

# BaptistWay: A desperate cry

April 19, 2013

- *The BaptistWay lesson for May 5 focuses on Psalm 69.*
- [Download a powerpoint resource for this lesson here.](#)

At times, we may say such things as, “I’m drowning,” “my back is against the wall” or “I’m holding on by a thread.” We make such comments when we feel overwhelmed, and by using these metaphors, we clue others to the anxiety we feel, without actually specifying the particular stressors we are undergoing.

Psalm 69 is an individual lament that comes from a person who is living through a horrendously difficult time. The psalmist pours out his agony with some of the common poetic metaphors of his day: “waters have come up to my neck ... I sink in the miry depths ... no foothold ... floods engulf me” (v. 2).

This language does not enumerate particular crises but clearly indicates overwhelming difficulty. The desperation drives the psalmist to cry out to God: “save me” (v. 1), “answer me” (v. 16), “draw near to me” (v. 18), “protect me” (v. 29). These petitions come with deep urgency in the midst of troubles that seem unyielding, so that the continual pleading to God leaves him exhausted. The poet knows where to turn for help; his difficulty is that he has not yet seen any relief. The delay, however, in no way saps his faith, for he continues to look for God for deliverance, confident help eventually will come.

## **Persecution**

While verse 1 describes the psalmist’s trouble metaphorically, later in the psalm he laments the specific hardship of persecution from others, as he

mentions “those who hate me without reason” (v. 4), “I must endure scorn” (v. 10) and “those who sit at the gate mock me” (v. 12). He even says his family turned against him (v. 8).

While the psalmist does not specify why others oppress him, the reason may have been the common ancient perspective that anyone who suffers must deserve that pain because of wrongdoing. The poet does mention “my guilt is not hidden” from God (v. 5), and he is among those wounded by God (v. 26).

In other words, he recognizes he is not sinless, and some of his suffering may be the result of divine judgment. However, his perspective is that while God is justified in disciplining him, the persecution he endures from enemies is undeserved, malicious and cruel (v. 4).

### **Desperate alienation**

The psalmist’s desperate alienation propels him to pray to the only one who cares: “Out of the goodness of your love, in your great mercy turn to me ... answer me quickly ... come near ... redeem me because of my foes” (vv. 16-18). As readers, we can sense the depth of the poet’s pain and perhaps at times in our lives identify with the feelings of suffering and alienation. May we also follow his example of turning at such times to God in prayerful trust, confident in the Lord’s steadfast love and mercy.

In addition to the petition for help, Psalm 69 also contains a prayer of imprecation, which is a petition for God to bring justice in the form of judgment on one’s enemies. Imprecatory prayers appear with some frequency in the psalms and often sound shocking to modern readers.

The psalmist prays God’s wrath will come upon his enemies in particularly harsh ways, even asking that his enemies be “blotted out of the book of life” (vv. 22-28). These requests especially seem troubling in light of Jesus’ instruction to love one’s enemies. The Old Testament also speaks against

taking vengeance on foes and instructs godly people to care for enemies (Leviticus 19:17-18; Proverbs 25:21).

While not condoning curses against enemies, we can recognize the value of being honest with God in prayer about what one feels, even negative emotions. Offering them up to the Lord in prayer is one way of seeking divine help in moving beyond destructive feelings.

### **Request for justice**

Also, seen in its best light, the imprecation is a request for justice to come on those who have shown themselves to be enemies of the Lord, as well as enemies of God's servant. Finally, these cursing prayers are not the final word in Scripture on how to treat an enemy. Jesus' example and teaching point the way to move from feelings of vengeance to genuine love for our enemies (Matthew 5:38-48).

Psalm 69 concludes with confident praise that God's rescue will come. The psalmist imagines his deliverance will encourage other poor, needy and captive people, who will also find hope in God's help (vv. 32-33). The last two verses of the psalm imagine a day when God's help will extend to all Judah in the form of rebuilding her cities and blessing her inhabitants.

This hope links with the psalmist's statement in verse 9 that "zeal for your house (temple) consumes me." The concluding promise to reconstruct Zion suggests the psalm in its present form dates to the exilic or postexilic period, when people were longing for a day when Jerusalem would be rebuilt. That day did indeed come for God's people in the era of Nehemiah (445 BC).

Theologian James Mays point out that this psalm, like Psalm 22, is repeatedly quoted in the New Testament and often linked to Jesus' life. A

few examples of connections may be seen in the zeal that drove Jesus to cleanse the temple (John 3:17), the rejection he experienced from his own people (John 15:25), the bitter treatment he endured before his death (Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23) and the meaning of his suffering (Romans 15:3).