

There seems to be a gulf between the realities of our two readings today. One is an anguished cry for help, and the other is an assurance of ready help. Psalm 69 is the main reading, and it is not a generic cry for help, but one that arises from a specific situation. The psalmist has enemies, but does not know why. "My enemies . . . accuse me falsely. What I did not steal must I now restore?" The psalmist does not pretend to be perfect: "O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you." But doesn't feel deserving of the hate he or she is getting.

Apparently whatever happened was the result of something they did *for* God, or out of faithfulness. "It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face." They might have been ineffective or dumb or not strategic, but their intentions were good. Now it seems like everybody has turned against them, that their intentions don't count. "I am the subject of gossip for those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me." This person is just overwhelmed. All the good they tried to do has backfired, and everybody hates them. But God can be trusted: "But as for me, my prayer is to you, O God. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me. . . . Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close its mouth over me."

There is a statement of faith in this lament, and the statement is that God must be held to account. I suffer, and I'm suffering for you, God; help me now. But you don't see the faith fulfilled or justified in the psalm itself, only in the poet's desperate expectation. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, he is unequivocal: "Ask and *it will* be given you; search, and *you will* find; knock, and the door *will be opened* for you. For everyone who asks receives." It's good to hear,

after the raw desperation of the psalm, but we're not sure what to make of it, having been in the psalmist's seat ourselves any number of times.

Janis Joplin famously sang, shortly before her death, "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz. My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends. Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends, So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?" I think Janis knew that wasn't going to happen. When she asks, in the second and third verses of her song for "a color TV" and "a night on the town," she knows that neither will really make her happy. "It's the want of something that gives you the blues," she once said. "It's not what *isn't*, it's what you wish *was* that makes unhappiness." Now, the psalmist isn't asking for superficial material goods; the psalmist is asking for deliverance from deep waters, which perhaps is what Janis really wanted too, but couldn't name.

Just two years ago in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, we all witnessed a deeply peculiar riff on Psalm 69, when the 38K-member Lakewood megachurch of Joel Osteen in Houston failed to provide shelter to victims of actual deep waters ("Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck").

At first, Lakewood representatives [said](#) the site was "inaccessible due to severe flooding." Then, as [photos surfaced](#) showing only a few inches of water on the ground, Lakewood said that it hadn't opened as a shelter because Houston hadn't asked it to, even though the site, a former basketball arena before \$75 million in renovations, seats 16,000 people and could accommodate thousands of victims.

Finally, Osteen said, in fact, "our doors have always been open" (what happened to the severe flooding?) [and that](#) "we were a shelter" (what happened to "we weren't asked?"). <https://www.thedailybeast.com/joel-osteens-prosperity-gospel-made-him-houstons-hurricane-pariah>

Here was a pointed case study on the apparent contradiction between Christian words and Christian deeds, and an implicit question about what Jesus *did* mean

when he said, “everyone who asks receives.” The Christian satire website “Babylon Bee” wrote (tongue in cheek),

Although Joel Osteen took flak over the weekend for closing up his church to flood victims and all but disappearing during the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, the megachurch pastor reportedly returned to the city on his luxury yacht “S.S. Blessed” to make amends Tuesday by tossing copies of *Your Best Life Now* to stranded flood survivors.

Osteen had his on-call yacht captain steer the large vessel through the flooded streets of the city, pulling up to survivors stranded on their roofs and on the roof of their cars as the prosperity gospel preacher smiled, waved, and threw out signed editions of the bestselling positive thinking book.

“Believe and declare you are coming into a shift!” Osteen yelled through a bullhorn, according to reports. “God wants His best for you! Enlarge your vision, develop a healthy self image, and choose to be happy!”

<https://babylonbee.com/news/joel-osteen-sails-luxury-yacht-flooded-houston-pass-copies-best-life-now>

Americans looking at the devastation in Houston saw a failure on the part of a high-profile Christian community to extend real help. This failure was made more /pointed/ by the pastor’s reputation for promising that “everything happens for a reason,” and God will bless *with prosperity* those who have faith. Either a good part of Houston failed to fulfill God’s criteria, or Joel Osteen’s gospel was empty nonsense.

The psalmist has suffered as a consequence of their attempts to be faithful, and while the ordeal is overwhelming, the psalmist takes it straight to God. In other words, there’s no question in their mind that this is something that God deals with. God is an expert on pain, and pays attention to it. I doubt that Joel Osteen had any animus against the Houstonites who were flooded out, but he didn’t seem to feel a connection to their pain, or struggle over how their great building might be a way God could minister to his neighbors’ pain. The prosperity gospel that Osteen

preaches is a gospel of avoiding pain. Sarah Posner, a student of current religious movements, says the prosperity gospel prioritizes achieving personal success over helping those who are in need. While Lakewood maintains a roster of [service opportunities](#), ranging from volunteering at the local food bank to going on a church-run mission to Botswana, these are dwarfed in number by the affinity groups, self-help programs, and advertisements on Lakewood's website.

"When you think about the big prosperity churches like Osteen's, or Kenneth Copeland's, the first thing you think of is not their soup kitchen," Posner said.

"Prosperity churches are focused on selling the merchandise of the pastor," she continued. "A lot of it is about how you can buy this book or this series, focused on how God loves you, or how to have your best life now."

Lakewood's response to Hurricane Harvey was not hostility, but incompetence because they weren't used to dealing with pain. "In contrast to Houston's Catholic churches and other congregations, Lakewood seemed taken by surprise by the whole notion that a church might be called upon to serve the needy. Their focus is simply elsewhere. 'It's God's will for you to live in prosperity instead of poverty,' Osteen has [preached.](https://www.thedailybeast.com/joel-osteens-prosperity-gospel-made-him-houstons-hurricane-pariah)" <https://www.thedailybeast.com/joel-osteens-prosperity-gospel-made-him-houstons-hurricane-pariah>

I think both of today's scriptures are best understood in the context of taking pain seriously. Suffering happens. The psalmist doesn't try to gloss over it; they express it *in detail*, with tremendous specificity, AND claim God's attention. This *is* something that correctly belongs in God's court. And Jesus, for his part, affirms that. You're going to be in need. You're going to be overwhelmed. Ask, search, knock;

God is attuned to the seriousness of such things. God is not, as we know, Santa Claus or a short-order cook, but asking/searching/knocking is how we remind ourselves that God is in this with us, and definitely acting on our behalf regardless of whether we can see it. Ask, search, knock, *because* it's what people in a relationship do, with a neighbor, with your own child. Include God in what's going on with you. It matters to God. I think that's what Jesus is saying. Be like the psalmist. Share in excruciating detail; God's got the time, and it matters. You won't be ignored.

I'm not a fan of wallowing in pain, but we definitely should not deny it, or try to get rid of it glibly. James Finley, clinical psychologist, Center for Action and Contemplation says, "Although it is true that there is no refuge from suffering; it's also true that suffering has no refuge from love that permeates it through and through and through and through and through. Love protects us from nothing, even as it unexplainably sustains us in all things. —Our practice is to become present to that infinite flow of compassion and love and bring it to bear in a tender-hearted and sincere manner in our very presence to the painful situation. We do this knowing that God is sustaining and guiding us all in unexplainable ways that are not dependent on how the painful situation might turn out."

O trustworthy One, may we be wise enough to leap voluntarily into the very fire from which we usually try to escape, with total trust that Jesus' way of the cross cannot, and will not, be wrong. May we trust that his way is the way of solidarity and communion with the larger world, which is indeed passing away and dying—you're your grace, may we trust the eventual passing of all things, and where it is passing to. We ask not to wait for liberation later—after death—but grasp it here and now. Amen.