

“Anger Metamorphosis”
Proverbs 29:22-26
August 5, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

Any serious discussion of conflict must deal with the topic of anger. It is an example of stating the obvious to say that many relational problems are caused by anger. It is anger that often makes destructive conflict so destructive. Have you ever considered the language used to talk about anger? We speak of an angry person as having “lost his temper” or his “head”. A synonym for being angry is to be “mad”, as if an angry person has lost his sanity. All of these expressions indicate the way anger threatens human self-control. To get angry is to lose control of ourselves.

When we lose control of ourselves, we often do things we later regret. It is reported of Alexander the Great that on one occasion a general of his, who happened to be a dear friend of Alexander’s, once got drunk and began to ridicule the emperor in front of his men. Alexander’s anger rose quickly, leading him to pick up a spear and hurl it at his drunken friend. His aim was better than he thought it would be, and the spear took the life of this childhood friend. Later, he felt such remorse and guilt that he attempted to take his own life with the same spear he had used to kill his friend. I think probably all of us have had the experience of getting angry, losing control of ourselves, and then saying or doing something we come later to regret deeply. In our anger, we want to hurt the person who is the object of our anger. So we speak words or sometimes take actions that injure another. Oftentimes, as soon as the words are spoken and we behold the injury done to the other person, we wish we could take it back. But, of course, we can’t. The harm has been done.

I did a quick Google search this week on anger and found a great deal of information on the topic of anger management. The American Psychological Association, for example, recommends three approaches to help manage our anger: expressing it in an assertive but non-aggressive way, suppressing it and using relaxation methods to calm ourselves down. In a way that will become obvious soon, I have chosen a sermon title that finds anger management to be an inadequate goal. God offers something far better than anger management—he offers what I call “anger metamorphosis.” As our hearts are changed to center our lives on God rather than ourselves, our anger is not eradicated but changed into something good and proper. Quite a few of the proverbs address the topic of anger. I want us to focus today on this 22nd verse of chapter 29: **“A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.”** This verse, in its context, teaches us three things about anger.

I. Anger's Bitter Fruit

According to this verse, anger leads to two bad things. First, it stirs up strife. During my first trip to Uganda over fifteen years ago, before the water filtration was very good, our drinking water had what we called floaters and sinkers. It was necessary to skim the floaters off prior to drinking, and to stop short of the bottom of the cup before you reached the sinkers. What you would not want to do is to stir up the glass prior to drinking, because it would spread the sinkers throughout the water. Anger has just that effect in our relationships. Destructive conflict is portrayed in this verse as being potential in all our relationships. Anger has the effect of bringing it out of dormancy and spreading strife through these relationships. Angry people tend to spread conflict like a contagious disease.

One of the ways anger produces strife is from the simple fact that anger almost always produces some visible effect. It cannot be hidden. There are two different Hebrew words for anger in this verse. The first one, translated *wrath* in our versions, is the word for nose or nostril, because one of the common visible effects of anger is the flaring of the nostrils. The second word, translated *anger* in our version, is the word for heat. Anger is like a rising temperature in a pot of water. At first, the increase is undetectable, but as it keeps rising, a visible effect is inevitable. Steam will begin to rise and it will eventually come to a boil. Anger is just like that. If it's there, it will eventually be seen, and when it is seen, its effects will lead to an increase in strife. I think we are often unaware of the visible effects of anger in our own lives. My family has pointed out to me that they know I am angry because I emit a little grunt. On the anger scale, my little grunt is probably on the side of the scale that describes smaller anger responses. Yet I notice that it produces an immediate and negative effect in others. Everyone gets on edge. Anxiety increases, and along with it fear and defensiveness. My little angry gesture creates an environment that is friendly to a storm of strife. The reason there is so much strife in some marriages is that there is often one spouse whose interior temperature is constantly at 211 degrees, about one degree below boiling. It takes very little provocation to see that increase to the point that the anger spills out and brings its destructive effects to those around.

Second, anger leads to increased sin. An angry person causes much transgression. As we've already seen, the language for anger communicates a loss of self-control. We lose our heads, our temper and get mad. This provides us with a powerful demonstration of the falsehood of all notions of man's innate goodness. What happens when people lose self control and get angry? Do good things happen or bad things? The answer is obvious. When we are not angry, we are able to exert a certain level of control that prevents us from engaging in destructive behavior. So we don't say everything we're thinking, and we don't do everything we want to do. We may want to ram that car that just cut us off, but we don't. We gain control of that urge and force ourselves to act responsibly. Anger is when we lose this control and act on the urges. The check valve that is keeping all the bad stuff from coming in malfunctions. Do you know what a check

valve is? It's a valve in a pipe that keeps things flowing in only one direction, preventing any flow in the other direction. Why would you want such a thing? Well, you have pipes in your house to take the sewage out. You want that only to move in one direction, from inside your house to outside your house. If something were to malfunction in the public sewer system, you would not want everyone's sewage flowing into your house. So a check valve is put in your pipe that would prevent such a thing from happening. When we get angry, the check valve malfunctions and all the stuff in our hearts flows out unchecked. But the point I'm making here is that all this bad stuff has been there all along. Anger removes the check valve, and sin is allowed to increase.

So in the Bible, Cain gets angry when his offering is not accepted by God. The check valve malfunctions, and his inner urges express themselves. He hates his brother, Abel, and acts on this in the form of murder. Great transgression is then unleashed in Cain's family. His great-grandson, Lamech, is infamous for his statement of revenge. **"I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold"** (Gen. 4:23-24). Not long after this, we read that **"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"** (Gen. 6:5). "One given to anger causes much transgression."

II. Anger's Powerful Root

Anger management is nothing more than making sure the check valve works properly. What if there were a way to get rid of the problems caused by anger at the source so that a check valve becomes unnecessary? Does this passage say anything about how anger could be addressed at its heart? Bruce Waltke has pointed out in his extensive commentary on Proverbs that we often misread the book by seeing it as containing a series of unrelated proverbs. He says that the proverbs are grouped by theme, and these groupings are noted by literary keys in the original language. He finds such a grouping in verses 22-26, noted by the same word (in the original) that begins and ends the section. So verses 23-26 are somehow related to the topic of anger. Here's how I think they are related. They describe the deeper sins that lie at the heart of anger. The two I want to comment on are pride and unbelief.

One of the big reasons people get angry is pride. **"One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor"** (v. 23). Pride says, "My will must be done, and if you don't get on board with my agenda, I will get angry at you." Humility says, "I would like this to happen, but I may not know what is best either for me or for others. So I will be slow to draw conclusions about what needs to happen in my life. I will be open to the unexpected things God brings into my life." Did you notice the paradox of verse 23? A proud person wants honor and thinks he knows the path by which it should come. So he insists that this

path be followed. The humble person also wants honor, but doesn't trust that he knows the correct path for that to occur. God sees to it that the proud are brought low, that they don't acquire the honor they are convinced they know how to bring into their lives. Those who humbly renounce control of their lives are the very ones who acquire honor. God brings it to them.

What is the root of anger? It is the proud desire to be in control of one's life, a desire that doesn't trust that God is up to the task. One of the website articles on anger that I read this week gave the following advice to women about how to deal with angry men in their lives. "Close, trusting relationships with others help you avoid depression after life stresses and help prevent illness, speed recovery, and promote longevity. But a bad relationship can cause depression... Unfortunately, men with bad tempers cause a great deal of the stresses women face today. Find out how you can improve an angry man." The article then goes on to talk about things a woman can do to keep their men from getting angry. Do you see, though, how this path will lead to more problems? It will cause the woman to get angry because she now has an agenda that will seek to control another person. When her man doesn't cooperate with her agenda, she will get angry. Anger can only be successfully dealt with at its root. Let's look next at how we do that.

III. Anger's Metamorphosis

Before moving any further, I need to point out something that is quite important. We have been talking about anger as if it is always sinful. It is not. God himself is angry, and Jesus, during his earthly life, exhibited a proper anger. Anger is aroused from our strong passions. What makes anger sinful is when the passion behind it is self-centered instead of God-centered. When Jesus' anger is aroused, it is not because someone has done something that hurts him. Rather, it is when God's glory is injured. Our goal, then, is not to rid our lives of anger, but to see anger transformed into something that is righteous. The opposite of anger is not no anger, but slow anger that is motivated by a desire for God's glory.

How do we get to this place of righteous anger? By seeing Jesus to the point that we come to trust him. We need to trust God to run our lives, and one of the ways we can learn to trust him is to see the anger of Jesus. John 11 is the well-known account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Twice in this passage we read that when Jesus contemplated the death of his friend, that he responded with indignation (v. 33, 38). Jesus was angry at death and the ravages of sin in this world. When Jesus gets angry, he does something about it. Don't you long for a powerful friend who will see the bad things in your life and get good and mad about it? And since he's a powerful friend, when he gets mad he is able to do something about it. Jesus is that friend. He sees the sin in our lives, the marring of the image of God within us, the destruction brought by sin, and he gets angry. When he gets angry at Lazarus' death, he raises him from the dead. When he gets angry at the destructive sin in us, he undertakes to do something about it. At

great cost to himself, he dies to pay the penalty for this sin, and he begins to rule in our lives in such a way that we are changed from the inside out. Our need is to trust him.

CONCLUSION:

Years ago, I came across a poem that I have kept, because it expresses well to me the life of humility and trust. Such a life is God's path to seeing our anger transformed to be what God wants it to be. The poem is called "The Road to Life."

At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. He was out there sort of like a president. I recognized His picture when I saw it, but I really didn't know Him.

But later on when I met Christ, it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal.

I don't know just when it was that He suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since.

When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable... It was the shortest distance between two points.

But when He took the lead, He knew delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, He said, "Pedal!"

I worried and was anxious and asked, "Where are you taking me?" He laughed and didn't answer, and I started to learn to trust.

I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I'd say, "I'm scared," He'd lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance and joy. They gave me gifts to take on my journey, My Lord's and mine.

And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away; they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did, to the people we met, and I found that in giving I received, and still our burden was light.

I did not trust Him, at first in control of my life. I thought He'd wreck it; but He knows bike secrets, knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, knows how to jump to clear high rocks, knows how to fly to shorten scary passages.

And I am learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places, and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion, Jesus Christ.

And when I'm sure I just can't do anymore, He just smiles and says... "Pedal."

So let us repent of our desire to be in control of our lives and trust Jesus with this control. He is the one who will help us get good and angry at the right things and keep us from the self-centered and destructive anger that is so damaging to us and to others.