

the biblical attitude toward anger is one which recognizes both anger's inevitability and the need for it to be dealt with constructively—precisely in order that its “deadly” consequences might be avoided.

I. Overview of Scripture

It is refreshing to note that the primary Hebrew term used for anger is the term which we translate literally as “nostril” or “nose.” The imagery of flaring nostrils has long been associated with the presence of anger in humans and other animals. This terminological fact suggests that such imagery belongs to the deeper recesses of human memory. For when the ancient Hebrews gave voice to the phenomenon of anger, they did so with this physical imagery of snorting and blowing nostrils. Indeed, when the Hebrew language expressed the phrase we translate as “slow to anger,” it did so with language that meant literally “long of nose.” It is impossible to avoid wondering whether there is a connection with another, more modern, folk locution that seems to have something to do with anger: “don’t let your nose get out of joint.”

The Bible employs this earthy imagery first of all in what B.T. Dahlberg has called a nonjudgmental “recognition and, indeed, dignification of [humanity’s] capacity for and exercise of anger” (*IDB*, I, p. 135). For one thing, anger is acknowledged as a characteristic aspect of human behavior that must be taken seriously and handled prudently. Moreover, it is seen as something with serious consequences and thus is not to be taken lightly or casually.

More importantly, there is even a positive view of anger which sees the possibility of it operating in the service of faith and piety or in the defense of justice. David’s anger at the metaphoric account given him by Nathan of his own sin results in a self-conviction. The anger of the prophets is both a mirror of God’s own wrath and a thoroughly human indignation at the failings of justice in the community. While it may be fair to say that the New Testament is less inclined to given a positive role to human anger, “the prophetic anger and indignation of Jesus which he displayed on a number of occasions would seem to leave open in the NT the possibility—certainly it leaves there the memory—of the redemptive use of this human passion, where it becomes a sign and the incarnation of God’s wrath (Matt. 12:34; 15:7; 23:13-36; Mk. 3:5; 9:42; 10:14; John 2:15; 8:44).

“Indignation” is the term by which we can best describe this positive role of anger in the biblical perspective. It would be a mistake of the first order for this form of anger to be overlooked, much less repressed. It is the ground of most of the noble moral impulses of human beings. Without such “righteous indignation” at the injustices of life, we are reduced to people without norms or standards. Yet, just because it recognizes a proper indignation, the Bible also recognizes the possibility of such indignation being perverted. The Bible knows that when anger comes, sin may be present.

II. Cain and Abel

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:2b-7).

There is an interesting and even tragic appropriateness of this story to the theme, "Anger: Prelude to Violence." The rest of the story goes on to tell how Cain summoned his brother into the field and killed him. Thus the story unfolds against the warning that was given to Cain as his anger kindled against his brother. This appears to represent a classic instance of what Andrew D. Lester calls "explosive anger" discharged not against the actual threat which is felt but against a substitute target (*Coping With Your Anger*, pp. 64-65). Modern theorist and ancient text agree in seeing here a destructive manifestation of anger. What the story proposes about anger is that it presents a precarious situation in which danger threatens but is not inevitable. Thus Cain is counseled that his anger is something which must be "mastered" since with it "sin is couching at the door."

We do well not to assume that "mastered" means "repressed." It is just as likely to see here a challenge to fruitful response to our anger. Indeed the very question which God asks of Cain in the story is an invitation to explore, become aware of the roots of his anger: "Why are you angry?" Apparently Cain's failure is not in being angry, but in never getting to the roots of his anger.

Our attempts to examine the roots of Cain's anger remain forever speculative, but in light of the biblical perspective on "righteous indignation" discussed a moment ago, some speculation may prove illuminating. The boundary between such righteous anger and destructive anger may be thin indeed, passing from the former to the latter when there is a premature identification of our human interests and concerns with the interests and purposes of God. Cain's dilemma seems to have had something to do with coming to terms with the difference between his perspective and God's. God had not esteemed his offering. In essence, God had declared that the things important to Cain were not necessarily the things important to God. Cain, having naively assumed that what was important to him was also important to God was caught with a premature identification of his interests and concerns with those of God. The result was a profound anger—of the destructive variety; not proper indignation, but misplaced rage.

There was another option open to Cain. It was the option of fathoming the reality of his anger, discerning its source in the threat implied in God's disregard of his offering and hearing its message that everything in which we are engaged is not of divine importance. A more constructive response to the anger he felt might have been a chastened estimate of his own life's agenda—perhaps

even an evaluation of the option represented by his brother's concerns. Such a contending with his anger—not at all a matter of repressing it—would have exemplified the “mastery” for which God calls in the story. It would have involved an exploration of the anxiety underlying his anger and a consideration of alternative responses that might more constructively confront the anxiety. Such exploration would not have been easy, but it would have held out the possibility for a constructive resolution. But with persistent realism, the story notes that human beings have a difficult time responding constructively to anger and are not infrequently victimized by the sin which “couches at the door” of our anger.

This passage concerning Cain and his anger shows us why theology came later to regard anger as one of the “deadly sins.” However, it also shows us that in the biblical perspective the first response of God to our anger is not its condemnation or repression. The first response of God is to invite us to understand it more fully, the only possibility for dealing with it more constructively.

III. Anger Before Sundown

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. . . . Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4:26-27, 31-32).

In the light of our previous reading of the Cain and Abel story, this passage of Scripture is perhaps not as surprising as it sometimes is to persons who have assumed that the Bible urges us simply “not to be angry.” Here we find the same potential for sin in anger, but likewise we find the same assumption that we can respond in a constructive fashion. If we may fairly read the Cain and Abel story as posing the choice between fathoming our anger and succumbing to rage, we can read this passage from Ephesians as posing a choice between resolution and resentment—resentment being another destructive form of dealing with anger.

This passage is of special importance because of its clear acceptance of the inevitability (and perhaps the moral neutrality) of the experience of anger. “Be angry. . . .” But immediately there comes the warning: “but do not sin.” More specifically it recommends a strategy for avoiding the evil latent in anger, that is, for not giving opportunity to the devil. The strategy is as profound as it is simple: “do not let the sun go down on your anger.” What can this mean except that a direct and prompt resolution of the threats giving rise to our anger, a confronting of them in a straightforward manner to determine what is generating the anxiety and frustration resulting in anger?

The second two verses cited carry the strategy a step further. They assume that in our anger we will be confronted with choices that are clearly destructive: bitterness, wrath, clamor, slander, malice. Again it is important to note that we are not told that we cannot think such possibilities. Rather the passage assumes that we will think them but that we can make a disciplined effort to

“put them away.” The positive counterpoint to this putting away is a disposition to kindness, tenderheartedness—in a word, to forgiveness.

The composite strategy recommended for resolving our anger commended in these verses is prompt facing of the source of our anxiety and discomfort (“do not let the sun go down”) and a resolve to avoid responding to our anger with resentment (putting away bitterness, wrath, clamor, slander and malice). Some of these latter counsels seem to imply dispositions and attitudes, but some of them are surely behavioral as well, especially clamor and slander. We can respond to our anger by constantly pressing our grievances against those we think have dealt wrongly with us, accusing them of injustice and worse. But that is a behavior we choose in response to our anger—not the anger itself. We can also resolve to be forgiving, in the awareness that our purposes and interests come into conflict with those around us—not always because of someone’s evil intent—but at least some of the time because we live in a finite universe where all our needs are not perfectly ordered to one another.

Here we have another crucial element of the biblical perspective, one which acknowledges the reality of anger, its potential for evil, but also its prospects for positive resolution. The key is again the willingness to confront the sources of anger promptly and a resolution not to identify our interests with those of the divine prematurely.

IV. Nursing Anger

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, “You fool!” shall be liable to the hell of fire (Matt. 5:21-11).

In concluding this analysis of some of the more important biblical texts which constitute a perspective on anger, we return to the one indicated at the outset to have been a chief culprit in fostering misunderstandings about anger. As suggested then, the real culprit is not the text’s misunderstanding of anger, but our misunderstanding of the text. Like the other passages we have investigated, this one is not objecting to anger itself but to what is done with anger. In particular, the grammar of this passage suggests that the reference is not to the experience of anger but to continuous anger, anger upon which we dwell, or even—as the NEB translates it—anger which we nurse.

If we take this latter metaphor with some seriousness we can see that what is disapproved is not anger but a destructive dwelling in anger and brooding over it, doubtless with accompanying thoughts of vengeance toward those believed to be responsible for the threats we feel. Such a dwelling with anger is destructive to the point of being murderous. Small wonder then that the passage occurs in connection with the prohibition of killing. There is important insight expressed here to the connection between anger and violence. To the extent that anger is not resolved, to the extent that it is allowed to linger as resentment and brooding vengeance—to that extent anger portends destructive

rage, sooner or later.

The text continues with some suggested strategies not unlike those we have already analyzed: principally the strategy of resolving the sense of threat we have with those from whom we sense alienation. Frustratingly enough, the text does not get highly specific about how we can accomplish reconciliation that it recommends, but it does make one passing reference which is perhaps a clue worth pondering. It tells us to "make friends quickly." Whatever else making friends involves, it involves not nursing grievances we believe we have against another, but looking for that which we can respect and like in them. All in all the counsel is to confront those who make us anxious and seek a community of interest and concern with them and emphatically not to nurse anger, not to cultivate it, protect and empower it.

Here too we find a consistent illustration of the biblical perspective. Anger is potentially murderous, but the crucial fact is not whether we experience anger. The crucial fact is how we respond to the anger we do experience—whether by nursing it toward explosive destruction; or by seeking to make friends even with what threatens us mightily.

Conclusion

Our analysis of these various portrayals of anger in the Bible suggests a perspective very much like the one argued by Andrew Lester: Scripture takes for granted the fact of human anger, knows that it has within it a potential for evil, and thus when it disapproves of an angry event it judges "the results of mishandled anger rather than . . . the experience of anger" (*Ibid.*, p. 37).

In a slightly different vein, Richard P. Walters has argued that the Bible has a perspective on anger which distinguishes between the positive forms of indignation and resolution on the one hand, and the negative forms of rage and resentment on the other (*Anger: Yours & Mine & What to Do About It* p. 17, *et passim*). What we have seen seems to bear out the broad lines of this judgment as well. Indignation is a form of anger that needs to be expressed when the purposes of God's justice and love are palpably scorned. Such is the form of anger proper to racial discrimination in this country as well as to apartheid in South Africa. This form of anger requires expression as a challenge to that which offends God's cause. Its resolution comes with, and only with, the restoration of God's purposes in human affairs. However, this is probably the least likely form of anger among us these days.

In contemporary society there is considerable evidence that rage and resentment take precedence over resolution in our dealing with anger. In this context the consistent biblical perspective is a valuable one for the community of faith, reminding us that we always should be seeking to know "why are we angry?"; that we should deal with the sources of our anger promptly and forthrightly, not letting "the sun go down on your anger"; and that ultimately we need not nurse our anger, but make friends with that which threatens us.

As that way of resolving anger becomes our way, rather than the ways of rage or resentment, we will perhaps better understand the Psalmist's strange claim: "Surely the wrath of men shall praise thee" (Ps. 76:10).