
Anger Part 2: Three Lies About Anger and the Transforming Truth

by David Powlison

What is anger? How should we handle it? Part 1 of this article¹ sought to provide biblical anchors for understanding this volatile experience. We saw that the Bible treats anger in rich detail. We saw that anger involves the whole person: body, emotions, mind, motives, and behavior. It has an interpersonal focus, always having to do with God and usually having to do with other people. It is both natural and learned, for good and ill. It is a moral matter. God gives us a worldview from which to think about anger, and within which to wrestle with the varied expressions of anger that we encounter.

In Part 2 we will critique three of the most pernicious misconceptions about anger that dominate our culture. As Christian counselors, we can offer the biblical alternative with all its depth, hope, and power to people enmeshed in lies. The truth provides a pathway out of anger and out of the confusion that surrounds anger. This part of the article will conclude with a set of eight questions that aid in assessing and overcoming anger in a godly way.

Lie #1: Anger is Something Inside Me

One crucial implication of all we've discussed is that anger is not a "thing." It is a moral act of the whole person, not a "substance" or a "something" inside you. That might sound obvious, but most popular understandings of anger don't see it. Is anger a hot, emotional fluid that builds up pressure inside? Or is anger a demon that takes up residency? These common ideas—opposed to each other in every other way!—both agree that anger is a something.

In Western culture at large, many theories of anger see it as an emotional fluid that builds up pressure inside and must be released. This "hydraulic" theory of anger contributes to the pop wisdom that anger

"just is, neither good nor bad." Things *are* neutral; moral agents aren't. Why does this theory seem plausible? Because images such as the following capture something of what anger can feel like: A person's anger can be "pent up"; "his pump is primed." People can be "boiling mad," "filled" with anger, waiting to "explode." They "blow off steam." Old, unresolved anger can be "stored up inside," "harbored" for decades. If you "get it off your chest" until your anger is "spent," you feel better. All these metaphors persuasively depict anger as a pressurized substance inside us.

No doubt, these colorful descriptions *do* capture how anger feels. But a metaphor is not meant to overpower the thing it intends to illustrate. The writers of the Old and New Testaments, for example, didn't really believe that an inner furnace got stoked up to make you hot when you "burn" with anger. The "burning" metaphor graphically captures the sensation of anger and its effects, but it's not intended to cancel out the fact that anger is something people do. Anger feels fiery, but it's not a fire. The solution to sinful anger is not to surgically remove the furnace or to drink enough water to quench the fire! The solution is a moral one: to "turn" from sin to God's grace in repentant faith.

What do I mean if I say, "My angry neighbor growls, barks, snarls, and snaps at her kids; she chews and bites their heads off; she gets rabid and foams at the mouth"? Those are illuminating word pictures. But certainly I don't mean that she has an inner hydrophobic watchdog, and that the rabid canine within has taken over! In that case, the only solutions would be to muzzle her or to put her out of her misery. A mad dog is a "thing" that talking can't fix. But I've known snarlers who, by hearing God, repenting, believing, and obeying, grow peaceable.

When people believe that anger is a pressurized substance, something inside, not something they do, the idea points to a solution other than repentance. The need for some kind of catharsis seems logical. Counseling will seek to release pressure by "lancing the boil" (another metaphor!). "You have this hot stuff simmering inside you that needs to get out. Here's a pillow. Call it your Mom. Take this baseball bat and wallop the pillow, cursing her out for everything she did. You'll get the anger out of your system. You'll feel better, and you'll be fixed." The scenario sounds logical only if anger is a *thing* inside. But because anger is

¹"Understanding Anger," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 14:1 (Fall 1995), pp. 40-53.

not a thing, but a moral act of the whole person, the scenario is sinful.² Anger is not a thing, so the true solution is self-understanding, an acknowledgment of wrong, repentance, faith, and new obedience by the power of God's grace.

The second way in which anger is visualized as a thing is seen in animistic cultures—and in some seg-

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ments of contemporary Christian culture. In these settings, many people treat anger as a "demon." The logic is identical to the secular hydraulic model. Again, anger is *something* inside you. You will be fixed by getting the "thing" out of you, in this case by casting it out. Again, the theory seems plausible. Just as angry people boil, so anger, as much as any sin, makes us exactly like the devil. He is the accuser who usurps the throne of judgment, spouts half-truths and lies, and brings wrath against God and other people. The whole angry world lies in his power, and the devil seeks to mold us into his image. When you see (or are) a sinfully angry person, *voilà*, the devil's image is displayed. But the devil's hand in anger is no different from his involvement in any other sin. He does not demonize us into sin; he rules us. He tempts and lies in his attempt to control and destroy us. The solution lies not in exorcism from supposed demons of rage, anger, pride, and rebellion; it lies in *repentance* from rage, anger, pride, and rebellion, turning to the Lord of grace. Anger is a moral act, not an indwelling thing, and its solution is a moral act, too.³

Because anger is something that people *do* as moral agents, there's no reason that anger must be vented or exorcised to be truly resolved. Theories that liquify or demonize anger sound plausible because they draw on a vivid metaphor or on the arch-accuser lurking in the neighborhood. But they misconstrue

²This is not to say that catharsis may not make people "feel better." Many things make angry people feel temporarily better that provide no real solution to moral problems: e.g., calming medication, eating junk food, orgasm, sleeping, watching TV, gossiping your story to get people on your side, screaming and hitting things, working out in the gym, getting away to Bermuda. Such things often do take the edge off, but they don't change the heart.

³See my *Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) for a more extensive critique of the notion of demons of anger.

what they see and lead people astray.

Lie #2: It's Okay to be Angry at God

We've seen earlier that anger at God is commonplace. The Bible speaks of it scores of times.⁴ It's one of the most logical human reactions, given the nature of sin, but it's a deadly wickedness. What Job's wife said was terrible advice, but at least she had her facts straight: "Curse God, and die" (Job 2:9).

Many popular psychologies discuss anger at God in a very unhelpful way. The standard advice runs something like this: "If you are angry at God you need to do four things. First, remember anger just is, it's neither good nor bad. It's okay to feel angry at God. He made us with angry emotions. Second, God often lets us down and disappoints us. How else can we explain being abused, and crying out to Him for deliverance, yet the abuse continued? If He's supposed to be in control, then He could have stopped it, and He didn't. Third, you need to ventilate your anger at God. He's a mature lover, and mature love can absorb the honest anger of the beloved. So don't be afraid to tell Him exactly what you feel and think. Many Psalms portray anger at God, so if other godly people have let out their rage at Him, you can too. Don't censor your feelings and language; say it like you feel it so you won't be a hypocrite. Fourth, you need to forgive God. Forgiveness is the opposite of anger, and you need to let go of the hostility to be at peace in yourself and to build a trusting relationship with God. Forgive Him for the ways He let you down." Plausible? Many find it so. Coherent? It does hang together. True? No way.

Anger at God is profitably examined by asking, "What do you want and believe?"—just as you would with any other instance of anger. What you will invariably find is that your heart is controlled by particular cravings and lies that have been substituted for the living and true God. For example, if I crave marriage and believe that God will reward my devotion to Him with a wife, my heart sets itself up for anger at God. Anger will come when the desire is not satisfied and the belief proves unwarranted.

Anger at God of the sort that is frequently seen in counseling is—virtually without exception (we'll discuss those "anger" Psalms in a moment)—sinful

⁴Perhaps most vividly in the sustained hostility towards Jesus Christ the Son of God, and towards those forerunners and messengers of God who preceded and followed Him (especially David, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and Paul). In the wilderness, grumbling expressed angry displeasure with God. In Proverbs 19:3 a foolish man "rages" against the Lord. In Revelation 16 it says three times that men "blasphemed God" rather than repenting.

anger. It overflows with malice and mistrust towards God. It firmly embraces (and proclaims) lies about what He is like. It rationalizes any number of self-destructive and sinful behaviors. Anger at God presents a wonderful counseling opportunity. Handled rightly, it is the royal road into the evil disorder of the human heart. By the grace of God, those who are

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angry at Him can often discover for the first time who He actually is, and who they are as well.

Let's examine the therapeutic formula point by point. First, we've dealt with the fact that anger is not neutral. Anger towards God will either maliciously accuse Him or express living faith in Him. Those angry emotions with which we are "made" may be either godly or devilish. In contrast, the first piece of therapeutic advice entirely avoids the moral dilemma inherent in anger.

Second, does God let us down when we suffer? Nowhere in the Bible do we find a shred of evidence that God ever truly betrays us. The Bible discusses suffering constantly, but it always shows us that any apparent "betrayal" by God must be seen in the context of His larger purposes. Certainly, people may truly and seriously let us down. Abusers betray trust in such a heinous way that if hell has gradations, they merit the deepest pit.⁵ Certainly the devil torments us. That's what he's about. Certainly suffering hurts—by definition. Anger towards tyrants and the arch-tyrant is heartily warranted. And groaning (to God, in faith and hope) about our sufferings is heartily warranted. *But God has never promised freedom from tears, mourning, crying, and pain—or from the evils that cause them—until the great day when life and joy triumph forever over death and misery.* The interweaving of God's glory and our well-being is far bigger than people imagine. Have God-ragers believed false promises or overlaid their

⁵I'm citing a worst case scenario. Many people who are angry at God have suffered more mild hardships: disappointment in love, a financial reverse, the death of an aged parent, a proposal rejected at a church committee meeting. I've been struck that people who are angry at God have typically suffered the exact same hardships as people who love God!

own expectations upon God? Have they then become angry at a "disappointing" God, even confusing His actions and motives with Satan's and with evil people who imitate the devil's cruelty? It is curious how people who don't *really* believe in the sovereignty of God become hyper-Calvinists ("He could have changed things and didn't") when they are angry at Him. To *really* believe in God's sovereignty is to gain an unshakable foundation for trust in the midst of even hellish torments, let alone the milder pains.

The real God is the *deliverer* from tyrants, not the tyrant. He is the only hope of the "poor, afflicted, needy, unfortunate, and oppressed" who find themselves attacked in a world "filled with violence." And—a truth so profound that we can only say it with trembling—when we are honest with ourselves we realize that we are more like the tyrants than unlike them. The line between good and evil runs through *every* heart, except the heart of the Lamb of God. It's not that we deserved from others what they did to us. That was simply evil, and it will be repaid fully with the wrath of God (poured out either on tyrants or on Christ for those who repent). But that does not mean that we are thereby innocents. We also deserve wrath for our own sins. Jesus suffered the tortures we fairly deserve.

The anger at God that counselors often see *invariably* masks a deep self-righteousness and expresses blatant unbelief. Nowhere does the world's therapeutic formula challenge that self-righteousness and unbelief. Instead, it reinforces it (which is why so many find the therapeutic model so plausible and attractive!). Because it never talks about the sinfulness within anger at God, the therapeutic formula never can offer the only true hope for such strugglers: the sin-bearing Savior who will deliver His people from the condemnation and corruption of their own sins, and from the pain of other people's sins.

The Bible challenges the third point in the therapeutic formula, too. You do not need to ventilate your sinful anger at God in order to deal with it. You need to repent of it, like Job. You need to understand the demands, the false beliefs, the self-righteousness that produces and drives it. There is no psalm that encourages the kind of ventilation of hostile anger that the therapists encourage. In the "anger" psalms, without exception, what breathes through is an attitude of faith. Yes, there is true upset, complaint, hurt, and dismay. We can reverently call it righteous anger because it yearns for God's glory and the well-being of His people. Such loving anger yearns to have God, our only hope, eliminate the sufferings we currently experience. The intensity of the complaint arises from the

intensity of the faith. It contains no cursing, no hateful bitterness, no lies, no scorn or hostile belittling, no blasphemies. Psalmists are dismayed because they know and trust that God is good, because they love Him, and because they struggle to reconcile His promises with current affliction.⁶ Psalmists move *towards* God in honest faith, wrestling with their circumstances. But people angry at God shove Him away. Psalmists want God's glory and want evil to go away; they groan and complain in their faith. And typically (also ignored by the therapeutic counterfeit), they manifest an awareness of guilt and sin; they rec-

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ognize that suffering in general is somehow deserved. This is an awareness that coexists with hating the evil intents of those who afflict. When the Bible teaches us how to voice distress to God, it teaches a cry of faith, not a roar of blasphemous rage. The therapeutic alternative is too distorted ever to teach troubled people how and why to complain to a God they love.

Fourth, the notion of forgiving God is a final blasphemy in a string of blasphemies. Granted, the person who really deals with anger at God by repentance and faith will no longer feel angry at God. He feels overwhelming gratitude (another thing missing in the counterfeit) because he has *found* forgiveness, not because he has *granted* it. God is *good*. He does not need our forgiveness. He never stands in the dock as the accused, no matter how much our sinful anger seeks to put Him there. With whom does forgiveness begin, so that a trusting relationship between man and God can be rebuilt? Is it with us? Impossible. The therapeutic counterfeit gets this point, like the others, dead wrong.

The Psalms and Job do not provide biblical support for these trivializing and distorted ideas. Even Job, a godly man of honest faith, repented at the end for his strand of self-righteousness. To the degree that he had blamed God and sought to justify himself, he was brought to admit that he was wrong. That is what

⁶Outside the Psalms, Habakkuk most poignantly does the same.

the book is *about*. The Psalms, when read in their entirety, don't say what they are alleged to say by those who take verses out of context to support a false idea.

Every step in the world's therapeutic formula is bent to one end: keeping man on the throne of pride. This therapeutic counterfeit justifies anger as neutral, blames God for being bad, ventilates hostility, and finally "forgives" the great Offender. It exhibits a shallowness of moral reasoning, a shallowness in even formulating the problem of evil (let alone wrestling with it), and a shallowness in engaging the Scriptures. It ought to make *Christian* people angry!⁷

The person who is honest about his or her anger at God—and gets to the truth about it—will walk a very different route from the one prescribed by the popular formula. The repentant and believing heart will not settle for some uneasy truce between my past sufferings and my current willingness to tolerate some sort of relationship with a God who let me down. The believing heart will find truth, joy, hope, and love unspeakable. The believing heart will find God.

Lie #3: My Big Problem is Anger at Myself

Many of the problems just discussed reappear in current notions of self-forgiveness. If I'm angry at myself—and the phenomenon is a common one—current wisdom argues that I chiefly need to forgive myself.⁸ Two truths typically are thought to motivate the self-angry to self-forgive. First, "God did not create junk, and since He created me I must be worth something." Second, "Jesus thought I was so valuable that He loved me and came to die for me." On the foundation of these affirmations I can feel good about myself, and view my failings more tolerantly. End result? I "forgive myself" instead of being angry at myself.⁹ It sounds plausible to many people. But it's

⁷Certainly passing the first test of righteous anger, being upset about things that hurt people and defame God. Such anger will also pass the other tests (see Part 1 of this article) if we love God and love people who are angry at God, wanting to give them real aid instead of lies.

⁸See the fine article by Robert Jones, "I Just Can't Forgive Myself: A Biblical Alternative to Self-forgiveness" that follows in this issue of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*.

⁹It is probably truer that the therapeutic goal is actually to "accept myself as basically OK, with understandable shortcomings like everyone else," not to "forgive myself." Forgiveness implies that something is so wrong that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). The self-forgiveness teaching inhabits the world of humanistic self-acceptance, not Christian forgiveness. The world of self-forgiveness is a world whose god plays the tolerant, worldly-wise grandfather. God is a loving Father with much better things in mind for His children!

wholly misguided.

Why are people angry at themselves? First, invariably they have failed to live up to some standard. That's what anger is, a judgment against perceived wrong. That standard may be bogus—needing a house that looks like the pages of *House Beautiful*; getting straight As; being able to please an unpleasable parent; having a textbook quiet time. Or the standard

Whose eyes are doing the judging when I am angry at myself?

may be accurate—committing adultery, having an abortion, laziness. In either case, there is something I believe I should live up to. I want to live up to it. But I fail. That's the first piece of insight in my self-understanding.

Second, anger always entails a judge, because they are the ones who make judgments. In the Old Testament metaphor, something can be displeasing either “in my eyes” or “in your eyes” or “in the eyes of the Lord.” Whose eyes are doing the judging when I am angry at myself? My own. I evaluate, and my judgment is final. This is why self-haters never get much satisfaction out of well-meaning attempts to help them believe in God's forgiveness in Christ. They may “already believe” that God has forgiven them for the messy house or the abortion, but it isn't enough: “I can't forgive *myself*.” And my eyes are all-important, more significant than God's.

It is worth noting that frequently people who “can't forgive themselves” serve both their own eyes and the eyes of others. I want my house to look impeccable to please myself (thus I displease myself when I fail) *and* to please or impress my mother and neighbors. When my house is messy, I loathe myself. I have failed on all counts, failing to please both myself and others. Or I may have accurate standards (abortion) but the wrong eyes. In my eyes I “can't forgive myself” for having had an abortion. How could I have done that? I must make up for it, or I must suffer for it. That is highly self-righteous on all sides of the intrapersonal transaction: I simultaneously play judge, criminal, and savior, and know nothing of the righteousness of Christ that makes the New Testament sing for joy. Typically, others' eyes again play a role parallel to my own eyes: I'm ashamed to have anyone know about the abortion. They might think ill of me. The Bible terms this the fear of man, substitut-

ing social opinion for the fear of the Lord. The eyes that self-haters live before are often a composite of what the Bible calls pride and the fear of man.

Third, when I set up the standard and the eyes that judge me, I also create my definition of a “savior.” To make up for my failure to meet my own (or others') standards, I may strive and fret to attain perfection. I work twice as hard at house-cleaning. I open my home to unwed mothers and compulsively minister in the pro-life movement. But it doesn't work. The house keeps getting messy, and no matter how good I am, the abortion still blots my past. I decide to keep trying to play my own savior by rebuilding a perfect record, which (if only I could do it) would make everything better. But I fail. So self-hatred always has the last say. I go endlessly back to dealing out my own punishment, playing the judge and the sacrificial lamb rolled into one. I lacerate myself mentally. I brood on regrets, self-recriminations, self-hatred, accusing myself mercilessly for my transgressions (imaginary or real). I'm angry at myself. I can't forgive myself.

Biblical counseling must approach such people at all three points: standards, “eyes,” and saviors. They live in a comprehensive counterfeit of biblical reality, which is why they are so confused and unhappy. Only truth can bring them wisdom and joy. Your goal is to redefine the reality in which they live, to state how life can be transformed by the renewing of the mind.

First, search out whether the standards people use to judge themselves are God's, their own, or ones that they borrowed from others (such as Mom and neighbors). Sometimes the standards will be accurate; many times the standards will be distorted and can be challenged and changed in the light of truth.

Second, whose eyes supremely matter? Whose approval matters? To live before my own eyes is to substitute my conscience for God. This is an act of pride. To live before other's eyes—for their approval—is to substitute their evaluation for God's. This is an act of man-fearing. To live in God's eyes is the beginning of wisdom. The self-hater who awakens to this awakens to reality. He becomes aware of sins he never suspected and of his real need for forgiveness.

Third, who is the proposed savior from all this chaos and misery? Does the person look to his own efforts to find a way of perfection? Does he punish himself for the guilt of his perceived failures? Jesus Christ alone gives perfection; He alone can bear guilt. He can forgive the varied sins that are present: genuine transgressions (adultery, abortion, laziness), the trust and faith in false standards (*House Beautiful*), the choice to live before eyes other than God's (my own and Mom's), and the pursuit of a self-attained right-

eousness as a false savior. Jesus gives a real righteousness—His own perfect life—to people who sin. He gives real forgiveness—His perfect self-sacrifice to bear our punishment—to people who sin. He gives indwelling power—His Holy Spirit—to renew our minds, give us joy, and change us. What a relief from the stifling self-absorption of self-forgiveness schemes.

Self-haters will find their problems resolved as they work this through. There are no loose ends in God's loving truth. Living for *House Beautiful* will recede into the background as a nervous, petty folly from which God has delightfully delivered me. The abortion was truly forgiven, not because I made amends or punished myself, but because Jesus loved a sinner. The pride and fear of man that elevated myself and other people to the judge's bench are replaced by the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. The legalistic perfectionism of my efforts at success and the self-punishment of my anger at self are replaced by gratitude for the grace of God. Case closed, no longer "angry at myself," yet not a whiff of "I need to forgive myself."

Notice, by the way, how the false analysis (Angry at yourself? Forgive yourself.) led to a false gospel, just as it did when we considered anger at God. In the biblical scenario, there is no hint of "You are worth so much because of creation, and Jesus' love shows how valuable you are, so you can feel OK about yourself." The truth is, creation and redemption don't give us much reason to feel good about ourselves. Our creation was in the image of the God of glory. Yet look how far we have fallen: "The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts while they live."¹⁰ An honest look at our glory in creation "stops every mouth... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Similarly, our redemption was won in a way that displays how utterly bad and helpless we are. The only good and worthy Man freely died for ungodly, weak, sinful enemies. Those facts hardly offer a reason for confident self-acceptance and self-forgiveness! Grace, by definition, ruins self-worth. The covert pride that inhabits "low self-esteem" and "anger at myself" is not cured by misaffirming me as valuable. The biblical gospel points us to the worth of Jesus Christ, who redeemed the unworthy and deservedly damned. How much better is this real gospel, which defines our need for forgiveness from *God* (not ourselves), and provides it, full and free. People who embrace God's grace become

¹⁰Ecclesiastes 9:3; cf. other analyses of the human moral condition such as Genesis 6:5, Jeremiah 17:9, and Romans 3.

truly happy, free of the need for props to their wobbly self-concept. An accurate, biblical self-knowledge destroys the supposed need for self-esteem. It produces the only people on the planet with reasons for confidence as they approach life.

The idea of forgiving yourself to resolve anger at yourself actually panders to a core sin: it keeps people living before the wrong eyes—their own. "I'm angry at myself; I need to forgive myself." That airless psychic closet is a far cry from the real world that the Bible frees us to live in. For example, in 1 Corinthians

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4:3-5, Paul says that it doesn't matter what other people think of him: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court." He doesn't live in the eyes of others. Then he says it doesn't matter what he thinks of himself: "Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent." He doesn't live in his own eyes. Finally he says, "It is the Lord who judges me," and goes on to discuss what it means to live in God's eyes. My opinion of myself ("conscience") and your opinion of me ("reputation") don't matter unless they conform to God's opinion of me. They are extremely valuable when they stay in their place; they are tyrants when they seize the throne.

Anger at self, like anger at God, comes to a rich and satisfying resolution when understood rightly and when the Gospel is applied. The counterfeits that are frequently offered to troubled people are enough to make Christians weep with grief and anger.

A Pathway Out of Anger

Let's move in a positive direction. How can we take the biblical teaching on anger to help us change? That's the payoff question. All that we've looked at thus far can be summarized in eight very practical questions. The first four questions help assess anger; the second four lead to resolution.¹¹

Let me use as an example a simple situation that tempts many (all?) of us to get angry. You're in a traf-

¹¹This basic framework applies to other problems besides anger. It is simply a summary of the biblical pattern of change.

fic jam and running late for an important appointment. It's five minutes before noon. The appointment is for noon. You are stuck on the highway ten miles away, in traffic that has not moved for twenty minutes and shows no sign of unsnarling. One common response? *You* snarl—with anger, frustration, disgust, dismay, unhappiness, tension. When you do, ask yourself these questions.

Question #1: What is the situation?

This one is easy. What is the provoking situation? Anger is provoked, it has a trigger, it happens for reasons in specific times and places. What is happening to you? "I was not tempted to anger until I was stuck in the traffic jam, and the clock was ticking towards noon, and I knew I'd be late for my appointment." The significant situation includes the Department of Transportation that decided to do road work at that exact moment, the traffic, the time, the appointment, the possible reaction of the person waiting for you, and so forth.

Question #2: How do I react?

This question is also relatively easy. It is meant to help you identify the specific ways you express sinful anger. What is happening in your thought life? Mentally curse the transportation department. Play out anxious mental scenarios of how to make my excuses to the person I'm leaving in the lurch. Self-recrimination perhaps: "Why didn't I leave earlier, or take a different route, or listen to the traffic report on the radio? What if the person I'm supposed to meet gets disgusted with me?" Where is God in all this? Perhaps I've cursed, invoking His wrath to serve my frustrations. Perhaps I've had a fleeting thought that "I ought to... or I shouldn't..." but that doesn't slow the runaway train. Perhaps I've thought angry thoughts about God, "Christianity doesn't work; God's a joke; what's the use?"

Body and emotions? I feel angry, irritated, hot. The longer I sit here the more I feel steam coming out my ears. I feel tense. Back of the neck is tightening. Stomach is churning. Anxiety about missing the meeting.

Actions? Creep up to the bumper ahead and don't let anyone merge from the sides. Strike my fist on the dashboard. Groans, sighs, hisses. Vent my disgust, "I can't believe it! This is ridiculous! Of all the...." Flip the radio on and off aggressively. An obscene gesture or phrase. Drive like a maniac once the traffic clears. A semi-coherent outburst of anger and excuses when I finally arrive at the appointment.

This stew of anger (and some fear) is a classic "works of the flesh" human reaction.

Question #3: What are my motives?

I'm grumbling and complaining, so some set of cravings and false beliefs must be driving me. Ask basic questions: What do I really want? What do I really believe? The anger comes out of my heart; it's not caused by the situation.¹² Here are some possible rulers of the heart:

- "I want to get where I want to go when I want to get there." That's unalloyed pride.
- "What will the people think of me? I was late once before." Fear of man.

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- "I want and need the money this sales call was sure to produce" (or the cure that doctor was sure to provide; or the love that person was sure to give me; or...). Varied cravings ("I want") and false beliefs ("I need") regarding money, medicine, love.

When these cravings (classic "lusts of the flesh") and false beliefs rule my life, they produce sinful anger. If God ruled my life, these natural affections would be subordinated. I might feel some disappointment, but wouldn't be floundering in the swamp.

Question #4: What are the consequences?

Anger has consequences. It creates feedback loops, vicious circles. Perhaps as drivers aggressively edge forward, I grind into the car next to me and get an earful of the driver's hostility and a \$250 charge on the deductible of my collision insurance. Perhaps I reap emotional and physical consequences: guilt, increasing distress and tension, stomachache and headache. Sometimes the consequences are fatal: the obscene gesture leads to the recipient pulling a gun and firing. Perhaps when I finally arrive at the appointment I'm so hot, bothered, flustered, and full of excuses that I make a terrible impression and lose the sale (or girlfriend). Maybe the immature way I act blows my reputation with the doctor's entire office staff, and they have twenty minutes of sarcastic humor behind my

¹²After all, if I had really wanted to avoid the appointment, I would be delighted at being stuck in traffic with a great excuse! Sinful happiness is a problem for which people rarely seek counsel. The Bible abounds with examples of people who rejoice at getting what their evil hearts crave (e.g., Psalm 73:3-12; Jeremiah 50:11; Habakkuk 1:15; Luke 6:24-26 and 16:19, 25; Revelation 11:10).

back. "My day is ruined."

The first four questions have identified and dissected the anger reaction. They point out the specific provocation, the detailed stew of reactions, the underlying motives, and the consequences. We've glimpsed, even in this tiny incident, the vicious circles that define "sin and misery." The next four questions move towards biblical resolution by the grace of the God who has been peering into what's been going on the whole time.

Question #5: What is true?

Who is God? What does He say? Many biblical themes and truths may be significant, but I will concentrate on three that are always important when dealing with anger. First, God is present and in control of this and every other situation. His sovereignty surrounds the things I face in Question #1. I am not meant to control the world, but that does not mean that the world is random and out of control. You will solve sinful anger as you learn to believe, "God is extremely relevant when I'm stuck in traffic and running late. He is present and He is up to something good in my life as His child. God's overriding purpose is to remake me into the image of Jesus Christ, to make me a person slow to anger and full of trust, to make me a peacemaker not a warmaker. I don't like the fact that my appointment must be scrubbed, but God has handed me a perfect opportunity to become a different sort of person."

Second, God's law speaks to events such as this. The law acts in two ways, as a mirror and a lamp. First, God holds up a mirror to me: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." That first great commandment lays bare my heart: What did I love instead? I got annoyed because I loved my way, human approval, and money (or health, or love). This command diagnoses the things I found out about myself in Question #3. In fact, it taught me to ask those sorts of questions! The second great commandment lays bare my fruits. What works of the flesh emerged from the cravings of the flesh? The sinful reactions of Question #2 are exposed for what they are. I'm even taught what kinds of things to look for by the multitude of biblical examples and precepts that illuminate this command.¹³

¹³Of course the Bible doesn't need to or claim to list every single detail. It teaches us what sinful anger looks like and gives us numerous examples, making us wise to discern other examples. For example, I don't need a proof text to know that the act of "buying *Penthouse* and masturbating as

God also holds out the law as a lamp to guide me. The first great commandment tells me to love (and trust, fear, hope in, turn to...) God. I can trust His provision for me financially (or for health, or friendship/marriage) instead of lusting after these things. I can love Him for bringing wisdom's clarity and sense into a situation that was previously an emotional swamp. It tells me how to meet and know God (Ques-

The gospel is the bridge between the law as mirror and the law as lamp.

tion #6, below). The second great commandment speaks positively of considering the interests of others. How will that apply? I could be charitable as the traffic merges, and let someone in. Perhaps courtesy would have me make a phone call (if possible) to let the person waiting for me know the situation. This command speaks of patience, and of numerous other good fruits which will apply in different life situations. It reminds me to tell the truth when I tell people what happened. It challenges me to gain the wisdom I need to apply God's will into this exact situation—at 11:55 a.m. when stuck in traffic and late for an appointment (Question #7, below).

Third, God's truth speaks of the gospel. I have been convicted of violating the first and second great commandments in this small incident on the highway. These are sins. And the gospel is the bridge between the law as mirror and the law as lamp, between the chaos of sin and the joys of wisdom. The gospel forgives sins, restores me to God, provides power to be different, and gives hope bigger than the disappointments of life. God is a very present help in trouble,

a temper tantrum at God" expresses sinful anger. Such an analysis is implicit in "The works of the flesh are evident, [give 15 examples...], and things like these" (Galatians 5:19-21). That passage and others give us enough variations on the theme of anger to enable us to get the picture. Scripture orients us to reality, teaching us how to observe and think about our world accurately.

Sometimes the view that Scripture is "sufficient" for counseling is caricatured by opponents, as if it means Scripture contains all the facts with which counseling works. This is an absurd view held by no person in the history of the world. Instead, Scripture is sufficient to interpret all the facts with which counseling works. If Scripture were exhaustively encyclopedic, we could not even ask a person his name and get to know the details of his life! But biblical categories *will* map on to those idiosyncratic details—sufficiently, perfectly, and wisely.

and can give me grace to act peacefully and charitably as I ride out the traffic jam. I can know and rejoice afresh in the inexpressible gift of the love of God.

Question #6: How can I turn to God for help? Do it.

Question #5 laid out the worldview in which problems now make sense. God is revealed, and the way of escape from folly into wisdom is made clear. Mere analysis, however, even the clearest thinking (something Questions #1-5 seek to bring about), won't change me. Question #6 gets me moving. God means me to seek Him, to transact with Him. I need to apply the truths of Question #5, for example working through the questions distinguishing righteous and sinful anger. It's not hard to tell that my anger fails the first test of righteous anger¹⁴: this traffic jam is *not* a moral evil demanding the energies of anger. My sinful anger has asserted that lie because I served the false gods identified in Question #3. I need to repent, turning from the cravings and works of the flesh to the Lord of life. I need to confess my sins, ask forgiveness, believe the gospel, ask for the wisdom to know how to respond and the power to do it. The results of all this will be the clear-mindedness of "coming to my right mind." I will know genuine gratitude to God, and contentment (still in the traffic jam, no less) that was inconceivable while I soaked in my sins. Thank you, God, for who You are, for the goodness of Your gospel that has met me right here in my need! "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom... she is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire compares with her" (Proverbs 3:13, 15). I am experiencing the blessing of wanting wisdom more than my way or impressing people or getting money or the other things that threw me into a fluster.

Question #7: How should I respond in this situation to glorify God? Do it.

Repentance and faith lead to concrete changes in behavior, emotion, thoughts. Righteousness is just as specific as the sins described in Question #2. At the simplest level, I may simply take a deep breath and relax, trusting that God is indeed in control. But God has other fruits in mind, too. I become a charitable, courteous driver. What does it matter if I'm two more car lengths behind? I'll let a couple of cars in. God has set me free of both the hostile and competitive aspects of sinful anger. The traffic jam is no longer a dog-eat-dog battle. I offer thanks to God. I plan what I will say to the person I've stood up: not anxious excuse-mak-

ing or blustering irritation, but the simple facts and a concern for their welfare. I'll plan to apologize for the inconvenience. (I won't ask forgiveness, that's for when I sin against someone; apologies are for accidents. If I had left fifteen minutes late in the first place, then seeking forgiveness for inconsiderateness would be called for.) What a joy to be free of the emotional chaos of sin. Instead of that mix of anger, anxiety, confusion, and disgruntlement, I'm peaceful with the grateful "peace which passes understanding" and

Godliness creates gracious circles.

"secret of contentment" that come from living in the light of the gospel. Question #7 tackles every aspect of the situation described in Question #1, and walks out the will of God in detail in my world.

Question #8: What are the consequences of faith and obedience?

We've already mentioned some of the subjective benefits. More objectively, maybe a dented fender or even a killing got prevented. Somebody else was kept from stumbling into sinful anger or murder on my account. And in my corner of the world, the half dozen cars around me, maybe my courtesy and relaxed response proves catching. Godliness creates gracious circles. Here we come full circle and find that godliness, while not guaranteed to change the original situation, often has an effect for good on the world. Maybe I end up making the sale anyway because the manager is so impressed at the calm, reasonable way in which I handled a frustrating situation. He'd seen too many other salesmen come in spouting excuses and coming on strong. Godliness intrigued and attracted him.

The possibilities for the many-sided blessings of God are endless. Instead of my day being ruined, God has extricated me from sin and misery, and this is perhaps one of the most significant days in my life from the standpoint of growing into the image of Christ. I've learned how life works in God's world. I've learned how the gospel works. I've learned profound lessons in a very tiny corner of life. And perhaps when I talk to a troubled, distraught friend that evening on the phone, I'm able to "comfort those in any affliction with the comfort with which I have been comforted by Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:4). I didn't suffer much—the inconvenience of a traffic jam—and maybe he or she is suffering a great deal. But the dynamic of the human

¹⁴See the first part of this article, "Understanding Anger," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 14:1 (Fall, 1995), pp. 40-53.

heart is identical: I will understand my friend's temptations to anger, fear, and despair because I've understood my own. And I've come to understand the way of escape. Walking this through has not only blessed me, but has made me able to wisely counsel others.

A traffic jam—that's only a tiny case study. Some people might ask, "What does this have to do with major afflictions and major provocations to anger?" In the way the Bible views things, it has everything to do with them. The same truths about God apply in the same way. Sure, many details will differ. And the Bible is frank: there are tears that won't be wiped away and enemies who won't be out of the way until the last day. Question #8 does not create heaven on earth. But it creates tastes of heaven, even though the last enemy has not yet been put under Christ's feet. If on the day

I see Christ I will be made completely like Him, then in a small way I taste the joy of heaven in a traffic jam by being made a bit more like Him. These eight questions orient us to *Christian* reality, which is to say, they orient us to reality! They teach us about our world, ourselves, our God, how to live. People whom God teaches how to handle traffic jams, He will teach how to handle anything.

[Part 3 of this article, "Helping Angry People," will focus on the process of offering counsel to angry people. It will appear in the next issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, God willing. Isn't it interesting how that last phrase can keep readers, author, and editors alike from sinful anger should something interfere with those plans!]