
Anger and God's Grace: A Case Study

Anonymous

Anger is one of my greatest problems. It typically erupts in harsh words in a torrent of speech, although at other times I withdraw and refuse to talk to anyone. My mind becomes confused, and I lose my sense of concentration. I feel low emotionally and even lose my appetite. At the time that I began my self-counseling project, these were standard responses when I became angry.

Test #1

Soon after I had chosen anger for my project, I was invited to speak at a church conference. A free-will offering was taken for me, and at the end of the visit I was given an envelope which held nearly five hundred dollars in cash — the entire offering. I placed the envelope in my Bible and handed it to my wife. We stopped at a nearby restaurant for lunch and then made our way back towards home.

After about twenty minutes of driving, I asked my wife to put the envelope in her purse. She began to look frantically around the car and finally said, "I think I left the envelope and the Bible in the restaurant."

I slammed on the brakes, turned the car around, and sped back to the restaurant. When we arrived, we found our booth occupied by four new customers. We asked them if they'd seen our Bible, and they answered "No." The waitress had the same reply. In complete silence, my wife and I left the restaurant and sat in the car for half an hour. Then we again began our drive home.

From the moment my wife had given me the bad news, I had said nothing to her; but I was boiling inside. I wanted to express all the anger I felt and to make my wife aware of how stupid, careless, and irresponsible she had been. I actually hated my wife at that moment and did not even want to look at her. I wanted her to feel miserable, and I wanted to be alone to indulge my self-pity. As I careened down the road

The author of this study chose anger as the focus for his self-counseling project in a recent counseling class. Details have been altered to allow him to remain anonymous.

at over seventy miles an hour, I angrily told my wife that she had done a stupid thing.

Turning Point

After some time I glanced over at her and saw tears running down her cheeks. I was not unmindful of the fact that I was being tested on my anger, the topic of my project. I knew that God wanted me to please and honor Him in my responses and to be loving and forgiving to my wife. I slowed down and gently squeezed my wife's arm. I prayed silently and asked God to forgive me for my harsh words to her. I confessed the evil thoughts and feelings that had been

I was aware that God had tailor-made this incident to allow me to see my own heart.

surging through me from the moment the loss had been discovered.

Later I drew my wife closer to me and asked her forgiveness for what I had said. I recalled an incident when I too had left something valuable in a public place and had never gotten it back. I told her that she meant more to me than the money that had been lost.

My wife was totally unprepared for the loving way I reacted. (That's not surprising since it was completely uncharacteristic of me.) She cried more tears and apologized again for what had happened. Later she drew close to me and thanked me for being her husband. This time it was I who was unprepared for her reaction. I had never before handled my anger in a way that would deserve such a response.

Test #2

About a month later I brought home a new television set for the family—something we'd all been anticipating. The next day my daughters were playing indoors and began running around the living room. Oblivious to everything but having fun, they ran into the TV table and knocked the new TV to the floor. The picture tube was cracked irreparably.

My old patterns of anger surfaced quickly. I was so enraged that I was tempted to strike the girls. I

blamed their mother for her negligence in disciplining our children. I stormed out of the house and walked around the neighborhood for half an hour, deep in self-pity. I wanted my family to feel ashamed for making life hard for me when I was trying to make life easier for them.

But again, I was aware that God had tailor-made this incident to allow me to see my own heart. I realized that I had again sinned against my wife in the way I had spoken to her and that I had sinned against the girls too. I knew I had to live in such a way that they knew I loved them and that they meant more to me than money and material things.

Turning Point

I went back to the house thankful for the walk, which had given me time to cool down, pray, and reflect on the value of material things versus the gifts of love, children, and family. I apologized to my wife for my accusations and later that evening we did two things.

During our family devotions we talked about the incident, and I spoke to the girls about their behavior. The goal for me was to do this lovingly and without talking about the cost of the television and how long it would take us to save for another one. Each person prayed and asked God for forgiveness for what he or she had done wrong in the incident. The second thing we did was establish some clear rules about acceptable play in the house!

The Fruit of Obedience

What has happened since those incidents? I've been surprised and humbled to notice how much has changed, how much God has blessed my efforts to trust and obey Him. My wife and I talk more freely and openly than we ever have in our marriage. When something is bothering me, instead of exploding or retreating in silence, I am learning to talk it over with her and, in some cases, with my daughters. I feel much more love from my wife and am conscious of her desire to please me. This is happening at the same time that I am finding it easier to love and please her.

I sense a closeness in our whole family that was absent before. My children seem more relaxed with me, yet they take the responsibility to warn each other about getting too rough or wild in the house. When I discipline the girls, I can talk about the problem instead of venting my anger. In other words, I am respected and loved as a parent and no longer feared.

There were two other times after the TV incident when the girls broke something in the house (fortunately, not as valuable). They were sitting on the floor

in their room, and I went in to talk with them about it. Their positive reaction was fun for me to watch, and it was also comforting to see the fruit that my obedience to God can encourage in others.

New Honesty and Openness

The last time I was angry with the kids, instead of taking a walk alone, I invited the family to come with me to talk about the problem together. I should say that this kind of openness has coincided with a new honesty from me about my own sins. The self-counseling project drove me to spend more time in prayer than usual. As I prayed, God kept convicting me of my pride and wrong motives. I asked God for for-

*I must think before I do or
say anything when I am angry.*

giveness and later confessed what I had learned to my wife. I also told the girls what God had been teaching me about myself.

Our family prayer time is getting more meaningful and rich. In fact, we don't dare skip it because the girls refuse to go to bed! They keep reminding us, sometimes singing out, "We haven't prayed yet...!" There is more openness, and we are all learning to confess our sins before each other. The children will ask forgiveness for things we didn't even know they did! God is becoming a present reality to the girls. When they pray, they sound as if they are talking to someone they really know.

The benefits have extended beyond my family too. My own fellowship with God has deepened, and it seems that people can see the change in our family. People in church have told us how happy we look; our lives are part of our testimony, not just our words. We have more opportunities to minister outside our family; and as we do, I sense within myself a greater sincerity, openness, and depth in my service.

What Made the Difference?

What has made the difference? God made significant inroads into my anger as I trusted more fully in the work of the Holy Spirit for my sanctification. That work is progressive; and as I reflect on the changes I have seen, I know that I will have victory one day as I "grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

That has gone hand in hand with a better under-

standing of anger from God's point of view. I take it more seriously now, as something that is selfish, uncontrolled, sinful, and hurtful to others. It must be banished from my life as a Christian because I cannot have a good relationship with anyone, including God, when I am angry; and I certainly cannot serve Him effectively. I have come to see that my anger rarely had anything to do with righteous indignation; it was just an expression of personal annoyance and wounded pride. My pride and hurt feelings were idols in my life. I had to confess them to God and repent.

My view of trials and suffering has also changed. When troubles come, I am learning to remember that God is in them rather than just blaming someone else for them. As I reflect on Romans 8:28-30, I realize that the difficulties I've detailed in this study were for my good so that the wrong motives of my own heart could be revealed. As I faced these idols, God helped me to turn from them in humility and repentance so that He could make me more of what He wants me to be.

I am learning that God works through people and circumstances to accomplish His plan and purpose in our lives. This is leading me to a deeper trust in God, that His grace is sufficient for any circumstance of life (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As the two incidents revealed not only my anger but my attitudes toward material things, God has been teaching me that He will provide for our every need (Philippians 4:19). My prayer life has deepened as has my thanksgiving that God works all things for my good and His glory.

This had led to new patterns in my life even when I do get angry. I no longer lose my appetite and ability to concentrate when something goes wrong. That long period of silence is also receding, and I am going to God in prayer more quickly instead of reacting in the flesh.

I have come to a deeper appreciation and thank-

fulness for the Old Testament description of God as "slow to anger and plenteous in mercy." It humbles me and yet also provides the foundation on which I can seek to be more patient, loving, and forgiving of others.

Present Struggles

I still have an ongoing problem with anger. My instant first reaction is still sinful. I still make harsh and hasty remarks, though they are fewer and more quickly renounced. My main focus now is to deal with the reality that I must *think* before I do or say anything when I am angry. I am praying and meditating on five key verses:

Proverbs 10:19: "In the multitude of words, sin is unavoidable. But he who restrains his lips is wise."

Proverbs 15:28: "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things."

Proverbs 17:27: "He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding."

James 1:19: "Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger."

Ephesians 4:26: "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger."

My prayer is that these verses will be true of me as I open myself to the Spirit of God and seek to obey Him. I have seen real growth in this area, for which I am so thankful. I have caught myself smiling at things that ordinarily would have annoyed me. The fact that I can sit and talk about problems with my family without exchanging bitter words is amazing!

The process has been a spiritual growth experience that has allowed me to look at myself and allow the Spirit to work in and through me. Most of all, it has given me an opportunity to take a closer look at God's grace and to lean on Him for more of it.