

The Angriest Man in the Bible

In this chapter we continue a series on the seven deadly sins, which we call the seven *daily* sins because we wrestle with them daily. In this chapter we look at the sin of anger or wrath. Before we can define anger, identify anger in our own lives, and fight anger with the Gospel, we need to talk about one of the angriest men in the Bible, Esau. Esau's anger problems began when he was born. His birth was unique. He was a first-born twin (Genesis 25:24-25). In that culture being the first born meant that he was the one who would inherit the lion's share of the wealth and the family name. He was the one through whom the Messiah would come. But a message from God came to his parents, Isaac and Rebekah, and God said, "The older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). In other words, God had plans to turn their culturally preconceived notions upside down. He chose the younger son and blessed him before they were even born.

This created quite a dilemma, because Isaac wouldn't believe this promise of God. He doted on and favored Esau, which wasn't difficult because Esau was a man's man. He was the son every father wants. With a manly beard and a chest full of hair, he was a hunter. But he grew up indulged by his father and became impulsive and foolish. Jacob, on the other hand, grew up in the tents. The tents was where they wove baskets and baked cakes. Jacob was raised among the women and became a man who tried to get what he wanted through manipulation and deception. He was favored by his mother (Genesis 25:27-28).

This family division came to a head when Isaac got old and it became time for him to pass down the family name and inheritance. Instead of believing the promise of God and walking by faith and not by sight (no pun intended, as he was blind), he stubbornly still favored his firstborn. He called Esau to himself, preparing to bless him and give him the family name and inheritance (Genesis 27:1). However, Rebekah, the mother, overheard and hatched a plot with Jacob to deceive his father. He wore goat's hair on his arm, and his father was fooled. He took the blessing (Genesis 27:5-29).

Not long after, Esau came home from a hunting trip and he said, "My father, please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give

me your blessing” (Genesis 27:31). Then Isaac realized what had happened and “trembled very violently” (Genesis 27:33). Esau also realized what had happened and cried out bitterly, “Is there any blessing left for me? (Genesis 27:34). This particular event would shape the rest of Esau’s life. This wound, this offense, this moment in which Esau was cheated of everything he believed he deserved, would shape his life and he would go on to become a madman, a bitter man.

Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob. But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, “Behold, your brother Esau *comforts* himself about you by *planning* to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran and stay with him a while, until your brother's *fury* turns away—until your brother's *anger* turns away from you.” (Genesis 27:41-45)

Defining Anger

When referring to the Bible for the definition of a word, we must remember that the Bible is not a dictionary and we don’t necessarily get “dictionary” definitions of words from it. We must glean it from the context of stories. We want a practical and helpful word that we can apply to our own lives and to define anger from this story, but we must remember that this is not the first or last story of anger from the Bible. The first story of anger in the Bible is the story of Cain and Abel, which describes the first brother killing his own brother out of envy and bitterness, and the last story of anger in the Bible is of Jesus, his eyes like blazing fire, wearing a robe dipped in blood. “From his mouth comes

a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (Revelation 19:12:13, 15).

If Cain was angry and sinned, is Jesus also sinning in his anger as he drives out the Pharisees and the religious rich from the courts of the temple (Mark 11:15-17)? No, of course not. The problem with defining the deadly sin of anger is that anger itself is not a sin. Paul tells us, “Be angry and do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). In fact, the Church should probably be a little more angry than it actually is.

The Greeks vs the Christians

Here’s where we’re going to separate the philosophy of the world and the philosophy of Christianity. Christianity is not a religion in which we learn not to get our feathers ruffled. It is actually a religion in which we learn to get our feathers ruffled in the right place, the right time, and right manner. The Church is not a place for hushed tones and polite manners. The Church is a place of anger and processing that anger. It’s a place for mad men. The church that is nonchalant with the sins of society and the injustices of this world and holds a university-like, academic indifference to the evil in our hearts will soon not be a church.

Christianity is not a religion of moderation in *all* things. Only in some things. In fact, the philosophy that says, “Never let them see you sweat,” is not biblical. That is Greek philosophy, coming from Plato and the Stoics.

Christianity says, “Get involved. Get worked up. But get worked up in the right way.” Anger is not inherently a sin but if pointed in the wrong direction can become sin. If Adam had gotten a little more angry, we wouldn’t be in the mess we’re in. When a serpent is hitting on your wife, that is not the time for sloth. That is the time for passion and for anger. He should have done what Jesus did when the serpent started talking to his wife and stomped on his head.

A bitter kind of anger

The ancient Christians, however, have been talking about the deadly sin of anger for over a thousand years, and they're not wrong. Because they aren't talking about all types of anger. When they speak of the deadly sin of anger, they speak about a particular type of anger. Is it wrath? Well, it could be, but God has wrath. They use the word *ira*, but that doesn't do us any good because it's Latin.

So we need a word to describe the sin of Esau. What was it? And is it a sin in our own hearts? Hebrews 12 gives us the perfect word: bitterness (v. 15). Is there ever a point in time when bitterness can be thought of as good? Is there ever a point in time when Jesus was bitter? When we say someone's bitter, it's always bad. Taken from the story of Esau, bitterness is a heart disposition of internalized anger that is created when someone doesn't get what they think they deserve.

According to this, would you say you're a bitter person? Is a past offense keeping you from what you think you deserve and making you bitter? I'm not asking if you're a person who gets angry. I hope you are. If you're not a person who gets angry, you're in the clutches of the vice of sloth. I hope you are a person who gets angry at the injustices in the world and the sin in your heart. But are you a person that anger *gets* or are you a person who uses anger as a motivator to fight poverty, sickness, and sin? Esau believed he was cheated out of what he deserved, and that turned him into a bitter, angry person.

Diagnosing Anger

If you're not sure if there's a root of bitterness in your heart, let's now try to identify it. Hebrews 12:15 uses the illustration of a root to describe Esau's sin of bitterness. A root is beneath the surface. A root has the DNA and all the potential to burst forth into a forest, producing all sorts of fruits if given the right nurture. If bitterness is in your life, it's bubbling right beneath the surface. Like God said to Cain right before he murdered his brother, it is like a crouching tiger. Cain didn't notice it; it was his blind spot, and God said, "If you don't kill anger, anger will kill you" (Genesis 4:7). Cain didn't repent or listen to the voice of God, gave

full vent to his wrath (Proverbs 29:11, NIV), and opened his door to anger and it got him by the jugular.

It began to enslave him and when the right opportunity came, he killed his brother. A root of bitterness sprung forth into a forest of fury. The secret is that it lies beneath the surface and usually only emerges in smoke-filled back rooms, in gossip sections of Bible studies. It's below the surface in a person's life, in a church, in a city, and in a nation. So we have to root it out by looking at the fruit of bitterness. We may not be able to see the root, but we can backtrack from the fruit to the root.

Fruits of bitterness

The first noteworthy fruit of bitterness is rage or wrath. Wrath and rage are not always wrong but they can flow from bitterness. Rebekah knew this. She knew that her son Jacob had better hightail it out of there before his brother had the right opportunity for his bitterness to turn into rage and he killed him like Cain killed Abel. Police officers know this as well. Police officers aren't afraid of burglaries. Burglaries are not personal. What they are afraid of is domestic violence. Domestic violence is something that blows its top after years of bubbling below the surface. John Piper teaches that anger kills more marriages than lust, and I agree. Finally the bitterness builds up into domestic violence and crimes of passion. Those are the bloody, gruesome crime scenes you don't want to see. A particular police officer once said, "When I come upon a criminal who has done a great injustice, I have to force myself not to care. I have to say, 'It's just the job.' Because if I don't fight anger with sloth and develop some sort of coldness and indifference, I am likely to burst forth in anger myself and do some really bad things." For the record, sloth is not the right weapon to fight anger, but we'll get to that in a bit.

The second fruit of bitterness is a loss of self-control. In Genesis 27, Isaac prophesies that Esau will be a man who lives by the sword (v.40). He experienced a grievous offense, and it was a valid hurt, by all accounts. But this experience began to color all of his life. It turned him into a man of the sword. With one hand he would tightly grip all the things he thought he deserved and with the other he would hold a sword, so that if

anyone ever threatened what he thought he deserved, he would kill. He became a man who would never be vulnerable again, never letting them see him sweat. He became cynical, paying the world back for the sins his brother committed against him. He became out of control, essentially.

An ancient Christian named St. John Cassian said that bitterness inside the heart gives birth to a demon. He doesn't mean a literal demon, with horns and a pitchfork. He means that it gives birth to a power: the power of anger, which begins to possess you. That bitterness that you've kept with you and nursed like a little baby inside of your bosom is getting bigger and bigger and its power is possessing you, taking control of your ears. Now everything you hear is interpreted through the grid of your bitterness. It takes control of your eyes so that everything you see is colored by that bitterness down inside. Your mind is brainwashed. You've lost self-control.

When we say someone has lost control, sometimes we mean that they are being controlled by rage. But there's a much more dangerous loss of control, and that's when your brain has been handcuffed by the bitterness inside your chest. Everything you see and hear, your interpretive grid on life, the way you view your circumstances, and the way you view God, is processed through a fog of anger; that's when you've lost control of your life. You freak out on people and you're always reading into everything, almost actively looking for offense. And if you look for offense in this broken world, you will find it.

The next fruit of bitterness to watch out for is delight. Genesis 27:42 says that Esau comforted himself. What does that mean? Is he patting himself on the back, like when you go to the shrink and they encourage you to hug yourself? Is he looking at himself in the mirror and pumping himself up? No, he's comforting himself with thoughts about harming Jacob (Genesis 27:41). He's meditating and strategizing and fantasizing about the day when he finally gets to kill his brother. That puts a smile on his face. He gets some kind of sick delight and comfort from contemplating his brother's demise.

Frederick Buechner writes, "Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun." Comparatively, envy's not fun, is it? It makes you feel small and sucks the joy out of your life. But Buechner continues that

anger is “to lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.” When you dine on anger, all you do is destroy yourself. The worst destruction of all is the loss of control, the rage, and finally the vengeance. Esau wants to pay his brother back and he thinks that the only thing that will satisfy him is if he kills him.

In our culture, we have police officers, prisons, and federal penitentiaries, and none of us want to go there. So our desire to keep ourselves from that horrendous hell keeps us from going around murdering people. This is one of the things that restrains society. But back then they didn’t have police officers and prisons, and they did go around murdering people, with “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” as their motto (Exodus 21:24). But we make people pay in other ways, don’t we? We don’t murder them. We roll our tongue and savor the morsels as we make them pay with jabs and criticisms and gossip and slander and little side looks and shutting them out and giving the cold shoulder. Husbands and wives, are you making each other pay, holding on and nursing those grudges? That bitterness will blow up your marriage, and eventually your family, your church, and even your city.

A diagnostic test

Having covered the fruits of bitterness to help us identify the root of bitterness, here are a few diagnostics to further help us see them in our own hearts and lives. You might be a madman if...

...you are cynical. You’ve been hurt by people and you will pay the world back by never trusting them again.

...you nurse your grudges, letting them mature in your heart.

...you find yourself striking out at people in manners disproportionate to the offense.

...you find yourself meditating on all the things you’ve been cheated of.

...you get depressed when things don't go your way.
...you often blurt out things when riled up that you later regret saying.
...some people are afraid of your bad temper.
...you've gotten so angry at times that you've become physically violent, either hitting or throwing things.
...you still get angry when you think of the bad things people did to you in the past.
...you often find yourself having heated arguments with the people closest to you.
...you don't say anything at the time when someone says or does something that upsets you, but later you spend a lot of time thinking of the cutting replies you wish you would've said.
...people tell you you have a thin skin and short temper.
...your competitive side makes it hard to have fun and enjoy life.
...you are unable to discipline your children without venting your anger on them.

Defeating Anger

With truth

I've saved a lot of space in this chapter for the fight, because we definitely need to fight this one. It is rampant. Colossians 3:8 says to put away anger and wrath. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:7 (NIV), "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:7 that "love bears all things." Love doesn't have to pay back. Love endures for a long period of time. I hear Paul and I also hear Jesus when he says that if they ask for your shirt, give them your cloak also (Matthew 5:40). If they ask you to walk one mile, go ahead and walk two (Matthew 5:41). If they slap you in the face, turn the other cheek and say, "I'll have another, sir" (Matthew 5:39).

I hear Jesus saying these things, but frankly, I am lost at how to do them. We know that we are supposed to put away all anger and malice and vitriol. We know that we have a root of bitterness. We have pondered

it long enough. Now we have to figure out how to beat it. The Bible prescribes truth and love as weapons in this fight.

Romans 12:19 says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.” When you have been cheated of something you believe you deserve—perhaps someone has stolen an opportunity from you or is standing in the way of all your hopes and dreams—don’t avenge yourself. Leave it to the wrath of God, because God says, “Vengeance is mine. I will repay” (Hebrews 10:30, Romans 12:19).

This is the weapon of truth. Meditate on this, that God is sovereign and in control; that his eyes run to and fro the earth as he checks hearts rather than criminal records (2 Chronicles 16:9); that he is the all-seeing Spirit who knows our souls, who counts up and measures all the thoughts and words and deeds of mankind; that when he puts you on trial he doesn’t need witnesses because he sees everything; and that he is the perfect and pure and holy judge who will bring all to an account (Revelation 6:10). When you know that on the day of the Lord he will right every wrong and when you know that the Messiah has come to preach justice and set the captives free, you can step back take your injustice or offense and give it to God (Isaiah 61:1-3). “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God,” but God’s anger does (James 1:20). So we give it over to him. Plunge your hurt and offense into his hands and let him deal with them.

With love

The problem is if we are supposed to wait for God to repay all those who have hurt us, is it not true that all those who we have hurt are also waiting for God to repay us? If we are waiting for God to right every wrong committed by our enemies, what about when he comes to right every wrong that we commit? If God is going to right every wrong, the whole world would once again erupt into a great flood. But he promised never to do that again (Genesis 8:21). Even then, how do we know the truth of God’s sovereignty and still have any hope at all?

Romans 12:19 answers this in its first word: “Beloved.” The book of Revelation says that God is coming back with a sword in his mouth to

destroy the nations and all those who do not worship him will die (1:16, 11:18). He is just and holy and he is angry at sin. He's not a slothful, indifferent God; his feathers are ruffled in all the right ways. If you know that, you should be filled with joy that Paul calls you "Beloved." If God was angry at everyone, there's no way Paul could call anyone beloved. But he says that you are beloved because God sent his son into this world and he poured out his anger on him; his feathers got ruffled, and he aimed them all as sharp arrows at Jesus Christ on the cross of calvary (Isaiah 53:4-6, Romans 5:8-9). He made *him* pay. The Lord said vengeance is his to repay, and he poured it out on Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 32:35). The sky went dark and the earth shook, and Jesus lifted up his said, saying, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33-34) But there was no voice to answer. God doesn't and won't make you pay if you are in Christ. So don't make others pay. You are not obligated to. God has given you so much, so why not let yourself be cheated? Why not let it go?

When Esau finally reunited with his brother Jacob after many years, Jacob was afraid that he was finally going to vent all of his anger and murder him. But Esau said, "God's given me enough." Jacob said the same and they hugged and wept (Genesis 33). God's given you enough. You don't have to swipe. You don't have to hold the things you feel you deserve with an iron grasp in one hand and a sword in the other hand to threaten those who would take from you. You don't have to be an angry person characterized by bitterness.

Counting on God to right the wrong

The next time you're filled with resentment because you are not getting what you deserve, remember this: You should be rejoicing that you don't get what you deserve. This is how the gospel beats bitterness. It does take a lifetime being filled with bitterness, fighting it with the gospel. But we press on because we know that Jesus paid it all.

There's one more passage that I want to dive into. It is most definitely the most offensive chapter in the entire Bible. You might say, "But Pastor, you don't know what they did to me. You don't know what

God has taken from me.” It is true that some of us have been hurt more than others. But I guarantee you that you haven’t been hurt as bad as the guy in Psalm 137. In fact, if you could imagine the greatest hurt and injustice that anyone could ever do to you, this would top it. Would it be killing you? No. It would be killing your child. Humiliating them and tormenting them. It would be the worst evil that this world could ever produce.

Psalm 137:1 says, “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept.” The Israelites had been invaded, destroyed, and carried off as slaves to Babylon. They sat down not by the waters of the Jordan river, where God promised they would live forever with eternal bliss, but in their land of exile, Babylon. Things weren’t making sense at all, and there they sat down and wept as they remembered what had been seemingly taken from them. “On the willows there we hung up our lyres” (v.2). Their captors taunted them and demanded songs from them about their beloved nation (v.3), but they couldn’t play music. They were angry and sad.

It’s a terrible thing when a bully torments a little child in school, takes his lunch money, and beats him up. But what’s worse is when he makes that little boy beg him in front of his friends. Then it becomes not just oppression but humiliation. A bully like that is playing with the fires of human rage. I heard a story once where a bully picked on all the kids in school and made them beg in front of their friends. But one day he picked on a kid who had a 230-pound, 6’4” older brother. That older brother made that bully go around and kiss the foot of every person in the entire lunchroom, humiliating him to the core. He never came back to school.

It’s one thing to be beat up. It’s another thing to be demanded to sing a song of joy in the midst of it. This is exactly what happened in Babylon. Babylon, the bully nation, came into Israel and slaughtered them and destroyed all they worked for in so many years, and then they brought them back to Babylon and began taunting them. Psalm 137:7 says, “Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, ‘Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!’” The Edomites were the descendants of Esau and were shouting praise and

cheering them on. Psalm 137:8-9 continues: “O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”

I would wager that this is the most offensive verse in the entire Bible. Many years ago, around 586 b.c., Babylon, the bully nation, came into Israel and pillaged and plundered while the Edomites and all the nations around them cheered them on. They razed the city to the ground, flattened the temple, raped and stole everything they could, and they even grabbed babies from their mothers’ arms and dashed their heads on the rocks. This historical event is recorded for us in the pages of the Bible in Psalm 137, and here we have the psalmist asking God to pay them back.

Was he following the advice of Paul and not seeking vengeance but rather turning it over to God, who says, “I will repay”? Yes. He knew that the Bible said there was going to be a day of the Lord when the Messiah would come and right every wrong. That’s what he means when he asks God to remember them. Like the thief on the cross who said, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42), the psalmist prays, “Remember *them* when you come into your kingdom.”

This is radical because in those days, when one nation went against another, or one person against another, it began a cycle of violence going round and round for years and years. One nation would destroy another, bitterness would stew in the defeated nation for years, and finally it would rise up and destroy the other. The cycle of violence continues down to this very day, but here in this psalm we have the gospel of Jesus Christ interjected into a society and a Christian who says, “I’m not going to repay. I’m going to pray.”

The end of the cycle

If the world would listen to this and turn over to the truth of God’s sovereignty and the love he displayed by directing his wrath away from us, the cycle of violence could end. The psalmist does not avenge himself; he turns it over to God. He processes his emotions and anger in

prayer. Christians are not people who learn never to get their feathers ruffled; we learn to get our feathers ruffled in all the right ways. He takes the offense and goes to God with it. He's not like a Buddhist monk who comes out of prayer with his face glowing and his mood serene; he's like a madman who comes out of prayer with disheveled hair and red eyes. Madmen like this wrestle with God. Christians wrestle with God and process their anger in prayer, admitting that they have been hurt because they live in a broken world. And the cycle of violence ends.

But what about love for your enemies and turning the other cheek? As Christians knowing the sacrificial love of Jesus, should we pray for God to vent his wrath on others in vengeance? I would say no. Because we now know something that the psalmist doesn't know. When the day of the Lord came, Jesus Christ did not come to condemn and crush and repay. He came to be condemned, crushed, and repaid. It's as though the incarnate God looked down on all the world and all of the violence and said, "Enough is enough." But he didn't send a flood to wipe us all out. He sent his own son to be dashed against the rock of Golgotha, whose blood poured out not like a flood to wipe us out but like a river to wash all the violence away.

And Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). So we don't pray, "God, please repay them." We pray, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). In that way we become a society of truth and love. Imagine the individual who gets the gospel truth into their hearts. Imagine the church. Imagine the city that can get this truth.