooner than you think. His blessings are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness!" But this psalm won't let us off easy like that. The most important words in Psalm 44 are "for your sake" in verse 22. In Romans 8 the apostle Paul quotes the entire verse as proof that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39).

Conclusion – Even if we are killed all day long, slaughtered like sheep, sold as slaves, scattered as a church family, afflicted and oppressed by enemies on all sides, by faith we will keep on singing laments as a spiritual discipline. And in that communal lament we will rejoice that it was all "for his sake." For the sake of Christ who suffered and died to save us. For the sake of bearing witness to the gospel. For the sake of waiting until God gains all the glory. Because when he finally wakes up to arise, we also shall arise. And on that day, our lamentation will turn to praise. Hallelujah and Amen.