

How to Pray When You're Tempted by Anger

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February 25, 2021 by: Christopher Ash



This article is part of the How to Pray series.

Five Things to Pray

I do not know if you, who are reading this, are struggling with anger. If you are, I do not know what is making you angry. It may be something very deeply distressing. I cannot, therefore, write to you as a pastor could speak, having listened to your heart and prayed with you and perhaps wept with you as you weep. I want simply to offer five pointers from the Bible, five things you might focus on in your prayers as you seek to do the heart work necessary in your own circumstances. You may wish to talk this over with a brother or sister in Christ or with a pastor.

1. Pray for a deeper conviction of your own sin.

I want—with fear and trembling—to begin with something deeply counter-intuitive. I want to encourage you to ask God to show you as never before the depth and misery of your own sin. *Wow!* you say. *That is outrageous! I come to you with some terrible grievance, some story of how another has wronged me, and all you can do is try to tell me how bad I am. That is pastoral insensitivity indeed!*

And yet that is, as I understand it, what the Lord Jesus does in Matthew 18:21–35. A brother or sister in Christ has offended me. I am struggling to forgive them. And Jesus tells me a story in which, however big the debt the wrongdoer owes to me (and it is not trivial), the debt on which I need to meditate is the astronomical debt that I owe to God.

Astronomical! *Lord, show me more of my own sin.* And that—paradoxically—will begin to put my heart in the place where I can address the bitter anger that is eating me up. *Help me grasp how much you have forgiven me in Jesus. Please.*

2. Pray for the Holy Spirit to make you angry about the right things.

My problem—and it may be yours—is that I am naturally angry when my own treasures are attacked, my own reputation damaged, my own comfort threatened, my own control compromised, my own projects opposed. What I want is all directed the wrong way, to spend on my own desires and passions (James 4:3).

The Bible tells me I ought to be furiously angry—with the anger of Jesus and the anger of the Spirit of God—when the honor of God the Father is attacked (John 2:17), when the wicked turn away from God’s good law (Ps. 119:53), when Jesus is dishonored and the Bible despised. I am not to be angry because this might damage my own reputation as a pastor, but because I care for the honor of God. Because I long deeply for his righteousness and his kingdom.

It is easy enough to say this but an extraordinarily deep and difficult task to achieve it, for it means a change deep in my heart. And such a change cannot even begin except the Spirit of Jesus should work radically in me. Only God can do this. I need, therefore, to make it a definite focus of my prayers. *Lord, change me so that I care less about myself and more deeply about your honor and glory in your world.*

3. Pray for the wisdom from above.

James promises that “if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). That is a wonderful promise. I used to think it meant I could ask God to know which way to go in life’s big and little decisions. But when James talks about wisdom again in chapter 3, it is clear that wisdom is not so much knowing what decision to take as growing in godly character (James 3:13–18). In particular, if I am struggling with ungodly anger, then only the wisdom that comes from above will shape me to be “pure . . . peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruit.” So I can claim the promise of James 1:5 in my struggle with anger because God has promised to give me a slow-growing, long-lasting, deep-rooted wisdom from above that will change the person I am. That is a very wonderful promise indeed, and one worthy of some intentional praying!

4. Pray for the ability to leave room for the anger of God.

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves,” writes Paul, “but give place to the wrath of God” (Rom. 12:19). People often say they don’t like the idea of an angry God. Behind this is sometimes the thought that an angry God leads to angry Christians who with then act with violence like the religious fanatics of some other religions. But when we understand the Bible’s teaching about the wrath of God, it has precisely—precisely!—the opposite effect on us. If God is not angry at wrong, then it is all down to me and my fellow religious fanatics: we must put things right; and if necessary, by violent actions. But, precisely because God is angry with injustice and evil, you and I can leave space for his anger by not taking the law into our own hands. This is what the psalmists repeatedly do as they pray for God to act in judgment on the wicked.

If I, or one dear to me, has been wronged, the bitter anger that can eat up my heart is fueled by the unspoken thought that only I—or we—can put this right. The more terrible the wrong the deeper the resentment and bitterness digs into our souls. Some wrongs are just so destructive and dark that it feels that only a lifetime of bitter anger can hope to address them. Such would be true, for example, of the wickedness of physical or sexual abuse of a child. In many parts of the world and at many times in church history, the sufferings of the martyrs have been such that only hope in the last judgment of God can take away this gangrenous bitter anger. If this is you in any measure, please hear again the word of Romans 12. You do not need to avenge yourself because you may be completely confident that “vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Romans 12:19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35).

5. Pray for Jesus to return soon.

For my final pointer, I want to come back to the letter of James. As we read through the letter it becomes clear that many of the Christians to whom James writes are suffering bitter injustice. They have plenty of reason to be angry—very angry, furiously angry. In James 5:1–6 we meet some of the oppressors and hear a vigorous—terrifying!—word of imminent judgment on them (a word which ought to encourage us to search our hearts lest we too be guilty). And then, in James 5:7–11, he stirs his hearers to “be patient . . . until the coming of the Lord.” For Jesus will return very soon. He is “standing at the door.” Pray that he will come soon, for this is what he has promised: “Surely I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20).

Christopher Ash is the coauthor with Steve Midgley of The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience.