

SLAYING THE DRAGON – VALIANTLY WAGING THE WAR AGAINST *ANGER*

Within western culture, High Middle Age legend has it that there were fire breathing dragons that once roamed the earth. These are the mythical creatures that make for the most exhilarating, or death defying of adventures. The mere thought of their alleged existence is what necessarily begs the intervention of a heroic knight who saves the day, and the beautiful princess, of course, by administering the death blow to this flying, fire-breathing, four-legged serpent. Despite the fantasy element of such myths, dragons fit perfectly well within the Christian world view as these could have been dinosaurs that once roamed the earth alongside the people who were created in God's image (Job. 40:15-18; Ps. 74:13-14; Is. 27:1). Even the fact that many cultures in the world recollect some or other story that includes the presence of big reptile like creatures, or "dragons," supports this conclusion, the Welsh flag, not the least of these.

However, as much as I love creation science and the beauty and mystery of the world that God created, the kind of fire breathing dragon that I have in mind would not be identified on any list of extinct dinosaurs, including *Parasaurolophus*, that could have been fire breathing (Duane T. Gish, *Dinosaurs by Design*, 82). The dragon I have in mind is ANGER. If ever there was a real, living, fire-breathing dragon in the world, this would be it. This dragon cannot be fought with a sword forged in steel. It is a creature so fierce and wicked that it has been known to lead to physical or bodily damage, the ruin of friendships, wars and other kinds of strife, murder, and the crumbling of marriages and families. No physical means aimed against it will ever prevail. The only way that it can be conquered is purely by knowing how Scripture defines it and instructs us to fight against it. Christians of all people must be solute to mortify anger in their lives. Anger can even be deceptively present in the church since it is a sin that can be conveniently justified as "that's just her personality" or "he just calls a spade, a spade." So doing it gets swept under the rug and remains there unaddressed and unchecked where it festers, breeds and creates serious damage in the church.

In order to correctly handle this serious sin of anger we will *first* look at how it is *defined*, biblically. *Secondly*, we will look at the *dangers* that it poses to the world, in specific the dangers it holds for the church. We will *lastly* look at the *biblical instruction for ridding* our lives of anger.

1. Defining the Dragon

First, it is important to understand the animal that we are dealing with. As I have already stated, anger has caused an incalculable amount of damage in the world and the church, both physically and emotionally. The reason for this is that anger tends toward violent behaviour. But before we get to the obvious results of anger, I'd like for us to understand it within its biblical context.

Enter Cain...Enter the *Dragon*

All of the sudden most reading this will suspect where this is leading. To be sure, it indeed leads to the first homicide ever committed by someone. It certainly leads to the first death of someone murdered by someone. But apart from these obvious deductions, what may not be so obvious is the fact that what caused this atrocity to begin with was nothing more and nothing less than the good old-fashioned sinful attitude of, "*I deserve better than this.*" What caused Cain to plot murderously against his own blood-relative, Abel, was the fact that he thought he deserved better treatment from God. The story went as follows:

³In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. ⁶The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

⁸Cain spoke to Abel his brother.^[a] And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." (Gen. 4:3-8).

Reading through this one can very quickly see how events started to escalate. First, we read that both these brothers brought an offering to the Lord, Cain an offering of fruit, and Abel an animal offering. God then accepts Abel's offering and not Cain's. Some theologians have said that Cain's was not accepted because God did not require a fruit offering but an animal offering. This may be true in one way or another, especially in light of the bloodbath of sacrifice that lay in the future for Israel (Lev. 1:3; 22:20-22), who at this stage was not even a nation yet. However, as R. Kent Hughes (2004:103) points out, what also may be underlying God's refusal of Cain is the sinful attitude that was accompanying his offering of fruit. Cain brought whatever he thought would do, it seems. Whereas Abel brought the prime of his flock to offer to God. Hughes (2004:103) remarks that "Cain evidently was indifferent about his offering, but Abel was careful about his...The difference was that of heart attitude. Cain came to God on Cain's own self-prescribed terms, but Abel came to God on God's terms. Cain's spirit was arrogant, as the subsequent story will reveal." And to this many can agree, the subsequent story involves

not just being upset at one's brother, but being so angry that one is willing to lift the hand against him, and kill him.

This account of two brothers illustrates so well that the sin which belies anger is arrogant pride. Pride can be said to be that original sin which plummeted mankind into this sinful existence that we have to fight and contend with on a daily basis. In this sense Cain may not have been so much different from his parents who, at the opportunity of "having their eyes opened and being like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5) ate of the forbidden fruit, in one moment of pride and arrogance, allowing their entire progeny to suffer the dire consequences of sin and a fallen world.

Pride leads to a panoply of sinful behaviour (Prov. 16:18), not the least of these, *anger*. We think we are entitled to angry attitudes or behaviour because someone or something has caused us an injustice. Perhaps the main reason in the church for anger at times can be that we think God has favoured others and not us. This leads us to sinfully compare ourselves to the way that God is working in the life of a fellow believer. We might look at their possessions, their talents, personalities or whatever and falsely come to the conclusion that God has favoured them and not us. Now, while it might be true that God could sometimes reject our efforts when, like Cain, they are done in arrogance, it is still wrong for us to compare ourselves to our fellow saints. Jesus had some stern words for Peter when he disagreed with the Lord's plan for his life after comparing himself with John (Jn. 21:21). The point of Jesus rebuke is that God will have his way in the lives of all of his children. The plan that we have envisioned for ourselves may not be God's plan, and with this we have to be satisfied.

Here's the main point: We get angry when the world does not run our way (Gen. 4:5). When your spouse does not treat you in the way you think you deserve to be treated, you get angry. When your children do not obey you in the way you think you ought to be obeyed, you get angry. When your friend at church in some way or another fails you, you get angry. And the list goes on, and on. But what is so obvious about an angered response to these situations, sinful as they may be, is the fact that those who sin against you are sinning against a fellow sinner who at some point in the not-too-distant future will be sinning against someone else. Yes, you are just as much a sinner as the one who most recently, perceivably sinned against you. So the point is, a healthy dose of "knowing who we are before God" will go a long way (1 Jn. 1:8).

Anger is pride, and pride is the response of the person who does not have a realistic and biblically informed view of who they remain to be in this life, until the glorification of their bodies (1 Jn. 3:2-3). For this reason, unchecked anger poses great danger to the church and the families that constitute the church.

2. The Dangers of the Dragon

Picture yourself sitting in rush hour traffic. The green light is not particularly long-winded, at least not for the direction that you are driving in. You are about twenty cars away from crossing this intersection. Just as the light turns green, everyone from the car closest to the light all the way down the queue are revving their engines in order to make the green, all except the motorist directly in front of you...For some of us, this situation would be particularly testing, especially on a day that some debit orders has bounced, the boss has left all operations in the office to the non-golf playing staff, the goldfish has died, the cat has had babies, and a neighbour has decided to dump their rubbish in front of your garage door with the hope of making the truck, which, sadly for you, won't return until next Tuesday. It is during times like these that even the elect will be tempted to anger.

Yes, the fire-breathing dragon of *anger* can stick out its scaly head in situations as described above. Sadly, when it does, it can leave a trail of carnage in its wake. There are a healthy amount of warnings against angered behaviour in Scripture. As Christians we should not only be familiar with these but be mindful of their warnings on a daily basis when the world, the flesh, and the devil appeals to our fallenness, as it did with Cain (Gen. 4:7).

This is where the Proverbs become helpful. There are numerous warnings against anger and even entertaining people who have earned the reputation of being angry people (Prov. 22:24). Here's some of the top dangers that anger poses to the family and the church:

“¹² Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.” (Prov. 10:12).

The kind of malicious anger that the Bible addresses may lead to more difficulty, given the opportunity. According to this proverb, it is the aggressor that could cause more aggression coming from others. If you have ever wondered why there is so much anger and *strife* in the world, it is because of this. Hatred leads to more hatred. And where hatred is, there will be anger. The words “stirs” provides for a helpful visual clue of what happens when people are angry. When I was younger, the adventurous, yet foolish thing to try at home was to mix regular pool chlorine with cow's milk. Once shaken in a closed bottle, the two react within the close confines of the bottle to where it can create so much pressure that it can lead to an explosion powerful enough to crack the marble of a swimming pool if tossed into the pool, and I have a high school friend on record to prove it.

This is the destructive power of hatred mixed with anger. It leads to more chaos and destruction. So just think about what it can do in the church if we allow this kind of angered hatred to be *stirred*.

“¹⁷ A man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated.” (Prov. 14:17).

Solomon also warns about the *foolishness* that is bound up in anger. Since anger is often not “premeditated” as such, it is usually a knee-jerk impulse to, as stated before, a person, thing, or situation. The church can act foolishly and unlovingly toward one another when we allow ourselves to lose our tempers and do stupid things. It can come out in so many ways. Someone does something which we perceive as an attack on our character and we immediately want to address it without having gotten our attitudes right. When we act this way we are being impulsively sinful and it *will* be detrimental to the health of the church, in the least. If ever someone sins against their fellow believer, which we all do at some point or another, the church, of all places, is that family where the sinning party should be treated with kindness, and not according to their ‘own medicine’ (Lk. 17:3-4; Rom. 12:17a; Eph. 4:32; 1 Jn. 1:9). The foolishness of anger will lead to harsh treatment, disfellowship and discord whenever there is sin, something which our Lord strictly warns against (Rom. 12:14-18).

“³ A stone is heavy, and sand is weighty, but a fool's provocation is heavier than both. ⁴ Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming...” (Prov. 27:3-4).

Lastly, anger can lead to the *provocation* of other saints, weather our spouse, children or fellow saints (Eph. 6:4). Although some might, spiritually speaking, be better equipped to not take an angry person to heart, others, especially those who are young in the faith or who are weak will find it more difficult to stand firm when being assaulted by those who vent themselves in anger. It is easy for an angry situation to provoke one weaker in the faith to want to do the same, so repaying evil for evil (Rom. 12:17).

In this sense anger is *cruel*. If ever there was an opposite to the Christian virtues of love, kindness, patience, etc. it is *anger*. Anger acts with cruel intention. How many times have you heard someone say: “I didn’t mean to throw your cell phone into the ocean” or “I didn’t mean to shout at the kids.” But this is not so. Actually they did mean it, every single word and exaggerated syllable of it, sometimes even in the cruelest of ways. But actually what they are experiencing after the bomb exploded, and this would be the right way to describe it, is *regret*. And this is *overwhelming*, not just to the one guilty of anger, but to all parties included. Anger overwhelms us. Just think about the last time someone had a fit of rage in public. Yes, it can be humorous too. But strictly speaking, it is ugly, cruel, and it overwhelms and debilitates.

The church of Christ has had to deal with much in the centuries that have passed. One such thing it had to deal with was the evil fits of evil Roman emperors. But this can be expected one way or another. It is normal for the unregenerate world to act in anger and be furious about things, people and situations. Not so for those who are born again. If there was ever a place where anger should be rooted out, it is in the church of the living God (1 Cor. 6:9-

11). Why? Because there can be no fellowship between those who are called to be loving, and those who are habitually quarrelsome and who have proven themselves unsaved through their behaviour (Prov. 22:24; Matt. 7:19-20; Matt. 18:17).

3. Slaying the Dragon

Any would be dragon slayer should be willing to face his dragon once he knows what kind of animal he is facing, and the dangers that it poses. Now that we know better how to define the sin of anger, biblically, and have also been made aware of the tremendous damage that it is capable of, we must also now start getting committed to the task of *ridding* anger from our lives.

The method of attack is nothing novel or new. There really is no silver bullet that will allow it to all of the sudden vanish from a person's life. The only answer to this common sin is twofold: Anger must be fought through prayer and perseverance. Just as a side, this is basically the way we combat any form of sin. Sure, there are always practical things that one can employ and this is something that Scripture also helps with. For instance, if someone battles with sexual lust, then it is best not even to walk down a certain street if not doing that could lead him into temptation (Prov. 7:25). The same applies to all forms of sinning. If we know we are weak in a certain area, then it would be best to not blindly allow ourselves to fall into situations where we know we will be tempted to be angry. This would be good and is advisable.

However, the nature of temptation is that it crouches around the corner. It does not announce its presence most of the time. It can appear unannounced out of the blue, as to speak. And it is in situations like these that prayer and perseverance will serve us well.

Prayer

We sometimes tend to forget the effect that prayer can have on a potentially explosive situation. One of the ways in which people can also be led to anger outbursts is when they get anxious about something. It doesn't matter who we are. When there is no more fuel in the tank or food in the cupboards, or when something bad is about to happen, all people, men or women can be tempted to get angry about it. But even in situations like these the biblical way to deal with it is simple, yet often neglected.

Paul gave solid advice to the Philippian church when he said: "6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

This is the go-to strategy in every potentially sinful situation, including dealing with anger. Prayer is the way we deal with all of our weaknesses and infirmities. But we so often tend to forget this, and then what happens is we

rely on our own strength when dealing with something and then wonder why the situation went haywire. The most loving, gracious, only-existent God knew how we should deal with sin and here in Philippians the message has not changed. As God's children we constantly need the Lord to guide us, keep us, sustain us, and lead us out of temptation.

The Lord Jesus once gave his disciples a model for prayer and one of the things that the Lord taught them here was to pray that God will not lead them into temptation (Matt. 6:13). If we truly believe that God is in control of all human and earthly affairs, which He is, then certainly we should also be willing to commit every aspect of our sanctification to him in prayer, including the temptation to sin. This can't be stressed enough.

This latches on nicely with what Paul taught the Corinthians. First, he tells them in 1 Cor. 10:13 that whenever we are tempted to give in to *temptation*, in this case, the temptation to be *angry*, God remains faithful in two ways: First, He will never allow us to be tempted beyond what we can handle. Paul says, "...God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability..." In other words, God will not allow us to be tempted so heavily to where it exceeds our God-given ability to fight the temptation. So, this is one way in which we can be *calmed* and comforted during a potentially explosive situation. It is when we admit our reliance on God as we pray, knowing that He is not just mindful of the situation, but that He is also totally sovereign over it.

Secondly, as "real" as the temptation may be, so "real" will the eventual arrival of an outcome be, as well. This is especially important to know in any valiant fight against anger. God has promised this. He has promised to provide the way of escape (v. 13b). Paul says, "but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." Herein lies our ability. It starts with reliance on the only one who can do anything about anything — our loving heavenly Father.

With this in check, we can weather any storm, as we are powered by the Spirit in prayer (2 Cor. 12:9). But we must also be committed to actively mortifying the flesh. This is where the perseverance part comes in.

Perseverance

Perseverance simply means that the Christian will in the grand scheme of this fallen world continue to look and behave like a Christian, even with indwelling sin present. You see, the true believer can never be at rest once convicted of a particular sin. Their zeal for the Lord will, as a rule of life lead them to repentance of sin, even after long periods of disobedience. Listen what Paul says to the Corinthians once again: "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10). Godly grief is what produced our initial repentance from sin, this is what led to our salvation, but godly grief is what continues to lead us to repent of sin. Christian are people who continually repent of sin over and over again.

Along with this comes the idea of dying to sin, and being committed to putting our sin to death. Anger can create so much disaster anywhere, not just the church, but especially the church. This is after all what is true of any believer. Believers are people who have died to self and who were born again in Christ. Paul said this so well in his letter to the Romans:

“⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin.” (Rom. 6:5-7).

This is what is naturally true of every Christian. We have spiritually been crucified with Christ. This means that we are no longer who we used to be. In the case of anger, this means that you are no longer the quarrelsome, angry and contentious person that you used to be. It simply can't be the case. Paul adds that the Lord did this for us so that we would no longer be ruled by sin. Fits of rage is therefore not commonplace for Christians. If a Christian has an outburst of anger then it should be seen as rare, and not the norm. Why? Because they have been set free from sin.

For reasons like these, we cannot simply turn a blind eye to our anger. We have to *cut at the heart* of our anger, which, as was already stated, is often pride induced. When dealing with anger or any sin for that matter, you have to be relentless. You can't treat it the way you treat your water and lights bill. This is something that needs immediate attention, and *aggressive* at that. Once last time Paul helps us to understand the severity of sin and the severity with which it should be addressed:

“²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Using an ancient athletic race as an illustration, he compares our perseverance on the road of faith and our fight against sin to the perseverance seen in those who run a race. The first key to success is “self-control.” This is the first key ingredient to any fight against anger. In fact, fits of anger are the opposite of self-control. When someone is no longer in control they give in to their sinful anger. The second key is “discipline.” Discipline and self-control go together. However, discipline requires daily dying to self and yielding to the Spirit of God. Without discipline no one will ever grow spiritually and have victory over anger. We do this by beating our flesh into subjection (“buffet” DBT; “chastise” YLT).

These keys listed above accompanied by the key of prayer will eventually lead to the unlocking of a storehouse of blessing in the life of the one who yearns to deal seriously with their sin of anger. And the blessing is obvious — they will start to see the positive results in their relationships. The Lord certainly commands that we take this seriously (Heb. 12:4). Thanks be to him that it is possible all because of his continued grace in our lives.