

Focusing on Others in the Midst of Our Suffering

In my previous article, I called attention to the fact that—as we go forward into this New Year—we may find ourselves, like David, overwhelmed by the attacks and persecution of others. Verse 2 of Psalm 69 extends this metaphor of being *overwhelmed* with the phrase “...the flood sweeps over me.” David reminds us of the need for a firm “*foothold*” when we’re suffering if we’re going to keep from being *totally overwhelmed*. I noted last time that this Psalm points forward to Jesus Christ (see below) who is the firm foothold for his people. Notice next in verse 3 that David must have been experiencing this persecution for quite some time already. “I am *weary* with crying out; my throat is parched.” This phrase pictures someone who has cried out to God for a long time but who seems to have nothing available to him to soothe his burning throat.

Along with a “parched throat” David’s strength is literally spent. “My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.” In other words, “I’m so weary I’m not even able to keep a steady watch against the attacks of the enemy. I need some rest and relief.” Notice now verse 4: “More in number than the hairs of my head are those who *hate me without cause*...” This is clearly a difficult time in David’s life and, seemingly, coming from great numbers of people. This phrase, “those who hate me without cause,” points us forward across redemptive history. This was fulfilled by Jesus Christ on the night before he was crucified. At this point in John’s gospel, Judas has already departed from the group and has gone on his mission of betrayal. In John 15, Jesus is teaching his remaining 11 disciples a lesson on those who will hate them—for who they stand with, and for what they stand for. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you....Whoever hates me hates my Father also....But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘*They hated me without a cause.*’” (John 15:18, 23, 25)

It’s been suggested that these first few verses of Psalm 69 can be compared to Hebrews 5:7-9 in the New Testament and can be seen as a commentary on what Jesus experienced in his humanity here on earth: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect (*referring to his completed work on behalf of sinners*), he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him...”

Clearly, unlike Jesus, David was not perfect, but David certainly believes he’s innocent of anything that would cause this *intense* persecution. As we look further in verse 4, David declares that his enemies “attack me with lies.” The phrase in verse 4 translated, “What I did not steal must I now restore?” is just to say that David believes that he’s being treated as a criminal who’s being punished for something that he hasn’t done.

David continues to make the case that he believes himself to be innocent and does not deserve this intense persecution. Let's move on now from sinking in the mire to:

—Seeking to Honor God in the Midst of Suffering:

After what David has said about his innocence, we may wonder what's going on as this next section begins talking about David's sin. Notice verse 5: "O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you." Is David saying that his sin is the cause of his suffering? I would suggest that David is merely acknowledging the obvious: He knows that he's far from perfect and the fact that God's people have *often* sinned in the midst of their suffering is very real. What David is saying—and we see this from the following verses—is that he doesn't *ever* want his sin to be a negative example to other's in the Covenant community.

"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 dishonor *through me*, O God of Israel." (vs. 6)
This is an *amazing example* that we want to seek, by grace, to emulate. It can be so easy to fall into patterns of *only* focusing on the wrongs that are being done *to us* and the suffering that we're going through. When we do that, we can fall into grumbling and complaining and even seem as if we've lost our trust in God. We can sometimes forget that we're called to honor God—including taking our primary focus off of ourselves and considering how our lives can impact others—even in the midst of reproach and unjust suffering.

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