

## *The Angry Christian*

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Psalm 137

*“Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!”*

Anger is an emotion that has become a taboo in our society. We all get angry, but we want to hide it, keep our anger to ourselves. To show anger is risky, it is dangerous; it is seen as a lack of will power. What if one of the presidential candidates was to show true, full, unbridled anger during the recent debates? His candidacy would be over before the debates were. “Don’t rock the boat” we are told. Don’t create a scene. Control your tongue. Bottle it up. Have you heard all of this before? Have you ever tried to live by it? I went on-line to see what I could find about anger in our culture and specifically in Christianity. The majority of Websites that popped up first on Google were Christian websites. Aha, I thought, there is a place for anger in our faith; there is a “Christian” approach to anger. But each web site offered methods and techniques for hiding, suppressing and controlling our anger. We are told that to be angry is a sin. I guess it is a sin to be honest with you and with others, to be angry, let alone to show that you are angry. Have any of you seen a 1950s propaganda movie which paints a picture of how to be an Apple pie “American” family. This movie instructs the children to hide their emotions when Father comes home so that he will not be bothered with sullen children after a long day at work. Look sharp, be well behaved, and always smile. We do try to bury our emotions or at least our anger. I wonder why anger, a human emotion that we all experience, is seen as an emotional sin.

We are afraid of what anger can do, aren’t we? There is good reason – anyone who has been or knows someone who has been a victim of domestic violence can attest to the horrific, negative affects of uncontrolled anger. Anyone who has suffered any kind of abuse, verbal, physical or in any other kind, can attest to the dangers of uncontrolled anger. Anger, rage, or wrath can be dangerous. And in no way do I want to belittle or neglect the seriousness of abuse – in it we see the sinful results of uncontrolled anger to its extreme. There is no justification for abuse. But anger in itself need not be considered a sin. Yet we often try to hide it, because in our society, showing anger has become something of a taboo.

No matter how much we want to hide it, anger is embedded in us one way or another. We all feel anger we all become angry, and we all struggle with how to cope with anger. In the Psalm read today we can almost feel the anger being expressed, and if we enter into the Psalmist’s experience, then we can journey with the writer from one stage of anger to the next. Why don’t we go with the psalmist, sit by the waters, and allow our laments to turn to rage? Let’s consider our own feelings of anger as we hear and experience the anger expressed in Psalm 137? First, ask yourself, “What is it that makes us angry?” Traffic jams, phone calls during supper time, junk mail, spam, long sermons, rudeness, mumbling, insolent behavior, time wasted, and the list can go on and on. I think the underlying similarity, the root cause, is that from our perspective, something is upsetting our existence – something is not right for us, our equilibrium is upset in our mind. We have been treated wrongly, we feel. This happens to all of us. We are constantly bombarded with issues that make us angry, and we are constantly trying to cope, deal, and ignore our experiences.

In the Psalm, we see people dealing with anger. The Israelites have been forcefully removed from their land, they are in exile, and they are separated from all that they hold dear. And what makes being in a foreign land so distressing is that they are away from their God. You see, it is important to remember the significance of being removed from home. They felt God was with the temple in Jerusalem, and only in Jerusalem could true worship occur. Talk about upsetting the balance and disturbing the equilibrium! Taken away from their home, they were also taken away from their God. Yet they do not seem to be angry at first, do they? Instead we hear this lament, this sorrowful cry of sitting by the waters of Babylon and weeping, remembering, sighing for a long lost Jerusalem. What are they doing but moping about in a mournful state crying for a lost land. But what else can they do? Their captors mock them, reminding them of their frustration, their sense of hopelessness, their knowing that things are not right, and their lot, increasing their sadness. In his work on the Korean concept of Han (the bitter resentment of the oppressed), the theologian Andrew Park describes this behavior in the beginning of the Psalm, as an inactive anger – it is anger that is internalized, bottled up and controlled. They have been wronged in a horrific way, but cannot respond in any way that will lead to the justice they demand – so like a turtle they

go inside their shells, and weep and wait hoping for change. This is detachment. It is removing yourself emotionally from the situation because what else can you do? Have you ever found yourself doing this? Detaching yourself so much that eventually you feel nothing? This is the plight of the oppressed. Think of the Japanese placed in internment camps during WWII, or the Jews in the concentration camps. What could they do? How could they respond? There was nothing they could do but try to live. In many cases they had to bury their anger because an expression of anger would only lead to more hurt and turmoil. The dehumanizing way they were treated gave them no choice but to remove themselves from the situation in any way possible. Their anger along with their sadness and hurt had to be inactive for the sake of living. How many of us live day to day with such burdens on our shoulders? How many of us bury our own anger and live in a lie – hoping no one will notice? We smile, and say we are fine, but the anger is still there in one way or another, just buried. The fights with our spouse, the pressure from our boss, the betrayal by our friends, the expectations at school, or the basic demands of life add to our own anger. No matter how much we want to hide it, anger is embedded in us in one way or another.

Eventually, from time to time, the anger will boil up to the surface and confront us in a positive or a negative way. This is the point when we yell - enough is enough! Isn't this when we feel that anger can be the most dangerous? When it escapes our control and turns into a raw emotive rage? The turtle has become too overwhelming, we don't want to be in the shell any more, we want to lash out, fight back, and voice our anger. When you honk your horn, or share a few choice words, your anger is coming out. When you shout, kick, and scream your anger is coming out. Have you seen the movie, *Witness*? In this movie Harrison Ford is hiding with the Amish, and trying to live in the Amish way. But when he and the people he is with in the nearby town they are mocked by tourists. The rule is that the Amish are a peaceful people who never respond or fight back. But when Ford and his group are confronted, mocked, and made a fool of, he allows his anger to get the best of him and lashes out. (The other Amish claim that he is from Ohio – I guess Ohio folks are just violent.) Our violent reaction has been justified with the phrase, "I don't get mad, I get even." This is the move to retribution – the Rambo, Rock, Van Damme, Kill Bill revenge motif that drives the plot of so many action movies. Do you see, these are all violent reactions to anger, and maybe that is what scares us. Maybe we are scared that we will become the ugly, violent human that our own basic nature demands. Look at the active anger at the end of the Psalm, look at the horrific retributive violence that is suggested in the passage. Smashing babies against the rocks?! I have studied this passage, and there is no way to soften this reading. This is not a metaphor, a figure of speech – it is language of revenge from a wronged people. This is vindictive, this is rage, and this is anger at its worst.

Andrew Park describes this rage as an active anger or an active Han – as I've said before, Han is the Korean concept of the bitterness which leads to resentment. In Park's work, he looks at Han on the societal level and traces the active response of an oppressed people. For example, he is looking at the oppression of the South Africans during apartheid, the oppression of the Blacks in America, and the oppression of women across the world. The response is what the sociologist Peter Burke calls the frustration-aggression hypothesis. The more we realize how we are wronged added to the inability to change the wrongs increases the frustration which will eventually lead to aggression. And we have seen the fruits of aggression that is possible. We saw it in the LA riots, in the Seattle WTO protests, we saw it in the student movement of Teammean Square, we saw it in the Chicago riots, and we see it in the Psalm read today. But the reaction of the society is the reaction of the individual. Don't we see such a reaction on the individual level – the violent, visceral revolt against whatever it is that is causing us harm, oppression, or unease. This is what we are afraid of in the church, isn't it. The violent reaction, the angry cries of the mob, the decisions made purely by emotion without any reason and rational.

So we become most guilty of hiding our emotions when we are at church. After all, we don't want a riot to occur during worship, do we? We don't want to cause that much disturbance in a sacred setting, right? Is that why we are so afraid of bringing anger to the church? Because we see the riots, and say, "not us." Is that why we don't have a way to voice our rage, our discontent and our malaise in a sacred setting. Is there a place to voice our anger in worship? I don't think there is. We want to look our best for God, don't we? We want God to see our good side, our happy agreeable side. We smile for God, because we don't want to upset God. We comb our hair, brush our teeth, vacuum the crumbs out of our corridors and look pretty for God. We put our family fights, our spouse fights, our rage, our discontent on the back burner when we come to worship so we can offer joy, praise and be the shiny happy people that we think God calls us to be. And maybe we can convince ourselves that God isn't watching us the rest of the time - that God doesn't see what we do.

What if there was a way to express and process our anger in a holy context? What if there was a

way to be angry in worship – what if we were allowed and encouraged to be angry with God. What would that look like? How would we do that? First we have to allow ourselves to be honest with God, and that means at times showing and admitting to God our anger. After all, we are in a relationship with Christ and with God, and when we do not show our feelings honestly then it is an unequal and unsteady relationship. Many marriages stay together when the spouses share honestly their frustrations, sorrows, and anger. In the honest sharing the relationship grows because you are making yourself vulnerable and open to the other person. But so often I hear the assumption that we are not to show God our anger, our doubt and our rage. God knows you whether you like it or not, and wants you to be able to share yourself. So open yourself, share yourself, and be angry with God. Lets be honest, isn't there a lot that happens in life which we believe gives us justification for our anger? Don't we want to get angry with God again and again? So don't hold back, ask those burning questions. Why did my spouse, parent, loved one die? Why am I afflicted with this disease? Why is it that I work hard and can still barely make ends meet? Why do I feel so distant from my family? Why aren't you the loving, caring God that I want to be and fix things for me? Why do you allow millions of people to die in wars, genocides, and other atrocities? Why is there suffering in the world? Shout out in rage; cry out "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Sing out with passion, "How long, Oh Lord, How long will you forsake me." Drop the assumption that this is not proper, for the best worship is honest worship – and these are honest questions. This is what brings the psalmist to the point of rage against their oppressors – this honest white hot rage is what causes the horrific curse of the babies of Babylon to be massacred in such a horrific way. It was worship in the most honest and raw way possible.

But how can we express our anger and our rage in worship? This is a question that is difficult to answer because it is not often practiced in a Christian tradition. What do we have in our tradition that give us guidance to voice our rage? I look to the Psalms for guidance – the inspiration of Scripture offers some focus. Remember that the Psalms were originally used as prayers for the community in a worship setting. Remember that the Psalms themselves are worship. We have the perfect example of our Lord Jesus on the Cross crying out Psalm 22, "My God, My God, Why have you Forsaken Me?" We have Psalms like the one read today that show anger moving from a point of immobilized despair to an active rage and desire for revenge. These are prayers for individuals and the community at the same time, and they can be prayers for us as well. Regardless how we do it, there must be a way that we can express and process our anger in a holy context.

For if we can express our anger to God, and share our anger with God, and then our response to our anger need not be dangerous, but can be holy. If we are honest with God all of our emotions, including our anger, and allow God a place to be with us in those emotions, then the active response, that which we often fear can be a holy, blessed response. Did the author of the psalm read today act upon his or her wishes expressed in the last couple of verses? History suggests not. But can we speculate that the author, and all those praying this Psalm were in a different place in the end – yes. Perhaps they became resolute not to give up and give in to the Babylonians. Perhaps they became steadfast in the conviction that they would continue to sing the Lord's song because God had not left them... despite the mocking.

Look at the examples in history. What kept the civil rights movement of erupting into even more violence but the articulation of social rage in a holy space? Don't you think that God could take that rage, that unrest and transform it, sacralize it into something that would lead towards a blessing? What let the Bishop Romero to continue to fight and work on behalf of the poor and the oppressed in Latin America but the rage he had which was made holy by God. So we are to voice our anger to God, give our anger to God, and then wait and see what will happen. Oh when we give our anger to God we are then given the focus and the blessing to act upon it in a holy way. We are given the strength to stand up and speak truth to the powers and principles which have no place for our Christian message. We are given the strength to stand up and demand that the love of Jesus Christ have a place at the table when people's lives are on the line. We are given the strength to stand up and declare to the world, that we may feel like we are in exile, but we will still sing the Lord's song as loud as we are able because it is a song that all need to hear.

Oh give it to God, your rage, your anger, your unjust experiences, your frustrations, and your fears. Be honest, be angry, and then allow God to lead you in your actions, in your responses, and in your witness to the world. AMEN