

When I was growing up, my favorite Bible story was the OT story of Joseph, the 11<sup>th</sup> of the twelve sons of Jacob. In case you aren't familiar with the story, let me give you the short version and maybe you'll understand why it would have been captivating for a little boy. The great patriarch Abraham has a son, Isaac, who had a son, Jacob. And Jacob had twelve sons. Of all his sons, he loved the 11<sup>th</sup> son, Joseph, most of all. And he wasn't shy about it. He made Joseph a special coat – some probably grew up hearing it called the coat of many colors – that set Joseph apart as the favored son. Well his brothers were jealous of him, and it only got worse when Joseph started having dreams about his brothers and his parents bowing down to him, and then shared these dreams with his family. So his brothers get sick of him and decide they're going to kill him. But one of the brothers intervenes and suggest that

they should sell him instead. So they sell him to some travelers on their way to Egypt, tell their father he's dead, and as far as they know, that's the end of it. They are free of him. Well Joseph ends up in Egypt as a slave, working in the house of the head of the king's guard. He rises to a place of prominence where he's put in charge of the whole household, which is great, except that the woman of the house takes a liking to Joseph and tries to seduce him. But Joseph, being a young man of character and integrity, runs away from her. And she is so angry at being rejected that she falsely accuses Joseph of trying to assault her, and he is thrown in prison. While he's there, God gives him the ability to interpret the dreams of two other prisoners, who promise that they will get him out once they are released. But they forget about him and he is left to languish in prison. Now eventually, the story turns and

God grants Joseph favor and he rises to a position of power in Egypt. But for a significant part of his life – from the age of 17 to the age of 30 – Joseph was unfairly, unjustly, undeservedly enslaved and then imprisoned. He had done nothing wrong, yet he suffered. Not because of anything he did, but because of the hatred and false accusations of others, he suffered.

I can only imagine what he must have felt for those thirteen years, what he must have thought, what he must have said, what he must have prayed. To be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To be an heir of the promise: the promise of blessing, the promise of descendants, the promise of land, the promise of bringing blessing to the world. And yet he finds himself cut off from his family, from his home, as far as he knows, from the

promise itself. Enslaved and imprisoned, all for having done nothing wrong. And that feeling – being abandoned for no reason, **suffering unjustly** – isn't unique to Joseph. Abel experienced it, being murdered by his own brother for offering a fitting sacrifice to the Lord. Job experienced it, being afflicted by Satan because of his faithfulness. David experienced it, having to flee from King Saul after being nothing but kind to him. The prophets – men like Elijah and Jeremiah – experienced it, having spoken a message directly from God and being hated for it. The Apostles experienced it, being persecuted, imprisoned, and even executed for preaching the message of Jesus. Christians throughout the history of the church have felt it, being mocked and laughed at and attacked and beaten and tortured and killed for their faith. And while we haven't experienced anything that extreme, all of us have probably

felt the confusion and frustration and injustice of suffering unfairly. Maybe you lost your job or you were betrayed by a friend or you suffered a devastating illness or you experienced some terrible tragedy, and you didn't deserve it. You feel abandoned by God, and you can't figure out what you might have done to cause it.

What do we do in those moments? What do we think? What do we say? What do we pray? Well we find one really good answer **in Psalm 44**. Because the Psalmist finds himself and his people in that exact situation, and he cries out to God. And his cry, his prayer, I think offers a model, an outline that we might consider following. So I want to invite you to take your Bible and turn with me to Psalm 44, and I'm going to ask you to follow along as I read [READ PSALM 44].

Now we've talked over the last few weeks about the different kinds of Psalms. Psalm 63 was a Psalm of trust. Psalm 136 was a Psalm of remembrance. Psalm 54 was a Psalm of imprecation asking God to bring justice on his enemies. Well Psalm 44 is a Psalm of lament, specifically a national lament or community lament. It's a song for the people of God when they have collectively suffered at the hands of their enemies. And so they are now seeking help from the Lord. It's a complaint and it's a plea.

And even though the most pressing issue (the very reason the Psalm for writing the Psalm) is their suffering and their need, the Psalmist doesn't begin by focusing on either of those. He begins by saying, "**We have heard** what you did for us in the past." He begins by recounting God's

faithfulness. He begins by remembering the miraculous and powerful ways God had helped them in the past. Specifically, how the Lord brought them out of their captivity in Egypt and into the Promised Land. How He afflicted their enemies, freed them from slavery, drove out the inhabitants of the land, and planted them in it, giving them a home. And it was not by their own power or military might or strategic brilliance. All of it was by God's powerful right hand and sovereign arm. God did these things. And God did these things for His people because He delighted in them. It wasn't because they had done anything to deserve it. It wasn't because they were just that amazing. It was because God, in His sovereign, electing love, chose to set his favor on them. He fulfilled the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to

you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” God had done all those things for His people.

And they had not forgotten it. They had continued to tell those stories. They had lived out the instructions of Deuteronomy 6, where God had said, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” They had followed the instructions given in Joshua 4, “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD.” They have followed the command to pass down the word and works of the Lord from generation to



generation, to remember and celebrate these things, to understand and rejoice in who God is and who they are as His people. This is what prepared them to endure what they were going through.

The same goes for us. We prepare ourselves to endure unjust suffering by remembering and recounting God's faithfulness. We prepare to endure as a church by reminding each other of these things. You prepare to endure as families by recounting these things around the dinner table or in your living room or driving in your car. You prepare to endure as an individual believer by remembering these things in your own heart and mind. Tell the stories. The stories of creation, of Adam and Eve, of Noah, or Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and Joshua, of Deborah and Gideon and Samson, of David, of

Daniel and Jonah. Tell the story of Jesus, how, in order to bring us back to God, the eternal Son of God came to earth as a man. How He lived a life of perfect, sinless obedience to earn righteousness for us that we could not. How He died our death in our place to pay our penalty for our sin so that we might be forgiven. How He rose again, conquering the grave to secure life for us. How He ascended to the Father's right hand to rule and reign over all He had made. Tell that story. Tell the story of your own testimony, what He did to draw you to Him, what He's done since then to provide for you and protect you and bless you. Tell those stories. That's how you lay the foundation to be able to endure.

The second statement the Psalmist makes is, "...**so we trust** in you." We have heard what you did for us in the

past, so we trust in you. God's past faithfulness and provision and rescue had led the Psalmist to trust and hope in Him. The God who did all those things is the same God now. He is ever-present and unchanging. He was no more powerful or close in those days than He is today. He was then and He is still their King who ordains and works salvation for His people. They recognize His reign and rule over them, and they submit to His providence. And because of who He is and what He does, they triumph over their enemies through Him. Their trust is not in themselves, in their bows and arrows or their swords. The Lord is the One who saves them. Psalm 20:7, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God." And so they boast in Him continually and give thanks to Him forever. Because of all He has

done, and in light of the fact that they remember and recount those things, they trust in Him.

What do you trust in to save you? From suffering or sadness or loneliness or emptiness or brokenness or sin or death. What do you hope in to deliver you? To what do you bow your knee to rescue you? What do you boast in continually and give thanks for forever? Is it money or family or friends or success or pleasure or entertainment or ease or your own goodness? A second ago I mentioned that they told the stories of God, and those stories moved them to trust Him. If the stories you tell are all about you and what you've done and what you've said and what you've accomplished and what you think, there's a good chance you're going to end up trusting in you. What you talk about will often betray where your hope is found. If we

remember and recount the stories of God, of Jesus, we are more likely to find our hope in Him.

Now if the Psalm ended there, it would be a Psalm of remembrance or a Psalm of trust. But it's a Psalm of lament, and so here's where we get to the lament, the complaint. The third statement the Psalmist makes is, "...but You have rejected us." We have heard what you did for us in the past, so we trust in you, but you have rejected us. In spite of all His past deliverances, God has now seemingly abandoned them. He has, in their view, rejected and disgraced them. Instead of success, now they are experiencing defeat. Instead of prosperity, now they are being plundered. Instead of life, now they know death. Instead of being settled in the land, now they are scattered. Instead of freedom, now they are taken captive.

God has withdrawn His hand of favor and blessing. In the past, He had put their enemies to shame, but now the Psalmist's face is covered in shame. And pay close attention to who they credit for all this. Who has done these things? God has. In His meticulous sovereignty whereby He works all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11), He has brought this calamity on them. Isaiah 45:7, God says "I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things." None of this is accidental or incidental. This is come from God's hand, which maybe the hardest part of this Psalm, believing that none of this happens apart from the will of God. And apparently, in their view, it's all for nothing. There is no purpose in it. There is no glory in it. They are simply treated as worthless, and no benefit comes. They are taunted and scorned and laughed

at. They are constantly reminded of their shame and disgrace and suffering and abandonment.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel forsaken by God? Ever feel abandoned and forgotten? Ever feel defeated? Empty? Scattered? Bound? Under the shadow of death? Taunted and scorned and mocked and reviled? Do you every have the boldness to tell God that? Is it ok to say that to God, "I feel like you've abandoned me?" Yes, it's ok. Because what are you doing when you say that? First, you're talking to Him. Second, you're being honest. And third, you're seeking an answer from the only One who can give it. When you feel rejected and forsaken, go to God. Tell Him. Cry out to Him in frustration and distress and even anger. That's lament.

But here comes the really challenging part. All of these things the Psalmist and his people are experiencing are, throughout the Bible, threats against the unfaithful, the disobedient, the rebellious. They are punishments. Which is why they are so confused and perplexed, because the fourth statement is, "...**though we have** NOT forsaken you." We have heard what you did for us in the past, so we trust in you, but you have rejected us, though we have not forsaken you. They are NOT guilty of the kinds of things that would bring this consequence. They have NOT committed the wicked acts for which these sufferings are retribution. They have NOT forgotten God or betrayed His covenant. They have NOT turned from Him or His path. Now let me be perfectly clear: they are not claiming sinless perfection, and God doesn't demand it of them. That's why His covenant contains provisions for sacrifices



to atone for sin. They are claiming faithfulness. It's like in the NT when it says an elder or deacon must be above reproach. Not perfect, but faithful. Characterized by obedience and submission to the Lord. Responding properly when you DO sin. They have done all of those things. Their fundamental loyalty is set on the Lord. They have not given their hearts to idols. They have remained true to the covenant. They acknowledge that if they HAD turned from God and worshiped and served idols, God would know it and would be right to punish them. But in their faithfulness to Him, they suffer ruin and desolation and are being slaughtered like sheep.

There was a general worldview in that day that good behavior results in good outcomes (blessing, favor), and bad behavior results in bad outcomes (curses, suffering).

You see that mentality in Job, where his friends reason that if all this bad stuff is happening to him, it must be because he's done something bad. You see it in the prophet Habakkuk, where he can't fathom that wicked people prosper while the righteous suffer. You see it today in the prosperity gospel which says if you're faithful, God will bless you with financial gain and physical health and favorable circumstances, but if you don't have enough faith, you'll suffer. That's more like the Hindu concept of karma than it is biblical faith. In 1 Peter 4:12 we're told, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." Look at the very One we claim to follow, the One whose name we bear. Jesus was perfectly sinless, and yet He suffered. In 1 Peter 1:20-23 we read, "For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it,

you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” It should not surprise us that we would suffer even in our faithfulness, because the One with whom we are united suffered in His faithfulness.

And that last part of the verse I just read – but continued entrusting Himself to the One who judges justly – leads us to the last statement of the Psalm, “...**so come now** to help us!” We have heard what you did for us in the past,

so we trust in you, but you have rejected us, though we have not forsaken you, so now come to help us. Even though they don't understand, even though they are confused and perplexed, they don't give up. They don't lose hope. They cry out to God. They call upon Him to wake up, to rouse Himself, like the apostles did to Jesus in the boat in the middle of the storm. Wake up! Don't let us die! The Psalmist feels as though God is sleeping and has hidden His face and forgotten them. Is He? Has He?

Psalm 121:4, "Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Psalm 94:14, "For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage."

Joshua 1:5, "I will not leave you or forsake you." So they know in their heads that He is not asleep and has not forsaken them, but this is the earnest cry of their heart. It's not an accusation, but a genuine expression of grief and

lament. They are utterly cast down, belly to the ground, soul in the dirt. And in their deep distress and desperation, they don't look for complicated theological explanations. They don't turn to sinful actions and attitudes. They simply plead with God to rise up and help them, to redeem them. And not for their own sake, but for the sake of His name and reputation. For the sake of His steadfast love, His lovingkindness, His mercy, His hesed that endures forever.

So what does this Psalm do for us? It meets us in a moment of distress and pain, and where it might be most natural to grumble and rant and rail, it helps us take our confusion and grief and even anger before God in trusting prayer. It helps us set our minds and hearts on God's proven faithfulness and power and deliverance SO THAT when our world seems to collapse through no fault of our

own, and when we have no choice but to acknowledge God's sovereign hand in it, we can STILL run to Him and cry out to Him in genuine confidence that He will help us. That's what real, living faith looks like. Paul uses this Psalm in Romans 8 to remind us that, in spite of ongoing, unjust suffering, we are not separated from the love of Christ. Have you known the love of Christ that would make it impossible for you to be separated from Him? In 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, he writes, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." Have you trusted in the death and resurrection life of Jesus that would sustain and uphold you through affliction and persecution? When we suffer unjustly, we

look to Christ, who was the only one truly innocent of ALL sin, yet suffered for our sake, so that our unjust suffering might not be meaningless, but might prepare us for a glory that we can't even comprehend. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.