

What Does that Mean? Slow to Anger

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Big Ideas: God's is an anger we can trust.

Fred and I have two boys, Erick and Brian. For the most part they have always gotten along well. That said, growing up, Erick, like many big brothers, occasionally liked to pick on Brian. Partly because he could, partly because he found it entertaining, partly because he has never forgiven Brian for dethroning him as the only child.

Brian, our more laid back, patient child adored his older brother, and would put up with his antics for quite a while, sometimes days on end, but when he was done, he was done. The first time we took note of this they were 2 and 4. We were gathering at the dinner table, Fred stepped away for a phone call, I was grabbing stuff from the counter when all of a sudden, Erick screamed at the top of his lungs. I whirled around and Brian was sitting calmly staring at Erick while Erick was screaming, "He stabbed me, he stabbed me!" I noted the fork in Brian's hand, but I didn't see any damage, until I got close and then saw 4 blood spots forming in Erick's eyebrow.



Another time Fred and I were in the kitchen when Erick came running, Brian right behind him, fist up in the air. Erick made the tactical error of running in to a room with no way out; when Brian caught up with him, he let Erick have it. In these particular moments, Erick seemed to know he deserved what he was getting and did not defend himself which I appreciated as at the time, he was much bigger.

They are now 24 and 26 and you will be glad to know Brian no longer stabs people with forks! He has learned to handle big emotions, which is good because he works in the Emergency Department and is often around big emotions. And Erick has come to deeply appreciate his brother's wisdom and friendship.

Today, in our series, *What Does that Mean?* We are looking at not just one word, but a phrase, "**slow to anger**," especially as it relates to the character of God. In Exodus 34:6, a verse Hannah and John both referenced in their sermons on compassion and lovingkindness (hesed), God describes His character to Moses. In this verse we also find today's phrase. Let's look one more time at what God says about God.

Then the Lord came down in a cloud and stood there with him (Moses); and he called out his own name, Yahweh.

The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out,

"Yahweh! The Lord!

The God of compassion and mercy!

I am slow to anger

and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness...."

If you have been here for all three sermons you might be thinking, enough already. But you should know we are not the only ones repeating this verse. It is *the most repeated* verse within scripture - quoted in its entirety 7 times and parts of it another 20 times. God seems to be making sure that those who seek to know Him, will know that He is the God of compassion and mercy, slow to anger, filled with unfailing love.

Slow to anger, does not mean God never gets angry, and we will explore that this morning, but don't miss this - anger does not define God – *slow to anger* defines God. Unhealthy spirituality develops when we see God as PRIMARILY angry; anger as *a* dominant, or *the* dominant character trait of God.

I grew up with an angry dad; some of you may have as well. In a broken, pain-filled world, anger is not unusual. We found out late in Dad's life that he had endured hard things in childhood, which didn't take away the damage he did to our family, but certainly gave us greater understanding and compassion. Dad's anger boiled just below the surface and we never knew when it would blow.

We develop our first ideas about God through our parents. Ideally, we learn about unconditional love, healthy correction, forgiveness, support and joy. Yet out of their brokenness, parents often give broken images of God. For me as a child, God terrified me. I saw God as angry, unpredictable, and far bigger and more powerful than even my dad. I was six years old when, after a revival service we had attended, I asked my mom if she thought I would go to heaven if I died. I don't remember everything she said, but it ended with yes, and she could not understand why I began to cry. I wasn't worried about hell; I was worried about heaven.

God has graciously and consistently fathered me out of that broken image. God says being SLOW to anger is "who I am." I have certainly found this to be true. The Hebrew word translated in this verse as *slow*: is **arak** It can be translated **long, patient, or slow**. Slow to anger, means God's anger does not constantly boil just beneath the surface. His anger takes a long, slow pathway.

The Hebrew word for anger is **aph** - and can be translated **nostril, nose, face, or anger**. Anger typically, humanly speaking, shows up on the face, doesn't it? Nostrils flaring? It takes God a long time to get there. When God was preparing to set the Israelites free from Egypt, He gave Pharaoh, who had enslaved His people unjustly and cruelly for hundreds of years, a long rope. 400 years, and 10 distinct chances to let the Israelites go before He said, *ok, we are done, we are doing this, and this is how it's going to go*.

My husband, Fred, and I were driving to Eugene recently, and I asked him, "*What does it mean to you that God is slow to anger?*" He thought about it and said, "*It means God responds, He doesn't react.*" I liked that. That feels safe to me. There is going to be a very slow path to His anger and when it does come, there will be warning and a planned response, not an angry lashing out. God does not "fly off the handle."

Some of you who know the Bible well may be thinking of a few incidents that suggest otherwise; I don't want to ignore those. A 33-minute sermon will not resolve all of our questions, but let me offer a couple of things to consider. The Bible covers over 4000 years of God relating to humanity, in a book we can carry around. That necessitated an economy of words. Words chosen carefully and succinctly. There is incredible continuity of message in the Bible, but we can't pretend it is without complications. Because of the economy of words and thousands of years covered, there are stories for which we do not have the full background. We do have enough to grasp the big picture, to know that God so loved the world that He gave His son, that He chose to pay a debt we could not. Verses like Ex 34:6, repeated often, help us get the big picture of God, but still our knowledge is only partial.

We wonder over the poor guy who reached out and touched the Ark of the Covenant when it was tipping and died immediately, because God had said not to touch it. Or in the book of Acts, Ananias and Sapphira, struck dead for lying to the early church. Both of those may seem extreme. Bob Cymbala and Cherry Cox for ABF last week spoke of the holiness of God as something to take seriously, which played a part in both of those stories. And we might want to consider that we do not know these stories in their entirety. God does.

The violence in the book of Joshua raises questions for us. By that time, over 1500 years had gone by on the earth between creation/Genesis and the moment Joshua leads Israel into the promised land. God has seen every moment of those 1500 years – we get only the briefest overview.

A wise and respected pastor I once worked with said, *“I really wonder sometimes if the Old Testament isn’t more about man’s misunderstanding God than understanding God.”* Did Joshua get everything right? I don’t know. The Bible was not meant to be an all-inclusive book of knowledge answering every question. It was meant to teach of us God and of His love story with humanity. Paul in I Corinthians 13 says that in this life we see things imperfectly, and twice he says, *“our knowledge is partial and incomplete.”* We will not fully understand God, the way God understand us fully now, until eternity.

Those thoughts are not meant to erase questions—just to add a bit to our thought bank. Despite the things that raise questions for us, the idea that God is slow to anger holds weightier proof through scripture than the idea that God is an angry, unpredictable tyrant. God’s description of Himself to Moses is repeated and affirmed by those who walked closely with God and knew Him well.

Pastor Nathan, in last week’s Musings, referred to the prophet Jonah. If you know that story, Jonah ran away from his assignment to preach to the Ninevites because, as he tells God in anger in Jonah 4, (after the Ninevites had repented and God forgave them rather than destroying them), Jonah said: *I knew you were going to do this - I knew you were going to forgive them – for I know you to be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.* Jonah is not having this happy, gushy, worship experience with God. He states what he knows to be true about God, and in that moment, he doesn’t even like it. But he knows that is who God is.

As I said early, being slow to anger does not indicate that God never gets angry, but I contend that His is an anger we can trust. First, we can trust it to be long in coming, we don’t need to live in fear that we are going to make a wrong move and He is going blow up on us. I’ve made plenty of wrong moves through the years, and despite my messed up paternal image of God, and my questions about certain scripture passages, my experience has taught me that when God’s anger is aroused, His is an anger that is **just (fair), merciful (restrained/controlled), and redemptive (always working for good)**

Let me share an important word from respected scholar, N.T. Wright:

The normal objection to theories of atonement and redemption that focus on divine anger is that this seems to run contrary to the deepest themes of the New Testament. Now, of course, divine anger at human rebellion and particularly at the rebellion of the chosen people features prominently throughout Israel’s scriptures. Similar notes are struck in the New Testament, not least in the teaching of Jesus himself.

And suggestion that “sin” does not make God angry... needs to be treated with disdain. When God looks at sin, what he sees is what a violin maker would see if the player were to use his lovely creation as a tennis racquet. But here is the difference. In many expressions of pagan

religion, the humans have to try to pacify the angry deity. But that's not how it happens in Israel's scriptures. The Biblical promises of redemption have to do with God himself acting because of his unchanging, unshakeable love for his people. (NT Wright)

When King David abused his power by taking Bathsheba, another man's wife, for himself and then having her warrior-husband, loyal as they come to king and country, killed in order to cover up his sin, would we have wanted God look the other way? No. And God didn't. He sent the prophet Nathan to tell David a story. It's recorded in II Samuel 12:1-10:

There were two men in a certain town. One was rich, and one was poor. The rich man owned a great many sheep and cattle. The poor man owned nothing but one little lamb he had bought. He raised that little lamb, and it grew up with his children. It ate from the man's own plate and drank from his cup. He cuddled it in his arms like a baby daughter.

One day a guest arrived at the home of the rich man. But instead of killing an animal from his own flock or herd, he took the poor man's lamb and killed it and prepared it for his guest."

David was furious. "As surely as the Lord lives," he vowed, "any man who would do such a thing deserves to die! He must repay four lambs to the poor man for the one he stole and for having no pity."

Then Nathan said to David, "You are that man! The Lord, the God of Israel, says: I anointed you king of Israel and saved you from the power of Saul. I gave you your master's house and his wives and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. And if that had not been enough, I would have given you much, much more. Why, then, have you despised the word of the Lord and done this horrible deed? For you have murdered Uriah the Hittite with the sword of the Ammonites and stolen his wife. From this time on, your family will live by the sword because you have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own.

God responded—justly. He addressed David's sin, holding him accountable. He responded mercifully—He spared David's life and his kingdom, and God responded with redemption. After the death of the child conceived on that sin-filled night, God gave to David and Bathsheba the child Solomon and eventually, through the line of David, the Messiah Himself. Our redemption.

It is interesting, and perhaps telling of us all, that David's anger was so great over what he thought was someone else's bad behavior. Furious that a rich man with many sheep had taken another man's one little, beloved lamb. But David, in true David fashion, received Nathan's word against him, and confessed willingly, sincerely, his sin against God. God forgave him and spared his life, but there would be consequences in David's family.

If you have read the context of Exodus 34:6, you know this very verse about God's compassion, love, and being slow to anger is set within a moment of judgement. The context follows shortly after the Israelites worship of the golden calf. Verse 7 needs to be read with vs. 6. It reads:

"I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected – even children in the third and fourth generations." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Hold the phone –What does it mean that the parent’s sins are laid upon children and grandchildren? There are two other passages in scripture that say God won’t do that— that parent and child will each be responsible for their own sin. It simply means God lets the choices and lifestyles of the parent take their natural course affecting generations.

David’s son Absalom would lie with David’s wives and spend his life using the sword against David. In religious terminology we call this *generational sin*. Counselors call it *generational dysfunction*. One generation’s lifestyle and choices shaping another.

We have a God who is compassionate, merciful, slow to anger and filled with unfailing love. And our choices and our actions, post-Jesus, have consequence. It is God’s mercy and desire that those generational sins be interrupted. Anyone who turns to God will find mercy, forgiveness and redemption. Things can change.

Let’s bring this into the New Testament. Perhaps the greatest example where we recognize Jesus as slow to anger is when He has been unjustly tried, beaten and abused through the night, and hung on a cross—and then prays, *“Father forgive them, they do not know what they do.”* The character of God on full display.

One pastor writes,

“There are two kinds of people who are hard to help in pastoral counseling. One thinks he is too far gone to be forgiven. The other thinks forgiveness is a snap. One thinks he is utterly disqualified for the kingdom. The other thinks he is a shoe-in. The one thinks God is unbendingly wrathful. The other thinks God is a pushover. One is blind to the magnificence of God’s mercy. The other is blind to the magnitude of his own misery.”

Where are you today in thinking about God and anger? Do you see anger as a primary character trait of God? God says otherwise; He says, I am slow to anger and proves it again and again. Or do you see God as never angry? Skye Jathani, NT scholar, whom John interviewed several months ago says:

Abandoning any commitment to divine wrath is not only unbiblical, it’s immoral. Although advocates of this view say they’re devoted to a God of love rather than judgment, they unknowingly construct a false god who is ultimately indifferent to the sufferings of people and the spread of evil.

If we have recognized the magnitude of our misery and the misery our sin perpetrates on others, if we have acknowledged that, then we have truly come to a place of repentance; we have come to the cross. There we have an advocate before God in the person of Jesus Christ. I John 1:9 tells us *“If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us of all unrighteousness.”* Our debt paid.

The cross is not God’s **reaction**; it is his loving and stunning **response** to our brokenness. It is just—the debt has been paid; it is merciful—we do not get what we deserve, and is redemptive—it changes us, liberates us from sin, gives us new life. If we say we have come to the cross and yet take sin lightly, personal or collective, then it begs the question – have we really bowed our knee, our heart at the cross? Paul asks in Romans 2:4:

“Don’t you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can’t you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?”

To know God as both slow to anger and as the God who calls the guilty to account is healthy spirituality. God is slow to anger, and His anger is an anger we can trust.

