



Sermon Transcript

January 3, 2021

Psalms of Encouragement

When Feeling Abandoned by God

Psalm 44

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 3, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Introduction

This past week, I stumbled upon an article that was talking about abandoned church buildings in the country of France. These abandoned churches are hundreds of years old and they range from small chapels to large ornate cathedrals. Some of these buildings have been abandoned for a long time, consequently, they have fallen under such disrepair that vegetation has sprouted up throughout these decaying buildings. One of these large abandoned cathedrals actually had a stream of water flowing through what once was a sanctuary. The article indicated that photographers flock to these long abandoned buildings, because admittedly, there is a certain beauty found in the mixture of these ornate buildings with various kinds of vegetation sprouting up from these abandoned buildings. And yet, as a person of the church, there is something profoundly sad about these pictures of abandoned church buildings. Aside from giving us a picture of the protracted dark spiritual landscape of Western Europe, it is a reminder to me that the life of a church is not found in a building. It is found in the people. When the people abandon the faith, the building naturally falls into disrepair.

Have you ever felt abandoned by God? It is an awful feeling. I can't think of a worse feeling than to feel as though God has abandoned you. It is a feeling that causes you to feel like your life resembles those abandoned church buildings. If God has "left the building", there is an inner anguish that wells up within us because our lives feel like they are quickly falling into disrepair. C. S. Lewis felt this sense of abandonment after his wife died of cancer. He sought comfort from God, but didn't feel as though God was even there when he cried out to God. Have you ever felt like that? Confused about God's seeming abandonment he cried out, "What can this mean? Why is God so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?"

Have you ever felt abandoned by God? It is not an uncommon feeling among people of faith. The reason I say that this feeling of abandonment by God is not an uncommon feeling is because it is a common expression in the Psalms. The Psalms are brutally honest. D.A. Carson says, "I find hope in the fact that there is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but a faith so robust it wrestles with God." Keep in mind, the Psalms are the original hymnbook of the church and over 40 of the 150 Psalms are these songs that give expression to our pain and our suffering. Bono, the lead singer for U2 was talking about the honesty of the Psalms with the pastor theologian Eugene Peterson and he wondered out loud, "why isn't church music more like that?" Have we ever sung a song on Sunday morning that issues our honest complaint that God seems absent to us?

When you feel abandoned by God, the Psalms are a good place to turn. They give expression to your pain and they help you put your trust in God even when God seems distant. So for the first four weeks of 2021, we are going to seek encouragement from God through the honest cries of the Psalms. This morning, I want to speak encouragement to the one who feels abandoned by God by looking at Psalm 44.

Psalm 44 is not a cry confined to an individual. It is a communal lament. The people, the nation, the congregation as a whole are crying out to God because they have been defeated by their enemy and they can't understand why. We will see in a moment that it was not because they have been unfaithful to God. Quite the contrary. They are basically throwing their hands up in the air and with a sense of bewilderment, they are saying to God, "we don't get it!" Which is another way of saying, "We don't get God." They are feeling abandoned by God because they are suffering for no apparent reason. And the other thing that makes this Psalm somewhat complicated is that unlike many other Psalms of lament, this Psalm doesn't come to any sense of resolution. Like a lot of our problems, the issue that is causing them to lament just seems to linger.

All that being said, there is encouragement to be found in this Psalm. I want to say from the outset, it is not my intention this morning to say more than what this Psalm says. In other words, I am not feeling the temptation to give as complete a picture as I possibly can for the reason behind the unexplained suffering we experience in life. I am more interested this morning in the unique contribution this Psalm gives to the person of faith who lives in the unresolved mess of life and at times just wonders where God is in all of it. What does this Psalm have to say to the person of faith who turns their bewildered gaze to heaven and is tempted to pray what we read in verse 23 of this Psalm, *"Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord?"* He goes on to ask God, *"Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?"*

Very simply, I want to walk through the four sections of this Psalm so you can hear the cry of these people of faith. And then, for your encouragement, I want to make three observations from this Psalm that I pray speaks comfort to the one who can't make sense of their suffering and is feeling like God has gone to sleep on them.

We Praise You All Day Long: A Prayer of Praise

What is interesting about this Psalm is that it begins with a word of praise and a confident trust in God. This congregation is a people with a deeply rooted faith that has been passed down to them through the passing generations. So they begin by rehearsing what God has done for them in past generations. They recall how God brought their ancestors into the promised land by his mighty hand. They sing . . .

¹ O God, we have heard with our ears, our fathers have told us, what deeds you performed
in their days, in the days of old:

² you with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted;
you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free;

³ for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm save them, but
your right hand and your arm, and the light of your face, for you delighted in them.

Recalling what God had done for their people in the past, this present congregation responds with their own expression of trust and faith in God. The faith of their fathers has become the faith of their generation. At the beginning of the year, I pick a word to frame my thoughts for the coming year. The other morning, I was in Psalm 145 and I sensed the Lord laying on my heart Psalm 145:4, “*Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts.*” In about a month I will become a grandfather and the word I chose for the coming year is *generation*. My role as a grandfather is to pray for that next generation of faith. It is a prayer for my family and my church family. Here in this Psalm we see another generation of faith rise up and give praise to God.

Keeping in mind that this is a song of the congregation, the leader begins with a word of praise and then the congregation follows. You can see the back and forth movement of the song between the leader and the congregation with the pronouns “my” and “our.” So the leader begins to sing . . .

Leader: ⁴ You are my King, O God; ordain salvation for Jacob!

Congregation: ⁵ Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down
those who rise up against us.

Leader: ⁶ For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.

Congregation: ⁷ But you have saved us from our foes and have put to shame those who
hate us.

All together: ⁸ In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name
forever. *Selah*

If the Psalm ended right here, it would be a wonderful expression of congregational praise to God for his work in the past and their trust in God in the present. Their faithfulness is expressed when they sing *“In God we have boasted continually.”* I am not sure why the ESV translates this word *continually*. Literally it is the phrase *all day long*. It is a phrase we will see at the end of section 2 and section 3 of this Psalm. But suffice it to say, this congregation is a congregation of strong faith. They testify of their undying faith by singing, *“In God we have boasted all day long, and we will give thanks to your name forever.”*

Then we find this word that we often encounter in the Psalms, *Selah*. Some think that this word is inviting us to simply pause and reflect. Others think it is a musical term that indicates an instrumental interlude. It is the guitar solo, or the change of key. If that is the case, it would be a good place for an interlude because the mood and the tone of this song is about to change rather dramatically. And one would think that the musical tune would change as well to reflect the move from praise to lament.

We Are Disgraced All Day Long: A Prayer of Lament

The cause for their lament is that they have been defeated by their enemy. We are not really sure what event this is alluding to in the life of Israel. Some have said that perhaps this is referring to the time when Jerusalem fell and was carried off into exile. The only problem with that is their exile to Babylon did not happen during a time of covenantal faithfulness to God. The prophets were pretty clear that the exile was easily explainable. They went into exile for their idolatry. But in this Psalm you have a faithful group of people—*“In God we have boasted all day long”*—and yet, they have suffered defeat of some kind at the hand of their enemy. Their suffering is unexplainable to them.

It is unexplainable to them because when their forefathers were about to go into the Promised Land they were told that if they are faithful to keep the covenant they had with God, God would bless them. But if they were unfaithful they were warned in Deuteronomy that they would be defeated by their enemies, they would become a byword among all the peoples and that they would experience ruin and destruction. These are the very things they lament over in this Psalm. This a lament over the unexplained suffering that happens to the faithful. The curses for breaking covenant with God is what they are currently experiencing even though they have been faithful. And so notice how they blame God by saying six times *“You have . . . “*

- ⁹ But you have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies.
¹⁰ You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have gotten spoil.
¹¹ You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations.
¹² You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.
¹³ You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around
us.
¹⁴ You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.
¹⁵ All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face
¹⁶ at the sound of the taunter and reviler, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

They truly feel abandoned by God because they can't make sense of their suffering. They are bewildered because their suffering doesn't fit their formula for life. I think we can relate to their cry because we are prone to want to give a reason for our suffering or even affix some kind of blame or purpose or cause for our suffering and our pain. When we can't explain our suffering, we often feel as though God is the cause for our pain or God has not come through for us as we think he ought to. At least, that is how we feel. These people of faith said that they felt God was treating them like sheep who have been set aside for slaughter. And so this congregation who has boasted in God *all day long* now find that their trouble and their shame is like a cloud that covers them *all day long*. Sometimes our pain and suffering hovers over us *all day long* and it clouds everywhere we go and it even casts a cloud over God and he seems covered or distant or asleep . . . and we feel abandoned.

We Suffer All Day Long: A Prayer of Protest

This congregation of faith isn't finished expressing their feelings towards God. If anything, their cry intensifies. Their cry moves from lament to protest. The word "protest" is a word that marked 2020. We saw quite a few protests taken to the street this past year. When protest spills out onto the street there is this collective cry over something that is not right. And so this congregation is "taking their protest to the street" and they are issuing their protest against God because they feel as though what is happening to them is not right. Listen to their protest.

- ¹⁷ All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you,
and we have not been false to your covenant
¹⁸ Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way;
¹⁹ yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of
death.

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

²¹ would not God discover this?

For he knows the secrets of the heart.

²² Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

I want to make a comment about verse 22, because I think how you interpret this verse will color how you see this Psalm of lament and how it encourages us to respond in our own suffering. This is also a verse that Paul quotes in Romans 8 that will help us at the end of the sermon find encouragement in our suffering. So the verse reads like this: *“Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”* The question we need to answer about this verse is whether or not this is a positive statement or a negative statement.

The common interpretation of this verse is that it is a positive statement. You might wonder, what could be positive about this statement? *“Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”* What it would be indicating is that the congregation is coming to terms with their suffering as the normal experience for those who follow God. In fact, their suffering is the suffering of persecution and so they have embraced that by saying, *“Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long.”* Clearly, we see this throughout the Scriptures. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake . . . Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

But I don't think that is the point here in this passage. It doesn't fit the context. The people are complaining about God's inaction and they are about to petition God to wake up and rouse himself to their concern. I think that this is an inspired honest complaint that many who have been bewildered by suffering have felt. And so this Psalm invites such an honest cry. God, we who praise you all the day long are being killed all the day long here! We don't get it! We can't find you right now! We are like sheep to be slaughtered! This Psalm is saying to us that this cry and this complaint is an acceptable cry from the one who is experiencing unexplainable suffering. It is an honest cry. God, I feel abandoned and my life is in disrepair.

We Turn To God: A Prayer of Petition

Out of this protest comes their prayer of petition. They feel like God is sleeping. Have you ever felt like that? They feel like God is hidden from them. Have you ever felt like that? They feel like they are forgotten. Have you ever felt like that? And so they turn in prayer and cry out for God to help them in their suffering.

²³ Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever!

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

²⁵ For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly clings to the ground.

²⁶ Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

It is interesting how this Psalm ends. There is no ‘aha’ moment that puts everything into perspective. This Psalm does not end with a nice tidy bow that puts everything back together for us. There is no pretty resolution awaiting us at the end. It leaves us pondering God’s “unknown tracks” in the midst of our distress. But the last line does give us something to fall back on. *“Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.”* What we can’t explain requires us to rest in the promise of God’s love. That is often where Psalms of lament take us.

Three Words of Encouragement

What encouragement can I offer you from this Psalm, especially if you are feeling abandoned by God.

Our Suffering is not faith’s final word. We may feel like God is asleep, but we know that God does not slumber, nor does he sleep. We know that in our heads, even though our hearts are not feeling it. I can’t lose sight of the fact that this communal lament begins with communal praise for God. There is something about the way that this Psalm is constructed that brings me peace even when I feel abandoned and lost to God.

There is a beautiful symmetry to this Psalm that brings me a sense of calm and peace. It is a symmetry that speaks to the idea that when the reason for my suffering is unexplainable, there is still order to life and God is at work. You can’t really see the symmetry in the English text. But it is pretty clear in the original Hebrew.

The first section, the prayer of praise, is made up of ten lines. I have tried to capture

this in the way I laid it out in the sermon transcript. Even these ten lines are divided into two even sections of five lines each.. The first five lines recall what God did for them in the past. The next five lines rehearse their present faith and trust in God. The second section, the prayer of lament is made up of eight lines. Then the prayer of protest is six lines, followed by the prayer of petition with four lines. It looks kind of like a pyramid made out of Legos, or a an Old Testament ziggurat. Ten lines, followed by eight lines, followed by six lines and then four lines. This controlled construction of lament and protest has order to it. I found that comforting for the one who feels like life is out of order. It reminds me that unexplained suffering that seems out of order is not the final word here and that at the base of my lament is still a confident trust in God even when I can't explain it and when God seems absent.

It is OK to protest. I mentioned that Psalm 44:22 is quoted by Paul in Romans 8:36. It is a passage that many consider to be one of Paul's finest.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall tribulation or distress, or persecution or famine,
or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

These are a list of common ways we suffer in this fallen world. Earlier, in Romans 8, Paul indicates that along with creation we groan. And sometimes our groanings are so intense we can't put words to them. When that happens, the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. And so to illustrate what Paul is saying here, he pulls from our Psalm this morning and says . . .

³⁶ As it is written,
For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Admittedly, I have often been perplexed by this verse and what it is saying. But now I have come to see that we are invited, as the Psalms do, to give voice—even protest—to the sufferings that are often unexplained. This helps us to come around those who are suffering and to cry with those who cry. It tells me that I don't have to embrace a stoic faith that doesn't feel the ache and the pain of suffering and nor do I need to give a an answer or a reason for such pain. Sometimes we feel that we need to give an answer to people in their grief and often that answer can make things worse. What most people need is a person of faith to cry with them and to acknowledge through shared groaning that this is not the way it is supposed to be. But then like the Psalm

ends, to remind ourselves of God's *steadfast love*. Or as Paul puts it . . .

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus knows: When I read Psalm 44, I can't help but see Jesus in it. Two times in this Psalm, the people express how they feel. They feel like they are "sheep to be slaughtered." I can't read that without seeing Isaiah 53:7 and this wonderful description of the coming work of Jesus.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and he was afflicted,
Yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

Jesus know what it is like to feel abandoned. He too was like a lamb led to the slaughter. He died on the cross for our sin and through his resurrection he conquered sin and death. This assures us that our cry and protest of lament is not the final word. In fact, as Paul says in Romans 8, all these things is working together for our good. It is kind of like those abandoned buildings that are drawing photographers to them to capture the unlikely beauty of the vegetation emerging from the decaying buildings. God is working something good through our suffering and our groanings. Through our prayer of protest and our cries of lament, we are expressing our faith and trust in God because we long for the day when every tear will be wiped away and everything will be made new.

Conclusion

Do you feel like God has abandoned you? Is there some unexplained suffering in your life that is making you feel like God has gone asleep on you? It is ok to give voice to that pain. To express, in protest, along with all creation that there is something that is not right with the pain of this broken world. And as you do, you will find the gentle and loving care of God who hears your cry and has done something about it. Jesus has extended his eternal love to us if we turn in repentant faith to him and nothing will separate us from that love.

