



ANGER



1



ANGER

Deadly Anger.

What would cause a person to strap explosives around his body, walk into a crowded room, and kill?

What would bring a postal worker to the point of revisiting the site of his firing and take human life?

What would put a teenager on the street in prostitution?

What would send a college senior into a classroom with random murder on his mind?

What would cause a wife to take a knife to her husband?

What would cause a young man to endanger life by driving a car at speeds exceeding 100mph?

What would land business partners in court suing each other into bankruptcy?

What would cause a person to live looking into a bottle at the end of every work day?

Anger.

Yes, but a certain kind of anger—unresolved anger. And if you follow the bread-crumbs trail backwards from the

ANGER

point of destructive anger, you will probably find unresolved loss. Something important has been lost and we are powerless to get it back, heal it, fix it, or protect it. And we are angry.

You know the lines—

The person I'm in love with isn't in love with me.

It's the coach's fault that I'm not starting.

The doctors missed the clues. They are so inept.

I deserved that promotion. But they had it out for me.

This stupid job. It's their fault for moving us here.

Simon doesn't know anything about music. I am an Idol!

We lost something and we are powerless to get it back. The loss of power makes us angry. Crime testifies to the fact. Rage pours from terrorists who see no other way to have the world as they wish it. The masses revolt violently. Spouses retaliate vengefully.

Anger is deadly. And like acid in a plastic jug, it destroys its container first.

Anger comes in many varieties.

Resignation anger—My esteem is shot. Hurt me if you want. Use me if you wish. Trample me under

ANGER

foot. Pain is better than nothing. At least I know I'm still alive.

Crock-pot anger—The lid is on but what's inside is steaming. And when the right temp is reached, somebody's gonna pay.

Blaming anger—It's their fault. I'm a victim. They are to blame.

Subtle, controlling anger—I'll never let anybody do this to me again, so back off.

Powder-keg anger—I dare you to push the button. The Incredible Hulk is going green.

Random anger—I'm not responsible for what I do. No one cared that I got hurt, so why should I care that they get hurt?

Follow the trail. The bread crumbs lead to loss.

In Eph. 4:26-27, Paul tells us to be angry and sin not. To this he pens an interesting warning: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil."

I suppose the devil prefers the low-rent district of unresolved anger. He will go to bed with us, use our

ANGER

dreams as a rehearsal for what was done to us, and haunt our waking restlessness. He will get up the next morning and go to work on unresolved anger. By the time he is done in the kitchen, he has cooked up a stew of bitterness, spite, prejudice, backstabbing, gossip, abuse, insults, nerves, resentment, rage, tantrums, cussing, sulking, moods, and attitudes. He becomes the CEO of our perspective, and all reality passes through his interpretative grid. We open wide and swallow whole the stew that destroys. Before we know it, we are enemy-centered people. We see in every person remnants of the one who wronged us. Our defenses go up toward them. Our quills extend in self-protection. Our looks kill, and our words are daggers that go deep into their soft bellies. They never saw what hit them. They recoil from us. And the devil insinuates that they are our enemy. Our whole life is organized around being angry, and the devil is the daily chef of the stew we consume.

This anger is deadly.

But there is another version.

Un-Deadly Anger.

We are angry. And we have our reasons.

Adults who should have been safe, but weren't.

Parents who should have stayed married, but
didn't.

ANGER

Kids at school who could have been nicer, but
weren't.

Bosses who should have been fair, but weren't.

A church that could have helped, but didn't.

A roommate who should have told us what
everyone was saying, but didn't.

A person who should have stayed faithful, but didn't.

People who should have left our stuff alone, but
didn't.

Institutions that could have flexed, but wouldn't.

Disease that could have landed elsewhere, but
didn't.

Death that should have waited, but wouldn't.

We are angry. And we have our reasons. And those
reasons are the most reasonable reasons of all—to us.
So we are angry. Some of us know it. Some of us don't.

Anger is the emotion that tells us
that we are not getting what we want or deserve.
that our will is being blocked or frustrated.
that we are losing someone or something very
important to us.

Anger is that flashing red light on our instrument panel
that says, "Pay attention! Something is wrong
here."

ANGER

And the Bible has a very interesting two-word command about anger: BE ANGRY!

Paul is explaining to the Ephesians the new life they are being schooled in. He tells them they are no longer living by the old lessons of self-centeredness, but by the new way of Jesus-likeness. When God raised them from their dead, old ways, he resurrected them into new learning. In essence Paul says,

Be angry, but don't sin.

Be angry, but don't stay angry.

Be angry, but don't room with the devil.

It appears that Paul assumes we will be angry. But what matters is what we do with it and about it.

In Matt. 5, Jesus discusses anger in conjunction with the Old Testament law about murder.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder;" and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire (*Matt. 5:21-22*).

ANGER

The consequences of anger seem to escalate in this text. We begin our anger with a warning about the liability of being judged and end it with a threat of hell-fire.

Anger is first an emotion for which we may be liable.

Then it becomes an insult. The word is *raca*. To pronounce it correctly, you need to spit from the back of your throat. To say it is to do it. We began with emotional feelings about a deed done to us, and now we have an attitude about it. We've slept on it, and woken with names for the person who did the deed to us. We hold them in contempt. Before we move to hurt them, we must pass judgment on them in our court of reasonable anger.

Finally, anger is a destructive deed. It is a deed used to say to someone, "Nabal" or "You fool." In biblical days, this was a curse. A curse was the opposite of a blessing. Where a blessing was words invested with power to give life, a curse was words invested with power to destroy. This particular curse assigned one to the trash heap of godlessness. The word is *nabal*. Say this to someone and you're headed to hell, or Gehenna, as the text records it.

I've been to hell. I went there several years ago with a group of college students. We were visiting Jerusalem when the guide pointed out the Valley of Hennom

ANGER

(Gehenna). It was the city dump, the place where people took their trash and heaved it over the cliff and down into the valley. Earlier in Jewish history, the Ammonites had sacrificed their babies to the gods in that valley.

You may remember the description of hell—"the worms there never die, and the fire never stops burning" (Mark 9:48, CEV). That's because worms were always eating the refuse and the public servants kept a fire going at the city dump to turn trash into ashes.

Gehenna—where everything worthless is taken and left.
Gehenna—where you put things that have no useful life left in them.

When you get to the point that the anger inside has moved from

an emotion to be aware of

to

an attitude of contempt

to

a destructive deed . . .

you are spent, used up, ready for the trash heap.

There is nothing of worth or value left in the anger.

Most of us take our anger in one of two directions—outward or inward.

ANGER

Outward anger looks like road rage, yelling and screaming, a fist through a wall or a foot through a door, giving hand signals telling someone where to go, destroying property.

Inward anger is very different. It looks like obsessive worrying, biting your fingernails, depression, cutting, eating yourself to death, letting other people use your body, walling yourself in, suicide.

One of the clearest pictures of inward anger was painted in the movie, *Dead Poet's Society*. Neil was a college student who wanted to major in the arts. His father was a domineering man who insisted that Neil forget the foolishness of drama and instead, prepare to run the family business. Neil found himself torn between pleasing his father and following his dream. Though forbidden by his father, Neil won the lead role in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his performance brought the house down. His father, rather than congratulate him, took him from the cast celebration and drove him home, where Neil was given one more tongue-lashing. Late in the night, Neil sneaked quietly into his father's office, picked up a gun, and killed himself. That is anger turned inward.

Outward anger hurts others.

ANGER

Inward anger hurts us.

Either way, life is destroyed.

The good news is that there is a third option. We can take our anger Godward.

Be angry—tell God.

Be angry—don't sin.

Be angry—vent heavenward.

God specializes in trash recycling. God takes the smoldering, worm-eaten trash of our lives and converts it to something useful—reconciliation, justice, peace. The anger is not discarded by God, but redeemed for useful purposes. Being a Christian does not eliminate our anger. It converts and transforms it.

Could it be that anger, yielded to God, shaped and directed by God, becomes the passion for redeeming the world? Could it be that redeemed anger is the energy we need to do something about a world gone wrong?

I wish I could be as angry as Jesus. And I'm not talking about the one-time temper tantrum He threw in the temple.

I'm guessing it was anger that gazed into the Pharisee's eyes on Sabbath and saw the forbidding look—and He healed anyway.

ANGER

I'm guessing it was anger that stooped to the ground as people quoted scripture about stoning an adulterous woman.

I'm guessing it was anger that cast the devil out of a crazed man and into the town pork supply.

I'm guessing it was anger that stilled a storm.

I'm guessing it was anger that raised Lazarus.

I think the redeeming deeds of Jesus may have come from anger. He saw the world at its worst, destroying the people God loves, and He looked heavenward to the Father, asking, "What do you want me to do with this?" And the result was a passion for wholeness, justice, peace. The Spirit moved Him to act. He could not casually observe a world gone wild.

It makes me wonder if one day in England, William Wilberforce just couldn't stomach any more slave trading, and if he looked heavenward, asking, "What do you want me to do with this?"

It makes me wonder if Susan B. Anthony just couldn't stomach any more alcohol abuse.

ANGER

It makes me wonder if Martin Luther King, one day down in Birmingham, just couldn't stomach any more racial prejudice.

It makes me wonder if Charles Colson just couldn't stomach the spiraling plight of prisoners.

It makes me wonder if Nelson Mandela just couldn't stomach any more apartheid.

It makes me wonder if when we figure out what's in our craw, when we figure out what makes us angry, if we wouldn't be on the verge of discovering the passion for redemptive action. If maybe our calling is connected to our anger.

If there was more redeemed anger in the world, there would be less poverty, less discrimination, less character assassination, less abuse, less divorce, less pain. If there was more redeemed anger, there would be fewer battered wives, neglected children, religious frauds, power games, liars and cheats.

Christians are too nice. We swallow our anger too often. It's time we took it to God and figured out what to do with it. No need to waste things that can be recycled. Be angry—don't sin.

ANGER

Forest Gump loved Jenny. From childhood, they were bound in friendship. Jenny's father abused her. She took her anger inward and almost destroyed her life—drugs, alcohol, running, hiding, letting anyone use her body. She came to the brink of suicide. But Forest loved her. One day, as a seeking adult, she returned home. She walked down the road to her old house, long since emptied by the death of her father. The anger that she had turned inward suddenly erupted outward. Jenny began to hurl rocks at the old house. She threw every rock she could find, with every ounce of energy she could muster, and then fell in a heap in the road. Forest sat down beside her, took her in his loving arms, and said those profound words—"Sometimes there's just not enough rocks." In that moment, Jenny's life began again.

God painfully watches our attempt to resolve our anger, as we either throw rocks at others, or stone ourselves. God stands ready in any moment to take us up in divine arms, recognize the pain done to us, receive the raw anger into himself, and redeem it for good. Only God can do this . . . and God's people on His behalf.

Anger need not be deadly. It may be quite lively!