

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Six

PSALM 69

Rejected Because of Zeal for God

Some people are hated for what they did wrong. This man is hated for what he did right. He fasted, and they made jokes about it. He wore sackcloth, and he became the town's favorite insult. He cared about the house of God more than anyone around him, and it cost him his brothers, his reputation, and very nearly his mind. "More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause."

After Psalm 110, no psalm is quoted more often in the New Testament than Psalm 69. It shows up when Jesus clears the temple, when He explains to the apostles why the world hates them, when He hangs on the cross and says "I thirst," when Paul writes about Israel's hardening, when Paul tells the strong in Rome to bear with the weak, and when Peter stands up among the disciples and explains what to do about Judas. That is a remarkable range for one Hebrew song. And yet the same psalm contains a line that could never have come from the lips of Jesus, and a section of prayers against enemies so severe that many Christians quietly skip them.

We are going to read all of it. Read Psalm 69 twice this week, once straight through and once with a pencil, and do not skip verses 22 to 28. Then read John 2:13 to 22, John 15:18 to 25, John 19:28 to 30, Romans 15:1 to 4, Romans 11:1 to 12, and Acts 1:15 to 26. By the end of this lesson you will know more than how the New Testament uses one psalm. You will know how the New Testament reads the Old.

First impressions

The superscription reads, "To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. Of David." "According to Lilies" is almost certainly a tune name, the way we might write "to the tune of Amazing Grace" at the top of a hymn. The occasion is not given. David knew years of being hunted by Saul and later of being driven out by his own son, and the psalm fits a season when the man who cared most about God's honor was the man everyone found it easiest to despise. When he speaks of God's "house," he is not thinking of Solomon's temple, which did not yet exist, but of the tent where the ark rested and of the God who dwelt there. Read 2 Samuel 6 and 7 sometime and you will see how consuming that concern was for him.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 69 straight through twice before working the questions. Where does the psalm turn from complaint to praise?
 - b. What in this psalm bothered you most on first reading?

Sinking in deep waters (69:1–4)

The psalm opens with drowning, not with fighting. Water at the neck, mire with no foothold, a flood sweeping over him, a throat worn out from crying, eyes going dim from watching for God who has not yet come. It is one of the most physical descriptions of despair in the Bible. And then the reason: he is hated, and hated "without cause," by people more numerous than the hairs of his head. The last line of verse 4 is a courtroom picture: "What I did not steal must I now restore?" He is being made to pay for something he never took.

2. Read 69:1 to 3. List the images the psalmist uses for what he is going through. Which one is the most honest description of a hard season you have known?

3.
 - a. Read 69:4. What is the charge against these enemies, and how does the psalmist describe their number and their methods?

 - b. "What I did not steal must I now restore?" Describe in your own words what it feels like to pay for something you did not do.

O God, you know my folly (69:5–12)

Now stop at verse 5, because everything in this lesson depends on how you handle it. "O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you." David does not claim to be sinless. He claims to be innocent of what these particular enemies accuse him of, while admitting that God knows him better than anyone and that there is plenty God could name. That is exactly right for David, and it is exactly wrong for Jesus, who committed no sin (1 Peter 2:22) and who could ask His enemies to their faces, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46).

Here is the point to grasp, and it will serve you for the rest of your life as a Bible reader. The New Testament never quotes Psalm 69:5 of Jesus. It quotes verses 4, 9, 21, 22 to 23, and 25. It treats the psalm the way it treats Jonah in the fish or the bronze serpent in the wilderness: as a real thing that happened to a real person, in which God had built a pattern that Jesus would fill up completely. David is the righteous sufferer, though not a sinless one. Jesus is the righteous sufferer with nothing left out.

4.
 - a. Read 69:5. What is David admitting?

b. Read Hebrews 4:15, 1 Peter 2:22, and John 8:46. Could Jesus have prayed verse 5? Why not?

c. Then how can the New Testament put other lines of this psalm in Jesus' mouth without twisting Scripture? Answer in two or three sentences of your own.

Study Skill, The Difference Between Prophecy and Type: A direct prophecy is a prediction: a prophet says something will happen, and later it happens. Micah 5:2 naming Bethlehem is a direct prophecy. A type is different. A type is a real person, event, or institution in the Old Testament in which God has planted a pattern that finds its full and final expression in Christ. The Passover lamb, the bronze serpent (John 3:14), Jonah's three days (Matthew 12:40), Melchizedek (Hebrews 7), and Adam (Romans 5:14) are all types the New Testament itself identifies. Two rules keep this safe. First, a type resembles Christ at the point Scripture presses, not at every point; Jonah ran from God, and the bronze serpent was a piece of metal on a pole, but neither fact ruins the comparison. Second, we only claim a type where Scripture authorizes the connection, not wherever we notice a resemblance. Psalm 69 is a textbook case. The New Testament presses the hatred without cause, the consuming zeal, the reproach, the thirst, and the desolation of the enemy. It leaves verse 5 alone.

5.
 - a. Read 69:6. What is the psalmist afraid of, and who is he worried about?
 - b. What does that fear tell you about him?
6.
 - a. Read 69:7 to 9. Why exactly is he bearing reproach? Note the phrase "for your sake."
 - b. Verse 8 says he has become "a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons." Read John 7:1 to 5. What happened to Jesus in His own family?
7. Read 69:10 to 12. Name the three things he is mocked for. Notice that every one of them is an act of devotion. Why does genuine devotion so often draw ridicule?

Poison and sour wine (69:13–21)

Verse 13 is the turn in the middle of the darkness: "But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD." He does not stop praying. Then verses 19 to 21 give us the loneliest lines in the psalm. "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." The Hebrew word behind "poison" refers to a bitter, toxic plant, and the older translations render it "gall." "Sour wine" is the cheap vinegar wine that laborers and soldiers drank. Together they picture the last insult offered to a dying man: not even a cup of water, but something bitter.

8.
 - a. Read 69:19 to 20. What has broken his heart, and what did he look for and not find?
 - b. Read 69:21. Now read Matthew 27:34 and 27:48 and John 19:28 to 29. What did the soldiers offer Jesus, and how many details line up?

For Further Study: Set the four Gospel accounts of the drink at the cross side by side: Matthew 27:34 and 27:48; Mark 15:23 and 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:28 to 30. Notice that Jesus was offered a drink twice, that He refused the first and received the second, and that John says the second happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled. What was the difference between the two offers, and why might Jesus have refused one and accepted the other?

The hardest verses in the psalm (69:22–28)

Now come seven verses that many Christians read once and never read again. Let their table become a snare. Let their eyes be darkened. Pour out Your indignation on them. May their camp be a desolation. Add to them punishment upon punishment. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living. These are called imprecations, prayers calling down God's judgment. They are in the Bible, God put them there, and we are not going to pretend they say something gentler than they say.

Several things should be said honestly. These are prayers, not plans; the psalmist asks God to act and does not lift a hand himself. They are prayers for justice against settled, unrepentant wickedness, prayed by a man who has been slandered and abandoned. They belong to a covenant in which God's justice was largely expected within this life. And, most importantly for us, the New Testament picks up two of these very verses and shows us how they are to be used.

9.
 - a. Read 69:22 to 28 slowly. What is the psalmist actually asking God to do, and what is he not asking to do himself?

- b. Read 69:26. What reason does he give for the request?

- c. Read Romans 12:19 to 21 and 1 Peter 2:23. How does a Christian handle the desire that lies underneath these verses?

For Thought and Discussion: Revelation 6:9 to 10 shows the souls of the martyrs under the altar crying out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood?" That is an imprecation, prayed in heaven, by people God calls holy. So the longing for justice is not itself sinful. Where is the line between longing for God's justice and nursing personal revenge? Does the fact that vengeance belongs to God make it easier or harder for you to let go of it?

The vow of praise (69:29–36)

The psalm does not end in the dark. Verse 29 turns the corner, and by verse 30 the man who was drowning is singing. Notice what he says in verse 31: praise and thanksgiving "will please the LORD more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs." That is the same note we heard in Psalm 40:6, and it is not a coincidence; it runs all through the Psalter. And notice who he thinks about at the end: the humble, the needy, God's own people who are prisoners, and the future of Zion. A man in agony ends by praying for other people.

- 10. Read 69:29 to 36. What does the psalmist promise to do, whom does he think about, and what does he believe God will do in the end?

The apostles read Psalm 69

Now open the New Testament and watch six writers or speakers reach for this one psalm. Read each passage in its own context, not just the quoted line, and ask each time what the writer is using the psalm to prove.

- 11.
 - a. Read John 2:13 to 22. What did Jesus do, and what did the disciples remember from Psalm 69:9? Notice that John writes "will consume me" where the psalm says "has consumed me." What might that small change be saying about where the zeal of Jesus was heading?

 - b. Read Romans 15:1 to 4, which quotes the second half of Psalm 69:9. What is Paul asking the strong Christians in Rome to do, and how does the example of Christ support it?

12.
 - a. Read John 15:18 to 25. Jesus quotes Psalm 69:4 ("They hated me without a cause"). What is He preparing the apostles for?
 - b. Read John 19:28 to 29. John says Jesus spoke "to fulfill the Scripture." Which line of Psalm 69 is being fulfilled, and what does that tell you about how deliberately Jesus went to the cross?
13.
 - a. Read Romans 11:7 to 12, where Paul quotes Psalm 69:22 to 23. Of whom is Paul speaking, and what has happened to them?
 - b. Now read Romans 11:1 to 2 and 11:11 to 14 and 11:23. Is Paul saying God is finished with these people? What does he actually say?
 - c. Read Acts 1:15 to 26, where Peter quotes Psalm 69:25 along with Psalm 109:8. Notice that the psalm says "their camp" and Peter says "his camp." What is Peter using the psalm to decide, and what does the change from plural to singular show you about how the apostles applied Scripture?

Study Skill, Reading a Quotation Back in Its Original Context: Whenever the New Testament quotes the Old, do three things. First, find the quoted verse in the Old Testament and read the whole paragraph around it. Second, read the whole paragraph around the quotation in the New Testament. Third, ask what the New Testament writer is using the quotation to prove. Do that with Romans 11:9 to 10 and Psalm 69:22 to 23 and you will find something a hasty reader misses entirely: Paul quotes a prayer for hardening, and then in the very next verses insists that the hardening is partial, that it is not final, and that God's purpose in it is mercy. The quotation is not Paul's conclusion. It is one step in an argument that ends in Romans 11:30 to 32 with mercy for everyone. A quotation ripped out of its argument can be made to say almost anything. Read the argument.

The rejected One and the reproached church

Put the pieces together. Jesus was consumed by zeal for His Father's house, and it got Him killed. He was hated without a cause, misunderstood by His own family, mocked for His devotion, given vinegar when He was thirsty, and left without one comforter. Every reproach that was aimed at God landed on Him.

Romans 15:3 says it in seven words: "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." That is what He did with the psalm. He lived it.

And then He handed it to us. He told the apostles plainly that the world would hate them because it hated Him first (John 15:18 to 25). He told all of us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44), and He did it Himself from the cross (Luke 23:34), and Stephen did it while the stones were falling (Acts 7:60). We are not given the imprecations as a script for our anger. We are given something harder and better: we hand the whole matter of justice to God, who will certainly do right (Romans 12:19; 2 Thessalonians 1:6 to 8), and then we go feed our enemy and give him a drink.

Optional Application: Think of one person who has genuinely wronged you and who has never made it right. This week, pray for that person by name, every day, asking God to bring them to repentance and to bless them. If Romans 12:20 gives you an opportunity to do them an actual good turn, take it. Then write down what praying for them did to you.

Your response

14. Psalm 69:9 says zeal for God's house consumed him. Be honest: what consumes you? If someone watched your calendar and your bank account for a month, what would they say you are zealous for?
15. Verse 20 says, "I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none." Who do you know who is looking for a comforter right now and not finding one? What will you do about it this week?
16. Write one specific step you will take in light of what God has shown you in this psalm, and one prayer you would like the group to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask the class this question and let it sit: "Have you ever been punished for doing the right thing?" Do not press for painful stories. One or two short answers will open the psalm better than any introduction you could give.

Discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance. Question 4 is essential; the whole method of this series stands or falls on it, and the class should be able to explain in their own words why the New Testament can use a psalm without claiming every line of it. Questions 11, 12, and 13 are the heart of the hour. Question 9 will take longer than you expect, so decide beforehand how much time it gets. Watch the clock and do not let the imprecations swallow the lesson.

Wrap-up. Read Romans 15:1 to 4 aloud, then Romans 12:19 to 21. Close by praying for people the class knows who are being reproached for Christ right now, and by naming, silently, one enemy each person will pray for this week.