

How to Complain to God

Psalm 44

Turn to Psalm 44 please. What are we allowed to say to God? Are we allowed to complain to God? About how he is treating us? Is there a right way to complain to God? Are we allowed to tell God that he is not treating us right?

Yes, there is a right way. Ps 44 will show us what it is. And we'll look at Israel complaining in the wilderness, which is the wrong way to complain.

Ps 44 is a lament psalm, that's what the experts call them, they are usually psalms that protest to God that he's not taking care of his people. The psalm experts divide our 150 psalms into seven or eight different kinds of psalms, and lament is one of these kinds.

They all agree that lament is by far the most common kind of psalm. Somewhere between a third and a half of all the psalms have lament in them. These are not our favorite psalms. We almost never use them in our call to worship, and I do not use them to lead our gatherings.

But this winter we'll look at several lament psalms. For one, I don't want to give a biased view of Scripture. If these is going to be a series on the book of Psalms it needs to give a fair view.

According to Psalms, we should be protest to God when our church is together worshipping him. Psalms teaches us that we do not have to be happy and thankful to worship God.

There are enough troubles in this church, pain and heartache. We have reasons to complain to God that he's not helping. We need to know that he urges us to do exactly this, and he teaches us that this is the right thing to do.

Setting of Psalm 44

This psalm is Israel's prayer to God after Israel lost an important battle or series of battles against an enemy nation. We don't know the details of when this happened, just what we can figure out from reading the psalm.

But this psalm made it into the book of Psalms, which means it was in their one and only song book. This psalm was a part of regular worship for hundreds of years after it was composed.

Ps 44 has four stanzas, and as the prayer gets more desperate the stanzas get shorter. The first stanza has ten pairs of lines, the second stanza has eight pairs, the third six, and the fourth four pairs of lines.

The first stanza of Ps 44 praises God for his faithfulness in the past to Israel's armies. His faithfulness in the distant past, and his faithfulness in the lifetime of the composer.

We have heard it with our ears, O God; our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago.

² *With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our ancestors; you crushed the peoples and made our ancestors flourish.*

³ *It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them.*

⁴ *You are my King and my God, who decrees victories for Jacob.*

⁵ *Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes.*

⁶ *I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory;*

⁷ *but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame.*

⁸ *In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.*

Verse 6 – the armies used bows and swords, but they did not trust in bows and swords, they knew that victory came from God not their weapons.

Now we'll read the second stanza, and it is very different.

⁹ *But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies.*

¹⁰ *You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us.*

¹¹ *You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations.*

¹² *You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale.*

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

¹⁴ *You have made us a byword among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us.*

¹⁵ *I live in disgrace all day long, and my face is covered with shame*

¹⁶ *at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.*

This psalm accuses God, I cannot think of any other word for it but accuse. V9 - **you** have rejected **us**. **You** have humbled **us**. **You** no longer go with **us**. V10 – **you** made **us** retreat. V11 – **you** gave **us** up to be devoured like sheep, **you** scattered **us**, **you** sold **your** people.

I said I'd ask if any of you had spoken to God like this. Put up your hand – have you?

When you lost a battle in those days, if you were not killed you were taken to be sold as slaves. Israelites had been slaughtered, and survivors – men and women and boys and girls – had been sold as slaves among the nations. God did all this, and he did not even get the money.

¹¹ *You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations.*

¹² *You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale.*

The second half of that stanza speaks of shame, humiliation. The psalm uses words like scorn, derision, disgrace, shame, the taunts of those who revile me. Most of us have had some really humiliating experiences where we were not trying to do anything shameful or humiliating, but what happened and the way people responded was sure humiliating.

Did it ever occur to you to hold God responsible for that? To say, God, you led me into this and you gave me know way out – did you know we could say that to God?

How NOT to Complain – Israel in the Wilderness

Turn to Exodus 14. The wilderness Israelites complained to Moses about their troubles, and made Moses the problem. Psalm 44 complains to God about troubles, and makes God the problem. When Israelites were in trouble in the wilderness, they spoke like atheists. God was not in the situation, the problem was human.

Exodus 14:11 *They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you [Moses] brought us to the desert to die? What have you [Moses] done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’?”*

In their complaint there is no God. They complain like atheists. Who brought them out of Egypt? I’ll read another. Listen for this – who do they speak to? And who is in charge?

Ex 16:3 *The Israelites said to Moses and Aaron, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you [Moses and Aaron] have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”*

Israelites spoke to Moses and Aaron, not God. Who brought them out into the desert? Moses and Aaron. That takes no faith. Ps 44 is convinced that God himself is the problem, and the only effective way of dealing with the problem is to have an honest conversation with God, and plead with him to be merciful. That takes a lot of faith.

Again, who do they complain to, God or people, and who is the problem, God or people?

Ex 17:3 *But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses [not against God]. They said, “Why did you [Moses, not God] bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”*

Num 14:2-4 All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” [Journey continues at the end of the 40 wilderness years] Num 20:4-5 Why did you [Moses] bring the LORD’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? ⁵ Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place?

In Psalm 44, the problem looked entirely human, the problem was not God at all. Israel’s armies were being defeated. Who is the problem? In our day, we might complain against the enemies, arrogant and cruel enemies. The enemies would be the problem, not God.

Even more likely in our day, we’d complain against our own army, as Israel did against Moses. We’d blame our own generals, our king, for not training the army properly, for not giving the soldiers decent weapons, we’d blame the leaders for clumsy military plans. We’d blame soldiers themselves for not fighting fiercely, for being cowards or blundering fools.

That's what we'd do. But Psalm 44 does not blame the generals or the king or military plans or the soldiers. In Psalm 44, this is a God problem, to be taken up directly with God, in the worship of the whole people of God.

The generals and soldiers might really be blundering fools, but Psalm 44 knows that if God decided to give Israel's armies success, they would have success, the problem would end.

And that is faith, and that's why God loves Psalm 44 and he loves the people who pray that way. And that is why God was fed up with the Israelites who complained in the wilderness.

In the third stanza, vv17-22, God's people say, "we have been faithful to you, you've not be loyal to us but we've been loyal to you, we did not lose these battles because of our sin, and you God know this is true."

¹⁷ *All this came upon us, though we had not forgotten you; we had not been false to your covenant.*

¹⁸ *Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path.*

¹⁹ *But **you** crushed **us** and made us a haunt for jackals; **you** covered **us** over with deep darkness.*

²⁰ *If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god,*

²¹ *would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?*

²² *Yet because of **you** we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*

Some of us find it almost impossible to view ourselves this way. If we have troubles, it is our own fault, we've sinned. Some of us find it almost impossible to view others this way – if they have troubles it is their fault, they have been false to God's covenant, somehow their hearts have turned back.

Ps 44 invites us, urges us, to not look at it that way at all. God himself is urging us, "No, don't make this all your fault, that's not right at all!" Well if it is not our fault, why do these troubles happen? According to Ps 44, God invites us to lay it all at his feet **in our public worship**.

Some of us say bad things just happen, that's all. It is not our fault, and it is not anyone person's fault either, and it is not God's doing, it is a fallen universe and bad things just happen.

In broad strokes, people, that is not a biblical view. That is not the way the book of Psalms leads us to pray and worship. And you will say, "if God is doing this he's a lot worse than I thought."

Which may be true. It is clear from Ps 44 that horrible things happened to Israelites because they lost these battles to the enemy, and Ps 44 holds God responsible for these things, not the enemy army or the Israelite army or the random fate of a fallen universe.

This psalm could say all these things to God, and still end by reminding God of his *hesed*, his unfailing love, his loyal love, his unending covenant love. "*Rise up and help us, rescue us because of your unfailing love.*"

²³ *Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.*

²⁴ *Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?*

²⁵ *We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.*

²⁶ *Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.*

Even among the psalms, which are very bold with God, Ps 44 pushes the edge of what faith can properly say to God in congregational worship. *Wake up, LORD! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget us?* Is this any way to approach God's throne? It feels like disrespect, irreverence.

And yet, God has given this psalm back to us. God wants us to come to him this way. He would rather we pushed the boundaries of reverence than that we avoid him. He wants us. He's telling us he wants us in our pain, our heartache, our humiliation and shame, and our disappointment.

When Israel complained in the desert, they complained to the leaders, not to God. In the lament psalms, God's people complain to God directly, and it is called "worship."

When Israel complained in the desert, the important people were the problem. In the lament psalms, God is the problem. Israel complained out of lack of faith, lack of trust in God.

The psalms complain out of great faith. God is sovereign over all these things. Is God sovereign over all these things? That will decide to whom we complain, and what we complain about.

It takes great faith to hold God responsible, and to still believe that we can appeal to his unfailing love. We are not used to trusting in this way. God is speaking to us, giving this psalm to us. He's urging us to pray to him in this way.

He is also teaching us who is responsible and what we should do about it. He's inviting us to respond in faith, urging us to come to him in faith.

Father in heaven, God of Psalm 44, we know that you have been completely faithful to your people over all the hundreds of years. You have been good to us, and we here have tasted your kindness. You are our king and our God, and we will praise your name forever.

But there are deep heartaches in this room because you, Father, have rejected our prayers. You have given us over to illness and sorrow, pain and fear, and in this way you have crushed us. You have given the upper hand to those who are against us. Because of things you brought into our lives, we are shamed and humiliated. We have come to you for a way out, but you have hidden that from us.

We have not stopped trusting you, or worshipping you, or living in your ways. Our hearts have not turned back from you, our feet still walk toward you. Yet because of you the enemies of our souls press us hard, and we are often brought down. Don't reject us forever. Don't hide your face and forget us. Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.