



Anger: A Biblical Perspective

by Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking time to explore this very important topic of anger. Whenever we explore such a powerful topic, please remember we are on a journey together with heaven as our home. So, for Jesus' sake who suffered and died for you, care and love one another. If you feel suicidal and feel life is no longer worth living, or feel an overwhelming desire to hurt someone, please seek help. You need not suffer alone.

GROUND RULES (PLEASE READ)

1. If you are in a dangerous situation, seek help. Get out of the dangerous circumstance.
2. If at any time you feel depressed, suicidal or homicidal, contact your PCM (primary care manager [provider/physician]) or go to an emergency room.
3. If you are seeing a pastoral counselor, therapist or doctor, do not stop treatment. Tell them about your faith and the positive impact faith has on life.
4. If you are self-medicating — drinking excessively, using drugs outside of their intended prescription — cease. Get help if necessary.
5. Love life! It is a gift from God and is so precious.

ANGER AND THE CHILD OF GOD REDEEMED UNDER CHRIST

Digging Deeper Into God's Word: Psalm 4 and Mark 3

Let's explore two Bible passages and discover insight they share about anger.

Opening Prayer:

Gracious and loving God, today I feel overwhelmed. Life comes at me with pummeling fists. Sunshine and roses are replaced with uncertainty and worry. As I look at my life, beginning in the water of Holy Baptism and continuing to bliss-filled eternity with You, I am confident that this chapter, this season of struggle, will pass. I know with confidence that You stand beside me. I am Your child. Even death cannot separate me from Your love. Help me embrace and take to heart the comforting words of the hymn:

“Neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord His children sever; unto them His grace He showeth, and their sorrows all He knoweth” (LSB 725). Amen.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul provides instructions on how people can live lives that reflect their Baptism. In Ephesians 4:26, Paul quotes Psalm 4. We will now discover together why this is such a powerful psalm regarding anger and Christian living.

Psalm 4

- ¹ Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have given me relief when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!
- ² O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?
- ³ But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.
- ⁴ Be angry, and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.
- ⁵ Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the Lord.
- ⁶ There are many who say, "Who will show us some good?
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!"
- ⁷ You have put more joy in my heart
than they have when their grain and wine abound.
- ⁸ In peace I will both lie down and sleep;
for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

Opening Discussion:

Read aloud Psalm 4. What is your reaction? God knows and loves His people. Like the psalmist, our life is filled with distresses (v. 1). The list of suffering, pain and sorrow is so long and deep. Conjuring up just a short list brings despair. Feeling overwhelmed leads to hours of restlessness while trying to sleep (v. 4). We need rescue from these sleepless nights (v. 8). But God does not leave us alone in our suffering. How does this psalm encourage you when feeling overwhelmed?

Note: Satan works overtime to destroy and discourage. Yet through sheer tenacity and the love of Christ, you persevere in the face of danger. This is accomplished through the grace of God manifested in Christ Jesus. The love of God allows us to rise above anxiety, frustration, loneliness, distress and anger.

VERSES 1–3: The full weight of God’s loving relationship

Verse 1: What is King David’s tone of voice when addressing the Lord? _____

The Lord’s best and brightest were reluctant and afraid. Life frequently blew up in their faces. They approached God in the rawness and desperation of life.

- **1 Kings 19:1–14:** The great prophet _____ (*Elijah*) was afraid!
- **Exodus 3:** Even _____ (*Moses*), the man who defied Pharaoh, parted the Red Sea, and saw the face of God felt overwhelmed with his duties.
- **1 Samuel 1:8–15:** _____ (*Hannah*) was in such deep despair in prayer ... crying and praying.

How does King David address God in the Psalm (v. 1)? _____ (*God of my righteousness*)

We have the same right as David, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to come to our God in times of desperation. We are made His children and have access to him 24/7! Take a moment and read Galatians 2:19–21.

Verse 2 speaks to one of the causes of depression, anxiety, suicide and homicide ... shame! God tells us to acknowledge our _____ (*shame*) to Him, to lay it on His shoulders and place it at the foot of Golgotha. Yes, shaming and belittling hurt! Ask a high schooler what it's like to be humiliated on Facebook. Or have a loved one make callous and hurtful gibes ... it hurts! God knows! The Lord does not listen to the mockers in life, but to His loving child: you. "The Lord _____ (*hears*) when I _____ (*call*) to Him."

Verse 3 declares we are _____ (*set apart*) by the Lord. What a loaded and beautiful phrase! When God the Father looks at us through the eyes of the cross, His Son makes us wonderful, beautiful and cherished! Jesus brought you into this wonderful estate ... a redeemed child of God!

The "God of righteousness" hears our plea for help, regardless of where we are — under direct fire, in a noisy desperate battle, or alone and feeling isolated.

VERSES 4–5: The 'intimate' Lord who helps us when troubled

The Holy Spirit, through David, addresses the problem of _____ (*anger*). Anger is serious business. The word _____ (*anger*) is recorded 269 times in the Bible. The good news in this text is that God does not leave us "hanging." The Holy Spirit gives us a remedy. We are to offer _____ (*right*) sacrifices and _____ (*trust*) in the Lord.

Can you think of people in the Old Testament who got angry? List only 3; there are lots!

(Possible answers: Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Saul, David, Elijah, Jeremiah)

At this point in your reading of the Old Testament, you will notice the Lord gets angry.

Look at John 2:13–16. Do you think Jesus was angry? _____ (*Yes*). (See also Matt. 21:12–17, Mark 11:15–19, Luke 19:45–48). Glance at Mark 3:5 and Mark 11. Did the Lord get angry in other passages as well?

Take a moment to explore Ephesians 4:6. The Apostle _____ (*Paul*) admonishes us to _____ (*not sin*) when we become angry. In his letter to the Church of Ephesus he is quoting the very psalm we're studying! _____ (*Anger*) is not the problem. We are created in the image of God. The eternal Lord God, Creator and sustainer of the universe becomes _____ (*angry*). Wow! Consider that Christ Himself became _____ (*angry*). We are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26) and redeemed under Christ. We get angry too. Anger is not wrong or sinful. It is what we do with our anger that makes all the difference.

Read Romans 12:1. When reflecting on Psalm 4 about offering a right _____ (*sacrifice*), it is meant for us to present ourselves and "trust in the Lord." Luther wrote concerning Psalm 4:5, "For to trust in the Lord means to trust in Christ. Without him, we can do nothing."

VERSES 6–7: Christ's loving embrace

Who shows us favor? Where can we go when hurt? _____ (*The Lord*)

Where do you go now when you hurt? _____? Do they give you light, or a place to vent?

Read Verse 7. We look to the _____ (*Lord Jesus*) as the source and center of joy!

Read Matthew 11:28–30. List a few ways that burdens lifted by Christ bring about joy.

VERSE 8: A “grace-filled” conclusion

According to David, what happens when we approach the Lord with our feelings of being overwhelmed?

_____ (*lie down and sleep in peace*)

Read Philippians 4:6–7. What is the connection with Psalm 4:8? _____ (*Prayer*)

_____ (*When feeling anxious, place yourself in the loving arms of Jesus*)

MARK 3:1–6

Let’s now take a look at how our Lord Jesus used, saw and approached anger.

“Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come here.’ And he said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mark 3:1–6).

Opening Discussion:

Read aloud Mark 3:1–6. What is your reaction? Are you surprised by Jesus as He “looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart”? Have you ever done or accomplished something good and positive even though you were angry? Jesus was doing something forbidden by Sabbath Law. Did Jesus break the Sabbath or fulfill God’s great and wonderful plan of redemption? So, is anger always bad? Is anger sinful and wrong? Discuss your answers.

VERSES 1–2:

“Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.”

How was the withered hand understood by the following:

- the synagogue community? _____ (*it represented sin*)
- the person with the withered hand? _____ (*it represented a wide range of possibilities: God’s abandonment, a curse, a sin...*)
- Jesus and His disciples? _____ (*it was a validation to show Christ as the promised Messiah of Scripture, a fulfillment of the Old Testament, the Lord of the Sabbath*)

VERSES 3-4:

“And he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come here.’ And he said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent.”

Jesus told the man, “Come here.” Can you think of other places in the Bible where Jesus bids people to “come” to him? (There are 62 references of “Come to me” in the Gospels.)

- **Mark 8:34:** “And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”
- **Mark 10:14:** “But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.’”
- **Mark 10:21:** “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’”
- **Matthew 11:28:** “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus asks the question in verse 4, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” Who was committing sin? Jesus or the crowd? What were those in the crowd doing that was a violation of God’s law and not just the Sabbath? _____ (*They were plotting to kill Jesus*).

VERSE 5:

“And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”

Who was Jesus directing His anger towards? _____ (*The crowd*)

Why was Jesus angry? _____ (*Possible answers are: the unbelief of the crowd, the sinful condition of the crowd, their lack of belief that Jesus was the Messiah, the crowd not believing Jesus capable of working miracles*)

What would you call this type of anger? _____ (*Redemptive anger*)

What other emotion did Jesus show in verse 5? _____ (*Grief*)

Closing:

Jesus healed the man! He again demonstrated that He is indeed the Christ of God, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. This points to the cross. Through the suffering and death of the Lord, we are free from Satan, hell, death and the grave. We are His children through the waters of Holy Baptism. We have the right to come to Him with ALL our concerns, throughout the tumultuous roller coaster of life. We are to be a prayerful people, to come to Him whenever we have needs, whether at home, separated from loved ones or in fear.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, we thank You for Your dwelling among us. You reveal Yourself to all of humanity as the Son of Man and the Son of God. Like the one suffering with the withered hand, we come to You as flawed creatures seeking wholeness and healing. If it is a physical malady, heal it. If it is a wounded soul, redeem it. If it is a mental condition, remedy it. Thank You for being with us, Lord, in this time of study. Amen.

DIGGING DEEPER: WHAT IS ANGER?

The general definition of anger is: “Trouble; vexation. A strong passion or emotion of displeasure or antagonism, excited by a real or supposed injury or insult to one’s self or others, or by the intent to do such injury” (*Webster’s Dictionary*). But this barely begins to describe the deep hurt and wrongs afflicted on us by someone else’s anger or our own anger. This is the tip of the iceberg for many who have been deeply hurt or abused. We feel anger, sense it, taste it. Some carry anger around with them, and it burdens them. Many don’t want to feel angry, but are at a loss concerning what to do with it. It disrupts sleep, relationships, communities, our own health.

Note: The following is oversimplified for the purpose of discussion and further research and study if desired.)

1. **Physical anger** comes from chemicals secreted in the brain: epinephrine and norepinephrine. These are also called adrenaline and non-adrenaline. (There is much more to the physiology of anger. If you want to find out more you can invite a medical provider to your class to present on the topic.) These chemicals provide great strength and a defense mechanism. In other words, they get you through some tough stuff. This physical anger is an appropriate emotion in time of crisis and an emergency, but only at certain places and at certain times.

Question: What does anger feel like to you as a physical sensation?

2. **Mental anger** covers up stuff that is not being dealt with. So when you get angry, ask yourself, “What’s really going on here?”

Question: What does anger feel like to you as a mental sensation?

Why study anger from the perspective of the Christian faith?

We are created in the image of God. The Lord God cares deeply for our body, mind and soul. If you have ever attended a graveside service, you may hear the pastor pray the following:

“May God the Father, who created this body, may God the Son, who by his blood redeemed this body, may God the Holy Spirit, who by Baptism sanctified this body to be his temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh” (*Lutheran Worship*, 90.)

God knows His people. It is the Lord God who created us, sustains us and loves us. The gift of redemption by His Son on the cross saves us from our sins. The Holy Spirit creates saving faith in the water combined with His Word in Holy Baptism. All true.

But we are all creatures of a fallen humanity. We are at a loss for what to do about anger. It seems like anger is now out of control. The unhealthy expression of anger is now considered an entitlement or a badge of honor, while at the same time many are apprehensive about expressing anger due to a misunderstanding that anger is “wrong,” “evil” or “unchristian.” Both of these views are unhealthy and wrong-headed. The wanton destruction caused by acting out in anger leaves nothing but burnt bridges and broken lives. Unchecked anger breaks hearts and ruins relationships.

And yet many have a misunderstanding about anger. Some were told by well-meaning people that Christians are not allowed to be angry. This is untrue. We will explore this and other aspects of anger in our study. We know undisciplined and unconstrained anger leads to medical problems such as ulcers, insomnia and addictions. Anger is a cause of serious behavioral health conditions, including depression, anxiety, suicide and homicide. Most importantly, if anger not expressed appropriately, anger can lead to physical death and eternal separation from God.

But anger, in and of itself, is not a failure or a flaw. Scripture speaks clearly about anger. So, what are we to do with our anger? God gets angry, we get angry. Jesus gets angry, we get angry. Thus, there is even a redemptive quality to anger if used appropriately.

In this study, we are going to explore anger from a Christian perspective. We will seek insights in Bible passages and take note of ways anger should be approached. Finally, we will close our session by exploring constructive uses of anger.

The Negative Side of Anger

1. Angry people are less likely to have healthy supportive relationships.
2. Angry people tend to have fewer friends. They are more likely to be depressed, and they are more likely to become verbally and/or physically abusive toward others.
3. Anger reduces intimacy in personal relationships; husbands and wives and other family members are more guarded and less able to relax in their interactions with hostile people.
4. Angry people have pessimistic and negative attitudes toward others and are unable to recognize or utilize support when it is available.
5. Angry people don't realize the impact their behavior has on others. They don't realize that they are pushing people away when they refuse or ridicule genuine attempts at helpfulness.
6. Angry people also tend to drink, smoke and eat more than their less angry counterparts.
7. Anger's physiological response evolved to help people handle physical threats. However, there are not very many places where physical aggression is an appropriate response.
8. Uncontrolled anger can result in loss of employment, loss of one's family and even incarceration.

For more, please see, "Social Costs Of Anger" at gracepointwellness.org/116-anger-management/article/5810-social-costs-of-anger.

Question: What else would you add to this list of the negative effects of anger?

Points to Ponder (feel free to discuss one or all of these):

- We observe anger and witness its devastation all the time! At work, in church and in the family.
- Anger adversely affects who we are. Anger has negative impacts on our most important relationships. Anger makes us people we do not want to be.
- Anger is profitable in the entertainment business. Think of the list of blockbuster movies that have to do with anger and revenge.
- We see people in our world today enraged at social injustice while destroying and burning businesses and the lives of owners and workers alike.
- What does God have to say about anger?
- Is anger evil?
- Is there a redemptive aspect of anger?

Question: What else you would like to ponder concerning anger?

Holy Scripture, a Quick Survey:

God's Word references anger frequently. In the ESV translation, "anger" is mentioned 269 times. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew root word for anger is אָנַף (anaph). It literally means "breath" or "snort" (biblehub.com/hebrew/599.htm). Often we can tell if people are getting angry — we often hear the phrase "flaring one's nostrils." In the New Testament, the Greek word for anger is ὀργή (orgé). At its root is the understanding of anger as "to teem, to swell" (biblehub.com/greek/3709.htm). In the New Testament, anger is often described as "boiling over." I knew a person who referred to his anger as the turning over of an old car engine on a cold morning. As he turned the key and the engine attempted to turn over, it got closer and closer to "firing up." After about three attempts, the engine would "turn over and come to life... like his fury, building and building until it exploded." Anger is mentioned first in the book of Genesis where we recall the hostility of Cain towards Abel (Gen. 4:6–8). Anger is mentioned in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ to St. John.

"If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:9–10).

The book of the Bible which references anger the most is Jeremiah, with "anger" cited 34 times. The great prophet Jeremiah speaks concerning God's anger at His people. In the ESV translation, anger is mentioned three times in the Gospels (Matt. 5:21 and 18:34, and Mark 3:5). However, in the Greek Bible, "anger" (ὀργή, orgé) is mentioned in Matthew 3:7, Mark 3:5, Luke 3:7, Luke 21:23 and John 3:36.

Question: Why do you think anger is mentioned so often in the Bible?

What Did Luther Think About Anger?

Martin Luther spoke and wrote about anger. We are in good company with our study. Luther was a highly disciplined man who knew Holy Scripture and the doctrines of the church. In the inspired Word of God, Luther saw God's righteous anger expressed in the Law: Humanity stands condemned as rebellious. All are fallen creatures and therefore destined to hell for eternal punishment. At the same time, Luther understood the love of God expressed in the Gospel: the redemptive act of His Son for all humanity, our Savior Jesus dying on the cross.

"Of all the places to search for God, the last place most people would think to look is the gallows. Martin Luther confessed that there, in the shadows cast by death, God does indeed meet his straying, rebellious human creatures. There God reveals who he is; there he reveals who they are. Not in flight beyond the clouds, but in the dust of the grave God has come to tell it like it is about himself and about humanity."¹

This marvelous act of Christ on the cross, apart from anything we do, restores us. We are now redeemed: bought back from hell, death and the grave. Luther understood the resurrected Christ, the victorious Lord of all! Luther acknowledged and made clear that we continually struggle with our humanity and hence look to the Holy Spirit who creates saving faith in our hearts through the waters of Holy Baptism. But Luther always knew humanity was at constant struggle. He used the phrase *simul justus et peccator*, which means "at the same time sinner and saint." Keeping all this in mind, here are a few thoughts from Luther on anger. The following citations are from Ewald M. Plass's magnificent one volume work, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

¹ Robert Kolb, cited in Neal J. Anthony, *Cross Narratives: Martin Luther's Christology and the Location of Redemption* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 22.

- Luther sought to differentiate anger from hatred. “It is like the difference between old wine and new wine. For hatefulness or hatred is an inveterate anger” (26).
- Luther believed that anger is ingrained in the heart and not in one’s world or life situation. Luther tells a story of a monk, grumpy, petulant and irascible. This friar realized after leaving the cloister because everyone was making him mad, that he alone was the source of his anger and not the monastic community (26).
- Luther understood the human condition by acknowledging how difficult it is to rid ourselves of anger. Notice in the following how Luther sees us rationalize anger while it continues to grow and overtakes our life, health and happiness. “If the heart is inclined to anger to begin with, and, besides, now gets the notion that it is doing right and well by being angry, then devil has won the game, the grudge grows greater from day to day, and the hearts become increasingly bitter toward one another” (27).
- In his Large Catechism, specifically the Fifth Commandment, Luther confessed that God gives authority to certain individuals and institutions to act out of anger in order to maintain order and punish evil. “For it is proper for God and for everyone who is in a divine estate to be angry, to rebuke, and punish because of those very persons who transgress this and other commandments.”
- Clearly this concept is in agreement with Luther’s understanding of “The Two Kingdoms,” as this reflects Romans 13:4 (*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, CPH 2006, 379).
- In his understanding of the Bible and what it says about anger, Luther believed that a disciplined person can use anger as a tool. This is an important point. Here is what Luther says: “I have no better remedy than anger. If I want to write, pray, preach well, then I must be angry. Then my entire blood supply refreshes itself, my mind is made keen, and all temptations depart” (29).

The clarity Luther brings to the topic of anger indicates the following:

1. Anger is a neutral, yet powerful feeling.
2. Anger can be useful when applied in a mature, measured approach.
3. It is important to know what is anger and what is not anger (anger verses hatred).
4. Anger is not the issue in many cases. Rather, it is how we respond to anger that makes all the difference.
5. When we become angry in order to process it, channel it and use it for the mission of Christ, we have to “own it, discipline it and acknowledge it.”

Question: Do you remember hearing any teachings on anger in church or Sunday school?

Optional prayers:

“I leave all things to God’s direction; He loves me both in joy and woe. His will is good, sure His affection; His tender love is true, I know. My fortress and my rock is He: What pleases God, that pleases me.

God knows what must be done to save me; His love for me will never cease. Upon His hands He did engrave me with purest gold of loving grace. His will supreme must ever be: What pleases God, that pleases me.

My God desires the soul’s salvation; My soul He, too, desires to save. Therefore with Christian resignation all earthly troubles I will brave. His will be done eternally: What pleases God, that pleases me.

My God has all things in His keeping; He is the ever faithful friend. He gives me laughter after weeping, And all His ways in blessings end. His love endures eternally: What pleases God, that pleases me.” (*LSB* 719)

Let us pray. Through the suffering and death of the Lord, we are free from Satan, hell, death and the grave. We are His children through the waters of Holy Baptism. We have the right to come to Him with ALL our concerns, throughout the tumultuous roller coaster of life. We are to be a prayerful people, to come to Him whenever we have needs, whether at home, separated from loved ones or in fear.

About the author:

Rev. Dr. Steven Hokana, Chaplain, Lieutenant Colonel, USA (Ret.) is the assistant director of LCMS Ministry of the Armed Forces. His driving passion is a deep love for those who struggle through difficult life events. Steve has written and spoken extensively on the topic of Christ's power through painful issues of life. He is a clinically trained chaplain with a specialty in spirituality and post-traumatic stress disorder. Hokana is a member of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education and a Diplomat, American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress.

Hokana is a retired active-duty U.S. Army chaplain with 31 years of service to our nation. His assignments varied from Airborne Infantry, Armor, Combat Service Support, to major medical centers and military academic institutions. He is the recipient of the Legion of Merit medal, Order of Medical Military Merit medallion, the St. Martin of Tours medal for meritorious service as an LCMS Chaplain in the military, and the Four Chaplains Medal by the United States Army Chaplaincy for collegial selfless behavior while rendering religious support in the U.S. military.

Chaplain Hokana has been married to his awesome bride Mary for 36 years. They have three adult children and two wonderful grandchildren.