

## Psalm Genres (Part Four): Laments

### Learning to Think Through Trials

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I hate to be a downer, but we will talk about grief and sorrow and trial a lot today. Many realize that the average person's life is difficult, and it is difficult on its face. Nobody goes through life happy-go-lucky. If they do, they are missing something. They just got pie in the sky. They are Pollyanna.

Everybody has troubles and trials as they go through life. We are on this planet with 8 billion other people, and we do not make it easy for each other. We keep getting into each other's business, and trials and tribulations multiply.

The poet Longfellow said that "into each life some rain must fall." But he was understating the case. Normally it is storm after storm after storm. Helen Hayes, an American actress, said that "the hardest years of life are those between 10 and 70." The man who wrote Peter Pan, English novelist James Barrie, said "life is a lesson, a long lesson in humility." Jean Cocteau, he was a French writer and filmmaker, he said "life is a horizontal fall." Another English writer, William Hazlitt, he wrote a lot of essays during his time, he said "the art of life is to know how to enjoy a little and to endure very much." And finally, O. Henry, one of my favorite short story writers, an American, he said, "life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating."

The Bible too has a lot to say about woe and grief because life is indeed full of sorrows. Here are just a few verses to whet your appetite. Isaiah 53:3 describes our Savior as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." If you would think that anybody would be happy and joyous throughout His life, you would think it would be God Himself. But when He was here on earth, He had to go through quite a lot of suffering.

One of the first things He said publicly in His beatitudes, in the second beatitude:

**Matthew 5:4** Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

He also said in Matthew 24, verse 13,

**Matthew 24:13** He who endures to the end shall be saved.

It means there is going to be a lot of trouble, a lot of problems, especially at the end time, and the only ones that are going to really make it are those that endure all those trials.

Jesus says in John 16, verse 33, very "positively" to His disciples,

**John 16:33** In the world, you will have tribulation.

And Paul said, in a very similar way in Acts 14, verse 22,

**Acts 14:22** We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.

And finally, in II Timothy 3, verse 12,

**II Timothy 3:12** Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Now, I cherry-picked those, of course. But it is the general tenor of the Bible that human life is not fun. We have periods of fun and joy and goodness, and times when we feel content. But overall, because of things like death and various conflicts with one another and the way men are, they tend to ruin things and destroy things. Life is tough. It can be brutal. It can be short. Life is not easy for most people.

You usually have to have something like a billion dollars to have some sort of what you might call protection against certain things that happen in this life, but really money cannot keep you from grief. People around you are going to die. Things are going to go wrong. We think of money as a refuge, as a safeguard, but in the end it is not.

Let us go to Ecclesiastes 7. We will read verses 2 through 4. This was Solomon's conclusion about life and it is well known. Both my dad and I went through Ecclesiastes 7 quite thoroughly, I think. He sure did. He did like 10 sermons on Ecclesiastes 7. I am not exaggerating too much either.

But he gives us an understanding here, Solomon does, about the basic tenor of life. Let us start in verse 2.

**Ecclesiastes 7:2-4** It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. [Meaning death. Death is the end of all men, and that is what they take to heart.] Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

So essentially Solomon is saying here that we learn or we understand or grow so much more from the woes that we suffer than in the good times. In the good times food is plentiful, drink is flowing, laughter is all around. We are just joyous because everything is going so well. But those things actually just distract us and do not teach us very much. It is when times get hard and you have to really sit down and think things through that we begin to learn about life, about ourselves, about our goals, even the big questions like why are you here and that sort of thing. It makes us take a moment and think things through.

In the world, sorrow prevails. But people, in an attempt to kind of forget that, they say, "Let the good times roll!" Because they want to forget all their sorrows. (I will not try the French or the Cajun French. I tried it on Jarod and he kind of looked at me funny. We will let Craig say it. I like his accent on that.) But the hard times are what we normally face in life, rather than all the joyous times. And especially so before God calls us.

The chances of having a really good, great life not touched by sorrow without God are almost nil. And even though we come into the church and have our various trials because God is trying to improve us, He is trying to make us into the image of His Son, there is a good reason for those things,

and if we are attentive and we are faithful to Him, we understand that those things are for our good, and they actually increase our joy and our praise of God.

So if we want to succeed in life, if we want to make the most of our time, our 70 or 80 years that God gives most of us, Solomon says we must understand life's woes and learn wisdom. We have to sit down and think about cause and effect. We have to think about why these things happen and what we can do, how we can act, how we can think about life and other things, especially like the doctrines and principles of God so that our lives are, in the end, full of joy rather than full of woe.

Now the Psalms can help us do this. I do not know if you are aware. I did not know this, but there are more laments among the Psalms than any other genre. And it is not even close. Laments and complaints constitute one-third of the 150 Psalms that are in the psalter, so that means about 50 of the psalms that you read in your Bible are laments or complaints. So that makes it a dominant feature of the book of Psalms. More ink is used up on laments than on many other—even praise psalms.

Now, scholars distinguish individual laments and communal versions of laments. We are not going to go into a great deal of which is which, and I am not going to give you a listing of them because there are so many. But I want to give you an idea of how they are distributed within the Psalms or throughout the Psalms because I think it is very interesting.

Individual laments are primarily in the first book, the first 41 psalms. I will give you some percentages as we go here. I should also say that there are quite a few in the second book of Psalms too. But the Psalms, we could say, are front-loaded with laments.

Most of the lament psalms that are in the book of Psalms are in the first few books. And the ones that are praise hymns, praise psalms, are back-loaded. The praise psalms predominate in the last couple of books, especially Book Five. Book Five has a lot more praise psalms than earlier books.

So we have individual laments in the first part. Communal laments tend to be the ones that are in the later part of the book where everybody is together and

usually asking God to solve a problem for the whole nation or, in our case, we would say the whole church. But the laments tend to peter out a bit as you go through the book of Psalms and the praise psalms, the ones that express joy and adoration for God, increase.

Now these psalms of lamentation function as appeals to God for rescue. And they typically arise from situations involving things like physical illness or somebody out there has falsely accused the writer of something or an enemy is persecuting the writer or there is warfare in the nation or any kind of distress that is upon the writer, and he wants to express to God that things are really bad here and we need Your help. Or it could be a combination of those things. These things do not wait in line for one another. Sometimes you are bombarded with several at a time.

The prevalence of laments in the Psalms reflects, as I have been saying, a fundamental theological reality that we have trouble in this life. And so rather than denying the difficult dimensions of human experience which we all go through, we all have to endure, we all have to try to solve, the psalms of lamentation bring suffering and distress into full view. God does not hide the fact that we go through trial, that we live in sorrow, that we have various troubles throughout our lives. So rather than ignoring it, He brings it out into the open, we could say. Let us not hide this. Let us talk about these things. Let us figure these things out.

So He brings them front and center to our attention and makes us think about them. And then when we sing them or when we study them, it helps us work through both the feelings, the emotional side, and the reasoning, the intellectual side, so that we can get through these times of grief and trouble. So God gives us, in the Psalms, at least 50 opportunities to reflect on how we can learn from the trials of our life.

Now before we go on any further, I want to remind you about what the Psalms help us do. This is that paragraph that I read to you in the first sermon in Part One. The man was a Protestant pastor named Sean Finnegan, and he gives us a good suggestion about how to use the Psalms. So I will just read this again so you can have it in mind.

The best way for you to use the Psalms is to ask yourself how you're feeling. What are you going through? Are you in desperate need for deliverance? Read the psalms of petition. Are you sad and looking to boost your confidence? Read the psalms of trust. Are you seeking to expand your praise vocabulary? Look for psalms in the praise or enthronement categories. Are you having an existential crisis and asking why God doesn't help you? That's what the psalms of complaint are for. You get the idea.

So if you have a situation, ask yourself how you feel about it, what you are thinking about it. And then start digging into the Psalms, into these genres that match what it is you are feeling and going through. God has put enough wisdom in the psalms, in these types of psalms, to help you start moving forward. And if you use them properly, it will probably end up that you will not just start moving forward, you will begin to understand things that will help you overcome it altogether.

Obviously, today we are going to be looking into this other genre of Psalms, the lamentation psalms. Most of them were written by David.

I get the feeling sometimes that David was the most depressing man that ever was on the face of the earth. He had dozens of these lamentations in the first two books of the Psalms. But there are a few of these lamentations written by Asaph, and the sons of Korah wrote a few as well. So psalms of lament complain or mourn about the hopelessness of the psalmist's situation. Usually, I will just say usually, these psalms end positively. They get around at some point to a statement of faith and trust in God for deliverance or healing or mercy or whatever the petition is that he has asked. But they are not always happy psalms.

As a matter of fact, when we were singing, Hunter chose a lament for us to sing, and I knew it was a lament in Scripture, but it was ah da da da da da da—it was not all that bad. But that is the difference between what is actually written and what comes out in our hymns. A lot has to do with the music that they are put to.

As I said before, because there are so many psalms of lamentation, I am not going to give you a long list of them. However, there is, as I have already mentioned, an interesting distribution of them as compared to hymns of praise throughout the five books of Psalms, and I want to give you some figures about that to help you see that.

In Book One, the first 41 psalms, 24 of those 41 are laments. That is 59% of Book One's psalms are laments. David was quite depressed early on and so in Book One, he wrote a lot of lament psalms. As a matter of fact, after the first two opening psalms, you know, the introductory psalms for Book One, 3 through 11 are all laments except for 8. And I think we sang 8, which was nice. And then we went back to 4, and that was a lament that did not quite sound like a lament. But yeah, Psalms 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11 are all laments, and that is what hits you when you first open the book of Psalms and you start reading through. You know, man, this guy is depressed. He has so many enemies. He has things happening bad to him right and left. Does he not ever get a break? But he ends most of them with, I will trust in God because He is by my side or something along that line. That is Book One. Fifty-nine percent are laments. Only eight are hymns of praise.

Book Two has 31 psalms. 20 of them are laments. That is 65% of Book Two's Psalms are laments and only 6, or 19%, are hymns of praise. In Book Three, eight of the 17 psalms are laments. That is 47%, and six, that is a better percentage than Book Two, 35%, are hymns of praise. In Book Four, only four of the 17 psalms, that is only 24%, are laments, and now five are hymns of praise. That is 29%. It is getting more toward the praises than the laments. And finally, when we get to Book Five, only 10 of the 44 Psalms, that is 23%, are laments, and 23 psalms, that is 52%, are hymns of praise. So it is lopsided.

What this means is that laments cluster thickly in the early books and become less frequent throughout, while praise hymns are fewer in the early books but more numerous later, and they absolutely dominate Book Five, saying that the end is quite a bit better than the beginning.

Now whether we look at the progress through the Psalms as reflective of the history of physical Israel or the progress of spiritual Israel toward the Kingdom of God, or whether we look at it as reflecting God's plan from the

very beginning to the Kingdom of God and the New Heavens and New Earth or (I think this is probably the way) we look at it mostly because we tend to be selfish creatures, so we look at the progress of the Psalms as the path of the individual Christian toward the Kingdom of God.

I think what the Bible is showing is that times of lament and trial tend to occur early, however we look at it, and should peter off—should decrease—as maturity and wisdom deepen. So we start off, usually, with a lot of problems because we just simply do not know. We are foolish. We do not understand things. We do not know how to handle things properly, and so that is why after baptism, we tend to have problems because we are just starting off and we find all these things that, "oh, I used to do this before baptism and now I can't," and we have to face those things. People who are in our lives have to deal with us in this changed state and that causes friction.

And so we have problems and trials and we have to learn how to deal with that and over time, we gain wisdom and know better things to say rather than just get in your face and "you need to eat clean meats," you know. We learn how to work with those things so we do not offend everybody and cause ourselves greater trials.

So the way laments and praise psalms are in the Psalms kind of reflect how it goes throughout our lives. Like I said, the trials should, over time because of our wisdom and maturity, begin to taper off, while on the other hand, times of praise and giving glory to God should go the other direction. We should be having a lot more joy and praise as we go into our older years, into our senior years.

The way it is here in the Psalms, if we are looking at it that way, our old age should be one of joy, even though we know that we are coming to the end of our time. And that should encourage us. We do lamentable things early in our conversion, and we have to pay the price, but life with God over the long haul should improve dramatically as we mature into the image of Christ until in the resurrection there are no tears or sorrow. But we, like the angels around His throne, praise God day and night. That is what we are looking for. That is the goal, that we are so in touch with God as we go through our conversion that we cannot help but praise Him all the time for all the wonderful things He does.

I mean, let us just look at that in Revelation 21. This is the goal we are all looking for. We will start in verse 1. John writes,

**Revelation 21:1-7** I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud shout from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, and there shall be no more pain, for the former things [the things in the early part of the Psalms, you might say] have passed away." Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful." And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son."

That is what He wants us to look forward to, to work toward as much as we can in this life to be one with Him, to understand that even though we still live in this world, that with Him we could have joy, that we can look beyond the circumstances of our lives and say, "I'm content because God is with me."

Now back to the lament psalms. The writers of these psalms of lamentation wrote them in a fairly dependable pattern that consists of five elements, and I will give those five elements to you.

The first one is that it begins with an invocation or a cry to God. And it is often accompanied by—as is normal in prayers—exalted titles for God. You know, God is my refuge, God is my strength, God is the Sovereign, God is my King, God is my God. And sometimes it incorporates in this invocation an element of petition. "I've got something to ask You. Hear my cry. God, bend Your ear to me," and that sort of thing.

The second element is that the psalmist voices the lament or the complaint, and it consists of a definition or a description of the crisis that he is going to write about. Usually the psalmist takes several verses to sketch a vivid picture of evildoers, and he lists their evil deeds that they have done against him.

The third element is that the psalmist makes a petition or a supplication asking God to do specific things to correct the crisis, to solve the crisis. Fourth, he makes a statement of confidence in God. And then fifth, he ends usually with a vow to praise God or he simply just praises God. But he ends up on a high note saying, "You're a wonderful God. You do all these wonderful things for us, and I'm going to trust in You."

So those five things again just quickly: First an invocation, then the lament or complaint. Then he makes a petition or a supplication. Fourth, he makes a statement of confidence in God, trust in God, and then fifth, he gives a vow or he praises God.

Now, you will not find all of these in this order in every psalm. But these five elements are usually there. They might be mixed up a little bit but they are generally there. Sometimes, depending on the crisis or depending on the format of the psalm or whatever, some of these will be repeated throughout. Sometimes the psalmist omits one because he does not think it is necessary, or sometimes he combines them together. But you will find these elements there. Generally they are present in each of the psalms of lamentation, and we are going to see one here.

Let us go to Psalm 64 as an example of this, and I will point these things out to you as we go through this. There are only 10 verses in this psalm. It is a good example of a lament. I could have flipped through the book of Psalms and gone like this because there are so many laments in here, but I chose 64. Let us just read it. See if you can pick them out as we go.

**Psalm 64:1-10** Hear my voice, O God, in my meditation; preserve my life from fear of the enemy. Hide me from the secret counsel of the wicked, from the insurrection of the workers of iniquity, who sharpen their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows—bitter words, that they may shoot in secret at the

blameless; suddenly they shoot at him and do not fear. They encourage themselves in an evil matter; they talk of laying snares secretly; they say, "Who will see them?" They devise iniquities: "We have perfected a shrewd scheme." Both the inward thought and the heart of man are deep. But God shall shoot at them with an arrow; suddenly they shall be wounded. So He will make them stumble over their own tongue; all who see them shall flee away. All men shall fear, and shall declare the work of God; for they shall wisely consider His doing. The righteous shall be glad in the Lord, and shall trust in Him. And all the upright in heart shall glory.

I think the elements here are pretty easy to spot. Of course, I was able to do this in my chair, in my office, and just do this like used to do poetry in my high school and college years, but I think it is pretty plain, and they are mostly in the right order.

The invocation, that is the first one. This is the first line. We would call it verse 1A, if you will. "Hear my voice, O God, in my meditation." He is invoking God's help. Hear my cry. Hear my voice. Hear my prayer.

Then we get to 1B through verse 2, and this is the lament. "Preserve my life from fear of the enemy. Hide me from the secret counsel of the wicked, from the insurrection or rebellion of the workers of iniquity." That is the problem. That is the trial he is going through. He wants help from God. He is lamenting their secret plots of the wicked and their rebellion. Evidently, this is a psalm of David. He was going through some internal rebellion and a whisper campaign or something like that against him. And so he is asking God to look on this matter. "I'm having trouble here at court. There are people who are shooting arrows, verbal arrows at me. They're getting together and they are talking about how they could depose me or whatever, undermine me." And that is his complaint. "God, how'd You let this happen? Why'd You let these people get around me and start making my life miserable?"

This also includes his supplication. Like I said, sometimes they smash these things together and do not make them all one after another. The supplication is here: Preserve my life. And also hide me. Preserve my life is the first thing he says after the invocation and then verse 2 starts with "Hide me from the

secret counsel of the wicked." So it states the problem, the thing that he is lamenting, and it also states what he wants God to do.

Let us go on to verses 3 through 6. This is probably the easiest one to spot of all. This is an extended description of the wickedness of his oppressors, of the rebels. You know, "they sharpen their tongue like a sword." How vivid is that? "And they bend their bows to shoot their arrows," but the arrows are bitter words against him.

And so he is describing his enemies here and letting God know how vile and terrible what they are doing is. He is making a case by describing what it is that these people are doing. They are sinning against me. They are rebelling. They are saying lies against me, and they are shooting them at me and trying to undermine me. Of course we know that David was chosen to be king by God and so this was actually, if you look at it, this was a rebellion against God and His anointed. And so he is letting God know in vivid language just what is going on here.

Verses 7 through verse 9. Now this is where he turns positive. These are confident statements that God will foil his enemy's stratagems. "God shall shoot at them with an arrow." He turns it around. They are shooting arrows, these words at David, but he says, God is going to go ahead and pull out His bow, and He is going to shoot arrows at them. He is going to give them exactly what they are giving me. And "they shall be wounded," he says. "So He will make them stumble over their own tongue." He was being slandered. It was a campaign against him by words in this particular case and he is saying, "I'm confident that God is going to turn those words right around on them and make them stumble, make them fall because of what they said that is untrue and rebellious."

And he also says here that when this becomes known, when this comes out, "all men shall fear." I think this has double entendre, if you want to use that term. The one meaning is that they will fear the king, fear rebelling and having this whisper campaign against the king, but they will also fear God behind David, and it says they "shall declare the work of God," that these people who fear will talk about it and make it known. He says, "for they

shall wisely consider His doing." They will look at, see what God did to back David up, and they will say, "Okay, we shouldn't do this." You do not get away with things when you go up against God's anointed.

Finally, we get to verse 10 and that is where we see the final element, the praise of God. And verse 10 is simply a quick word of praise for God's deliverance. "The righteous shall be glad in the Lord, and shall trust in Him. And all the upright in heart shall glory." A very positive statement to round out the lament, saying that this is going to work out for good for the righteous. And it is very interesting here that he ends with not necessarily that God will get the glory, but the upright in heart shall glory. And I think the meaning here is that they will praise God, but there is going to be a residual glory for them because they have remained faithful.

So one thing we can really see from just this one example is that psalms of lamentation usually proceed from woe, depression, anxiety, hopelessness to faith and praise, exaltation and wisdom. They, from the start to the end, turn over from negative to positive. And that is very instructive for us because it gives us hope, gives us a great deal of hope that even though things are really bad, that if we follow these things through and trust in God, then they are going to turn out for good. I mean, what does Romans 8:28 say? That all things work together for those who love God and are *the* called according to His purpose. So if you stick with it, if you trust in God, if you let Him act, remaining faithful, then things will turn out well. So we have this transformation in the lamentations from negativity to positivity.

Now, one author described this movement from negative to positive as a quest. And I think that is a very interesting way of thinking about it, that the psalms of lamentation describe a quest. The psalmist is baffled and stressed by a trial at the beginning and he uses the psalm to seek a solution to his unbearable problem. He is questing to find an answer, to find a way that the trial that he is going through can be overcome. And the solution is *always* trust in God. Sometimes you will not see that literally. It will not say trust God or it will not say have faith in God, but it will describe things like patience or endurance or maintaining one's righteousness or even be joyful or content. And that is where they usually end, with joy and contentment because one has persevered through the trial. And God has turned things around.

That is the typical lament in the Psalms.

Now we are going to go to an atypical lament. Go back 20 chapters to Psalm 44. If you want to follow along in your hymnal, this is pages 34 and 35. Dwight Armstrong split this psalm up into two of our hymns and I think you will recognize them as we go through. But we are looking at this one because it is not a typical psalm of lamentation. As a matter of fact, it is not a personal psalm of lamentation. It is a communal one. It is all of Israel is participating in this. And it was written, as far as we know, after a humiliating defeat in battle in David's time. We do not normally think that David lost battles, but this was a time when he probably did. It is just not mentioned in the Scripture. Israel may have suffered this defeat by the hands of the Edomites and the Syrians a short time before what is mentioned in the Bible, and that is David's overwhelming victory over them.

Let us go back to II Samuel 8, verses 13 and 14. Now this is what happened after the psalm was written as far as we know.

**II Samuel 8:13-14** David made himself a name when he returned from killing eighteen thousand Syrians in the Valley of Salt. He also put garrisons in Edom; throughout all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became David's servants. And the Lord preserved David wherever he went.

If we were going to do a chronological Bible, we would put Psalm 44 right before verse 13. Verses 13 and 14 show the aftermath of Psalm 44, of David's petition for all of Israel for help.

Let us go back to Psalm 44. What I am saying is the victory that we see in II Samuel 8:13-14 may have been God's answer to this prayer of lament in Psalm 44. So we have already seen that David's and Israel's faith was answered positively. But let us see how this worked in the psalm itself. The psalm has four sections. And I will just give them to you.

The first eight verses, 1 through 8, one section. Second section is 9 through 16. The third section is 17 through 22. And then the last section is 23 through 26. Each section describes a different attitude toward God among the people.

Alternatively, we can say that these four sections describe the process of the psalmist's thoughts as he thinks through the problem. I like the second one better, that these four sections are his thought process, his reasoning process as he is trying to determine why in the world they were defeated so badly in battle. And so he comes to a conclusion ultimately.

Now these four attitudes, or if we look at it in the second way, these four thoughts that he had are these. In the first section, 1) it is boasting of God's historical deliverance. Look back in history and see what God has done to save Israel. If you want a way to label this, it is speaking to God: You have helped us. Past tense, You *have* helped us. That is what he discusses or he thinks about in the first eight verses. Let us read them.

**Psalm 44:1-8** We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds You did in their days, in days of old: You drove out the nations with Your hand, but them You planted; You afflicted the peoples, and cast them out. For they did not gain possession of the land by their own sword, nor did their own arms save them; but it was Your right hand, Your arm, and the light of Your countenance because You favored them. You are my King, O God; command victories for Jacob. Through You we will push down our enemies; through Your name we will trample those who rise up against us. For I will not trust in my bow, nor shall my sword save me. But You have saved us from our enemies, and have put to shame those who hated us. In God we boast all day long, and praise Your name forever. Selah.

You see how this works here. He is talking about the past and what had happened in the past, what had been recorded in history. They knew that God had come to their aid because their fathers had faithfully taught them their history. This is commanded in Deuteronomy 6 and several other places where it says if your son asks you this, you tell him this sort of thing. In Deuteronomy 6 it is, you shall talk about these things all the day and let them know what I have done for you throughout the exodus and other times.

So the psalmist here acknowledges that Israel did not deserve any credit for any of the things that had happened in history, that it had been all God's doing. Whether it was victory over enemies or gaining the land, God had

done it all because He had favored them. That is what it says there at the end of verse 3. "It was Your right hand, Your arm, and the light of Your countenance because You favored them." He had done it through grace. He had done it through a covenantal favoritism because He had chosen them as His people, and they had agreed to be His people. And so He had done all those things for them. Simply, He had done those things because *He loved them*.

In verse 4 we see here that the psalmist or the people pledged their loyalty and asked for God to do as He had done before, to command victory. So His word would go out and His enemies—their enemies—would fall. That is what they were looking for. Give a decree and give them victory. And they go on to say here, as we get to the close of these first eight verses, that they will do as their fathers did and follow His lead. And He gets all the credit and glory. That is the first thing they are thinking here.

Let us go on to the second section. The second section from verses 9 through 16 is perplexity that God had not delivered them. If you want a phrase to stick on this, remember the first one for the first eight verses was, *You have helped us*. Well, this one on the second section is, *You are not helping us now*. And they are confused. Why? Why are You not helping us? Let us read this one, starting in verse 9.

**Psalm 44:9-16** But You have cast us off and put us to shame, You do not go out with our armies. You make us turn back from the enemy, and those who hate us have taken spoil for themselves. You have given us up like sheep intended for food, and have scattered us among the nations. You sell Your people for next to nothing, and are not enriched by their price. You make us a reproach to our neighbors, a scorn and a derision to those all around us. You make us a byword among the nations, a shaking of the head among the peoples. My dishonor is continually before me, and the shame of my face has covered me, because of the voice of him who reproaches and reviles, because of the enemy and the avenger.

So here in the second section, they change tack. The psalmist changes his approach. Why, God, are You not helping us? Why are You treating us differently than our fathers who trusted You? We trust You. Why are we

going through this? Our situation is dire. Look at all these things that have come against us. But You are not helping us. The whole paragraph is a description of how miserable their situation is.

They feel as if they fight alone. They actually say "You do not go out with our armies." That He is nowhere near. They flee from their enemies. Their enemies take spoils from them rather than they take spoils from their enemies. And it gets worse. They complain to God that He is selling them out for nothing. He is getting no return. Neighboring nations scorn them and think them weak and dishonorable. They feel reviled and shamed. The whole underlying tone here is that they are perplexed and confused. Why have You forsaken us? We do not get it. What have we done?

Let us go on to the next section. The third section is verses 17 through 22. And this section is *confidence that they had been faithful to God*. And the title we can put here is, *You should help us*. The first one was, You have helped us in the past. You are not helping us now, is the second section, and the third section is, You should help us. Now, let us read this, verse 17 through 22.

**Psalm 44:17-22** All this has come upon us; but we have not forgotten You, nor have we dealt falsely with Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from Your way; but You have severely broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death. If we had forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a foreign god, would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart. Yet for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

They are standing on their integrity here. They say, You should help us because we have been faithful. They assert that they have kept the covenant. They were not sinners. They were not idolaters, they said. They were still loyal to God despite the shame and the confusion, despite the defeat. And they challenge God. You know our hearts. You know we are true to You, yet we suffer and die. Why? The perplexity lingers in this section because what

is happening goes hard against their experience and understanding of how God works. They think God delivers the faithful. Why are we suffering defeat?

Let us go on to the fourth section. This is 23 through 26. And this is a section of *trust that God would ultimately give them victory*. And my little phrase for this one is, *You will help us*. So we had, You have helped us in the past. You are not helping us now. Third, You should help us. And fourth, You will help us. Let us read this one.

**Psalm 44:23-26** Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever. Why do You hide Your face, and forget our afflictions and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our body clings to the ground. Arise for our help, and redeem us for Your mercies' sake.

The gist is here: We have no idea what is going on. We do not understand, but we know God will deliver us sometime. It is a statement of raw faith despite the circumstances which point to continued pain and suffering. They do not see how it is going to end. They do not see how they are going to come out on top, but they know God is in heaven and He is watching them and watching the situation, and if they have to shout into the heavens to get His attention, they will. But they know that He is going to respond in time.

Even though it seemed like God was asleep, that He was not listening, they would plead for deliverance because they trust in God's mercy and God's perfect timing. They understood—David understood—that God was waiting for something, God was working something out. There was a time for deliverance and they had not gotten there yet. God does things perfectly in their time, as Ecclesiastes 3:11 says. So they have an attitude like Job here. Job says in Job 13:15, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." That is ultimate faith. Whatever God decides to do to me, I will still trust Him.

They were rattled, the Israelites were, and still confused because they could make no sense of the situation but they would trust Him to intervene when the time was right—or not!—for whatever His greater purpose was. They would trust Him, whatever the case.

That is how this psalm ends. The psalm ends positively like many of these do, even though it ends unresolved. We know from II Samuel 8 that it was resolved, but the psalm does not give us that clue. They did not know how it was going to end. And during a trial, we often do not know how God will save us or whether He will at all, whether He will intervene and give us some sort of relief.

What Psalm 44 does is provide us with a template for our thinking as we go through severe and as yet unresolved trials. Let me just give you four points, and we will close. This is the template that this psalm shows.

1. Consider what God has done in the past. What is His pattern? What does the Bible say that He does? Seeing what He has done should build our faith to say that if He works this way in the past, He is faithful and going to work the same way. He does not change, so we can trust in Him. That gives us faith.
2. Consider the present situation realistically like they did. "Look, God, You're not helping us." How bad is the situation really? Try to be objective here. Are we making a mountain out of a molehill? Or is it really as bad as we think? Are we just being sensitive? "Oh, my feelings are hurt." It could be that. Get over it. Are we letting our emotions cloud our perceptions? Take a realistic look at what is going on actually.
3. Consider our personal faithfulness. Has our sin caused this problem? You have got to ask that question. Are we truly faithful, or have we been slipping? We all have things to repent of. We all need to improve. So we have to consider our own part in all of this and make sure we repent and move forward doing what is right.
4. Consider our resolve to endure with God to the end. Are we willing to suffer more? Most of us would say, "No, I do not want to suffer," but maybe God's wisdom is on this that you need to suffer a little more for some reason. We do not have His wisdom to understand why He is putting us through this, but are you willing to suffer more?

Or maybe even worse, are you willing to take a no from God? Because sometimes He says no. We ask Him for healing or this or that or the other thing, and He says no, this would not be good for you. I have other plans. Are you willing to either suffer more or receive God's answer of no? Are you still going to be faithful to Him? Are you still going to hope in Him even though He says no?

I will quickly go through those four again. One, consider what God has done in the past. Two, consider the present situation realistically. Three, consider our personal faithfulness. And four, consider our resolve to endure with God to the end.

Let us finish in Lamentations 3, a good place to finish a sermon about psalms of lamentation. We will read verses 22 through 33 and then 40 and 41. This passage contains the author's advice to those who lament their present situation. And mostly his advice is about how a person should think about God and himself. Puts us in the right attitude in beginning to think through the situation that we are in.

**Lamentations 3:22-33** Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in Him!" [These are the right attitudes to have. Verse 25 begins the advice.] The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him. Let him put his mouth to the dust—there may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach, for the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.

**Lamentations 3:40-41** Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord; let us lift our hearts and hands to God in heaven.