

## 11. How do I deal with my anger? (Part 1)

Psalm 52:1-For the director of music. A maskil of David. When Doeg the Edomite had gone to Saul and told him: "David has gone to the house of Ahimelech".

Why do you boast of evil, you mighty man? Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God? Your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor, you who practise deceit. You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth. You love every harmful word, O you deceitful tongue! Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin: He will snatch you up and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living. The righteous will see and fear; they will laugh at him, saying, "Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!" But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever. I will praise you for ever for what you have done; in your name I will hope, for your name is good. I will praise you in the presence of your saints.

Wretched Doeg the Edomite! He was a scoundrel. He betrayed David to King Saul; betrayed Ahimelech the priest and his family too; then, when the most ruthless Israelite henchmen were unwilling to execute the priest's family, Doeg did it. I hate Doeg, and I wasn't even there.

Anger is a right response to evil. But very often it causes us problems because we express it badly.

Some deal with it like hedgehogs. They curl up in a ball, go quiet and refuse to admit there's anything wrong. The hedgehog is like a slow cooker stewing over many hours or days.

Others deal with anger like a rhinoceros. Anger wells up, and they charge. They say they've dealt with the anger, but after a while, the rhino's back on the charge again, leaving a trail of broken relationships and sore knuckles.

The hedgehogs are partly right, of course. We have a responsibility to control our anger to limit its impact on others. The rhinos are partly right too, because anger needs to be expressed.

The 'deprecatory' Psalms are those which denounce God's enemies. The intensity of the anger they convey is terrifying. That makes many shy away from them, as if they encourage violence and contradict the Bible's teaching about forgiveness.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, these Psalms are model for us how to place our hatred and desire for revenge into the hands of a person able to defuse those emotions safely. Did you notice that David has no intention of avenging Doeg himself? He says, "God will bring you down to everlasting ruin".

I have been struck by these words from Miroslav Volf: "*Rage belongs before God...* by placing unattended rage before God we place both our unjust enemy and our vengeful self face to face with a God who loves and does justice" (Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 124).

Put another way, giving full vent to our anger in prayer can be the beginning of the process of forgiveness. At the same time, we can avoid the pitfalls of the hedgehog and the rhinoceros.

I read an article recently about a Christian cage fighter who channeled his aggression (relatively!) safely in the ring, allowing him to be placid in the rest of life.

Perhaps we need to start thinking of prayer, at least at certain times, as the fighting cage in which we pour out our boiling emotions to the God who can transform them into raging compassion<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I have taken the idea and the phrase "raging compassion" from the title of a book by John Swinton: *Raging with Compassion, Pastoral responses to the problem of evil*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.