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## Psalm 69: To the Choirmaster: according to Lilies. Of David

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**Psalm 69**  
**To the Choirmaster: according to Lilies. Of David.**  
(NRSV) (Revised Common Lectionary)

**Introduction to Psalm 69**

This Psalm poses some difficulties for our understanding. Traditionally it is a psalm ascribed to David, but in verse 9 the Psalmist complains that “zeal for the House of the LORD” was consuming him. As you know, at the time of David there was not yet a Temple; that was built by the son of David, King Solomon. And even if the verse would be interpreted as a reference to the eagerness with which David wanted to build a Temple, David is not very likely to have suffered the insults (verse 9b) of his contemporaries for entertaining such an idea. Furthermore, verse 35 expresses the confidence that God would save Zion, the hill on which the Temple had been built, and rebuild the cities of Judah. No devastation of such magnitude occurred during the lifetime of David.

But if David was not the composer of this Psalm, who was? And when might it have been written? There really is no clear answer to these questions. And so what we shall do is, first of all, to develop a profile of the Psalmist from what he says of himself in this Psalm. Then we shall be in a better position to determine how we can use the Psalm.

1. The Psalmist calls himself “a servant of the LORD” (verse 17), one of the many servants of the LORD who shall soon dwell in and possess the rebuilt land of Judah (verse 34).
2. The Psalmist is one who has been smitten by God (verse 26a), one of many who have been wounded (verse 26b note).
3. In his affliction the Psalmist waits for the help of God (verse 3). His faith and hope in God are the issue in his suffering, because what is finally at stake is the trustworthiness of his God.
4. As he waits on God, he practices pious religious observances, like fasting and wearing sackcloth (verses 10-11).
5. For his hope and piety the Psalmist is made the target of heart-breaking scorn and ridicule (verses 19-20). He is alienated from his own family (verse 8). His behavior is not only the subject of conversation among the elders who sit at the gate of the town (verse 12a), but has also become the butt of jokes among the drinking crowd (verse 12b). This suggests that he was well known in the community. He looked for support from them, but instead he was given “gall for food and vinegar for drink” (verse 21), a metaphor for inflicting extreme pain and anguish.
6. The Psalmist is suffering in faith, and therefore also suffers for his faith. He complains to God, “It is for your sake that I have borne reproach” (verse 7), and again, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me” (verse 9). The basic form of the reproach against the LORD and the believer in the LORD is the taunting question, “Where is your God?” Look, for example, at Joel 2:17. It is a time of catastrophe upon catastrophe in Israel: a plague of

locusts, fire, and earthquakes. It seems as if Israel is being singled out for disaster. And the issue has become whether or not Israel's God is there to help; or, if he is there, whether or not he is able to help. Israel's enemies are taunting them with the derisive question, "Where is your God?" The prophet Joel therefore gives instruction, among others, to the priests and minister of the LORD, saying:

**Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage (your People) a mockery, a byword among the (Gentile) nations. Why should it be said among the (Gentile) peoples, 'Where is their God?' "**

The difference in the case of our Psalmist, and it is a painful difference, is that the taunt comes not from outsiders, but from his own community. In that respect this Psalmist suffers in much the same way as did the Psalmist of Psalm 22:6-8:

**But I am a worm, and no man; scorned by men, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they wag their heads; "He committed his cause to the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"**

7. The deliverance of the Psalmist will be significant for others. He represents and speaks for a larger group (see 1 and 2 above). They are the lowly, the God-seekers, the needy, and especially (verse 33) "God's own who are in bonds." That last designation sounds very much like a term used for the Israelites of the Babylonian Exile. The Psalmist anticipates that when the more faint-hearted among the oppressed (to say nothing about the outright faithlessly skeptical) see his deliverance, they too will rejoice with revived hearts (verse 32). The Psalmist's deliverance will be a sign that the scenario of salvation proclaimed by the prophets of the Exile -- Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Second Isaiah -- will be fulfilled, (verses 35-36), when all creation rejoices in the final rule of God.
8. There are also the denunciations of verses 22-28. It is hard for us to imagine a believer uttering such strong condemnation upon his enemies, and moreover asking God to be partner in his vindictiveness. Or, if we have become accustomed in our society to language which easily shouts at others, "Go to hell!" or "Damn you!" it is hard as Christians to think of such vituperation with approval. Two things need to be said: (a) It is easy to register our disapproval of such sentiments from the sidelines; it is something else if we ourselves are in the thick of the conflict. (b) If indeed the Psalmist is on God's side, and if his oppressors reproach the Psalmist, then they are indeed reviling not only the Psalmist, but also the God in whose name the Psalmist acts. And that is something which no one may do with impunity; for God will not tolerate blasphemy forever. That at least is what the Psalmist is saying to his tormentors.

Whether the Psalmist *ought* to have spoken so vindictively is another question. I rather doubt that we can ever answer that question fully. The more important question, however, is whether *we* ought to allow ourselves to speak so. The answer to that question is an unambiguous "NO." I grant that there are moments when we *feel* like damning our detractors. However, both Jesus' example and Jesus' command to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27, 28) have to override the language of the Psalmist. The Psalmist indeed spoke against his, and God's, enemies with the language of retribution; however, much we may be tempted to use his precedent as a rationale for our own behavior, we dare not claim a right to do so. Jesus has shown us another and better way.

9. We need to give preliminary consideration also to verse 9. The Psalmist is consumed by zeal for the House of the LORD. As we have already noted, this passage excludes David from consideration, for the Temple had not yet been built. And although he had his heart set upon building that Temple, and though the LORD reserved that honor for his son Solomon, we have no reason to believe that David's deep desire to build a Temple earned for him the reproach of his contemporaries.

We know that such a phrase would characterize the prophet Jeremiah. He lived in the years before Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonian siege, 586 B.C. During his ministry he inveighed publicly and vigorously against the desecration of the House of the LORD, the Temple, whose sacred precincts had been cheapened and trivialized by greedy commerce and complacent faith. You can read his bitter denunciation against his contemporaries in Jeremiah chapters 7 and 26. Jeremiah was also called a servant of the LORD, and he suffered persecution and scorn at the hands of his contemporaries. Indeed, he suffered quite literally the fate of being sunk into the mire (compare Psalm 69:2 with Jeremiah 38:6). And he responded to his enemies in much the same way as the Psalmist did. Read for example Jeremiah 20, where the prophet was placed into the stocks and spoke a bitter lament.

If we look to verses 34-36 of the Psalm with their emphasis on the rebuilding of Zion and Judah, we are in a time when the nation had been destroyed, and the road ahead lay in the direction of rebuilding what had been destroyed. But we know from such prophets as Haggai and Zechariah that those Israelites who had returned from Babylonian Exile quickly became a discouraged and dispirited people, and the prospect of rebuilding of the Temple began to loom more and more like an impossible dream. Anyone who would seriously propose such a program, and throw himself into the project, would soon be derided by large segments of his contemporaries.

And finally there is the picture of the Suffering Servant of the LORD in Isaiah 53. Here is a figure of one who suffers greatly and, moreover, suffers innocently. His sufferings are inflicted by God himself, but his suffering and final vindication is for the encouragement and deliverance of all.

We shall probably never know just who wrote this Psalm and when it was written. But from the sketches above you can see that in the Old Testament there was the growth of a pattern of an idealized figure, an ideal of suffering for the LORD, even of an innocent suffering under God for the sake of others. Psalm 69 fits into that pattern. Of course we are alerted to that pattern by the actual course of events in the life of Jesus. Every one of the stages above, #1-9, describe Jesus, the embodiment of that ideal, who gave flesh to that picture of faithfulness to God under increasingly hostile circumstances. The single exception would be #8, but even that exception is anticipated in Isaiah 53:7, where the innocent Suffering Servant was oppressed and afflicted, but did not open his mouth.

The New Testament writers frequently quoted verses from this Psalm (there are seventeen references to this Psalm in the New Testament), and thereby alert us to the fact that we should think of Jesus, the Lamb of God, when we read and pray this Psalm. Some of their frequent citations of the Psalm are noted for you below.

When we pray this Psalm we are to do so as Jesus-followers. The reason that this Psalm is a part of the liturgy for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost is that, so understood, it coheres so well

with the Gospel for the Day (Revised Common Lectionary), Matthew 10:24-39. It is a discourse of Jesus to his disciples, whose theme is that the disciple is not above his/her master.

One final preliminary note: I have boxed the excerpts that have been chosen for use in the liturgy. You may judge for yourself whether these excerpts do justice to the riches of this Psalm. I hope that you will not be among the many in the congregation who will not have a clue as to why these verses are an appropriate lesson from the Word of God.

**Vv. 1-4**

- <sup>1</sup> Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.**
- <sup>2</sup> I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.**
- <sup>3</sup> I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.  
My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.**
- <sup>4a</sup> More in number than the hairs of my head  
are those who hate me without cause;**
- <sup>4b</sup> many are those who would destroy me,  
my enemies who accuse me falsely.**

Presumably it is metaphorical language when the Psalmist complains that he is in over his head. But as we have noted, at least in Jeremiah's case, it was also a literal description of what Jeremiah had to endure.

- <sup>4c</sup> What I did not steal  
must I now restore?**

This is a colorful way of protesting one's innocence.

**Vv. 5-12**

- <sup>5</sup> O God, you know my folly;  
the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you.**
- <sup>6</sup> Do not let those who hope in you be put to shame because of me,  
O Lord GOD of hosts;  
do not let those who seek you be dishonored because of me,  
O God of Israel.**

When the Psalmist protests his innocence in verse 4b and 4c, he of course does not do so in any absolute way. He acknowledges to God that he is guilty of wrong-doing and sheer folly in his behavior. But that is not the point here. The point is that he is placing his hope in God, and that others are encouraged by his example to place their hope also in God. He therefore pleads

with God that God not let him down, because otherwise a lot of good people will be embarrassed and dishonored for having followed his example.

**7 It is for your sake that I have borne reproach,  
that shame has covered my face.**

**8 I have become a stranger to my kindred,  
an alien to my mother's children.**

**9a It is zeal for your house that has consumed me;**

John 2:17 uses this verse to describe the emotions of Jesus as he was cleansing the Temple.

**9b the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.**

In Romans 15:3, St. Paul employs this verse of Jesus, who came to endure human hostility against God.

**10 When I humbled my soul with fasting,  
they insulted me for doing so.**

**11 When I made sackcloth my clothing,  
I became a byword to them.**

**12 I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate,  
and the drunkards make songs about me.**

The Psalmist is asking God for vindication not so much for his own sake, as though he wants to be favored above his detractors. He reminds God that the reproaches he suffers are after all directed ultimately against God. "I have gone out on a limb for you, O God. I am zealous for the honor of your House. I am fasting and humbling myself before you in the prescribed manner. And for my faith in you, O God, and for practicing the piety you have commanded, I am humiliated. I don't mind that so much for myself, but look at the contempt they are hurling at you, O God!" That seems to be the substance of what the Psalmist is saying.

### **Vv. 13-21**

**13 (NAB) But I pray to you, O LORD,  
for the time of your favor.**

**O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me.**

**With your faithful <sup>14</sup> help rescue  
me from sinking in the mire;**

**let me be delivered from my enemies  
and from the deep waters.**

**15 Do not let the flood sweep over me,  
or the deep swallow me up,  
or the Pit close its mouth over me.**

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

**17 Do not hide your face from your servant,  
for I am in distress—make haste to answer me.**

**18 Draw near to me, redeem me,  
set me free because of my enemies** (and so vindicate me before my enemies).

- 19 You know the insults I receive,  
and my shame and dishonor;  
my foes are all known to you.**
- 20 Insults 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.**
- 21 They gave me poison for food,  
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.**

(All the Gospel writers record how Jesus was literally given vinegar to drink on the cross; see, e.g., Luke 23:36.)

In these verses the Psalmist interrupts his lament briefly with a more petitionary style of prayer to the LORD, before returning once more to a lament.

**Vv. 22-28**

- 22 Let their table** (religious sacrificial feasts at the Temple) **be a trap for them,  
a snare for their allies.**

This is a difficult verse to translate, as you will notice by comparing several translations. It seems to mean that the Psalmist wishes that his enemies' religious observances be the occasion for their destruction; and not for them only, but also that God would at the same time visit his wrath upon all their friends.

- 23 Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and make their loins tremble** (either with fear or from disease) **continually.**

(In Romans 11:9-10 St. Paul quotes vv. 22-23 as being fulfilled when God hardened the hearts of the obstinate in Israel who refused to believe in Jesus as Messiah.)

- 24 Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.**
- 25 May their (en)camp(ment)** (poetic for "village") **be(come) a desolation;  
let no one live in their tents** (poetic for "residence").

(Acts 1:20 finds v. 25 fulfilled in the suicide of Judas and the vacancy he thereby left in the circle of the Twelve. Psalm 109:8b is cited as authorization to fill his place with another.)

- 26 For they persecute those whom you have struck down,  
and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more.**

This verse reveals that the Psalmist understands his persecution at the hands of members of his community to be ultimately from the hand of God.

- 27 Add guilt to their guilt;  
may they have no acquittal from you.**
- 28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.**

We may note these verses above, and we may understand how the Psalmist feels as he prays them. I do not think that we Christians may pray in this way.

**Vv. 29-33**

- 29 But I am lowly and in pain;  
let your salvation, O God, protect me.**  
**30 I will praise the name of God with a song;  
I will magnify him with thanksgiving.**

The Psalmist's pain and persecution are not so severe that he overlooks his duty to thank and to praise God.

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

Praise and thanksgiving are more pleasing to God than any mere external offering of even the finest animal sacrifices. The Psalms often speak this way. It is easy to misunderstand this verse as proposing sacrifices and thanksgiving as mutually exclusive alternatives: either sacrifices or thanksgiving. The alternatives are rather sacrifices with thanksgiving or sacrifices without thanksgiving. God always wants praise and thanksgiving; no amount of sacrifices can compensate for their lack.

- 32 Let the oppressed see it and be glad;  
you who seek God, let your hearts revive.**  
**33 For the LORD hears the needy,  
and does not despise his own that are in bonds.**

In these verses the Psalmist uses four designations for the same group of people: (a) those who are oppressed, namely by members of their own community who are taunting them; (b) those who seek God, namely those who are serious about the will and the way of God in their particular time and circumstance; (c) those who are in need of the LORD's salvation and vindication; and (d) God's own who are in bonds, a term for those suffering Exile. For them the Psalmist prays, that they may experience gladness and the timely revival of their discouraged hearts. "Let them see for themselves, O LORD, that you are indeed Yahweh, who has regard for his own faithful People."

**Vv. 34-36**

- 34 Let heaven and earth praise him,  
the seas and everything that moves in them.**  
**35 For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah;  
and his servants shall live there and possess it;**  
**36 the children of his servants shall inherit it,  
and those who love his name shall live in it.**

The final word, after all the discouraging opposition, after all the lament, after all the vindictiveness, after all the petitions, is the confident assertion that God will indeed rebuild Zion, the mountain that houses the Temple, that God will indeed rebuild the land of promise, that God



will indeed give the land in prosperity and peace to his servants and to children's children, and to all who love the Name of the LORD. Because that day is surely coming, all of heaven and earth are bidden to join in the rejoicing.

Christians of course need to translate these earthly geographical and political references. The Temple as the residence of God has been replaced by the Body of the Incarnate Christ as the residence of God. And that Temple was rebuilt in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

**Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 69:**

God our Father, you fulfilled the ancient prophecies in Christ's passover from death to life. Through the contemplation of his healing wounds, make us zealous for your Church and grateful for your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Nugget

*Interviewer:* On some level or another, it appears that many evangelicals may be yearning for richer ecclesial (=churchly) formation. As you may know, students at a number of evangelical Protestant schools have over the past couple of decades gotten increasingly interested in Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, and more recently in Eastern Orthodoxy. But these developments have dismayed a number of evangelical theologians and other leaders. How much do you think evangelicals should care if their children embrace Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy?

*Methodist Theologian Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University:* I think they ought to rejoice. Then their children have the best possible of worlds and the parents did good (sic). Look, there's no way that evangelical life is sustainable within a liberal economy. And so their children are just figuring out now where you have to go to survive. Evangelical parents ought to be happy about that.

*Interviewer:* Why is evangelical life not sustainable in a liberal economy?

*Hauerwas:* There's no way it will be able to resist, for example, the church-growth movement. Churches in the church growth movement may last ten years, but I don't think they'll last a century. Evangelicalism cannot help but be susceptible to a market economy to try to attract people on the grounds that "we have what you've been looking for." Traditional Christianity says, "Outside Christ and the church, you don't have the slightest idea what you're looking for. That's why you need us to reshape you and your desires."

*Walter E. Keller*

June 20, 1999 – **The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**