

project constant hope

How can I pray
when I am
angry?

What the Bible says
about expressing anger

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION



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INTRODUCTION

Controlling your temper is better than being a hero who captures a city.

Proverbs 16.32

We've all been in situations when we find it hard—or almost impossible—to control our temper. In the heat of anger, harsh and hurtful words can be said. In the worst-case scenario, anger can cause us to act in ways that bring harm or even death to others. Our anger may be directed toward an individual. Or, when our anger stems from unprovoked acts of terrorism or societal violence, it may be directed toward a group or a nation. How do we learn to control our temper and channel anger appropriately?

It is important to recognize that anger is a very natural human emotion. Psychologists acknowledge that it is necessary to identify and express our anger (see the Appendix). While the Bible often speaks against uncontrolled anger, it also recognizes the necessity of expressing anger, expressing it even to God. Turning our anger over to God demonstrates our trust in God.

To understand anger we must understand ourselves, what makes us angry, and our own potential to do good or harm. We can suppress anger—but somehow it always escapes, leaking out like slow poison, or exploding in rage.

When we confess our anger faithfully and honestly to God, he can change it into something for good—surprisingly, it can even turn into something extraordinary and life-changing.

God wants to use us to bring about good, and God can use our anger as well. We can learn to channel our anger into a driving force for good.

This booklet on anger is designed to work as a complete tool for anger management, with each section building upon the ones that precede it. But it is also possible to study each section independently.

This resource is interactive in that it uses a questioning style to lead to new insights about anger. Few of the questions have a “right” answer. Instead they are meant to encourage you to bring your feelings and your thoughts into dialogue with specific Bible passages. Please don’t rush into answering the questions. Spend time reflecting on your answers and why you answered the way you did.

When any question provokes a strong reaction, stop and explore it carefully. Be sure to note any questions and thoughts you have about the Bible passages. The object is to get you into conversation with God and God’s Word.

Each of the five section ends with a time for prayer. Feel free to add your own prayers, or to be creative in bringing your thoughts and feelings before God. Take a moment each time to address God directly, even if it seems senseless or difficult, or even if you don’t believe God is listening. Give God the chance to answer.

How can I pray when I am angry?

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1 IS MY ANGER OUT OF CONTROL?

In the opening chapters of the Bible we find the story of two brothers, the children of Adam and Eve. Theirs is a story of how jealousy led to anger, causing one brother to turn against the other.

Adam and Eve had a son. Then Eve said, “I’ll name him Cain because I got him with the help of the LORD.” Later she had another son and named him Abel.

Abel became a sheep farmer, but Cain farmed the land. One day, Cain gave part of his harvest to the LORD, and Abel also gave an offering to the Lord. He killed the first-born lamb from one of his sheep and gave the LORD the best parts of it. The LORD was pleased with Abel and his offering, but not with Cain and his offering. This made Cain so angry that he could not hide his feelings.

The LORD said to Cain:

“What’s wrong with you? Why do you have such an angry look on your face? If you had done the right thing, you would be smiling. But you did the wrong thing, and now sin is waiting to attack you like a lion. Sin wants to destroy you, but don’t let it!”

Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go for a walk.” And when they were out in a field, Cain killed him.

Genesis 4.1-8

THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever been so angry that you wanted to hit or seriously hurt someone? Have you ever said—or even thought to yourself—“I could kill that person!”

Cain was so angry that he could not control or hide his feelings. When have you been in such a situation?

Why was Cain so angry? Do you think he had a right to be angry?

What did God have to do with Cain's anger?

What makes you that angry? Name a few things. You might start by thinking of some recent times when you have been angry.

If you're studying this booklet as part of a group, mention any of the things on your list you feel comfortable sharing. If you're studying on your own, take some time in the next few days to ask someone close to you what makes them angry. If you're comfortable doing so, share with that person what makes you angry.

How do people's lists differ?

You don't have to say their names out loud, but who makes you angry? You might think of co-workers, friends, supervisors, children, family members. At times anyone can do something that makes you angry.

Sometimes we don't immediately anticipate the consequences of our anger. Do you think Cain really planned to kill his brother? Why or why not? Do you think he was fully aware of the consequences of his anger?

When have you reacted out of anger, causing more harm than you expected?

What happened after the anger had taken its toll? What were the consequences?

The story from the Bible continues ...

Afterwards the LORD asked Cain, "Where is Abel?"

"How should I know?" he answered.

"Am I supposed to look after my brother?"

Then the LORD said:

"Why have you done this terrible thing?

You killed your own brother, and his blood flowed onto the ground. Now his blood is calling out for me to punish you. And so, I'll put you under a curse. Because you killed Abel and made his blood run out on the ground, you will never be able to farm the land again. If you try to farm the land, it won't produce anything for you. From now on, you'll be without a home, and you'll spend the rest of your life wandering from place to place.

"This punishment is too hard!" Cain said. "You're making me leave my home and live far from you.

I will have to wander about without a home, and just anyone could kill me."

"No!" the LORD answered. "Anyone who kills you will be punished seven times worse than I am punishing you." So the LORD put a mark on Cain to warn

everyone not to kill him. But Cain had to go far from the LORD and live in the Land of Wandering, which is east of Eden.

Genesis 4.9-16

THINK ABOUT IT

Do you think Cain's punishment for killing Abel was appropriate? Just right? Too severe? What punishment would you place on Cain in this situation? From your reading of Genesis 4, what do you think was the hardest part of the punishment for Cain to bear?

We know that Cain was angry with Abel. What feelings do you think God had toward Cain?

Why do you think God protected Cain?

PRAY ABOUT IT

LORD God, I know it is all too easy for me to become so angry that I feel like hurting or killing others. Teach me to take responsibility for my anger and my feelings of hatred. Guard me from sinning and protect me from seeking revenge when others do me wrong. Amen.

2 IS GOD ANGRY WITH ME?

Since the earliest days of human civilization, people have worried about making God angry. “Good things” were normally seen as signs of God’s favor or blessing. On the other hand, “bad things” were considered the result of God’s disfavor or anger. We must have done something to make God angry with us, people might have thought. Something has displeased God, and God is now getting back at us.

We read in the book of Deuteronomy that Moses described clearly for the people of Israel the blessings that would come from obeying God. At the same time, Moses described the consequences of disobedience.

Moses told the people of Israel that if they obey the laws and teachings of the LORD God, they would receive these blessings:

The LORD will make your businesses and your farms successful.

You will have many children. You will harvest large crops, and your herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats will produce many young.

You will have plenty of bread to eat.

The LORD will make you successful in your daily work.

The LORD will help you defeat your enemies and make them scatter in all directions.

The LORD your God is giving you the land, and he will make sure you are successful in everything you do. Your harvests will be so large that your storehouses will be full.

If you follow and obey the LORD, he will make you his own special people, just as he promised.

Deuteronomy 28.3-9

Moses also told the people of Israel what would happen if they chose not to obey the laws and teaching of the LORD God. They could expect these consequences:

Your businesses and farms will fail.

You won't have enough bread to eat.

You'll have only a few children, your crops will be small, and your herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats won't produce many young.

The LORD will make you fail in everything you do.

No matter what you try to accomplish, the LORD will confuse you, and you will feel his anger. You won't last long, and you may even meet with disaster, all because you rejected the LORD.

Deuteronomy 28.16-20

What specific things would make God that angry? Failure to obey God and worshipping idols or other gods really brings about God's fury.

Moses told the people of Israel:

If even one of you worships idols, you will be like the root of a plant that produces bitter, poisonous fruit. You may be an Israelite and know all about the LORD's agreement with us, but he won't bless you if you rebel against him. You may think you can get away with it, but you will cause the rest of Israel to be punished along with you. The LORD will be furious, and instead of forgiving you, he will separate you from the other tribes. Then he will destroy you, by piling on you all the curses in *The Book of God's Law*, and you will be forgotten forever.

Deuteronomy 29.18b-21

THINK ABOUT IT

God does not want to be that angry with us. God does not want to punish us or do anything that would bring us harm and suffering. God created the world for goodness and peace and desires people to experience the joy of fellowship and harmony with God.

Name a few things you can do to please God and invite God's blessing and favor.

But we recognize that it is sometimes difficult to stay on God's "good side." After all, we are humans with the ability to choose disobedience and sin—and it often seems that humans are prone to choose sin over goodness.

Sin is always displeasing to God. And when one act of sin leads to another and to another and to still more sins, what do you think will be God's reaction? Read on to discover what one of God's prophets had to say about that.

During the seventh century B.C., the people of Judah looked forward to a future time when they believed the LORD would make them powerful and would wipe out their enemies. This future time of justice, victory, and celebration was called "the day of the LORD." But the prophet Zephaniah told the people that when the

day of the LORD came, not everything would be good—he also warned that all who had not obeyed the LORD would be punished.

The great day of the **LORD**
is coming soon, very soon.
On that terrible day,
fearsome shouts of warriors
will be heard everywhere.
It will be a time of anger—
of trouble and torment,
of disaster and destruction,
of darkness and despair,
of storm clouds and shadows,
of trumpet calls
and battle cries
against fortified cities
and mighty fortresses.

Zephaniah 1.14-16

But Zephaniah reminded the people what they had known for some time: that they could avoid being swept away by the LORD's anger if they would obey and worship only the LORD.

You disgraceful nation,
gather around,
before it's too late.
The **LORD** has set a time
when his fierce anger
will strike like a storm
and sweep you away.
If you humbly obey the **LORD**,
then come and worship him.
If you do right and are humble,

perhaps you will be safe
on that day when the LORD
turns loose his anger.

Zephaniah 2.1-3

The Bible includes many passages that tell us that God's anger can certainly bring total destruction. During the eighth century B.C., there was a time when the LORD was angry with the nation of Israel for becoming too proud and forgetting about God and what God wanted from them. The Lord spoke these words through the prophet Hosea:

I, the LORD, have been your God
since the time
 you were in Egypt.
I am the only God you know,
 the only one who can save.
I took care of you
 in a thirsty desert.
I fed you till you were satisfied,
then you became proud
 and forgot about me.
Now I will attack like a lion,
 ambush you like a leopard,
and rip you apart like a bear
 robbed of her cubs.
I will gnaw on your bones,
as though I were a lion
 or some other wild animal.
Israel, you are done for.
 Don't expect help from me.
You wanted a king and rulers.
Where is your king now?
 What cities have rulers?
In my anger, I gave you a king;
 in my fury, I took him away.

Hosea 13.4-11

THINK ABOUT IT

It may be hard to learn that such verses are in the “holy” Bible. Think a few minutes about your reaction to these verses that describe God’s anger.

Think about some recent times you’ve been angry at someone. Was that person a stranger or someone you knew? How close are you to that person?

Anger itself assumes some relationship. Being angry means that something is going on that affects us strongly, something that we care deeply about.

It does not justify abuse, and it isn’t pleasant, but anger can be a sign of really being in relationship with someone. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Look at the world. Think how often we fail to be the people and societies that God wants us to be. Think how frustrated God must get with us at times, watching us act repeatedly in ways that we know will not please God.

Do you think God’s anger can be a sign that God cares about us?

But God’s anger is not the whole story. God’s judgment of our sin and disobedience can be terrible, but God’s love is even more remarkable—God’s love knows no bounds!

The **Lord** is merciful!
He is kind and patient,
and his love never fails.
The **Lord** won’t always be angry
and point out our sins;

he doesn't punish us
as our sins deserve.

How great is God's love for all
who worship him?
Greater than the distance
between heaven and earth!
How far has the LORD taken
our sins from us?
Farther than the distance
from east to west!

Psalm 103.8-12

The sin of humans may be great. But no matter how spread out that sin is—whether it's your sin or the sin of others—God is ready to forgive it and remove the judgment on it. God is always ready to interrupt anger with forgiveness.

The apostle Paul, a first-century Christian, tells us that we are now kept safe from God's anger because God sent Jesus to die for us so that we would be set free from the power of sin.

Christ died for us at a time when we were helpless and sinful. No one is really willing to die for an honest person, though someone might be willing to die for a truly good person. But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

But there is more! Now that God has accepted us because Christ sacrificed his life's blood, we will also be kept safe from God's anger. Even when we were God's enemies, he made peace with us, because his Son died for us. Yet something even greater than friendship is ours. Now that we are at peace with God, we will be saved by his Son's life. And in addition to everything else, we are happy because God sent our Lord Jesus Christ to make peace with us.

Romans 5.6-11

PRAY ABOUT IT

Lord God, I know you get angry at my stubbornness and the ways I disobey you. Help me now to focus on your great love for me and your willingness to forgive and accept me as your dear child. Thank for your love and the ways you teach me how to live for you. Amen.

3 DOES GOD HEAR ME WHEN I'M ANGRY?

The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 prayers and songs used by the ancient people of Israel in their worship of the LORD God. What makes many of the psalms so meaningful even today is that they express a range of human emotions: from sadness to joy, from hopelessness to hope, and even from anger to acceptance. The writers of these psalms often let God know when they were angry.

The writer of this psalm felt hurt and rejected by God.

I pray to you, Lord God,
and I beg you to listen.
In days filled with trouble,
I search for you.
And at night I tirelessly
lift my hands in prayer,
refusing comfort.
When I think of you,
I feel restless and weak.

Because of you, Lord God,
I can't sleep.
I am restless
and can't even talk.
I think of times gone by,
of those years long ago.
Each night my mind
is flooded with questions:
"Have you rejected me forever?
Won't you be kind again?
Is this the end of your love
and your promises?
Have you forgotten

how to have pity?
Do you refuse to show mercy
because of your anger?"
Then I said, "God Most High,
what hurts me most
is that you no longer help us
with your mighty arm."

Psalm 77.1-10

Another writer asked God to destroy all enemies.

Our God, don't just sit there,
silently doing nothing!
Your hateful enemies
are turning against you
and rebelling.
They are sly, and they plot
against those you treasure.

Our God, scatter them around
like dust in a whirlwind.
Just as flames destroy forests
on the mountains,
pursue and terrify them
with storms of your own.
Make them blush with shame,
until they turn and worship
you, our **Lord**.
Let them be forever ashamed
and confused.

Let them die in disgrace.
Make them realize that you
are the **Lord** Most High,
the only ruler of earth!

Psalm 83.1-3, 13-18

The following writer uses prayer to express frustration with God's seeming silence. Put yourself in the psalm writer's place and think of a time when you have strongly desired God to act on your behalf.

I praise you, God!
Don't keep silent.
Destructive and deceitful lies
are told about me,
and hateful things are said
for no reason.
I had pity and prayed
for my enemies,
but their words to me
were harsh and cruel.
For being friendly and kind,
they paid me back
with meanness and hatred.
My enemies said,
"Find some worthless fools
to accuse him of a crime.
Try him and find him guilty!
Consider his prayers a lie.
Cut his life short
and let someone else
have his job.
Make orphans of his children
and a widow of his wife;
make his children beg for food
and live in the slums.

"Let the people he owes
take everything he owns.
Give it all to strangers.
Don't let anyone be kind to him
or have pity on the children
he leaves behind.

Bring an end to his family,
and from now on let him be
a forgotten man.

“Don’t let the LORD forgive
the sins of his parents
and his ancestors.

Don’t let the LORD forget
the sins of his family,
or let anyone remember
his family ever lived.

He was so cruel to the poor,
homeless, and discouraged
that they died young.

“He cursed others.

Now place a curse on him!

He never wished others well.

Wish only trouble for him!

He cursed others more often
than he dressed himself.

Let his curses strike him deep,
just as water and olive oil
soak through to our bones.

Let his curses surround him,
just like the clothes
he wears each day.”

Those are the cruel things
my enemies wish for me.

Let it all happen to them!

Psalm 109.1-20

THINK ABOUT IT

Psalm 109 may be one of the angriest compositions in the Bible. Some people may even have a hard time reading it. How did you respond to it as you were reading it?

Think about your worst enemy or someone you think of as truly evil. Now read this chapter aloud like you mean it. Try reading it in your angriest possible voice.

Can you do it? If that enemy were able to hear you pray like this, would they be shaking in their boots?

When have you been as angry as the person who wrote this psalm? Name a few things you think would cause you to get this angry.

If you're in a group and feel comfortable, share with others some of the things on your list.

Do you think it's acceptable to pray to God with this kind of anger? Remind yourself that there are some angry prayers in the Bible.

Passages such as the Psalms remind us that God can listen to and handle our most violent anger. Fortunately

God responds to anger better than people usually do!
God has been listening to this kind of prayer for ages.

But what about anger that is directed at God!

*We trust that God is good, and we put our hope
in God. Do you ever find it hard to believe this statement? Can
you always see God's goodness? What about when violence strikes
down innocent people? Or when good people are oppressed and
abused by powerful evildoers? When have you felt that God was
far away from our human situation?*

*There's a story about those same questions in the Bible. Job, a
good man, suddenly lost all his children and property. Feeling
totally abandoned, Job was able to express his anger to
God...openly and intensely!*

I beg you, God, don't forget!
My life is just a breath,
and trouble lies ahead.
I will vanish from sight,
and no one, including you,
will ever see me again.
I will disappear in the grave
or vanish from sight
like a passing cloud.
Never will I return home;
soon I will be forgotten.

And so, I cry out to you
in agony and distress.
Am I the sea or a sea monster?
Is that why you imprison me?
I go to bed, hoping for rest,
but you torture me
with terrible dreams.

I'd rather choke to death
than live in this body.
Leave me alone and let me die;
my life has no meaning.

What makes you so concerned
about us humans?
Why do you test us
from sunrise to sunset?
Won't you look away
just long enough
for me to swallow?
Why do you watch us so closely?
What's it to you, if I sin?
Why am I your target
and such a heavy burden?

Job 7.7-20

In another story from the Bible, an Israelite woman named Naomi experienced the death of her husband and her two sons in a foreign land. She must have believed that God had turned against her. Without any means of support, she decided to return to her home in Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Upon her return, she expressed her bitterness to the women who came out to greet her.

“Don't call me Naomi any longer! Call me Mara, because God has made my life bitter. I had everything when I left, but the LORD has brought me back with nothing. How can you still call me Naomi, when God has turned against me and made my life so hard?”

Ruth 1.20, 21

It certainly seems that God sometimes acts like our enemy! An unknown writer, writing at the time of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C., said it this way:

The Lord was like an enemy!
I have suffered much
because God was angry.
He chased me into a dark place,
where no light could enter.
I am the only one he punishes
over and over again,
without ever stopping.
God caused my skin and flesh
to waste away,
and he crushed my bones.
He attacked and surrounded me
with hardships and trouble;
he forced me to sit in the dark
like someone long dead.

Lamentations 2.5a, 3.1-6

THINK ABOUT IT

You don't have to decide right away whether the author of this lament is right or wrong to accuse God in this way, that is, whether or not God was an angry bone-crusher. But we know that this cry came from deeply-felt hurt, a wound all the more painful because it seemed to come from God.

We also know that God did not reject or ignore this complaint. Is it possible that by listening intently to such pain and anger, God makes it more tolerable?

What have you been reluctant to complain about to God? Have you experienced hurt or disappointment that you think God is responsible for? What is the worst thing you've ever thought about God?

You might write it down, or just voice it in your mind. But do so without fear of condemnation. God will not reject your thoughts and feelings, no matter how angry or bad they seem to you. Remember: God is able to hear you at your worst and still love you without condition. Reflect a few minutes on this affirmation.

PRAY ABOUT IT

Hear now the prayers of my heart, Lord. I bring my most inner feelings and most bitter thoughts before you, knowing that you love me anyway. Thank you for bearing me and understanding me completely. I claim and believe that I am your child. Amen.

4 CAN ANGER MOTIVATE ME TO DO GOOD?

The Scriptures remind us over and over again that God gets angry – angry at sin and disobedience and acts of injustice. The same is true about Jesus, God's own Son.

Jesus was saddened and angered by injustice. When he saw the temple turned into a place of exploitation, he became very angry.

Jesus went into the temple and chased out everyone who was selling or buying. He turned over the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of the ones who were selling doves. He told them, “The Scriptures say, ‘My house should be called a place of worship.’ But you have turned it into a place where robbers hide.”

Blind and lame people came to Jesus in the temple, and he healed them. But the chief priests and teachers of the Law of Moses were angry when they saw his miracles and heard the children shouting praises to the Son of David. The men said to Jesus, “Don’t you hear what those children are saying?”

“Yes I do!” Jesus answered. “Don’t you know that the Scriptures say, ‘Children and infants will sing praises?’” Then Jesus left the city and went out to the village of Bethany, where he spent the night.

Matthew 21.12-17

THINK ABOUT IT

It doesn't specifically say so, but it sure sounds like Jesus was angry here. How do you think Jesus was feeling? Which of his actions suggest this emotion?

Jesus was angry enough to cause a scene...and to disrupt business as usual. Is it possible that he was also angry at the priests and teachers for not "seeing" what the children saw? When have you been angry that others don't see things the way you see them?

Another time, Jesus became angry when religious leaders disapproved of his healing someone on the Sabbath.

The next time that Jesus went into the meeting place, a man with a crippled hand was there. The Pharisees wanted to accuse Jesus of doing something wrong, and they kept watching to see if Jesus would heal him on the Sabbath.

Jesus told the man to stand up where everyone could see him. Then he asked, "On the Sabbath should we do good deeds or evil deeds? Should we save someone's life or destroy it?" But no one said a word.

Jesus was angry as he looked around at the people. Yet he felt sorry for them because they were so stubborn. Then he told the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did, and his bad hand was healed.

Mark 3.1-5

THINK ABOUT IT

Jesus got angry. Had you ever thought about this before? Does being a person of peace mean you can't get angry? Describe the things that made Jesus angry.

Name things in the world you feel it's okay to be angry about.

Do you think these are things God also gets angry about?

If you're in a group and feel comfortable doing so, share with others some of the things on your list. If you're studying on your own, take some time in the next few days to ask someone close to you what things in the world make them angry. If you're comfortable doing so, share with that person some of the things from your list.

Anger is not automatically destructive. Neither does anger always lead to acts of violence. Anger in the service of God and in response to injustice can become a tremendous resource, a great source of energy.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang a revolutionary song that demonstrates God's concern for justice.

Mary said:

With all my heart
I praise the Lord,
and I am glad
because of God my Savior.
God cares for me,
his humble servant.
From now on,
all people will say
God has blessed me.
God All-Powerful has done
great things for me,
and his name is holy.
He always shows mercy
to everyone
who worships him.

The Lord has used
his powerful arm
to scatter those
who are proud.
God drags strong rulers
from their thrones
and puts humble people
in places of power.
God gives the hungry
good things to eat,
and sends the rich away
with nothing.
God helps his servant Israel
and is always merciful
to his people.
The Lord made this promise
to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his family
forever!

Luke 1.46-55

THINK ABOUT IT

You may not have ever associated this Bible passage with anger. It doesn't mention anger or wrath. People over the centuries have heard it as a song of hope. And it is.

Mary sings about a world where the whole order of things has been turned upside-down. But the world we see is so often a world where unjust rulers oppress the weak, where the poor go hungry while the rich feast—is a world to be angry at. God's people have always prayed for the coming of a different and better world—a world in which God and God's ways are in control.

But we, just like Mary, live in a world that falls far short of this ideal. So we sing with her, feeling both anger and hope.

Anger as the source of energy for change has a long and positive tradition. The Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) got mad indeed and, by advocating for justice, have saved thousands of lives. In Argentina, mothers protesting the disappearance and murder of their loved ones bonded together to demand an accounting from the government and eventually brought down the military government. These holy mothers, like Mary before them, suggest a way to make anger motivate us toward goodness.

To be sure, anger can lead to violence. But name some ways your anger can lead you toward something positive and desirable.

PRAY ABOUT IT

With all my heart I praise you Lord, and I am glad you work with me to bring about goodness. Teach me to be angry at the things you hate: injustice, cruelty, oppression, intolerance — especially when I find them in my own thoughts and actions. Accept my anger, God, and use it to heal and not to destroy. For with you, all things are possible. Amen.

5 WHAT DO I DO WITH ANGER?

Anger is a powerful emotion. The Bible instructs us to work hard to keep from letting anger cloud our judgment and lead us to do things we will later regret.

My dear friends, you should be quick to listen and slow to speak or to get angry. If you are angry, you cannot do any of the good things that God wants done.

James 1.19, 20

Jesus said:

You know that our ancestors were told, “Do not murder” and “A murderer must be brought to trial.” But I promise you that if you are angry with someone, you will have to stand trial. If you call someone a fool, you will be taken to court. And if you say that someone is worthless, you will be in danger of the fires of hell.

So if you are about to place your gift on the altar and remember that someone is angry with you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. Make peace with that person, then come back and offer your gift before God.

Before you are dragged into court, make friends with the person who has accused you of doing wrong. If you don't, you will be handed over to the judge and then to the officer who will put you in jail. I promise you that you will not get out until you have paid the last cent you owe.

Matthew 5.21-26

THINK ABOUT IT

Is Jesus saying that getting angry with someone is just like committing murder? Is he telling us not to be angry?

Is he saying that anger is dangerous or that anger can cause people to judge us and become our enemies?

Maybe Jesus is also saying that our anger brings us before God's judgment. Think about what happens in the courtroom and how some cases turn out. Think about the time and expense involved. Many lawyers will admit that it's often better to make peace or amends outside of court than to seek judgment inside court—even if you've got a good case.

Why do you think Jesus told us to go find the person who is angry with us, rather than the person we are angry with?

As we continue reading this booklet, we understand that anger is not forbidden to us. Anger is a part of being human. Anger happens. But we have choices about what to do with our anger.

Don't get so angry that you sin. Don't go to bed angry and don't give the devil a chance.

Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others. Don't yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude. Instead, be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ.

Ephesians 4.26, 27, 31, 32

THINK ABOUT IT

The author of Ephesians seems to be talking about anger that is out-of-control and about the danger of letting anger, instead of God, rule your life.

Think of people you know who always appear to be angry. What do you think life is like for them? Is it possible for an angry person ever to be satisfied? happy? relaxed? thankful?

Physically, how does anger make you feel? Do you ever notice a tightness, a burning, a churning, an ache, a numbness? Where? Take a few minutes to remind yourself where you hold your anger and how it makes you feel. Write your thoughts here.

If you're in a group and feel comfortable doing so, share with others some of the things on your list. If you're studying this on your own, ask someone close to you where and how they feel their anger.

Are these generally pleasant, healthy feelings?

Being possessed by anger is itself a cruel form of bondage. Richard Allen was an ex-slave who helped found the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in the early part of the nineteenth century. He had plenty of cause to be angry. At one time, for example, he was interrupted at prayer because he was in a "white

folks only” part of the church. But Richard Allen had heard the God of the Bible. He’d been baptized and taught the Scriptures and had experienced God in his life.

In the midst of oppression and hate, Jesus offers a new teaching:

You have heard people say, “Love your neighbors and hate your enemies.” But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong. If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for that? Even tax collectors love their friends. If you greet only your friends, what’s so great about that? Don’t even unbelievers do that? But you must always act like your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5.43-48

Anger will only get us so far. God has said that hate, terrorism, violence, and oppression, can ultimately only be defeated by love. Seeking revenge and continuing the cycle of hate just breeds more anger.

The Scriptures also say,

“If your enemies are hungry,
give them something to eat.

And if they are thirsty,
give them something
to drink.

This will be the same
as piling burning coals
on their heads.

Don’t let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.

Romans 12.20,21

In the book of Genesis we find the story of Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons. When Joseph was young, he was sold into slavery by his brothers. Why? Joseph's brothers were jealous because their father Jacob seemed to favor Joseph more than them. Years later, Joseph became governor of Egypt. When he was reunited with his brothers, he was able to forgive them.

After Jacob died, Joseph's brothers said to each other, "What if Joseph still hates us and wants to get even with us for all the cruel things we did to him?"

So they sent this message to Joseph:

Before our father died, he told us, "You did some cruel and terrible things to Joseph, but you must ask him to forgive you."

Now we ask you to please forgive the terrible things we did. After all, we serve the same God that your father worshiped.

When Joseph heard this, he started crying.

Right then, Joseph's brothers came and bowed down to the ground in front of him and said, "We are your slaves."

But Joseph told them, "Don't be afraid! I have no right to change what God has decided. You tried to harm me, but God made it turn out for the best, so that he could save all these people, as he is now doing. Don't be afraid! I will take care of you and your children." After Joseph said this, his brothers felt much better.

Genesis 50.15-21

THINK ABOUT IT

What would your life be like if you, and those nearest to you, were able to have all anger and bitterness removed from your minds and hearts?

What would happen if our anger were to be transformed into powerful motivating energy that could be used to work for justice and peace and to ease the suffering of others?

What work does your anger make you eager to do? Make a list of these things and think how you can begin to make them happen.

PRAY ABOUT IT

Loving God, you have heard the prayers and thoughts of angry people over and over again. Yet you still love each of us. Teach me to love and to forgive others when they wrong me. Transform my anger into energy that leads to good. Transform what feels deadly into new life. Amen.

APPENDIX

WAYS TO HANDLE MY ANGER

Talk it out! Talk to someone you trust. Even isolate yourself in a room and talk to yourself. Put into words what makes you angry, how you feel about it. It's hard to know what to do with your anger until you have articulated it. By "hearing yourself think" you might discover something you didn't recognize (or want to) before. The process of simply giving voice to your anger can, in itself, bring healing.

Write about it! If you're angry with someone, write that person a letter. It's comforting to know that even after it's written you can decide whether or not to send it. If you don't send it to the person you're angry with, maybe there is something else you can do with it that corresponds to your feeling. For instance, you could mail the letter to yourself. When the letter arrives, read it through carefully. Which of your feelings have changed in the few days it took to get the letter? Which ones remain the same? Or you could tear up your angry letter, then prayerfully and safely burn it or bury it in the ground.

Get physical! Do something with your body. Think about what you're angry about and hit a tennis ball or slap a pillow. Go running or do yoga. Chop wood. Paint or get your hands into clay and see what happens. Let your body work out its anger. Medical science tells us that long-term anger is physically harmful. Take good care of your physical self—God wants your healing in every possible way.

Share your anger with God. Before you take any decisive action, talk it over with God. Take it to God in prayer, and see what God can do with it. It might come back changed.

If it is physically safe for you to do so, try to talk with the person you are angry with, or who is angry at you. Do you care about this person, and can you communicate how you feel to this person? Are there ways in which you can respond differently than before?

May your anger be a holy and acceptable offering to God. May God be at work to bring peace to your life and to our world. May God bless you and hear your prayers.

In the words of the apostle Paul,

God our Father loves us. He is kind and has given us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope. We pray that our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father will encourage you and help you always to do and say the right thing.

2 Thessalonians 2.16,17

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