In this lecture we will seek to expound a national lament psalm, Psalm 44. It was handed over to the chief musicians and it belongs to the sons of Korah. It’s a maschil. The exposition of this national lament psalm will become clear if we employ it to answer the theological question, “Why do good people suffer?”

Now that question is a universal question. From the spank of the doctor when we draw our first breath of air to our closing gasp upon earth, man experiences pain. And wherever man has gone on this wide earth, tears have been shed and hearts have been broken. I suspect it’s because this experience of pain and suffering is universal that God set His classical example of suffering Job beyond the limits of Israel in the unidentified land of Uz. And by so much we can all identify with that classical example of suffering. And man has unvariably asked the question, Why, why do people suffer. What place is suffering designed to fill in God’s universe.

Now we are obviously dealing with an immense theological question. And in order to narrow our question, at the outset we ought to recognize that there are two types of suffering. There are deserved sufferings and there are undeserved sufferings. By deserved sufferings I mean those pains which we experience because we have violated some law. If for example we violate the law of the state by exceeding the speed limit, we will experience the mental anguish perhaps at seeing flashing red lights in our rearview mirrors, and we will feel the financial pinch of losing $10 or $15. If we disregard the law of gravity by stepping off a ten story building, we will experience pain. If we violate the laws of health in our youth, in due process of time we shall reap the consequences in our bodies. If we violate God’s moral law, He assures us that in due course we will experience the pain of eternal separation from Him. Of course, we have all violated that law and hence we have the need of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has placated God’s wrath against sin. But for most of us, deserved sufferings are not our problem. We understand the principle of retribution. Our problem...
centers more in the area of undeserved sufferings, those pains which we experience when to our knowledge we have violated no law of heaven and no law of earth. And it’s to that question that I wish to address Psalm 44.

Now in order to make this problem of undeserved sufferings more acute, I think it will be helpful to recognize that there are two types of people who experience undeserved pains. There are good people and there are innocent people. By innocent I mean those who are not consciously involved in doing God’s will. They are passive. For example, a child playing under a tree being struck by a bolt of lightening with all the consequent pain is an example of an innocent person experiencing undeserved pain. By good, I mean one who is consciously involved in doing God’s will. And precisely because he is seeking to do God’s will, he is experiencing pain. To me this is the exact antithesis of deserved sufferings. If deserved sufferings are those pains which we experience because we have violated some law or principle of God’s word, and undeserved suffering are those pains which we experience when we have not violated God’s law, then that problem becomes most acute in the case of a good person who is deliberately seeking to establish God’s word and do His will; but in payment he experiences pain instead of benevolent reward. It seems to me if we can understand the concept of why good people suffer, we can understand all shades of undeserved sufferings.

Psalm 44 is an example of a good person or good people suffering as we have defined it. Precisely because they are seeking to do God’s will, we find them in a lamentable state. Some idea of the nature of their condition can be seen in verse 22, in the famous verse that Paul quotes in Romans chapter 8. They say, “Yea for thy sake are we killed all the day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.” As the exegesis of the psalm will indicate, the army of Israel has gone out to do holy war in accordance with the injunction of Deuteronomy chapter 20, but instead of achieving a brilliant military victory, they have gone down in humiliating defeat in some unnamed battle field. And having experienced that devastating, humiliating defeat, they returned to the temple at Jerusalem and they pour out this lament before Yahweh.

Now, I think it will do well for us before we look at the actual contents of the psalm to say a word about its structure for it will help us to understand the message of the psalm. Psalm 44 is carefully contrived. It has the usual embroidery effect of most of the psalms. It is built in a very conscious structure, namely
as Ridderbos at Free University Amsterdam points out, it is constructed in its thought patterns like a ziggurat. A ziggurat is a man made mountain of the ancient Near East in the form of a step pyramid in order to bring the worshipers and prayers closer to the deities. Psalm 44 is in the form of one of these step pyramids; that is, it begins with ten lines of poetry in the first eight verses. Normally, the Hebrew line divisions correspond with our verse divisions; but in these first eight verses, there are two cases where there are two lines of Hebrew poetry for one verse; namely in verses 1 and 3 there are two lines of Hebrew poetry hence in the first eight verses there are ten lines of poetry. From hereon in, the verse divisions correspond with the Hebrew poetic line divisions. After the first thought unit of ten lines, there now follows a unit of eight lines, verses 9 through 16. And then a unit of six lines, verses 17 through 22. And finally a unit of four lines, verses 23 through 26. Hence, in its thought analysis, we find ten lines, eight lines, six lines, four lines. And interestingly enough, in this lament psalm the petition section is in those last four lines where the worshiper is closest to God, as it were. Moreover, as we shall see as we analyze the psalm in its content, the ten lines break apart into a five and a five. The first unit has five and five in its hymn. Then the eight lines break apart into a four and four, and those in turn into twos and twos. The six probably breaks apart into a three and a three. And the last four lines also break apart into equal divisions of two and two.

Now with that background concerning the structure of the psalm, let us look at the content of the psalm itself. In the first ten lines, we have a hymn of confidence as you’re aware in a lament psalm. And so we would normally expect to find a confidence motif in the psalm. This hymn of confidence falls into two equal parts. In the first part they find their confidence in God’s past victories through the armies of Israel. In particular, they recall God’s faithfulness to the armies of Joshua at the time of the conquest. And the thought is that since God gave them victory in the days of Joshua, this memory serves as a handmaiden to their faith in their present distress, as they know they will go out to battle once again. It is interesting to note that this psalm must have been written while the kingdom was still in existence, that is while Israel still had an army. That is, it must have been written before 600 B.C. And yet already at that early time the people of God were recalling the book of Joshua to bolster their faith. We in the church living 2,500 years later, are still appealing to the same inspired literature in order to bolster our faith as we seek to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Let us read then the first three lines where they find their faith
encouraged and bolstered by recalling God’s past faithfulness to the armies at the time of the conquest. They say, verse 1, “We have heard with our ears, O God. Our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in those times of old; how thou didst drive out the heathen, the goyim, the nations with thy hand, and plantest them;” That is, having dispelled, disinherited the Canaanites, God planted the fathers in Israel as a fruitful vine in the land. It started as a little tender plant that was to overspread all the mountains of Israel. “How thou didst afflict the people,” referring to the Canaanites. And now this should be translated instead of “and cast them out” rather the š-lak here should be, “And you spread them out.” That is, you spread out the fathers as this fruitful vine over the land. And how did they do it? Verse 3, Joshua and his armies got not the land in possession by their own sword. This clearly attested at Jericho for example. “Neither did their own arm save them, but your right hand and your arm and the light of your countenance because thou hast a favor unto them.

Now having found their faith and courage by recalling God’s past faithfulness to the armies of Israel, the king, probably, on behalf of the people expresses his confidence in God in the next five lines, in verses 4 through 8. “Thou art my King, O God. Command deliverances for Jacob. Through thee will we push down our enemies; through thy name will we tread them under who riseth against us. For I will not trust in my bone, neither shall my sword save me. (And now with the perfect of confidence) But thou hast saved us from our enemies, and has put them to shame who hated us. In God will we boast all the day long, and praise thy name forever. Selah .”

But now the voice of faith, the voice of confidence shifts to the voice of sight in the lament section of the psalm. In the first four lines of this eight line section, they describe their defeat on this unnamed battlefield. In verses 9 and 10, they state their defeat in bald, literal terms. But then in the next two lines they use figurative language to show the extent, the devastation of that defeat. First of all, then, in verses 9 and 10, they state it literally: “But thou hast cast us off, put us to shame, and went not forth with our armies. Thou made us turn back from the enemy; and they who hate us took spoil for themselves. (And now figuratively) Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for food,” that is, our armies were like a herd of sheep, a flock of sheep, going to the shambles, the slaughter house, the butcher shop, “and thou hast scattered us among the nations. Thou sellest thy people for nothing and
dost not increase thy wealth by their price.” That is, you gave away your armies for nothing in the sense that we got none of the enemy in exchange. We lost our thousands and we killed none of the enemy. This was the six day war in reverse. Whereas in the six day war, the army of Israel killed its 35,000 and lost by body count 679 men. In this war, Israel lost the thousands and got none of the enemy. And consider again that in the six day war it was not the theocratic nation going out to battle, but back here it was God’s picked, chosen, elect theocratic army doing battle that went down in that humiliating defeat.

Now he shows his contumely, his shame, and he describes in the next two lines how the enemy nations are poking fun of them and ridiculing this army of God. Verse 13, “Thou makest us a reproach to our neighbors, a scorn and a derision to those who are round about us. Thou makest us a byword among the nations, a shaking of the head among the peoples.” Just as after the six day war the newspapers and the news media poked fun at the armies of Egypt, so also after this war, Yahweh’s army became a laughing stock, the butt of jokes, the analogy for a poor army. Now the king expresses his confusion. “My confusion is continually before me, and the shame of my face hath covered me, for the voice of him who reproacheth and blasphemeth, by reason of the enemy and the avenger.”

And now having given us his lament, in verses 17 through 22 we hear the protest, namely: this is undeserved suffering. They have violated no law, but instead they have been seeking to do God’s will. Verse 17, “All this is come upon us, yet have we not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant. Our heart is not turned back, neither have our steps declined from thy way, though thou hast severely broken us in the place of jackals.” The “though” there might better be translated “but thou hast severely broken us in the place of jackals and covered us over with the shadow of death.” “If we had forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange God, would not God search this out? For He knoweth the secrets of the heart.” In other words, if this was deserved sufferings because we had violated some law, would not God have revealed that to them through a prophet as He did in the days of Joshua in the case of Achan. Recall how after they had gone up to Ai and had gone down in that humiliating defeat before the inhabitants of Ai, Joshua prostrated himself on the ground and poured out a lament like this. And then God said to Joshua, “Get up off your face, there is sin in the camp.” And as it turned out, one of the soldiers, Achan, had violated God’s law not
to touch of that which was banned and devoted to destruction. But in this case there is no reproach. The prophet is silent. God does not condemn the people. They have not gone down in defeat because they have violated some law. No, they say, verse 22, “Yea for thy sake are we killed all the day long, we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.” As you know, this is exactly Paul’s word to describe his experience as an apostle. Going out in this world to do God’s will, he has gone down with shame and shipwreck and beatings and pain.

Now in verses 23 through 26, we hear the petition. “Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord. Arise! cast us not off forever! Wherefore hidest thou thy face? And .forget test our affliction and our oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly cleaveth unto the earth. Arise for our help! And redeem us for thy mercy sake.” Do you see why they are suffering? It’s here in the petition. Why do you sleep, O Lord? Wherefore hidest thou thy face?” Do you see the answer? This inspired poet does not know. He says, “Why, Wherefore” and in the psalm we are given no answer and that is the way it is in light as the wise men of Israel clearly recognized it.

It is futile to try to understand the why’s and the mysteries of life as to why good people suffer. It is even as the writer of Ecclesiastes expressed it in Ecclesiastes 3:11, “He hath made everything beautiful in its time; also God had set the eternity, (looking to see the whole thing) in the heart of man, but He has so made it that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” If one reads Ecclesiastes closely, he will find that theme running all the way through. It is futile to unravel the mysteries of life. I read one time over in Iran of some workers who were going down a road toward their jobs in a field and one worker turned aside to relieve himself. And after he had turned aside, the whole road gave way and his fellow workers were swallowed up into sheol and there he was left standing and we might wonder why. One can duplicate and reduplicate illustrations like that. All too often we don’t know why.

We might well ask the question then, What is the Holy Spirit trying to teach us in our psalms. Why did He give us this psalm? I believe He is giving us truths to live by while we are going through our times of undeserved sufferings. That is why I pointed out earlier the form of the psalm. Even though he is in a dilemma and he’s lost rational contact, yet he has complete control of the situation and in composure he is able to sit down and write and exquisitely formed psalm. I like the way Bob Thieme illustrates it in his book,
Why do Christians Suffer. He says that when we go through our times of undeserved sufferings, it is like a pilot flying through a fog or flying through a storm who has lost visual contact with the world around him. As the pilot is flying through the clouds and he cannot see one foot in front of him, the danger is that the pilot will panic, he will sublimate, unless he knows where he is at all times. Perhaps you say the Moody science film, Signs Posts Aloft, in which there was a conversation between a pilot guiding a craft into an airport in the Rocky Mountains with the control tower. But as he is bringing the craft in, suddenly he hits a cloud bank and he frightens and he looses control and he panics and the plane goes into a spin. He cries out, “Help, help me, I’m in a spin.” And the men at the radio control tower cried back to him, “Take your hand off the stick.” And he says, “I can’t.” And they say, “Take your hand off the stick.” He says, “I can’t.” And again they cry out in desperation, “Let go, let the craft right itself.” But the man has so panicked and lost control of the situation that he cannot heed the command. And the last thing one hears on the tape is, “I can’t.” And the man has brought himself to death because he panicked and did not know where he was and could not control his situation.

So it is when we as Christians go through our times of undeserved suffering. We lose rational contact, we can’t understand why it is that we are in this dilemma. The danger is that we will panic. And when we panic, we will quit the ship, we will bail out. Some people turn to drink. Some people escape by means of sleeping pills and others commit suicide. But the question naturally arises then, How do we know where we are; how can we control the situation? Our psalmist turns to some fundamental attributes of God. And that’s what I would like to consider in the next lecture. I would like us to see those great attributes of God that this psalmist lays hold of that enables him to come safely through this storm, this experience of undeserved suffering.