

Speaker 1: [00:14](#) Hello, welcome to this episode of the St Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. Today we're going to be thinking about a topic which I'm pretty sure that all of us have faced in the past, perhaps some of us continue to face it on a fairly regular basis, which is this: when we are feeling really angry about something or when we are really angry about someone, how on earth do we bring that to God in prayer? It's a difficult one, isn't it? Because when we are angry, we might feel too guilty about our emotions to come before God, or we might think that he's going to be angry at us because we're angry ourselves. So the result is, then, that very often we just don't pray. We just seeth away inside. We let the anger fester without any prayerful outlet. And if we do decide to pray about it, we might be worried about what sort of language we can use to God. What are the boundaries of what we can say and what we shouldn't say? So that's what we're going to be thinking about in this podcast. And there's a Psalm in the Old Testament, Psalm 137, that we're going to be thinking about that will help us to get to the heart of the issue.

Speaker 1: [01:34](#) I wonder if you're old enough to remember Boney M. I know I am. I'm a bit embarrassed to say that I bought a few of their records too when I was a teenager - many, many years ago. Some of us might be a bit embarrassed to admit liking them, but in reality they were a pretty popular band, weren't they? In fact, Boney M are the 33rd best selling pop act of all time in the UK. Can you believe that? And their best selling single was, of course, By the Rivers of Babylon. And it was a great song for its time. It was based on this Psalm 137 in the Old Testament: "By the rivers of Babylon where we sat down there, we wept when we remembered Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Well, everyone knows how it goes, but perhaps not surprisingly, when they wrote the lyrics, they missed out the last two verses of this Psalm which say, this, "Oh daughter, Babylon, you devastator. Happy shall they be who pay you back for what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock."

Speaker 1: [02:40](#) It's not a very catchy line for a pop song is it, really? In fact, verses like that in the Bible can be a bit embarrassing because here we are trying to be disciples of God, we're trying to be peaceful and loving and forgiving, and then you get a verse like this that actually encourages us to take up the babies of those we hate and smash them against rocks until their heads are pulp and there is no more life left in them. What on earth are we going to do with ideas like that in the Bible? Well, we could ignore it, of course. We could pretend that those verses don't exist and we could just focus on the warm and cuddly bits of the

Bible. But that's not really a very honest approach, is it, because we know in 2 Timothy that it says, all Scripture is inspired by God.

Speaker 1: [03:33](#) It doesn't say all those bits of Scripture that are nice and easy to understand are inspired by God. It says all Scripture. So if even these verses are inspired, we'd better get our heads around them and see what they have to say to us. And actually the more I reflect on this Psalm, the more helpful I find it because it has a great deal to tell us about how to pray to God when we are angry. We all get angry, but sometimes in life we feel consumed by anger. Anger becomes the dominant dominant emotion that we feel. Everything we do, everything we think can become focused through our anger. It might be as a result of being desperately hurt by someone, a broken friendship or a divorce or as a result of an experience of loss, grief or bereavement. For some reason, there may be a residual anger from an experience of abuse or addiction or a poor childhood. In many ways, for many different reasons

Speaker 1: [04:45](#) our lives can become disfigured through deep, deep anger and anger that just won't let us go. And since we can't just wish our anger away, how do we pray about it? Because as I said earlier, many people don't pray about it, of course. Some people cope with anger by putting it in a box or putting it to the back of their mind. They carry on their everyday lives, their jobs, their marriage, their relationships, as if nothing was wrong at all. And that self delusion can carry over into their relationships with God and the church. Sunday after Sunday, they can come to church, smiling, chatting, singing the hymns and praying the prayers as if nothing were wrong. But underneath the mask, there is a raging anger. Someone is hated, a circumstance is despised, or maybe God is despised for not being different or not having made life a bit different. The anger boils away and our lives are destroyed just in trying to keep it hidden because it's always there waiting to rise to the surface. It's waiting to boil over. So when you are angry with others, when you are angry at life or angry at God, how do you pray? Well, I'm sure that Psalm 137 can help us here.

Speaker 1: [06:19](#) But before we look specifically at what it has to say, let's get a bit of historical background first. The Israelites had been living peaceably in Israel for many years when the Babylonians attacked them. And the Babylonians were the biggest, the most powerful nation in the world. And they had attacked and defeated the Israelites and taken them captive back to Babylon, which is now Iraq. And almost the entire nation was carried off into captivity hundreds of miles from home. Uh, they had to

leave their homes. They had to leave their possessions, their businesses, their temple. Everything they counted as dear to them was ripped out of their lives. And this Psalm was written while they were in Babylon. They'd been there for nearly 70 years and they were angry. They were dispossessed, they were broken, and they were homeless, so as the first verse of the Psalm says, "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." And don't be fooled by the quiet imagery of this verse because even in these words, there is actually a great expression of pain.

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The Israelites had been used to living in a country of rugged terrain with hills and rivers and streams meandering across the landscape. But Babylon was all neatly ordered around man-made canals. Even the geography of Babylon, as beautiful as it was, was a reminder of what they had lost and increased their pain and their sense of loneliness. And then, in verse two, "On the willows there, we hung up our harps". And again, it's such a powerful image here because the Israelites had always been a people of song. They'd always used their instruments and their voices to praise God. This was their tradition. This was their heritage, but now in their pain and their desolation, the harps are hung up on the willow trees. No noise, no playing, no songs of rejoicing. They had nothing to sing about. And perhaps some of us listening to this podcast want to hang up our harps as well because we feel that we've got nothing to sing about either. But even worse for the Israelites, their suffering

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silence was was mocked by the Babylonians, which added insult to injury. As we read in verse three: "For there our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked us for mirth saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion." So we can understand their words in verse four, "How can we sing the song in a strange land?" How can we possibly praise God in this situation? Why should we let our faith be a sport for those who don't care? Because the truth is that even in the midst of their pain and their desolation, even in the midst of their ever increasing sense of anger, the Israelites had not lost faith in God. The reason that they wouldn't sing wasn't because they no longer trusted God. It wasn't because they no longer believed, but because their faith was so precious to them. They wouldn't just go through the motions, they wouldn't just sing and smile just to keep other people happy or just because they were expected to. And when we feel angry inside, neither should we because trusting God is too personal for that.

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As verses five and six of this Psalm, say, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither. Let my tongue cling to the

roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy." Is it any wonder that after years of loss and pain and abuse and anger was welling up deep inside of them to the point where they were feeling overwhelmed. And then what was their prayer will in verse seven? "Remember Lord, against the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, tear it down, tear it down, down to the foundations." There's a call for vengeance to fall on these people and then most savage of all, these verses, eight and nine: "O daughter, Babylon, you devastator, happy shall they be who pay you back for what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock." Now we need to be honest about this and recognize that this of course is not a godly attitude. It's not good and pious. It is sinful. It's unjustifiable to want such harm to be brought onto innocent children. But there is something for us to learn about prayer through these wishes of the Israelites.

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And perhaps the first thing to say is that true prayer is born out of passion. It's a sad truth that the church today, and Christians today, often don't really share a passion for prayer. Now I'm ashamed of that myself, that I've watched the news each night and I might see migrants dying in the Mediterranean or I might see refugees fleeing from Middle Eastern conflict. I watch the news and I see the bodies of Syrian children massacred - and I don't cry. Yes, of course, I think it's awful just like everyone else and I remember to pray a little for them most days and pray for a resolution to their problems. But I don't engage with the reality of the situation with passion. I don't see those images like God sees them because if I did, I would be tearing my hair out with anger. I would be shouting for something to be done about it.

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I would be spending hours every day on my knees in prayer. If I had some of that spiritual passion burning within me, maybe I would be praying like the Israelites did. Perhaps I too would be asking for vengeance. Perhaps I too would be wanting those who commit such terrible crimes to suffer and have their children's suffer in the same way that they've inflicted suffering on others. And I wonder which is the greatest sin? Is it the sin of the mother who wishes for something unspeakable to happen to the children of her enemies or is it my sin that causes me to watch the news to yawn, switch over and then watch Frasier on E4 or something? Which is the greatest sin? The sin of wanting revenge in the face of mistreatment or the sin of apathy, of not caring enough to get off the sofa and to do something about it?

- Speaker 1: [13:38](#) Jesus says in Revelation Chapter Three, "I know what you've done. I know that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish that you were either one or the other, but because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I'm going to spit you out of my mouth." It is not the grieving mother who will be spat out of Jesus's mouth as a result of her passionate prayer, born out of the heat of the moment. But as for me, I'd better watch out because my lukewarm attitude will receive condemnation from a passionate God. God wants us to be passionate when we pray, even when that passion leads us to say things in prayer that we ought not to say. And that's the second lesson that we learn from this prayer of the Israelites, that when we pray and show God the full force of our anger, it's actually okay to do that.
- Speaker 1: [14:46](#) It doesn't matter what you say to God. He's big enough and strong enough to cope with it. If you are having a really rough time in your life right now, if you're feeling angry at God for your circumstances, tell him. Don't just tell him. Shout at him. Rant and rave and swear at God if you want to. It's okay because he's big enough to handle it. It might be, I suppose technically sinful. It might be the wrong way to approach him, but it's far better to do that than to keep your anger bottled up inside and approach God like a hypocrite, using all the right words in prayer, but approaching him with a hateful heart. You know, God is just not interested in our words. He loves each one of us so much that he wants us to share with him, uh, what, what is in our hearts.
- Speaker 1: [15:44](#) And if we do that, we're not going to catch God out. So there's no surprises for him in our hearts. Just a couple of Psalms on, we read at the beginning of Psalm 139. We read these words: "Lord, you have examined me and you know me. You know everything I do. From far away, you understand all my thoughts. You see me whether I'm working or resting, you know all my actions even before I speak, you already know what I will say. You are all around me on every side. You protect me with your power. Your knowledge of me is too deep. It is beyond my understanding." No, we can't take God by surprise. He knows what we're thinking. He knows what is in our heart. So isn't it better to be straight and upfront with God? Isn't it better to get out our hurt and our bitterness and our anger and get it all out into the open with God?
- Speaker 1: [16:41](#) If we try to ignore our pain, we can do stuff that will gain us temporary relief through overworking or drinking or absorbing ourselves with over-busyness. But the reality is that we do need to face up to our anger, give it to God, and let him deal with it. It is a beautiful truth about prayer, which is this, that we can, we

can take risks. When we pray, we can say things that might be inappropriate. We can try new approaches to God. What's the worst that can happen? If we pray an inappropriate prayer or get the language wrong, or we get our motivation wrong, we're not going to get struck down by a bolt of lightning. We're not going to be thrown into the pit of hell for all eternity. Let's learn a lesson from the Israelites in this Psalm. Let's take a few risks in prayer and maybe say some stuff that we know isn't too godly, but at least it's honest and tell God what's really in our hearts.

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Now, in closing, as we come towards the end of this podcast, let me tell you how the story ends because there's nothing worse than not knowing the ending, is there? Well, the Babylonians were destroyed eventually by the Persians. And about 10 years after this Psalm was written, the Israelites were allowed to go home and they rebuilt their homes. Uh, they rebuilt the temple and they became prosperous once again. Uh, but the Israelites went back quite peaceably. Uh, there's no evidence that they ever did smash any babies against the rocks. It seems that they had a vented their anger in their prayers, not in their deeds, which of course is a far healthier way of going about things. But what is important to grasp, of course, is that it was God who overthrew the Babylonians. He wasn't absent from the Israelites situation. He cared passionately about their anger and their suffering.

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God heard their prayers and he answered them. And that's the truth for us all, that we can be confident that God hears our prayers. He hears our anger and he will answer our prayers according to his will. Our God is a God of love, who hates to see us suffer, and he will do everything necessary to strengthen us through the tough times of our life. All he asks is that we are honest with him, that we are open with him about how we feel. Even when we're angry, God wants to hear it from us in an honest and open way. Now, I love the way the Bible is structured. I don't think it's any coincidence that in the plans of God, Psalm 137, which we thought about today, is then followed by Psalm 138, the first three verses of which say, this: "I thank you Lord with all my heart.

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I sing praises to you before the gods. I face your holy temple, bow down and praise your name because of your constant love and faithfulness. Because you have shown that your name and your commands are supreme. You answered me when I called to you. With your strength, you strengthened me." And for many of us, I think it can be a long, sometimes slow, journey from the anger and bitterness of Psalm 137 to the peace of mind and worship of Psalm 138. But it is a journey that each one

of us is called to make; not in our own strength but in the strength of God.

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Well

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maybe today is a day for you to begin that journey, uh, to express to God your anger and then to begin to let it go. Let the anger go and then you will be on a journey towards joining in with the last verse of Psalm 138 which says this to God: "You will do everything you promised. Lord, your love is eternal. Complete the work that you have begun." So if you are struggling with anger today, pray about it. Be honest to God and begin to let it go. And make that journey your own journey from Psalm 137 to Psalm 138.

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Well, thanks for listening today. I hope that this has been helpful in giving you something to think and to pray about. Please do email me if you've got any further thoughts or questions or you want to continue the conversation. steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Check out the church website standrewsenfield.com, the Facebook page St Andrew's Enfield, and please do subscribe to these podcasts and also let other people know about them as well so that we can continue to grow together in our knowledge and understanding of what God is doing in this wonderful world of his. Anyway, uh, enough from me today. I hope that you have a wonderful day wherever you're going and you have a deep experience of God's peace and blessing in your life. Thanks for listening. Bye.