

Character of God:

'Erek 'Appayim / Slow to Anger

SCRIPT REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

0:00-0:35

If you tried to describe what God is like, it could be difficult or daunting. But when the people who wrote the Bible pondered the mystery of God, they consistently described God's character in this way: compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal love and faithfulness.¹

We're going to look at this third phrase, that God is "slow to anger." Now, that might surprise some people. Isn't the God of the Bible mostly angry, striking people down for their sins? Well, it turns out that God's anger in the Bible is way more nuanced than that and way more interesting.

"LONG OF NOSE"

0:36-1:26

In Hebrew, the phrase "slow to anger" is pronounced *'erek 'appayim*, or literally, "long of nose." But what does God's patience have to do with a long nose?

Well, first, we need to look at the common biblical Hebrew way to say that someone is angry: "their nose burned hot." Like in the story of Joseph, when Potiphar thinks that Joseph tried to sleep with his wife, "his nose burned hot."² It's usually translated "his anger burned." It's describing how your body, especially your face, gets hot when you're filled with anger. And so in Hebrew, the main words for anger are either "nose" or "heat" or "hot nose."

1. Exodus 34:6

2. Genesis 39:19

This is why a patient person is called “long of nose.” It takes a long time for their nose to get hot. Like in the biblical proverb, “A person’s wisdom is their long nose,”³ that is, their slow anger!

GOD’S ANGER AT HUMAN EVIL

1:27-2:44

Now, in the Bible, God gets angry numerous times, but God doesn’t have a nose or get hot! These are metaphors, using our experience of hot anger to describe how God feels when he witnesses human evil. Just like you would get angry if you saw a child being bullied on the playground, so God gets angry when humans oppress each other and ruin his world. In the Bible, God’s anger is an expression of his justice and his love for the world. But he’s slow to anger, which means he gives people lots of time to change.

Like in the story of the Exodus, when Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites and has their baby boys thrown into the waters, God sends Moses to confront Pharaoh.⁴ And Pharaoh’s given ten chances to let Israel go free.⁵ But after the tenth refusal, Pharaoh rides out with his chariots to destroy the Israelites,⁶ and so God destroys him in the waters.⁷ Pharaoh’s own evil is turned back upon him, and we read that this is an act of God’s “hot anger.”

Now, that’s really intense. But think about it. God wouldn’t be good if he didn’t get angry at Pharaoh’s evil and eventually do something about it. And notice that God’s anger is expressed by handing Pharaoh over to the consequences of his own decisions.

3. Proverbs 19:11

4. Exodus 3:7-10

5. Exodus 7:14-11:9

6. Exodus 14:5-7

7. Exodus 14:26-28

And this is actually how God's anger is shown throughout the Scriptures, like in the story of the Israelites. Over and over again, for hundreds of years, they betray the God who rescued them from slavery. And though he gives them many chances to turn around, they keep giving their allegiance to the gods of other nations.

And each time we read that "the hot anger of God burned against the Israelites." But notice what always follows: "God gave them over into the hands of their enemies."⁸ Israel wanted to serve the gods of other nations, and so God, in his just anger, gives them what they want, as those nations circle back and defeat Israel.

This is similar to what the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans.⁹ He says God's anger is being revealed against human evil, and then three times he says what that looks like. God hands people over to their destructive desires and decisions, even if it leads to death.

But Paul also says God is patient, giving people time to come to their senses and change.¹⁰ Because remember, God's anger is a response to human evil, and it's based on a deeper character trait: his compassion and his loyal love. God is not content to let people sit in their own self-destruction. In the Bible, God's on a mission to rescue.

8. Judges 2:14

10. Romans 2:1-4

9. Romans 1:18-32

This is why Jesus said that he was going to Jerusalem to die as a demonstration of God's love for his enemies.¹¹ He would stand in the place of his people, who were choosing self-destruction, and take the consequences of their decisions upon himself. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we see God's anger at evil and his love for people working together to provide forgiveness and life for a humanity lost in self-ruin.

So God's anger in the Bible is really important, but it's not the end of the story. When God is angry and brings justice, it's because he's good. And he's extremely patient, working out his plan to restore people to his love. And that's what it means to say that God is "slow to anger."

11. John 3:16