

## *The Reality of Anger and Enemies*

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Psalm 3; Psalm 10  
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The other day, I was telling a friend that I would be preaching a sermon about the role of anger in the Christian life, and my friend thought I was crazy. “Why would you talk about something like that?” It’s a fair question, and I would say that there haven’t been many Sundays when I’ve preached about the role of anger in the Christian life.

Thought that may actually be part of the problem.

Because what we all know is that we all get angry. Even those of us who only say, “I’m not angry, I’m just frustrated.” Anger is a fact of life in our broken and sinful world, and it may be especially so during times of significant change. And though the Christian track record on dealing with anger is not always that great – whether our own anger or the anger of others, anger is a fact of life, and – and this is important for us to realize – anger is a gift from God. And, similar to what we have said before, the psalms provide us with a script for processing our anger.

Now some people may react to that statement by insisting that anger is one of the seven deadly sins – a list which is not from the Bible, but from the early church. Down through the years, the church has shamed people for being angry, including times when people had every reason to be angry about abuse or oppression or wrongdoing. The church has too often - and I know I’ve done this myself - communicated that it was more important to be nice and polite than it was to be honest and just and fair.

The Bible recognizes that anger and sin are two different things. The gospel stories describe Jesus himself as becoming angry. So it can’t be entirely bad. Ephesians 4:20 tells us to “Be angry, but do not sin,” which makes it clear that anger and sin are two distinct things, although the emotional surge of anger is not easy to handle well.

Anger is a powerful emotion that God has given us, and anger lets us know that something is not right. The challenge is that our anger does not tell us whether the thing that needs to be fixed is outside of us, or inside of us. Our anger does not tell us whether God is calling us to address a problem in the world, or a problem inside of ourselves, or as can be the case, a little bit of both.

Getting angry is not the sin. Anger is a powerful emotion that God has given us, and anger lets us know that something is not right. The question is what to do about it when we get angry.

The first thing that we can always do with our anger is to pray it. We share our anger with God, whatever it is, turn it over to God, and allow God to work with it, purify it, clarify it, use it.

As with grief, the psalms give us a script for processing and metabolizing our anger. Praying the psalms places our anger in our ongoing relationship with God.

Because the psalms speak *to* God, *the* most important word in the psalms is the word “you.” The psalms are not just talking about God; they are talking to God. The psalms bring all of our emotions, including anger, into our ongoing relationship with God. And when we pray the psalms, what we learn is that we can say anything to God. God does not want us to censor our prayer-speech.

We do not need to be afraid that just because we say to God, “I want you to strike my enemy on the cheek and break the teeth of the wicked,” as Psalm 3 does, that God is then going to go out and do exactly that, as though God is a Cosmic Bellhop, waiting around for orders from us. “Vengeance is mine,” say the Lord in Deuteronomy 32 and Romans 12, which is God’s way of saying, “I will be the one who decides whether to act against someone.” The psalms teach us that it is safe and legitimate and appropriate for us to let God know that we want God to move against someone. In God’s wisdom, God may or may not decide to do what we ask. The point is that God wants us to process *everything* with God. If we refuse to process our messy emotions like anger and rage with God, if we suppress them, because we don’t think proper Christians talk like that, those emotions do not go away. They go underground, where sooner or later, they will erupt – either against ourselves or against others. And then we will end up with a society where anger and rage and depression are running amok. Which you may have noticed, is not so far off the mark. If we will follow the psalms in processing them with God, we can allow ourselves to be transformed by God’s grace.

Psalm 10, the second psalm we read today, shows us that anger does not only need to be prayed on our own behalf, but can also be prayed on behalf of others. Psalm 10 may be described as a psalm of social justice, prayed on behalf of people who are being mistreated and preyed upon by those in power: “Rise up, O Lord; O God lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.” Psalm 10 will lead us to ask, “Who in our community and world are being oppressed like this?” We may also find ourselves asking, “Are there any ways that I am oppressing others like this?” All of that can be turned over to God. Psalm 10 closes with an affirmation of faith and confidence in God that resounds with the force of contemporaneity. “O Lord, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.” You can imagine the people of Ukraine praying those words.

By praying our anger, the psalms take the powerful emotion of anger and turn it towards God's reign of justice, where the poor are cared for, where the vulnerable are sheltered, and where righteousness rolls down like a mighty stream so that God's will is done.

Friends, where in your life do you find the emotion of anger rising up? Notice those places, do not stuff them down somewhere, but bring that energy to your prayer life with God. Allow the psalms to help you process those emotions with God. Invite God into them, and see what God does with that, see how God uses it, how God changes you in the process, and how God's reign of justice is built, in you, with you, and around you. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, Amen.