

Identity Crisis: Slow to Anger (Palm Sunday)

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Introduction

God's hot anger and wrath, especially in the Old Testament, are major reasons why many people struggle to read the Bible. But it is only when these types of statements are taken out of the immediate context and read independently of the larger biblical story that they can be used to create a portrait of God that is imbalanced and distorted. Within the correct context, we find that God is incredibly patient despite the disobedience of His people.

Missing the Mark

Until we recognize that we were created in the image of God, we will suffer from an identity crisis. As we learn about the characteristics of God, we can begin to understand who we were created to be. The Hebrew word for sin (*khata*) literally means to miss the mark. This is an analogy to the philosophical goal of ancient Israel. The target is for each individual to obtain God's character while retaining their individuality. Missing the mark by not reflecting God's character is a *Khata*.

Long Nose

God establishes who he is to Moses on Mount Siani. He spoke: "Yahweh, Yahweh, **compassionate and gracious, slow to anger**, overflowing with **loyal love and faithfulness**" (Exodus 34:6-7). The idea of being slow to anger is pretty well established by the phrase itself. However, it is more than just keeping yourself from losing your temper. It may be more accurate to say that the character of God is slow to act upon anger.

The Hebrew phrase used in this passage is ‘*Erek Apayim.*’ It literally translates to ‘Long of Nose.’ When someone becomes angry, their face often turns red, beginning with their nose. In other scriptures, it notes that someone's face ‘burned hot’ with anger. The idea here is that someone that is ‘long of nose’ had more patience or did not act on their anger quickly.

God’s Long Nose

In Exodus 32, Moses was on Mount Siani receiving the Ten Commandments from God, but the people waiting at the base of the mountain got impatient and scared and decided to redefine God’s image for themselves. They fashioned the image of a golden calf and worship it in place of God. God saw their rebellion and told Moses, “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation” (Exodus 32:9-10). But Moses pleaded for their lives and reminded God of His promise and plan for them. “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (Exodus 32:14).

However, as soon as Moses reached the bottom of the mountain and saw what was happening for himself, he smashed the tablets God had given to him and gave the order that resulted in the death of around three thousand people. God had graciously relented, yet Moses was unable to manage his own temper. In this story, we see how willing God is to withhold anger, compared to Moses losing it as soon as he actually sees what’s going on. The Old Testament is full of God withholding anger, despite the grumbling and rebellion of the people He is providing for.

Intentional Anger

God's anger and discipline has a purpose. His anger burns when we settle for something less than his character. His anger is an act of love, compassion, grace, and faithfulness. In the Old Testament, God is the author of order and His way is the preservation of good. The enactment of His anger is simply Him giving those who stood against that order exactly what they wanted; chaos, disorder, and evil.

In all the uncomfortable Old Testament stories of God's anger, we remember the unpleasant end to the story, but we often forget the incredible amounts of time where His patience was enacted. We remember when He sent a flood to destroy the world, but we forget that God witnessed endless rebellion and unimaginable pain caused by humanity for well over 1,500 years before He allowed the flood to destroy His creation. And even then, He showed grace by saving the last redeemable family (Genesis 6-9).

The Patience of Jesus

We can read all throughout the four books that recount the Gospel story of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) how Jesus often showed incredible patience and temperament in the face of those that were challenging, and often insulting Him. His interactions with people displayed love, compassion, and grace when He could have easily let His anger burn hot against them. The Pharisees criticized Him, the Romans insulted Him, and even His disciples often misunderstood Him. Yet, He was slow to anger.

In one account, however, we see Jesus finally act on His anger. "When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a

whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2:13-17).

But was this really a display of a short temper? Jesus had been coming to the temple for over 30 years and had seen it in this condition of it all for that entire time. When His time had come to do God’s work of reconciling humanity and calling out where the Jewish people were missing the mark, Jesus finally acted in a noticeable and memorable way. He used a cord to chase out the animals and caused no physical harm to any person. He put an end to the idolatry happening in His Father’s house. His anger burned hot and He acted on it in an intentional way.

How long is Your Nose?

In Ephesians 4, Paul wrote: “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger and sin are not the same things. It is not a sin to feel anger. We miss the mark of reflecting God’s image and character when we act unwisely and impulsively on the feeling.

James encourages us to work on reflecting God’s character of patience. “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19-20). We frequently experience anger simply reacting to how something adversely affects us. God only acts on anger intentionally and patiently. We learn to reflect God’s image and character as we practice patience and grow our nose.

Further Study:

- Bible Project Video (Slow to Anger):

https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/slow-to-anger/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_video

Discussion Questions:

- To say that God is “long of nose” is to say that he is patient—it takes him a long time before he becomes angry. He gives people time to respond to his gracious warnings. In your culture, what expressions are used to describe a patient person?
- Does Jesus’ self-giving love help us see God’s anger toward evil and his patient love for people at the same time? If so, how?
- What triggers your temper? How can you grow in patience in that area to help prevent anger?