

(Devotional #33) **Praising God When Things Go Wrong**
(Psalm 44:4-8)

Proposition: *When ‘good men suffer,’ the suffering never is meaningless, even when we cannot readily discern its purpose; in fact, the suffering of the righteous can be a cause for praise.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER wrote in his book, LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON, “We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.” I think what Bonhoeffer meant is: “the true measure of a man comes to light in times of difficulty.”

CHARLES SWINDOLL said: “If you allow it, suffering can be the means by which God brings you His greatest blessings.”

TIM KELLER points out: “Suffering actually is at the heart of the Christian story.” Keller is right – and in his book, THE REASON FOR GOD, he makes the argument that “in light of the cross – where God Himself bore the suffering for human sin – of all the objections that can be raised about why God allows human suffering, one cannot say that God lets us suffer because He does not love us.”

In yet another book, WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING, Keller suggests, “when looking at suffering through secular eyes, suffering never is seen as a meaningful part of life.” But is this secular viewpoint correct? Is there never an underlying divine purpose to suffering?

Christians should **NOT** look at suffering like the world looks at suffering: unlike in **BUDDHISM**, **SUFFERING IS REAL – suffering is not an illusion**. Unlike the eastern concept of **KARMA**, **SUFFERING OFTEN IS UNFAIR**; (in human terms) *the balance sheet does not always balance*. And unlike to **THE SECULARIST**, **SUFFERING CAN BE MEANINGFUL – there can be a purpose to it**.

Good people sometimes endure terrible experiences: Job certainly did! Of all the Biblical characters, who might come to mind when considering suffering, Job is in the forefront. And then there is **Jesus** – who in one sense is ‘**the ultimate Job**’ – for He suffered in spite of – *if not because of* – His innocence¹.

The world offers no explanation for suffering – other than to attribute it to ‘*bad luck*’ resulting from ‘*random chance occurrences*,’ an *explanation* that should satisfy no one. The Bible, however, deals with suffering and does not shy away from what some have called, ‘**the most difficult theological issue in the Scriptures**’ – **WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?**

Now we began this lesson by addressing the problem of suffering; in particular, I have called attention to the suffering of good people. But now I want to shift our focus from **THE WHY QUESTION** to a different one: **CAN WE FIND IN SUFFERING A BASIS FOR PRAISE?**

Many of the Psalms expose the sufferings of their authors. John Luther Mays, in his book, The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook of the Psalms, writes:

(In the Psalms) prayers for help are a theological interpretation of suffering. They place the troubles of life in a context of meaning. They provide the way to move affliction out of the realm of merely accidental, fortuitous meaninglessness, into the comprehension of a view of self, the world, and God. In other words, THE PSALMS PUT SUFFERING INTO A HUMAN CONTEXT.

¹ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21, and also Isaiah 53:8-9; Matthew 27:4, 19, 54; Luke 23:4, 15, 41, 47

In the midst of Psalm 44, there are five verses that seem to follow this pattern. This is a psalm written by the Sons of Korah². The Psalm, broadly speaking, covers the subjects of **GRACE**, **GUIDANCE**, and **GLADNESS**. It was written during the reign of King Hezekiah³ and was associated by the Israelites with the Passover celebration⁴ that Hezekiah had reinstated. This is important because Israel's hope for the future is inextricably linked to her past ... and the Passover recalls the Exodus from Egypt, while at the same time pointing forward to the coming of the Messiah.

After reciting what God had done for their forefathers⁵ by delivering them from their enemies during the Conquest of Canaan (*verses 1-4*), the Psalmist turns to how the facts of Israel's history form the basis for confidence that God will protect His people in the present and in the future.

When we think about Israel, we always must consider that *the 'facts' of Israel's history* are *'theological facts.'* This does not mean the events recorded in Scripture did not happen; they *did* happen just as they are recorded for us in the infallible Word of God ... what I mean by *'theological facts'* is this: *'we always must be looking for the Hand of God at work within those facts.'* And it is not inappropriate to look for the same, *'Providential Divine Hand'* in the founding and preservation of our own country.

John Phillips suggests *a conceptual relationship* exists between the theological history of Israel and the theological history of the United States. And he mentions this because he believes Psalm 44 can teach us how to pray for our own country. He admonishes us to *"go back through history, combing it for every instance when God, in providential ways, gave help in time of need⁶."* ***And keep in mind, where there is no need, there can be no help given; 'need' and 'aid' (or help) are interdependent; one cannot exist without the other.***

Our nation is not a theocracy and should not be confused with Israel, but our founding fathers came to our shores seeking freedom to worship God without government interference. Five of my ancestors, including my 9th and 10th Great-grandfathers, came to Plymouth aboard the Mayflower. On the Mayflower, forty-one men drew up and signed the first written agreement for self-government ever put *en force* in America – ***It was called THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT:***

In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith ... having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith ... a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents, solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic.

² Exodus 6:24 lists the names of three sons of Korah: Assir, Elkanah, and Abiasaph. These three only make up the first generation of Korahites (*vid.*, 1 Chronicles 9:17-19; 2 Chronicles 20:19) ... it was the Sons of Korah, the future descendants of this line, who wrote eleven of the Psalms (Psalms 42-49; 84; 85; 87; 88).

³ Cf. 2 Kings 18-29.

⁴ Between the institution of the Passover at the time of the Exodus (1446 B.C.), and the reign of Hezekiah (end of the 8th Century B.C. into the early years of the 7th Century B.C.), the Passover celebration had been suspended. Hezekiah, as part of his religious reforms in Judah, reinstated the Passover (*cf.* 2 Chronicles Chapter 30).

⁵ Three things always should come to mind when considering Israel's history: The Exodus, the Conquest, and the Covenants.

⁶ John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms, Volume One, Page 341*

Among the men who signed this compact is my grandfather, Samuel Fuller. Another grandfather, John Lothroppe, came to America from England two years later on the Griffin. He was ordained a deacon by the Bishop of Lincoln and served as pastor of the First Congregational Church of London. His young daughter, Jane Lothroppe, would marry Samuel Fuller in 1635 in a ceremony officiated by Myles Standish in Plymouth Bay Colony.

These colonists, like the Israelites, faced many difficulties, and both they and the Israelites turned to their faith in God for a remedy. One thing is clear: *Israel owed EVERYTHING – her existence, and any good thing that ever came to the nation – to God alone – and so do we.*

Now the context of Psalm 44 – is unpleasant. It speaks to a time of national crisis and war. It is a time when most of us would not be thinking about praise or thanksgiving. Most of us would be praying for deliverance ... and so did Israel. But amidst all the trouble the nation was facing, we read in Psalm 44, words of assurance and confidence ... **PRAISE** ... for the God of Israel:

*You are my King, O God; Command victories for Jacob.
Through You we will push back our adversaries;
Through Your Name we will trample down those who rise up against us.
For I will not trust in my bow,
Nor will my sword save me.
But You have saved us from our adversaries,
And You have put to shame those who hate us.
In God we have boasted all day long,
And we will give thanks to Your name forever – Psalm 44:4-8*

There are many examples of God providentially interceding in the affairs of men ... when men were in trouble ... when men had no hope of winning the day apart from divine intervention.

Such was the case when God interceded on behalf of England. The date was May 30, 1588. The Spanish Armada set sail from Lisbon with one purpose in mind: to bring England to her knees. The Spaniards had one hundred-thirty of the most capable warships in the world. In contrast, England's Navy was small, made up in large part of armed merchant ships, certainly inferior in every way to the almost invincible flotilla they faced. But God had given the battle to England in spite of the odds. The British damaged a few ships of the Spanish fleet but sank only two; God sank the rest with a fierce wind and mighty riptides off the coast of Scotland.

You are my King, O God ... In God we have boasted all day long ... And we will give thanks to Your name forever.

We can look back to Gideon and his inferior army of three hundred men, facing a coalition of Midianites and Amalekites, described in Judges 7:12 “*as numerous as locusts, with camels that were without number, as numerous as the sand on the sea-shore.*” Humanly speaking, the battle was a *lost cause* and Gideon and his men were *doomed* ... except God stepped in and gave the day to the Israelites:

You are my King, O God ... In God we have boasted all day long ... And we will give thanks to Your name forever.

How can we not recall the demise of Goliath⁷, the Philistine giant? Again, there was no way David, a mere shepherd boy, could defeat the Philistine Champion ... but he did

⁷ The story of David and Goliath is recorded in 1 Samuel 17.

because God guided the stone from his slingshot so that it struck home and brought down the great giant.

You are my King, O God ... In God we have boasted all day long ... And we will give thanks to Your name forever.

During the latter half of the Intertestamental Period, a 400-year gap of time between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews were being abused by the Seleucid Empire. In one memorable incident, Antiochus IV issued a decree requiring the Jews to worship the gods of Greece. This brought about a conflict known as the Maccabean Revolt. Under the leadership of a Jewish priest known by the name, Mattathias, a Hasmonean, the Jews refused to obey the decree of Antiochus – and a revolt ensued. After the death of Mattathias, his son, Judas Maccabeus led an army of Jewish dissidents that – against all odds – defeated the Seleucids.

You are my King, O God ... In God we have boasted all day long ... And we will give thanks to Your name forever.

The Apostle Paul wrote: ***“What then shall we say to these things⁸? If God is for us, who can be against us⁹”?*** What a wonderful promise to dwell upon in times of trouble! God was *for us* before we ever were *for Him!* And again, Paul wrote in Romans: ***“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us¹⁰.”*** If these are not reasons for **PRAISE** — I am not sure what is!

Psalm 44 clearly states, ***“victory in battle will not be won by bow or by sword¹¹.”*** Victory comes from the Hand of God alone ... and it is for this reason that we praise Him, not just in good times, but in bad times as well – *for it is in our human weakness that the strength of God is made manifest¹².*

Most of us are not fighting any battles today with a bow or a sword. But we all are fighting a spiritual battle:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies – Ephesians 6:12.

Whatever battles you are facing; whatever disappointments may have come into your world this year ... and for most of us, we can name quite a few ... do not lose hope! Keep the faith! (*And just for the record, I am writing this on **Friday the 13th 2020!***) Nevertheless! Say with Gideon and David and scores of others:

You are my King, O God ... In God we have boasted all day long ... And we will give thanks to Your name forever

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⁸ “These things” includes all that Paul had said in Romans 8:18-30, in which he declared, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us as believers.” Later in the chapter, Paul asserts: “We know that all things (good things and bad things) work together for good to those, who love God, to those, who are called according to His purpose.”

⁹ See Romans 8:31

¹⁰ See Romans 5:8

¹¹ See Psalm 44:6

¹² 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My strength is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.