

8. Is it okay to feel angry?

Ephesians 4:26, 31-32

"In your anger do not sin": do not let the sun go down while you are still angry... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Is it okay to feel angry? You may just as well ask, is it okay to sweat? We don't have much choice about it: if we get hot, we sweat. If we, or someone we love, or our community is wronged, we feel angry. Like sweat, the pressing issue with anger is how we deal with it.

As a new Christian, I struggled with the idea that the God of love can get angry, despite the fact that the Bible clearly teaches that he does. My pastor asked me a question that changed my thinking: "What would you feel if you saw an elderly lady being mugged?"

I saw the point immediately. It would be morally sick *not* to feel angry at such wrong, to stand by in a state of Zen-like calm. Sure enough, if we feel angry about injustice, we can be sure that God cares about it more.

In the light of what has happened in West Cumbria, many people will be experiencing consuming anger. The intensity of this emotional experience must be disturbing. It may be reassuring for those feeling such anger, or for those trying to help angry family and friends, to know that God feels anger. And if he gets angry, then anger in itself cannot be wrong.

In fact the Bible describes God's anger as fierce, hot and consuming. He understands, and does not condemn even the most overwhelming anger we can feel.

That's why St. Paul did not say, "Anger is sin". Rather, he said, "In your anger, do not sin". There are times when it's right to be angry. The problem is that anger easily leads to sin.

When we study God's anger in the Bible we notice two outstanding differences between his and our anger.

First, his anger is always **rightly motivated**. It is not motivated by illegitimate selfishness, but by a legitimate concern that his perfect love is honoured.

Second, God's anger is always **perfectly expressed**. He is slow to anger; he will declare his judgement openly and act without vindictiveness to avenge wrong.

I remember from science at school how light meets a prism and refracts into its constituent colours. Anger may begin as a godly reaction to evil. But then it meets our selfish hearts, and is refracted into many ugly colours – like the list mentioned in today's verses: bitterness, rage, brawling, slander and malice.

The only way to neutralise the colours of this lurid rainbow is to focus on the compassion and forgiveness of God. When we grasp how he has put away his anger against us in the death of his own Son, our hearts are melted and anger turns to compassion.