

Large Space Rocks That Pass 'Near' Earth Help Us Think About God of the Cosmos

10/24/2021

Dear Teacher,

In the Bible, some people experienced God as an opponent, even when they were doing his will. The current news about large asteroids whizzing "nearby" our planet leaves room to think about how, in some circumstances, God relates to us in an oppositional way. That's an aspect of the Divine we don't often consider, but one that opens some new realms of spiritual learning for us. So that will be the topic of this installment of *The Wired Word*.

If you'd prefer a different topic, look at our second lesson, which explores the phenomenon of growing anger in the world today. We touch on whether anger has any useful purpose, how anger is expressed in the Bible, and how we can handle feelings of anger in godly and productive ways.

You are welcome to email the student version of either lesson to your class members, depending on which lesson you prefer to use for your class time. To do so, click here (<http://www.thewiredword.com/subscriber/studentlist.aspx>).

May God bless you as you teach the scriptures this week.

The Editorial Team of *The Wired Word*



Large Space Rocks That Pass 'Near' Earth Help Us Think About God of the Cosmos

The Wired Word for the Week of October 24, 2021

In the News

Ruth Hamilton, 66, of Golden, British Columbia, was sleeping earlier this month when a meteorite crashed through her roof and landed on her bed, right between the two pillows, barely missing hitting her, and leaving her with drywall dust all over her face.

The rock weighed 2.8 pounds and was about half the size of a loaf of bread.

She's grateful not to have been hit or killed by the interplanetary object, but she plans to show the meteorite to her grandchildren and other kids at the local school. For the present, however, she has loaned it to researchers at Western University in Ontario and the University of Calgary so their scientists can test it.

Those researchers have used the meteorite's estimated trajectory to identify the likely site of additional debris, and by doing so, they found another chunk of meteorite near the side of a road.

"We strongly expect that dozens of more meteorites will have fallen, and encourage residents to be on the lookout as they do their yard work and walk in the indicated strewn field area," said Alan Hildebrand, a planetary scientist in the Department of Geoscience at the University of Calgary.

On the night the meteorite bombed Hamilton's house, other Canadians heard two loud booms and saw a fireball streaking across the sky.

Space rocks are often leftovers from planet formation and, depending on their size, are called by different names: *Asteroids* are large rocky bodies, in orbit around the sun. *Meteoroids* are smaller rocks in orbit around the sun. If a meteoroid enters the Earth's atmosphere and vaporizes, it becomes a *meteor*, which is often called a shooting star or a fireball. But if a small asteroid or large meteoroid survives its fiery passage through the Earth's atmosphere and lands on Earth's surface, it is then called a *meteorite*. By whatever term, all those objects are made of rock, as opposed to *comets*, which are composed of a significant fraction of ice and dust.

Astronomers say meteoroids hurl toward Earth every day. Most burn up in the Earth's atmosphere, but those that survive the trip, like the one that landed in Hamilton's bedroom, are called meteorites. And enough do survive that museums have some of the rocks and others are sold on eBay. In February of this year, the auction house Christie's held a record-shattering sale of rare meteorites, taking in more than \$4 million.

So, should we be worried when NASA's Center for Near Earth Object Studies reported, as it did last week, that massive asteroids, including one about the size of the Empire State building, will whiz near Earth in the coming weeks?

Probably not, scientists say, because huge space-rock hits on our planet are extremely rare, and in the cases of the asteroids currently being watched, their "near" trajectory to Earth is near only in cosmic terms, and will miss our planet by millions of miles.

Near-Earth objects are defined by NASA as "comets and asteroids that have been nudged by the gravitational attraction of nearby planets into orbits that allow them to enter the Earth's neighborhood."

But it's a big neighborhood. One of the nearest approaches was Asteroid 2021 TJ15, which on October 16 just missed the Earth by 238,854 miles -- about 30 times the diameter of our planet.

Large impact craters on the Earth's surface tell the tales of a few direct big space-rock hits, but all of them date from eons ago.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Meteorite Crashes Through Ceiling and Lands on Woman's Bed. *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/14/world/canada/meteorite-bed.html>)

Massive Asteroids Will Whiz Past Earth in Coming Weeks, Including 1 Nearly Size of Empire State Building. *ABC News* (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/massive-asteroids-whiz-past-earth-coming-weeks-including/story?id=80601381>)

The Difference Between Asteroids and Meteorites. *Phys.org* (<https://phys.org/news/2015-06-difference-asteroids-meteorites.html>) Asteroid Impacts: 10 Biggest Known Hits. *National Geographic* (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/130214-biggest-asteroid-impacts-meteorites-space-2012da14>)

Applying the News Story

When the Bible opens by saying, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ..." (Genesis 1:1), it is telling us that God is not only the creator of our planet, but also of the cosmos in which it resides. And when God finished, he called the creation "good" (Genesis 1:31).

So why does it sometimes seem as if the cosmos is intent on harming us, as, for example, by lobbing rocks at us from space?

That question itself is not the focus of this week's TWW discussion, but it does lead us to consider some of the texts from the Bible where God -- or his agent, or someone God unleashes -- behaves in ways that inexplicably oppose people who are trying to do his will. Job is a case in point, where God permits Satan to harm Job in serious and painful ways.

In the scripture discussions below, we will examine some more specific cases like this the Bible presents and see what we might learn from them -- regarding not only who God is, but also who we are in relationship to him.

At the same time, an important balancing understanding in all this is that sometimes, what we perceive as opposition from God may simply be the nature of things in this life, where trouble is inevitable, whether it is a rock from space, a tsunami, an accident, a personal crisis, etc. It gives little comfort in the moment that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33), but as Christians, that should be our mindset. Our faith is demonstrated in how we respond to such events -- being able to find that peace in Christ. Our faith never was intended to provide protection from troubles.

The Big Questions

1. Does the fact that God sometimes seems to take action against those who are loyal to him suggest that there is a tough-love component to God's compassion for his people? If so, what are the implications of that?
2. When has a human opponent helped you broaden your understanding of life?
3. What is troublesome about thinking of God as having an oppositional side to his nature? What might be helpful about that?
4. What might it mean for one to be provoked by God?
5. Why do you think we try to make everything about us? It doesn't really rain to ruin our vacation, does it? Is it possible that something bigger is going on that has nothing to do with us? Is it okay for God to have a purpose for an event that has nothing to do with us, and still know that God loves us?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 32:25

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. (For context, read Genesis 32:22-31

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+32%3A22-31&version=NRSV>.)

This verse is part of a larger story in which Jacob, who years earlier had deceived and cheated his brother Esau, is now en route to a meeting with Esau in hopes of reconciling with him. The night before they are to meet, Jacob sends his family and entourage ahead while he himself prepares to spend the night alone near a stream called Jabbok. Perhaps his intention is to calm himself for the upcoming meeting with his brother or to plan what he will say or simply to meditate, but whatever it is, something quite different happens. Jacob suddenly finds himself in an all-night wrestling match with someone whom the text calls a "man," but when the match ends, Jacob says he has "seen God face to face" (v. 30). Whoever Jacob struggled with that night, Jacob understood the encounter as his having wrestled with God.

We would expect, of course, that in any contest between a mortal and God, the winner would be a foregone conclusion. Certainly in a wrestling match, God is the heavyweight. But in this night-long struggle, we find no indication that God could overwhelm Jacob at any moment God so chose. In engaging Jacob, God seems to limit his power so that Jacob has a chance, and Jacob holds his own. He isn't whipping God, but neither is he being defeated by his divine opponent.

Finally, as dawn is breaking, this mysterious adversary, seeing he is not prevailing, strikes Jacob on his hip, knocking it out of joint, and insists that Jacob let him go. Jacob, however, refuses, unless this God-man will bless him. So the opponent asks Jacob his name, and when Jacob answers, the antagonist gives him a new name, Israel, which means, "the one who strives with God."

But Jacob soon discovers he has not won the struggle in any complete way. Jacob asks his opponent for his name. In other words, Jacob wants to understand the mystery of heaven and earth, but the opponent will not give it. The opponent blesses Jacob, as Jacob asked, but he will not give Jacob all that he seeks. Some things have changed, but others will remain as unsettled as they were before the match began.

Thus, as the sun comes up, the opponent disappears, and Jacob limps away with less than he sought from the all-night struggle, aching in the hip and probably all over. He survived seeing God face to face, and received a blessing, but he did not get God's name.

Still, Jacob is sore -- literally -- but not a sore loser, for he has received more than he ever expected. He is no longer merely Jacob, the deceiver; he is now Israel, the one who strives with God.

Questions: Why do you think God limited his power in the wrestling match with Jacob? When have you wrestled with God? What was the issue? Did either of you win? Explain.

What, besides too much caffeine, are some reasons for sleepless nights? Is God sometimes seemingly present as an agitator as one lies awake or sleeps only fitfully?

What might it mean to seek God's blessing and to be given it, but only after a wounding struggle? When have you experienced spiritual "limping"?

Exodus 4:24-26

On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision." (For context, read Exodus 4:18-26 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+4%3A18-26&version=NRSV>).

This is part of the narrative of Moses' return to Egypt after he had fled that land, settled in Midian, married Zipporah, and with her, had a son, Gershom. In Midian, through the burning bush incident, God called Moses to return to Egypt, and lead the Israelites out of slavery.

Moses obeyed God, and set off for Egypt, taking Zipporah and Gershom with him. At a nighttime stop en route, the incident described in the verses above occurred. In short, God tried to kill Moses. Since Zipporah is able to stop the attack by circumcising Gershom, we may surmise that the failure of Moses to circumcise his

son previously may have been the reason for the attempt on Moses' life. And since circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and his people, the message may have been that the covenant was not to be taken lightly. One Bible commentator says that the narrative is a "witness to the deep, untamed holiness of God."

The same commentator adds: "There is indeed something visceral, untamed and hostile about this God. Those who are called by this God to service find on occasion that more dangerous than the task is the danger of Yahweh's own person. ... That threat pertains even to God's closest associate [Moses], and Israel must take care not to count unguardedly on God's intimate friendliness."

This is no namby-pamby God who sits quietly on the sidelines of life waiting for us to notice him. When it suits his purposes, God is an in-our-face figure who confronts us through our conscience, through other people, through scripture, through worship, through gut-wrenching situations or through other means to force us to deal with him. In those times, it is not that we cannot find God; it is that we cannot get him off our back.

Questions: When have you had to stop on your journey and deal with God's agenda instead of your own? In what ways have you experienced God as the one who needles you to change? As the one who provokes you to try harder? As the one who bulls his way through your defenses to demand your commitment? As the one who hounds you to surrender to him?

Numbers 22:22-23, 31

God's anger was kindled because [Balaam] was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey ... The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road. ... Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. (For context, read Numbers 22:1-38 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Numbers+22%3A1-38&version=NRSV>).

This narrative from Numbers is about a soothsayer with a bad temper, an angry angel who won't get out of the way and a donkey with good common sense.

They all come together around an incident during the time when the people of Israel are in the wilderness after fleeing slavery in Egypt. They have camped on the plains of Moab, which frightens the native Moabites. The Moabite king, to protect his people from possible threat, sends for a foreign wizard/soothsayer named Balaam to place a curse on the Israelites.

God tells Balaam he will not be able to curse the Israelites because God has already blessed them, but God gives the wizard permission to go to the Moabite king (v. 20). Balaam heads out, riding his donkey. On the way, the donkey spots an angel with a drawn sword blocking the road and heads into the field.

Balaam cannot see the angel, and beats the donkey until she returns to the road. A similar scenario occurs two more times.

Then, all scientific improbabilities aside, the animal speaks to Balaam asking, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" In response, Balaam complains that she had made a fool of him. In fact, he says, if he had a sword, he would kill her on the spot.

At that point, God enables Balaam to see the angel. Balaam falls on his face and pleads for mercy.

The angel then instructs Balaam that he is to go to the Moabites, but speak only what the angel tells him, which turns out to be a blessing on the Israelites.

Why God sent the angel against Balaam is unclear, because God had given Balaam permission to make the journey, but apparently God needed to hammer home the instruction that Balaam was to speak only the message God gave him -- the blessing on the people of Israel.

Questions: What might we learn when we experience God as an opponent or an aggressor? How should we balance that against God as one who loves us?

When has something so arresting happened (it needn't be a talking donkey) that you were forced to deal with what God wanted instead of what you were planning to do?

James 1:2-4

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. (No context needed.)

James offers us some perspective for those times when we experience God as an opponent. Here he indicates that trials and trouble can cause us to grow in the Spirit.

Questions: How is it possible to rejoice in difficult circumstances? When is perseverance a spiritual quality? When is it not? What does it mean for a Christian to be "mature and complete"?

For Further Discussion

1. Comment on this: During Vince Lombardi's reign with the Green Bay Packers, sports writers noted that one particular player was most often the object of Lombardi's anger. The pastor at one Green Bay church had a team member in his congregation and asked him if the sports writers were right. Was that particular player really criticized as much as the papers indicated? "Definitely," said the player-parishioner. "He's Coach Lombardi's favorite."

2. Respond to this: The fourth-century church father St. Augustine tells of experiencing the "opponent" nature of God when he tells of his delay in responding to God's call. Augustine says that God attacked him through his senses: "You called and shouted and burst my deafness. You flashed, shone, scattered my blindness. You breathed odors, and I drew in breath and panted for you. I tasted, and hungered and thirsted. You touched me and I burned for your peace."

But then Augustine described the outcome of staying in that struggle with God: "I shall nowhere have sorrow or labor, and my life shall live as wholly full of [God]."

3. Here's how one man described his call into the ministry. He had been feeling the quiet tug of God for quite some time, but the man really wasn't interested. Then, he says, "God started to shout at me." It seemed that he could hardly get through a day without something in his usual routine suddenly taking on new confrontational meaning -- and what had been God's gentle "Please-respond" became a provocative "Well, what are you going to do about this?" The man says that when he finally yielded to God, he was blessed with great peace and joy.

Describe a time when God "shouted" at you.

4. TWW team member John Coulson comments, "This topic makes me think about the randomness of life. When you think on the cosmic scale, the fact that the meteorite did or did not hit her is amazing. When you think of the path that the object traveled, a fraction of a second or a little more friction and it burns up in the atmosphere, makes a huge difference. Reminds me of a sad story in our area a number of years ago where a bridge construction crew was placing a beam across a road and something happened that the beam slipped and fell on a car, killing the driver instantly. If the car had been seconds earlier or later the beam may have entirely missed the car. Was God's hand involved? Probably not, but it does make you stop and think."

How do you view the seemingly random nature of many things in life? Are they really random or is God involved? Can they be both?

5. Comment on this: There's this strong desire to find meaning in everything. Sometimes a rock in space is just a rock in space.

Responding to the News

This would be a good time to learn more about the science behind the restless, seemingly wild, often-frightening but awesome cosmos so that you don't fall into the old "God of the gaps" trap by assuming that when you encounter a mystery like a meteorite smashing into a bed God must have had something to do with it.

Prayer

Enable us, O Lord, to learn to perceive your direction for our lives, even when it seems to come against what we have planned. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

How to Handle the Rising Rage Epidemic

The Wired Word for the Week of October 24, 2021

In the News

Have you noticed how angry people seem to be these days? Multiple studies have been tracking what some describe as an epidemic of rage, exacerbated by tensions during a global pandemic. Several segments of society have noted escalating verbal, psychological and physical abuse. The airline industry is struggling to handle a historic rise in angry passengers; restaurant employees have been assaulted by customers who object to safety measures meant to keep everyone safe; school board members, teachers and administrators are threatened by unhappy parents, whatever policies they support or oppose.

According to a recent National Nurses United union survey, 31% of hospital nurses have reported an increase/escalation in patient aggression, up from 22% in March 2021. An American Nurses Association 2019 survey showed that 1 in 4 nurses is physically assaulted on the job.

Anger might be triggered by physical factors such as pain, hormonal imbalances, lack of sleep, hunger or substance abuse; other triggers for anger include mental illness, legal or financial problems, racial unrest, social isolation, political hostility, family stresses, traumatic events, injustice, the sense that the social order is unraveling, abandonment and other factors.

According to the November 2018 NPR-IBM Watson Health poll, some 84% of people surveyed said Americans are angrier today compared with a generation ago; 42% of those polled admitted that they themselves were angrier in the past year than they had been further back in time.

James Averill, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, discovered in his studies that "Most people report becoming mildly to moderately angry anywhere from several times a day to several times a week." But surprisingly, in most cases, expressing their anger led to reduced tensions, as those involved became "more willing to listen, more inclined to speak honestly, more accommodating of each other's complaints." In addition, "anger ... forc[es] us to ... confront problems we might otherwise avoid [and] ... motivates us to undertake difficult tasks."

David H. Rosmarin, Harvard professor of psychology, says that anger is often a secondary emotion that is actually a reaction to a primary emotion such as fear, sadness, frustration or confusion. Because we don't like those feelings, we may skip over them and jump right to anger. So instead of saying we are afraid that we or someone we love might die of the virus, or that we might be losing our constitutional rights, or that our children might suffer if they have to do another year of remote learning, we might yell in anger at Joe Blow in the street for wearing (or not wearing) a mask.

Rosmarin writes that it is easier to blame others and to demand that they fix our problem, rather than to admit that we are struggling and need help.

"All human beings need to have connection with others, but we go into anger or attack mode as a way of defending ourselves. When we're aggressive, we don't have to show vulnerability to other people." It's too scary to admit weakness, because we think that gives other people power over us, Rosmarin states.

Peggy Smith, an expert in nonviolent communication, concurred: "It's not about anger -- it's about fear. We've been taught to be afraid of being vulnerable, but our actual strength is being able to own and express our own vulnerability."

"When we can accept and express [our weakness] to the people around us we increase the chances of getting their love and support," said Rosmarin, adding, " and we can thrive even in this challenging time."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Nurses Say Patients Are Getting More Abusive, and Simple Questions Can Set Them Off. *Yahoo News*
(<https://news.yahoo.com/flight-attendants-arent-only-workers-123500392.html>)

Why Am I So Angry for No Reason? *Medicinenet.com*
(https://www.medicinenet.com/why_am_so_i_angry_for_no_reason/article.htm)

The Real Roots of American Rage. *The Atlantic*
(<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/charles-duhigg-american-anger/576424/>)

Soothing Advice for Mad America. *The Harvard Gazette* (<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/a-closer-look-at-americas-pandemic-fueled-anger/>)

Is Our Society Getting Increasingly Angry? *Psychology Today*
(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201010/is-our-society-getting-increasingly-angry>)

Applying the News Story

We all feel anger at times. Such emotions are human and normal. How we handle those feelings determines whether they result in helpful or negative consequences. We can't begin to cover everything the Bible teaches about anger in one TWW lesson, but will briefly address the anger of God, Jesus' anger, human anger that leads to sin, and how we can be angry without sinning.

The Big Questions

1. How have you seen anger expressed recently? Were you angrier in the past year?
2. What do you think is at the root of anger? Why do people get angry?
3. Is the Christian faith more of a help or more of a hindrance in developing and maintaining constructive interpersonal relationships that are not characterized by an inordinate amount of anger? Explain.
4. What is righteous versus unrighteous anger?
5. What does the anger of God look like?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 34:6-7

*"The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation."* (For context, read Exodus 34:1-9
(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+34%3A1-9&version=NRSV>).

Psalm 7:6, 11

*Rise up, O LORD, in your anger;
lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies;
awake, O my God; you have appointed a judgment. ...
God is a righteous judge,
and a God who has indignation every day.* (For context, read Psalm 7:1-17
(<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+7&version=NRSV>).

It is tempting to think of God in simplistic terms: either as a God of love who is incapable of anger, or as a God of wrath who is incapable of love. But what we see in the Exodus text and in the whole of scripture is a much more complex picture of a God whose righteous anger against evil is the flip side of his love.

While we often think of judging in negative terms, as a synonym for condemnation, in Psalm 7, as in the rest of the Bible, judging is frequently associated with God's bringing justice to those who are innocent, victimized and oppressed. The CEB version renders verse 11 this way: "God is a righteous judge, a God who is angry at

evil every single day," with the footnote that the words "at evil" are not in the original Hebrew text, but are explanatory in nature. In the context of the courtroom of God's justice, we see that God directs his anger at destructive evil, punishing those who attack, bully and defraud the defenseless.

Human anger, on the other hand, is often misplaced, directed at easily targeted scapegoats rather than at the truly culpable. In addition, humans often get angry about much less worthy matters: We become irritated over unintended offenses, inconsequential slights and violations of what we believe to be our rights. In our zeal to punish whoever we hold responsible, we often seek revenge, desiring not only "to be made whole again," but to be enriched above our previous circumstances, at the expense of the offender.

The Bible tells us that God is not unjust in the way he expresses anger, but is laser-focused on bringing the actual perpetrator to justice, crafting punishment to fit offenses, and setting things right. That's why Paul advises us not to act on our anger by seeking revenge, but to "leave room for God's wrath" (Romans 12:19). God is much more capable of executing justice than we are.

Questions: When you first learned about God, was there a greater emphasis on the wrath of God, the love of God, or something else? How did those early teachings impact you and your spiritual development?

Why is it important for us to wrestle with both aspects of God's actions: his anger and his love? How do those traits fit together? What do you still wonder about with regard to these traits?

Mark 3:4-6

Then [Jesus] said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (For context, read Mark 3:1-6 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+3%3A1-6&version=NRSV>)).

On one Sabbath day, Jesus found a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. Jesus' enemies watched to see whether he would cure the man on the Sabbath, in which case, they could accuse Jesus of violating rules against working on the Sabbath.

Knowing his enemies would try to use it against him if he did what he thought was right, Jesus nevertheless immediately and publicly healed the man with the withered hand. He didn't hide what he was going to do to protect himself from the wrath of his opponents.

Questions: Why do you think the religious leaders refused to answer Jesus' question? What was at the root of the anger of the religious leaders, and to what did their anger lead?

What was behind Jesus' anger? How did he handle his anger? What did his actions cost him? What can we learn from his example about how to handle our own feelings of anger?

Genesis 4:6-7

The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master

it." (For context, read Genesis 4:1-16 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+4%3A1-16&version=NRSV>)).

It didn't take long before anger led to violence in the course of human history. God accepted Abel's offering, but had no regard for that of Abel's brother Cain. "So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell."

In this incident, we see how dangerous anger can be when it is not mastered and controlled. God urged Cain to examine the reason for his anger, to put it aside, and to master it. God's counsel to Cain reminds us that we are not helpless against our passions, but if we do not master them, they can master us. God assured Cain that he would be accepted if he did what was right, but Cain wouldn't listen. Instead, he turned his anger at God against his brother, and murdered him.

We may feel that we have no choice but to act on our fury, and that it is impossible to obey the biblical command, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Elsewhere, Paul advises believers to "live [and be guided] by the Spirit" and not to "gratify the desires of the flesh" that are "opposed to the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16-18, 24-25 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+5%3A16-18%2C+24-25&version=NRSV>)).

Before us we see two ways of living: the easy path of surrender to our rage, or the hard road of dying to the right to revenge. Jesus acknowledges that many take the easy road, which leads to destruction, and few follow the hard path to life (Matthew 7:13-14 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+7%3A13-14&version=NRSV>)). But the choice is ours to make. As we learn to open ourselves up for Christ to live his life in and through us, we can increasingly share in his victory over sin, including over the kind of anger that leads to sin (Galatians 2:19-20 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+2%3A19-20&version=NRSV>)).

In another case, God invited Jonah to a season of self-examination when the prophet became very angry that God was showing mercy to the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-11 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jonah+4%3A1-11&version=NRSV>)). Jonah complained that he hadn't wanted to preach to the Ninevites in the first place, since he knew that God was "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Always the drama queen, Jonah asked God to just put him out of his misery and let him die, rather than make him watch his enemies enjoy the forgiveness and mercy of God.

But God questioned Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

But Jonah refused to answer, storming out of the city in a huff. And God caused a bush to grow up over Jonah to give him shade in the heat of the day. But the next day God caused a worm to attack the bush, so that it withered. The sun beat down on Jonah's head, so he wanted to die.

Again God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?"

This time Jonah answered, to justify his right to be angry.

If you have the right to be angry about a bush you didn't create or plant, God said, don't I have the right to be concerned about the 120,000 souls and many animals in Nineveh, whom I did create?

Questions: Why do people hold on to grudges? What does clinging to anger do for people? Why did Cain cling to his rage? Why did Jonah hold on to his anger?

What harm does allowing anger to simmer do to the angry person? To those around him?

How do you imagine the story of Jonah ended? Did Jonah persist in his resentment against God for showing mercy to his enemies? Did God honor his request to let him die? Did Jonah have an "Aha!" moment and give up his anger and desire for God to punish the Ninevites? Or is there another way the story might have ended?

Ephesians 4:26-27

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. (For context, read Ephesians 4:25-32 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A25-32&version=NRSV>).

While misplaced and uncontrolled anger can cause much harm, the emotion of anger is actually a gift from God. When rightly used, anger toward injustice can be a reflection of God's heart for the poor among us. Righteous anger should be stirred in our hearts when we see harm done to the vulnerable. This kind of anger, managed wisely, can become a catalyst for change, so that God's will may be done more perfectly "on earth, as it is in heaven."

Paul's language here is very strong: He actually *commands* the Ephesians to *be angry*. That positive imperative is balanced by the triple negative imperative, as if to stress the importance of guardrails to protect us from the danger of abusing anger for selfish ends.

1. Do not sin
2. Do not let the sun go down on your anger
3. Do not make room for the devil

Questions: What is the difference between being angry without sin, and anger that leads to sin?

How can we "not let the sun set on our anger" if the cause of our anger remains?

How might anger "make room" for the devil (give the devil a toehold or beachhead)? How can we avoid that danger?

How can we make it more likely that our anger results in actions that cause people to rejoice and give thanks to God?

For Further Discussion

1. Eleanor Roosevelt is said to have noted "Anger is one letter short of danger." Think of an example that illustrates this.
2. What do you think theologian Lyman Abbott meant when he said this? "Do not teach your children never to be angry; teach them how to be angry."
3. "Anger is a boomerang," wrote author Karen Salmansohn. Explain.

4. According to writer James Pierce, "Everyone asks how to deal with anger when it arises. No one asks how to prevent anger from arising." How are these two statements different? What does our faith teach us about prevention of anger?

5. Think about this: Refuse to pay attention to aggressive acts. Don't amplify angry outbursts in social media by sharing them. Don't add fuel to a forest fire.

6. Think about how you might implement this in your own interactions with others:

Three "R's" of Handling Anger God's Way

Refrain from anger and restrain it

- Psalm 37:8 "Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath."
- Proverbs 29:11 "A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back."
- That doesn't mean bury your anger, but control whether, when and how you express it. Manage your anger, or your anger will manage you.

Reassess what happened that led to your feeling angry

- James 1:19-20 "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."
- God is slow to anger. As children of God, we should aspire to be like him in this quality. Ask the Spirit of God to produce the fruit of self-control in you, so that you don't fly off the handle at the drop of a hat. You don't need to take offense at every little thing, especially since more often than not, no offense was intended.

Release anger and the need to take revenge

- Colossians 3:8 "But now you must get rid of all such things -- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth."
- Ephesians 4:31 "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice."
- Feeling anger may be appropriate at times. But we need to vent our anger safely, without causing harm to others, and release our anger to God. Holding on to anger can lead to sin, and can harm yourself, others, and your Christian witness.

Responding to the News

1. Consider committing this quotation from the philosopher, Aristotle, to memory, to use as a guide when anger threatens to cloud your mind: "Anybody can become angry -- that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way -- that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."

2. When you experience anger, ask yourself the kind of questions God asked Cain and Jonah: Why are you angry? Is it right for you to be angry? What is the purpose of your anger? How can you master your anger, so that it is transformed into energy for good rather than evil?

Prayer suggested by Proverbs 14:17, 29; 15:18; 16:29; 19:11; 22:24; 29:11, 22; Romans 12:21

Teach us, O God, how to keep cool when provoked, exercising patience and self-control so that we can think wisely and creatively about how to handle stress calmly, after the heat of the moment has passed.

Help us, O God, to choose our associates wisely, avoiding those who are hot-tempered and easily angered, so we are not tempted to adopt their dangerous pattern of behavior.

Help us to choose your way of handling anger, rather than our own, so that we might conquer harmful impulses by doing good.

In the name of Christ, who showed us how to use anger for good rather than evil. Amen.

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