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# How to Deal with Anger

by Henry Brandt

If I were forced to rank a list of sins from the worst to the least destructive,...the top two sins would be anger and deceit...

Not everyone is an alcoholic; not everyone steals, or swears, or commits adultery. But *everyone struggles with anger*. It is a universal problem. I have observed it among primitive cannibals in Irian Jaya, among illiterate people in tiny villages deep in the forest of Zaire, among my playmates when I was a child, in my parents, in church members, in pastors, in highly educated people, in the very rich, in people in government. And yes, in me.

You cannot decide to be angry. You can take elaborate precautions to avoid being angry. But, sooner or later, anger underneath your skin is triggered by memory, someone's behavior, a conversation, a phone call, or a letter. It can cause your heart to beat faster, make you sweat, tense up your muscles, foul up your digestive system, alter the way you think, dictate how you act, and trigger words from your mouth.

There seems to be universal agreement that anger must be tamed. Yet there is vast disagreement over the cause and the cure...

## A Faulty Perception of Anger

This sentence sums up what almost everyone declares who comes to the consulting room with an anger problem: "My anger is a normal and justifiable response to the way I was treated."

Seldom does one inquire about the possibility of anger being sin in their hearts. That word has almost disappeared from their vocabulary. Instead, people declare that they are unhappy, tense, anxious, wor-

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ried, disappointed, misunderstood, mistrusted, unloved, or under extreme pressure. The buzz words are *stressed out* or *burned out*...

## What the Bible Says about Anger

Most persons who seek counsel will argue that they have the right to be angry. "Under my circumstances, can you blame me?" they will say in stout defense.... But as long as they argue in defense of their wrath, they will see no need nor have any desire to change and thus be delivered from the unhappiness of anger.

One of the most quoted verses in the Bible is this one: "Be angry and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26). My counse-

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lees uniformly declare that this verse means that their kind of anger is not sin. However, there is a part of that verse that is not debatable: Call your anger righteous if you will, but get rid of it by sundown.

Just five verses down from the "Be angry and sin not" verse, it clearly states that we can let anger be put away from us (see Ephesians 4:31). Galatians 5:16 says clearly that people who walk in the Spirit need not struggle with anger, which is an act of the sinful nature. There is no human remedy. Only God can cleanse your heart.

Notice what other biblical advice there is about the management of anger:

- "For the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20).

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•“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord’” (Romans 12:19, NIV).

•“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31).

•“Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret—it only causes harm” (Psalm 37:8).

•“Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for

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anger rests in the bosom of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

It seems clear to me that the Bible is telling us that God expects us to tackle the problems around us with His love in our hearts. Read on:

•“But I say to you, love your enemies...and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

•“Husbands, love your wives” (Ephesians 5:25).

•“Admonish the younger women to love their husbands, to love their children” (Titus 2:4).

•“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39).

•“Love the brotherhood of believers” (1 Peter 2:17, NIV).

•“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 3:12, NIV).

•“Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:5).

•“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35,38-39).

Jesus’ response to evildoers, as they crucified Him between two criminals, was: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

But the difficult problem is how can a human being who naturally responds angrily to the circumstances of life change from responding in anger to responding in love? Humanly speaking, we must admit that this biblical advice is impossible to attain. We all know that

to bottle up or swallow anger is not the solution. Bottled up anger can ruin your health and twist your thinking. You would become like a walking time bomb, set to explode at some external provocation.

The Bible offers a radical solution: “Put it away. Stop it.” This is humanly impossible. Yes, it takes a miracle. You need supernatural help.

### **The Steps to Change**

#### ***Step 1: Recognize Anger as Sin***

The biblical prescription for dealing with destructive anger is precise and strong. Strife, malice, hatred, anger, outbursts of wrath, dissension, and contention are works of the flesh—of the sinful nature (see Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:8). They are sin, and that’s good news, because there is a divine solution for sin. God promises to help you. Dealing with sin is His specialty. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NIV).

A simple step that gives you a source of strength to “stop” angry responses is to invite Jesus to come into your life. Yet many competent, able people have a hard time accepting the fact that they need supernatural help.

“I can manage my anger. Isn’t that good enough?” It certainly beats exploding. However, only God can help you to stop it. Because anger is sin, you need a Savior who will cleanse you of your sins: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

#### ***Step 2: Replace Anger with Godly Emotions***

When you have a forgiven, cleansed heart, you can ask God for the power of the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life (see Galatians 5:22-23):

- love
- joy
- peace
- long-suffering
- kindness
- goodness
- faithfulness
- gentleness
- self-control.

You will still have problems, face injustices, and encounter difficult people—as everyone does. You will still need to be energized, alerted, and motivated to correct what needs correcting. But a Christian knows that a person energized by the Holy Spirit with love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness,

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faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control has the strength to conquer the bitter, sarcastic words, anxiety, bodily tensions, and violent behavior that formerly characterized him.

The apostle Paul says it best: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:16, NIV)....

### God's Spirit in Uganda

A bloody civil war raged in Uganda. There were shortages of food, water, vehicles, gasoline, and clothing. The roads had potholes the size of a car. Everywhere we looked there were ugly war machines: tanks, trucks, artillery. We had to pass through frequent checkpoints manned by armed teenaged soldiers. We were stopped twelve times while driving the twenty-five miles from the Entebbe airport to the

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capital city of Kampala. Each checkpoint made us open our bags for inspection.

The next day we were to travel to the city of Goma, where I was scheduled to address a meeting. Sam, my driver, had been scouring in vain to find some gasoline for our vehicle. We were three hours late when Sam finally came to me to say he found some gas for \$30 per gallon. We needed fifteen gallons, or \$450 worth.

I questioned our going. Who would wait for a foreign speaker who is three hours late? Sam convinced me we should go. It was a slow, bumpy ride, and there were more roadblocks manned by unfriendly soldiers. We arrived at a meeting place packed with people. It was so hot and humid that the air in the room was almost unbearable.

I sat on the platform, looking out at the audience. I knew most of them were hungry. They were shabbily dressed. I knew no one in this audience had stood in front of a closet packed full of clothes and wondered what to wear. What could I say to these people when I had never wondered what I would eat or wear? I knew that many of them had suffered the death of a family member. Many of their families were scattered, some having fled into the forest to avoid being mowed down by hostile gunfire. I prayed silently, "Lord, I don't know what to say to these people. God, You have to help me."

The only thought that came to me was: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

I told them I believed that each one of them could have all they wanted of a free gift. The gift was the fruit of the Spirit. It was freely available to all people.

### An Important Message

After the meeting, a raggedly dressed man approached me. He said I seemed uncertain about my message. He reassured me that the fruit of the Spirit was available in Uganda, but I had left an important condition out of my message. He asked me if I would take the time to come to his home. He would like to tell me his story.

As we walked down a dusty road in the intense heat, he pointed to a large house, with perhaps five or six bedrooms, up in the hills. "That was my house," he said, "but Idi Amin's soldiers came one day and took it as headquarters for his army. My family had to flee, and today they are in the forest. I had a Mercedes Benz parked in front of my clothing store. One day the soldiers came and took my car. Then they took my store."

We had been walking on this dusty road lined with mud-walled huts with thatched roofs. We came to one, and he indicated that this was where he lived. We entered it: one dark room, dirt floor, and a box on the floor. He motioned me to sit on the box. He sat on the other end of it and continued his story.

"I would sit in my chair and work myself into a frenzy over the soldiers who took my car, my business, my house, and scattered my family. I was consumed with hatred, bitterness, and anger.

"When I was forced to leave my house, I took along a chair. I had a cow, also, which needed some fly spray. I traded my chair for the fly spray, but my cow died. I also had a goat and traded my goat for some seeds to plant a garden. But it didn't rain, so my garden failed. Now I have no car, no business, no house, no family, no chair, no cow, no goat, no garden.

"One day, as I sat on this box and rehearsed all of this, I thought I would burst with hatred and animosity. A man came to my door in the middle of this situation. He said he was a missionary and had come to tell me that God loved me. That's all I heard. God loves me? I exploded. Do you know what has happened to me?

"In a rage, I picked that man up and threw him out of my house. God loves me! I was so mad I could hardly contain myself! To my surprise, the man got up and came back in. I was startled at his boldness. He said he had come to tell me about Jesus and would

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like to continue. He told me, God loves you so much that He gave His own Son to die for you. If you ask Him, He will come into your life and change your heart.

"I was furious! Then suddenly, what this man said gave me some hope. I needed something, so I asked Jesus to come into my life right then. He did.

"Now I come to the part of my story that has to do with your message. I told you that something was missing.

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"When I asked Jesus to come into my life, I could still see my home occupied by soldiers, my Mercedes Benz being driven by soldiers, my business ruined, my family scattered, without a garden, and wondering how to survive. My heart was still filled with animosity toward those soldiers. My new friend read me a Bible verse intended for children of God: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

"A shaft of light into utter darkness! I needed to forgive those soldiers. I needed to love them. Sudden-

ly I wanted to love them. I opened my heart and poured out all the hate and anger and bitterness that I had stored up there. All I wanted was the fruit of the Spirit in my heart.

"You are right," he said. "We can have all we want for free. But you must meet God's terms. You must forgive men their trespasses."

My new friend said he was the richest man in Uganda. He had been released from the unbearable load of sin (hate, anger, bitterness) and now was basking in the unlimited wealth of the fruit of the Spirit that only God can give. As we parted, I promised him that I would share his story with others....

### **A Plan for Repentance**

...Repentance for anger as sin is rare. Jesus explained why: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come to the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20).

Unrepentant, intelligent people believe that they can justify their anger because God gets angry. This is why they comb the Gospels for any shred of evidence that Jesus got angry. The term "righteous indignation" just blurs the issue.

Perhaps 95 percent of anyone's anger is plain, old-fashioned sin, and we all know it. Anger plagues everyone. We should simply face it and take Jesus up on His offer: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).