

Psalm 44 A maskil of the Sons of Korah

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] Amen. So if you'd like to open your Bibles at Psalm 44. And of course the Sons of Korah are one of the main groups of authors of the Psalms.

I wanted to take one of different kinds of Psalms. Even if we don't entirely know what the difference between a mictam and a masculine is.

But nevertheless maybe to take one or two examples of that. And I also thought it would be good perhaps to look at some of the less well-known Psalms.

And I think this one qualifies in all those respects. And you can understand why. Because in many ways it isn't easy. Let's go to the first slide.

There are actually 13 masculine in the Psalms. Some of them attributed to David. Some to Asaph. And some like this one to the Sons of Korah. Just to remind you that the Sons of Korah assumed to be one of the two temple music schools.

[1 : 32] Like Asaph. And so it's not a particular author or particular person. But probably a group of people who were charged with care of the music in the temple worship.

And it's called a masculine. And unlike mictam which we thought about last week whose origin is obscure. The word masculine on the other hand has disadvantage of having rather too many possible meanings.

The root meaning is that to be make wise or prudent. It can also mean to have success or skill. So does it refer to some kind of teaching psalm?

According to Derek Kidner's commentary. One of the more extreme interpretations. That it means it's a psalm with difficult music. Only for the expert musician. Well that could be true I suppose. Seems a bit like that sometimes.

But it probably makes more sense to say that it is a psalm designed to make one wise or prudent. Although not all the psalms that are described as masculine are obviously teaching psalms.

[2 : 39] And indeed in a sense this one isn't either. But maybe it's a psalm that you're supposed to think about. Like the sayings, the riddles and sayings of the wise that it talks about in Proverbs.

That you need to think about and think it through for yourself to achieve understanding. Anyway what's this psalm about? The first question is what historical period or event does it refer to?

One might immediately think it refers to the exile, time of exile of the Jewish people. But in fact there are arguments against that. First of all it's included in the first two books of the psalms.

And as Derek Kidner points out most of the psalms in the first two books are of earlier origin. An even stronger argument for an early time authorship of it is that the claim at the end that we have not rejected your covenant.

Now the prophets were pretty well unanimous in that the exile was caused by the fact that the people of God had rejected the covenant. And so this would be sticking out like a sore thumb if it was actually referring to the exile.

[3 : 58] So it seems much more likely that it actually refers to some time of discouragement and indeed defeat earlier on in history.

I mean there are various such events recorded like for instance the death of Josiah. Josiah was said to be the best of the kings, the most faithful of the kings of Judah.

And yet he died in a rather pointless battle. So it could refer to that event or some other earlier defeat. But we're not entirely sure which one.

But I think it's probably pre-exile and clearly does refer to some time of discouragement and defeat among the people of God. This particular psalm is not as familiar as some of them.

Although that one verse about being regarded as sheep to be slaughtered or devoured might have sounded familiar. And that's of course because Paul quotes it in Romans 8.

[5 : 07] And we will come back and look at what Paul has to say about this psalm towards the end. But let's look at the psalm itself first. One thing that it's clear is that it's written by somebody with a considerable flair for the dramatic.

And there are several kind of tricks. I suppose you'd call them tricks or ways of making it more dramatic. You might notice for instance it's mostly written in the first person plural.

We, our, us. But at times of particular emotional intensity he switches to the first person. I, me, my.

And I think he does that cleverly to sort of enhance the emotional impact of it.

And of course the literary structure is clearly set out in one sense to shock us. To cause us to think. You know, he doesn't go where we expect he's going to go.

It fairly obviously divides into these three sections. There's a victory song at the beginning. And then a lamentation of defeat. And then there's this plea at the end for vindication and restoration.

[6 : 20] The end of verse 8 is that instruction, Selah, which again nobody is quite sure what it means. But it probably means pause. It probably means a dramatic pause. But it was hardly necessary at that point, is it?

There's a complete change of gear, as it were, at that point. And we wonder how the psalm got written. Decided when I started to read it.

Was the first part of the psalm written before a battle? And then the rest had to be written, rewritten or edited afterwards perhaps? Was it even two separate psalms?

Was there an early part? And then when things seemed to be less encouraging, somebody wrote a second half to it? That's perhaps possible. I think it's more likely, however, that it was all written together.

It's, you know, to say the sense of drama that it has, suggests that it was written as a single piece.

And just imagine, just put yourself in the position of the congregation who were hearing this or singing it for the same time.

[7 : 25] For the first time, sorry. I meant for the first time. Presumably, they were hearing and singing it at a time of some actual defeat and disaster.

And, you know, so they'd all turned up at the temple. And the sons of Korah had come out to lead the worship. And they sing this hymn of praise and victory at the beginning.

And the people must have been sort of sitting there and thinking, have I lost contact with reality?

What are they doing? Just put yourselves in the position of those people who first would have heard the psalm sung or first learned it and sung it.

They would think, wouldn't they, that, as I say, that the psalmist had somehow lost contact with reality. But no.

The psalmist knows what he's doing and where he's going. And he rides this emotional rollercoaster, as you might put it, with some skill, in fact.

[8 : 34] So let's look at the three sections of the psalm. The first eight verses form a song of victory.

The structure is that quite common structure that we find in Hebrew literature. It's known as, if you want the technical term, it's called a chiasm. But it's this sandwich, this sort of in-out structure, where the last part mirrors the first part.

And in the middle is the most important, the focus of the whole structure. This is a fairly straightforward chiasm. But it's cleverly done because there was a change of tense in the middle.

The first half of the sandwich, as it were, is what happened in the past. And then the second half of the sandwich says, Now, me, I, us. Let's just look at what it actually says.

Just look at the verses as I read out the summary. So in verse 1, he starts by saying, Our fathers told us of God's deeds. In verse 2, he remembers their victories.

[9 : 46] In verse 3, he reports, as it were, on the victories of the past. He was probably thinking of Joshua, perhaps. And how they were won, not by their military skill or the sophistication of their weaponry, but rather how these battles were won by God himself.

And then in the middle, he has this great cry, God gives the victory. Verses 3b and really through to 4 and 5.

And then the psalmist unwinds it again. He says, It's God, not our military skill, that gives us the victory. But now he's put it in the present tense. It's not our skill who gives the victory.

And he does declare some victory in verse 7, although one wonders quite what victory he's talking about. But he does say that God has given us the victory now, in the present tense.

And so in verse 8, he recounts God's victories and glory now. And we might have expected him to stop there. And at the center of the sandwich, as it were, is this glorious declaration that it's the sovereign Lord who decrees victory for God's people.

[11 : 12] Dramatic pause, because the people are thinking, hang on a minute though, this is not where we are. We've just faced a disaster. What are we to make of this?

And so we have this, as we might say, the big but. And he suddenly switches from this song of victory to a lamentation. He abandons the chiasmic structure here.

Instead, it's a downward staircase, almost, as he steps down through the sort of stages of emotional discouragement.

But I want you to notice a few things about this. This is not a cause of despair. And most importantly, neither is it an abandonment of faith or an abandonment of belief in God's power and God's, that it is God who gives the victory.

In fact, quite the opposite. If you notice, he says, you have all the way through. In each step, he says, you have done this, referring, of course, to God.

[12 : 28] Nowhere does the author abandon his confidence in God's sovereignty. In fact, in some ways, you can say he follows the idea of the first section to its logical conclusion. If it is God who decrees victories for Jacob, it must also be, in this case, God who has declared, decreed defeat for God's people.

That's the logic of it. And so, it's not as if he's saying the words of verses 1 to 8 are untrue. He's not saying, you know, this is all fairy tales.

It's all stuff in the past, but it doesn't happen in the real world. He's not saying that at all. He's saying that these things clearly are true. And history shows us that.

We do know the victories that God declared for his people. It is true, but it isn't the whole truth. And that's the point, I think, the psalmist is trying to make here.

And if you look at what he's saying here, you could say it's not the power or even the sovereignty of God that's being called into question here. It's rather his adherence to the covenant.

[13 : 42] You notice that later on, of course, he appeals to the covenant relationship between God and his people. So, it might be just worth reminding ourselves of what it was that God had actually promised in this covenant.

And it appears a few times in the Pentateuch, particularly in Deuteronomy, for instance. I'll read it out, but basically, I put it on the board there, on the screen.

Deuteronomy chapter 29, verses 12 and 13, says the following. You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath to confirm you this day as his people that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We haven't read all of it, but, of course, the people's requirement, as we see in Psalm 44, verse 20, was that they should serve no foreign God. And God's half of the covenant was his claim that he would be their God.

If they serve no foreign God, he would be their God. It doesn't actually say anything about endless victories. In fact, it didn't promise them a lack of struggle.

[15 : 11] They were told that they would have to go on and possess the land and that would be a time of struggle and conflict. And, indeed, the psalmist does claim here that the nation has not turned to any foreign God.

They've kept to the path of following the Lord. And I think we need to be careful not to explain away this point. You do find interpreters doing that sometimes.

They more or less dismiss verse 17, which says, it's not as if we've turned away from the path. They say, oh, well, the people must have sinned.

Well, yeah, of course they had. But that's not the point. The covenant didn't require the people to be sinless. The covenant required that they would serve no foreign God.

God. But what was it that God had actually promised? Was it exemption from struggle and conflict and setbacks? No, it wasn't that at all.

[16 : 15] What God had promised is that they would be his people and he would be their God. And sometimes we think of God like a kind of vending machine, don't we, where you put in the right coins and you press the right buttons and your right snack comes out.

But it just doesn't work like that. God's covenant doesn't work like that. And I think, also, we shouldn't reject the nation's claim to have kept the covenant but neither should we reject the reality of the suffering described.

That's the other thing that people do sometimes, isn't it? Say that, well, suffering's not really real. It's a whole religion based on that and Christian science claims that there's no such thing as suffering. But this is real suffering. It's real pain. There's real shame here. We could say it's real disillusion if you use that in the literal sense of the term, of something they thought was true actually being found not to be true.

So let's just have a look at this staircase, downward staircase as it were. The word that's translated rejection more literally means pushed aside.

[17 : 43] Pushed aside as if God was no longer interested. As if he's no longer sort of that's not you know, I haven't got time for that now, I'm not interested in that anymore, I did that in the past but that's not where I'm at now.

That seems to be the meaning of the term rejected. And the psalmist suffers not so much a failure of belief as a failure to understand why God would want to do such a thing.

And so the triumphant note of the first section is actually unpicked piece by piece. You can just compare it. Verse 3b talked about love, God's love for his people.

Verse 9 says we have rejection and humbling. Verse 4 said that God decrees victories for Jacob but this is a song about a defeat.

Verses 2b and verse 5 talked about Israel crushing her enemies but in verse 11 it's God's people who are crushed and scattered.

[18 : 59] And in verse 3b we see the people described as God's prized possession, the one that God loved and now in verse 12 we see them sold off as worthless junk.

It's a great picture really isn't it? It's like disposing of an old car. I'll take whatever you'll give me for it. That's what he says isn't it?

Didn't even bother to negotiate a decent price, I just wanted it off my hands. That seems to be what he's saying here. And then it gets really personal doesn't it?

Instead of boasting and praise in verse 8 and instead of remember from Psalm 2 where it says the Lord holds the nations in scorn and they plot against him.

In this case it seems to be the nations who have the last laugh. In verse 13 and 14 what is it that the nations are saying?

[20 : 07] It must be something like clearly their God has abandoned them or more likely he was never there at all. That must be what the nations are saying. And he switches in verses 15 and 16 doesn't he to the first person again.

Instead of we it's I. And his life he's suggesting is frankly not worth living. It almost seems as if he's given up any hope of relief.

All he can see really is the enemy who's bent on revenge. I think we must as I say give credence to this.

If we don't discount the claim of verse 17 that they had not abandoned the covenant we shouldn't discount that this is real suffering, real pain, real confusion.

Suffering is real. And if we only had verses 1 to 8 without the rest of the psalm in a sense it would be living in a fantasy world because it doesn't always seem to go so well.

[21 : 19] well. But this is pretty terrible isn't it? One feels one must surely conclude the people must have done something particularly bad to merit this retribution.

but the psalmist as he thinks about this is trying to come to terms with this defeat that the people have obviously suffered he rejects that obvious conclusion and again notice what he says he appeals to God that the people do have a clear conscience that they had not abandoned him and yet he says they're struggling in the dark verse 19 and look at what he says in verse 22 he says for your sake we face death all day long it's not that they're facing death all day long because they've rejected God and sought some other God it is because they have kept to the service of the Lord that they face death all day long they're suffering as the Lord's people and this is the basis of the appeal at the end in verse 23 and 26 they cannot understand why God seems to have pushed them away and they know the Lord is not a fickle and a capricious God and so their cry for help is based on his unfailing love in verse 26 and as I say the word there is that word hesed is one of Phil's if you listen to Phil preaching you know it's one of

Phil's favourite words hesed steadfast love covenant love the love that God shows for his people and so the psalmist does know where to go for help and will not abandon his faith in God and yet in one sense the underlying question remains unanswered doesn't it why does God do this why have you putting it why are you putting us through this Lord and we can ask the same question can't we as I hinted in my prayer earlier why was the gospel preached in society changing power in the 18th century and then it became kind of institutionalized in the 19th century and went into decline so that in the 20th century

God's people are indeed regarded with scorn and derision you've got to turn on the TV to see that and as I say at least here it's limited to words as David was saying earlier this morning to the children but words do hurt in other places of course it's not just sticks and stones but swords and tanks and AK-47s why does God allow this why does God give these times when it seems God's people are defeated and struggling why is there individual suffering in the lives of the faithful believers that was one of the questions that Chris was asking this morning if only somebody could stand up here and give us an answer to that question but actually

I would suggest to you the Bible never does answer this question directly and just think I say just think of the book of Job you may or may not be familiar with the book of Job but the book of Job is all about this question Job suffers apparently unjustly and some not very helpful friends come along and say oh you must have done you know God is not unjust you must have done something really bad to deserve this suffering that's a summary of it there's about 38 chapters of this there's a lot of it but at the end Job says well I want to stand before God I want him to answer me not these rather unhelpful counsellors and indeed in the end God does answer Job but it's not quite perhaps the answer that he wanted the Lord said to Job this is

[26 : 05] Job 40 verses 1 to 8 I don't think I put it on the slide I'll just put the text up there Job 40 verses 1 to 8 the Lord said to Job will the one who contends with the almighty correct him let him who accuses God answer him then Job answered the Lord I am unworthy how can I reply to you I put my hand over my mouth I spoke once but I have no answer twice but I will say no more then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm brace yourself like a man I will question you and you shall answer me would you discredit my justice would you condemn me to justify yourself

I'll stop there of course there's a lot more of this but that's the answer that Job gets would you discredit my justice would you claim the Lord is unjust in order to justify yourself and yet we know as in Job's case that suffering is not always a direct result of sin it is true of course that suffering is an indirect result of sin but Jesus himself gives us an example doesn't he of one of those nasty accidents that human cities and people are prone to this is Luke 13 4 and 5 he says those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem I tell you no unless you repent you too will all perish it's not that they were particularly sinful and so

God knocked a tower over on them that's not the right way to look at it that yes there is suffering in the world because of sin but sometimes it is in a sense unfair dealt out to people if God's blessings don't pop out like a vending machine then his judgments don't either and so the climax of this psalm is in verses 23 to 26 will the Lord hide his face forever does his covenant love mean nothing does the nation suffering mean nothing and again we're not given the answer here but in fact as I say the Bible never gives us in a sense a straight answer to that question instead it gives us a person it gives us a king who would lead them to victory they had to wait hundreds of years for it for the answer to their prayer things got a lot worse before they got better but

God did send his king but even then it wasn't at all the kind of king or the kind of victory they expected just as Job didn't get quite the answer he expected he got an answer but it wasn't quite the answer he expected God doesn't give us a direct answer to the problem of suffering instead he shows us a person we've been looking haven't we with Phil in the mornings about the suffering servant of Isaiah that suffering servant of course is primarily Jesus himself how do we know that who is the one who can honestly truly say without any hint of doubt all this happened to me though we had not forgotten!

you or before false to your covenant there must remain an element of doubt when the psalmist said that but the Lord Jesus Christ could say that without a shadow of doubt that would be Jesus of Nazareth who could say that without any doubt at all but was he exempt from suffering on the contrary he was described wasn't he as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief instead of immediately turning aside the sufferings of God's people he actually identified with them and went

through that same suffering and yet in doing that he was the actual answer to their prayer not the answer perhaps they expected but he was the real answer to their prayer so

[31 : 07] I thought I'd allow the apostle Paul to have the last word on this psalm and on suffering and on the covenant love which God has for his people because he has quite a different slant on this so perhaps you would like to open your Bibles turn to Romans chapter 8 so Romans 8 starting at verse 28 and I'm going to read through to verse 39 we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose for those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son that he might be the first born among many brothers and those he predestined he also called those he called he also justified those he justified he also glorified what then shall we say in response to this if

God is for us who can be against us he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with them graciously give us all things who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen it is God who justifies who is he that condemns Christ Jesus who died more than that who was raised to life is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword as it is written and of course he quotes in Psalm 44 for your sake we face death all day long we are considered a sheep to be slaughtered no in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us for

I am convinced that neither death nor life neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future nor any powers neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord what are the things Paul is talking about here he says hardship trouble persecution famine nakedness danger sword and yet what does he say he said in these things we were more than conquerors the psalmist is seeking a victory and God does promise a victory but perhaps not in the way that the psalmist expected it but the psalmist says that none of these things actually can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus the psalmist in a sense didn't get his answer because he was looking forward but we know that all questions like that are answered in the Lord

Jesus Christ and he doesn't promise us a life freed from suffering he doesn't promise us times even of seeming defeat when things seem to go wrong for God's people sometimes we find that in fact he says in this world you will have trouble don't expect anything else but he says that in these things we are more than conquerors for nothing can separate us from that covenant love that love of God that is found in Christ Jesus our Lord in these things we are more than conquerors