

Anger

Anger is a very tricky emotion. I have been told before that it is a secondary emotion. In other words, as a secondary emotion, anger typically is a response to some event or deeper emotion within a person. Let me explain this a bit more with a couple of examples.

If you find yourself out of control in life - say, with a medical condition - and you are not able to do the things you once did, anger will naturally arise as a secondary emotion. It will arise as a response.

Here is another example: if a neighbour's house is robbed and vandalised, and the crooks get away, this injustice causes anger to rise up as a secondary emotion. Anger will arise as a response to the situation.

This means that it is not necessarily a sin to be angry. After all, Jesus was angry in the temple and at the death of His friend Lazarus. Again, anger is not necessarily a sin when it is expressed as righteous anger toward sinful and bad things.

However, there are times when anger – as a secondary emotion – is indeed sinful. For example, anger becomes sinful when it is based on selfish reasons, pride, entitlement, jealousy, and so forth. For example, if a colleague at work receives a promotion or recognition that you wanted, well... it is easy to become sinfully angry towards that person and even to slander them behind their back. You get the picture.

But why mention all of this?

In Genesis chapter 4, we hear about two brothers, Cain and Abel. Long story short, they both brought offerings before God Himself. God liked Abel's offering but did not approve of Cain's offering. As a result, Cain lost his temper and went and put a scowl on his face. Now, one would think that Cain's anger was justified; however, it was not. In fact, God Himself told Cain that he did not have the right to be angry. God told Cain that he would have been smiling if he had done the right thing. Cain was to blame, not God. You see, Abel gave his offering in faith, whereas Cain gave his offering without faith. Abel gave his offering to God as an act of worship, whereas Cain gave his offering as a self-righteous way of trying to earn God's approval.

Cain's anger was not righteous. Cain's anger was not healthy. Cain did not have the right to be angry with God or Abel. And this is where we need to pay special attention. This is where we need to be alert. Instead of Cain's anger being a short-lived sinful secondary emotion, his anger developed roots and then burrowed into his heart, turning into bitterness, resentment, and hatred. Perhaps we could say it this way: Cain's sinful anger was crouching at the door of his heart; however, Cain was so fuelled by wrath towards God and Abel that this sinful anger ripped into his heart and pounced on his heart like a wild beast and began to devour his soul. Cain's anger went from a secondary emotion into the basement of his heart and took up residence in Cain's heart in the form of resentful rage.

We have all been there before when anger turns into bitterness, resentment, and hatred. It is an awful place to be. When sinful anger gives birth to bitterness and then takes root in our hearts, we begin to blame everyone else around us, while we are easily triggered and irritable. Indeed, when short-lived anger burrows into our hearts as long-term bitterness, our outlook on life becomes toxic, and there is no hope for anything. This deep-rooted bitterness can even bring about physical pain in our body, as our chest muscles are wrapped in frustration and our stomachs are tied up in knots. To make things worse, if left unchecked, bitterness leads to embedded hatred, and hatred then leads to spiritual suicide, which results in us being cut off from the Lord's grace.

In the case of Cain, we saw what happened; his raging anger and vindictive spirit poured out upon Abel, as he stoned and murdered Abel in a field.

Where do we go from here?

As we consider Cain, it is important to note that Cain's issue was that he got angry when he had no right to be angry in the first place. You see, there are times when we are not angry over a situation when we should be angry. And then, there are other times when we should not be angry over a situation, but we are. And that second example of being angry when we should not be angry is what we should pay special attention to. You see, Cain got so incredibly angry because he was not justified with his offering. God did not validate Cain's unfaithfulness.

Cain was easily given to anger because he was so invested in his works, his pride, his accomplishments, and his self-righteousness. Those who are self-absorbed in their own greatness are the most easily offended because they trust in themselves and not in Christ. However, I get the impression that Abel would not have been so easily angered - not because he was super pious or religiously good - but rather because he knew that he could bring nothing before God. Consider that old hymn, Rock of Ages (330), for a moment. Verse 3 states,

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.*

It is hard to get offended before God when you have nothing in your hands to give Him. It is hard to get angry in life when you have nothing to cling to in life except the cross. It is difficult to get defensive when you know you are helpless to begin with. For, when you are empty-handed, naked, helpless, and foul, you are not keeping score of what you didn't get or should have received but are grateful for what has already been given to you. And that is the key difference between the way of Cain and the way of Abel.

You need not get defensive, angry, or lash out like Cain at your neighbour or God Himself. The reason why? When the Lord God confronts our sins through His Holy Word, He is right about our sins. Also, when we are called out on our sins by loved ones, chances are, they are probably right as well. And when your conscience bothers you, more often than not, you have probably failed again. But take heart, you are never left in your condemnation to be given over to anger, bitterness, and resentment, for you no longer live; you have been crucified with Christ. One does not need to be easily triggered or defensive over one's life when one's whole life is found in Christ, especially when there is more grace in Christ than there is bitterness in one's heart.