

Are You Sleeping, Are You Sleeping, Father God?

Psalm 44 September 1, 2024

Let It Be is one of *The Beatles'* most enduring hits. But did you know that John Lennon *loathed* the song? He thought Paul was too traditionalist - that the song was too religious. He said, "What can you say? [It has] nothing to do with The Beatles."¹

In the second-century B.C., the high priest of Israel had a similar response to Psalm 44. He was so disturbed by what he read in this song that he forbade the Levites from reciting some of its verses.²

This is a song about suffering. It is not only a personal and national lament,³ it is also a bold plea to God, accusing Him of abandonment and demanding a response.

It can sound almost disrespectful to the Lord. And yet, this song has applied to just about every generation of God's people. Some scholars tie it to the time of David.⁴ Others to Jehoshaphat or Hezekiah.⁵ Others say it was a song for the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁶ Others the time of the Maccabees. Others say it's for the Great Tribulation.⁷ The Apostle Paul applied this song to his time.

Every generation faces suffering we can't understand. I'm sure many here can identify some area of defeat or difficulty that doesn't make sense. Why doesn't God act? Why doesn't He speak or direct? If you've felt those discouragements, take courage: God has given you a song to sing.

How do you get God's attention when seems like He's not watching? If you were a psalmist, you'd write a song. And this song, in particular, is meant to teach us how to speak to God when we feel unfairly defeated or when the suffering we face makes no sense. It's called a *Maskil*. That is a category of songs that give special insight. They're also noted for their musical difficulty.⁸

As we move through these verses, we'll see this isn't just a musician lashing out impulsively. Despite his frustration and desperation, we'll see that he remains full of faith in God's love and power. But he doesn't hold back. He carefully and deliberately constructs a song that culminates in this prayer: "God, why are You sleeping? Please wake up and intervene for us."

I use the word "constructs" purposefully. In our English translations, we miss something truly remarkable about this song: It's a ziggurat!⁹ The psalmist builds from start to finish in 4 stanzas.

¹ <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/beatles-song-john-lennon-hated-passion/>

² C. Hassell Bullock *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-72*

³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

⁴ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, David Brown *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*

⁵ *EBC*

⁶ J.J. Stewart Perowne *Commentary On The Psalms*

⁷ Arno Gaebelein *The Psalms: An Exposition*

⁸ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

⁹ Glenn Paauw *Why We Need a Literary Bible*

In the Hebrew, the first stanza is 10 lines of poetry, and it is a stanza of *praise*. The second stanza is 8 lines of poetry. It is the stanza of *pain*. The third stanza is 6 lines and it is the stanza of *protest*. The final stanza is 4 lines, and it is the stanza of *petition*. Ten, eight, six, four. The pinnacle is a bold and honest prayer - a call for God to act. Let's begin at the slab foundation of praise.

Psalm 44:Superscript - For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah.

The sons of Korah were originally custodians and doorkeepers in the Tabernacle. But during the time of David, they became elite singers and songwriters. Eleven of their psalms are preserved for us, and we still sing their lyrics. *As The Deer, Better Is One Day*. They were faithful, faith-filled men.

The first stanza is the bedrock they build on. In it they praise God's work, grace, and faithfulness.

Psalm 44:1 - ¹ God, we have heard with our ears—our ancestors have told us—the work you accomplished in their days, in days long ago:

One reason John Lennon didn't like *Let It Be* was because he thought it was "granny music." Paul McCartney grew up singing songs around the piano with his family. John wasn't a fan of the style.

The sons of Korah are excited to sing their grannies' song. They begin with this wonderful declaration: God, we've heard and we believe! Generations of God's people had walked with Him and seen Him work and passed those truths on to their children and grandchildren. The sons of Korah kept singing the story - even when part of that story was when their own direct ancestors were judged by God for rebellion.¹⁰ But *this* group heard and believed and proclaimed.

We are responsible to proclaim the true story of God's faithfulness first to our families, then to our communities and then wider world as the Lord sends us out.

Psalm 44:2-3 - ² In order to plant them, you displaced the nations by your hand; in order to settle them, you brought disaster on the peoples. ³ For they did not take the land by their sword—their arm did not bring them victory—but by your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, because you were favorable toward them.

It wasn't Joshua's sword that conquered Canaan. It was all God's strength. The Israelites *couldn't* do it in their own strength. Just look at the battle of Ai. But when God was working among them, *nothing* could stop it. No nation could stop God from His plans to plant and settle His people in the place He wanted to give them.

For Old Testament Israel, this was a physical gift - a kingdom on earth. But God *still* wants to plant and settle His people. Look at Psalm 1. Look at Ephesians. God's desire for you is *growth* and *peace*. Why? Because God *delights* in His people. That's what "favorable" means there in verse 3. God takes pleasure in us.

¹⁰ Numbers 26:9-11

Psalm 44:4-7 - ⁴You are my King, my God, who ordains victories for Jacob. ⁵Through you we drive back our foes; through your name we trample our enemies. ⁶For I do not trust in my bow, and my sword does not bring me victory. ⁷But you give us victory over our foes and let those who hate us be disgraced.

The sons of Korah were extremely loyal to David. They were some of David's first supporters when he was banished by Saul.¹¹ But they did not tie their identity to his political power. They recognized that *God* was really their King. *He* was their strength. *He* was their hope. *He* was their song.

They were willing not only to sing, but also to battle. That's not an easy thing to do. It's easy to talk a big game about God's power and deliverance, but when it's time to actually put on a sword and march to the front, that's something else. Especially when you know *your* strength is not enough. But they believed that God still had victories for His people.

He still does for you and I today. Not the kind of physical and political victories we see in the Old Testament. We no longer struggle against flesh and blood. Now we conquer with love and grace.

Psalm 44:8 - ⁸We boast in God all day long; we will praise your name forever. *Selah*

They put their belief into practice. They were going to praise God all day long. In the Temple. Marching out to war. Swinging a sword. They made a plan to praise. Boasting here means to exclaim, to rejoice, to lift up, to praise with sincere and deep thanks.¹²

From this foundation, they now begin their complaint. The bedrock of faith and hope and praise. In fact, before moving on they give a *Selah*, which we believe was some sort of a directive to pause and consider. From this place we now move to stanza two - the stanza of pain. They turn from what has happened to what *is* happening.

Psalm 44:9-11 - ⁹But you have rejected and humiliated us; you do not march out with our armies. ¹⁰You make us retreat from the foe, and those who hate us have taken plunder for themselves. ¹¹You hand us over to be eaten like sheep and scatter us among the nations.

When you compare what God *had* done and what was now happening, there was a total reversal. Instead of victory, there was defeat. Instead of settling, there was scattering. Instead of provision, they had become plunder. Instead of being shepherded, they were being sacrificed.

The singers are confused. This isn't just bad luck. They're convinced that, "God, *You* did this!" As we move through these verses, Derek Kidner points out that the distress deepens with every line.¹³

¹¹ 1 Chronicles 12:1-6

¹² *TWOT*

¹³ Derek Kidner *Psalms 1-72*

Psalm 44:12-16 - ¹² **You sell your people for nothing; you make no profit from selling them.** ¹³ **You make us an object of reproach to our neighbors, a source of mockery and ridicule to those around us.** ¹⁴ **You make us a joke among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.** ¹⁵ **My disgrace is before me all day long, and shame has covered my face,** ¹⁶ **because of the taunts of the scorner and reviler, because of the enemy and avenger.**

Where is the favor? Where is the delight? It seems like God was so disgusted with His people that He was willing to sell them at a loss!

As good theologians, this is the part where we say, "Well, it *must* be because of something they did. After all, lots of judgments in the Old Testament were punishment for sin." It's true, God would, at times, use other nations to discipline His people. But we need to be careful. Sometimes in the Bible, "good" theologians come upon a scene of suffering and conclude it must be the *victim's* fault, but they turn out to be wrong. Think of Job's friends. Think of the blind man in John 9. The disciples asked the Lord, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus said, "Neither!"

And that's what the next stanza is all about. The protest. The sons of Korah present their case that while they aren't perfect, they had done nothing to deserve this present suffering.

Psalm 44:17-21 - ¹⁷ **All this has happened to us, but we have not forgotten you or betrayed your covenant.** ¹⁸ **Our hearts have not turned back; our steps have not strayed from your path.** ¹⁹ **But you have crushed us in a haunt of jackals and have covered us with deepest darkness.** ²⁰ **If we had forgotten the name of our God and spread out our hands to a foreign god,** ²¹ **wouldn't God have found this out, since he knows the secrets of the heart?**

The truth is: Sometimes you will suffer when you haven't done anything wrong. Some pain, some defeat, some mistreatment. Look at the Apostle Paul. Look at the children of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt. God had *sent* them to Egypt. They didn't disobey Him. Yet they were oppressed.

This world is diseased with sin. It touches every corner of the planet, every aspect of the human experience. God is going to fix the problem, but meanwhile you *will* suffer unfairly at some point.

Now, *sometimes* we suffer because of the choices we make, either individually or nationally. Joshua, at the end of his life, said, "Hey, you guys have *got* to get rid of your foreign idols and turn your hearts to the Lord." The people wouldn't do it, and what followed was the time of the Judges.

But the sons of Korah invite God to investigate them in verse 21. "God, come look! Audit our hearts and lives!" They still were loyal to Him *even when* it seemed like they had been abandoned.¹⁴ "Our hearts have not turned back!" Their circumstances were terrible, but remember the bedrock: The foundation of their song *and* their lives was their faith in a true and mighty God - their trust that He would not ultimately fail them.

¹⁴ *EBC*

Psalm 44:22 - ²²Because of you we are being put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.

For context - their suffering wasn't just a hostile work environment or unfair treatment. People were actually being butchered. That doesn't mean our less-extreme sufferings don't matter - they do - but the severity of their suffering makes the toughness of their faith all the more significant.

As they grapple with why all this is happening, the sons of Korah accidentally stumble on an answer that was new to Old Testament believers. Gerald Wilson writes, *"In this context of feeling abandoned and rejected by God for no apparent reason...the community of faith makes an amazing step of understanding - not complete understanding...but understanding that shapes their will to commit themselves in a new and painful way: 'For **your** sake we face death all day long.'*"¹⁵

Paul famously quoted this verse in Romans saying this was the plight of Christians. His conclusion was *not* that God had failed us, but that despite suffering, God's love conquers. And we conquer through the love of Christ. Some suffering is a result of the fact that God loves us and we love Him.

Derek Kidner writes, *"[Psalm 44] implies the revolutionary thought that suffering may be a battle-scar rather than a punishment; the price of loyalty in a world which is at war with God."*¹⁶

Now, I tend to think of life as all Jericho or all Ai. Jericho, the walls just come down, God's people go in and win easily. At Ai there's defeat, but *oh*, we know why! There was sin in the camp. Ok, we take care of that, now it's all Jericho from here on out. But what about the fight at Gibeon? So much work. A protracted battle that took longer than they had daylight for. And that was them fighting *someone else's* battle. And then there was the rest of the land to conquer and settle. The Christian life is lived on the battlefield. In this world we *will* have suffering. But be of good cheer. Be courageous. Our God and King, Christ Jesus has conquered the world.¹⁷ Victory is coming.

The sons of Korah are convinced that they are suffering unjustly, that God Himself is responsible, that He should be helping them and He's not, but *still* they go to Him for relief. This is the musical version of Job's famous line, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

So, after a foundation of praise, and then building upward the levels of pain and protest, they're ready to stand at the top and bring their petition to the Lord, still believing God truly loves them.

Psalm 44:23-24 - ²³Wake up, Lord! Why are you sleeping? Get up! Don't reject us forever! ²⁴Why do you hide and forget our affliction and oppression?

Verse 23 is what the high priest Yohanan couldn't accept. He said, "God neither slumbers nor sleeps." Of course, that is true. God does not sleep...except when He does.

¹⁵ Gerald Wilson *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms, Volume 1*

¹⁶ Kidner

¹⁷ John 16:33

In Mark 4, Jesus and His disciples get into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. A great storm crashed upon them and the boat was being swamped while Jesus *slept*. What did those men do? They woke Him up and said, "Teacher! Don't you care that we're going to die?"¹⁸ Very Psalm 44.

Had God abandoned them? They felt like He was asleep on the job. And we feel that way, too sometimes. God welcomes us to call out to Him in those moments.

The sons of Korah are bold. In some sense, they may even step over a line. Then we remember that God the Holy Spirit put His stamp of approval on this song. Psalm 44 is a gift from God to us to use.

Are you in a storm of some kind? Do you feel like Christ has abandoned you? It's ok if you do. But now remember He *is* with you. He *does* care. He is working in your life. Fear is not the answer. Walking away from Him is not the answer. Lashing out is not the answer. Holding to your faith is.

Psalm 44:25-26 - ²⁵For we have sunk down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. ²⁶Rise up! Help us! Redeem us because of your faithful love.

The psalm ends without resolution or relief. As the melody comes to a close, the singers are *still* crushed in the dirt. There is no response from heaven. But look at the last phrase.

As Paul McCartney sang the refrain of *Let It Be* for the first time, one article reports that John Lennon sat grimacing. He hated it. Wanted it over. Wanted it done.

The sons of Korah end their song not with a grimace but with confidence - the same hope they had at the start. Their hearts are full of faith in God's *hesed* love. A love of loyal tenderness and *action*. They *still* trusted that God was a Redeemer - that it was His delight to help His people.

They say, "Lord, we *know* You *love* us! We know You're not done! Come and work in us as You have before." Love gets the last word.

This was also Paul's conclusion when he applied this psalm to himself and all suffering Christians.

Romans 8:35-39 - ³⁵Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written: Because of you we are being put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered. ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

¹⁸ Mark 4:35-41

Are you suffering today? Maybe it's because of choices you've made. Maybe it's because of persecution of some form. Maybe you really *can't* make sense of why it's happening. The words of wisdom this *maskil* has for you are this: God hears your prayer. He has great power and plans for your life. Your suffering will not ultimately end in defeat, though it *may* end in physical death. But God's *hesed* love is the last word. A faithful love. A loyal love. A love that cannot lose. A love you cannot be separated from if you belong to Jesus Christ. Cling to Christ, even if the world is crashing down.

Two questions now present themselves to us: First, do *you* belong to Jesus Christ? Are you one of His people? Are you safe in His love? You can be, even today. He has invited you into relationship.

Second, if you're here and you're suffering, the Lord knows. But we can all put our circumstances in perspective. That's certainly what the sons of Korah were trying to do. "God, here's what You've done, here are Your promises, here's what You've called me to, but *here's* what we're experiencing." They were struggling with understanding and perspective.

When it's not *our* suffering, it's easy to put it in perspective, right? The fiery furnace? What a *great* situation! ...Unless you're the one in the flames! David in the cave about to be killed? *AMAZING!* Look at how God works! Paul bobbing up and down in the sea! *WOW!* What a testimony of God's faithful goodness.

But *my* circumstances? Send an overwatch! Get me a chopper out of this battlefield! God, this has to STOP! Maybe. Maybe God wants to deliver you. Maybe He wants us to endure. Maybe someday our suffering will be seen a moment of honor or refining or a chance for the Lord to do a new work in us the way He so loves to.

None of us want to suffer, especially when it's not our fault. But in this world we have trouble of all sorts. God doesn't ignore it. And He doesn't demand we pretend like it isn't happening or it doesn't hurt. He gives us songs like this to pray and sing to Him to remind ourselves of the truth.

And, as we close, we can see one last image. There are the sons of Korah, singing loudly from the top of their ziggurat. Suffering. Taking painful shrapnel. They said, "We're going to praise God all day long." Three times we see that phrase, "all day long." They said, "we're being killed all day long. When we're not dying, we're being disgraced to everyone around us all day long. But we know God is still God and so we will praise You all day long."