

THE VICTIM AND THE VICTOR

SERIES: PATTERNS FOR PRAYER

by Steve Zeisler

As we're continuing our study of prayer, our focus this morning is going to be on the cross of Christ. In the wonderful prayer, Psalm 69, we will consider the gift of his life for us.

Earlier this week I listened to "Stormin' Norman" Schwartzkopf give a press briefing. Aggressive and dominant, he stood in his desert fatigues, four stars on his collar, explaining what was going on in the Persian Gulf. He is an amazing individual, energetic, enthusiastic, and articulate. I read subsequently that he has an IQ of 170. A four-star general, he's the commander of all the allied troops fighting the war in the Persian Gulf. I'm glad he's on our side!

As I read Psalm 69 during the week I recalled that King David, the author of this prayer, like "Stormin' Norman," was also once a military commander in the Middle East. David commanded armies and fought in roughly the same region that we see displayed in graphic terms on the nightly news. He, too, was a bold and brilliant commander, a confident fighting man. As impressive a figure as General Schwartzkopf is, David the king was surely far more impressive even speaking only in human terms. He not only could fight wars, but he could rule his nation in peace. He walked with God, he wrote the psalms, and he was a man of immense capability in every area of life, from wielding a slingshot to ruling a nation. Yet we'll see, in considering Psalm 69, that he was someone who was well-acquainted with his own inadequacies, who was clear about his weakness.

Admitting inadequacy

I would submit to you this morning that all of us, both men and women, but perhaps men especially, need to have a way to speak to God about that which is not right in us. We're a competitive society. We reward those who always win. We love generals with big voices, bright minds, and confident attitudes. Bob Jackson knows every sport there is, as the advertisers say, and he's held up as some kind of model. Figures who are consistently successful are paraded before us regularly. But we need to have language that says, "I know I am failing. There is a dark side to me." We need this language to be able to ask for help. So let's look at Psalm 69 together. Verses 1-5:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. 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 know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you.

Clearly, David is in a circumstance of some desperation. He realizes that he is drowning, if you will. Water is up to his neck, there is no foothold for him, he's sinking, he's desperately concerned, and he's confronted with enemies who outnumber the hairs of his head. He admits he is frightened and weak, unable to do anything about the circumstance he is in. In verse 5 he even speaks clearly of his own guilt in these matters. There is unrighteousness in him that only God knows. This is language not of a glorious king who is winning a battle, someone who is rising with the tide, dominant and overwhelming, but rather a man who is in great need. And for as gifted a man as David, the Lord's anointed, to say these things is very significant. How will we speak to God when we're in need?

Suffering humiliation

When I was eight or ten years old I went often to a public swimming pool not far away, where a group of kids hung out during the summer. There were older kids at the pool, and I wanted to be one of the gang. One day I was in the pool at the deep end where the older kids were, and one of them decided to hold my head under water. I have absolutely vivid memories of the sensation of almost drowning, of not being able to free myself from what he was doing to me. I couldn't breathe and I was thrashing with all my might. I was utterly terrified. If you have ever been anywhere near drowning, when your body longs for air and you can't get it you know it's an awful sensation. After it was over, I felt humiliated; I was so frightened that I was crying uncontrollably, and I didn't want to cry in front of these older boys whom I had been trying to impress. The combination of weakness, loss, and humiliation is also a vivid memory for me.

It is an extraordinary thing that we pray to a Savior who knows what it is like to go through every human emotion

Verses 1-3 use the metaphor of drowning, and at the end of v.4 humiliation is added, "I am forced to restore that which I did not steal." That is, he is having financial means taken from him and given to someone else, yet it isn't a debt he has rightly incurred. He is having money extorted from him. Extortion is always the work of bullies, isn't it? Big kids take a little kid's lunch money just because they're bigger and stronger. David is saying that he feels a sense of violation. One of my 10-year-old son's friends was recounting to him recently how he had gotten a new bicycle for Christmas and was at a park near by. Some young toughs from another neighborhood came by, threw him off the bike, and took it. Bullies who do these things not only make us suffer loss, they make us suffer a feeling of humiliation because we cannot prevent it from happening. So we are not only taken advantage of, but we feel violated and weakened, and that's David's experience in this psalm.

David makes a number of references to his anatomy in the metaphors he's using. He speaks of his foot not finding a foothold, his throat being parched with crying, his eyes failing him—it's as if he's going to pass out; everything goes black and enemies greater in number than the hairs on his head. He's using various parts of his body to give us a picture of the sense of desperation that he feels. Let's read on in verses 6-12, as his prayer of struggle continues:

May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the LORD Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel. For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who in suit 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 the drunkards. Ridicule for righteousness.

What David describes here is ridicule. He is in sackcloth, scorned, and alone. At the end of this section, "I am the song of the drunkards" is a telling phrase. Men who have descended to the lowest point, inebriated foolishness, find someone still lower to make fun of. He is the song of the drunkards. This resounding ridicule, this ruining of his reputation, and setting him beyond the bounds of interest, caring, or approval is a painful thing. Further, he realizes that this suffering is coming about not justly, but specifically because he has zeal for the things of God. It's those who are insulting God who insult him, those who are in rebellion against the Lord himself who have picked David, the anointed of the Lord, as their target. And his prayer in verse 6 is important: "May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me." He hopes in this time of trial, desertion, and humiliation, not to dishonor anyone who's seeking the Lord.

Yesterday I was in Berkeley. My wife Leslie had taken our car to the women's retreat, and Joey Lunger of our body, who had ridden with Leslie, left her car for me to use. Joey has a sticker on the back of her car decrying abortion on demand in this country. As I drove across the Bay Bridge I began to wonder if it would be wise to park a car with such a politically incorrect message in the People's Republic of Berkeley. A public outcry on behalf of righteousness (even so muted a version as a bumper sticker) can bring about an antagonistic response. David makes the same point in v.9: ". . . zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those

who insult you fall upon me."

Tuvya Zaretsky led our service this morning. Tuvya is a member of the Jews for Jesus staff. He and others are going, as they do every summer, into the heart of New York City on a month-long witnessing campaign. I was delighted to find out that Janna Sanders from our body is taking off from work and going to serve with the New York campaign as well. They will be on the streets of New York City, specifically reaching out to Jewish people and urging them to receive the Messiah, knowing they will meet scorn, ridicule, and resistance. But they are doing it anyway, because they have a zealotry for the gospel, a desire to be part of the things that are important to God.

A Messianic psalm

Now we cannot have gotten this far in this psalm, being familiar with the New Testament, and not have noticed that it is not just about David. The language of Psalm 69 is picked up in a number of places in the New Testament in direct reference to the Lord Jesus. This prayer is about David, who's serving as a model for us of how a man can speak to God about his needs, struggles, and fears. But it is more than that. It is also about David's greater Son, Jesus, who applied the words of this psalm to himself. In John 15:25 he quoted Psalm 69, when he said, "This is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'" In John 2:17, after thinking about the Lord's actions as he cleared the temple of money-changers, his disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." Later on, we will get to verse 21 of this psalm, which speaks of vinegar and gall that were given symbolically to David, but given literally to the Lord: Matthew 27:34 says, "There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it he refused to drink it." In Psalm 69:8, "I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons," speaks of rejection that was Jesus' exact experience. His own family thought he was crazy, and refused to listen to him precisely as this psalm says. It speaks of David in symbolic terms and Jesus more literally.

The point is that we can see Jesus in this psalm of difficulty and struggle. This crying to God for help in weakness, this reaching out to the Father, is extremely important for us to understand. Jesus became human like us. Beyond that he became sin for our sakes. Our Lord prayed in the garden that he would be released from the descending burden. It is an extraordinary thing that we pray to a Savior who knows what it is like to go through every human emotion, every loss, every shortcoming, every weakness, to have sin surround him and to feel guilty and reprehensible before his Father. Jesus knows these things, not because he sinned himself or because he ever deserved to feel them, but because he accepted our sin upon himself. Hebrews 4:14-16 says: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

The Christian gospel alone says God begins not by elevating us to the highest but by joining us in the pit. He doesn't wait until we somehow clean up our act sufficiently to deserve his recognition. The Lord Jesus himself, our high priest, suffered everything David could write of in this psalm, and knows exactly what it's like to be drowning, hopeless, needy, desperate, and weak; to sense failure, to be wrapped in sin, and to have only the faintest hope left for himself. It is an extraordinary business to speak of God in such a way.

To listen to the call for holy war or jihad makes a powerful declaration that the God of Islam is one God; he is a holy God; he is a God of dignity, power and authority, he commands obedience and gives righteous laws, from their perspective. Many of the things Islam would say about God ring true to what the Bible says. But the God of Islam is never anything but the God who commands obedience, who insists on change, who rules from the heights. Muslims will often speak of the mercy of God, but it is the mercy of a great sovereign who condescends to do merciful things for people. The Christian gospel, on the other hand, speaks of a God who does not just rule on high, dispatching mercy from the remoteness of heaven, but who joins us where we are, who knows us, who prays this prayer and appoints it to himself, a God who has joined the human condition in everything that we can experience. The incarnation of Jesus is one of the greatest and most important ideas imaginable, one of the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith.

Calling on David to act

Now starting in verse 13 there are two sections of requests David makes in addition to everything we have seen so far. Verses 13-19 are one Section and verses 20-29 the other. Once again, we will do well to relate David's experience to that of Jesus on the cross -- in this because of their contrasts. Verses 13-19:

But I pray to you, O LORD, In the time of your favor; in your great love, O GOD, answer me with your sure salvation Up to this point he has been reciting the sorrows, the loss, the ridicule, and the drowning. Now he's saying, "Answer me in the time of your favor." Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, born the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me. Answer me, O 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; redeem me because of my foes. You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you.

Now David has not protested having the water come up to his neck, figuratively speaking. He merely described that experience in the first verse of the psalm. His foothold had failed him, and he has sunk deeper and deeper; the water was to his knees, and then his waist, then his chest, and now his neck, and it threatens to engulf him. He's the song of the drunkards, he's been ridiculed, and he's suffered abuse. But eventually, having come to this point, there should come an end: "Answer me now, lord. Don't let the pit swallow me. I have come to the very edge of losing everything. Now it's time for your great hand to pull me up and establish me, to secure my place." And, of course, David the king will have experienced the rescue of God.

Jesus, however, when we come to this section, found his prayer resoundingly rejected by heaven. When Jesus came to the very edge, when the waters were up to his neck and the pit threatened to enclose him, when he called out that the cup should pass from him, the lord God said, "Absolutely, no! Away to hell with you." That is why we find the awful cry on the cross of Christ, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God didn't save him from the pit it did close its mouth over him. Jesus Christ became our sin and was put to death on the cross. He was buried in the grave, his life lost to him, his God rejecting him, No saving act interveered.

It is precisely because Jesus was willing to go to that length in becoming the guilt offering for us, that we can pray as David did, "Lord, save me, rescue me." We can pray confidently with the expectation that no suffering of ours will end in damnation, that the pit won't win a victory over us. Because he would not answer the prayer of his own Son, he will answer our prayers.

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Christ the accursed

Let's pick up then with verse 20. This is the second set of requests, which David can pray but which Jesus would not:

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

These words aptly describe events that took place during the execution of Christ: scorn from the onlookers, ridicule from one of those crucified next to him, a crown of thorns on his head, the offer of vinegar to drink. David in some experience of his was rejected and scorned as well. So what was his prayer? Verses 22-29:

May the table set before them be- come a snare; may It become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened Sc 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. I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me.

David prays roaring and awful imprecations down on those who should have come to his aid and would not. Crime upon crime should be charged to them! God in his fierce anger should destroy them! Jesus, however, prayed from his cross that his tormenters be forgiven. Jesus faced distress with none to come to his aid, friends either betraying him or running and hiding, big enemies ridiculing him. Jesus, in that setting, asked for those arrayed before him to be forgiven, not cursed.

Now David's prayer, I submit to you, is not an inappropriate prayer. It's here right in the middle of Psalm 69; you can't avoid it. There are other places in the Bible where cursing prayers are recorded, and they are some of the most awful curses you can imagine. If you want to learn how to curse, read the Bible! These prayers reflect an understanding of God's righteousness and his abhorrence of sin. Only in the gospel can the curses and forgiveness be reconciled without either being diminished. Jesus received all judgment upon himself and therefore he prays, "Forgive *them*." As his followers we become ministers of reconciliation - those who have received an undeserved gift and who pass it on to others. Luke 19:10 says, ". . . the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." The curse is proper, but the curse does not fall on the one who deserves it. It falls on the sin bearer.

That's the glory of what took place on the cross of Christ. That's why Jesus would never speak as David did in v.22-28. He said only, "Forgive them, Father," David prays down curses. Jesus did just the opposite because these curses were borne in his own flesh.

I was struck by one of the hymns we sang this morning, "O Sacred Head Now Wounded." It ought to be deeply moving to us to consider the cross of Christ, to consider how absolutely different everything is because of that event in history.

What language shall I borrow To thank Thee, dearest Friend, For this, Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end? O make me mine forever, And should I fainting be, Lord, let me never, never Outlive my love to Thee.

That's what should be drawn from us as we read about Jesus' identification with us and what it cost him. We need to be reminded of what's changed because of what he's done.

Resurrection hope

The psalm ends with a prayer of thanksgiving. Resurrection life is the last note to be sounded. David has called down curses, and God has laid them on his Son. The grave has swallowed him, yet the grave could not hold him. He is alive again! We read in verses 30-36:

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 hoofs. 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.

The call to be thankful -- "I will praise God's name...and glorify him with thanksgiving" -- recognizes that when the Lord answers the earlier cry of anguish, it produces not pride or self-glorification, but humility. I don't bring a fatted animal, with its hooves and its horns, the gift of a rich man. What I bring is just a word of thankfulness. It is the needy, the poor, and the ordinary who find reason to be hopeful. There is coming a day in the future when God will restore every thing that ought to be restored. Hope and humility laced through with joy and thanksgiving end the psalm. We said earlier that we want this prayer of David, who (king though he was) spoke with honesty of his failure, to be an example to us. But beyond David's shortcomings we see the sin bearer who knows us, understands us, and has identified with us. In closing, let's read Hebrews 4:14-16 once more and consider how these truths might give our lives meaning and call forth loving response in us.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus The Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are -- yet was without [his own] sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

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Steve Zeisler
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