

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #72: THE ANGRY PSALMIST

By John Temples

We have become a nation of angry people. Sometimes it seems as if we are living in the Land of the Perpetually Offended. We're outraged that we can't solve the problem of__ (you fill in the blank--disease, terrorism, poverty, crime, telemarketers, homelessness, immorality). We're hopping mad that our government can't seem to get its act together. Some people's language suggests that they were born in the provocative case and the kickative mood.

Even Christians get angry about many things. But probably most of us, as soon as we feel anger rising up within us, say to ourselves, "Wait, I'm supposed to be a Christian; I can never be angry with anyone or anything." It's certainly true that anger can be harmful. It can destroy friendships and families and churches. But are we supposed to go through life never getting mad at anything?

Ephesians 4:26 does say, "Be angry and do not sin." However, it does not say "NEVER be angry." In fact, it commands anger! Just do not let your anger cross the line and become sin.

GOD GETS ANGRY

We're supposed to be like God. But the Bible tells us that God gets angry. He was so angry with the Israelites at Mount Sinai that Moses had to plead with Him not to destroy them. Psalms 7:11 declares, "God is angry with the wicked every day." The word *anger* occurs 233 times in the NKJV, and in most of those passages, it is speaking of the anger of God.

Jesus was angry on occasion. Mark 3:5 says that when the Pharisees despised Him for healing a man on the Sabbath, "He looked around at them with ANGER."

But what about us? Could a lack of anger be a sign of lack of compassion? Brother Scott Lamascus, writing in *The Christian Chronicle*, October 2001, said,

“Anger sometimes is a signal that our sense of outrage is intact--that we still recognize injustice, cruelty, and tragedy.”

Brother Lamascus also used an expression that caught my eye: “The Angry Psalmist.” We usually think of Psalms as a book of beautiful and pious devotions about God. But the book of Psalms is, to a large extent, David’s diary. And sometimes David had a bad day just like we do. In the Psalms, David pours out his soul, his innermost feelings, whether good or bad. And sometimes, we really are reading “the angry Psalmist.”

Three Psalms are particularly relevant in this regard: 73, 88, and 109. Read them, and you can just feel the intensity, the anger, and the frustration. What are they telling us? That God’s love is big enough to accept our frustrations, our anger--even when it is directed at Him. God is such a loving Father that He will allow you to come to Him and “beat your fists on His chest” in anguish.

PSALM 73

In this Psalm, the writer asks the pointed question we ask every time we sing *Farther Along*: Why do the wicked prosper, year after year? What is the value of trying to live a holy life and suffering for it, when evil people get rich and never seem to be punished?

Here are some excerpts from Psalm 73: “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs [pains] in their death, but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men.... Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish.... They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth.... Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning.” Can you and I relate to that?

PSALM 88

In this Psalm, the writer seems to be asking, “God, where are you?” Does this sound like anything you and I might have ever said? “My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave. I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength, adrift among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, and who are cut off from your hand. You have laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the depths. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you have afflicted me with all your waves. You have put away my acquaintances from me; you have made me an abomination to them.... Lord, why do you cast off my soul? Why do you hide your face from me?”

PSALM 109

In this Psalm, you find the mother of all prayers! Speaking of the wicked who had oppressed him, the Psalmist said: “Set a wicked man over him, and let an accuser [literally, a Satan] stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him be found guilty, and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few, and let another take his office. [Yes, this is the passage Peter quoted to justify choosing a replacement for Judas.] Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds and beg.... Let the creditor seize all that he has, and let strangers plunder his labor.... Let this be the Lord’s reward to my accusers, and to those who speak evil against my person.”

Not a Psalm you would want to read to your children or grandchildren before they go off to sleep! Why did God allow such to be put in the Bible? What is the value of having such “venting” recorded in Scripture?

For one thing, it lets us know that the Bible is a real book about real life. It is not a sanitized, idealized version of life in which everybody gets along, a discouraging word is never spoken, and we all live happily ever after.

The Bible is the record of real people--

- --experiencing the gamut of human emotions;
- --struggling with their anger and their lack of faith and their sins;

- --crying out to God about their doubts and fears;
- --and even questioning whether God hears them.

God assures us, though, in His word, that He hears us. He hears us when we are piously bowed in worship, and He also hears us when we are crying out for understanding at the unfairness of life.

HOW DID THE PSALMIST DEAL WITH HIS ANGER?

Here is where the real value of these Psalms lies.

In Psalm 73, after going on for quite a while about the prosperity of the wicked, he finally caught his breath and said, “When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their end” (Psalms 73:16-17). He finally stepped back and considered the big picture. He saw the certainty of punishment for the wicked in eternity. Yes, many times it seems that the wicked escape punishment in this life--it seems like they “got away with it.” But their judgment is certain.

Here is more of this Psalm: “Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors.... I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before you.... Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.... For indeed, those who are far from you shall perish.... But it is good for me to draw near to God. I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all your works.”

So Psalm 73 ends like it is supposed to, with the Psalmist acknowledging and submitting to the righteous justice of God.

Not so with Psalm 88. It doesn't seem to have a nice, neat ending. It ends with the Psalmist still angry, still asking why God has put all this misery on him. But in this Psalm, the resolution is not at the end; it is at the beginning. Verse 1 says, “O Lord, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You. Let my

prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry.” He clings to God and calls Him the God of salvation even when things are totally messed up and God is silent.

David (or whoever wrote this Psalm) was saying:

- God, I don’t understand what is happening to me.
- I even believe it’s Your fault.
- But I still trust You; I still call You the God of my salvation.
- I will not turn away from you, or cease praying to You, even though You do not seem to be answering.

That is an attitude you and I must cultivate and maintain.

What about Psalm 109--the one in which the Psalmist wishes all kinds of evil on his enemies and their wives and children? He finally does acknowledge and submit to God’s wisdom and justice. He says in verses 26-31, “Help me, O Lord my God! Oh, save me according to your mercy, that they may know that this is your hand—that you, Lord, have done it. Let them curse, but you bless; when they arise, let them be ashamed, but let your servant rejoice. Let my accusers be clothed with shame, and let them cover themselves with their own disgrace as with a mantle. I will greatly praise the Lord with my mouth; yes, I will praise Him among the multitude. For He shall stand at the right hand of the poor, to save him from those who condemn him.”

SOME LESSONS FOR US

Sin and evil may seem to have the upper hand, but we don’t have to give in to them or join them.

It may seem that God does not notice what is going on, but rest assured--He takes note of every deed that is done, every thought that is thought, every word that is spoken; and He will respond. “Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

It's all right to be angry and hate some things. There is a place for outrage and righteous indignation (but not for violence or vigilante-ism). It can move us to action and reformation. We spoke of Jesus being angry at the hard-heartedness and hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Mark 3). He could have let His anger go in two directions: outrage toward the Pharisees or healing of the unfortunate man they despised. He chose the latter. I once heard and appreciated something a brother in Utah said in a prayer: "Lord, let us not hate those who have done evil, but let us hate what they have done." And to help us keep the proper balance and perspective, it is good to ponder the writings of "the angry Psalmist." --John Temples