

GOOD & ANGER

REDEEMING ANGER, IRRITATION, COMPLAINING, AND BITTERNESS

David Powlison

“Good and Angry by Powlison now takes its rightful place as my number one recommendation on anger—not to mention it now stands as the fullest and wisest Christian response to the sub-theme of self-hatred and self-anger I have ever read.”

Tony Reinke, Desiring God.com; host of the *Ask Pastor John* podcast;
author of *Newton on the Christian Life: To Live Is Christ*

“If there is any counselor on the planet who is qualified to come alongside you and point you to the truth about yourself and the Lord who loves you, it is David Powlison. For decades now he’s been the primary voice of grace-saturated counsel and he speaks from a position of deep wisdom and careful exegesis. If you or someone you know has a problem with anger, this book is for you. In other words, everyone should buy it.”

Elyse Fitzpatrick, Author of *Counsel from the Cross*

“Endorsing something that has occupied fifteen years of the ‘salt n’ light’ life of Dr. David Powlison is a privilege. As an Anglican priest of an inner-city parish in Charleston, SC; having struggled with and viewed anger ‘up-close-and-personal’ in our community, the ‘God tools’ and experiences within the pages of *Good and Angry* are personally germane to me. And will enable me to teach others how to biblically ‘reframe anger.’”

The Rev. Dr. Dallas H. Wilson, Jr., Vicar, St. John’s Chapel, Charleston,
South Carolina

“David Powlison does not treat anger as a disease to be cured or a vice to be crushed. After all, the Bible depicts both Jesus and his heavenly Father as sometimes angry. Expect no comforting nostrums from these pages. Here, instead, you will find biblically faithful probing and gospel hope that will make it possible to be *good* and angry.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical
School, Deerfield, IL; cofounder of The Gospel Coalition

“This book is vintage Powlison—balanced, insightful, and richly nuanced. Powlison maps our anger (both good and bad) not on a sprinkling of Bible verses but on the gospel and the breadth and depth of biblical narrative. This is one of those books you not only read, but buy copies to pass to friends.”

Paul Miller, Director of seeJesus, author of *A Loving Life*

“It is a rare thing to find a fusion of biblically accurate and personally applicable insight in much that is written about anger. Dr. David Powlison is a stunning exception. He wields his written insight with all the wisdom and care with which a shepherd carries a staff to direct and defend the sheep dearly loved by the greatest Shepherd. His grasp of the Word of God and the heart of humanity is startlingly clear, compelling, convicting, and comforting.”

Joseph Vincent Novenson, Senior Teaching Pastor, Lookout Mountain
Presbyterian Church, Lookout Mountain, TN

“Good and Angry is the best book I have reviewed related to the heart of anger. David Powlison gets the nuances of the heart, and his careful and thorough understanding of anger from a biblical perspective is a significant contribution to the biblical counseling movement. He shows us that with Christ as our example and the gospel as our guide we can forgive, be motivated to mercy, and even learn to love our enemies. I recommend this book to anyone who has ever been angry, loves someone who struggles with anger, and especially to those who don’t think they have a problem with anger. I pray this book is as helpful to you as it has been to me.”

Garrett Higbee, Executive Director, Biblical Soul Care Ministries

“David Powlison helps us to think clearly about our anger, no matter which form it tends to take. This book really is a one-size-fits-all, and the format is like interactive counseling. Whether or not you are already aware of your anger problem, you need this book. *Good and Angry* is an exceptional resource for everyone—from parents and teachers to pastors and missionaries.”

Gloria Furman, Cross-cultural worker; author of *The Pastor’s Wife* and *Missional Motherhood*

“The great thing about David Powlison’s counseling and writing is that he is willing to get his hands dirty as he brings the gospel into the root problems of our lives. His discussions not only deal with the realities of our struggles but the realities of his own grappling for help—at a depth most of us are not capable or daring enough to consider. Yet, as troubling as are the problems he tackles, so refreshing and realistic are the gospel truths he uncovers for us. He digs into his own heart to help us know how to bring gospel restoration to ours.”

Bryan Chapell, Pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, IL

“This is the most complete, biblical, insightful, and practical book on anger that I have ever read. The concepts are clearly explained with plenty of illustrations from the biblical record as well as from our daily lives. It is obvious that the author is quite experienced in this field, knowing the personal and interpersonal conflicts that trigger the angry reactions in us. It is hard to think of a person that would not be helped by this book.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo; President, Wisdom and Integrity Ministries

“*Good and Angry* masterfully captures the way every last one of us needs our anger redeemed and brims with practical wisdom to help that happen. This book moves far beyond anger management, consistently reorienting us to God’s redemptive purposes for anger against real wrongs, while unveiling the lies that fuel destructive rage and cold-hearted grumbling. I have not read a more soul-searching and refreshing book in a long time.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Director of Counseling, CCEF New England

“*Good and Angry* takes a comprehensive look at good anger and destructive anger. I especially appreciate how David names the more covert forms of anger

such as indifference, withdrawal, and contempt as being just as sinful and destructive as the more aggressive anger of rage and bullying. I will encourage my clients who are in destructive relationships to study this book to gain greater self-awareness of what's driving them when anger overwhelms them."

Leslie Vernick, LCSW; relationship coach; speaker; author of *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage* and *The Emotionally Destructive Relationship*

"Far too often in Christian circles our approach to emotions tends toward simplistic and negative. 'Anger is bad. Stop it.' That's why I'm so grateful for David Powlison's robust, redemptive wisdom found in *Good and Angry*. David teaches us how Christ's gospel of grace emancipates our hearts so that even the messy emotion of anger can fruitfully and beautifully reflect the holy love of Christ."

Bob Kellemen, Biblical Counseling Chair at Crossroads Bible College; author of *Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives*

"I struggle with sinful anger every day. This book is an excellent source of help in understanding my problem, discerning my motives, examining the lies I tend to believe, and diagnosing the deep roots of sin that compel me to explode in rage or retreat in cold, hateful disdain. In his chapter on anger toward God, Powlison invites us to a courageous honesty that puts us on the pathway to repentance, the sweet and rugged landscape of every believer's life."

Barb Duguid, Author of *Extravagant Grace*

"I've had righteous anger before, I think, but not very often. Most of my anger is more than a little bit unrighteous. In this wise and immensely practical book, David Powlison brings a lifetime of skill at understanding the human heart to help us deal with one of the world's biggest problems: anger, and everything that leads up to it."

Philip Ryken, President, Wheaton College

"David Powlison helps us to see that anger is not a problem to be solved but a natural human response to injustice, things we believe to be 'not right.' The problem we face is how to respond to what is 'not right' without sinning. Powlison helps us by encouraging us to admit our sinful anger problems, exposing the roots of sinful anger, and teaching us how to 'express the right kind of anger in the right way.' I needed this book! And if you're anything like me, you need it as well."

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

"Throughout the years, Powlison's works have been such helpful resources to turn to in pastoral ministry. *Good and Angry* proves to be no different as it provides keen insight into a very prevalent human emotion. From layperson to seasoned pastor, this book helps all those looking to investigate the root of anger. While doing so, Powlison artfully and tenderly brings his readers into the embrace of God's mercy."

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister of Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston, MA

“With characteristic humility and wisdom, David Powlison has produced a rich resource on understanding anger. He moves us beyond our reflex to repress and repent and shows us how our anger can increasingly reflect the loving purposes of God in Christ. The ‘constructive displeasure of mercy’ is a phrase that I will be meditating on for a long time.”

Winston Smith, Faculty, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

“All of us struggle with the hot unpleasantness of emotions and desires on the spectrum of anger. This problem frustrates us, saddens us, and often enslaves us. We need a wise and gracious guide to point us to the mercy of God’s Word. David Powlison is a man of peace and his words in this book breathe wisdom and point to Christ’s own grace for change. Since anger is all of our problem, we all need this book.”

Heath Lambert, Executive Director of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors and Associate Pastor at First Baptist Church Jacksonville, FL

“David Powlison is never simplistic. This biblically rich, psychologically insightful analysis puts anger under the microscope and shows us just how complicated it can be. It also shows us how to relate anger to the really big themes of Scripture—grace, redemption, and the restoration of all things. Read this book and see why anger matters far more than you ever thought it did. Read this book and learn how to be both angry and good.”

Steve Midgley, Executive Director, Biblical Counselling UK

“David Powlison’s *Good and Angry* will serve as a seminal work in the arena of biblical care. Providing the reader with a sound conceptual understanding of anger while suggesting rich biblical insights for change, this book contains truths that equip the believer to more effectively address the struggle of anger in its varying forms. Powlison’s style and wisdom are always profound and refreshing. This book is no exception.”

Jeremy Lelek, President, Association of Biblical Counselors

“This is the opposite of a self-help book; it is a God-help book. Here we find readable, pithy, and searching reflections on what God says about anger—and its redemption by grace—in the Bible. Highlights include Powlison’s treatment of the exemplary nature of God’s anger, the multitudinous ways in which our anger falls short of God’s, and the confusion of Christian defenses of anger against God. Again and again, this gentle sage of sanctification leads us back to the one who overcame our anger, and his, at the cross.”

Eric L. Johnson, Lawrence and Charlotte Hoover Professor of Pastoral Care, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Complaining, and Bitterness

DAVID POWLISON



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I dedicate this book to Mark and Karen Teears,
Barbara Juliani, and New Growth Press. Thank you.
Through your persistence, humility, and helpfulness,
we have been able to bring this book to publication.

We have witnessed a miracle of grace that makes the angels rejoice!

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Acknowledgments

I am grateful that my faith was formed and is still being nurtured by men and women who understand that to live as a Christian is a synonym for living as an honest, wise, and humble human being. Every human capacity, every human activity, every sphere of human life is meant to be “very good”—as we once were by creation in God’s image, as we never are because we have fallen hard, as reappears in the person of Jesus. Because he cares, his anger works as anger is meant to work, and his mercy speaks the final word in all who love him. Because he cares, he is remaking all things human—even this difficult, unruly, and destructive thing we call anger—so that we become like him.

Introduction

We all have firsthand experience with anger gone wrong. We've dished it out. We've been on the receiving end. We've heard and seen others get angry at each other. At some point in each day you are probably affected by some form of anger gone bad—either your own or someone else's.

Often it's mild—frustrations, complaining, irritation. Often it's veiled—judgmental thoughts, passive aggressions. Often it's buried—hidden from conscious awareness, painted over with pleasantries, anesthetized by distractions, busyness, or mind-altering substances. All too often it's intense—bitterness, hostility, violence. It's no surprise that when the apostle Paul lists typical sins, half his list belongs to the anger family (Galatians 5:19–21).

And yet anger done right is a great good. It says, “That’s wrong” and acts to protect the innocent and helpless. It says, “That’s wrong” and energizes us to address real problems. God, who is good and does good, expresses good anger for a good cause. Jesus gets good and angry—in the service of mercy and peace. He is willing and able to forgive us for our anger gone bad. He is willing and able to teach us to do anger right.

But it is hard to sort out the good from the bad in anger, isn't it? And it's even harder to change when anger has gone bad. Why are problems that are so common so difficult to solve?

All of us are in this boat. It's hard to do anger right. Unless you have somehow numbed yourself to the human condition, every one of us struggles with anger. My chief goal in this book is to teach you *how* to more fruitfully and honestly deal with your anger. Your struggle with anger (and mine) will last a lifetime, but it can go somewhere good. We can learn to deal with anger differently.

This book is not about “solving” anger problems. That word *solve* suggests that we can arrive. Give us some answers, change some behaviors, and—just like that—no more problems. It suggests that bad anger is simply a bad habit. But anger is not a problem to solve. It's a human capacity—like sex, happiness, and sorrow. It is a complex human response to a complex world. And like all human capacities and responses, it sometimes works well, but too often goes bad. Anger creates problems. But having and expressing the right kind of anger in the right way is a good goal.

I can't promise you a technique, insight, or strategy that's foolproof. (When it comes to anger, nothing is foolproof!) I won't offer you self-affirming truisms to reframe your self-talk so your moods even out. I am not going to give you deep-breathing and relaxation techniques to help you keep your cool. And I definitely won't encourage you to get in touch with the real you and tell the world how you really feel.

But I do promise you that there are ways to think through and work through your anger that are wise and true. There are ways of handling anger that produce *good*. There are ways to become more peaceful in many situations and more cleanly angry in the situations that call for it. There are even ways to fail well, so you learn how to find mercy and pick yourself up again after blowing it.

What Do You Bring to the Table?

We are going to talk about hard topics. Will you join in? Will you think hard? Will you speak up honestly? Will you take constructive

action? We're talking about anger, after all. It's the dark, turbulent emotion of destruction.

We'll examine incidents that leave a bitter taste, and whole lifetimes that go sour with accumulated bitterness. We'll look at volcanic wrath, but also the momentary irritations. I've often found that we learn the most from the little things, the everyday disappointment, frustration, disagreement, and complaint. What we learn transfers to the big things. It's like learning to walk before learning to walk a tightrope.

If you're willing to enter the conversation, this book will prove to be about *your* anger.

You picked up this book for a reason. In a constructive atmosphere, in the pursuit of true and living wisdom, why not tackle big things? We can talk straight and think carefully about things that really matter.

- Anger really matters.
- To mess up when it comes to anger is to mess up your life.
- To get anger straight is to get your life straight.

Think about reading this book as an honest conversation about something that really matters. We are sitting down together at the kitchen table for a long, slow heart-to-heart talk. A good conversation includes pauses to think, sometimes lengthy pauses. Sometimes you have to come back later and finish what you couldn't quite put into words.

This book is divided into four sections. The first section will help you ask questions and explore your particular experience of anger. The second section will answer the question what is anger? The third section will tackle how destructive anger is changed into something constructive. Then the final section will look at particular difficult cases.

Three Suggestions

Let me suggest three things about how to read this book. Each is a different way to take your time as you read.

First, read *with a pen in hand*. Right from the start I'm going to ask you to stop and respond. I'll make statements. So take the time to write down what you think. Give an example. I'll ask you questions. Take time to ponder, explore, and reflect. Jot down your answers. Keep your pen at hand so that you can write down the gist of what you're thinking, what you wonder, and where you struggle. Get *your* real life into the mix. Of course, as the author I get first say on the printed page. But your details will make the story come to life. Each chapter ends with a section entitled "Making It Your Own" that gives you an opportunity to interact with and respond to what you've read.

Second, read with a yellow highlighter next to your pen. What strikes *you* as you read? Take the time to highlight one sentence on each page or in each section. At the end of each chapter go back and reread your highlights. Then pick the one sentence from the entire chapter that most strikes you, and consider the following questions:

- Why did you choose this?
- What does it mean to you?
- If you agree, how would your life change if this sentence became true of you?
- If you question or disagree, put it into words.

Using your pen and highlighter will help you to notice, stop, and consider so that you can respond.

Third, pay close attention whenever you find yourself thinking, *but what about . . . ?* The But-What-Abouts—BWAs—are *very* important. They are the places you collide with what I write. You sense that something you want to know hasn't been said yet. The key questions that *you* are asking come to the surface wherever you find yourself wondering BWA _____? Your questions bring into

focus the perceptions and the life experiences that *you* must make sense of. This book is the product of hundreds of BWAs that I've asked about anger over many years.

The BWAs can create a problem. They get distracting if they talk too loud and too soon in the process. We stop listening. No conversation takes place. Don't let your BWAs hijack the process. Write them down and save them for later.

This book invites you to a slowly unfolding meal. If in the middle of appetizers, you suddenly cry out, "But what about the dinner rolls? What's for dessert? Who's doing the dishes?" then you never taste the hors d'oeuvres. An important question may pop into your mind as you read chapter 2, but it might not get answered until chapter 8. You may strongly disagree with something you read in chapter 5, for which you will find a satisfying explanation, or at least a plausible suggestion worth considering, in chapter 17.

The topic of anger bursts with big questions. At any moment we may only be snooping around one small answer, but it may build toward an answer to your big questions. So take note of your BWAs, and keep reading.

If you take this book to heart, you'll get anger right more often. Yes, you'll still fail. Perhaps you already know your typical pick of the poisons—whether your angers are mild, veiled, buried, or intense. Perhaps you've already learned wise things about how to deal constructively with failure. But wherever you find yourself in the process of facing and dealing with anger, God is merciful. He is not surprised by our blind spots. He is not surprised by our failures. God is merciful. He willingly meets us. He works patiently and persistently. He is merciful and will not give up on you. He will complete the good work that he begins.

As you read and ponder this book, I trust that you will grow in self-knowledge. I trust that you will grow more aware of your need for God's mercy, strength, and protection. You will grow in knowing your Father, your Savior, your life-giving Spirit. We have it from Jesus himself, sealed with his blood. Ask—he will give. Seek—you

will find. Knock—he will open the door and welcome you in. There is no script, of course. I know that you will grow in ways impossible to predict. Sometimes you will be dismayed and discouraged at how hard the road seems.

If you lack wisdom, ask God. He does not reproach you for needing his help (James 1:5). Sometimes you will be delighted and encouraged at how directly and immediately the Lord helps you. And I know that in the end, you will be filled with joy. “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

» » »

Making It Your Own

1. Were there any places in this introduction where you thought, *but what about . . . ?*

(I'll make the questions harder in the future!)

2. Go back through this introduction with your highlighter and single out the sentence that most caught your attention. Why did you choose this sentence?

SECTION 1

OUR EXPERIENCE

The next three chapters aim to give you a feel for the destructiveness of anger and for its constructive potential. They aim to help you think clearly about your own tendencies. Seeing yourself more clearly sets the stage. Then explanations and solutions that come later will *connect* to where you actually struggle.

CHAPTER 1

Angry People

Perhaps you can identify with George Banks in the movie *Father of the Bride*. George (played by Steve Martin) gets into a conversation with his daughter's fiancé. He describes her this way,

Annie is a very passionate person and passionate people tend to overreact at times. Annie comes from a long line of major over-reactors. Me, I can definitely lose it. My mother, a nut. My grandfather, stories about him are legendary. The good news, however, is that this overreacting tends to get proportionately less by generation, so your kids could be normal.

Passionate people, major over-reactors, people who lose it. In the hands of Steve Martin such behavior is hilarious to watch, a bit maddening to live with, and touchingly human all the while.

But in real life, anger is the reaction that incinerates marriages and disintegrates families. It energizes gossip and guns down classmates. It divides churches, turns friendship into enmity, and erupts in road rage. It is the stuff of every form of grievance and bitterness. The fact that some of us overreact in less colorful ways does not mean that those who are quiet are not angry. Anger is also the basic DNA of complaining, brooding, irritability, and bickering. The "shoes" of problem anger are like a pair of open-heeled bathroom slippers. One size really does fit all. The crucial issues in anger touch every one of us.

This book is for all of us because we all experience anger. If you've always been strong-willed, argumentative, and volatile, you are in these pages. If a lifetime of disappointment and disillusionment has left you embittered, this is for you. And even if you're quieter, you're in this book too. In the way we do anger, some of us explode, some of us simmer, some of us seem dormant—but all of us experience anger. And if we don't, it's because we've anesthetized ourselves or detached.

For example, I was born easygoing. I can take no credit that my innate disposition is low-key. For many years I didn't think I had an anger problem. I found angry people puzzling and a bit intimidating. Why do they bother to get so bent out of shape over *that*? But either I've become a worse person as I've gotten older, or I've learned to know myself a bit better. Quiet brooding, defensive withdrawal, judgmental thoughts, low-grade irritability, a critical attitude, avoiding outright conflict, indifference to reparable wrongs—these are just my less dramatic brands of an anger problem. My personal tendency has never been to go on the offensive with frenzied hot war. I've specialized more in keeping a safe distance from conflicts—and, if necessary, engaging in a cold war.

Why would I of all people write a book on anger? My interest in anger has grown as I have come to realize that I too (in my own quiet way) am part of the problem of anger, not simply an observer or victim of others' anger. At the same time, I'm trying to help other people, some of whom operate in the incendiary mode, some who are deeply embittered, and some who are rather like me. We all need help.

I've known lots of angry people. During my last year in college I worked as the Saturday night bouncer at the Club Casablanca. On numerous occasions I got up close and personal with extremely surly customers. One reeling drunk got so incensed when I escorted him out of the bar that he threatened to come back with a gun and kill me. I quit on the spot rather than waiting to find out if he meant it.

Working in psychiatric hospitals for four years provided a steady education in the out-workings of bitterness and hostility. Forty hours a week on locked wards is an education in the dark things in the human soul. A lot of anger comes out in a psychiatric ward. And it has many unhappy companions: confusion, heartache, deceit, self-pity, fear, and—saddest of all—false hopes, shattered hopes, and no hope. I became familiar with an abyss of miseries to which none of us is immune.

Yes, I've known lots of people—including the person I see in the mirror—for whom anger goes bad, rather than doing good. Now, after more than forty years of doing counseling ministry, I could assemble a Hall of Fame—a roster of bitterness, destructiveness, and sheer unhappiness—called “Angry People I Have Known.” Let's look at several examples.

Domestic Gunslingers

Anger is not just a strongly felt emotion that takes place inside us. It's interpersonal. It affects others. I once counseled a couple who had a gunfight in their suburban house. Willy was upstairs with the pistol, Brenda downstairs with the rifle. They'd had words—the usual, daily bickering. It had gotten more heated than usual. Finally, ugly words escalated into domestic World War III. A half-dozen rounds of live fire zinged up and down that stairway! Their marital dispute blasted bullet holes in the sheetrock, scared the daylights out of the neighbors, and brought police sirens wailing to their door. Talking with me was part of their court-mandated alternative to felony charges. For some reason I've never forgotten this story!

You've probably never been in a gunfight. I never have either. But one landmark in understanding my own anger came when all I did was move a magazine two inches.

It was about ten o'clock one evening. My wife Nan and I had just gotten our fussy two-year-old off to bed. Dinner dishes overflowed

the sink. Toddler debris had turned the living room into a FEMA disaster site. A basket of clean laundry needed folding.

Oblivious to it all, I sprawled full length on the couch to read the latest issue of *National Geographic*. Nan walked in a few minutes later and said, “It sure would be nice to have some help cleaning up.” I lowered the magazine two inches closer to my face and buried my nose in my reading.

I realized, *I’m angry*, though I hadn’t said a word. But inside I was saying plenty: *It’s been a long day. I need a break. If only she’d asked more nicely. I don’t feel like doing it now. We could do it tomorrow. Go away and don’t bother me. Why is this happening to me?* But amazingly, sanity also intruded: *You’re angry. Love is patient, but you’re being impatient right now. Love is kind. You’re being unkind. Love gives. You’re being selfish. Your withdrawal is a form of hate.* I was arrested by what is true, by words of God that he made personal. I came to my senses and got up.

A gunfight is one way to cut another person off and protect your turf. Burying your head two inches deeper in a magazine is another way. But that night I made peace with the God who is patient, kind, and giving. And I also made peace with Nan, asked her forgiveness for my selfishness, and we tackled the dishes together.

The Volcano

Anger outbursts are not just isolated events. The underlying attitude can become a life-defining characteristic. Helen was in her sixties and so consumed with hatred that her hands and voice shook when she introduced herself. Her anger had destroyed her marriage, intimidated and alienated her children, cost her job after job, and driven away every person who ever tried to be her friend.

She spoke of grievances that went back decades. For example, years earlier she had run the audio ministry of a church. The minister would routinely preach for thirty-two to thirty-five minutes, rather than the twenty-eight minutes that allowed a sermon to fit

neatly on a half-hour audiotape (yes, it was a long time ago!). Helen's bitterness and gossiping (she had scores of similar grievances against scores of similarly benighted persons) eventually split that church.

Helen's wrath on the day I met her was as fresh and fierce as if all offenses had occurred twenty seconds ago, not five, twenty-five, or fifty years in the past. Her rage seethed continually, barely controllable, on the edge of exploding. She was "Mount St. Helens" (her son's wry nickname for her, and the reason he kept both his distance and his sanity). Sadly, she took every bit of alienation that she caused, every negative consequence, every broken relationship, and converted it into one more good reason to be angry at all those terrible people that life had inflicted on her.

You're probably not as petty and destructive as Helen. She was ready to go off without any provocation. But she's just an extreme version of a common problem.

When a little thing pushes your buttons, it says something big about the buttons inside you. When I moved that magazine closer to my nose, it didn't take any forethought. I just did it. If a moment of sanity had not arrested me and gotten me up off the couch, then that small grievance—and 10,000 more sure to follow—could have worked inside me to destroy our marriage. Bad anger doesn't just go away. It festers over a lifetime. And good, constructive, problem-solving anger—like mercy—doesn't just happen. It must be cultivated over a lifetime.

The Iceberg

Anger is the "hot" emotion by which we vent our displeasure. But some of the most ominous forms can be cold as ice. Jimmy was sixteen. He sat in the chair next to me, quite composed, bored in fact. His parents thought he ought to talk to someone, but he wasn't much interested in talking to me. Eventually we got past the monosyllabic, awkward silence phase. As Jimmy opened up a bit, he told story after story about how he'd been mistreated by his family,

classmates, teachers, God, and the whole godforsaken universe. He gave a detailed recitation of all the injustice, unfairness, betrayal, disappointment, offense, and plain old stupidity committed against him. He had a rap sheet on the whole world.

Jimmy played his parts to perfection: crime victim and aggrieved plaintiff, prosecuting attorney and hanging judge, unanimous jury, outraged public, and ever-so-willing executioner. Most of his stories seemed plausible, but none of the offenses sounded particularly outrageous. They were the things that happen to everyone. Two things struck me about Jimmy.

First, he spoke in an unvarying monotone. His emotions were flatline. He sounded like he was reading from a telemarketing script. This dull litany of grievance was scarier than outright anger. At one point I asked him, “Are you angry?” (I was inviting him to say the obvious, let it come out of his own mouth. It might move our conversation in a good direction if we could establish that at least we had something worth talking about.) Jimmy seemed taken aback for a moment. Then he recovered his cool, and said matter of factly, “Nah, I don’t get angry . . . *I get even.*” His anger was chilly, not hot. It was more “premeditated, cold-blooded murder” than “crime of passion.” He was not going to waste emotional energy on the vermin and trash that he had to deal with in life.

Second, Jimmy lived in a universe that featured *him*. Everything was all about one all-important, all-offended being. Every scene in his film, every page of his book, every news story in his daily paper circled around Jimmy—but he was never an agent or cause of anything. Every person, event, place, and object existed only to the degree that it affected his pleasure or displeasure. And because every other character in the story had dedicated his or her life to making Jimmy miserable, he felt entitled to this *modus operandi* of bland, cold vengeance.

The monotone and logical paranoia chilled me. Here was anger in the genocidal mode: efficient, decided, as matter-of-fact as taking out the garbage or exterminating bugs.

You're probably not as cold and vengeful as Jimmy. I'm not either. But lowering the *National Geographic* two inches? That was a cold moment. Some form of hostility lurks in every relationship characterized by a cool or chill. All human reactions and emotions, however complex, play variations on themes of love and hate. Distance and indifference don't look like anger on the surface, but when you poke at it, the anger will come out.

The Morass, the Misery . . . and the Possibility of Hope

Anger plays a significant role in a morass of interconnecting problems. And yet, in an almost inconceivable way, the right kind of anger can play a key role in solutions. Sorting all this out is the goal of this book. Let me tell a story.

One wintry afternoon many years ago, I was in the grocery store picking up a few items for dinner. A young mother came into the store at the same time. She was pushing her cart up the aisle ahead of me, with her four-year-old boy tagging along. It was hard to say how old she was. I'd guess twenty-five, but she could have been in her early thirties. Hard lines were already forming in her face. She had long, uncombed, blonde hair and was wearing an army jacket and worn-out sneakers. Her eyes had a slightly haunted look, not quite here, as if inwardly preoccupied with troubles from elsewhere, embittered, restless. It was the kind of face that troubles and concerns you.

Her little boy started to fuss as they worked their way down the snack aisle. He wanted a candy bar, and she wouldn't buy it for him. He whined, "But I want . . ."

She cut him off, "NO!"

He whined a little more.

She lit into him. "How many times do I have to tell you? NO. NO. NO. I don't want to hear it out of you. If you know what's good for you . . ." Her threat trailed off. She stopped her cart and looked

away, out through the plate glass of the storefront. I had stopped too, concerned how this drama was going to play out.

The boy sulked a moment, and then complained some more, tugging at her jacket. “But I want candy.”

She cursed him. “You’re a [blankety-blank] pest, and I don’t know why I bother to take you anywhere.” She looked away, glanced back at him with hatred, looked far, far away at nothing in particular.

He whined again. “But I want candy.”

She turned and slapped him across the face. He started to cry. She looked away, down past the candy and chips, over the checkout lines, out across the parking lot. I thought that perhaps she was trying to keep herself from screaming or from killing him.

She suddenly turned at him again, and bent halfway down. She was in his face, looming over him, her right index finger at a forty-five-degree angle three inches from his nose. “If you don’t shut the hell up right now, I’m going to walk right out of this store, and I’m going to leave you here. Do you hear that? I don’t want to hear you, and I don’t want to see your face. If you say one more word, I swear to God I’m going to get in the car, and I’m never coming back, and I don’t care if I never see you again.” She turned and made as if to walk away. After a couple of brisk steps, she turned halfway back to grab his arm with a jerk and say, “Just shut the hell up.”

She pushed her cart up the supermarket aisle. The boy followed along, muttering to himself, looking down at that rubberized steel wheel shuddering across the linoleum. He didn’t seem afraid of being abandoned. He lagged a good step behind his mother, and a step to the side, dragging just enough to irritate her, but not quite enough to detonate her.

They were a couple of really angry people.

It made me angry.

I felt angry at the mom. She was abusing her son. It’s plain wrong to do what she was doing. I felt angry at the boy. He was tormenting his mom. It’s plain wrong to do that. I felt angry at whatever

background evils made this woman's life such a dark, hellish nightmare. All the things that are so wrong: boyfriends who don't care, parents who messed up their own lives too, drug dealers, poverty. And I felt angry at the choices she made in response to her difficult life.

The anger I felt seemed clean and constructive compared to the irritations I more often feel. I didn't hate that mother and child. I cared, however powerless I was to intervene. I was angry—I hated what they were doing—in such a way that I wanted to help. I wished I could protect them, give them mercy, and help them change. It was one of those too-rare moments when anger seemed motivated by love, not self-interest. But the good intention went nowhere that day. I couldn't think of how to make a connection.

Thirty-five years later, this book is part of that incident going somewhere. That incident is one of the BWAs that made me want to reckon more thoughtfully and constructively with anger.

These three angers in the supermarket aren't like anything in a self-help book. Half those books teach techniques for maintaining a degree of detachment so you can keep your cool amid the irritants of life. The other half urges you to stand up for yourself, to own your anger in order to feel empowered. Both kinds of advice sound plausible, sort of, sometimes, when the problem you're dealing with is a minor irritant, or if the things you're angry about can actually be fixed.

Sure, if you take a deep breath and visualize the beach when you're stuck in traffic, the world seems like a nicer place. Sure, when you verbalize your expectations in a non-demanding way, it's more likely people will give you what you want. Sure, acknowledge what you're feeling.

But this scene in the supermarket is not about irritants or about managing reality to get more of what you want and to feel better. It's about evils. It's about things that are wrong and destructive. They need to be made right. What it takes to make it right is not obvious, but the right kind of anger is part of the solution. Platitudes, affirming self-talk, mindfulness, self-assertion, or medication can never

do what actually needs doing. None of these angers is explained or resolved by the self-help industry. But they are what life is about.

Think with me about what we witness in this story. I'll make some assumptions, but I think they're plausible.

First, the boy's anger was the kind we're most familiar with: "I want my way. When I don't get it, I make a stink. I feel sorry for myself. It's so unfair if I don't get what I want when I want it. I'll manipulate you to get my way, and bully if necessary. I'll punish anyone who crosses my will." This sort of anger springs up when you want something and don't get it. Anger whines and sulks. Anger persists. Anger makes a scene. Anger is savvy and strategic.

We're all familiar with the boy's kind of anger: been there, done a bit of that, and at the time felt justified. An identifiable desire gets frustrated, and anger powers up from within to attack whatever impedes your will. It's a way to get your way, or to punish those who cross you, or to register your complaint. That little boy had a very grown-up problem. For one thing, he could never love his mom as long as he was using her. For another, he was becoming like her.

The mom's anger was like in kind, but not so simple. Her anger includes, but isn't limited to, "I want my kid to be quiet and not embarrass me. He's bugging me so I'm angry." Her anger had ripened through the years into a more complex evil. It has more history tangled into it. It incorporates more strands of current events. It wraps the despair of a bleak future into its aggression. It came as a torrent of mixed feelings, blind motives, and bad experiences. It was raw hostility, and it was also despair, fear, habit, regret, hurt, disappointment, consequences of past bad choices, lack of good role models, accumulated provocations, tight finances, mutually destructive relationships, lies believed, lousy life options, accumulated resentments, futile goals, and perhaps a hangover.

Her anger is half-right—many of the things that happened to her are wrong. And her anger has gone all wrong. It is one distillation of life "having no hope and without God in the world," as Ephesians 2:12 puts it. Her anger at her son was cosmic in scope and scale:

“Right now this kid represents *all* the bad choices I ever made and *all* the bad things I ever suffered and *all* the life I’m never going to have. It’s not just that he wants a candy bar . . . It’s that he exists, that I exist. I’m angry at everything.” Many desires, many falsehoods, and many fears drive her complicated self-destruction. She can never deal constructively with her kid being a brat when she half-resents his very existence and has no hope for her own.

Most of us have known at least a taste of the mother’s darker and more intricate passion. Often anger brings far more than current events onto the table. Often anger obeys more than one desire.

Perhaps you lived a period of your life in the waste of wraths and sorrows. Perhaps you’re there now. No one wants life to be hellish. Maybe you hate yourself for being hateful. But you don’t see any way out. You don’t know where to begin. How do you untangle your own angry reactions?

Most readers have probably never gotten that far lost, but perhaps you’ve experienced pain from someone else’s morass of anger exploding onto you. This mother and son were attacking and wounding each other in the aisle—you can feel what it is like to be treated that way. Rage brings misery to those on the receiving end. It is difficult to negotiate your way through life when you live in the shadow of the volcano. How can you go forward constructively rather than retaliating, cowering, or bolting?

Perhaps you are trying to help someone else who lives in the morass. If you’ve reached out to troubled people, you’ve often run up against such hopelessness. Many unhappy strugglers don’t know where to begin and see no way out. A person like the mother in the grocery store often justifies and defends the very things that are destroying her. How can you help such tangled people? It’s hard for a would-be helper to know where to begin and to see any way forward. A real understanding of anger and a true solution to anger problems must go as deep as these problems.

And it must go deeper. The story is also about the impulse toward a qualitatively different kind of anger—something good. I’m

not so familiar with the kind of anger that I felt in the supermarket that day. It seemed right. I ought to feel that way more often. It was inextricably mingled with love. It was a kind of anger that cared. It intended to do something constructive, however small, amid the fire-storm of evils. I hated what both the mom and the boy did to each other. But it was a loving hate. It seemed just: “That’s wrong and unfair, and it should stop.” It seemed merciful: “If only we could bind up what is so broken.” It animated some sort of redemptive impulse: “How can what is now so wrong be made right again?”

All this is the deeper and wider problem of anger that I want us to grapple with together in this book.

People Like You and Me

Anger stands out when it wears its colorful and dramatic costumes: violent, relentlessly embittered, ice-cold, or flailing in misery and confusion. But the difference in the angers described above and the anger that you or I experience is a difference of a degree, not of kind. We’re all more alike than different. So I can get irritated when someone is guilty of disturbing the peace of my personal comfort and convenience. I can get irritated at incompetent customer service reps. I can get irritated when someone doesn’t take the time to understand me accurately, caricatures what I believe and do, and disses me on the basis of what they’ve imagined.

You know some things about me and about people I’ve known. And I also know some things about you, even if we’ve never met.

First, you get angry too. Of course you are not exactly like Helen or me or other members of our rogues’ gallery. Then again, the differences are probably matters of degree. You can probably identify with these people, even if your way of doing life operates in a different key or tempo or volume.

Second, I know that your anger is sometimes justified. Someone else did something truly wrong. We live in a world that contains significant provocations. There are evils worth getting upset about.

Maybe there have been times you handled the provocation rightly too. Just anger is supposed to motivate fair-minded, constructive, and energetic problem-solving. Have you ever had a taste of doing it right? Anger is meant to be laced with mercy and loving intent. Does that ring any bells? Have you ever experienced someone else—a parent, coach, coworker, teacher, pastor, spouse, friend—who got mad in a way that actually brought good? It sometimes happens.

Third, I know that many times your anger is not justified, or it gets blown out of proportion. You were irritable. You got into nitpicking or feeling sorry for yourself. Perhaps you take things personally that aren't about you. (Have you ever complained about the weather or cursed in a traffic jam?) Perhaps you misinterpret or exaggerate what someone else says or does. It can be hard to see and admit because we seem so plausible to ourselves. But I bet this is so. You were ruled by your agenda, your expectations, your convenience, your pleasure, and your fears. You couldn't see it at the time, but when somebody or something got in your way, you lost it.

Fourth, I know that there have been other times when it was right for you to be bothered about what happened, but your anger still got out of line. What you thought, what you said, and what you did was hostile, even mean-spirited. You got stuck in being judgmental. In a nutshell, you returned evil for evil, as if two wrongs could make it right. You became essentially destructive, not basically constructive. Your anger created more wreckage, more hurt, and more alienation, rather than positive solutions.

Fifth, I know that whether you were right or wrong to get upset, there have been times when anger at what happened hung around a lot longer than it should. You became bitter at a betrayal and couldn't let it go. You brooded, replaying video clips in your mind. You rehearsed. How wrong she was! How many reasons I have to be upset at him!

Sixth, if you've piled up some mileage on life's odometer, I know that your anger probably has accumulated some complexities. Anger isn't necessarily a cause-and-effect reaction to one particular event.

Often there's a cumulative effect to life's disappointments and frustrations. Take a daily dose of Sartre's "hell is other people!"¹ Mix in the reality that "hell is myself," and life simply grinds you down, burns you up, and wears you out. Disillusioned people may not fuel the hot fires of anger outburst. Why bother to get uselessly upset? They may not point to any one specific grievance that makes them bitter. But cynicism is a close kin to anger gone bad.

Seventh, I know something about you that we've barely mentioned but will discuss at some length in later chapters. There are times when you, like me, have the opposite problem. You really ought to get upset, but you don't. Something truly wrong is happening—not necessarily to you—and you don't care enough to care. You aren't wired to pay attention and react. You ignore or shrug off things that are wrong and ought to be tackled. Maybe you don't even notice. Maybe you even endorse and perpetrate the wrong.

In an odd way, absence of appropriate outrage is also an anger problem. It's not a problem anyone ever seeks help for. But we ought to. When the impulse to anger is rekeyed into something good and constructive, it includes the ability to be rightly aroused against true evils.

Finally, we know one more thing about each other. Every one of us has a hard time changing. It's hard to think straight about anger. It grabs you and it's got you. The ancient Romans had a saying, *Ira furor brevis est*, "Anger is a brief madness." Anger makes us crazy, blind, confused, and confusing. The beams of sanity are rare. Have you ever noticed and marveled later at your irrationality? *What came over me? How could I have thought that, said that, done that?* Sometimes the insanity is not so brief. It settles in and stays a while. Sometimes the habit runs on for a lifetime—a hamster wheel you don't ever get off.

How can you figure out what's wrong and needs fixing? How do you know what you should have done instead, and what you should do now? How do you separate the destructive parts of anger from the constructive parts? How can you learn to get upset about the

right things *and* to express your concern in the right way? Where can you find help that really helps?

We need help. We need forgiveness. We need both vision and strength to change. We need a Savior—on scene, active, committed, practical, personal—to get mixed up with our troubles.

Anger? We're in this one together. And so is Jesus.

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Making It Your Own

1. This chapter has been packed full. Go back through and pull out your yellow-highlighted sentence. What about that sentence strikes you?
2. Of all the forms of anger portrayed, select two or three that are most characteristic of your life. Give a concrete illustration.
3. Have you ever had a taste of anger going right? Describe specifically what was happening. What did you feel, think, and do? What was the outcome? Have you ever witnessed someone else doing anger in a way that was truly constructive?
4. An ancient, wise, prayer makes this request of God: “Let the design of your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace.”

Wherever anger misfires, we have two needs. We need God to intervene in love, and we need to do something.

So ask God to help you. He willingly meets us in our need: *Lord, let the purposes of your compassion and mercy shine into the waste of my wraths and sorrows, and give me peace.*

And commit to work. You are already making time to read. Continue to put in the thought and effort to pursue greater wisdom.