

Fleshly Anger and Righteous Indignation

*“Cease from anger,
and forsake wrath:
fret not thyself in
any wise to
do evil.”
—Psalm 37:8*

FLESHLY ANGER HAS ITS

expression manifested daily in our own country and throughout the world. Shocking events make the headlines, and the news media regularly provides graphic coverage of violence visited upon people. In many countries there is carnage that affects vast numbers of people. Many are imprisoned or even killed because of religious or political beliefs that differ with those in power. In our own land, as well as elsewhere, we find rebelliousness and distrust by one group against another.

Even between children and parents, manifestations of fleshly anger are often apparent. Consider, for example, a small child who wanders away from her mother in a store. In two-year-old fashion, she begins to finger the bright packages of candies only to hear a penetrating shout by her parent that she

should not touch those. In such a case, though a wrong behavior was being corrected, the voice of authority perhaps caused much more notice than the child's actions would have brought. If, additionally, corporal punishment is administered in public as a result of parental anger, the child becomes mad, feels mistreated and humiliated. According to some psychologists, we are told that such treatment might well have injurious results to the youngster in the long-term.

Another illustration that might nurture anger in a child is the feeling that he or she is being treated differently than others. Consider the child who brings gifts to everyone else's birthday parties, but when she has her own her mother tells her friends not to bring presents. The explanation given by the parent that "I don't want your friends to feel obligated," does little to satisfy the sense of disappointment and resentment which the youngster would feel during what should be a happy occasion.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ANGER

Regardless of who the person is that displays anger, it can be a destructive force which produces numerous harmful consequences to self and others. Manifestations of its existence and effects go back to early human history. Following the expulsion from the Garden of Eden because of disobedience, Adam still worshipped God and taught his sons, Cain and Abel, to offer sacrifices that would manifest their devotion.

On one such occasion the brothers were working in the field. Abel made an offering of a lamb, which pleased the Heavenly Father. Cain made an offering

of grains and produce from the field, but God did not find that offering acceptable. Cain then became angry and jealous. He subsequently quarreled with his brother and finally struck and killed him. This uncontrolled rage in Cain led him to commit the unspeakable act of murder. (Gen. 4:1-8; Heb. 11:4; I John 3:12) There are other examples in the Scriptures where unjustified anger was demonstrated.

NAAMAN'S EXAMPLE

Naaman was the captain of Benhadad's Syrian army, and he contracted the disease of leprosy. In Naaman's home there was an Israelitish girl who waited upon his wife. She had been brought out of the land of Israel as a captive, but she remembered well the Prophet Elisha. She told Naaman's wife that if her husband could see the prophet in Samaria his leprosy might be healed. The king learned what the maid had said, and he told Naaman to go to Samaria with a letter to King Jehoram of Israel, although it failed to mention Elisha. It merely said that he had sent Naaman to Jehoram to be cured of leprosy. Jehoram was concerned, however, because he knew that he could not cure leprosy and feared a trap. Elisha heard of the matter and Jehoram's distress, and he sent a message saying, "Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." Thus, Naaman went to the house of Elisha and stood at the door, but the prophet merely sent a messenger who told Naaman what he should do.—II Kings 5:1-10

The instructions were: go to the Jordan River, wash seven times, and the leprosy would be gone. At this point Naaman became angry. Elisha had not

even bothered to come out and pray to his God in Naaman's presence. If it were just a matter of washing in a river, there were a lot of better rivers in Syria. The account states: "Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper." Naaman was afflicted with pride and was insulted that Elisha did not greet him personally. He protested in a rage that all he was told was to wash in the Jordan River seven times to cure his leprosy. It was only after his servants persuaded him to heed the prophet's instruction that he was healed.—II Kings 5:11-14

BALAAAM'S RAGE

During their approach to the Promised Land, the Israelites traveled through Moab. The king of this territory, Balak, thought that they came to make war against him, so he sent for a man named Balaam, who was reputed to have power from God. King Balak promised Balaam silver and gold if he would curse the Israelites. Because Balaam loved the thought of riches he was willing to do this. He rose early the next morning and saddled his donkey to go with the princes of Moab to meet the Israelites. God's displeasure came upon Balaam, however, and he sent an angel to stand before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam could not see the angel, but the donkey saw him, and he turned out of his way. Balaam angrily struck the donkey to make it go back. The angel went on further and again stood in Balaam's path. When the donkey reached that place, it pressed close to a wall to get by, but that

hurt Balaam's foot, and he struck the animal again.
—Num. 22:1-27

Balaam was angry because he could not control his donkey to travel through a narrow pass. He wanted the silver and gold promised him if he would curse Israel as King Balak requested. The animal could see the angel of the Lord holding a sword to slay Balaam if he proceeded further, so it refused to move forward. After the donkey was given the power to speak words of rebuke to Balaam for the beatings it received at his hands, Balaam was allowed to see the angel with the sword drawn to kill him if he continued in his act of unrighteousness.—vss. 28-31

CURRENT MANIFESTATIONS OF ANGER

In today's society, unjustifiable anger is found in schools, the workplace, at home, and among other social relationships. This has resulted in the creation of a huge array of professional services that deal with anger management and counseling. Anger, as well as all destructive behaviors and habits, is a byproduct of sin. However, the various emotional health practitioners would have no clients if they espoused such a philosophy. In suggesting possible causes of anger, a therapist might suggest low self-esteem, rejection, physical or mental disorders, poor social relationships, false accusations of wrongdoing, and misreading the meaning of events in one's life and becoming offended.

TRANSFORMATION AMONG TRUE CHRISTIANS

Among consecrated believers, faithfulness in walking as the Master walked will result in a life that is totally opposed to sinful practices such as fleshly anger. The change that comes upon us once we devote

ourselves to the doing of the Heavenly Father's will is due to the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. It is described as being transformed, which when fully carried out, will not only result in our change from sinfulness to righteousness in thought and conduct, but ultimately, we will be changed from the human to the divine nature if we are faithful unto death.—Rom. 6:3-6; 12:1,2; Rev. 2:10

The Bible indicates it is God's will for Christians to overcome anger and other sinful traits: "Now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And be thankful."—Col. 3:8-15, *Revised Standard Version*

OVERCOMING SINFUL PROPENSITIES

Those who have devoted their lives to following the Master will find that, because of human frailties, it will be impossible to consistently perform every aspect of these requirements. Nevertheless, it is possible for us to manifest perfection of intention and be acceptable to the Father: "For it is God

which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”—Phil. 2:13

This work of God in us is accomplished in various ways. He has given us the Holy Spirit that enables us to overcome the inclinations of the old nature. He has given Scriptures for us to study and to understand what his desire is for us. His providence shapes our affairs through needed disciplines and encouragements. We have a family of brethren with whom we can share our experiences and learn from each other. God has given us the privilege of prayer to succor and sustain us. He has provided precious promises and the assurance that he will never leave us nor forsake us. When we are faint, we receive strength from our Advocate in our difficulties. Forgiveness is promised us when we repent of our trespasses and strive to be more watchful of our actions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HEART

Cain’s anger led to the murder of Abel. Could those who are spirit-begotten ever have fleshly anger or murderous thoughts in their hearts against others? Jesus gave a definition of adultery which was even beyond the physical act, and which involved having an improper desire in one’s heart towards another. (Matt. 5:28) Likewise, without the physical act of murder, it is possible that the spirit of murder could be found within believers if they are not diligent in maintaining heart purity. The Apostle John said, “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer:

and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love, ... because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”—I John 3:14-16

DANGERS FROM NOT RESISTING SIN

If we harbor feelings of animosity toward anyone, we must wage an aggressive warfare against such a disposition lest it consume us. Paul admonishes us: “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:19-21, *New Revised Standard Version*) That warning is addressed to New Creatures in Christ and demonstrates that all works of the flesh, including anger, must be eliminated, because the continuation in such an evil course would bar us from attaining the heavenly kingdom.

We are to remember, as the apostle suggests, that we have this new nature in “earthen vessels.” (II Cor. 4:7) The earthen vessel has practically all of its blemishes and fallen tendencies still as powerful as ever, except as the new mind has these under its mastery and control. However, if that control should be released even for a moment, the result would be the reviving of the old nature. We may be sure that our Adversary is alert and fully realizes the situation. He will do all in his power to put us off guard, even to the extent of endeavoring to make

“white appear black” and “black appear white” before our judgment. The Lord very graciously shields us from temptations more than we are able to bear. (I Cor. 10:13) Nevertheless, it is possible for us at times to be overcome, not only in the infancy of our new nature, but also in its further development. In fact, our testing may be permitted to grow more severe as we near the close of our earthly sojourn. We must not object to this, as it is exactly what we should expect.

We offer the following quote: “The Apostle, following this line of thought, declares, ‘I keep my body under,’ and again he says, ‘Mortify, therefore, your members which are upon the earth’—your earthly ambitions, will, etc., everything in yourself that would tend toward envy, hatred, anger and strife—put these to death. Allow the new nature to have full sway and control in every thought, in every word, in every deed. And watch to this end; watch your thoughts, watch your words, watch your conduct. Many can watch their conduct who find it difficult to scrutinize and properly weigh their thoughts and their words. Truly the Apostle intimates that out of the heart proceeds envy, bitterness, evil speaking, backbiting and strife; unless they are in the heart the mouth cannot utter them, for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaketh.” —Reprints, p. 4217

RESPONDING TO PERSONAL ATTACKS

The matter of not reacting in anger provides a severe test to believers when they are unjustifiably treated in an evil manner. Jesus said, “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you,

and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”—Matt. 5:11,12

All of us occasionally receive ill-treatment at the hands of others. When we do what is right and are slandered because of it, do we feel blessed and joyful, or angry? If ever there was an individual on earth who not even once was deserving of an unkind word or action, it was Jesus Christ. Yet, he was opposed and slandered, but he never responded in a manner demonstrating personal anger against those who hated him without a cause. He suffered for righteousness’ sake and left an example for all believers to follow. The Apostle Peter wrote in this regard: “This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, yet take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.”—I Pet. 2:19-23

CHRIST’S EXAMPLE

Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath and the Pharisees condemned him for that. The Lord responded, “What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on

it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.”—Matt. 12:11,12

This same event is described by Mark in these words: “He saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.” (Mark 3:4,5) The look of anger on the Master’s face was an expression of righteous indignation, because the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites, and whose hardened hearts Jesus could read. Indeed, the spirit of Israel’s law did not prevent the doing of good deeds on the Sabbath.

GOD’S CHARACTER

“God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day.” (Ps. 7:11) Many fail to understand that the meaning of “angry” in this text refers to God’s righteous indignation against sin. They instead visualize him as a vengeful being intent upon destroying much of the human family whose evil ways they feel warrant such punishment. Throughout the Bible, however, there are many references to God’s perfectly balanced qualities of love, holiness, unchangeableness, and justice.—John 3:16; Lev. 20:26; James 1:17; Ps. 89:14

Our Heavenly Father perfectly balances his attributes and is always in control. We could never imagine him saying after having formulated his plan, “Satan makes me so angry with all of the

wickedness that he is perpetrating, I am going to destroy him right now.” In God’s own due time, and according to his perfect judgment, he will do exactly that. He manifests righteous indignation towards sin through his unerring justice, such as when he condemned Adam because of disobedience. Nevertheless, love found a way to provide an opportunity for man’s recovery through the sending of Jesus as a “ransom for all.” (I Tim. 2:5,6) Loving righteousness and hating iniquity is an integral part of our grand Creator’s character, and these exist in perfect harmony. The permission of evil was provided to instruct the human family as to the real consequences of sin and disobedience.

During Christ’s kingdom the Adversary is to be “bound” for a thousand years, after which he will be released to test mankind for a “little season” to determine whether they have internalized the principles of righteousness, or if they will follow Satan and reap destruction with him. (Rev. 20:1-3) When all creation has been fully restored and God’s character is entirely vindicated, his righteous indignation will not need to be further manifested. All will then come to him in loving obedience, and iniquity will be a thing of the past. How blessed we are in having such a wise and merciful God.

SCRIPTURAL EXHORTATIONS FOR BELIEVERS

As New Creatures in Christ, we must rid ourselves of the works of the flesh if we are to be more than overcomers and associates of the Master in his kingdom. Our serious endeavors to identify our weaknesses and rectify them should be of paramount importance in our lives. Paul counsels us: “Grieve

not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.”—Eph. 4:30,31

Here are some of the actions we can take to control anger in our lives, with scriptural references to help guide us in this effort.

Overlook minor offenses. “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.”—Prov. 19:11

Accept personal responsibility for one’s own errors. “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”—Matt. 7:5

Intensify our prayer life. “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”—I Tim. 2:8

Be just and merciful. “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”—Mic. 6:8

Be ready to exercise forgiveness. “Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”—Eph. 4:32

Use great care in our conversations with others. “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”—James 1:19,20

Meditate upon the wholesome and the good. “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are

lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”—Phil. 4:8

Be receptive to godly counsel in addressing matters that have the propensity for resulting in strife. “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.”—Prov. 11:14

May God’s Holy Spirit enable us to overcome unrighteous anger in our lives. ■