

But As For Me... "Will God Answer?"

Psalm 69

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Introduction

We gather here this morning with the stated purpose to worship our God and be encouraged in the Gospel. We talk together because we have shared life experience that has Jesus Christ at the center. We sing together about the greatness of God, about the change found in the Gospel and about the wonders of what God has done for us in Christ. And we listen together from the Scriptures where God is speaking to us for us to hear, learn and then follow Jesus in all areas of our lives.

And yet, if we are honest, sometimes it is a struggle to be here. There are distractions, temptations and difficulties that put themselves in the way of this worship. We often must admit that for most of us sitting in this room, "Life is hard!" We are confronted with those struggles each day. For some it is with health, perhaps with a new illness or maybe the nagging reminders of pain, stiffness, weakness of the same old disease. For some it is managing finances, perhaps in the form of mounting debt, loss of a job, rising inflation or unforeseen expenses. Many have difficulties with relationships and are frustrated with a toddler, teenage or young adult child, exasperated with the recurring failures of a spouse, oppressed by a coworker or boss in the workplace or even being shunned by family or former friends because of one's faith. And, if we are completely honest, we all are struggling with what the Bible clearly states is sin. We are selfish, manipulative, dishonest, angry, prideful, fearful idolaters who put self and a myriad of other interests ahead of God and his glory in our lives. We live in a hard world with hard hearts. We often struggle staying committed to worship and service with God's people.

When we reflect and respond to this, God often seems far off and distant. Every one of those Bible/gospel promises seems empty or useless. Words like trust, faith, love, refuge, anchor, stronghold, shield, and rock all seem to tarnish and fade. So, we respond in ways that range from feeling alone, filled with sadness and despair to independence and even supposed self-dependence. And again, if we are honest, this leads us to more pain, struggle and fear.

This morning we will be reading together the 69th Psalm. It is one of the many psalms and biblical texts that address this problem of the hardness of life. To put this psalm in some context we need to remind ourselves that the Psalter, the word used for the entire body of psalms, seems to have been collected and edited into a "five-book" collection. The first and second Psalms seem to be the introduction to the entire Psalter, with their emphasis on listening to and living by the Word of God and trusting and worshipping the Son-King. Book II of this collection extends from the 42nd Psalm and ends with Psalm 72. There is a large section of David-authored praises from 56-68 followed by 3 lament psalms and a concluding praise.

The 69th Psalm is the first of these laments. It is very personal, meaning that we can hear a singular individual's voice in the words of the psalm, but it has strong community overtones and connections. It is the voice of one who is in pain, one who struggles with life, one who is in conflict with those around them and invites us in vivid images to share and identify in that struggle as well. And as we finish this morning, hopefully, we see exactly how we can learn and grow from a passage like this.

Now, scholars differ a bit on how this psalm is arranged. I will have us read it as 5 stanzas, with the middle and last being the ones with the most emphasis. Each of the stanzas have some sense of "plea" and "protest". Most of the protest is contained in the first four stanzas, verses 1-29 with the idea of salvation bookending this section. The pleas are contained in speech directed to God, the protests are found in descriptions of the situation and issues. The images are vivid and raw. We will read each stanza with some comment and then bring the Psalm to a conclusion at the end.

We want to see how, if we trust in "God's steadfast love and saving faithfulness" (which is the focus of verse 13 where the psalmist states "as for me"), will God answer?

We will read the psalm together, a stanza at a time after some comments set up the section.

Drowning in hatred (1-5)

The first stanza finds the psalmist drowning in hatred. He cries out with a plea for salvation, for deliverance. He follows that with a protest in very powerful images. He then comes to a specific point that indicates that lies, deceit, and false accusations are about to overwhelm the writer. The psalmist recognizes that there is no other answer but to cry out to God for deliverance. No withdrawal will allow the poet to avoid the calamity and no self-help program will get him through it. We simply hear an impassioned, "save me!"

Save me, O God!

For the waters have come up to my neck.

*I sink in deep mire,
 where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
 and the flood sweeps over me.*

*I am weary with my crying out;
 my throat is parched.
 My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.*

*More in number than the hairs of my head
 are those who hate me without cause;
mighty
 are those who would destroy me,
 those who attack me with lies.*

*What I did not steal
 must I now restore?*

*O God, you know my folly;
 the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.*

Despised in persecution (6-12)

And then we find out that this struggle is related to the life of faith expressed publicly by the psalmist. He is not denying his own sin and failure but knows he is the target of slander and lies because of his desire to worship and honor the name of God himself, particularly as it is expressed in worship at the temple. He is concerned that his persecution or at least his "reputation" will extend beyond himself personally to involve those around him who are like-minded. He points out that it is important for God to preserve his own reputation by the vindication of worshippers like the poet. God's own name and glory are at stake in the eyes of those who are looking in on the situation.

*Let not those who hope in you
be put to shame through me,
O Lord GOD of hosts;*

*let not those who seek you
be brought to dishonor through me,
O God of Israel.*

*For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
that dishonor has covered my face.
I have become a stranger to my brothers,
an alien to my mother's sons.*

*For zeal for your house
has consumed me,
and the reproaches of those who reproach you
have fallen on me.*

*When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting,
it became my reproach.
When I made sackcloth my clothing,
I became a byword to them.*

*I am the talk of those who sit in the gate,
and the drunkards make songs about me.*

Patient in trust (13-21)

This third stanza sits in the middle of the psalm. In this psalm the phrase "but as for me" has a significant role in the unfolding of the meaning and power of this poem. The psalmist will be patient in his trust. I think the problem involves the situation the community is in. In the previous stanza we saw the issues involved with respect to worship and devotion. The struggle, pain, and despair of living in their current situation can be dealt with in several ways and the psalmist finds himself persecuted particularly because he is pursuing the path of worship. As we read the "But as for me" phrase in the psalm, this phrase assumes there are other answers to his predicament. To go ahead and follow his accusers in their failure and idolatry or to vindicate himself by climbing out of the mud or swimming to shore are both false responses to the situation. The psalmist pleads and then patiently trusts God answer.

*But as for me,
my prayer is to you, O LORD.
At an acceptable time, O God,
in the abundance of your steadfast love
answer me in your saving faithfulness.*

*Deliver me
from sinking in the mire;
let me be delivered from my enemies
and from the deep waters.*

*Let not the flood sweep over me,
or the deep swallow me up,
or the pit close its mouth over me.*

*Answer me, O LORD,
for your steadfast love is good;
according to your abundant mercy,
turn to me.*

*Hide not your face from your servant,
for I am in distress;
make haste to answer me.*

*Draw near to my soul,
redeem me;
ransom me because of my enemies!*

*You know my reproach,
and my shame and my dishonor;
my foes are all known to you.*

*Reproaches have broken my heart,
so that I am in despair.*

*I looked for pity, but there was none,
and for comforters, but I found none.
They gave me poison for food,
and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.*

Persuaded in truth (22-29)

The fourth stanza is a plea for vindication. The psalmist is persuaded in truth. It sounds harsh to our ears, but ultimately all improper approaches to the struggles of life are sinful, idolatrous, rebellious assaults upon God's character itself. And the accusers' attacks upon the psalmist have taken on a more representative flavor as against God himself. It concludes with a final bookend to the section, a repeat plea for salvation.

*Let their own table before them
become a snare;
and when they are at peace,
let it become a trap.*

*Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see,
and make their loins tremble continually.
Pour out your indignation upon them,
and let your burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be a desolation;
let no one dwell in their tents.*

*For they persecute him
whom you have struck down,
and they recount the pain of those
you have wounded.*

*Add to them punishment upon punishment;
may they have no acquittal from you.*

*Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.*

*But I am afflicted and in pain;
let your salvation, O God, set me on high!*

Confident in praise (30-36)

The final stanza demonstrates that the psalmist is confident in praise. This stanza is a call to praise and worship in the face of the conflict, despite the circumstances. It has two parts, the first is a personal re-commitment to worship and praise that flows from his heart and extends in an invitation to those around to join him. It then finishes by bringing all creation into the celebration. God's city, the dwelling place of God with His people will confidently be the final, vindicated rest for those who serve Him and love His name.

*I will praise the name of God
with a song;
I will magnify him
with thanksgiving.*

*This will please the LORD
more than an ox
or a bull with horns and hoofs.*

*When the humble see it
they will be glad;
you who seek God,
let your hearts revive.*

*For the LORD hears the needy
and does not despise his own people who are prisoners.*

*Let heaven and earth praise him,
the seas and everything that moves in them.*

*For God will save Zion
and build up the cities of Judah,*

*and people
shall dwell there and possess it;
the offspring of his servants
shall inherit it,
and those who love his name
shall dwell in it.*

Reflect and Respond

So, before we lift this Old Testament text and drop it into our lives, we must first think a bit about how this text informs and points us to Jesus and the Gospel. What does the rest of Scripture, particularly the New Testament say about or even use this text?

So, let's start with this. The idea of a servant who experiences unjust suffering is common throughout the rest of the Psalter. And then one who suffers on behalf of others, particularly Israel as a nation is rehearsed in several passages later in time than the original writing of the psalm. The prophet Jeremiah speaks like this in 11:18-20, 15:15, 17:14, and in Lamentations 3. Isaiah has an extended section regarding a "suffering servant" of which chapter 53 is the most famous and prominent where we hear "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows..."

And there is that "Son-King" we were introduced to in the 2nd Psalm, that sees in the life of the Psalmist (David) this deliverer. But we eventually recognize that David and all his subsequent earthly sons are inadequate for the task. The Old Testament leaves us waiting for this great king, prophet, and "seed". We are compelled then to see the promised, anointed one as Jesus of Nazareth. From this the 69th Psalm, we see Him as a lowly servant. Ultimately His circumstances are to be seen as "smitten by God." He is waiting and trusting for the proper, determined time. His understanding of worship is called into question by His contemporaries, and He suffers and is scorned for that faith and commitment. And finally, His situation and work are important for "others."

The Gospels quote or allude to this psalm at the crucifixion and at other events in Jesus' life. Luke in Acts, Paul in Romans, and John in his Gospel and in Revelation use this psalm as well. The Gospel of John makes us extend the connections in chapter 2 where we read:

"And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

In John 15:25 we read Jesus's words that "they hated me without a cause." And all the Gospel writers (Matt: 27:34, Mark 15:23, Lu 23:36, Jo 19:19-30) speak of receiving sour wine to drink at his crucifixion.

The apostle Paul in an "application of the Gospel" section of Romans in chapter 15 uses this psalm to encourage his readers to consider Jesus. There he says:

Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Peter uses this psalm in his speech in Acts 1 regarding Judas and by extension, those who are enemies of Christ. And Paul uses this psalm again regarding the blindness of the nation of Israel despite their apparent blessings and position in Romans 11:9-10.

What then does this have to do with us? Even though the psalmist is lamenting about his personal tragedy, this is only an example of the persecution that Jesus experienced. The psalmist's testimony concerning himself takes on a prophetic role when compared to the ultimate sufferer, Isaiah's suffering servant.

Jesus had zeal for the temple, not the physical building but the relationship between the God who was worshipped at the temple and the people who approached the temple in faith. We can look at our struggles through the lens of the psalmist because we have been redeemed and adopted by Jesus himself who has a zeal for us. We have confidence of eventual and ultimate "vindication" because Jesus has been crucified, buried, resurrected and is at the right hand of the Father now. We have a "more" that is experienced spiritually now and will be a blazing reality in the end because of the life and work of Christ. That should have been the focus as we celebrated resurrection Sunday as we remembered the story and impact of the Gospel. If we are followers of Him, then we are forgiven, given life, given standing and look to the future vindication because we are "in Him."

Jesus still has zeal for his temple, the people of God. Jesus is still working for us and in us right now as the community that worships together and approach him in faith. We talk, sing, and hear His Word together. And we are told to take up our cross, the struggles of life, the suffering appointed to our paths and trust Him for His timing, knowing that He *will* answer. The ultimate struggles experienced by Christ should empower and drive our life now. Let us conclude by rereading the concluding verses of the Psalm, noticing their forward emphases and connect to it passages from Hebrews and Revelation. Let us confidently then respond to the question, "will God answer?"

*Let heaven and earth praise him,
the seas and everything that moves in them.
For God will save Zion
and build up the cities of Judah,
and people
shall dwell there and possess it;
the offspring of his servants
shall inherit it,
and those who love his name
shall dwell in it.*

Let's couple that with Hebrews 12:28, where just a few verses earlier we would have read "*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*".

*Therefore let us be grateful
for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,
and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship,
with reverence and awe*

And finally with Revelation 21:1-5

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,
for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.
And I 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 voice from the throne saying,
"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,
and God himself will be with them as their God.
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,
and death shall be no more,
neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore,
for the former things have passed away."*

*And he who was seated on the throne said,
"Behold, I am making all things new."*

