

What Does the Bible Say About Anger?

Question: "What does the Bible say about anger?"

Answer: Handling anger is an important topic. Christian counselors report that 50 percent of people who come in for counseling have problems dealing with anger. Anger can shatter communication and tear apart relationships, and it ruins both the joy and health of many.

Sadly, people tend to justify their anger instead of accepting responsibility for it. Everyone struggles, to varying degrees, with anger. Thankfully, God's Word contains principles regarding how to handle anger in a godly manner, and how to overcome sinful anger.

Anger is not always sin. There is a type of anger of which the Bible approves, often called "righteous indignation." God is angry ([Psalm 7:11](#); [Mark 3:5](#)), and believers are commanded to be angry ([Ephesians 4:26](#)). Two Greek words are used in the New Testament for our English word "anger." One means "passion, energy" and the other means "agitated, boiling." Biblically, ***anger is God-given energy intended to help us solve problems.***

Examples of biblical anger include Paul's confronting Peter because of his wrong example in [Galatians 2:11-14](#), David's being upset over hearing Nathan the prophet sharing an injustice (2 Samuel 12), and Jesus' anger over how some of the Jews had defiled worship at God's temple in Jerusalem ([John 2:13-18](#)). Notice that none of these examples of anger involved self-defense, but a defense of others or of a principle.

Anger turns to sin when it is selfishly motivated ([James 1:20](#)), when God's goal is distorted ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)), or when anger is allowed to linger ([Ephesians 4:26-27](#)). Instead of using the energy generated by anger to attack the problem at hand, it is the person who is attacked. [Ephesians 4:15-19](#) says we are to speak the truth in love and use our words to build others up, not allow rotten or destructive words to pour from our lips. Unfortunately, this poisonous speech is a common characteristic of fallen man ([Romans 3:13-14](#)).

Anger becomes sin when it is allowed to boil over without restraint, resulting in a scenario in which hurt is multiplied ([Proverbs 29:11](#)), leaving devastation in its wake, often with irreparable consequences. Anger also becomes sin when the angry one refuses to be pacified, holds a grudge, or keeps it all inside ([Ephesians 4:26-27](#)). This can cause depression and irritability over little things, often things unrelated to the underlying problem.

We can handle anger biblically by recognizing and admitting our selfish anger and/or our wrong handling of anger as sin ([Proverbs 28:13](#); [1 John 1:9](#)). This confession should be both to God and to those who have been hurt by our anger. We should not minimize the sin by excusing it or blame-shifting.

We can handle anger biblically by seeing God in the trial. This is especially important when people have done something to offend us. [James 1:2-4](#), [Romans 8:28-29](#), and [Genesis 50:20](#) all point to the fact that God is sovereign and in complete control over every circumstance and person that enters our path. Nothing happens to us that He does not cause or allow. And as these verses share, God is a good God ([Psalm 145:8](#), [9](#), [17](#)) who allows all things in our lives for our good and the good of others. Reflecting on this truth until it moves from our heads to our hearts will alter how we react to those who hurt us.

We can handle anger biblically by making room for God's wrath. This is especially important in cases of injustice, when "evil" men abuse "innocent" people. [Genesis 50:19](#) and [Romans 12:19](#) both tell us to not play God. God is righteous and just, and we can trust Him who knows all and sees all to act justly ([Genesis 18:25](#)).

We can handle anger biblically by not returning evil for good ([Genesis 50:21](#); [Romans 12:21](#)). This is key to converting our anger into love. As our actions flow from our hearts, so also our hearts can be altered by our actions ([Matthew 5:43-48](#)). That is, we can change our feelings toward another by changing how we choose to act toward that person.

We can handle anger biblically by communicating to solve the problem. There are four basic rules of communication shared in [Ephesians 4:15, 25-32](#):

- 1) Be honest and speak ([Ephesians 4:15, 25](#)). People cannot read our minds. We must speak the truth in love.
- 2) Stay current ([Ephesians 4:26-27](#)). We must not allow what is bothering us to build up until we lose control. Dealing with and sharing what is bothering us before it gets to that point is important.
- 3) Attack the problem, not the person ([Ephesians 4:29, 31](#)). Along this line, we must remember the importance of keeping the volume of our voices low ([Proverbs 15:1](#)).
- 4) Act, not react ([Ephesians 4:31-32](#)). Because of our fallen nature, our first impulse is often a sinful one (v. 31). The time spent in "counting to ten" should be

used to reflect upon the godly way to respond (v. 32) and to remind ourselves how anger is to be used to solve problems and not create bigger ones.

Finally, we must act to solve our part of the problem ([Acts 12:18](#)). We cannot control how others act or respond, but we can make the changes that need to be made on our part. Overcoming a temper is not accomplished overnight. But through prayer, Bible study, and reliance upon God's Holy Spirit, ungodly anger can be overcome. Just as we may have allowed anger to become entrenched in our lives by habitual practice, we must also practice responding correctly until it becomes a habit itself.

Jesus and Anger

In the New Testament, there are several words used most frequently to express anger.

- **Thumos** appears twenty times and means a turbulent commotion, boiling agitation of feeling, sudden explosion. It's like our word *rage*.
- **Orge** appears forty-five times and describes a long-lasting attitude that often continues to seek revenge, like our word *resentment*.
- **Aganaktesis**, mentioned five times, is a form of anger without the implication of inappropriate behavior: *indignation*.¹⁰

In the New Testament, Jesus teaches us some of the things that anger God. Jesus acted out His anger when He drove the moneychangers out of the temple courts. He did this because they had made God's house a marketplace; they had cheated people and prevented them from worshiping God (see [Matt. 21:12](#)).

He became angry with the Pharisees because of their heartlessness. They wanted Him to keep the rules they had made for the Sabbath, and they had no compassion for the man with the shriveled hand whom Jesus healed (see [Mark 3:5](#)).

Jesus was very indignant when the disciples tried to prevent people from bringing children to Him (see [Mark 10:14](#)).

He consistently felt "righteous anger toward oppression, injustice, and unmet human needs. And he didn't hesitate to express his angry feelings."¹¹ Since Jesus was without sin, He vividly demonstrated for us that all anger is *not* sin.

Anger—Good or Bad

Rage expresses anger in explosive words and/or actions. Resentment stuffs the anger inside. Both forms of anger can destroy our relationships, affect our personalities, damage our effectiveness, and color our sense of worth. Indignation, however, can be the motivation for constructive action.

Where would we be today if God-fearing men and women had not become indignant about the terrible traffic in slaves that dehumanized black people?

Florence Nightingale's indignation over the unsanitary conditions and terrible care British soldiers received when they were wounded in battle revolutionized the nursing profession.

Dr. Semelweiss's indignation over the high mortality rate of mothers in childbirth led to the sterile procedures that save so many lives today.

The indignation we feel at the slaughter of millions of unborn infants has generated the pro-life movement. We have seen how this protest can be done in a manner consistent with Christianity. We have also seen how it can lead to sin, such as the murder of abortionists.

More and more people, even non-Christians, are expressing indignation at the filth on TV and in the movies.

Indignation over the abuse of women and children has caused people to take action. Concerned men and women have created shelters to protect the victims of domestic violence and develop programs to help the batterers.

Indignation stirs us to action. It starts our engines. God has given us this emotion as a tool to protest evil, to mobilize us to action, to correct injustice, and to give us a passion for service. When we are angry about the things that anger God, we are on a safe track.

Moses exhibited righteous indignation when he came down from Mount Sinai after forty days of talking with God and receiving his holy law. At the foot of the mountain, he found the Israelites in a wild orgy, dancing around a golden calf. He smashed the two tablets of stone to the ground, shattering them as powerfully as their laws had been shattered by the people's rebellion. God did not rebuke him for that.

But forty years later, Moses' rash, impatient anger exploded in rage, and he disobeyed God and struck a rock twice with his staff instead of speaking to it as

God had commanded. For this display of anger, Moses was rebuked by God and forbidden to enter the Promised Land.

What Makes You Angry?

We can learn a great deal about ourselves by considering the kinds of things that make us angry. Ask yourself the following questions, and try to be honest in your responses.

- Does your husband make you angry because he doesn't pick up his dirty clothes when the hamper is just six steps away?
- Are you resentful toward your mother-in-law because she interferes or keeps competing for first place with your husband?
- Do you feel indignation when a fellow employee is treated unfairly?
- Do the men at work anger you with their comments, jokes, and put-downs about women?
- Do you get irritated with your boyfriend because he is not as attentive as you would like?
- Do you respond with anger when your children are difficult to handle or disobedient?
- Does it upset you when your husband doesn't really listen to what you are trying to tell him?
- Are you resentful toward your boss because he is demanding and unsympathetic about your family pressures?
- Do you get angry when you seem to lose control over others?
- Are you enraged when your pride is bruised?
- Is your anger the result of ongoing grudges and bitterness?
- What is your emotional response to irritations? Do you blow up at the least provocation then forget the incident and leave the debris of injury in your wake?
- Do you suppress your anger and nurse a growing pile of offenses that keep you seething inside, while on the outside you pretend that you're okay?
- Is your anger an impetus for producing change?

Considering your answers to these questions can help you reflect upon the sources of your anger.

Anger Management—God's Way

You probably noticed that God's Word doesn't say we will never be angry. Nor does it say that all anger is sin. However, it does set limits for us. We're told, "In

your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" ([Eph. 4:26-27](#)).

Anger can be a constructive tool, able to build bridges, not walls, if it's managed properly. For example, if we commit ourselves to dealing with our anger before we go to bed, it won't grow during the night into resentment and bitterness. Dealing with anger before bedtime is not always an easy thing to do because at times there's no way of confronting the other person on the day of the incident. In that case, we have to take the circumstances to the Lord and promise Him we will work out the details as soon as possible. Otherwise, we are warned that unresolved anger gives the devil a foothold in our lives.

Anger is a wedge the devil drives into our spirits. If it's unresolved, it can lead to discouragement, depression, hatred, and even murder. It can cause friction and divisiveness in a family, a church, or in the workplace. That's why Scripture advises us, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" ([Eph. 4:29-32](#)).

When we speak unkindly or negatively, we grieve the Holy Spirit who lives within us. Why does He grieve? Because even though He is willing to give us the power to react differently, we choose to ignore Him. He is there to radiate Christ through our bodies, and we persist in snuffing out that light with our sins. Although these behaviors are the products of our sinful natures, we no longer have to be under their control.

In the New Testament, particularly in [Galatians 5:16-26](#), we learn that there are two sources of power for our lives: The sinful nature and the Holy Spirit. The sinful nature was crucified with Christ. Its control over us was broken. Now we have Christ Himself living His life in us.

When we follow the Holy Spirit's guidance, yield our emotions to His control, and are attentive to His gentle nudges, He will produce in us the character of Jesus Christ: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" ([Gal. 5:22](#)). If these qualities are deeply ingrained in our character, they will surely change the way we respond to irritation and provocation.

Two Ways to Express Anger

Psychologists today have classified the way we handle our anger into two categories: *assertive* and *aggressive*.

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In his book *Good 'n' Angry*, Les Carter distinguishes the two: "Assertive anger puts forward one's beliefs and values in a confident, self-assured manner. It is helpful and considerate of others. When used correctly, assertiveness is a positive trait. Assertive anger seeks to put forward what a person believes to be right. However, aggressive anger is used in an abrasive, insensitive way. . . . There is little concern for the impact the anger will have on the recipient. Aggressive anger is a negative trait."¹²

An incident in the life of the biblical character Nehemiah allows us to see how he dealt with a situation that made him very angry. He is a good example of an individual who used his anger assertively, and his restraint produced positive results.

Nehemiah was in the midst of accomplishing a great work. He had returned to Jerusalem from an influential position in the court of Babylon, and he had traveled there for one purpose: to organize the disheartened Jews living in Jerusalem to rebuild the walls around the city. Everybody was working day and night to finish the job. Then a delegation of poor Jews came to him with a complaint:

"Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, 'We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain'

"Others were saying, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine'

"Still others were saying, 'We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others' (Neh. 5:1-5).

Wealthy Jews were taking advantage of their poor brothers by lending them money and demanding interest and collateral. This was in direct violation of the Mosaic law—Jews were never to charge interest to their own poor. Furthermore, they were forbidden to enslave another Jew for any reason. A debtor could work off his debt as a hired hand.

[Nehemiah 5:6](#) records Nehemiah's response: "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry."

Nehemiah's reaction was one of indignation—righteous indignation, and his anger was in sync with God's anger.

How can we use anger to bring about change? Here are some valuable principles about anger we can learn from Nehemiah:

Admit Feeling Angry

Nehemiah never covered up his emotions. He acknowledged them openly and without apology. His anger started his engines and motivated him to action.

Think Before You Speak

Nehemiah didn't spout off the first thing that came into his head. He said, "I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials" (Neh. 5:7a).

Have you ever spouted off and then been sorry afterward? Words that pop out of our mouths in the heat of anger are usually things we would not say if we thought about them first. Nehemiah controlled his tongue until he had "pondered." He planned exactly what he would do and demand.

The New Testament gives us similar instructions: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" ([James 1:19-20](#)).

Confront and Propose a Solution

Once he'd thought things through, Nehemiah spoke: "I told them, 'You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!' So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said . . .

"What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil" (Neh. 5:7b, 9-11).

Nehemiah knew that he had scriptural support for his point of view, so he was fearless as he confronted these influential men—he charged them with violating God's laws.

Sometimes we treat people of wealth and power in a different way, giving them more preferential treatment than we do those who have none. We do this because we don't want to rock the boat. We don't want to lose their contributions. We don't want them to retaliate. We don't want a lawsuit.

But not Nehemiah! He didn't mince any words. He said, "What you are doing is wrong! Stop it! Give back what you've taken!" He stood uncompromisingly for justice. His own example put them to shame. He demanded immediate restitution. He didn't allow for any halfway measures. And what was the response from these powerful men?

"We will give it back,' they said. 'And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say!"

Then Nehemiah made sure they wouldn't backslide. "I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, 'In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"

"At this the whole assembly said, 'Amen,' and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised" (Neh. 5: 12-13).

Nehemiah had no illusions about people. He was wise enough to make these men take an oath in public, before the Lord, that they would do as they promised. He threatened them with God's punishment if they reneged on their promises. And they all followed through. Nehemiah's indignation resulted in restitution and justice for his oppressed countrymen.

Check Your Stress Level

I find that when I haven't had enough sleep or I'm under a lot of stress that I have a tendency to say things I don't mean and speak in a tone of voice I wouldn't normally use. When you find yourself getting angry, check your stress level to see if you aren't tired, impatient, and oversensitive.

Danger in the Hormone Zone

Normal hormonal changes can also play a part in our tolerance level. When I was in the midst of menopause, my middle son was entering puberty. I realized I was irritable and often unreasonable in my dealings with him during a time when he, too, was experiencing unfamiliar feelings and fears. At times we seemed like

hostile strangers rather than loving mother and son. To say the least, we were a poorly matched pair.

One day, I sat down with him and said, "Robert, you've reached a time of your life when your body is changing. You are becoming a man, and you'll soon be able to reproduce children. And I'm at the opposite end of the spectrum—my body is losing the ability to have babies. Both of us are experiencing feelings we haven't had before. If you help me, we can get through this together with a lot less difficulty."

Since I seemed to have his full attention, I went on. "Robert, there are two things that really bother me, clutter and noise. Do you think you could be more orderly and less noisy?" My explanation helped him to understand. He was so sweet and responsive. After that conversation, he really made an effort to be considerate, and I tried to be more tolerant. This got both of us through a tough period.

Yield Your Temper to the Control of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit lives within us and wants us to have victory over our besetting sins. He is the one who produces self-control in us. The more we let Him take over, the more self-control we will have. This begins with a "time-out" process.

In order to keep our temper from controlling us, we have to take time out to turn our minds toward God. We have to choose to offer up our circumstances to Him, to release the outcome to Him, and to ask Him for guidance and wisdom.

Resist Satan and the Spirit of Anger

We need to resist Satan every morning *before* we encounter the situations that trigger anger in you. As James instructed us, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" ([James 4:7](#)).

Choose to Forgive

As we learned in the last chapter, choosing to forgive is an act of the will. And a big difference in our behavior occurs when we live our lives knowing we are always going to forgive instead of giving ourselves permission to hold grudges.

Accept Your Circumstances From God—They May Not change

If you find that you are continually made angry by your circumstances, chances are you are waiting for God to do something miraculous. Maybe you're waiting for Him to change your world into a better place. The fact is, He is more likely to

change you—from the inside out—so that you are able to cope with your present circumstances. In the meantime, He will use that difficult situation—perhaps it's your mate, child, parent, or employer—to develop the fruit of the Spirit in your life. In the meanwhile, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" ([Rom. 5:3-4](#)).

If You Fail, confess It As Sin Immediately

When losing your temper causes you to say or do something inappropriate, immediately take responsibility. First confess your failure to the Lord, and accept His forgiveness (see [1 John 1:9](#)). Then go to the person you have offended and say those two difficult little words: "I'm sorry." Finally, go a little further and say, "What can we do to work this out?"

Pray for Wisdom

Wisdom is one thing we can count on God to provide us with every time we ask. [James 1:5](#) tells us that God delights in giving us wisdom. When we are faced with an infuriating situation, we need to pray for a constructive solution to the problem. This may entail a readjustment of our attitudes. It may require a compromise based on open communication. Most likely, the answer will come through hard work, not through an instantaneous change.

And when it comes to communication, pray that you are able to express your feelings in the right way and at the right time. Suppose you have to talk to your husband about something that bothers you a great deal. You know it won't be easy because he gets defensive and accusatory if you so much as broach the subject.

Pray about it. Then try bringing it up in a loving, peaceful way. You might want to approach him after a nice dinner in a quiet restaurant. Hold his hands. Look into his eyes and say, "I need to talk to you about something that is really troubling me. I need your help in working this out."

It is usually best to wait until you are feeling calm to explain why you have been angry. That way, even if he becomes irate, at least one of you will be thinking and speaking rationally!

Nehemiah's story makes one thing clear: All anger is not sin. Indignation motivates us to correct wrongs while rage and resentment keep us from maturing emotionally and growing spiritually. With the help of God's Spirit, we can learn to

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recognize the difference. Through His presence within, we will react His way to this challenging world—a world in which rage and violence are leaving horrifying scars at every level of society. We can be agents of change!