

## Noxious 'thoughts' 5 – Anger

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In his list of *logismoi* or debilitating patterns of thinking, it is anger that Evagrius writes most strenuously about. Evagrius Ponticus, fourth century desert monk and diagnostician of the soul, uses the Greek word *orge* to name this thought; it has the sense of festering resentment, rage or wrath. 'The most fierce passion is anger', he wrote:

It is defined as a boiling and stirring up of wrath against one who has given injury – or is thought to have done so. It constantly irritates the soul and above all at the time of prayer it seizes the mind and flashes the picture of the offensive person before one's eyes. Then comes a time when it persists longer, is transformed into indignation, [and] stirs up alarming experiences by night. This is succeeded by a general debility of the body, malnutrition with its attendant pallor, and the illusion of being attacked by poisonous wild beasts.

It's a vivid description, and I wonder it lands for you? Does it resonate? Do you know something of this experience? Does it scare you? Can't sleep, horrible dreams, tense stomach, I recognise some of this, and I imagine you do too. So, let's talk about it.

According to Evagrius anger is a fierce passion – severe, vicious, intense. He likens it to water boiling in a pot on the stove, and we can see it– the steam, the agitation; the growling and churning!! It's a far cry from 'the condition of the soul as clear and still', Angela Tilby writes. And that's the problem, *orge* clouds judgement and loosens our control – when we're seething with anger we lose objectivity, empathy and discretion. '*Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath*', the Psalmist counsels, '*for it tends only to evil*'. And, ain't that the truth!! Who of us hasn't said or done things we regret in a fit frustrated rage?? Or been hurt when someone's else temper boiled over? This injury can be physical – broken bones and bodies (and we're hearing distressing statistics about the prevalence of domestic violence in our society); it can be psychological; and spiritual. Indeed, Evagrius saw *orge* as a fundamental barrier to prayer. As soon as the monk attempts to pray, the image of the offender flashes into his mind – a massive distraction. The thought is

easy to indulge and we go over it again and again. It takes hold, and prayer takes flight. Binding memory of injury to the soul is like ‘hiding fire in chaff’, Evagrius writes – a recipe for disaster.

Okay, we get the point, it’s a problem; harbouring a grievance is dangerous. But are we talking about all anger here? What about Jesus; he got angry? Are there different types of anger? Righteous anger? What about when vile things are perpetrated? Isn’t anger the appropriate response; to injury or despicable crime?

In the scriptures, the Old Testament in particular, there are numerous references to anger. God’s love for the world is a passionate love, and God is angry (it is said) when this love is spurned; angry at injustice; angry when the poor are exploited or ignored. On the other hand, there are references to God being ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love’ (e.g., 103.8). This suggests that divine anger (whatever it is) is not reactive or vindictive.

With humans it’s more problematic. In the OT, anger is often linked to hatred and violence. Smouldering resentment spurs Cain to murder his brother Abel, and Saul to try and kill David. ‘*Just as the churning of milk produces butter, and pressing the nose brings forth blood, so the churning of anger produces strife*’, it says in Proverbs (30.33), and we see this writ large time and again. Even so, anger is never condemned outright. Rather, it is to be moderated.

‘*When you are angry, do not sin*’, it says in Psalm 4, ‘*ponder it on your beds and be silent*’. Paul’s famous advice in Ephesians picks up on the same theme, though with a twist: ‘*Be angry but do not sin, don’t let the sun go down on your anger*’ (v 46). In the book of Jonah, at one point, God’s asks the sullen prophet (4.4): ‘*Is your anger a good thing?*’. A friend of mine, a Hebrew scholar, proposes that it’s better translated: ‘*Is your anger doing good?*’ which suggests that anger can be constructive.

So, we’re starting to get a broader and more nuanced picture of anger. It doesn’t seem to be something we can (or should) be rid of entirely. In this sense it’s natural; to be expected in certain situations. It’s not wrong or evil per se. What is

wrong, and dangerous is the neurotic indulgence of anger; harbouring resentment, nursing grievance, bearing ill-will – ‘binding memory of injury to the soul’. This is what Evagrius is on about, the thought from which we must repent, if we are to experience the freedom Jesus called ‘the kingdom of God’.

Now, of course, this is easier said than done. When we’re feeling hurt or offended, mostly we struggle to let go. In part, because the wound is raw. It may be all we can do to stop ourselves lashing out. That’s good, but just holding it in, suppressing or repressing anger doesn’t resolve it. Pain that’s repressed, tends to gnaw away and disturb us. Repression leads to *depression*, and *infection*. ‘Whatever fills spills’ Scott Hagan writes (*How to Salvage a Broken Relationship*).

Holding quiet feelings of bitterness in your heart is not a game you can play for long. It’s not just the words you speak, it’s the emotions you carry. At some point, what’s inside travels outside.

So, beyond not clobbering someone or lashing out with words, what can we do to forsake wrath, to break free from obsessive, angry patterns of thinking? An important first step is to acknowledge our anger, and the hurt that lies behind. And second, and this is likely to take a few steps, intentionally, to deal with it.

When I say, acknowledge it, I mean, name it. If we’re angry, there’s no point pretending we’re not. Simply recognising it brings some relief.

How we do this is important though. To say just *I am* angry, or *I am* furious is to give it too much power. As if, anger is all there is to me; I’m consumed (possessed?) by it. Far better to acknowledge that I feel angry but that it’s not the whole of me. I gain capacity to *respond* to rather than merely *react from* my anger. I can choose now how to be with my anger. I empower myself to act beneficially, constructively.

This action can take various forms. I may choose to speak directly with the person who’s offended me. If that’s not possible, I could speak with someone to help me process it – a counsellor, spiritual director, minister, friend. And I stress, *process*, not just vent and obsess about my grievance. Processing anger includes

understanding the emotions that lie beneath it, and the experiences that trigger it – feelings of shame, frustration, disappointment, weariness, trauma, helplessness, betrayal, exclusion, threat... And it includes discerning how the energy of anger may be put to good use. It's often expressed destructively, but need not be. Jonah, '*is your anger doing good*'; making a positive difference?

We see the constructive expression of anger in what Brittany Higgins and thousands of other women are doing in their protest at the violence done by men; in the *Black Lives Matter* movement calling for transformation of racist systems and law enforcement. It's how some in our own community are channelling their concern and frustration with drug laws that further condemn and defeat people already struggling with drug dependency. Anger is an energy that can be profoundly creative.

And, in this regard, prayer is helpful. In fact, for the most creative and constructive uses of anger, it's essential. By prayer, I don't just mean talking to God about it – or asking God to take it away. I mean bringing the whole of ourselves – all those ragged, despairing, bitter thoughts and feelings before God, being with them compassionately and long enough that they start to soften and yield; a bit like soaking a piece of mud-encrusted cloth. Gradually, it softens the hard edge of our anger. We become more pliable, more able to engage the injustice, the perpetrators, the issues with grace and real authority. I think of someone like Martin Luther King Jr who worked to transform systemic racism not on the basis of violent retaliation, but with miraculous patience, love and courage. The strength of his commitment to justice never wavered, but his protest opened rather than closed down space for others – and something of this same spirit continues in BLM.

Evagrius wrote of anger disrupting prayer, which it can if it possesses us. So why not, bring it into prayer; let God behold and soften our anger? 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you', Jesus taught. That's not easy. Mostly, we want punishment for those who hurt us. Paradoxically, praying our

anger, can be liberating. Softening the heart, easing pain, and mysteriously, opening space between us; the possibility of peace.

So, anger (*orge*) - binding the memory of injury to the soul. It's a thought, a way of thinking that most of us struggle with, especially when we're hurt. The possibility that Evagrius lays before us is liberation from angry thoughts – from being consumed by anger, our energies sapped or channelled in destructive behaviours, to being awakened and empowered by it. 'Is your anger doing good?' God asked Jonah. It's a question and a possibility for each of us, for 'the kingdom of God is at hand'. Let us repent and believe the good news. Amen!

#### References

Tilby A (2009) *The Seven Deadly Sins: Their Origin in the Spiritual Teaching of Evagrius the Hermit*, SPCK, London.