

## Seven Deadly Sins

### Anger – Jonah, The Angry Messenger of Grace

#### Jonah 3:10-4:11

When God saw what [the people of Ninevah] did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

<sup>4:1</sup>But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup>He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. <sup>3</sup>Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

<sup>4</sup>And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

<sup>5</sup>Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.

<sup>6</sup>Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. <sup>7</sup>But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. <sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

<sup>9</sup>But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?"

And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."

<sup>10</sup> And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup>And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Anger is not an “if” but a “when” in our lives... and it starts early. Hardly anything in our lives starts earlier than anger.

An infant’s body becomes stiff in rage because mommy is done nursing, because daddy takes away a toy.

Some of you have experienced anger expressed in physical, emotional, sexual abuse, often by those who claim to love you.

Some of you live with deep self-loathing – an anger turned inward, perhaps a sadness or disappointment that has risen to a kind of rage that you begin taking out on your body... perhaps by working at a frenetic pace, perhaps by setting impossible goals for yourself, perhaps by withdrawing and hiding behind a well-armored shell, perhaps by punishing yourself with food or pain or cynicism. Perhaps by cutting.

Some of you are angry at the world – what you have experienced in the circumstances of life, from the way others have treated you, have made you steel yourself against anything out there, a gritty self-reliance that is energized by anger

Some of you are angry at the Church –

Probably more of you than are willing to admit it are angry at God.

After all, he has a lot for which we think he needs to give an account, and what’s even more infuriating is that he doesn’t seem to be as forthcoming as we’d like with answers and explanations.

More than a few of you have stumbled over the wrath of God on your way to trusting in Christ – the image of our God as a consuming fire, going to war, leading his people into battle, sending judgment, even pouring out his wrath upon Jesus, the one true innocent and righteous one in all history, can be a formidable obstacle to faith in his mercy and his offer of grace in the gospel.

I am vulnerable to anger. It’s true – even for a guy whose name means merry or joyful. I’ve learned what paths lead me to anger, and I try to stay away from them. But I know what I’m capable of. When I was in 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade, I was playing tennis with my good friend, Rob. He beat me, and I flew into a rage. I chased him, racket in hand, and when I caught him, I swung the blade of my racket full force down on his back. His face smashed into the gravel. He forgave me, and we’re still friends, but the memory haunts me.

Then there is Jonah, the poster child for angry pouters and thumb suckers everywhere.

Many of you know the story that leads up to the final chapter we just read.

God informs Jonah that he’s going to keep his promise to Abraham. He’s going to take the gospel to the nations. As Yahweh said to Abraham, in you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, he sends one of Abraham’s sons, Jonah, to be the bearer of the good news to... Judah. No. to Israel. No. To Nineveh.

NO way! Says Jonah without thinking twice.

Why is Jonah so hostile?

We read in Gen 10 that the kingdom of Babylon was founded by Nimrod, and under his leadership his kingdom spread into Assyria where he founded the city of Nineveh. By Jonah’s day, in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, a massive city located on the Tigris River. Jonah’s description was that it required a 3 days journey to travel across it – perhaps 60 miles. God said there were 120,000

people who did not know their left hand from their right. So, Yahweh refers to Nineveh as the great city, the important city. Now, knowing what we know about Jonah's story, we'll likely find it a bit ironic that the name Nineveh come from the Semitic word for fish.

But it was the capital of one of Israel's most formidable and ferocious enemies. 100 years after Jonah, Sennacharib king of Assyria left his palace in Nineveh and marshaled his armies to come destroy Jerusalem. Along the way he knocked off Israel's fortified cities like they were made of paper. When he arrives at Jerusalem his messenger Rabshakeh stands at the gates of the city and demands surrender. The historian tells us that he mocked King Hezekiah and the armies of Jerusalem – he said, as the text tells us, surrender or you will be forced to eat your dung and drink your urine. It's a disgusting image, isn't it – not the sort of thing to talk about in polite company. But, it is to this people that God sends Jonah.

Then have one of the great moments of prayer in all of Scripture. Hezekiah, counseled by the prophet Isaiah, takes the letter from Sennacharib demanding surrender and he spreads it out before the Lord.

What a splendid thing to do with all our troubles – come boldly before the throne of grace

Hezekiah prays, and God himself routs the armies of Sennacharib – the Assyrian king lost 186,000 soldiers we're told in 2 Kings 19. And Sennacharib fled home to Nineveh... where he was greeted by his 2 sons who promptly murdered him.

You can read all about it in the cylinders and artifacts recovered by archaeologists. Nineveh finally fell in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. 200 years later, Herodotus the historian wrote that Nineveh was a thing of the past, hardly a memory.

It was to this people that God sent Jonah.

But when Jonah got his order, he fled in the opposite direction. He was angry at God and unwilling to obey. He hated the Assyrians and had no thought for their souls or their well being. So he hopped on a Phoenician ship to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. Then God sent a great wind upon the sea. The crew feared for their lives, but... we see a new dimension of Jonah's anger... a deep self-loathing. He's willing to die, to drown. He's convinced God wants him dead. So he persuades the crew to throw him overboard. The wind stops and the seas calm... and as Jonah is sinking below the surface, God provided a large fish. Jonah is in the depths of sea... in death... in the grave... yet alive. He repents and God relents, and he's vomited up on the shore... and he begins his solitary trek... day after day... trudging wearily until he arrives at the gates of Nineveh.

God says, Allright... off you go. Give these people the good news – repent, believe, and I will show mercy, forgive their sins, and pour out my grace.

Jonah agrees, a bitter anger still boiling inside him. He says, "I'll do it, but... it's not my fault if they believe." What a strange thing to say. But he has nursed his anger to the point that he cannot see anything but his own satisfaction.

He does his duty – walks through the city for 3 days... proclaims the gospel...

And then he shuffles out of the city and this is where our text begins. The people of Nineveh believe. They repent. And God pours out his grace and mercy. And Jonah is furious... and his anger so turned in on himself, he once again seeks death. Just kill me now, God. I can't stand to witness this display of mercy on our enemies... on Republicans, on Democrats, on liberals, on conservatives... on Assyrians...

Jonah parks himself under a vine... which had been appointed by the Lord. And Jonah enjoyed the shade – he was glad. What irony – Salvation, grace, and mercy disgust him, but a vine, a plant makes him delirious with delight. But then God sent a worm to kill the arbor and a sultry east wind that would have made life miserable without shade and protection. Once again Jonah’s anger... not a violent physical anger... but a surly despairing anger, and once again he tells the Lord... Just kill me. End my life now.

The book ends with God’s words. Jonah, you are angry that a plant died making you uncomfortable. You pitied the plant for which you did nothing. How much more then should I pity the people of Nineveh, a great city, half a million people and many animals.

Footnote: many animals. The creation gets the last word in this story of redemption. As Paul reminds us in Romans, god is committed to redeeming the world, the creation, not just people. This is why stewardship of creation matters.

This is one of the great ironies – God has zealously and dramatically offered generation after generation to show mercy on his people, but they have refused. Now he shows mercy one time to their enemies – and they receive the gospel with joy and gratitude. But the prophetic indictment of the book is that God’s people are no different than the reluctant prophet. So we have to ask, Are we similarly hard-hearted

Jonah is quite a case study in anger, isn’t he.

Perhaps as we think about ways in which we are angry, we see ourselves in moments of Jonah’s life.

Anger has made Jonah reclusive, rebellious, suicidal, despairing, selfish, and bitter.

Aristotle wrote: ‘Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – this is not easy. It may feel impossible. And we all know that, don’t we.

Remember Yahweh’s conversation with Cain after Cain and Able brought their gifts to the Lord. Yahweh was displeased with Cain, and that disapproval drew out Cain’s wrath. God says to him: “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?” and then he warns him that if he does not turn away from his anger, it will destroy him like a lion devouring its prey. (Gen. 4:6) But Cain does not heed the warning, and refuses to “keep” his brother – he spills his brother’s blood.

So, it may seem like something of a surprise when we hear the Apostle Paul’s commanding us to be angry. He says it right there in the inspired text, Eph 4:26. “Be angry. Go ahead, get mad!

Oh, and he continues... <sup>26</sup> Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and give no opportunity to the devil.

He begins with 2 direct commands	Be angry
	Do not sin

Some English translations soften Paul's directness by combining these 2 statements: In your anger do not sin. But that shifts the whole emphasis. The point is: Be angry. Get mad! That is an action unto itself. Now, at the same time, Paul says, Don't sin. Our challenge is to do both at the same time – anger has its place and is sometimes our responsibility, but we must never be naïve about how frequently good and necessary attitudes and actions are accompanied by unrighteous and unjust attitudes and actions.

Think for a moment – what makes you angry? Then think... how does your anger control you? Do you insist on being right? Do you become a fighter? Will you sacrifice your friendships?

Be angry.      Do not sin      Do not let the sun go down on your wrath.

This is great advice for married couples, for any friends really.

As a general principle, take care of today's business today – don't succumb to fear or indifference in delaying to deal with things that really do deserve prompt attention... confession, forgiveness, repentance.

But Paul is using a figure of speech to say – don't hold onto your anger.

Don't nurse or coddle our anger

Don't use your anger as justification for your unwillingness to forgive.

Give anger its proper place... as soon as possible

Let anger do its proper work... and be done with it.

Why?

Do not give the Devil an opportunity.

An opportunity to do what? To destroy, to corrupt

To prevent reconciliation

To frustrate the work of the Gospel

To obstruct mercy

To turn hearts against God

After we receive God's mercy, the Devil seizes the opportunity to undermine that grace, and we discover that we have been thrust into an even more hostile environment than before we became children of God – we are now allied with God, and his enemy is now our enemy... and Satan's assault upon God is now directed at all who are in Christ

Anger, in a peculiar way, when it goes bad (becomes rotten), opens the door and gives Satan a particularly effective means of insinuating himself into our lives to wreak great damage not only to our lives but all we love – one another, the world, our relationship to God.

I suspect that because anger is so common, and because it so often appears to be provoked for just reasons, we hold onto it and may even take pride in it. What initially has the appearance of nobility and integrity quickly become pride, selfishness and destruction.

"Don't get mad, get even" – really means, if you're going to be mad, go ahead and get even too... get some satisfaction out of the anger. If someone is going to be the cause of your anger, you are justified in repaying them with vengeance. You know – an eye for an eye...

Remember the question that Yahweh asked Cain: **Why** has your face fallen? God wants us to find the root of our anger. We cannot merely manage or control the expression – the yelling, getting red in the face, the elevated blood pressure, the cursing, the fist clenching and the table pounding... or the cool calculated icy hot anger that plots, and schemes, and broods... We must dig down and find the root, the cause.

To help us do that... or make some first steps... I want to pose several questions about anger to help us think about our own heart.

## **WHEN DO WE BECOME ANGRY?**

Many of the sins and vices that we identify as deadly (envy, lust, pride, sloth, gluttony) are almost always accompanied by anger, an anger that gets aimed in a variety of directions:

- at others for possessing what I would have

- at self for not possessing it

- at God for allowing this miserable state of affairs – we have unholy expectations of the Holy One.

Our sins are marked by a kind of insatiability – in fact, being sated is not even a question: in the absence of pleasure, in the absence of joy, not only will nothing satisfy us... but our sins turn in upon ourselves and so devour us that we become empty, hollow -- there is nothing within us left to satisfy

We are angry when we fail to meet our expectations – we try hard to do right and not to sin, we fail, and we rage. Or, we do right, but then are treated unjustly in response. You know, “no good deed goes unpunished.”

Similarly we become angry when we are pressed to admit the limits of our abilities and existence

- I can't do it – I can't take it any more... and we just scream

We become angry when we feel betrayed – promises have been made to us, but they are promises which cannot be kept, yet we feel justified in demanding that we be given what we think we are due

We become angry when our ignorance is exposed – we're embarrassed.

Many of our angry outbursts are the result of grief that “never comes to sobbing” write Garrett Keizer (113)

- We hide our sorrows and thereby nurse our grief to a rage

Anger is an example of perverted love – a love that begins well-intended, but we don't get the response we believe we deserve, and with indignation we say, “How dare you?”

We become angry when we feel that time conspires against us – we are impatient and become angered at having to wait (including for improvement of faults)

We become angry when our work feels unproductive – there seems to be some correlation between depression and anger related to work. That is, depression creeps in when there is a lack of joy in our labor, when joy is replaced with anger the darkness of depression sets in making it very difficult to sort out feelings from thoughts.

Garrett Keizer writes: “Wrath is the anger of someone who has begun to play at God. Wrath is the anger of one who has distorted his sense of self and the world – a disproportion that he shares with his proud, envious, lustful, gluttonous, and avaricious counterparts. He feels that his prerogatives, his grievances, his right to redress are all absolute and holy. A person consumed by wrath has eaten and digested the forbidden fruit she thinks will make her a god. She storms out of the garden of Eden cursing and swearing acting as though she created the place and it’s her business and hers alone what happened there.”

Tim Keller says it this way: There’s probably nothing wrong with getting angry to a degree if somebody slights your reputation, but why are you ten times—a hundred times—more angry about it than some horrible injustice being done to people in another part of the world... or someone outside our community? Because . . . if what you’re really looking to for your significance and security is people’s approval or a good reputation or status or something like that, then when anything gets between you and the thing you have to have, you become implacably angry. You have to have it. You’re over the top. You can’t shrug it off.

Marcia Cannon says in *The Gift of Anger*: “You become angry when you define reality as unacceptable and you feel unable to easily correct it, tolerate it, or let it go”

Here, a common thread is emerging in this study of sin.

Control – we must have it.

In lust, we must possess those things that serve and satisfy our passions/desires

In anger, we must settle the score or make things right. I must be the one who discerns good from evil, right from wrong. I am the one whose sense of justice must be satisfied.

Why is your face fallen? Why are you so in the grip of anger?

To be free of anger that is rooted in self love, we must identify that weakness or vulnerability we are prepared to fight for to the death.

Elizabeth Oldfield: Wrath disconnects me from myself as well as other people because I use it to cover up what I’m really feeling and to disguise my part in the conflict. Wrath covers over the deeper desolations of fear and hurt. It can make me feel alive because it gives me a rush of adrenaline, a sense of power and agency, but if death is disconnection, it is really death in disguise.

Our goal is not merely to control behavior... but to find what is beneath the wrath, the rage, that controls us... or that we use to get what we want. What do we want that we believe can be acquired only through anger?

We must open our hearts before the Lord and let him help us name the pride, the lust... and help us see and repent of whatever we are clutching or wanting to protect... and that we defend tooth and nail with anger, wrath, and rage.

## **WHEN SHOULD WE BECOME ANGRY**

Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek” – not those who are passive, but whose power is under control and not driven by rage and revenge. Blessed are those who are angry and do not sin in their anger.

The simple answer is: We should be angry at the things that anger God.

**Idolatry**      God’s glory is assaulted

Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake your law. (Psa 119:53)

**Injustice**      God’s image is assaulted

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT YOUR ANGER IS RIGHTEOUS?**

1. It turns your heart to worship and prayer – only God can change what needs to be changed, and he does so in response to intercession and his providence
2. It warms your heart to reconciliation – the anger does not mask the possibility of what can happen by God’s grace

One theologian says that his Pentecostal tradition has a policy:

When you’re angry with someone, tell them, but hold their hand while you do so.

3. It energizes you to be an agent of grace and mercy

Unlike Jonah – what angered him most is God’s mercy

4. It emboldens you to stand with the weak and bear their suffering with them  
He that is angry without cause shall be in danger, but he that is angry with cause shall not  
He who is not angry when he has cause to be, sins. For unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices  
John Chrysostom (Homily 10)

5. It presses you to know God better and to trust him more deeply (it will make you love theology)      George Herbert:

But as I rav’d and grew more fierce and wild      At every word  
Me thoughts I heard one calling, “Child!”      And I reply’d, “My Lord.”  
Things are never as they should be until God makes them right  
I am never all I would like to be until God completes me



6. It liberates you – that is, it does not control you, enslave you. If it causes you to fixate on the anger, to nurse it and protect it, it is an idol that must be destroyed.  
“Sin is crouching at the door, and its desire is for you... not a good thing”

7. It banishes fear by strengthening love

How often are we terrified because of what we think will hurt us

We rage against all that's not right with the world... and if we let that anger accumulate we'll never get to sleep at night. We're convinced that we are helpless in the face of evil, and anger becomes a weapon of fear.

But our love flows from the Cross to the garden and the empty tomb. Our love comes from the One who has given himself for the salvation of the world. He has come. He has conquered death. He will make all things new. So, that today when I see all the things that stir my anger, we hear again his promise, “I am making all things new.” Our love for Christ, our deep trust in him, quiets our fears. It frees us to face suffering and all the things we cannot fix. It frees us to love in Christ's name and speak to each other the words that were so often on Jesus' lips, “Don't be afraid.”

## **WHY SHOULD WE BE GLAD THAT GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE? THAT HE IS ANGRY?**

It's critical that we distinguish God's wrath from our wrath. The wrath of God is defined by his perfect character not our sinful nature. The wrath of God is first a divine attribute, not a human creaturely emotion assigned to God in our limited understanding. The wrath of God is not an impulsive reaction. It is not an emotional frenzy. It is deliberate and therefore can be patient. It is just - it is an action based on what is due, and therefore it is fixed. It is never a boiling excessive rage. That is, the wrath of God is never in conflict with justice -- it is expressed in perfect relationship to justice that is due. The idea that God is angry at innocent people is an impossible contradiction - he could never be angry at innocence. The problem... what is hard for us to see because of our pride... there is no one who is righteous. Not even one person (Rom 3). Do you remember Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in Jn 3. Jesus said, "I have not come into the world to condemn the world." Why is that? Jesus explains: "Because the world is condemned already."

Remember, since Adam and Eve cut the moorings of human history, every one of us has been born lost at sea.

It's easy to think of God's wrath as the fire and brimstone of hell. But his wrath is manifest today. Tim Keller said that “cruelty, greed, and exploitation have natural, disintegrative and destructive consequences. These are all a manifestation of his anger toward evil.”

To divest God of wrath out of deference for those abused by anger is ultimately to salve the wounds with despair. It is to describe a God so benign as to be indifferent, so slow to anger that he is always late to save. (Keizer)

He sees things as they really are

He can be angry for things in a way that would destroy me – I can give him my anger

He is jealous in his love for his children – his wrath against evil and evil doers is the dark side of his covenant love and loyalty to us.

He is the one person who is able to express perfect anger... without sin... and be done with it.

Be angry      Do not sin      Let go of anger quickly

Do not give our Enemy an opportunity to destroy you by turning your heart to rage against the grace and mercy of God

How can we have the freedom to let go of urgent anger, to wisely and humbly direct just anger? It begins... the first step is living with the confidence that the wrath of God toward us has been spent upon Jesus. "My God is reconciled, is pardoning voice I hear." "Let us love and sing and wonder... Justice smiles and asks no more." God himself in Christ has born the wrath we deserve – he has exhausted it so it has no power over us. In Christ we are righteous and beloved. Rejoice and do not be afraid.

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Ephesians 4:25 – 5:4

<sup>25</sup> Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. <sup>26</sup> Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup> and give no opportunity to the devil. <sup>28</sup> Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. <sup>29</sup> Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

<sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.