

Christians pray Psalms 68 and 69 back-to-back in a way that King David never imagined. The eschatological vision of Psalm 68 depends upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The glorious march to Zion, celebrated in Psalm 68, becomes an ordeal of suffering in Psalm 69. Jesus saw himself in this psalm (Ps 69:4; John 15:25) and the apostles saw Jesus (Ps 69:9; John 2:17; Rom 15:3). The Savior of the world is ridiculed, mocked, scorned, and despised. He is estranged, rejected, abused, and condemned. The incarnate one – the very embodiment of God’s love and power – is heartbroken and hated beyond all measure because of his passion for the house of God and the people of God. On the cross Jesus received the symbols of his tormenters scorn, gall and vinegar. This did not escape the notice of the apostles who found in this reference a vivid prophecy of the messiah (Ps 69:21; Matt 27:34; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29).

In the Spirit, David prayed knowingly for himself and providentially for the Son of David. To deny Psalm 69’s messianic character because the psalmist did not intentionally prophesy a suffering messiah contradicts the apostolic interpretation of Psalm 69. This psalm filled Jesus’ praying imagination as the Father led him to the cross and then afterwards it gave the disciples a vivid prophetic description of the cross. We pray the psalm today as a guide to the cruciform life we are called to live in Christ. We know that the march to Zion runs through “the miry depths” and “deep waters.” When a passion for Christ takes hold we should not be surprised when we are hated without reason.

### *Praying Our Pain*

*Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in the miry depths,  
where there is no foothold.  
I have come into the deep waters;  
the floods engulf me.  
I am worn out calling for help;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes fail,  
looking for my God.  
Those who hate me without reason  
outnumber the hairs of my head;  
many are my enemies without cause,  
those who seek to destroy me.  
I am forced to restore  
what I did not steal.*

*You, God know my folly;  
my guilt is not hidden from you.  
Lord, the Lord Almighty,*

*may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me;  
God of Israel,  
may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me.  
For I endure scorn for your sake,  
and shame covers my face.  
I am a foreigner to my own family,  
a stranger to my own mother's children;  
for zeal for your house consumes me,  
and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.  
When I weep and fast,  
I must endure scorn;  
when I put on sackcloth,  
people make sport of me.  
Those who sit at the gate mock me,  
and I am the song of drunkards.*

Psalm 69:1-12

The psalmist leads by example, teaching us to transpose our pain into prayer. It is not only therapeutic, it is redemptive, to give poetic, verbal, and written form to our deep-felt feelings. Prayer is not the “spiritual” thing to do; it is the sensible, practical thing to do. We are often tempted to bury our troubles and pretend they’re not there. We try to escape the flood through distraction and denial, but the more we try, the more we feel engulfed and swept away. We seem to conclude that our problems are beyond the scope of God’s comfort and solution. We turn to psychologists and physicians before turning to the Lord in prayer. We tacitly assume that modern life has eclipsed the provision of the Lord and that we are on our own. This is not true, however, and our neglect of prayer has been at the expense of our physical, emotional, and mental health.<sup>1</sup> Praise God for counselors, therapists, psychiatrists and physicians, but real prayer is the prelude to help and healing.

The psalmist’s array of images is not meant to describe a literal historical situation. His painting of desperation is impressionistic. He allows the images to merge into one complete picture of danger, despair, and depression. He is overwhelmed – up to his neck in flood waters. It is as if he is drowning in sorrow, swept away in confusion, and pulled under by hate. He is lost at sea and dying of thirst. His sun-scorched eyes search the horizon for God, but to no avail. He is besieged by legions of enemies who hate him for no just cause and no good reason. In the court of public opinion he is found guilty on trumped up charges and condemned.

The persecution is so intense that he is desperate to keep his relationship with God unhindered. “God, you know every sin I’ve committed; my life’s a wide-open book before you” (Ps 69:5 The Message). Implicit in this plea is the power of forgiveness remembered and reaffirmed. Yet, the nagging feeling of letting God down and bringing shame on the people of God persists. He is conscious of his weakness and frailty, but confident that the reason for his suffering is due to his faithfulness. The psalmist acknowledges an emotion that is experienced by Christ’s followers

---

<sup>1</sup> Webster, Soulcraft, 14.

much more often than it is addressed. To be estranged from family members and siblings and to be alienated from colleagues and neighbors because of Christ can lead to self-doubt and a sense of guilt where there is no real guilt. We can suffer a “guilty conscience” for doing the right thing. This is the strange thing about obedience and faithfulness; you can feel bad for doing what God wants you to do. The psalmist humbly turns to God for reassurance in the midst of these feelings.

Like our Lord, we want to embrace the alienation that comes from the gospel. We want to “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12). If we follow Jesus’ path to the cross we can expect to receive his treatment. It is scandalous that the one who healed the sick, loved the outcast, and transformed the sinner should die a hideously cruel death by Roman crucifixion. What kind of world do we live in that sentences holy and compassionate men and women to die? Jesus exposed the obvious fact that the political and religious authorities are not always on the side of righteousness. Greed, pride, and hate often control the power brokers of society. Jesus became a victim for the sake of righteousness. It was impossible for anyone living in the first century to gloss over the practical social consequences of following Jesus. It should be equally impossible in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

If it’s not zeal for the Lord’s house that consumes us, but some other kind of zeal, we will be like the people who scorn the psalmist and oppress the just. Instead of identifying with the psalmist we will be like the antagonists in this psalm who insult, mock, and ridicule the righteous. When Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out the sheep and cattle and money changers, his disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2:17; Ps 69:9). But it was more than a single line that linked Jesus to this psalm. The whole description fits. Jesus “came unto his own, but his own received him not” (John 1:11). He was a foreigner in his own family (Ps 69:8). He prayed the way the psalmist prayed: “the insults of those who insult you fall on me” (Ps 69:9). The apostle Peter spoke of Christ’s followers being “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Pet 1:8) but this deep resilient joy more often than not coincides with the world’s contempt. It is only as the psalmist transposes his pain and fear into prayer that he is able to move toward praise.

#### God-dependent Prayer

But I pray to you, Lord,  
in the time of your favor;  
in your great love, O God,  
answer me with your sure salvation.  
Rescue me from the mire,  
do not let me sink;  
deliver me from those who hate me,  
from the deep waters.  
Do not let the floodwaters engulf me  
or the depths swallow me up

---

<sup>2</sup> Webster, *A Passion for Christ*, 161.

or the pit close its mouth over me.  
Answer me, Lord, out of the goodness of your love;  
in your great mercy turn to me.  
Do not hide your face from your servant;  
answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.  
Come near and rescue me;  
deliver me because of my foes.  
Psalm 69:13-18

The psalmist pleads: “answer me,” “rescue me,” “do not let me sink,” “deliver me,” “answer me, Lord,” “turn to me,” “do not hide your face,” “answer me quickly,” “come near and rescue me,” “deliver me.” He piles up his staccato pleas into a single petition reiterated ten times for impact. Everything requested is based on the Lord’s character and saving action. The psalmist turns to God because of his loving favor, his great love, his sure salvation, the goodness of his love, and his great mercy. At the heart of the psalm is an urgent plea for salvation from the only one who is able to save him. Until we pray this way ourselves and enter into the pathos of this prayer we cling to some vestige of self-salvation. We are still reliant on a form of self-justification, either religious or secular, to secure the self, to save the soul. We have not yet come to the end of ourselves. To pray this way is to embrace Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount beatitudes. Until we declare spiritual bankruptcy and throw ourselves on the mercy of God, we will never know the saving power of the Savior. We are caught in a rip current of sin and death and the most natural thing in the world is to call for help.

Psalm 69 is not only our psalm, a sinner’s psalm (aren’t they all!), but it is also the Savior’s psalm. What Jesus experienced in Gethsemane is echoed in this psalm. Patrick Reardon writes, “In Psalm 69 we are given a vision into the very heart of Christ in the circumstances of His Passion.”<sup>3</sup> The psalm expresses what Jesus felt in the garden: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus offering up “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Heb 5:7).

### *Praying against Evil*

*You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed;  
all my enemies are before you.  
Scorn has broken my heart  
and has left me helpless;  
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,  
for comforters, but I found none.  
They put gall in my food  
and gave me vinegar for my thirst.*

*May the table set before them become a snare;*

---

<sup>3</sup> Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 135.

*may it become retribution and a trap.  
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,  
and their backs be bent forever.  
Pour out your wrath on them;  
let your fierce anger overtake them.  
May their place be deserted;  
let there be no one to dwell in their tents.  
For they persecute those you wound  
and talk about the pain of those you hurt.  
Charge them with crime upon crime;  
do not let them share in your salvation.  
May they be blotted out of the book of life  
and not be listed with the righteous.*

Psalm 69:19-28

It is hard to imagine the psalmist being able to add to his description of suffering but he does. He paints a picture of desperation. He is mired in mud, engulfed by a flood, rejected by family, and mocked by drunks, but the worst is yet to come. Soul pain is always more acute than physical pain. Three words eclipse the earlier description of mud and mire. He has been scorned, disgraced, and shamed. “There are few wounds as deep as those expressed in the words reproach, shame, dishonor.”<sup>4</sup> The psalmist goes so far as to say, “scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless.” Along with the apostles we rightly identify the “gall” and the “vinegar” with Jesus on the cross (Matt 27:34, 48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29). But the whole description applies to Jesus and may describe his lowest point.

The one in whom fellowship with the Father was his right by virtue of his being, and the one in whom fellowship with the Father was his right by virtue of his faithfulness and obedience, was completely forsaken and totally abandoned by the Father because of us.<sup>5</sup> When Jesus cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he gathered up all the lamentations of God's people and shouted them from the cross in a loud voice. Jesus' agony of soul was ultimately and most intensely spiritual. “Grief of mind is harder to bear than pain of body. . . Spiritual sorrows are the worst of mental miseries. . . We can bear a bleeding body, and even a wounded spirit, but a soul conscious of desertion by God is beyond conception unendurable.”<sup>6</sup>

On the cross Jesus was “scorned, disgraced, and shamed,” for our sakes. He deliberately identified with our sin and our alienation from God. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, by his wounds you have been healed”(1 Pet 2:24). The intensity of his struggle came not from a fear of death, but from his real experience of God-forsakenness. Spurgeon writes, “This marks the

---

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 247.

<sup>5</sup> Webster, The God Who Prays, 150.

<sup>6</sup> Spurgeon, Christ's Words from the Cross, 53.

lowest depth of the Savior's grief. The desertion was real. . . .It was no delirium of mind, caused by weakness of body, the depression of his spirit, or the near approach of death. His mind was clear to the last. He bore up under pain, loss of blood, scorn, thirst, and desolation. . . .All the tortures on His body He endured in silence; but when it came to being forsaken by God, then His great heart burst out. . . . It was a real absence he mourned."<sup>7</sup>

It is crucial for Christ's followers to frame the psalmist's imprecations against evil (Ps 69:22-28) in the light of Christ's suffering. In the Spirit, the psalmist leads us down a path that ends at the foot of the cross. So much so, that after the reference to bitter gall and sour vinegar, we expect a plea along the lines of "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).<sup>8</sup> Such a plea sounds more consistent with Jesus' command to his followers to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. But instead, the psalmist unloads a searing indictment against those who deserve God's judgment. He contrasts his impressionistic painting of desperation (Ps 69:1-15) with an impressionistic description of judgment. Table fellowship becomes an occasion for betrayal and entrapment. Physical health is lost to blindness and seizures. Instead of invoking God's blessing, the psalmist calls God to pour out his wrath. He wants the oppressors' whole neighborhood wiped out and all their names erased from the book of life.

It is not wrong to want the end of evil and the judgment of the wicked. We forget that Jesus described judgment in graphic and violent language. Hell is outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28.). Jesus warned, "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matthew 5:22). And again, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into eternal fire" (Matthew 18:8-9). Jesus offers these words of condemnation at the final judgment: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). Jesus was explicit on the theme of judgment. "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matthew 13:41-43).

The startling truth that brings this messianic psalm into Christian worship is the correspondence between the psalmist's description of judgment and Jesus' experience of the wrath of God. Judas turned table fellowship into a snare and used friendship to trap Jesus. Bloodied, beaten, scourged, and crucified, Jesus experienced extreme physical abuse and torture. The wrath of God was poured out on him. He was abandoned by God. His name was blotted out. Jesus was charged with humanity's crimes. The psalmist's imprecations become descriptive of the judgment that Jesus faced on our behalf. This puts Psalm 69 in a new light. "David's anger was fanned by his zeal for justice, which the Old Testament largely exists to keep before us; but Christ came to

---

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon, *Christ's Words from the Cross*, 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 248.

crown justice with atonement.”<sup>9</sup> Isaiah’s prophecy echoes the redemptive meaning of Christ’s sacrifice: “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:4-5).

*Praying our Praise*

*But as for me, afflicted and in pain –  
may your salvation, God, protect me.  
I will praise God’s name in song  
and glorify him with thanksgiving.  
This will please the Lord more than an ox,  
more than a bull with its horns and hooves.  
The poor will see and be glad –  
you who seek God, may your hearts live!  
The Lord hears the needy  
and does not despise his captive people.  
Let heaven and earth praise him,  
the seas and all that move in them,  
for God will save Zion  
and rebuild the cities of Judah.  
Then people will settle there and possess it;  
the children of his servants will inherit it,  
and those who love his name will dwell there.*

Psalm 69:29-36

The psalm ends with a hymn of thanksgiving. The individuality implicit in the phrase “but as for me” evolves into a great company of worshipers. The poor, the needy, and the captive will “praise God’s name in song.” The need persists – the psalmist is afflicted and in pain – but the darkness of his lament lifts as the light of the Lord’s salvation and protection dawns. If the praise of God’s people eclipses the sacrifices of oxen and bulls, how much more will the sacrifice of Christ eclipse the sacrificial system. The people of God’s own choosing, the poor, will see and be glad. Beatitude based belief then and now. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). The Lord is receptive and responsive and loving to the needy. He does not despise; he entreats. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The encircling company of worshipers expands to include heaven and earth, “the seas and all that move in them.” Praise goes universal. “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Ps 150:6). The psalm closes with a vision of God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven – the vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). Zion is saved. The cities of Judah rebuilt. And the inhabitants of the land are those who “love his name.”

---

<sup>9</sup>Kidner, Psalms, 248.