

One rainy evening, a salesman was driving home. As he traveled down the highway, he saw a man hitchhiking. Feeling sympathy for the drenched man, he pulled over to offer a ride. When they reached the man's desired exit the salesman stopped, let him out, and wished him well. As the salesman pulled away he felt proud of his good deed. A few moments later, however, he put his hand on the seat beside him and went into a panic. His wallet was gone! He always put his wallet on the seat beside him! And now it wasn't there! But his panic quickly turned to anger. "*How dare he!*" he yelled, "*I do him a favor, and he repays me by robbing me!*"

So when he saw an emergency turnaround, he made a u-turn and raced back down the highway. Getting off at the exit where he left the man, he spotted him. So he gunned the engine, flew up to the man, and slid his car to a halt in front of him to block his path. Then he jumped out of his car and ran up to the man in a rage. Breathing heavily, and turning redder with each passing second, he screamed in anger "*HAND OVER THE WALLET!*" Trembling, the man obeyed.

Later that night, the salesman was still fuming at what had happened. So he began to tell his wife about it. But before he got to the part about turning around and tracking down the thief, his wife interrupted him. "*That reminds me,*" she said, "*when I got in the van this morning, your wallet was on the seat. You must have left it there when we came back from dinner last night.*" In his rage the man had not recovered his own stolen wallet at all, but had stolen the wallet of an innocent man. He isn't alone in his anger however. Or in the harm and damage it can cause. Anger has been a painful reality for people from the beginning of time. Cain became angry with his brother, and killed him. Moses became angry with the Israelites, and disobeyed God. And the religious leaders of Jerusalem became angry at someone who annoyed them and unknowingly had the Romans crucify the very Messiah for whom they had been waiting.

Two thousand years later little has changed. On the news each night there are stories of bosses angry with employees and employees angry with bosses. There are stories about customers angry at businesses and businesses angry at customers. And there are stories about neighbors angry at neighbors, politicians angry at other politicians, and nations angry at other nations. Which is sad. For anger is not a good thing. Anger does harm. Anger creates trauma. Anger destroys. And that fact leads to what seems to be a conundrum. That is because while we believe God never does harm, never creates trauma, and never destroys, the Bible says God feels anger. The Bible says God expresses anger. And the Bible says God acts in anger.

In Numbers, for instance, we are told how as the Israelites complained in the wilderness, and God's anger was not only "*kindled,*" but in His anger sent fire to "*consume the outlying parts of the camp.*" In Deuteronomy, we are told how the Israelites were warned not to follow other gods because God's anger "*would be kindled . . . and He would destroy you.*" And we are told in the gospels that Jesus became angry at a fig tree, became angry at the Pharisees repeatedly, and once became so angry at Peter He called him "*Satan.*" But the fact that God feels, expresses, and acts on something the Bible labels as "*anger*" is a conundrum only if the emotion we refer to in our sinful human lives as "*anger*" is the same thing the Bible is speaking about in reference to God. To see if they are the same thing, we have to look at what GOD says about HIS "*anger.*"

First, God tells us HIS anger is always directed at an injustice or at His people doing that which is evil or harmful. We see this in Exodus where God says *“you shall not afflict a widow or orphan. If you afflict them at all, and they cry to Me, I will surely hear; and My anger will be kindled.”* In those words God tells us that His anger is always righteous anger. That is because God doesn't become upset like a child that He didn't get His way. God's anger always has a holy purpose in mind, and a righteous outcome in view. In fact, God says that He only expresses and acts on His *“anger”* when there is no other way to effect a holy outcome, saying in Numbers that *“I am slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression.”*

But when people refuse to repent when God calls them out for sin, and defiantly continue to do what is evil or hurts other people, He says He has to step in to judge. And when He does step in to judge, He says that it is not with passionless demeanor like a modern justice, but with emotion like a disappointed parent. Which is why God says that when people do evil things *“a fire is kindled by My anger.”* By contract, our human anger often fails to be righteous. For our anger is often motivated by self interest or petty concerns. Our anger is often driven by disappointment that we didn't get our way. And our anger is often prompted because our feelings got hurt. That is because our sinful anger is often more like a child having a temper tantrum than a holy being trying to bring about a righteous end.

We see this in a story about B.H. Carroll, a famous Baptist preacher. One day Carroll's brother visited, and they decided to take a bus to go to lunch. As they walked to the bus stop, Carroll told his brother how his sons were getting angry at the drop of a hat, saying that *“just this week the principal called because they had gotten into yet another scuffle at school.”* As they boarded the bus, Carroll put his fare in the box but the driver didn't see him do it and said he didn't pay. Carroll instantly became angry at the accusation. Eventually, Carroll grabbed the driver and held him in a headlock and made him verify that he had paid. As Carroll fumed at the restaurant an hour later, his brother eventually started laughing at the irony of the situation. Referring back to what Carroll had told him about his boys losing their temper at the drop of a hat, his brother pointed an accusing finger at him and said *“I see where your boys get their tendency for anger.”*

Second, God tells us that because HIS anger is always righteous, but our may not be, the more we fallen human beings express anger the more likely it will be sinful. We see this when we look further into what God says about His anger. In Psalm 30, for instance, God says His *“anger is but for a moment, but His favor is for a lifetime.”* In Psalm 78 God says He has *“often He restrained His anger, and did not stir up all His wrath. [For] He remembered that they were but flesh.”* And Psalm 103 God says He *“will not keep His anger forever. [For] He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the East is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us.”* Which tells us that while God gets angry when people harm one another and do that which is evil, He does not let His *“anger”* get in the way of bringing out a righteous outcome in any given situation - the way we fallen humans can do - even when we have something valid to be upset about.

We see this in the story of an older woman who drove her 30 year old Buick to the grocery store. Just as she was about to pull into an open parking space, a young man in a new sports car raced into it. As he walked past her, she put down her window and asked, “*young man, didn’t you see that I was going to pull in there?*” “*Yes, I did,*” he said. “*Then why did you do it?*” she asked. “*Because I’m young, and I can,*” he said with a smile, and then headed into the store. When he came back out a few minutes later, he saw that the older woman was still fuming. He also say that her anger wasn’t passive aggressive in any way. Instead, she had her car sideways in the aisle and she was backing up and then speeding forward - smashing into his new sports car each time. So he raced up to her and screamed “*What are you doing?*” “*Getting even,*” she said. “*Why?*” he asked. “*Because I’m old, and I still can,*” she said.

The final thing God tells us is that when we choose to express what we have carefully determined to be righteous anger (and not sinful retaliation), we must do so in as holy a way as possible. That is because “*human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires,*” as James states in his epistle. And the reason is because in our fallen state “*those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves.*” That is because in our fallen state it is more likely that when we react in anger we will make a bad situation worse rather than better, turn 1 unrighteous act into 2, and fail to “*produce the righteousness God desires*” in us or in those to whom we act in anger. But God calls us to make bad situations better. God calls us to make unrighteous acts into holy outcomes. And God calls us to work with Him to “*produce the righteousness [He] desires*” in us and in those to whom we are tempted to act toward in anger.

Which is why God tells us “*he who is slow to anger has great understanding.*” It is why God tell us “*those with good sense are slow to anger.*” And it is why God warns us not to “*be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools.*” Which is why He also says through James that anyone who thinks “*they are religious, and does not bridle their tongues, deceives themselves, and their religion is worthless.*”

We see how we can be righteous even when we have valid occasion to be angry in the story of a woman who went to the post office. The clerk was being obnoxious to everyone that day. When it was her turn, the woman told him she only needed to buy a single stamp. For some reason that set the clerk off again and he berated her for wasting his time. Then he pushed the stamp across the counter with such force it floated up into the air, and landed out in the middle of the lobby floor. But rather than become angry, the woman quietly walked over to the stamp, picked it up, put her money on the floor where it had been, and walked out. Humiliated, the clerk quietly waited on the remaining customers. She was only able to respond to an angry tirade that way, however, because she understood what God meant when He said through James “*be quick to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger,*” because she understood what God meant when He said through the writer of Proverbs that “*a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh words stirs up anger,*” and because she understood what God meant when He said through another biblical author “*good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.*”

As we gather together with the images of Veteran's Day still on our minds, the issue of anger has never been more relevant. For those who serve to protect others from the harm that anger can cause know that the mere expression of rage in return to acts of rage (even when the ire is directed at the worst kinds of injustices) does not magically make the world a better place. They, above all others, know that the wrath of military might cannot change how people think, change how nations act toward other nations, or make the pain of past injustices automatically go away. And they, above all others, know that to heal people from the damage anger so often brings about in this fallen world, we need to not only refrain from responding to others with anger ourselves, we need to invite everyone to turn to God. For God alone can heal the wounds anger causes. God alone can bring comfort to those who are harmed by the anger of those around them. And God alone can bring about peace in the hearts of angry people. So let us then turn to Jesus this day - and every day we encounter anger directed at us or feel anger toward anyone else - for only the Prince of Peace can bring serenity to angry hearts.