

Lament and Praise

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Date: 22 March 2026

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[0 : 00] Good morning. It is good to see you this morning. It's good to be here. I was supposed to be here last week as well. And yeah, that snow made it impossible. And you definitely had more snow up here than we did in Sheboygan as well. So probably good that we worshiped in other ways last week, but it's good to be here this week. My name is Chuck Adams. I'm a member at Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Sheboygan.

And I bring you greetings from fellow brothers and sisters at Calvin Church and also from the whole denomination. I serve as your representative from all of the Christian Reformed churches in Wisconsin to the Council of Delegates. And so I bring you greetings as well from the denomination. This morning, our text is going to be from the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible. It's also one of the most honest.

In the Psalms we hear many voices, many emotions. Some Psalms are joyful, others are calm and confident, and many are full of pain and confusion and questions.

One writer says the book of Psalms strikes nearly every theological chord that resounds through the Hebrew scriptures. And yet, for all of their variety, the Psalms share at least one thing in common.

[1 : 28] They're mostly made up of words that are spoken by people to God. Praise for help and songs of praise and prayers spoken in real trouble.

They're inspired by God, but they come from real human lives. They come from below rather than on high. They're shaped by fear, by anger, by hope, and by trust.

And because of this, the Psalms express a wide range of emotions. As I said, some are full of joy, but others are full of grief. One scholar has said that the Psalms are moody because they reflect real life.

And today, especially as we walk through the season of Lent, this honesty of the Psalms matters. Lent is not a season of pretending that everything is fine.

It's a season of reflection, repentance, and of waiting. Lent invites us to slow down, to face the brokenness in our lives and in the world, and to bring all of it honestly for God.

[2 : 36] This morning, we're reading Psalm 69, which is a psalm of lament. If you have your Bible with you, please turn to Psalm 69.

Towards the end of the sermon, I'm going to be reading through it again, so you may appreciate having the text in front of you then. Otherwise, you can certainly read along on the screen or just listen along as I read.

So here are the words of Psalm 69. Psalm 69.

Psalm 69. Psalm 69. Psalm 69. You know my folly, O God. My guilt is not hidden from you. May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, O 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. For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face.

[4 : 03] I'm a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons. For zeal for your house consumes me, and the insult of those who insult 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 drunkard.

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. Rescue me from the mire.

Do not let me sink. Deliver me from those who hate me, from 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.

[5 : 03] Redeem me because of my foes. You know how I am scorned, disgraced, and shamed. All my enemies are before you. 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. May the table set before them become a snare.

May it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so 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. Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again. From the depths of the earth you will again bring me up. You will increase my honor and comfort me once again. I will praise you with a harp. For your faithfulness, O my God, I will sing praise to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.

[6 : 10] My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you, I whom you have redeemed. My tongue will tell of your righteous acts all day long. For those who wanted to harm me have been put to shame and confusion.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Psalm 69 is part of a large group of psalms that are called Psalms of Lament.

Nearly a third of the psalms fall into this category. Many of them were designed to be communal, meaning that there are 20 psalms of lament that are meant to be prayed and sung together as a people.

A few years back, this realization led some churches to request that the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church suggest that all of the churches in our denomination spend more time praying prayers of lament.

The churches who made the request point out that David, a man after God's own heart, authentically struggled and wrestled with God in the deepest parts of his emotions concerning the difficult circumstances he faced in life.

[7 : 22] Lament psalms teach us how to bring anger and grief and fear to God. They show us that faith is not pretending that we're strong. It's trusting God enough to be honest.

Scripture is full of lament. John cries out in confusion. Jeremiah writes an entire book of laments. Prophets like Habakkuk question God openly.

These people trusted God deeply. And that trust gave them the freedom to ask hard questions. I think this is especially important during Lent.

Lent reminds us that we live in the in-between. Between suffering and resurrection. Between confession and forgiveness. Between grief and hope.

Lament keeps us from being bitter. Instead of turning away from God, lament turns us towards God. It says, God, this hurts. And I don't understand, but I am still coming to you.

[8 : 28] And lament is also something that we need to do together as a people of God. The writers of that request to synod point out that we're currently witnessing a tragic number of our young people who are leaving the faith.

One of the reasons they suggest that might be leading to this loss of faith is the desire for an authentic faith in God. A faith in which we are able to question God about the reality of our lives. See, our world is full of injustice. It's full of violence and pain. And when the church learns to lament together, we can show the world that God welcomes honesty.

And that God cares deeply about what is broken. Some psalms of lament, including Psalm 69, contain imprecations or prayers that call down calamity and destruction and God's anger and judgment on his enemies.

And these verses can sound rather harsh to our ears. Psalm 69 has a whole section of imprecations starting at verse 22. Psalm 5 is one of the less extreme of those psalms.

[9 : 39] There the psalmist asks, Declare them guilty, O God. Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they've rebelled against people. Psalm 79 is another imprecatory psalm, and it's a little rougher.

There we read, Psalm 137 is perhaps the hardest for our ears to hear and for our minds to understand.

It says there, As hard as this language is to hear or to understand, it is important to hear the imprecatory psalms.

Just as it's a problem if we ignore the psalms of lament, we also make a mistake to ignore these imprecations in the psalms, or to chalk them up as simply being from a pre-Christian era. Esau Macaulay is an Anglican priest. He teaches at Wheaton College, and he wrote a book entitled, *Reading While Black, African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*.

[10:59] And in that book, Macaulay points out that the imprecatory psalms were a way for Israel to process their anger and their rage, and that they can also serve that way for us, especially when we're dealing with seemingly impossible issues of injustice and evil.

Now that rage is not an end in and of itself, and Macaulay himself recognizes this. He entitled his chapter on the imprecatory psalms, *What Shall We Do With This Rage?*

He notes that the psalmist and the Old Testament prophets, who most frequently use imprecatory language, warn that there is an ever-spiraling cycle of violence that is a dead end.

And he says that the gospel of Christ shows us the cross is the place where God enters into it, and thereby makes the cross the end of the cycle of violence and death.

See, imprecatory psalms are not about personal revenge. They're about bringing our rage and our injustice to God, rather than acting on them ourselves.

[12:09] These prayers come from people who have been deeply wronged, people who've been pushed into the mud, people with no power left. And instead of taking violence into their own hands, they place their anger into God's hand.

Lent reminds us that the cross is where God enters human suffering. At the cross, Jesus bears injustice and violence without passing in.

The cycle of violence ends. These psalms give us permission to name evil honestly, while still trusting in God to bring about justice.

Now let's take a look at Psalm 69 specifically, and kind of work through it. And again, if you have Psalm 69 open in front of you, we'll kind of walk through it once again.

In Psalm 69, you'll see that there's a pattern to the psalm. It's a pattern that's quite common to many laments in Scripture. If you look carefully, you'll see that Psalm 69 is really made up of six parts.

[13:15] It moves back and forth between prayer and pain. First, there's an opening prayer for salvation, followed by a lament. Then there's a prayer for salvation that's followed by another lament.

Next come the implications, followed by a final doxology, or a song of praise. The psalm opens with a cry for help. Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in the miry depths where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters. The floods engulf me. I'm worn out, calling for help. My throat is parched.

My eyes fail, looking for my God. Flooding waters were a powerful image for ancient Israel. To be underwater meant chaos and danger and death.

And we still use this kind of language today. We say we feel overwhelmed or like we are drowning. The psalmist feels this, and he cries out to God.

[14:18] His words invite us to name those moments when we feel overwhelmed, and we bring those times honestly for God. Next comes the lament.

The psalmist describes rejection and shame and loneliness, even from his own family. 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'm forced to restore what I did not steal. You, God, know my folly. My guilt is not hidden from you.

Lord, the Lord Almighty, may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me. God of Israel, may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me.

For I endure scorn for your sake and shame covered my face. I'm a foreigner to my own family, a stranger to my own mother's children. For zeal your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.

[15:19] 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. I am a song of drunken.

The psalmist doesn't hide his pain. He doesn't clean himself up before beginning to pray. He comes as he is. God already knows what is in the psalmist's heart, and God already knows what is in our hearts as well.

But lament reminds us that we don't have to pretend for God. Then in verses 13 through 18, the psalmist again asks for rescue, but at this time something changes.

He says, But I pray to you, Lord, in the time of your favor, in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation. Rescue me from the mire. Do not let me sink. Deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me, or the depths swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me.

[16 : 24] Answer me, 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.

Deliver me as of my foes. You see there in verses 14 and 15, an echo of that flood theme from the first two verses. The psalmist fears sinking into the mire and into the depths. That language of mud and mire, the slimy pit, the depths of the sea repeats itself throughout the psalms. One of the places where you see that is also in Psalm 40. Psalm 40 is one of my favorite psalms, and I'll readily admit that one of the reasons it's one of my favorites is the Psalm 40 by the band U2. Back in the 1980s, U2 regularly played the Psalm 40 at the end of their concerts.

I never got to a U2 concert back then as a poor college student, but I did occasionally get to hear recordings, both legal and bootleg, of some of their concerts. And the theme of these Irish singers who had been so affected by the injustice of religious warfare in their part of the country, these singers who were waiting patiently for the Lord, waiting for him to incline and hear their cry, waiting for him to lift them out of the pit, out of the miry plain, this theme was so moving to me as a college student then.

[17 : 52] And we see that same theme here repeated in Psalm 69. But did you hear the change? See, the psalmist doesn't only describe his pain, he also remembers God's love and mercy.

He reminds God and himself of the covenant promise. Even in suffering, the psalmist clings to who God is. As he holds together confession and hope, weakness and trust. He remembers the promises of God, even as he still struggles. And yet the pain is not gone. Remembering God's promise doesn't instantly erase grief or shame or injustice. The psalmist names heartbreak and rejection and deep loneliness. Even Jesus echoes these words on the cross when vinegar is offered to him. Psalm 69 recognizes that we cannot solve these things ourselves.

These prayers of lament evoke action from God. They help move the sufferer to a new place. They give us words for the deepest, darkest nights of our lives.

[19 : 03] And they recognize that just remembering won't end our lament. Lament gives us words when pain returns again and again.

You know how I am scorned, disgraced, and shamed. All my enemies are before you. 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. Now we move into the imprecation part of the psalm, where the psalmist's tears and rage burst out in intense expression against enemies.

It says there may the table set before them become a snare. May it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so 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've wounded.

[20 : 06] 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 right.

The psalmist cries out for justice. He asks God to deal with those who cause him harm. We, too, ought to feel free to express such intense feelings in our prayers. Because God hears our anger. He hears our cries about things not being the way they were meant to be. He hears our rage against injustice. His prayers remind us that evil matters to God. God isn't indifferent to injustice. But the psalmist also doesn't take that justice into his own hands. He trusts God to act. See, God's people have the promise of divine vengeance. As Christ himself says in Luke 18, Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?

[21 : 15] Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly. In the season of Lent, these words teach us the same patience.

Waiting for God's justice, even when it feels slow. And that brings us to the final verses of Psalm 69. A final doxology.

A song of praise, even in the midst of our suffering. But as for me, afflicted and in pain, may your salvation, God, protect me. 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 hooves. 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.

[22 : 17] The children of his servants will inherit it. And those who love his name will dwell there. This is a praise that's not loud or triumphant. It's a praise that doesn't pretend that all is well and that suffering is over.

But it is a praise that is steady and hopeful. The psalmist trusts that God hears the needy and doesn't forget them. He looks forward to a future restoration.

It's a praise that is directed outward at a God who keeps his promises rather than directed inward at our own feelings. The psalmist gives us a pattern for our lament, especially during that.

Lament and praise that is quiet and faithful, forward-looking. While we lament, we do so in humility and trust, recognizing that we live in a world that is still darkened by sin and that we have no power over death and injustice.

God does. The psalmist had a sure hope that the promise God made to Abraham for the land would be fulfilled. We too can have a sure hope that God is looking after his people, keeping his promise, that the day is coming when, as Revelation 21 verse 4 says, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[23 : 41] Perhaps there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of him as pasting. Perhaps as you read through Psalm 69 with me, you recognized some of the phrases.

This psalm is quoted many times in the New Testament, especially in the story of Jesus' suffering. The lament of this psalm becomes a part of Christ's own story.

Lament is not the opposite of faith. Rather, it is one of faith's strongest expressions. And during Lent, we are reminded that suffering is real, but it is not the end.

We lament honestly, and we trust deeply, and we wait with hope. So let's not rush past lament.

Let's bring our pain to God, and even in our sorrow, let's hold on to trust and praise, looking ahead to the day when every tear is wiped away.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. God, we know that lament is not our final prayer.

[24 : 58] It's a prayer in the meantime, and yet we live in that meantime. Yes, we wait in hope. We know that sorrow is not how the story ends.

The song may be in a minor key now, but one day it will resolve in a major chord. When every tear is wiped away, when death is swallowed up in victory, when heaven and earth are made new and joined as one, when the saints rise in a glorious body, then we will sing at last great hallelujah. For now, though, O Lord, lift our laments to you as we wait with hope. Father of those who are empty of hope and those who are cast out, enter into the chaos of every life with the silence of love. When we choke on bitter memories, hand us the cup of healing. When we wander down lonely streets, bring us home, Lord. Jesus Christ, conqueror of sin's power, enter into our deepest pain where life has bottomed out.

Fraydle our hearts when we cry out with fear. And when we face death, help us to see you stride out of the grave, pointing the way of the kingdom.

[26 : 19] Spirit of the forsaken and bearer of compassion, you are the mist shimmering over the valleys, stirring the waters of creation. You are the dew bathing the flowers every morning, anointing us with resurrection.

God and community, holy three in one. Hear us as we pray together. Would you stand together as we sing our closing song?