

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: Angry Prayers**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **Psalm 69**

Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.

<sup>2</sup> I sink in the miry depths,  
where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters;  
the floods engulf me.

<sup>3</sup> I am worn out calling for help;  
my throat is parched.

My eyes fail,  
looking for my God.

<sup>4</sup> 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 am forced to restore  
what I did not steal.

<sup>5</sup> You, God, know my folly;  
my guilt is not hidden from you.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> For I endure scorn for your sake,

and shame covers my face.

- <sup>8</sup> I am a foreigner to my own family,  
a stranger to my own mother's children;  
<sup>9</sup> for zeal for your house consumes me,  
and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.  
<sup>10</sup> When I weep and fast,  
I must endure scorn;  
<sup>11</sup> when I put on sackcloth,  
people make sport of me.  
<sup>12</sup> Those who sit at the gate mock me,  
and I am the song of the drunkards.  
<sup>13</sup> But I pray to you, LORD,  
in the time of your favor;  
in your great love, O God,  
answer me with your sure salvation.  
<sup>14</sup> Rescue me from the mire,  
do not let me sink;  
deliver me from those who hate me,  
from the deep waters.  
<sup>15</sup> Do not let the floodwaters engulf me  
or the depths swallow me up  
or the pit close its mouth over me.  
<sup>16</sup> Answer me, LORD, out of the goodness of your love;  
in your great mercy turn to me.  
<sup>17</sup> Do not hide your face from your servant;  
answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.  
<sup>18</sup> Come near and rescue me;  
deliver me because of my foes.  
<sup>19</sup> You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed;  
all my enemies are before you.  
<sup>20</sup> Scorn has broken my heart  
and has left me helpless;  
I looked for sympathy, but there was none,  
for comforters, but I found none.  
<sup>21</sup> They put gall in my food  
and gave me vinegar for my thirst.  
<sup>22</sup> May the table set before them become a snare;  
may it become retribution and a trap.  
<sup>23</sup> May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,  
and their backs be bent forever.

<sup>24</sup> Pour out your wrath on them;  
let your fierce anger overtake them.  
<sup>25</sup> May their place be deserted;  
let there be no one to dwell in their tents.  
<sup>26</sup> For they persecute those you wound  
and talk about the pain of those you hurt.  
<sup>27</sup> Charge them with crime upon crime;  
do not let them share in your salvation.  
<sup>28</sup> May they be blotted out of the book of life  
and not be listed with the righteous.  
<sup>29</sup> But as for me, afflicted and in pain—  
may your salvation, God, protect me.  
<sup>30</sup> I will praise God's name in song  
and glorify him with thanksgiving.  
<sup>31</sup> This will please the LORD more than an ox,  
more than a bull with its horns and hooves.  
<sup>32</sup> The poor will see and be glad—  
you who seek God, may your hearts live!  
<sup>33</sup> The LORD hears the needy  
and does not despise his captive people.  
<sup>34</sup> Let heaven and earth praise him,  
the seas and all that move in them,  
<sup>35</sup> for God will save Zion  
and rebuild the cities of Judah.  
Then people will settle there and possess it;  
<sup>36</sup> the children of his servants will inherit it,  
and those who love his name will dwell there.

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**Transcript:**

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Hello. Good to see all of you here on a sunny warm summer morning. Those of you joining us online also, thank you for joining us. As Annie alluded to in the prayer, the psalm is Psalm 69, and it's a fun one. King David is the writer.

"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs in my head. Many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me, for I endure scorn for your sake and shame covers my face, for zeal for your house consumes me. And the insults of those who insult you fall on me. Those who sit at the gate and mock me, and I'm the song of drunkards. But I pray to you, Lord, deliver me from those who hate

me. 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. Do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be listed with the righteous." David had big emotions. "But as for me, afflicted and in pain, may your salvation God protect me. I will praise God's name and song and glorify him with thanksgiving."

What do we do with that? Well, let's talk about that. A couple of weeks ago, someone asked me if I like country music. And I said, "Are you kidding? I was raised in stern Washington." We had to take country music classes to graduate from high school. It was called music appreciation, this truly unique American art form. And there's a country music song called I Pray For You, where the singer is singing about someone who done him wrong, as most countries music songs are. And this is what it says.

It says, "I haven't been to church since I don't remember when. Things were going great until they fell apart again. So I listened to the preacher as he told me what to do. He said, "You can't go hate in others who have done wrong to you." Sometimes we get angry, but we must not condemn. Let the good Lord do his job. You just pray for them. So I pray your breaks go out running down a hill. I pray a flower pot falls from a window sill and hits you on the head. I pray your birthday comes and nobody calls. I pray you're flying high when your engine stalls. I pray all your dreams never come true. Just know wherever you are, honey, I pray for you."

Oh, country music, the fount of all wisdom, right? That is exactly what is going on in the psalm that I just read, where David is like blasting, "God, blast my enemies. I hate them." This summer, we're doing a sermon series on the Psalms. These were the songs that people sang back in Bible times during worship. They're also prayers and there are nine different types of psalms each showing us a different way to pray. And if we pray these nine different ways, prayer then isn't boring. It's dynamic, it's exciting. It's life-changing.

But does that include this psalm where King David, the writer, is calling down curses on people's heads? Are we supposed to pray like that? Because that doesn't seem what Jesus would do, right? In fact, that's not what Jesus did. When he was being crucified, he prayed that God would forgive those who were crucifying him. And Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." And I don't think by pray for them, he meant the way that this Psalm is praying or the country music song prayed. And it's not just this psalm. There are many psalms that are like this. They're called imprecatory psalms. Everybody say imprecatory. That's a hard word. You did very good with that very well. Imprecatory psalms, cursing psalms, angry psalms, where the writer is like saying to God, "Blast those people. I can't stand them." For instance, Psalm 58 where the writer says about his enemies, "May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along." There's an image. "The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked." Whoa.

Or Psalm 137, which was written after the Babylonians burned Jerusalem to the ground, took the Israelites into exile in Babylon, and it begins so beautifully. "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." So poetic. But then the very last verse says, "Daughter Babylon, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." The word of the Lord.

Or Psalm 139 again, so beautiful, it says, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. I praise you because I'm fearfully and wonderfully made." And then out of nowhere, apropos of nothing, suddenly the writer says, "Oh, that you would slay the wicked. How I hate those who hate you, Lord." And then says, "Search me, O God, see if there is any offensive way in me." You mean like that last verse perhaps where you ask God to kill people, right? These are the songs they sang in worship. So should we be singing these songs? Should Jake and the band come back up, "O Lord, blow my enemies to bits in thine mercy." Wouldn't that be fun. Jake, let's do that, shall we? Yeah, no, we're not going to do that. No, we're not going to do that. And these were also the prayers that people prayed.

So are we supposed to pray like this? Are we supposed to ask God to blast the people that we're mad at? I will answer that question at the end of this sermon after we've looked at this psalm. And here's the main point, these angry psalms, imprecatory prayers help us deal with our anger in healthy ways. That's my main point, and that's important because there's just a lot of anger in our culture right now, isn't there? Everybody seems to be mad about everything, at everyone. There is anger all over the media, anger in our schools, anger in our churches, including this one, anger in our families. And this psalm and others like it are about a particular kind of anger, anger at people who have mistreated us in some way. Maybe you've been lied about, gossiped about in ways that damaged your reputation. Maybe someone took something from you that belonged to you.

I know a man who invented a product and his business partner got that product patented in his name and made a bunch of money off the product this man had invented. That's unjust. Maybe a spouse betrayed you, maybe a friend betrayed you, or a parent emotionally or physically abused you, or maybe you are angry at a whole group of people because you think they're doing harm like maybe people on the other side of you politically, and you're so mad you don't even know what to do with it. Who has hurt you? Who are you angry at? This psalm shows us how to deal with our anger in healthy ways. When we pray mad, some good things happen. And the first is this. When we pray angry prayers, it shows us that God welcomes us at our ugly worst.

Again, the writer of this imprecatory psalm is King David. In fact, he wrote a lot of imprecatory psalms, but he wrote other Psalms too. Nice psalms, pretty psalms. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." So let's just say this wasn't David's best moment when he wrote this psalm. He wasn't being his best self. And here's something important to remember. David prayed this way, but he didn't act this way. Usually, he showed grace and mercy to his enemies like King Saul who kept trying to kill him. And even when David had the chance to retaliate, he didn't. Imprecatory psalms show that we can bring our ugliest angriest self to God. God doesn't want the phony you, God doesn't do phony. God only does authentic and he doesn't want us come into prayer, downplaying our hurts, minimizing our pain, pretending we're not mad when we're actually mad. He says, "Bring it to me." And when we bring the full range of our emotions to God, good and bad, prayer isn't boring, it's transforming and it makes us more courageous, hopeful and loving.

And that's what happens to David over the course of this psalm. There's an evolution that David goes through over the course of this psalm. He's talking about his enemies, specifically people who are persecuting him because he follows God. He says to God, "For I endure scorn for your

sake, for zeal for your house consumes me and the insults of those who insult you fall on me." He's talking about people who are persecuting him for following God. And he's mad. He's really mad at them. He says, "May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your wrath on them. May they be blotted out of the Book of Life." It's like, "God, I'm mad. I'm really mad. I'm not just a little mad. I am extra super duper special mad." But then right after he vents all of this to God, the very next verse he says, "But as for me, afflicted and in pain, may your salvation, God, protect me. I will praise God's name and song and glorify him with thanksgiving."

He brings his worst, ugliest, angriest self to God. And over the course of this prayer, God leads him to be his better self, someone who trusts God, someone who can praise God rather than just curse his enemies. Sometimes when we vent, we feel better and sometimes we need to vent to God and maybe a trusted friend, pastor or counselor, and sometimes that may be necessary. But also let's just, little moment of realism here, let's just be really honest. A lot of times we vent to a lot of other people about someone we're mad at, never the person we're actually mad at. That would involve a conversation with them. But we just vent to a lot of other people our anger at someone or a group of somebodies. And the Bible calls that gossip and names it as a sin.

God says, "Vent to me and I'll lead you to your better self," which is what he does for David. David starts out, starts the psalm, cursing his enemies and ends praising God. He leads us. When we vent to him, bring our ugly anger to him, he will lead us to our better selves. Sometimes that means being able to bless God or bless the enemy. Sometimes that means he reveals to us that maybe we're part of the problem as well. Sometimes that's how he leads us to our better selves.

Someone told me this week that she was praying this week about some people she was mad at and then the Holy Spirit just kind of said to her, "Do you have to be so darn mad all the time?" And she thought, "I am angry a lot. I am part of the problem here. The problem here is not just that, problem here is me." One of the sobering things about imprecatory prayers is to think that it's quite possible that someone is praying this angry prayer about me. And sometimes the way God leads us to our best is he shows us where we're part of the problem. Cursing prayers aren't prescriptions for how we should act. They show that God welcomes us to bring our worst selves to him in prayer where he leads us to be our better selves.

Second thing that praying angry reveals to us, it reveals that God is a God of justice, who cares about the truly horrible stuff that has happened to us. Right? These psalms are written about folks who have done really awful things, right? These angry psalms are not written about people who were driving slowly in the left-hand lane because cars hadn't been invented yet. But had they been invented, that's exactly who these psalms are about. These are written about people who do truly terrible things.

Psalms 137, the one that talks about dashing Babylonian babies against the rocks. Well, here's the thing. The Babylonians had burned Jerusalem to the ground. They had killed innocent people. They had carted the Israelites off into exile and Babylon, and as was quite common back then, the soldiers would rip babies out of their mother's arms and throw them against rocks. That's what the Babylonians did to the Israelites. That enrages God. We lose a lot if we only focus on the love of God and forget about the wrath of God because the love of God demands the wrath of God.

Theologian Miroslav Volf who suffered a lot in the war in the Balkans says, "If you think that believing in a God of wrath is primitive, then you've had a very comfortable life. You've never had your homes burned, your little one's killed." The love of God demands the wrath of God because a God who can look at child trafficking and violence and racism and genocide and all kinds of abuse and just say, "Oh, but I love everybody," that's not a God of love because he's indifferent to the pain of the people that are being abused and he's indifferent to the pain of the abuser, because that's not good for that person's soul. And to not call that to their attention, that's not loving either. If we care about someone, we're mad when someone does something to them.

When my parents were in decline and both having cognitive impairment, my dad because of strokes, my mom because of Alzheimer's, there was this one time they got a call and my dad answered the phone and the caller said, "Hi, Grandpa, this is Tyler." Tyler's my nephew. So my parents' grandson. "And grandpa, I'm in Germany in jail because I've been arrested on false charges and I need \$10,000 bail."

Now, someone without cognitive decline would recognize that as a scam. But my dad, in his confusion, panicked and thought it really was his grandson in trouble and started to give the caller his financial information. Now, fortunately, my mom, even though she had Alzheimer's, she recognized it as a scam and got on the phone and got rid of the caller in a way that only my mother could do. Talk about the wrath of God. When I found out about that, I was so angry. How dare you pray on vulnerable older people like that and do it in such a premeditated way. Because this wasn't just like ordinary level scam. This is next level scam. They had to do research to find out my nephew's name. I was so angry because if we care about someone, we are angry when something unjust happens to them. Where have you been mistreated, lied about in ways that damaged your reputation, taken advantage of, betrayed in some way, abused in some way?

I think about the refugees that you heard about earlier that this church is helping to resettle and the horrific, unjust, oppressive conditions they're fleeing from in their countries of origin. The imprecatory psalms appeal to a God of justice. He sees what has happened to you. He cares, and he's mad about it too. Which brings me to the last point about how praying mad helps us deal with our anger in healthy ways. And that is when we do these kinds of prayers, it reminds us to let God be the justice giver, not us. David vents his anger at God, but then he leaves it up to God to deal with it, right? He says, "Okay, God, here's what they did to me and here's the crime. And God, while I'm at it, might I suggest a punishment? Melt them like slugs, Lord. That's my strong advice to you. Take it or leave it. But I'm just saying, if I were you, I'd melt them like slugs." But then he leaves it up to God.

He leaves it to God because God says, "It is mine to avenge. I will repay. In due time, their foot will slip. Their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them." And sometimes the way that God punishes people is simply to let them reap the natural consequences of their own actions with the hope that they will turn to God. The Bible says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath." Now, that doesn't mean that people shouldn't be held accountable for their actions. They should. Sometimes that might even mean putting people in jail to protect other people from them.

But ultimate punishment and justice, that's God's domain. That's above our pay grade. That belongs to God, not us. Because here's what David does not do in this psalm. He does not say, "I am so angry that I'm going to take a solemn vow to someday do to them what they have done to me." And that was very common in David's culture to take a vow of revenge. That was in fact expected. But David doesn't do that. He leaves it up to God to deal with it. He says, "Those who sit at the gate mock me, and I am the song of the drunkards. So I slug them in the face and now I feel better." That's not the next line. The next line is, "But I pray to you, Lord, in your great love, O God, deliver me from those who hate me." Who's the punisher? Not me. It's God. Leave it up to him.

The imprecatory psalms help us deal with our anger by showing that God welcomes us at our ugly angriest worst, and then leads us to our best selves. They show us that God is a God of justice, who cares about the pain that has been inflicted on us, and that he is the justice giver, not us. Which is why ultimately all of these angry Psalms point to Jesus because he was the victim of all kinds of injustice. He was completely innocent. All he wanted to do was help people and they crucified him for it. He knows what it feels like to have injustice done to you, to be treated badly.

In fact, Jesus quotes this psalm in the New Testament and says it's about him when he says to his disciples, "This is to fulfill what is written in their law. They hated me without reason." That's a direct quote from this psalm. And Jesus is saying, "That's about me." God in the flesh, who is a God of justice and demands that every hard thing done to you be paid for in full. It's just that he bears the penalty. Not only are the sins done to you, but are the sins that you have done to others. He bears it himself on the cross, paying the price for us.

So action step. Is this psalm a model for how we should pray? You're mad at someone. Does that mean you should go home and, "Blast him, God, and do this and do that"? Ideally, no. Ideally no. David writes this psalm a thousand years before Jesus comes along and tells us to love our enemies and bless them. David's also writing this before the cross, where Jesus paid the penalty for every harsh thing that was ever done to us. So we can do what was a lot harder for David to do, which is to pray for God's best for the people who have hurt us. And I have found that when I do that, I actually end up being less angry at those people. When I am praying God's best for that person, I end up being less angry at them. Now that said, that's really hard to do sometimes, isn't it?

And the deeper the hurt goes, the harder it is to pray God's best for the person that hurt you. So sometimes our prayers may need to include some of these angry elements, where we pour out our anger to God, raw, unvarnished, unpolished, unedited, just spew it out to God in prayer, knowing that he's a God of justice, who caress about the wrongs done to us, letting him be the justice giver, not us, knowing that Jesus paid the price for everything done to us and everything we've done to others. And as we pray that, God will lead us to our better selves, where we can hopefully someday pray that God blesses the people that hurt us and even be able to reconcile with them. And to keep praying that prayer over and over and over as God leads us to be our better selves, just the way he did for David, who starts out cursing his enemies and ends up praising God. In short, God invites us to pray our anger so that we do not act on our anger.

One of the clearest examples I've seen of this is a story I told you before, but it was years and years ago, really long time ago. So I want to tell it again because it kind of illustrates this really



well. And it was on one of our first trips to Rwanda where we were invited to observe a Christ-centered reconciliation seminar between victims of the genocide against Tutsis and the perpetrators, the folks who had done that. And the part we saw of this seminar was between a woman and the man who had killed her entire family in front of her eyes, and he'd gone to jail for that. But now he was out and they were both seeking reconciliation. And at one point, the leader of the seminar tied a rope around her hand and the other end of the rope to his hand. And he told them to walk in opposite directions, which of course they couldn't do because the rope held them together.

And so he looked at the woman and he said, "See this rope? This is your anger, which is completely understandable. He killed your whole family. It's completely understandable. But notice that it is keeping you tied to the one person you most want to get away from. It is hurting you more than it is hurting him." And so he took the rope off their hands and he put it on the cross and says, "Jesus sees what he did to you. And Jesus is enraged by that, and he demands there is a penalty to be paid, but Jesus paid the penalty himself. This man's sin against you has not been excused, it has not been overlooked. It has been paid for in full." And then she sat down, and then this man tearfully, sobbing, confessed every terrible thing that he had done to her and saying that he felt ashamed and was going to do whatever he could to make restitution.

And he's doing all this, sobbing. And when he got done, this woman stood up and stormed out of the room, furious with anger, and a counselor followed her out. About 45 minutes later, she came back in and she sat down right next to this man who had killed her family. And she didn't look at them, but she just kind of gently nudged him with her arm like this, as if to say, "I can't forgive you right now, but I'm here. I'm still in it. I want to get there. I think we're going to get there. I'm just not there right now." And our translator said, "Sometimes it takes two or three of these seminars before people can finally forgive." And in that moment, I understood the cross better than I think I've ever understood it before. I mean, I've been to seminary, I've read lots of theologians.

I know all the theories and the atonement and blah, blah, blah. But in that moment, I understood the cross way better than I ever had before because she needed something big enough, like the death of God himself in human form, to assure her that God saw and cared about what happened to her and dealt with it and didn't ignore it. And that rope, which represented all of her understandable anger nailed to that cross was freeing her from the burden of the anger that was eating her up. She brought her rage to God, and God was leading her and this man toward healing and reconciliation.

Now, most of us in this church don't have that kind of horrific event in our lives, though some people in this church do. Some people in this church do. But however we've been hurt, whatever the cause, the anger in our heart is still just as real, whatever the cause is, and we all have it. And Jesus says, "Come to me, not at your best most loving self, but come to me at your angriest, ugliest worst. Bring all your anger, all your pain. Come to me at your worst, and I will lead you to your best."

So Jesus, help us do that. Help us bring to you our anger, our hurt, raw, unvarnished, pour it out to you. And then Lord, set us free from it and lead us into the people that you have created us to be. And we will tell everyone that you are the author of our freedom. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In some ways verse 29 serves as a turning point in this Psalm. How so? From the context what must have happened to David to turn him from cursing his enemies to thanking God?
- Jesus doesn't pray the way David does here. Jesus prayed that God would forgive the people who crucified him. In what ways are you like David? In what ways are you like Jesus?
- How is this Psalm a guide for how we should pray? How is it NOT a guide for how we should pray?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.