

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION v

PART 1:

UNDERSTANDING ANGER AND BITTERNESS

CHAPTER 1: The Emotion of Anger 1

CHAPTER 2: The Root of Bitterness 13

CHAPTER 3: The Deceitfulness of Anger and Bitterness 27

PART 2:

PUTTING AWAY ANGER AND BITTERNESS

CHAPTER 4: Emotion-Based Responses Versus
Bible-Based Responses 49

CHAPTER 5: The Response of Faith 61

CHAPTER 6: The Response of Forgiveness 81

CHAPTER 7: The Response of Love 95

PART 1

UNDERSTANDING ANGER AND BITTERNESS

CHAPTER 1

THE EMOTION OF ANGER

“I’d just as well tell you. You’re looking at an angry, bitter man.” Larry’s dark eyes flashed and his body tensed, as he leaned against the door to leave. I had been talking to Larry for over an hour about his shaky marriage. Indeed, for months I had met repeatedly with Larry and his wife, and for a time we had made progress. But the situation had deteriorated again. Larry wanted desperately to save his marriage, but he was hurt and frustrated. And in his hurt and frustration he was contributing heavily, albeit sometimes unintentionally, to the deterioration. “The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God,” the Apostle James wrote (1:20).

Countless wounds—physical, emotional, and spiritual—painfully attest to the truth of that Scripture. Anger kills people, turns children into rebels, disintegrates families, and divides churches.

Nobody disputes the destructive force of anger. Each of us has “anger stories” about ourselves or others, stories humorous or pathetic, about angry acts and the resulting damage. There are anger seminars, anger workbooks, anger therapists, and anger-control programs by the dozen. But their answers are nearly as diverse as the programs. The wide variety of solutions to this difficult human problem should hint strongly that we need more than “experts” to deal with it adequately.

Putting Off Anger

The Word of God is not silent on the subject of anger. There are references to anger in one form or another in virtually every book of the Bible. To gain a Biblical understanding of this powerful emotion, and more importantly, to find help for controlling it, we will consider both prescriptive passages (where God tells us what to do or what not to do) and descriptive passages (where we will observe anger in action).

Why do people get angry?

We like to ask “why” questions. Sometimes why questions are merely attempts to shove off responsibility or to challenge authority. But in this case the question is asked to gain insights that will help us face and deal with the problem of anger.

1. *A person gets angry because he doesn't get his way.* King Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard. When Naboth refused to trade or sell, Ahab went home “heavy and displeased. . . . And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread” (1 Kings 21:4). We often see this in children. Their will gets crossed and they explode. But unfortunately, the problem is not limited to children, as Ahab aptly demonstrates. No matter what our age or status, when we don't get what we want, our natural response is anger.
2. *A person gets angry because things seem out of his control.* The more Saul lost control over David, the shorter his temper became. Praise for David shocked Saul's ego like an earthquake. The more Saul sought to eliminate David, the more miserably he failed, and Saul became a very frustrated, angry man. Most of us will not readily identify with Saul—he is the bad person in the story. We identify with David. But under our masks, we are more often like Saul than we care to admit. When people do things that threaten our security or slight our ego, our efforts to

The Emotion of Anger

counteract them seem only to result in more of the same.

A wife is trapped in a lifelong relationship with a man who seems oblivious to her. A minister wants desperately to have peace in his church, but certain trouble-makers refuse to cooperate. Frustration over situations and people we cannot change eats in us like a cancer.

3. *A person gets angry to control.* This is only an extension of the former reason. Saul, like many of us, learned that anger makes people back off and often give in. It even makes some people willing to cater to you. A loud voice, a fist on the table, a lethal glare keeps others hopping. Anger controls. Rather than face the difficulty of confrontation with an angry person, most people bend. The ironic result, however, is more insecurity. Control gained through anger is generally good only as long as the controller is around. Nobody really respects the person who controls through intimidation. But anger, like most other emotions, doesn't have much foresight. It is focused on the immediate situation.
4. *A person gets angry in response to hurt or mistreatment.* When David and his men were rebuffed by Nabal, David put on his sword and set out to annihilate the whole Nabalite "tribe." David's reaction was typical. Sharp, sudden pain easily triggers curses and unleashes blind rage. And it matters little if the pain is physical or emotional. Vengeful anger may also grow little by little over years of mistreatment. And once a wound is open, the angry person may become extremely touchy. Slight mistreatment, even words or actions not at all intended to hurt, may trigger angry reaction.
5. *A person gets angry because his pride is wounded.* The Bible records that King Asa faced a horde of invading Ethiopians that outnumbered the Israelite army two to one. Asa humbly and fervently sought the Lord. God

Putting Off Anger

not only gave him a tremendous victory, but also brought a great revival among the Israelites—many from the northern tribes went over to Asa “when they saw that the LORD his God was with him” (2 Chronicles 15:9). Shortly after this, however, and perhaps in retaliation for the political fallout, Baasha, king of the northern tribes, came against Asa. This time Asa sent a “league payment” to the Syrian king Ben-hadad to get him to break off his agreement with Baasha and form a union with Asa instead. It worked. But Hanani, a prophet of God, rebuked Asa for relying on a heathen king instead of relying on the Lord. Asa’s response? “Then Asa was wroth with the seer, and put him in a prison house; for he was in a rage with him because of this thing. And Asa oppressed some of the people the same time” (2 Chronicles 16:10).

How could Asa switch so rapidly from urging people to follow the Lord to lashing out at the godly? Someone touched his ego, that’s why. That Asa’s pride was founded on his spiritual progress made it all the more subtle. Out of wounded pride a minister may make an angry reply to a just criticism, or a father may lash out at children who see through his mistake. Wounded pride hurts.

6. *A person may get angry as a spillover from unresolved guilt.* David was guilty of immorality and covered-up murder. When he was told a story about a rich man who took advantage of a poor man, however, he exploded. Covered sin makes us touchy. A man who secretly looks at pornography or attends peep shows on the sly will almost invariably be harsh with his children. A person who lives with a burdened conscience often wields a criticizing tongue. Such a person is continually engaged in the subconscious task of trying to transfer his guilt

to someone else.

7. *People also get angry in order to set wrong things right.* We all have a sense of justice. When David heard about the rich man taking his poor neighbor's only sheep to feed unexpected guests, David was incensed. Rightly so. There is a righteousness in this kind of anger. When a situation is wrong, anger is a motivation to set things right. Moses saw the lewdness of the calf-worshiping Israelites and was furious. Jesus saw the irreverence of the moneychangers in the temple and took decisive action. When we see two big boys beating up on a little boy, we have the same emotional response. We call it righteous indignation, and it is.

But there is a very subtle catch to this last kind of anger. Because it stems from our sense of justice, it feels right. It is JUSTIFIABLE. And without further thought, we easily make two mistakes. First, we transfer the rightness of our anger to whatever action we choose to take. Anger, like dynamite, is extremely explosive. Action powered by anger can cause terrible destruction. So the "Be ye angry" of Ephesians 4:26 is strictly limited with the imperative, "SIN NOT!" Being right in our assessment of a wrong situation does not mean we are right in using any means to set that situation straight. Although the anger may be justified, the action motivated by that "righteous anger" may be more wrong, more destructive, and more wicked in its hate and vengeance than the original injustice that stirred our anger. What can begin, in other words, as a right judgment that something is wrong can turn quickly into unrighteous passion to do even worse. Wars erupt out of this kind of righteous anger. Once the fuse is lit, the most heinous crimes are committed to "make wrongs right."

The second mistake we easily make under the halo of righteous indignation is considering all our anger to be righteous. No matter what stirs our anger, our mental processors make