

*Introduction:* The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America is a **JOKE!** Not, I hope to you, at least to some of you, but to other evangelical churches, perhaps to some Reformed and Presbyterian churches, and certainly to our contemporary society we are a joke. Like the ridicule cast at the nation of Israel here in Psalm 44, summarized by the sons of Korah, so little good is thought about the RPCNA by our neighbors. With heavenly wisdom, the sons of Korah did not begin a public relations campaign to better their image. They understood that their principle obstacle was not men, but the LORD God. He, apparently, was hiding. But why? What should you do, no, must you do, when God hides?

*Context:* Since we lack a revised Psalter in the NT, it therefore is to be received as adequate for the NT age, and as expressive of the OT and NT ages. While our citizenship in the kingdom of God is surely with greater privilege yet it is not consummated and the continuity and similarity between covenant ages remains.

*Contrast:* The charismatic movement illustrates the childish impatience of the church in childish tantrums and childish speech. The pragmatic orientation of the contemporary church emphasizes methodology as if strategy, programs, and attractions will maintain the church. Dominant around us in churches is the variety packages of self-expression and the abandonment of the doctrines of the psalms with the replacement of the sentiment of hymns. We are in contrast to the organized informality and entertainment oriented presentations by our simple, Bible-centered worship.

*Caption:* Psalm 44 is placed in the second book of the Psalter (Psa. 42-72). That suggests a date that precedes the Maccabean era of Antiochus, the pre-exile period of Hezekiah, and the Davidic period. This psalm assumes that God is not slack concerning His promises. The song is crafted for the voices of those saved by grace – the sons of Korah – who were spared their father’s punishment for rebellion when the earth swallowed Korah alive (Num. 16:32). To them and to all others, this psalm is full of teaching, hence the title Maschil ( translates as “contemplation”). Matthew Henry notes, “Some observe that most of the psalms that are entitled *Maschil* – *psalms of instruction*, are sorrowful psalms; for afflictions give instructions, and sorrow of spirit opens the ear to them.”

*Content:* Psalm 44 is a great meditation of the people of God on the question, “Why do the righteous suffer?” It begins with a celebration of the goodness of God in the past, moves to a bewilderment of the affliction in the present, and concludes with a petition for relief in the future. Our outline is:

- A. Recall God’s preserving distinction in the past (44:1-8)
- B. Restate God’s perplexing distance in the present (44:9-22)
- C. Request God’s powerful deliverance in the future (44:23-26)

#### **A. RECALL GOD’S PRESERVING DISTINCTION IN THE PAST (44:1-8)**

*Redemptive glories:* The psalmist recalls the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua. The Bible’s message is rooted in history (vs. 1-2). O. Palmer Roberts notes that this is the same way that we are to have our faith strengthen. He writes, “Faith in the future must be awakened on the basis of God’s great works in the past.” The psalmist learned about salvation by sovereign grace alone (vs. 3). The psalmist resolves to rely on God alone (vs. 4-7). William Plummer comments, “Every genuine child of God achieves victories more worthy of celebration than those of David when he defeated the lion, the bear, and the giant.” The psalmist resolves that God must receive all the glory (vs. 8).

Notice something else in verse 1. The works and the victories of God were told to him. He says, "Our fathers told us." The past victories of God that come to mind were told to him by a former generation. Their faith in God was the result of their spiritual fathers and mothers speaking to them and passing on the redemptive history of God. Be careful as you live in the present, as if the past doesn't matter, as if the testimony of our spiritual fathers and mothers doesn't make any difference. Don't despise or minimize what your parents teach you.

Verse 3 tells us, "For they did not gain possession of the land by their own sword, Nor did their own arm save them." It's very clear that the Lord has done these things in the past, these glorious works of redemption. They did not do it. It is not their strength, sword, or might. God accomplished it. What the psalmist was trying to remember in the midst of the hardship, is the great God who has done these great acts all throughout history.

*Historic glories:* As we review biblical history and later church history we should praise the Lord for the regular flowing of the Spirit as He causes the quiet, usual, one-at-a-time conversions, and well as the momentous flooding of the Spirit causing the climatic, unusual, sweeping conversions of multitudes.

The Church of Scotland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century has been singular among the churches. In other nations, the Lord thought it enough to convert a few in a city, village, or family to Himself, leaving the greater part in darkness, as it was in France and Poland; or the magistrates and a greater part of the people, as it was in Germany, Holland, and England. In Scotland, the whole nation was converted. Within ten years after popery was discharged in Scotland, there were not ten persons of quality to be found who did not profess the true reformed religion, and sealed it in *The Solemn League and Covenant* of 1643.

However, there is a mystery in God dealing with humanity. A brief survey of history shows this. One of the great centers of Christianity in the ancient world is the country we know as Turkey. Today, there are hardly any Christians. Is it because those people were so faithless, or is there some mystery that we do not understand? For a time in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, millions were drawn to the reformation in France. After only a few decades the French Reformed Church began to fade, not because of some sin, but because of some mystery in the divine administration of providence. The church in Scotland was so powerful in its witness in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was renewed in vigor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but today is impoverished and weakened.

Look at the church in America with such remarkable roots and evidence of blessing. Today, our compromise of doctrine and holiness is perhaps evidence that we are being abandoned by the Spirit of God. However, there are congregations with people who love the Lord. There are pastors who are faithful to the Word, and yet those congregations seem only to shrink. Some congregations seem to be doing well but are visited by afflictions. Sometimes the most faithful are the most afflicted. For example, there was an OPC pastor [Charles McIlhenny] in San Francisco who took a public stand against homosexuality. For two years, every day he received phone calls with death threats. Recall God's preserving distinction in the past.

#### **B. RESTATE GOD'S PERPLEXING DISTANCE IN THE PRESENT (44:9-22)**

*The suffering of the innocent* (vs. 9-16). What it is NOT is a lack of marketing strategies, and demographic studies. It is NOT a lack of revitalization committees, five-year plans, and

specialized recruiters. Rather it is God withholding His blessing. They are defeated, routed, spoiled, slaughtered, enslaved. The psalmist laments, “I do not understand what is happening. What I have heard how You delivered in the past is not what I am experiencing in the present. I’m experiencing defeat and misery. I don’t know how to make sense of this.” The psalmist makes six lament that he organizes in three couplets.

The first lament (vs. 9-10) grieves over the military defeat. He says, “You haven’t gone out with our armies. The enemy has gotten spoils from us. We have been slaughtered like sheep.”

The second lament (vs. 11-12) mourns that they have been dispatched. They have been slaughtered. They have been taken away as prisoners. He says, “You sold us for a trifle. You sold us for a few dollars. We seem to have no value to you, O God.” John Calvin writes, “If, therefore, we would expect a remedy from God for our miseries, we must believe that they befall us not by fortune or mere chance, but that they are inflicted upon us properly by his hand.”

The third couplet (vs. 13-16) laments the disgrace and shame heaped on God’s people, “Look what they have done. The people have made us objects of ridicule and scorn. We are a joke. They are laughing at us. We feel humiliated, disgraced, and covered with shame.” What he is saying is, “We understand that You are powerful, that You are a redeeming God, that You are a God who has provided for Your people throughout generations. But look at what is happening now. There seems to be a contradiction.” Even so, in your faith and in my faith, sometimes our creed collides with our experience. How should we respond? (See *Applications*)

*The innocence of the sufferers* (vs. 17-22). The psalmist claims to be innocence (vs. 17-18). This is not a claim to be sinless. Rather his generation was practicing true religion. They did not serve idols, but were faithful to the covenant with God. John Calvin comments, “It is, however, to be observed, that the faithful, although in their adversities they do not perceive any obvious reason for being so dealt with, yet they rest assured of this, and regard it as a fixed principle, that God has some good reasons for treating them so severely.”

The psalmist supports this claim of innocence by noting that God has not denounced them for sin (vs. 20-22). There is no apparent reason that we can discern for this suffering that we are experiencing. The psalmist asserts, “We have been faithful to the covenant, God. You have not brought blessing, but you have brought this disaster.” Restate God’s perplexing distance in the present.

### C. REQUEST GOD’S POWERFUL DELIVERANCE IN THE FUTURE (44:23-26)

*The appearance:* The psalmist is asking, “What is going on here? You said that if we were faithful to your covenant that You would bless us. If we were faithless to Your covenant that You would curse us. But we have been faithful, and yet have been cursed.”

Our inclination is to explain to this people that they had not been as faithful as they thought they had been. They are not suffering for righteousness. They are suffering for their sin. However, these people have been faithful to God’s covenant and yet are cursed.

The psalmist cries in verse 23, “Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord?” One impressive feature about the Psalter is the boldness with which prayers are offered to the Lord. The psalmist is saying that the Lord is in danger of becoming like Baal. Baal’s prophets prayed to

him to answer by fire on the sacrifice they prepared at Mount Carmel. They were taunted by the prophet Elijah who suggested that Baal might be busy, or on a journey, or sleeping, and must be awakened (1Ki. 18:27). Is the living God asleep? Psalm 121:4 asserts, “Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” The frustration of the people of God is so intense that they do not understand how being faithful they are apparently abandoned by God. This is an intense representation of the mystery of divine providence in history. There are times that we suffer even though we are righteous.

The Pharisees did not believe that. Whenever they saw someone suffering – cripple, lame, blind, deaf, diseased – they muttered to themselves, “Praise be to God who is a reliable judge.” They thought that sin brought sickness. But that is not the full revelation of Scripture. It is a mystery that even the righteous suffer.

*The reality:* Psalm 44 makes three important points about providence, progress, and purpose.

**First** – providence – the psalmist ascribes his situation to God. All events come from God. The psalmist refutes two false ways of trying to preserve God from blame for the suffering of the innocent. One approach is by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner asserts that God is not able to control all of life. God is not the cause of our troubles. God lacks power. A second approach is by evangelical Christians who promote “open theism.” What God lacks is not power but knowledge. God does not know the future because the future is caused by our free will choices. Since our free will has not yet caused the future, God cannot know the future. God is not responsible for what happens, because God does not know the future.

James Boice answers, “Although it makes the situation puzzling, the realization that God is in control is still both the proper way to approach our problems and the only possible way to find the solution to them. The secularist has nowhere to turn. Not only does he not have an answer, he does not have a way of finding one.” The first point is all events come from God. Providence.

**Second** – progress – the psalmist asserts that suffering is not always punishment for sin. God does chastise His people for their sin. If that is your situation, you know for what you are being punished. Remember, all sin deserves God’s just wrath. The real mystery is NOT why the holy God allows us to suffer, BUT why do good things happen to bad people? The question we ought to ask is, “How may I use this suffering to bring glory to God?” God may use suffering to strengthen your faith or to bring others to saving faith.

A pastor visited a young mother in the hospital, who had two young children, but she was dying of cancer. She was full of faith. She died bravely. Afterward, someone said to him, “I suppose you told her that God gave her that cancer.” He replied, “No, that is not what I said. But I will tell you what she said to me. She said that she could not have faced this ordeal if she did not know it came from the hand of God and served some purpose.” The way we react to providence affects those around us. It is a remarkable life that can say that this suffering comes from my kind Father. When the young mother died, there were many in the hospital who said, “We have never seen such a death.” What courage. What faith. What glory to Christ in such living and dying. The second point is the good that God is doing in your suffering. Progress.

**Third** – purpose – the psalmist testifies that our suffering is for God’s sake. The

psalmist's life was shaped by God's will and for God's sake. In Romans 8, Paul addresses the persecution of Christians. Paul cites Psalm 44:22, "For Your sake we are being killed all the day long" (Rom. 8:36). God has ordained us to join Christ in suffering. We are drawn closer to Christ by suffering with Him and for His gospel. The third point is that suffering is for God's sake. Purpose.

Psalm 44 also shows us three ways in which we conquer while we suffer with Christ and for His sake. First, like the psalmist, we are to call upon the Lord in prayer for deliverance. John Calvin writes, "Let us then bear in mind, that it is a true test of our piety, when, being plunged into the lowest depths of disasters, we lift up our eyes, our hopes, and our prayers, to God alone." The Lord is with you even when you do not feel His intimate presence. Second, we conquer in afflictions by holding firm our faith, being loyal to God. Third, we conquer by prizing Jesus Himself above all the pleasures and treasures of the world. Knowing Jesus as your Savior is more than enough to conquer. Request God's powerful deliverance in the future.

*Applications:* When God hides, and when you suffer righteously, here are five exhortations that outline a godly response. Maybe one of these will quiet your thoughts and stimulate you to trust your kind and wise heavenly Father.

**1. Live by your duties.** When your world is falling apart, remember that the events are God's, duties are yours. In an event, God is doing many things for many people (Gen. 50:20). Identify your place and duty.

**2. Learn to be patient.** John Flavel wrote, "The providences and purposes of God are usually like Hebrew words. They can only be read backwards. Wait for God to finish the sentence." When darkness envelops you, wait to witness what God will do next.

**3. List God's past graces.**

Lamentations 3:19-24 = Remember my affliction and roaming, The wormwood and the gall. My soul still remembers And sinks within me. This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. 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 hope in Him!"

Hebrews 10:32-34 = But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.

**4. Lift up your heart to God in prayer.** Recall the advice of John Calvin, "Let us then bear in mind, that it is a true test of our piety, when, being plunged into the lowest depths of disasters, we lift up our eyes, our hopes, and our prayers, to God alone."

**5. Lean on God's promises.**

Deuteronomy 31:6 = Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.

Isaiah 41:10 = Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will

strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.

Hebrews 13:5 = Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Live by your duties. Learn to be patient. List God's past graces. Lift up your heart to God in prayer. Lean on God's promises.

*Conclusion:* We are inclined to wonder about providence when we suffer as righteous people. The answer is found in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who was truly righteous suffered. He suffered a judgment that was not His. He suffered willingly and freely that He might redeem His covenant people. The attitude in Christ was that He was willing to embrace suffering as One righteous for the sake of God's great plan of redemption. We are not redeemers in the way that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer. But our suffering in this world of misery is a suffering in which the gospel continues to be preached and to gather the elect into the church. The day that our suffering ends is the day that the preaching of the gospel ends, and our Savior returns to restore the heavens and the earth. That day the saved and lost are separated. Our suffering is redemptive, NOT to propitiate the wrath of God, BUT to participate in the plan of God as He saves His own.

If you are suffering, if there is a mystery why the righteous seem so afflicted, remember Peter's exhortation: 1 Peter 4:12-13, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy."

The mystery of God's providence requires us to live by faith and not by sight. We must trust the purpose of God even if we do not understand it. Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts." God exercises His sovereignty over the church by saying, "Trust Me! Rely upon Me!" In our experience, there are not many who can be trusted. Politicians cannot be trusted. Too often, Christian friends cannot be trusted. Life is full of disappointments from broken trust. But Jesus Christ says to us, "You can trust Me! You can rely on Me!"

The pattern in Scripture is that in times of difficulty remember what God has done for you. Notice the opening verses of Psalm 44. The psalmist recalls "the days of old." Remember what God has always done for His people. We strengthen trust by remembering what Jesus Christ has done by His obedient life, accursed death, triumphant resurrection, and glorious ascension. We cultivate trust by looking back and by looking forward. Psalm 44 is marked by hope. God, who has saved us in the past, will save us in the days to come. John Calvin recommended meditating on the future life. Take time to think about heaven. Think about the new heaven and the new earth. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." In 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 he writes, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

When we remember the past and hope in the future, then we can trust in the present even when we do not understand the mystery of His sovereignty. We can rely upon Him. We can

trust that our good and gracious Sovereign will do all things well for His people.

Psalm 44 is descriptive of the current church ridiculed by contemporary society as a joke. Psalm 44 is prayed and sung in all sincerity by those who would be Reformed and Presbyterian when God hides.

*Prayer:* All wise and merciful Father, prepare us for the blessings You intend. Deliver us from the cursings we deserve. Lord, remind us no matter what situation we find ourselves in – if today we are not experiencing affliction, it may be in the days to come – remind us that You are faithful. You are good. You are loving. You are wise. You are for us. Help us to hear the sound of the gospel in the valley of despair. In Jesus' name and for His sake, Amen.

*Resources:*

Sinclair Ferguson, **Doubting Castle**, *Defending the Faith in a Faithless World: 1995 National Conference*, [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org)

W. Robert Godfrey, **5. The Sheep of His Pasture: God's Sovereignty Over the Church**, *The Sovereignty of God: 1996 National Conference*, [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org)

W. Robert Godfrey, **4. Providence and Evil/Suffering**, *The Invisible Hand: 2004 San Diego Conference*, [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org)

Tito Padilla, **Perplexing Providences**, Psalm 44, 10/10/2021, Columbia Presbyterian Church, Columbia, MD, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)

Richard Phillips, **Conquering Lambs**, Psalm 44, 11/14/2010, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com)

Chuck & Donna McIlhenny, **When the Wicked Seize a City** (iUniverse, Inc., 2000)

A highly publicized lawsuit .. a house firebombed in the night ... the shatter of windows smashed by politically (and wickedly) motivated vandals cuts into the night ...

All because Chuck McIlhenny voiced God's condemnation of a behavior and life-style and protested the destruction of society that results from its practice. That behavior is homosexuality, and that life-style is the gay culture. He was subsequently hounded and terrorized in his own town.

This book explores the rise of gay power and what it will mean if Christians do not organize and prepare for the battle.

*Psalter selections:* 43, 44A,44E, 44F [BPS]; 43B, 44A, 44B, 44C [BSW]