

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 6: ANGER
Ephesians 4:22-32, Selected Texts (NASB)
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Pastor Peter Scazzero of New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York City, came home from church one cold January evening to face an angry and resolute wife, Geri, who told him: "Pete, I'm leaving the church. I can't take any more of this stress--the constant crisis. I'm not doing it anymore. This church is no longer life for me. It is death."

Then he got angry, raising his voice to intimidate her: "That is out of the question. All right, so I've made a few mistakes. I'm working on it!"

Geri would not budge: "Good for you, but I can't wait any more. I quit. I love you, Pete. But the truth is, I would be happier separated than married. At least then you would have to take the kids on weekends. Then maybe you'd even listen [to me]!"

Pastor Pete later wrote about what he was thinking at the time: "I was enraged. A good Christian wife, married to a Christian (and a pastor I may add), does not do this. I understood at that moment why a husband could fly into a rage and kill the wife he loves" (Peter Scazzero with Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, pp. 20-21 *passim*).

The story of Pastor Pete and his wife Geri illustrates something both Oswald Chambers and A. W. Tozer warned about, that no Christian is in greater spiritual danger than the one whose ministry is succeeding beyond all expectations. You see, New Life Fellowship Church was a remarkable vision of a multicultural cell church ministering in different languages to the incredibly diverse population of New York City. After one failed attempt to plant a church, the ministry in Queens took off. Within a few short years it became hundreds of people, multiple services, and dozens of cell groups. Offers for speaking engagements flooded in to Pastor Pete along with requests to train others in his methods. Editors began to accept his book manuscripts for publishing.

And yet Pete had neglected the health not only of his own soul, but that of his wife, his children, and the other leaders of the church which outwardly was doing so well. He had followed a pattern of serious spiritual devotion, but he had allowed a partition in his inward man to prevent the Holy Spirit from transforming his emotional nature. He ran from one ministry responsibility to another, failing to invest in his wife and family, and failing to shield them from the intense demands and the many crises. It was the success of the ministry itself which provided the justification to keep doing it: *I feel like I'm burning out and sad all the time but the ministry is doing so well!*

It wasn't bad only for Pete's family and staff. This is illustrated by an experience in the early 1990's when one of his staff pastors took a group of hundreds of people away and started another church, surrounding the whole event with condemnations of Peter's ministry. Pete did his best to bring peace to the situation outwardly, but inwardly he was seething, as he later wrote: "...I was deeply wounded and angry. These feelings gave way to hate. My heart did not hold any forgiveness. I was full of rage and could not get rid of it....Just the thought of what had happened would trigger a burst of

anger, a knot in my stomach. Within seconds, curse words would follow, flying almost involuntarily from my mouth..." (Scazzero, p.28).

It would be easy to condemn Pastor Pete but we all know the sin of anger too well. We know about busyness and burnout. We know about stuffing our feelings and having them become a seething cauldron of bitterness and anger. And we all wish we didn't, but what can we do about it?

GOD'S ANGER AND OURS

We could have a tendency to think: *Well, God has anger--lots of it! Maybe my anger is not so bad after all.* We could think of many examples such as this one from Jeremiah, where the Lord was speaking judgment to the nation Israel: **"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, My anger and My wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and on beast and on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground; and it will burn and not be quenched'"** (Jeremiah 7:20).

But why does God have anger? The people of the nation Israel, who were granted every spiritual advantage, nevertheless departed from God in their hearts, sinned grossly, and had the audacity to walk into the temple and claim right status with God by virtue of their sacrifices. They had taught their children to make cakes for the "queen of heaven," who is the pagan goddess variously known as Isis, Astarte, and Ashtoreth. The Lord had promised blessing on condition of faith and obedience, but instead Israel put pagan religious articles and statuary in God's holy temple. Finally, some members of Israel actually participated in child sacrifice to pagan gods. These were very good reasons for God to be angry. If you and I have not done any of these specific things, know that we have done enough in our own sin to warrant the anger of God as well.

But the crucial difference between God's anger and our own is that his is perfectly righteous. We cannot say that of our anger, even when it has a righteous component. Human anger always feels justified to us, but the Apostle Paul warned of its dangers in uncompromising terms in his letter to the Ephesians: **"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice"** (Ephesians 4:31). The sweet feeling of self-righteousness is a deception, for as Paul quoted the Psalms to the Romans: **"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE..."** (Romans 3:10, caps in original). Let me confess to you that I have done almost everything Pete Scazzero has done--except the success. I have yelled at my wife, neglected people I love, cursed occasionally, and felt supremely justified in so doing. Fortunately, God did not kill me on the spot--or you, when you did it, too. Go on, admit it. It will be good for your soul.

WHY WE MUST NOT DENY OUR ANGER

Did you ever talk with someone who has stuffed their anger and will not admit it? They range from depressed to emotionally flat, frustrated to unhappy. While anger is bad, there is no beatitude which says: "Blessed are those who pretend that they are never angry, for others shall think well of them." There are some very important Biblical reasons not to deny our anger.

First, denying the sinful component of our anger is sin. The Apostle John wrote these words to his beloved children in the Lord: **"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to**

cleans us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10). So when we deny that we are selfishly angry we simply add the sin of lying to the sin of anger. How foolish to have the pathway to cleansing open before us and not use it!

Secondly, we must not deny our anger because it corrodes our souls. You cannot have a healthy soul when you are secretly seething with anger! Proverbs 17:22 says: "**A joyful heart is good medicine, /But a broken spirit dries up the bones.**" There is no joy in an angry heart, and if sadness dries our bones then anger roasts them. I remember one time my son asked me to cash in some change for him at the bank and get bills. He had filled a large milk jug with change, and somehow water had gotten into it. The change looked pretty good until we got down to the wet part, and from there on down the coins were so corroded that they were only recognizable by their size and metal. It seemed like the coins had been safely stored, but a chemical reaction was eating them away. The same thing happens when we try to deny our feelings of anger and just stuff them down into our souls. That is what happened to Pete and Geri Scazzero. Even while they were pursuing the Lord and his work with great zeal, their souls were being corroded by the anger they tried to hide inside themselves. This practice of denial can destroy a marriage, a family, or a church, and it turns us into bitter, joyless people.

Thirdly, we must not deny our anger because there are things at which we are supposed to be angry! Paul wrote the logic this way: "**Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ**" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The question then becomes: When was Christ angry? He was angry when the temple was changed from a house of prayer to the Father into an opportunity for extorting money from worshipers. He was angry when his disciples did not act and speak in faith. He was angry when the Pharisees tied up heavy bundles of spiritual duty and burdened the people in a way God never intended. He was angry when the Jewish religious leaders not only did not choose to enter heaven themselves, they prevented others from doing so. While we can never be utterly sinless the way Jesus is, we can nevertheless resonate with the passions of God's heart and hate sin along with him. Let's start with our own, shall we? And I do not think it is wrong for us to hate the way our society destroys unborn babies, actively promotes the breakdown of the family, keeps telling the Christians to stay out of public life, and dishonors God at every turn.

Fourthly, we must not deny our anger because, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, it is a danger in spiritual warfare. He wrote: "**...Do not give the devil an opportunity**" (Ephesians 4:27). Any time we sin and do not repent of it we give the Devil a tactical advantage which he can use against us. Any time we willfully corrode our own souls we weaken ourselves for spiritual battle. Any time we fail to resonate with the heart of our Father who hates sin and loves sinners we take ourselves off the front lines of battle against Satan and his fellow travelers.

HOW TO BE ANGRY

So there must be a godly way to handle anger. Paul wrote the key concept to the Ephesians, namely, that we must process it: "**BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger...**" (Ephesians 4:26). We have to put our feelings through God's sifter, to separate the flour from the stones, the topsoil from the rocks. The unholy part of our anger we admit, we confess, and then we repent of it. Over both parts, the righteous and the unrighteous, we exert self control by the power of the Holy Spirit. We've got to slow that train down, as James wrote: "**...Everyone must be**

quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:19b-20).

At least three things are assumed in these commands to self control. The first is that our minds must gain some self awareness. Why are we angry? We cannot fulfill the command not to let the sun go down on the reason for our anger unless we know the reason. When we ask the Holy Spirit to shine his holy light on our souls we will discover that there are both valid and sinful reasons. We may have been horribly abused as a child or adult and our heart harbors unforgiveness toward our abusers. Remember the motto which explains what happens when we do that: "Unforgiveness is the poison we drink hoping others will die." We have to forgive in order to have healthy souls. This does not mean that we excuse the bad acts of others, but God will deal with them.

A second assumption of the command to process our anger before the sun goes down is that our wills must be engaged to deal with whatever reasons we discover. One aspect of this which Paul mentions is that we must be willing to be, in a loving way, straight with each other, as he wrote to the Ephesians: "**Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another**" (Ephesians 4:25). Believe me, no one can read your mind that you are secretly angry about something! I remember one time when a church committee member told me he was glad the committee changed a policy after four years because he was getting ready to quit the church over it. I was on that committee, and the person not only voted for the policy which made him angry, he never presented an argument against it. Not even God can help us if we will not be straight with one another.

Thirdly, we must not imagine that even this fine list of good ideas can gain us victory over anger without the direct transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our souls! Paul wrote earlier in the same chapter: "**...Lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and...be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth**" (Ephesians 4:22b-24). How do we gain victory? Confess the sins of the corrupted old self, receive the cleansing of Christ, and put on the holy new self! Cry out to God for the anger to be extinguished and the spirit of love to rise in your soul. And no matter how many times you fail at self control, never stop seeking the Lord for the dynamic of new life in your soul. I do not say you should be lax about failures, but anger is a monster with great strength, and you may not slay him with one stroke of the sword of the Lord. But know this: no other sword will work.

Pastor Pete had led his family and church into a pattern of spiritual life which promoted a good pattern of devotion and service but which covered over the evidences of an unhealthy soul. He and Geri had to go to an emergency counseling center for pastors for several weeks. At one point, Geri woke him at 2 AM, stood up on the bed, and gave him "what for." But in the end it began a revolution in their lives, their family, and their church.

Are you eager for a revolution that will bring health to your soul? Are you tired of tending the simmering cauldron of anger that you hide deep inside? Anger will corrode your soul if you let it. Let us covenant to speak truth in love to one another, to process our anger in a godly way, and to pursue the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.