

Psalm 44 says that I am innocent – and I don't deserve what has happened to me.

Can people really say this?

On November 6, 2012, the Rev. Jose Dilson and his wife, Zeneide, were arrested in Senegal. They are missionaries of our sister church, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil. They had been working for 22 years in Africa, and had been arrested because of hostility from the majority Muslim population against their efforts to bring the gospel to the street children of Senegal. They were arrested for showing the love of Christ to the poorest of the poor.

Psalm 44 is their song.

Nine days ago, after six months in a filthy, crowded prison, Pastor Dilson and his wife were released (though they still await trial). He writes:

“The newspapers have published that we (Zeneide and I) are called a “diabolical couple,” and because we have been portrayed through the country's two major newspapers, plus the local radio stations, we have come to be hated by an entire nation.”

http://www.opc.org/news.html?news_id=184

When Pastor Dilson focused on the evil report that spread throughout the land, he could grow discouraged.

He wrote back in February:

“During these nights I experience battles you can't imagine. I also feel the presence of the enemy close by, whispering in my ear, saying that God does not care about me. What a fight I wage against self-pity, against the feeling of despair, loneliness, injustice, anger, and so many other feelings that seek to dominate me.”

http://www.opc.org/cfm/Senegal/Letter_from_Prison_130225.pdf

You can see that for Pastor Dilson, there was a considerable disparity between what he was experiencing, and the mighty deeds of God in the past!

Psalm 44 teaches us how we should think and act in times of persecution and trouble.

There are four parts to Psalm 44.

First, we remember your mighty deeds (v1-8)

Second, we lament that now you have rejected us (v9-16)
And all this, third, in spite of our innocence! (v17-22)
So that finally, we plead that you would arise and redeem us
for the sake of your steadfast love (v23-26)

1. We Remember Your Mighty Deeds (v1-8)

In the first half of the Psalm there are two voices:
there is the voice of the people, “O God, *we* have heard” –
but then there is a singular voice, “You are *my* King, O God.”

All through the first half of the Psalm these two voices alternate.
It sounds very much as though Psalm 44 was written to be a communal lament
for the king and his people as they mourn over a recent defeat.
But it would remain useful in all generations as a communal lament,
led by any community leader.

Of course, the great leader of Psalm 44 is our Lord Jesus.
Listen to the singular statements in verses, 4, 6, and 15-16:
v4 – “You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob”
v6 – “For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me”
v15-16 – “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.”

Jesus is the singular voice in this Psalm,
who leads us in singing.
But Jesus is *not* the plural voice.
That voice is us –
it is Rev. Dilson, and thousands upon thousands of others who have cried out
in agony and near despair –
at times wondering if God would hear – but then remembering:

“The circumstances of life, no matter how difficult they may be, do not diminish God's
glory or goodness. I cannot in any way keep from looking to my Lord and putting my
confidence in Him; my eyes and hope are fixed on him.”

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Or to say it another way:

a. We Remember What Our Fathers Told Us (v1-3)
*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:*

We start by remembering what God has done.

“what deeds you performed” in our father’s days.

This is the same language used in Habakkuk 3 –

as Habakkuk had reflected on the great deeds of long ago.

When we are discouraged – when things are not going well –

the first thing to do is “remember”!

We have heard with our ears what our fathers told us.

This morning we looked at Deuteronomy 6 –

where God commands Israel to teach their children of his mighty deeds,

as well as his commandments and laws.

Apparently *at least sometimes!*, Israel did exactly that.

It makes sense.

After all, even when they were disobedient to God,

they would no doubt *still* tell the great stories of the Exodus and the Conquest.

Those stories are simply too good to pass up!

Usually when we think of God’s great “deeds” of old,

we think of the Exodus.

But verses 2-3 make it clear that the focus here is on the Conquest.

² *you with your own hand drove out the nations,*

but them you planted;

you afflicted the peoples,

but them you set free;

³ *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.

Think back to Jericho.

The people of Israel marched around the city once each day for six days –

and on the seventh day they marched seven times around the city.

It was not by their *sword* that they won the land –

but by God’s right hand and mighty arm.

And the light of his face.

We have often sung Psalm 80 to the tune of “Veni, Emmanuel” –

let your face shine that we may be saved.

When God’s face shines upon us,

then salvation comes!
for you delighted in them.

Sometimes when you are reading through the Old Testament,
it can sound as though God is rather capricious – and even vindictive!

We need to be careful not to make it sound like God has a mechanical system of justice.
The freedom of God to do what he wills is important
We will see in this Psalm how important God's covenant is.
When God *says* that he will do something, he has *bound himself* to do it.

But sometimes there is a danger that we can start to see God as a “rules lawyer” –
and it can be hard – perhaps even impossible to “measure up” to God's standard.

But *why* did God drive out the nations before Israel?
Why did he save them by his right hand and arm, and the light of his face?

Because he delighted in them!
Because he was pleased with them!

Why did God delight in them?
Why was God pleased with them?

It's not because of how obedient they were!
Remember how Moses died in the wilderness before they entered the land?
Moses did not bring them into the land.
The Law could not bring Israel into the land.
Ambrose says this well:
“It was not Moses who led them in,
for fear they should attribute it to the Law and not to grace.
For the Law examines our merits; but grace looks to faith.” (ACCS, 338)

God is delighted in Israel because of his own grace and mercy.
Think of the Father's statement at Jesus' baptism:
“this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.”
When God delights in his people, then he goes forth and destroys their enemies.

And that's why the speaker shifts from the 1st person plural to the 1st person singular in verse 4.

b. You Are My King (v4)

⁴ *You are my King, O God;
ordain salvation for Jacob!*

In verses 1-3, it was the people of God who remembered what God had done.

Now it is a single individual who first declares that *God* is king –
whether it is the king – or some other representative –
now a single voice declares allegiance to God,
and then *commands* God to “ordain salvation for Jacob!”

Who is this person to speak in the imperative to God!

Well, remember verse 3:

You saved them because you delighted in them – because you were pleased with them.

Well, you are *my* King, O God.

And so with great confidence, the singular voice commands:
“ordain salvation for Jacob!”

Now the rest of Israel joins together with their singular leader, and cries out:

c. Through Your Name We Push Down Our Foes (v5)

⁵ *Through you we push down our foes;
through your name we tread down those who rise up against us.*

Some struggle with this.

After all, the rest of the Psalm makes it clear that the enemies are winning!

But Israel is speaking by faith!

After all, faith is precisely what makes the current situation so hard to understand!

We believe in God –

we trust in God –

we rely on him alone!

But it’s not working the way it should!

And the singular voice concurs:

d. I Do Not Trust My Own Might (v6)

⁶ *For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.*

The singular voice agrees that just like Israel of old,

it was not by their own sword that they won the land –

and even so, it is not by my bow and sword that I am saved.

And so all Israel chimes in and agrees:

e. But You Have Saved Us (v7-8)

⁷ *But you have saved us from our foes*

and have put to shame those who hate us.
⁸ *In God we have boasted continually,*
and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah

Think about the themes of these verses:

victory and defeat –
shame and praise –
our foes and our God.

In verse 3 we heard that God delighted in our fathers and so he saved them.

Verses 7-8 now say that God has saved us from *our* foes –
and has put to shame those who hate us.
And so therefore we give thanks to God forever.

The pattern is clear:

those who hope and trust in the LORD –
those whom God delights in –
are delivered from their foes,
and their foes are humbled and put to shame.

There's only one problem.

That is what has happened to us!

2. But Now You Have Rejected Us (v9-16)

a. You Have Rejected Us and Sold Your People (v9-14)

⁹ *But you have rejected us and disgraced us*
and have not gone out with our armies.

¹⁰ *You have made us turn back from the foe,*
and those who hate us have gotten spoil.

¹¹ *You have made us like sheep for slaughter*
and have scattered us among the nations.

Verses 9-11 are very clear that *God* is the one who has rejected and disgraced his people.

You have made us like sheep for slaughter.
You have scattered us among the nations.

We have been defeated before our enemies.

In verses 1-8, there are two things that God does:
he *defeats* his enemies (and shames them),
and he *honors* his people (and saves them).

Now in verses 9-14 we discover that God has defeated *his people*
and shamed them.

Shame is particularly the theme of verses 12-14:

¹² *You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.*

It's bad enough that you have sold us to our enemies –
but it's not even like you got anything out of the deal!
You delighted in our fathers – but you have treated us as though we are worthless!

¹³ *You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.*

¹⁴ *You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock^[b] among the peoples.*

They trusted in their God –
look where it got them!

Rev. Dilson tells the story of a Muslim man who approach him and verbally attacked him,
saying:

"You are nothing. You know nothing. And nothing you teach is worth anything. You are less than the little toe of anyone here." And with many other words he tried to humiliate me more and more. The words he spoke were hard and terrible. And all I said to him was: "Yes, you can continue. Yes, I am listening. Continue!" He became even more impassioned and poured out a flood of insults trying to drown me in his hellish words. After a brief silence, I asked him: "Have you finished? Have you said everything you want? If so, can I speak now?" With a stern voice he replied: "Speak!" — expecting I would reply in a tone of arrogance and anger.

So, I began by saying: "You're right. I really am nothing. I am less than a grain of dirty sand. I am dust. I am a worm. I am a filthy rag. I am a dead dog." And, almost crying, I added: "But I want you to meet someone who was everything, who was the Creator of the universe, full of glory, the Sovereign Lord, who in spite of all that, loved me so much that He gave up His life to be insulted, broken and shed His blood for me...."

And when this man heard me say that, it was as if he had been shocked with 50 thousand volts. He never expected that reaction. He expected I'd pay him back with equally harsh words. Then, with a soft voice he told me: "I have been trailing you and watching your movements over the past month. I was sent to test you, to see if you really are a man of God. And I can say that you are the man of God that everyone says you are. For a man of God, when humiliated, is exalted by God. Starting today, you have my respect."

http://www.opc.org/news.html?news_id=184

And the singular voice agrees:

b. My Disgrace Is Before Me (v15-16)

¹⁵ *All day long my disgrace is before me,
and shame has covered my face*
¹⁶ *at the sound of the taunter and reviler,
at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.*

In verse 7 we heard that God puts to shame those who hate his people.
But now, shame has covered *my* face.

Here, Jesus sings of his humiliation first.
Jesus has endured taunting and reviling –
and he has passed through the shame and disgrace of the cross.

But let's be clear about something.
The shame that Israel is experiencing is *not* what they deserve!

They trusted God –
they relied upon his strength and power –
and yet they have been defeated and put to shame.

3. In Spite of Our Innocence! (v17-22)

¹⁷ *All this has come upon us,
though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant.*

If Israel had failed to trust and obey the LORD,
then their defeat and shame would make sense!

But they *did* trust the LORD.
They were *faithful* to the covenant.
They remembered the LORD and did what he said.

You might be tempted to say,
Ah, but no one is truly innocent!
But in this case, Israel *was* innocent.

Innocent is not the same thing as sinless.
They are not claiming that they have never done anything wrong.
They are claiming that *with respect to the covenant*,
they are blameless.

¹⁸ *Our heart has not turned back,
nor have our steps departed from your way;*
¹⁹ *yet you have broken us in the place of jackals
and covered us with the shadow of death.*

It is worth noting that the Hebrew word for jackal
looks *almost* exactly like the Hebrew word for sea monster (tannim),
so some have suggested that actually what the Psalmist is saying
is “you have broken us in the place of the sea monsters” –
but either way, it is clear
you have treated us the way you treat your enemies.

You have covered us with the shadow of death.

Now,

²⁰ *If we had forgotten the name of our God
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
²¹ would not God discover this?
For he knows the secrets of the heart.*

If we were guilty, we would deserve this.
But we're not!

²² *Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*

Paul quotes this verse in Romans 8:36,
as he is explaining why nothing can separate us from the love of God Christ Jesus.

Paul does not try to say, “Oh, well, since Psalm 44 speaks of the ‘innocent’ one,
therefore it must be about Jesus!”

Rather, he sees that those who are in Christ may sing Psalm 44 together with the OT saints.
And Paul especially applies Psalm 44 to the persecuted church.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness,
or danger, or sword?
As it is written,
‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Paul suggests that we need to see Psalm 44 as the song of the persecuted church.

After all, if our Lord endured trial and persecution –
if he was reviled and put to shame by his foes –
if God even forsook him to death and covered *him* with the shadow of death –
then who are we to expect that we will never face trouble?

God has made his church like sheep for slaughter –
he has scattered us among the nations,
and sold us for a trifle –
in order that his power might be made known in weakness.

As Rev. Dilson exhorted us from prison:

My dear brothers and sisters, I want to remind you that your life is hidden in Jesus, regardless of where you are or in what circumstance you find yourself. You might find yourself being humiliated, misunderstood, sad, anguished, sick, facing many needs. I want to encourage you today: "Cast your care upon Him, for He cares for you." Don't let the enemy receive any glory, for the Lord is present, even though He's not solving your problem in the way you had hoped. He will give you grace to endure and to be more than a conqueror.

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Because slaughter and exile is not the end of the story!
It is not the end of Psalm 44!

And it will not be the end for anyone who belongs to Jesus Christ!
Because the church's hope is not that we will be persecuted and shamed!
Our hope is that God will arise and *redeem us* from our affliction.

4. Arise and Redeem Us for the Sake of Your Steadfast Love (v23-26)

²³ *Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?*

Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!

²⁴ *Why do you hide your face?*

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

There once was a day when Elijah, the prophet, came to Mt. Carmel,
and he mocked and taunted the prophets of Baal!

He said to the prophets of Baal,

"Cry aloud, for he is a god.

Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey,
or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27).

But now the people of God resort to the same image!
Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?

How dare they say this!

They dare, because God himself uses this language of himself.

In Psalm 78:65, Asaph says,

“Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
like a strong man shouting because of wine.
And he put his adversaries to rout;
he put them to everlasting shame.”

Sometimes God is asleep!

I know – that sounds strange, almost blasphemous!

Psalm 121:4 says that the God of Israel *never* slumbers or sleeps.

But since scripture says both – we need to say both!

In one sense, plainly, God does not sleep.

He always knows exactly what is happening.

No one has ever caught him napping!

But in another sense, sometimes (with respect to our expectations)

God is asleep.

What do I mean?

If God operated with “slot machine justice” –

in other words, if you do X, then God must do Y –

then sometimes it doesn’t work that way!

Sometimes you keep doing what is right –

and yet, it doesn’t go right!

As verses 25-26 put it:

²⁵ *For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.*

This is what was supposed to happen to the serpent!

Not to the seed of the woman!

²⁶ *Rise up; come to our help!
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!*

As Craigie puts it:

“According to their understanding of the covenant...

God should have been with them and given them victory;

instead he had crushed them (v 20) and permitted them to be slaughtered (v 23). . .

Neither the king nor the people have any solution

to the perplexing questions raised in the lament;
they can only conclude with a prayer that God not reject them forever (v 24).”

Prayer is the solution to the problem of Psalm 44.

“In a sense, there is no simple explanation to the issues raised in Ps 44,
any more than there is a simple explanation to the issues raised in the Book of Job.
Indeed, from a certain perspective, Ps 44 may be perceived
as a communal or national parallel

to the more individual and international Book of Job . . .

The problem in Ps 44 appears at first to be a problem of covenant theology.

If king and people had been faithful to the covenant stipulations (vv 18-22),

then why was God not faithful to his covenant commitment

to provide defense and deliverance?

The root problem, in other words, is precisely the problem of the Book of Job,

namely the problem of God.

But while the psalmist neither elaborates on the problem

nor points to a resolution in theology,

he points nevertheless to a more existential resolution.

It is to be found in the prayer with which the psalm concludes.

At the rational level, it would seem rather futile to pray and to seek God’s love,

when the immediate experience suggested that God would not be relied on.

Yet the prayer is rooted in a faith deeper than reason. . . .

And so ultimately, Ps 44 with its concluding prayer

points in the in the same direction as the Book of Job,

namely that there is an immense mystery in God and his ways,

but one must continue to trust and pray” (pp. 334-35).