

“When We Are Angry with God”
Psalm 44:1-19, 23-26
Ephesians 4:26
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Praying through life’s challenges. This has been my focus this month. Three weeks ago we heard how in Babylon you were only supposed to worship the king. But Daniel, true to his faith, stood at the open window and defiantly continued to pray to his God. Like Daniel, we can pray through tough times. We can keep our integrity. Next we looked at unanswered prayer and heard the story of Paul asking God to remove the “thorn in his flesh” (whatever that illness or weakness was). God’s answer: “my grace is sufficient for you.” We learned how God can work even in difficult situations from which we are not delivered. (If you missed either of these, or any other sermon, you can always go on the church web site and read it later.) Today, we tackle another challenging situation: how to pray when we are angry with God.

Anger is part of life. Anger lets us know when there is injustice, when a wrong needs to be made right. There’s another side to anger though: Anger can also serve our smaller selves, and lead to hurting others. We all get angry. Anger can be hard to manage. Holding on to anger too long prevents us from experiencing the joy and peace God wants for us. We can change how we express anger towards others. We can learn to be less angry, to have greater peace. Someone in my family growing up had anger issues. But later as an adult meditation transformed those angry outbursts significantly.

Maybe you’re one of those people who has anger issues. If you are getting angry too often; if you express your anger in ways you later regret, come and talk with me. I will help you find the resources you need to learn how to make different choices. Sometimes we turn anger inward and it can become depression. I can assist you in finding help for that too.

As we think about anger directed towards others, there is a time element. Counting to ten before responding can help a lot. Never disciplining a child in anger -- waiting until tempers are cool – is important too. Ephesians 4:26 reminds us to express our anger appropriately and then move on. “....be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

Our focus today is on the anger that is directed towards God. It might not be possible to get rid of this kind of anger before the sun goes down. It may take more time to resolve anger against God. With this kind of anger, it’s important not to rush things. People who feel angry at God often feel deeply wounded. Wounds take time

to heal. Let's see how our ancestors in faith dealt with their anger at God. Let's turn to Psalm 44.

Psalm 44 is a form of prayer called a lament. Here, the people are angry with God. Psalm 44 is a communal complaint. At certain places the prayer is written in the voice of the king is speaking on behalf of the people. Listen again to Psalm 44:4-7: "You are my King and my God; you command victories for Jacob. Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down our assailants. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But you have saved us from our foes, and have put to confusion those who hate us." The psalm begins with a confession of faith. But then quickly becomes a complaint. Things are not going well for God's people. Their enemies are winning the battle. God is not coming to their defense. Their prayers are not being answered.

At time in the Bible, God's silence can be a form of punishment for disobedience. But that's not what's happening here. God's people have been faithful. "All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you or been false to your covenant" it says in verse 17 says. Scholars tell us it's impossible to say for sure the date when Psalm 44 was written. The prayer fits many situations the Jews faced, beginning with the exile to Babylon and going up through the time of the Macabees in the 2nd Century before the common era. God's faithful people have suffered often, even when they didn't deserve it. And this left them frustrated and angry. You can hear the anger in verses 23 and 26: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off for ever!....Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love." The ancient Israelites fought against the other nations. They thought it was their gods fighting the gods of their enemies. When the Israelites went into battle, the ark of the covenant, representing the presence of God, led the way. "Arise, or "rise up" was the ritual cry chanted by the Israelite soldiers as the ark of the covenant was lifted to lead the people into battle. "Arise, God and bring us victory."

But sometimes, despite the prayer "Arise, God, come and help us, "God doesn't act in our lives. And we are left frustrated and angry. How do we pray in situations like these?

To answer that I'd like to tell you a story. It's from a book by Adam Hamilton's "Why? Making Sense of God's Will." There he tells this story about a woman who was angry with God. This woman and her husband longed to have a child. They prayed and prayed. Still no baby. The woman chose to go through expensive, difficult fertility treatments that went on for years. In time, the couple was overjoyed because the woman conceived. But during the first months of the pregnancy, she started getting violently ill. Tragically, the woman lost the baby. "How could God do this to her?" she prayed. After all that she'd gone through, all the prayers? Why, God, why? She struggled with God's will for her. "I had always thought God could, and would, do anything if enough people prayed - but people had and God didn't. Who was God, what good is God?" The experience led this

young woman to turn away from faith, to stop believing in God. It made it all the harder that this woman was the pastor of a small church at the time.

But she kept on praying. She kept on talking to God. She didn't swallow her anger. She expressed it. She did not give up on her relationship with God. As time passed she came to understand that God did not will the death of her unborn child; she came to accept God does not usually intervene miraculously to prevent hard things from happening in our lives. God walked with her. God comforted her. God then led her to be the answer to someone else's prayer. In time, her prayer "why, God, why?" became "what's next God?" "The "what's next?" was that she began to take the steps to pursue adoption. She learned of three Russian girls who needed a mommy. She and her husband adopted those little girls. And now they are a family of five and each of their lives are forever changed.

Does every story of anger against God end happily? No. But what we learn from this story is that when we are angry with God, if we keep on talking to God, then it's possible for our prayers to be transformed. Our "why, God, why?" can become "What's next God?" In his book, Adam Hamilton teaches that prayer is many things. And prayer is not primarily us asking God for favors. Prayer is not primarily about intercession. God is not a divine vending machine. Prayer is something more. Prayer is a conversation with God. Prayer is yielding to God, entering into a relationship with the Holy One. Prayer is a conversation with a friend, with whom you can be completely honest and open. In the midst of her anger against God, that woman did what people of faith do when we are angry with God: we keep up the conversation. That's how it worked in the lives of the people who prayed Psalm 44. And that's what can happen for us. The woman who suffered from infertility and grief at losing her baby kept on praying. The people of God in Psalm 44 kept demanding justice from God because they knew God's nature was steadfast love. God is faithful. Even though overcome by enemies, they won't let go of their belief that God can and would save them. The last hope of faithful people is the faithfulness of God..

Psalm 44 helps us see how faithfulness is about keeping the conversation with God going.

Have you ever known someone who is great at making conversation? My husband's grandmother was that kind of person. Myra was in her late eighties when I met her. She was so comfortable in who she was. Being around her you couldn't help but feel comfortable in who you were too. After making you a cup of instant coffee, or cooking up a hearty breakfast, she could sit and visit at the kitchen table for hours. She never acted rushed. and you felt like she had all the time in the world for you. that's how God is with us. You have a great conversation partner in your life right now - who is God. God, that a great conversation partner, will keep up her end of the conversation if you do your part. Prayer is less about asking for favors and more like taking time for a leisurely visit.

Faithful people like you and me, we experience joy, happiness, sadness, anger, surprise and more. When we get angry at others, we are invited to not stuff or hold on to anger but to express it appropriately and let it go. Our anger can fuel the task of making the world a more just and fairer place.

When we get mad at God, we are invited to remember that God, our great conversation partner, can handle whatever we want to talk about. God can handle our anger. When we are angry, all we need to do is keep up the conversation. And trust that God will take care of the rest. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our LORD Jesus Christ. Amen.