

STRUGGLING WITH ANGER

People get angry. All people. Every day. But should people who call themselves Christians feel anger? And if they feel it, should they express it? And if they should express it, then how, when and where?

Good questions.

We are made in the image of God. And God expressed anger in the Bible. God also showed steadfast or unfailing covenant love. Anger because of God's holiness. Mercy because of God's love. How do we live this balance today?

REST STOP #1: Anger, Fear and the Kingdom of God

When I prayed about this month's theme, I thought I heard the Divine Voice say, "Well, what are you struggling with in your life?"

Ouch. I didn't have to think long. I knew where this was pointing. I was angry.

I am angry. Angry at a thousand things. I'm angry at Hurricane Katrina and angry that thousands were hurt by the storm. I'm angry that my sister-in-law was killed six months ago. Angry about my job situation because of the heavy workload. Angry at the stress.

And of course, I'm angry with myself for letting the stress get to me.

I'm angry with God for making it so difficult right now.

And then there's the fear issue. Like my anger, I'm afraid of a thousand things. Big things like cancer. Little things like my hair getting thinner (or is my hair falling out because I'm afraid?) I'm afraid of stupid things like losing my passport or tripping on the sidewalk. I'm afraid of more substantial issues like missing what God has in store for me. I'm afraid I'll do something dumb and hurt the people I love.

I'm afraid of failure.

My fear and my anger, of course, are connected. My fears fuel an unhealthy desire to control people and situations, especially people and situations that are really better left up to God. And then, when I lose control—or lose my illusion of being in control—I get angry.

Sometimes I get angry with God. If God is all-powerful and all loving, then why do bad things happen to good people? Why do bad things happen to me?

And God, being truly all-loving and all-powerful, holds me and says ... (hold it .. it's coming .. I think ... well?)

Nope. Nothing. No answer. I keep asking this question and nothing comes. The Bible speaks to me—

—"My ways are higher than your ways" Is. 55:8-9—

—"All things work together for the good of those who love God ... " Rom. 8:28—

but sometimes those verses don't give me the answers I want. Am I asking too much? And then I read some of the Psalms, where other people rail at God too. Psalm 44 tells the story of a people abandoned by God, even though they had done nothing wrong. Or is that only their version of the story? Psalm 73 laments that the wicked seem to thrive and the righteous have trouble after trouble. But then after the psalmist sits in the sanctuary awhile, he sees that this injustice is only temporary. Psalm 88 cries the blues. And there is no answer, no hope, no solution in the end.

In other psalms, I hear people being angry, not with God but with their enemies. Psalm 137 calls for the babies of their enemies to be dashed against the rocks. God's people don't do it; they can't. It is not their place. But they surely ask God to do it. They're mad.

I have no answers. But the God of the Bible loved the people who shook their fists to heaven and God helped the people through the whirlwind of anger they felt towards others. God didn't bash any babies though.

And God loves me too.

When I think about Hurricane Katrina and cancer and work stress and thinning hair—all my anger and fear—I think I want a factory supervisor God. I think I want a God who pulls two switches and adjusts one clog and the problem's fixed.

But God has chosen not to be a factory supervisor God. For better or worse, God has chosen to be a Shepherd God. God is more like a shepherd gently guiding the often wayward sheep. Our God is the faithful parent God, up at 2 am, praying, watching out the window. No switches, no knobs, no chains on the teenagers or the sheep.

So sometimes I get angry because life is so messy. God is not going to take all my troubles away. If God did, I would become a machine part, a robot, and life would be as predictable as a clock.

And sometimes I'm afraid. God is not going to take away my fears. Not right away, at least. God will give me strength to stare those fears down.

So, I tell God about my anger. And God helps me unclench my fists. I tell God about my fears. And God wraps me up in everlasting arms.

REST STOP #2: The Ephesians 4:26 Prayer Station

Materials Needed:

- Paper and pens
- Bible
- a desk for writing and thinking

Part 1: Be angry

- 1 List every person, situation or thing that makes you angry right now. Be specific and thorough.
- 2 Look over your list. Remind yourself that it's honest to admit this anger. Remind yourself that it is psychologically healthy to express anger. And it's in the Bible.

Part 2: But do not sin

- 1 Look back over your list. For every instance of anger listed above, write down a righteous (godly) response to that anger and a sinful response to that anger. For example, "I'm angry at myself for messing up the job interview," might have these two responses. Righteous response: I need to pray for God to help me because I'm struggling to forgive myself. Sinful response: keep berating myself and refusing to give it to God.

- 2 If you have been sexually or physically abused, your healing may be more complicated than speaking to your offender and working at forgiveness and reconciliation. Most victims of abuse need a special process and help from caring pastors or other professional counselors. Seek these persons out.
- 3 If the person with whom you are angry is dead or refuses to admit wrong or be reconciled, then write a letter to this person that you send . . . to God. Write down your anger as concretely as possible and then release it to the higher court of God. If it helps you, burn the letter.

Part 3: Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

- 1 Plan now to carry out your righteous responses in the immediate or near future. Make yourself a note that says; "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Put it on your bathroom mirror or taped to your computer.
- 2 Remember these principles:
 - It's okay to be angry. Anger is a God-given emotion like other emotions.
 - But it's not okay to respond in a sinful way to your anger. This includes harboring evil thoughts, gossiping, refusing to confront the person with whom you are angry, hitting a person, etc. Also analyze the legitimacy of your anger. Is it justified? Are you partially to blame?

Take godly steps to be reconciled. God desires healed relationships in four significant areas: between ourselves and God, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and our inner self, and between ourselves and the created world. God will help us find healing in all those relationships. Don't delay to ask for his help.

REST STOP #3: What to do with the wrath of God

Depending on what you have heard at church or from books or the radio station, you may have the impression that God never gets angry . . . that God will always love you, no matter what you do or don't do, that God will always forgive you, that the wonderful grace of God will never end. Never.

Is that true?

Read these verses:

- Numbers 12:1-16
- Psalm 50:7-23
- Numbers 32:1-15
- Matthew 3:1-12
- Matthew 12:33-37
- Nahum 1:1-2

What is the nature of God?
Holy or merciful?

Yes.

“The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.”

Exodus 34:6-7

REST STOP #4: What to do with the wrath of God, Part 2

Depending on what you have heard at church or from books or the radio station, you may have the impression that God is a mean God ...that God is just waiting up in heaven for you to mess up so God can zap you with disease or trouble or who knows what. The God you know is the God who demands holiness, a holiness you can never hope to live up to. Never. Is that true?

Read these verses:

- Psalm 103:10-14 (or read the whole psalm)
- Isaiah 54:8-10
- Lamentations 3:22-24, 31-33
- Hosea 11:1-9
- John 3:16-17
- Luke 15:11-32
- Nahum 1:3

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Amen.