

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Ken Wood

The Messianic Psalms

Psalm 69

[Please note : English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

Today's talk is on Psalm 69 and is part of our series on what are called the Messianic Psalms. A Messianic Psalm is one of the 150 songs in the Bible's "hymn book", the Book of Psalms, which is specifically quoted in the New Testament, and shown there to be speaking prophetically about the Messiah, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ. As I see it, however, Christ is never far from view when we read the Bible, regardless of whether or not the part we are actually reading at any moment explicitly and unmistakably refers to Him. It follows that, as far as I'm concerned, we can see much in this psalm which points us to Him, irrespective of whether or not there is direct New Testament authority for saying so.

Let's now read the whole of Psalm 69.

"To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. Of David.

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.

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 dishonour through me,
O God of Israel.

For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach,
that dishonour 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.

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 dishonour;
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.

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!

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.”

A Psalm of Sorrow

There are not many places in the Bible where we find such a graphic description of someone in deep distress of soul, as is found in much of this psalm. Perhaps when you listen to the words of the writer, David, describing how he feels that he is sinking in deep waters and is all but overwhelmed, you want to murmur, “Yes. I’ve been there. I know how that feels.” Perhaps, too,

you can relate to the feeling that he describes of being worn out with crying to God for help, and yet it seems that God does not answer.

This psalm has been described as one of the four great “sorrow psalms”, the others being Psalm 22, Psalm 88 and Psalm 102. The Book of Psalms is actually made up of five books, and in many Bibles you will find some indication of where each of these sections begins. One of the four sorrow psalms is found in each of the first four books of Psalms. But there is no sorrow psalm in the fifth book. This, I would suggest, is symbolic of a magnificent truth about the nature of God. God is the author of happy endings! Most people are familiar with the phrase “and they all lived happily ever after.” It is the standard ending for a fairy tale. But it is also a completely accurate description of what God truly desires for each of us. It is only if we persist in wilful rebellion against Him that we will miss out on that ultimate blessing which God longs for us to enjoy.

The Man of Sorrows

In this psalm, then, we hear the words of a man who is enduring deep and unrelieved sorrow. Yes, it was written by David, and it tells us how David really felt, but in its deeper meaning, it is about Christ! And so, as we study the words of this psalm, we must try to take in the amazing truth that they accurately describe the experience of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, when He was here on earth.

The prophet Isaiah describes Him as a Man of sorrows, one who knew grief¹. I don't believe anyone has ever lived who has experienced greater sorrow than was endured by the Lord Jesus. Those who hurl criticism at God for allowing a world to exist in which there is so much suffering, should remember this sobering fact. No-one can teach God anything about sorrow. He has experienced it, far more deeply than anyone else.

Later, I intend to consider some of the verses of this psalm in detail, but before we get to that, let's say a little more about the sufferings which the Lord Jesus passed through. I am going, first of all, to make a distinction between two very different ways in which He suffered. Let me just say that He suffered for righteousness at the hand of man, but He suffered for sin at the hand of God.

He suffered for righteousness, at the hand of man

To say that He suffered “at the hand of man” means, of course, that He endured ill-treatment, of several different kinds, resulting from the actions of His fellow men. Firstly, He was subjected to violence which was unutterably horrific. He was beaten and spat upon by the Roman soldiers. The same soldiers made a crown out of thorns and pressed it onto His head in a mock coronation². He was subject to scourging³, which is far more brutal than simple whipping, because it is carried out with a whip fitted with small pieces of stone which is dragged across the victim's back. After being scourged, He was then required to carry His cross, as it rested on His back⁴. And that cross would be made out of raw, unsmoothed wood. But all of these tortures pale into insignificance when we think of the horrendous act of crucifixion itself, generally agreed to be the cruellest form of execution ever devised. I will refrain from going into details about how exactly it is understood to have worked.

Not only did the Lord suffer physically at the hand of man, but He also suffered emotionally, and this Psalm specifically describes this. Verse 4 speaks of His being hated without a cause and being “attacked with lies.” This reminds us of His trial before the high priest, at which many false witnesses came forward with accusations against Him, which the court threw out because the witnesses weren't consistent with one another⁵. Following that night-time trial, He stood, early the next day, before the Roman governor Pilate, and listened as the crowd angrily shouted their rejection of Him, demanding that He be crucified⁶.

What kind of emotional suffering could be worse, we might ask, than to listen as witness after witness makes false accusations about you, or as an angry crowd clamours for you to be put to

death? Yet, I believe, there is something which goes beyond even this. It is to be betrayed and abandoned by your closest friends. On the night before, the night of His arrest and trial, the Lord Jesus endured all of this as well. Of those twelve specially chosen followers, the apostles, one, Judas Iscariot, turned traitor and sordidly betrayed Him to the authorities for money. Another of them, Simon Peter, loudly protested with oaths and curses that Jesus was no friend of his, and as for the others, the scripture records that when Jesus was arrested, they all forsook Him and fled.

Yet you'll recall that I said that He suffered for righteousness at the hand of man. Of course, none of the ill-treatment meted out to Him was in any way just. But I said not merely that He suffered unjustly, but that He suffered for righteousness. In other words, it was not just that the things done to Him were done despite the fact that He was so righteous. It goes beyond that. The fact is, I believe, that it was precisely because of His righteousness that they were done to Him.

Perhaps we know people whom we regard as really good people. We may even know someone whose radiant goodness makes us feel ashamed, people whom we actually find irritating, because they never seem to put a foot wrong. Yet the most saintly person you've ever met is still a sinner, someone who in thought and word and deed falls far short of God's standard of righteousness.

Jesus alone, of all men who ever walked this earth, was without sin. For so many of His contemporaries who thought of themselves as religious people, as upright, good living people, the way in which they were unavoidably shown up by Him, how their pride and hypocrisy were searched out and exposed, became more than they could stand. In the end, the shining perfection of His life was too much for them.

He suffered for sin at the hand of God

Now, it is the way in which the Lord Jesus suffered at the hand of man which is mainly brought out in this psalm, but there is also an entirely different way in which He suffered. I am referring now to how He suffered for sin at the hand of God.

His suffering at the hand of man, whilst much more extreme towards the end of His life, as we have been describing, really went on throughout His life. His suffering at the hand of God was confined to His time upon the cross. His suffering at the hand of man, we can make some sort of attempt to understand, but His suffering at the hand of God is completely beyond us.

Whilst the Lord hung upon the cross, in the middle of the day, the scripture records that there came over the land a great darkness. This was an altogether unnatural event which lasted for three hours. It was as if nature could not bear to look on, as its Creator sustained the full weight of the wrath of God against sin. It was during those hours of darkness that He called out, quoting the opening words of another of the sorrow psalms, Psalm 22:

“My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”⁷

The prophet Isaiah, in verses 5 & 6 of the chapter I quoted from earlier, spells out for us what was happening at that time. This is what he says:

“He was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

When we say that He suffered for sin at the hand of God, what we mean is that He suffered for our sins, that He died as our substitute, willingly laying down His life so that we may be released from the penalty due to us!

The last part of verse 4 of Psalm 69 (“what I did not steal, must I now restore?”) seems to me to describe very beautifully how the Lord paid the penalty of sin on our behalf. I’ve quoted it from the English Standard Version, which, for some reason, treats it as a question. Most other translations I’ve looked at, don’t do this. It’s certainly much easier to understand simply as a statement. It is telling us that He has paid the last penny of what we owed on account of our sins.

The Psalm in detail

Let’s now go through the psalm in a bit more detail, looking at each small group of verses in turn.

Like many of the psalms, it begins with a heading, dedicating it to “the choirmaster” (sometimes translated “Chief Musician”). “According to Lilies” is believed to refer to either a tune, or some other detail of how it was to be sung.

The first four verses set the tone of the psalm, with their references to sinking in the deep mire, and to being hated without a cause. In John’s Gospel chapter 15 verse 25, the Lord speaks of how His being hated without a cause is written in the scriptures, although it’s possible that He was referring to Psalm 35 verse 19 rather than to this psalm.

Verses 5 and 6, which refer to the writer’s folly and wrongdoing, show that not every verse can be applied to the Lord, although those things were of course true of David.

In verses 7 to 12, the writer’s sufferings are explicitly said to be on account of his faithfulness to God. Here we can surely see the Lord suffering for righteousness at the hand of man, worked out in practical detail in some of these verses. Verse 8, whilst it is not quoted in the Gospels, seems to speak of the way in which the Lord’s natural brothers were offended at Him and didn’t believe in Him⁸, that is, not until after His resurrection.

The first part of verse 9, which refers to His zeal for God’s house, is quoted in John chapter 2 verse 17, in connection with one of the occasions when He cleansed the Temple, driving out the money changers and traders.

The second part of the verse is quoted in Romans 15 verse 3. There, Paul, in writing to the Christians at Rome, simply takes the psalmist’s words as a straightforward historical statement about the Lord, and argues from it that the Lord did not please Himself, but rather submitted to the will of God, suffering the reproach that followed from that willing submission.

In verses 13 to 18, the psalmist pours out his prayer to God to deliver him from his troubles. Weary with waiting for God he may be, as he states in verse 3, yet there is no hint of any criticism of God. Instead, he repeatedly appeals to God on account of the abundance of His steadfast love and mercy. He is content (verse 13) to wait until it is God’s time to act.

In verses 19 to 21, we return to the psalmist’s sufferings. The details in verse 21 seem a very accurate prophecy of the incident, recorded by all four Gospel writers, in which the Lord, whilst on the cross, was offered sour wine, or vinegar, to drink, although none of them mentions this Psalm. Matthew even records that it was mixed with gall, a bitter and poisonous herb⁹.

Verses 22 to 28 are an example of a type of prayer sometimes found in the Old Testament. It is a demand for justice, for the judgement of God to be brought down upon the guilty.

Now it is a great, and very solemn, certainty that justice will indeed be done one day. It will be pronounced by the only perfect Judge. In Acts chapter 17 verses 30 and 31, Paul declares that:

“God...commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.”

The man referred to here is the Lord Jesus. We can be thankful that in our land we have judges and courts which make sincere and strenuous efforts to be fair, and to take into account all the factors in a case. But they can never be perfect, because they can only go by the evidence put before them, and the testimony they hear. They cannot see into the human heart, but on that day, there will be a Judge Who can. And every plea for justice that has ever been uttered, ever since sin came into the world, will, I believe, be fully satisfied when He does.

Whilst this kind of prayer is found in the Old Testament, it is not for us as Christians, to ask for God to take vengeance on those who treat us unjustly. We are followers of Him Who taught that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us¹⁰.

The closing verses of the psalm turn at last to a positive note. They express the psalmist's confidence that God will answer prayer and will relieve the suffering. He expresses his intention to praise God (verse 30) and urges heaven and earth to do the same (verse 34).

In Luke chapter 24, there is a famous account of an encounter on the day Christ rose from the dead. Two of the disciples, not yet aware that He had risen, were walking from Jerusalem to a nearby village, when Jesus Himself joined them, but they were prevented from recognising Him. As they explained why they were so downcast, He rebuked them with the words:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”¹¹

As they walked on, He showed them from the scriptures that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer as He had, and how He would then enter into His glory.

Perhaps the scriptures He opened up to them on that day included the Psalm we've been considering. If so, then those two, surely the most privileged of all Bible students ever, must have received a vastly more complete explanation of those sufferings than I've been able to give in this talk. Perhaps too, their hearts were set on fire by the rising note of praise on which it ends, and the certainty that He Who suffered so much has now entered into His glory.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Psalm 69, in our series on the Messianic Psalms - talk number 1271. Scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version.

¹ Isa 53:3 ² John 19:2-3 ³ John 19:1(NKJV) ⁴ John 19:17 ⁵ Mark 14:56-59 ⁶ Matt 27:22-23 ⁷ Matt 27:45-46 ⁸ John 7:5 ⁹ Matt 27:34 ¹⁰ Matt 5:44 ¹¹ Luke 24:25-26

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