

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF ANGER

1 Samuel 18-19

Dr. George O. Wood

As we go through 1 Samuel 18 and 19 today, I'll be continually making reference to what is contained in these two chapters. My message is titled "The Destructive Power of Anger." A few months ago when we were in 1 Samuel 11, I preached "The Constructive Power of Anger." This is the twin to that earlier message. Anger can be alright. The passage in Ephesians says, "Be angry, just don't sin. And don't go to bed mad." We saw in 1 Samuel 11 the positive results of a person who is angry.

Anger, when it's well placed, can do two things. It can rouse us from apathy. In 1 Samuel 11, all of Israel is willing to lay down and let a whole group of their kinsmen become prisoners of war and have their right eyes poked out. It is an angry Saul who rises in indignation. Anger helps fine-tune us to the issues of social justice. People that go to work to correct wrongs in this world, whether individual wrongs or social wrongs, are people who are using anger well. The other thing anger did for Saul was it filled him with a new power. It is at the beginning of his reign as king, and he had not done diddly yet—until he gets mad. When he gets mad, we find him to be a powerful person and a champion—a real leader. Anger can fill us with a new power.

But anger can also be destructive. That is the side we will look at today from 1 Samuel 18 and 19.

First, take an inventory of anger in your own life if it's present. Then we're going to do a second thing. We're going to look at the marks of a destructively angry person. There are nine such marks in Saul's experience in these two chapters. Then we're going to look at the consequences

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of destructive anger in our lives. There are four of those. Then I want to conclude with some counsel for the angry—Saul and anyone like him who is destructively angry.

First, a quiz to help you determine whether you need this sermon or if you can check out. Here are eight questions. Do you have a quick temper? If you have a quick temper, it may suggest a lot of hostility in your life—sort of like your temper is a bowl of water, and when it's bumped it sloshes out. Second, are you apt to making thoughtless, unfeeling remarks? Like "You don't do anything right. You're nothing but trouble. You'll be the death of me yet. You're no good."

Often the person who makes thoughtless and unfeeling remarks regard it in a different kind of way. They see it as simply being direct and honest. The only way you can know whether you're direct and honest or whether you're thoughtless and unfeeling is to ask the person you're making those remarks to. They'll tell you. Third, when you offer a suggestion, are you apt to be more critical than helpful? Are your suggestions more on the downside than the upside? Do you simply want to point out where the person has failed rather than help them do right? Sometimes our suggestions, if they're coming from a critical spirit, actually perpetuate the negative behavior we want them to change. We drive the person's resistance to change even deeper. Fourth, are you inclined to tell people off? Are you always on edge? If somebody cuts you off on the freeway, are you ready to go at them? We give people a piece of our mind. Not the peace, but a piece of our mind. Fifth, are you slow to forgive a mistake or overlook a discouragement? Six, do you have a superior and overbearing attitude toward others? Seven, are you quick to complain when you're inconvenienced or imposed upon? Eight, do you resent it because you're not as well-off as someone else? Well-off can be material, it can be popularity, it can be looks, it can be money, it can be health—whatever. But, you resent it.

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I don't even think Saul would have answered "yes" to all of these questions. Dealing with a person with destructive anger is hard because they do not see themselves. So, just because you answered "no" to all the questions doesn't mean you're ok. You may be kidding yourself. But if you answered "yes" to five or more, then obviously there's a high degree of hostility in your life. You have a tendency to be critical, thoughtless, overly inconsiderate, argumentative, and unreasonable. Have a hostile reaction to people in general, and you'll have very few close friends—if any. If you answered "no" to all those questions, it may indicate something else. You may be patient, humane, tolerant, forgiving, and accepting. Or maybe you have let yourself become a doormat for too many people.

There are really only four things you can do with anger. You can repress it—try to bury it and don't admit you're angry. Deny it and ignore it—that's like putting a wastebasket of newspapers in the closet and lighting a match to it. Sooner or later, it's going to break out. You can try to suppress it, and sometimes that's called for. We need to cool down before we say what we're thinking—that's wisely suppressing anger. But we can't do that forever. Or we can express our anger, and that can be positive. "I'm really angry with you." That can be a very good thing to say to someone. But it also can be expressed very negatively, as Saul illustrates. Or we can confess anger. That ranges from simply admitting we're angry to seeking forgiveness when we've used anger wrongfully. Probably each of us has a degree of anger in our life. Some of us have more than others.

I. Let's look at the destructive marks of anger present in Saul's experience in chapters 18 and 19.

There are nine marks.

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A. A distorted sense of reality. In 1 Samuel 18:7–8, the women of Israel are singing a new ballad, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (NIV). That irritates Saul. It may irritate him, but it’s true. In resenting the truth, Saul is beginning to distort reality. He is wishing something not to be true that is true. It’s like the uselessness of a person saying, “I am so mad that two plus two equals four!” There is something wrong with a person who gets angry with a fact.

Has anyone in your family ever said to you, “You have bad breath today. Do you have some gum or a mint?” or “Why don’t you brush your teeth?” Do you get angry about that? Why should you? They know the aroma around you better than you do. Don’t get mad. Don’t have a distorted sense of reality. Accept the reality that is there without raging about it.

For Saul, the fact is, he has sat there for forty days in a row while Goliath has come out to challenge somebody to fight him. And he has done nothing. David is the one who got up and fought him. Besides, now Saul has been moved upstairs. He used to be a warrior, but now he’s king. And everybody knows that kings have to sit behind a desk because if somebody kills them, the whole nation collapses. We’ve got to have the administrator safe. The king doesn’t go out on the front lines. Saul is no longer the war hero. David’s the war hero. David is killing his tens of thousands, but Saul’s only killing his few.

Saul is a little bit like a bull running at the red flag. It’s not the red flag that’s going to cause the bull the problems. It’s the matador. Why not recognize the reality and run after the matador instead of the flag? But anger gets us chasing the wrong things. Anger distorts our sense of reality.

B. The second mark of destructive anger is unhealthy suspicion. In verse 8, Saul says, “What more can he get but the kingdom?” (NIV). We know that David had no designs on Saul’s throne

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at all. Maybe Saul could be forgiven for not knowing that at this particular moment. Let's admit that suspicion can sometimes be a good thing. Suspicion is not an "all bad" trait. It's a necessary preservative, like fear. Fear, in proper proportion, is right. I think you need little bit of fear when you drive southern California freeways. If you don't, there's something wrong. And you'll get careless. Fear's ok in proportion. Suspicion is ok in proportion. But it becomes unwholesome when there's no objective need or reason for it. That was the case with David. Saul was judging David's motives, and David didn't have those terrible motives. Saul is the kind of person who would say, "Don't confuse me with the facts. My mind is made up. He's after my throne and that's the way it's going to be." We may get the view that somebody's out to get us, or somebody's out to wrong us. That view may be crock. It may be totally off-the-wall and not right at all. But we die with that false perception. And everybody around us is dying because of our anger.

C. The third component of Saul's destructive anger is jealousy. Verse 9 says he "kept a jealous eye on David" (NIV). Jealousy can have a healthy proportion too. It can be a good attribute. But when it's extended as in Saul's case, it becomes very negative and destructive. The Grinch is a character in a children's book by Dr. Seuss. The Grinch cannot bear the sight of anyone enjoying themselves. He gets so made that he bites himself. That's being jealous. It's the spirit of "I will not be happy if someone else is happy. I will not be happy if someone else has something I don't have." It's been said that the person who keeps busy helping the person below him will not have time to envy the person above him. Saul paid no attention to helping the person below him—David—because of jealousy.

Preachers can even have it—men and women of the cloth. Two of the great preachers of the early twentieth century who blessed us with their preaching and with their books are F.B. Meyer

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and G. Campbell Morgan. Morgan was a much better orator than Meyer. At one point, they were pastoring in England within blocks of one another. Meyer confessed to a few of his personal friends, “It was easy to pray for the success of Morgan when he was in America. But when he came back to England and took a church near mine, it was different.” Jealousy. We have to deal with it.

D. The fourth mark of destructive anger is dark moods. In 1 Samuel 18:10, “An evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul” (NIV). Several months ago we looked at what that term meant. We noted how the Hebrews simply went from the present effect to the ultimate cause. When we deal with cause and effect relationships biblically, we deal with the intervening causes between A and B. So we would say today, if we were being theologically accurate, “God, in His sovereignty, allowed freedom of choice. He allowed Satan—a good angel—to become a deceitful angel. He confined him to earth. God also gave people freedom of will. God bound those angels who fell in rebellion against Him with Satan. People who walk away from God open their lives to those demonic influences. They may become possessed by them.” That’s how we would state it. But the Hebrew, looking at the chain of cause and effect, wipes out all the intervening things. It says, “The spirit was sent from God.” Which, in the ultimate sense, it was. What the Scripture is really saying is that we pay an awful price for our anger.

If we continue to walk in destructive anger, we may become commingled with spiritual forces we didn’t realize we were buying into. Why is it that so much of this country is on street drugs, prescription drugs for depression, alcohol, and other addictive substances? Why is crack such a problem in our society? I believe there’s more than the human element involved. There are spiritual powers behind these—demonic forces that enslave people and entrap them. Saul, through his anger and discipline in life, is now walking into dark moods.

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A book called “None of These Diseases” is an attempt to take the health codes of the Old Testament and relate them to their practical implementation of today’s world—showing how wise God was in giving those codes to His people. Anyone who travels today to third world countries immediately recognizes how wise those health codes are.

But in the book, the author tells of a visit by Dale Carnegie to Yellowstone National Park. Carnegie, with other park visitors, was watching the grizzly bears feed. A guide told them a grizzly bear could wipe any creature in the west, except the buffalo and the Kodiak bear. They watched a grizzly bear eat, and they noticed there was only one animal the bear would allow to eat with him—a skunk. It’s obvious the bear could have beaten the skunk in any fight. And the bear probably resented the skunk. But the bear did not attack the skunk. Why? It wasn’t worth it. He knew the high cost of getting even.

It’s a lesson we humans need to learn as well. There is a high cost to getting even.

We may spend long hours, days, and nights dwelling on our resentments—even plotting ways to strike back. We find the anger begins to get commingled with spiritual forces—forces that are stronger than our power to break. Was it worth it to be that angry?

E. The fifth mark of destructive anger is out of control actions or out of control responses. See verses 10–11. Now, for the first time in the text, Saul is acting on his anger. He’s no longer just sitting on it. He takes a spear, and he throws it at David—not once, but twice. He’s overtly acting on his hostility. He has lost control—like the first wrongfully angry man in the Bible. Saul is very angry, and his face is downcast.

Times haven’t changed. Police receive more calls for family conflicts than they do for aggravated assaults, murders, and all serious crimes put together. A policeman in this church said that the one call they fear most is breaking up a domestic quarrel. It’s so unpredictable. Sixty

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percent of all homicides in this country are against family members. Twenty-six percent or one out of every four policemen or policewomen who are killed are handling a family dispute. That's anger out of control—responses out of control.

F. A sixth quality of destructive anger is insecurity. Verse 12 says that Saul was afraid of David. Fear in this context is simply insecurity. He is threatened. His personal existence and well-being are threatened. He feels threatened and inferior to David. Anger has brought that insecurity into his life. Verse 15 repeats the fact that Saul was afraid of him. Verse 29, "Saul became still more afraid of him" (NIV). Three times in that one chapter it says that Saul was afraid. Unchecked anger digs away at our sense of worth—our sense of self-esteem. We do not become the whole person we are capable of becoming when we are angry.

G. Anger, in a destructive sense, will manifest itself in the trait of unreliability. The exceedingly angry person becomes unreliable. You can't count on them to keep their word. That's the case in verses 17–19. Saul says to David that his older daughter will be given to him in marriage, but when the wedding day comes, Saul rips him off. He gives her to somebody else.

H. An eighth quality of destructive anger is impure motives. See verses 20–21. He's got a second daughter, Michal. Why does he want her to be given in marriage to David? That she might be a snare to him! He says, "I'm going to get that guy. He's not rich, and he can't pay a dowry. I'll get him to kill some Philistines. Bring me a present of one hundred foreskins." Philistines were uncircumcised people. He's dealing with people who didn't have the niceties of warfare that we have today. Saul is trying to get Michal's love for David to snare him and cost him his life. What normal father would do that to his daughter? Take the guy she loves and try to have him killed before the wedding day? His motives in regard to David and Michal were impure.

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I. The ninth quality, seen in verse 22, is speaking untruths. Saul ordered his attendants to speak to David privately and say, “The king is pleased with you” (NIV). That was opposite of the way it was. The reason for these untruths is an attempt to destroy David. In fact, in chapters 18 and 19, Saul tried to kill David seven times. In 18:11, he tried to kill him twice by throwing a spear. In 18:13, he planned to have him fall into the hands of the Philistines. In 19:1, he tells his son, Jonathan, and all the attendants to kill David. Jonathan talks some sense into his dad for a little bit. In the early part of chapter 19, Saul cools off. David comes back into his court and is playing the harp again. But because Saul has never really dealt with his anger, it is only temporarily submerged. It surfaces again, and we find another attempt on David’s life. In 19:10, he tries to kill him with a spear again. In 19:11, he sends men to David’s house to watch it and kill him in the morning. But Saul’s daughter, Michal, the new bride of David, protects him. Then in 19:20, he sends men to capture David, but David flees to the prophet Samuel. Seven times Saul tries to kill David.

II. What happens as a result of destructive anger?

Think of a person whose anger is out of control. What is following in their wake? What are they going to reap? From this text there are four things that are going to happen in a destructively angry person’s life.

A. They are going to destroy themselves. Destruction of self is number one. Someone has said that anger is like trying to throw a cactus at someone to hurt them. You may hit them and hurt them, but in the process you’ll tear the flesh off your own hands. Most of us find socially acceptable ways to deal with anger—like repressing it, denying it, or appropriately expressing it. We may be like the little boy who was told to sit in the corner. He said, “I may be sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside.”

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When anger is not being treated honestly and objectively, it's channeled into kind of an emotional reservoir of slush. The slush accumulates and builds up pressure—like methane underground. Suddenly, it bursts the restraint—losses of temper, outbursts, and harmful actions. That abusive person may even say on occasion, “I won't do this again,” only to find themselves doing it again. Because destructive anger carries with it self-destruction.

B. Secondly, destructive anger brings devastation within families. Show me a destructively angry person, and I will show you people in the family who are hurting as a result—a destructively angry spouse hurting their spouse and hurting their children. Or a destructively angry child hurting their parents and their siblings. Anger brings destruction within the family. It did with Saul. He had a wonderful son, Jonathan. He was a great kid. Their relationship was tight at the beginning, but Saul's anger killed that relationship. His anger destroyed his family.

C. A third consequence to destructive anger is the harm caused to the general welfare of the community. The hidden loss of anger is the loss of the good we could have done—had we spent our time being productive, rather than being angry. Saul had the responsibility of being king. He spent so much time being punitively angry with an individual that he slacked off in being king. He slacked off in his administrative responsibilities. He got so consumed in vengeance that he nearly plunged his nation into civil war. Everybody suffered in the whole kingdom because Saul was angry.

That happens in people today, and can even happen in churches. Preachers can get destructively angry. I've seen some angry preachers—under the guise of being spiritual, but they are simply being selfish. They've split congregations by preaching texts like “Don't Touch the Lord's Anointed” and “The Door You Walked in Is the Door You Can Walk Out.” They won't listen to advice or counsel. Anyone who tries to make a suggestion is somehow a critic or an enemy—

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touching God's anointed. I've seen that kind of activity wreck whole churches and bodies. All because someone forgot that we're building the Lord's kingdom and not our own. Selfish and destructive anger causes harm to the general welfare of the community. It tears up the work of God.

D. Then there's the loss of relationship to God. That's consequence number four. Saul loses it with God. There's an unusual thing happening at the end of chapter 19. God is still trying to get through to angry Saul. Saul sends three groups on three occasions to try to capture David when he's with the prophet Samuel. But every time a group of people would go to arrest him, they would fall under the impact of the Holy Spirit, and they would begin to prophesy. They were helpless to arrest David. Finally, Saul gets fed up. First Samuel 19:23-24, "So Saul went to Naioth at Ramah. But the Spirit of God came even upon him, and he walked along prophesying until he came to Naioth. He stripped off his robes and also prophesied in Samuel's presence. He lay that way all that day and night. This is why people say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'" (NIV). What's happening? God's still trying to get through to Saul. Saul has, what I would call, a real charismatic experience. He's shed some of his clothes, and he's lying in a religious state of ecstasy on the ground. He's speaking forth the wonders of God's might, His majesty, and His name. His experience is thoroughly charismatic.

You can have a great experience with God one day, and the next day go out and act like the devil. That's what happened to Saul. He had a wonderful charismatic experience, but within days it was like it never happened. He was losing it with God. A walk with God depends on far more than one ecstatic experience. It depends upon getting your conduct in conformity with the personality of God as revealed in His law and in His Messiah, Jesus.

III. How can we help Saul?

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So many times I've read 1 Samuel and thought, "God has a plan for your life, Saul. You don't have to live this way. Here are some things you need to do to change." Maybe Saul wouldn't listen to anybody. That's a problem sometimes with a person destructively angry. They're not going to listen to anybody. But maybe if you have destructive anger in your life, you'll hear some of what God is saying to us. And you'll see what Saul should have done.

A. First, repent. I know it's a hard word. Saul needs to admit, face up to, and repent over his destructive anger. There's not a word in these two chapters that ever suggests he repents. Even in the few days of respite in 1 Samuel 19 when David was back in his court, Saul never said to David, "I regret what I tried to do to you." There is no apology or repentance to David, Michal, or Jonathan. So, it's easy for him to get back into the old mold of being destructively angry. Clear repentance is needed—recognition of "I need change."

B. Second, be honest. Never once does Saul say, for example, "David, I'm terribly angry with you. Please help me. I feel threatened by you. You're so good-looking, you're so popular, and you're so great at what you do." How would you like to come up against the guy who had all these qualities—all these things in this magnificent human being? Just face it and say, "I'm jealous of you, David. But I want to overcome this." Or say to Jonathan, "I wanted you so badly to be king, but God's called David to be king. It doesn't seem to bother you. Why should it bother me?" Or say to David, "David, help me be your father. I'll train you in these years on how to be king, so that when I die, you'll be a good king. And Jonathan will be at your right hand." What a different result might have been if Saul would have talked it out! If he would have prayed about it! If he would have just been honest to someone! But he kept sitting on and nursing his anger—until all conversation ultimately was lost.

C. Third, he needed to ask for forgiveness.

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D. Fourth, in Saul's case, he needed to put the Lord on the throne of his life and get his own ego off the throne. It's self who gets frustrated, humiliated, and resentful. Saul feels all those things. He's frustrated because things aren't going according to his plan—but then our plan may not be God's plan. He's humiliated because others are looking down on him—but what really counts is what God thinks about us. He's resentful because he's faced rejection by others—but the Lord is calling us to love our enemies and not resent them. He needs to quit seeking self and putting self first—which is very popular today. Get the Lord in first place. That's the only way you can love your enemies, return good for evil, and walk the second mile. It takes a strong person to do those kinds of things.

I'm not suggesting that just by hearing these four steps, all is automatically going to change. Sometimes change is a process, and it begins with a decision. We need to do whatever we should to follow up on that. It may be counseling; it may be extensive times of counseling, prayer, and therapy; or it may be studying the Word for long periods of time. Whatever works! And, God is able to deliver instantly. I know some people who God hasn't delivered instantly. But He's delivered through counseling and through godly people with insight. If you're in trouble with destructive anger, don't just keep sitting on it and doing nothing about it. Do something about it. The goal of life, in regard to anger, is really expressed to us in a positive way by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. If anyone could have been a destructively angry person, it was the New Testament Saul—Saul of Tarsus. But he changed. He changed because of Jesus—because Jesus was the Lord of his life. And he learned to think this way from Jesus.

I would suggest you take Paul's words, redo them just a little bit, put them on the mirror, or on a car visor, or someplace where you have to face them many times daily. And keep saying them over and over again—as a faith statement and as a prayer to the Lord. "I am very patient and

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kind.” Love is that way, but we’re not concerned with the abstract. We want to be that way. We want to be love in action. “I am patient and kind. I am never jealous or envious. I am never boastful or proud. I am never haughty or selfish or rude.” I’ve seen Christians go to church, then go to the cafeteria line and rudely cut in front of other Christians in the line. “I am never haughty or selfish or rude. I do not demand my own way. I am not irritable or grouchy. I do not hold grudges, and I hardly ever notice when others do wrong. I am never glad about injustice. I always rejoice when the truth wins.”

Saul never tried the way of love. He only tried the path of power—to bulldoze his way and his ability through the wrongful use of anger. And he perished as a result. But none of us have to be a Saul. His life is given to us in Scripture to help us see ourselves and to choose a different way—a different end.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we come to You now in prayer. All of us looking at our lives can remember occasions when we’ve been angry. Maybe we’re here today, and we’re very angry. Perhaps some of us are very destructively angry. You’ve sent this word today to help us—to remind us that if we leave this anger unchecked, it’s not going to go away by itself. It’s going to become worse, until we finally destroy ourselves and everybody around us. You sent Your Word today to intersect our lives and help us change—to get on the road to health and recovery and to put You first in our lives. I pray that we’ll do that. I pray that all of us, no matter what stage of life we’re in, will live out the words of 1 Corinthians 13. We realize that in the course of living, we’ll make many mistakes. Give us grace to keep repenting until we are completely conformed to Your pattern for our life.

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I want to pray especially for those who are the victims of anger—for the Davids who have been tossed around by another person's violent temper and anger. And have been hurt physically or emotionally. I pray for them. I pray they would have the good spirit of David—who doesn't let Saul's anger transfer to his own heart. David manages to keep his own heart pure and never becomes angry like Saul. He keeps his relationship fresh with You, and he keeps relaxed about life. He adopts a pattern of loving this man who was so ungracious and hateful toward him. He always stands ready to do good and to do the right thing, even when everything wrong has been done against him. Help us to do that, Lord, with the people who are destructively angry with us. Help us to remember Your words—about forgetting seventy times seven, about turning the other cheek, about doing good, about blessing, and about forgiving.

We realize that victims of anger always need to use good sense in what they will allow—in terms of destruction of their own body and their own sense of self worth. There may be occasions when we cannot effectively love or respond to a destructively angry person. The only alternative is to sever our connection for awhile until we can find out how to minister to them. But we do ask for Your healing for those who have been victimized by terrible anger directed against them.

Lord, as I pray, I become very aware that there are people here who have never really laid to rest the anger that was directed toward them as a child. Nothing is so uncalled for as anger against a child. I pray, Lord, that You would help that friend today to understand that it was nothing they did that caused that anger to be directed against them. They were innocent and helpless victims. And now that they're adults, I pray You would give them supernatural power to forgive their tormentors. That You would also help them to show mercy to others in their life. Because of their experience, You'll put within their life a heart of tenderness towards others, so their experience is not without meaning—so it's not in vain or not redeemed.

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Lord, You come into life to redeem us, to buy back every disadvantage and injustice we've experienced and turn it into a resurrection. Turn the loss that people have faced as children into a resurrection in their adult life. Help them, at whatever adult age they are, to forget those things, which are behind and look ahead to those great promises and assurances which You give us. We're thankful today that Your healing presence is here with us. May all of our hearts be changed by Your Word today. We ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.