

Anger & Contempt

Well, good to see you guys, if you have your bibles, turn with me to Psalm 94. If you weren't with us last week, we began a series called *All the Feels*, where we're learning about how to comprehend, understand, and then process our emotions through the book of Psalms in the bible. And last week we did mostly set-up, talking about how **when it comes to dealing with our emotions, most of us tend to fall into one of two camps**. One camp is the "suppress them" camp: where we just try our hardest to pretend that our emotions aren't there at all. And we said that that approach is problematic because eventually your emotions come out whether you want them to or not. And then the other camp is the "obey them" camp. This camp ascribes to the belief that the best thing to do is just do whatever your emotions tell you to do, whenever they tell you to. And we said that's problematic because you usually end up doing things in the heat of the moment that you regret.

So we ended up drawing the conclusion that neither of these camps are super compatible with the way of Jesus. That's the bad news. But the *good* news is that the Psalms offer us a third option: the option of *praying* our emotions to God. So we're acknowledging that our emotions exist, but at the same time insisting that there is a higher authority *than* our emotions, and that there is a proper *place for* our emotions. And what we're doing for the rest of this series is learning how to do that with all kinds of different emotions we tend to come across in life.

So today, we're going to look specifically at the emotion of *anger*. Now I do want to make sure that when I say "anger," we're all on the same page about what we mean. I think *some people* deal with really obvious, *overt* anger: those people you observe in everyday life and you go "yep, they need anger management, pronto." But that's not the only type of anger there is. There's also bitterness, resentment, contempt, and low-grade frustration. People sometimes express anger through cynicism, or passive-aggressiveness. Other people express their anger by slandering or gossiping, or "venting,"—which is what Christians call it when they want to gossip about someone but don't want to feel bad about doing it. So all of that—and probably more—are expressions of anger. **The point is that just because you've never wanted to go and punch through a wall, doesn't mean you don't struggle with anger.** Anger can come in a lot of different forms.

Now, one important disclaimer before we dive into the passage. I did want to mention that **one thing we aren't going to be talking much today is anger towards God**. What we have in mind today is more about anger towards *people* and *situations* in our life. There are two reasons for not addressing anger towards *God* today: 1) it's actually a little bit of a different animal to address, and 2) we're going to hit on anger and frustration towards *God* in a number of the other teachings in this series. But just wanted to make that clear up front to set expectations.

So with all that in mind, let's look at how the Psalmist *prays* his anger. Take a look with me at Psalm 94, starting in v. 1:

[1] O Lord, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! [2] Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve!

Okay, that just got real, *real* fast. Can we just agree that when you start your prayers with “O God of vengeance,” you’re *probably* dealing with some anger? Just a little? Generally, when life is going swimmingly for you, you don’t start your prayers with “God of Vengeance!”

So yeah, our dude is dealing with some anger. And it’s something serious. Such that he is calling on God to execute vengeance and act as a judge against the people he’s angry at. Now, there’s an interesting idea: God as a *judge*: We tend to think of God being a judge as a *bad* thing—like it somehow slipped past the P.R. department in heaven. So it makes me think of the guy in Market Square on the weekends, with the sandwich board sign that says in big block letters, “Get ready for Judgment Day.” We see God being a judge as sort of this obstacle we have to find our way around. But ancient Israel didn’t see it that way at all. And that’s because for much of their nation’s history, they were the *victims* of *injustice*. Slavery in Egypt, persecuted in Babylon, oppressed in a foreign land. **When you are frequently a victim of injustice, God being a judge is actually great news to you.** More on that a little later.

But that’s actually precisely what the Psalmist is angry about in this passage: *injustice*. That’s what he tells us next, v. 3:

[3] O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? [4] They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. [5] They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage. [6] They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; [7] and they say, “The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.”

Okay, so pay careful attention here: what specifically is the Psalmist angry *about*? Well, according to the passage, he’s mad about *evil, injustice, violence, and murder*. And then specifically, he’s angry that those things are happening to very *vulnerable* people groups—the widow, the foreigner, and the “fatherless,” or in other words, the orphan. So there is some *legitimate* injustice happening in this passage. These are all things *well worth* being angry about. And the Psalmist *is*.

And I think this clues us in to what *all* anger actually is. Here’s what I think is a pretty decent working definition of **anger: an emotional response to a perceived injustice**. Anger is when we witness something, that for whatever reason, is *unacceptable* to us. Something we *perceive* to be unjust—not okay.

Now, I use that word “perceived” very intentionally. Because **sometimes, we’re angry at things that we perceive to be injustices, but actually aren’t** injustices. If you showed up significantly late for work for a month straight, and then your boss eventually fired you for being late, you might be angry about that. But *should* you be? No. That’s not injustice. That’s called *being an adult*. Sometimes there are things we *perceive* to be unjust, but they actually aren’t unjust. But other times, we perceive things to be injustices **and they actually are**. This is where anger can be a *healthy* thing. This type of anger is why Ephesians 5 says, “*be angry, and do not sin.*” Just so we’re clear, that is a *command, in the bible, to be angry*. There are some things that we *should* be angry about. The Psalmist in this passage is angry about widows and orphans being trampled on. Is that something we should be angry about? Yes. So **there are some things that we perceive to be injustices, that are injustices, and we should be angry about.**

And then there are *many* times, it’s somewhere in between: **sometimes we are angry at things that are injustices, but they are nowhere near as unjust as our anger would seem to indicate.** They are

minor injustices, and our anger is disproportionate to them. So for example, Proverbs 19:11 says *good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense*. So apparently **there are times where there is a legitimate offense or injustice, but it is not worthy of our anger**. Some of you, if you're like me, might just want to commit that particular proverb to memory for the next few months. :)

Now here's the problem for most of us, when it comes to anger: **we tend to be more angry about perceived injustices than we are about actual injustices**. So we're usually not angry that widows in our city are being taken advantage of—we're angry that our spouse or roommate left the dishes in the sink again. We're not angry that orphans are being trampled on—we're angry that someone cut us off in traffic. We're not angry that refugees in our city are being discriminated against—we're angry that someone embarrassed us in front of somebody we were trying to impress. **I'm sure we all spend some time being angry about legitimate injustices in the world, but I bet for most of us, that's a pretty small portion of the time**. I bet we spend *more* time and more energy getting angry about the tiny little ways that people *inconvenience* us.

In fact, **here's a good litmus test to figure out if your anger about something that happened to you, is legitimate anger or not: are you just as angry when the same thing happens to somebody else?** If someone cuts you off in traffic, are you just as angry when you see them cut somebody else in traffic? I can tell you right now that *I'm* certainly not. If somebody cuts *me* off, I'm immediately like "police! Arrest this man. Arrest this man right now for hurting my feelings and adding fifteen seconds to my day. Cuff him and haul him away to jail please." But when I see somebody cut somebody *else* off? I'm usually like "well I mean they gotta do what they gotta do—that other person should've been a more aggressive driver, and then they wouldn't have gotten cut off." **If there is a stark contrast between our anger when something happens to us, and our anger when the same thing happens to others—that's a good sign that our anger isn't really all that righteous.**

So anytime you find yourself angry, I would suggest asking three questions about your anger:

- What am I angry about? To get anywhere with anger, you've got to first identify what's making you angry.
- Is it a legitimate injustice? Is what I'm angry about legitimately unjust? Or is it just inconveniencing to me? Is it truly wrong, or do I just not personally like it?
- Is my anger proportionate to the offense? Am I the *right* amount of angry, or *excessively* angry? Would I be just as angry if the same thing happened to somebody else?

And to be completely honest, you can't really answer those questions on your own. **You're very much gonna need the Spirit, the Scriptures, and other followers of Jesus to help you answer them**. But you've got to start by asking *those questions* about your anger.

However, in light of what our *passage* is about, for our purposes **this morning, let's assume that you've already worked through those questions with God and with other people, and the thing you're angry about is a legitimate injustice**. Because remember, what the Psalmist is angry about in this passage is *legitimate*: it's widows, orphans, and immigrants being persecuted and oppressed. So let's assume you've done the work, and concluded that the thing you're angry about is an *actual wrong* committed against you or someone else, that is *worthy* of your anger. Assuming that that is the case, let's keep reading. Let's pick it back up in v. 8:

[8] Understand, O dullest of the people! Fools, when will you be wise? [9] He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, **does he not see?** [10] He who disciplines the nations, **does he not rebuke?** He who teaches man knowledge—[11] the Lord—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.

So this kind of seems like an odd part of the prayer to me. At this point, he begins to *address* the *people responsible* for the injustice. The people he is angry *at*. But what makes it weird is that he's *not actually talking to* them. Who is he talking to? It's a prayer—he's still talking to *God*. So what is happening here, exactly? Well, it seems like what's happening is that he is so overcome with anger, that in the middle of his prayer he just starts imagining what he *wants* to say to the people committing the injustice. He basically slides right into an anger fantasy in the middle of his prayer. He says, "do you think God doesn't see you? Do you think God doesn't know what you're doing? Do you think he's going to let you get away with this forever?" His anger is smoldering so hot inside of him that it's difficult for him to even keep his focus on God and what he's praying for God to do. Now, don't tell me some of you haven't been *there*. Where you're praying about something, and your mind just drifts as you pray to all the things you're frustrated by? I've been there so many times.

But then he continues. Now in the next portion, **he is going to pivot from mostly talking about those committing the injustice, to mostly talking about those who are victims of injustice.** That make sense? So now he's talking about the people who are being wronged, being persecuted, being trampled on. Look with me v. 12:

[12] Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law, [13] **to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked.** [14] **For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage;** [15] **for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it.**

So *earlier* in the Psalm, the author essentially accused God of not caring about injustice—of not doing anything about it. But *here*, he actually states *confidently* that God *will* do something about it. So what just happened is that **he let his emotions about God—that it seems like God *isn't* doing anything about the injustice—meet the truth about God: that God *will* do something about it, and that he won't just let it go on forever.**

Now, we're going to point this out to you over and over again throughout this series, but *do not miss* how *nuanced* this approach towards anger is. If the Psalmist would've just said "God it seems like you don't care, so I'm going to conclude that you don't care," that would be *obeying* his emotion. That would be letting his emotion about God define the truth about God. But at the same time, if he said "God, you will do something about it so I will be silent and never question you," that would be *suppressing* his emotion. He does *neither*. He lets his raw emotion *about God*, come face-to-face with the *truth about God*. We might put it like this, and we'll put this on the screen: **my emotions don't make the truth not true, and the truth doesn't make my emotions not matter.** This is the tension the Psalms invite us to live in.

And then, in v. 16, he starts to land the plane. So what I'm going to do is just read straight through to the end, and then we'll go back and point some things out. Take a look, starting in v. 16:

[16] Who rises up **for me** against the wicked? Who stands up **for me** against evildoers? [17] If **the Lord had not been my help**, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence [in other words, I would've died]. [18] When I thought, "My foot slips," **your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up**. [19] When the cares of my heart are many, **your consolations cheer my soul**. [20] Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? [21] They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. [22] **But the Lord has become my stronghold**, and my God **the rock of my refuge**. [23] He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the Lord our God will wipe them out.

So in v. 16, he asks two questions that probably sound familiar: essentially, "Who's going to do something about this injustice?" That's very similar to what he's been asking throughout the whole passage. But this he adds in this very short, very important phrase this time. And it's the phrase "**for me.**" Do you see that? "Who rises up *for me* against the wicked? Who stands up *for me* against evildoers?" And his answer is, essentially, "God does." What he's getting at is that **in his anger towards injustice, he has company. In God himself, he has someone who not only hears his anger, but understands it firsthand. So when we find ourselves angry about legitimate injustice in the world, we find ourselves very close to the heart of God himself, who is also angry about it.**

Now I want to be *abundantly* clear about what I *don't mean* by that: **I am not saying that anytime you are angry at someone or something, God is on your team.** That is very much *not* my point—in fact, I would argue that is a very *dangerous* thing to assume. When you are angry, you *must, must, must* do the hard work of working through those questions about your anger first, before you go assuming *anything* about God being *with you* in it. But then—assuming that you are *angry about something legitimately unjust*, and that you are *proportionately angry about it—then*, what this passage is telling us is that we can find solace in knowing that Jesus is angry about it too. That **when we're angry, we are actually joining in on what God himself feels towards the injustice in our world. So in our anger, we can come to God with it and know that he is not a disinterested party.** We find one who passionately feels what we feel, in a far more *perfect* and far more *effective* way. That's what it means to find God to be our *rock of refuge, our help, our consolation*.

Another way of putting what the Psalmist says in these last verses is that **God will address all injustice.**

God will address *all* injustice

The Psalmist declares here that God *will eventually deal* with *all* injustice. Every bit of it on planet earth. I get this from a couple different places in those verses. We've already seen it in v. 16-17, and now we see it again in v. 23, "[God] *will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness.*" **The Psalmist is repeatedly declaring—asserting—that God will deal with the injustice in our world. It will not go on unchecked forever.**

To have any hope of processing and dealing with your anger well, you must—and I really mean *must*—have an understanding of God's sense of *justice*. And yes, that *does include* believing in a God who gets *angry*. While it might seem easier to believe in a God who *never* gets angry, who *never* executes judgment on anyone—that version of God will not give you much hope in the face of real injustice. Especially *personal* injustice against you. **If you do not believe in a God who can and will**

settle the score, you will *always* feel like you have to settle it yourself. You won't just be angry, you will be *overcome* and *controlled* by your anger. You will *always* feel like you have to lash out on people who do wrong, you will always feel like you have to pay people back for the injustice they commit. **To have any shot at *dealing with your anger*, you're going to need a belief in a God who can be trusted with justice.**

This is precisely what Paul has in mind in Romans 12, where he picks up this idea of God avenging injustice in the world. He says this:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, [in other words, do this instead:] "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Okay, I want you to listen to the logic in that passage. As odd as it may sound to us, it actually makes sense: Paul says "because you know *God* will ultimately execute justice, *you* don't *have* to." You don't have to lash out at that person. You don't have to get them back for what they did. You don't have to hurt them the way they hurt you. You don't have to gossip about them behind their back. You don't have to pay them back for what they did, because *God* will. Paul's point is that **when you believe in a God who executes judgment, you don't have to.**

Instead, you can actually respond to those you are angry at with food and drink. *Hospitality. Undeserved mercy. Grace.* Because you're trusting that *God* will settle the score. And Paul says that *by* showing that compassion to them, you are "heaping burning coals on their heads." What a weird thing to say, right? Here's what Paul means though: **by responding to injustices with grace and compassion, you are giving that person all the data they need to see that their injustice is not okay.** You're giving them example after example of what a life lived compassionately looks like. And eventually, one of two things is going to happen. Either, they're going to be so overwhelmed by your kindness towards them that they see the error of their ways. Or, *God* is going to use all those examples of kindness against them on the day he executes justice. He's going to say to them, "really? With all those constant examples of compassion and grace towards you, you *still* chose to be *unjust* towards other people?" That's what Paul means in this passage.

But don't read Paul wrong. It's not that you're just supposed to magically *stop* being angry. It's that you *direct* your anger, you *channel* it into something *productive*. Something that has the potential to be *redemptive*. And the way you do that is by taking your anger to *God* in prayer, asking that *he* would execute justice, and allowing him to transform your anger into something like what Romans 12 talks about. Maybe it even frees you up to help alleviate the effects of the injustice that that person did towards others. That's what it means to "not be overcome with evil, but to overcome evil with good." And what makes it possible is knowing and believing that **God will address all injustice.** That enables us to say, with the Psalmist, "who will stand up *for me* against the wicked? Who stands up *for me* against evildoers? *God* does."

But there's one *other* thing we need to know in our anger...

God has addressed *our* injustice

The other thing we need to know in our anger is that God has addressed *our own* injustice. We'll get to what we mean by that in just a moment. First, let me explain *why* we need to know that. As we mentioned earlier, anger *itself* is not inherently sinful or wrong—but at the same time, **anger can become a breeding ground for the sin of self-righteousness**. If we aren't careful, **anger can make us more and more convinced that everyone else is guilty, more and more convinced that we are always innocent**. And all the while completely justified in believing that.

And it's so incredibly easy to do, right? When we notice an injustice that somebody *else* is guilty of, one of the easiest things to do think first is “well *I* would *never* do what they did. I would *never* do what *they're* doing.” And you know what? That might be true. **When you witness injustice, it might be true that you would never do the same thing they did. But that doesn't mean you're not guilty of injustice at all.** It just means you're not guilty of *that particular* injustice.

We're all guilty of injustice. We're all just inclined towards different *forms* of it. Our objectification of other people is an *injustice* that must be addressed. Our selfishness and disregard for the needs of others around us is an *injustice* that must be addressed. And even our refusal to deal with our anger in healthy ways, responding instead with bitterness and resentment and gossip—those things *too* are *injustices* that must be addressed. And **if God is a just God, he must address all injustices—not just the injustices we are particularly bothered by**. Which means we too must be repaid for *our* injustice. However much we may *dislike* that truth, it's truth just the same. Something must be done about *our* injustice. And one thing that could be done about it is that we could be lumped in with the people that the Psalmist talks about, whom God will eventually wipe out and pay back for their injustice one day in the future. That's *one* option.

But the other option we find in 1 Peter 3:18. Take a look on the screen at this verse:

*For Christ also died for sins once for all, **the just for the unjust**, so that He might bring us to God...*

There may be no clearer, more obvious example of personal injustice than what Jesus experienced on the cross. All the powers that be in the ancient world had aligned against him, his closest friends had betrayed and abandoned him, he had been beaten within inches of his life, tortured in front of crowds of people, and then hung up on a cross publicly to be shamed as he bled out. And all of this happened to Jesus *though he did nothing wrong*. If you want an example of *total* injustice, that's *it*, is it not?

And yet, what words did Jesus cry out as he hung there on the cross as a victim of injustice? “Father—” what? “*Forgive them.*” *Forgive* them? Why not *anger*? Why not *malice*? Why not *contempt*? Why *doesn't* Jesus pray, like the *Psalmist*, “God of vengeance, wipe out these people! Give them what they deserve!” Why doesn't Jesus say that? I would argue it is because he knew that God the *Father* could be trusted to address their injustice. In fact, for some of the people committing the injustice, Jesus *was actively becoming* the means by which God addressed it. In that very moment he was intercepting God's own

anger towards *their* injustice, *on his body*. So even in the moment when Jesus is a *direct victim of injustice*, what comes out of him is grace. Undeserved mercy. Towards even those who committed unbelievable injustices against him.

And it's through that reality—through what Jesus accomplished there on the cross—that you and I can learn to do the same. We too can respond to injustices with tenderness, grace, and compassion instead of anger, rage and malice. **By becoming a follower of Jesus, by grounding ourselves in what was accomplished for us on the cross, we can move from praying “God of vengeance,” to “Father, forgive them.”** We too can become the type of people who respond to injustice with forgiveness and grace, because we realize that our injustices have been addressed at the cross. Because it means that even the injustice of the things we do *in our anger* has been forgiven and covered with grace.

But I want to make sure you hear me say: that happens *through* relationship with Jesus, not apart from it. The point of all of that is not that if you are angry, you need to learn how to be a forgiving person and then you'll be able to approach God. The point is that **by bringing our desire for justice, our desire for judgment, our anger to God regularly, he shapes us into the type of people who can pray “Father, forgive them” even in our anger.** The Psalmist says “God *has become* my rock of refuge.” It's a process. It takes *time*. And it takes being willing to bring our raw, unfiltered emotions to God when they come up.

So before we're done today, I'd love to give us some space to do that. So if you will, go ahead and put your stuff away, close your eyes, bow your head.

- First, I'd love for us to ask God **if there is any anger present in our lives**. It might be obvious, might be more subtle. Might look like aggressive rage, or might look more like quiet, stewing, passive-aggressiveness and frustration. Just ask God, “is there anger anywhere present in my life?” (Maybe this isn't really an issue for you right now. If so, that's great. Maybe you can spend some time praying on behalf of other people in the room who do struggle with it.)
- Second, **ask God if it is righteous anger**. Like we said, that's really something you're gonna need some help with. So if there is anger present, maybe shoot a text to somebody you trust, somebody in your LifeGroup, and say “I need you to help me sort through my anger this week. Don't let me forget.” But spend some time asking if your anger is righteous.
- And then last, if it is righteous, **ask God to help you come to him with your anger**. Spend some time praying for God to execute justice on what you're angry about, and then that in turn he would free you up to show compassion and grace towards whoever or whatever it is.