





For those who are hurting



1



I assume that your heart is broken and that you are tired with pain. You may well have no tears left for your sobs and be lurching between fear and anger. There are few good marriages, and most singleness is terribly lonely. Bringing up children is hard, and not bringing up children is hard. No-one lives that long without grieving someone close to them, and those wounds do not close. Illness lays us low and cancer scares us. I am not yet forty and I have buried friends from this disease. One friend is going through chemotherapy at the moment, while today – as I write this – another friend is having a scan to see if the hints a doctor picked up are cancer. Eighteen months ago I sat in the same waiting room, though it turned out the lump was nothing to worry about. Then there is the simple suffering of life – work pressures, household chores, money





worries and debts, difficult friendships and family tensions. Life is often a grind.

Of course there is joy, hope and laughter, and my life has been far freer from suffering than many I know. I almost feel embarrassed to write about this subject – what do I have to say? But we must look suffering in the face and square up to it, and not hide, run or escape from it. The latter are all the options the

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world around has to offer us – we could escape the pain of life in a beer can, a cult TV series, a shopping spree or an idyllic holiday. Or we could pretend that life is good, and update our status with a smiley face.

We do not struggle with the laughter and joy, and we do not struggle to know where God is in these. We talk of how the Lord has blessed us with a new job or how grateful we are that we can go on holiday. We are slower to see the blessing in redundancy or be grateful for the cancelled holiday as we drive to the hospital.





In this book we are going to see how the pain of suffering nearly overwhelms the faith of God's people. We will see how it threatens to break their trust in a God they have known and experienced and been close to for years. We are going to see that the writers of this psalm are faithful men who have served the Lord well and feel utterly confused by the way he is letting them suffer. And then we will see how he draws them to himself through their suffering – how he turns it from being a mark of his distance from them to an experience of his closeness to them. We will also see how God displays his love for us and his approval of us through our sufferings.

This book simply follows Psalm 44. It is a hard psalm, because it faces up to the truth of suffering. Yet since it is a hard psalm, it is also a glorious one, because the hope and love that it holds out are solid. They are as solid as a cross and as glorious as an empty tomb.

Wherever you are as you read this, I pray that you will see, know and feel the love of Christ in and through your suffering. I am confident that God will answer this prayer for you, for he is a Father who gives good things to his children.





The suffering singers

2

PSALM 44

Perhaps they looked at their instruments stacked against walls, avoiding one another's eyes. What do you do when your heart is broken, when your soul is shrivelled and dying of thirst? What do you sing when the news is of the slain, the defeats and the shame of God's people?

What do *you* do when you are ground down by suffering, when your hopes are dashed, your body is aching and sleep elusive? What do you do when the boss says how sorry he is, but they need to let people go? What do you do when the doctor gently tells you that she thinks this pain is cancer? What do you do when another pregnancy ends in death and despair? What do you do when you stand by the grave three years later and it is just more painful, more confusing? What do you do as another friend, but not you, gets



married? What do you do when there is just so little joy and lightness in your life, and the daily routine is grinding you down? What do you do when the darkness will not lift? I do not know what you are suffering, but God does, and he guides these words for you as I write them. He knows suffering, and he knows yours.

The sons of Korah knew suffering. It was underlined in their name. Korah was not their dad (he was a distant ancestor) but they were named for him because he was famous – notorious. He was the cousin of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 6:18–24), which made his rebellion against their God-given authority all the worse. In Numbers 16 he demanded an equal share in the leadership of God’s people, and he was judged by God with decisive speed. The Lord caused the ground to open and Korah and all his family went down to their graves alive.

But in Numbers 26:11 Moses wrote simply: ‘The line of Korah, however, did not die out.’ Whether they were spared or brought back from the grave by the Lord we are not told, but they are the ones who lived when they should have died. They were redeemed from death. They are like us Christians, who should





have died and yet live through the wonder and power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Their history, their title as sons of Korah, was a mark of shame and suffering and of the forgiveness and love of the Lord. They knew the suffering of God's judgment and they knew the wonder of his grace.

They also knew the heights, the glory days of Israel. They were chosen by David, the great king of Israel, the slayer of the giant Goliath, and a man after God's own heart. They were appointed to be the singers (1 Chronicles 25:1-8; Heman was a descendent of Korah, as we see from the title of Psalm 88) and gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 26:1) in the temple of God. If you are a Christian, you share their privilege. Chosen by God to follow his Son, to be filled with his Spirit and to herald his good news, you know, or have known, the glory days.

The sons of Korah knew God and they knew suffering; both ran through their family history like threads. But suffering was not only a family trait; it was a present reality for them. The suffering they will go on to describe in Psalm 44 is terrible. They are ashamed, scared, scattered and facing death. These





are no super-spiritual saints; they are people who know the grinding and crushing confusion and pain of ongoing suffering. If life is hard for you, they get that, and sing their song alongside you.

We are going to focus on Psalm 44 in this book. We need to begin by placing it in the flow of the Psalms. There are five books of these songs, and the second book begins, in Psalms 42–49, with a sequence of psalms of the sons of Korah. The first book was written by David, so it is appropriate that the second starts with a series by the singers he appointed. Yet the songs of the sons of Korah open with three songs of crushing pain.

Psalm 42 pictures a deer panting for water. This is no cute, soft-focus image, rather it is a picture of frantic desperation. The soul of these singers is on the verge of death, panting for want of God. In the midst of suffering their memories of the glorious days of festivals and feasts at the temple seem like bitter taunts. They are cast down and in turmoil as they compare their current pain with the days when they worshipped God and led his people in praise and thanksgiving. The psalm finishes in hope, a confident expectation that 'I will yet praise him, my Saviour and





my God' (42: 11). It finishes with hope, but with no end to the suffering.

Psalm 43 finishes with the same hope – phrased exactly the same way. It has no title, but the repeat of the chorus (43:5), which is identical to that in Psalm 42:5 and 11, makes it clear that the sons of Korah wrote this psalm. It picks up the worst pain of suffering, deeper even than the suffering itself – the pain of feeling that God has rejected you.

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Psalms 42 and 43 end in hope, but there is no answer, no resolution. They leave us with the pain of suffering, and with the deepest problem of faith: God is in charge, Christ is Lord and so when terrible suffering comes we cannot pretend it has nothing to do with him. We must either run from him – shaking our fist in bitter agony, and hating the Jesus who brought

