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CHAPTER 1

# WHERE DOES ANGER COME FROM?

Perhaps you can identify with Brooke.

Brooke, the mother of two preschoolers, loved her husband, Glen, an up-and-coming attorney. The couple had been married eight years. Brooke was a certified public accountant but had chosen to put her career on hold until the children started school.

“I think I made a mistake,” she told me. “I don’t think I am cut out to be a mother. I always wanted children, but now that I’ve got them, I don’t like the way I treat them. And I don’t like what they do to me. I don’t ever remember being angry or losing my temper before I had children. I always considered myself to be in control of my emotions. But I have to admit, I have often lost it with my kids. I hate myself when I do that.”

“What do you do when you lose it with the children?” I inquired.

“Different things,” she said. “Sometimes I yell at them. Sometimes I spank them really hard. The other day I picked up Ginger and shook her. That really scared me. I had seen on television just the day before a report of a mother who actually killed her child by shaking her. I don’t want to hurt my children. I love them, but I just lose control. I wish Glen would keep the kids and give me a break, but he is so stressed in his job that he says he doesn’t feel like caring for them. I think maybe I should go back to work and let someone else take care of the children.”

As I talked further with Brooke, I discovered that she was angry not only with her children’s behavior but also with Glen for giving her so little help. She was angry at herself for choosing to be a full-time mom, and ultimately she was angry with God for allowing her to be a mother. “He should have known that I wouldn’t be able to handle this,” she said.

By now Brooke was crying. To be honest, I felt like crying too, as I remembered the hundreds of mothers who have passed through my office over the years, feeling guilty, feeling alone, not liking their kids or themselves very much.

Then there was Rich, who came to my office well dressed, but I noticed his right foot was shoeless. I soon found out why.

“I’ve got to have help,” he began. “I’ve known for a long time that my anger was getting out of control, but Saturday was the last straw. For fifteen minutes, I tried to get my lawnmower started. I checked the gas, I checked the oil, I put in a new sparkplug, and still it wouldn’t start. Finally, I got so exasperated that I stepped back and kicked the thing. I broke two toes and cut a third. Sitting on the steps in pain, I said to myself, ‘That was really stupid.’”

“I’m embarrassed. I can’t tell people what really happened, so

I've been saying, 'I had an accident with a lawnmower.'

"This is not the first time I've lost my temper," he continued. "I've said some pretty nasty things to my wife and children in the past. I don't think I have ever physically abused them, but I've come close."

In the course of our conversation I discovered that Rich was highly educated, holding an MBA degree. He was married with two children, profitably employed, and owned a nice house in suburbia. Rich was an active member of his church and well respected in the community. Yet he had a habit of "blowing his cool."

Thousands of men can readily identify with Rich. Unfortunately, many of them are not as honest as he, and even fewer of them are willing to reach out for help.

Rich, with his broken toes, and Brooke, with her broken heart, are dealing with very different challenges. However, what they hold in common is the human experience of intense anger and their inability to handle it. Both knew that their anger had led them to inappropriate

behavior, but neither knew what to do about it. Thus, they suffered physically and emotionally from their destructive responses to anger—and their loved ones were suffering too.

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**ANGER IS THE OPPOSITE OF THE FEELING OF LOVE. LOVE DRAWS YOU TOWARD THE PERSON; ANGER SETS YOU AGAINST THE PERSON.**

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### **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE GET ANGRY?**

People of all ages and social status experience anger. Brian, a high school student, is angry at the teacher who gave him a D on his report card. Liz, Brian's teacher, is angry with her ex for failing to send the child-support checks on time. Maria, an eighty-five-year-

old grandmother, is angry with her oldest son, who seldom comes to see her; her son, Alex, is angry in general because he can't find a job and feels rejected by society. Marvin, a pastor, is angry with church leadership who always shoot down his best ideas. Bethany is only three years old, but she is angry with her mother, who took away her favorite toy.

*But what do we mean by anger?* The dictionary describes *anger* as “a strong passion or emotion of displeasure, and usually antagonism, excited by a sense of injury or insult.”<sup>1</sup> Although we normally think of anger as an emotion, it is in reality a cluster of emotions involving the body, the mind, and the will.

And we don't sit down and say, “I think I will now experience anger.” Anger is a *response* to some event or situation in life that causes us irritation, frustration, pain, or other displeasure. Thousands of events and situations have the potential for provoking anger. An elderly relative makes a tactless comment about your child's weight. The guy behind you on the expressway follows too closely. A friend is always posting political rants on Facebook. Your father was always angry about something when you were growing up, and now you have trouble managing your own anger.

Anger is fed by feelings of disappointment, hurt, rejection, and embarrassment. Anger pits you against the person, place, or thing that sparked the emotion. It is the opposite of the feeling of love. Love draws you toward the person; anger sets you against the person.

But the mind is also active from the very beginning. For example, if Becky asks her husband, Tim, to mow the lawn while she takes the kids shopping, and she comes home hours later and the grass is still shaggy, she may think, *If he cared, he would mow the lawn. He knows how much it means to me. I don't ask for much. What*

*was he doing instead? What HE wanted to do. How selfish.* But Tim responds inwardly, *Look at everything else I've been doing! I sealed the deck, took out the garbage, and walked the dog. What does she want?*

Meanwhile, Ken sits simmering in his department's conference room while Corey, his manager, tells him his numbers are down this quarter; and if he doesn't start producing, the company might have to let him go. *It's because I'm over fifty,* Ken thinks. *They're trying to get rid of all the old guys. Corey is what, about thirty-five? What does he know?*

Becky, Tim, and Ken are all experiencing strong negative emotions—in their minds. But there's more. The body also gets in on the experience of anger. The body's autonomic nervous system “gets the adrenaline flowing.” Depending upon the level of anger, any or all of the following may happen physically. The adrenal glands release two hormones: epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine (noradrenaline). These two chemicals seem to give people the arousal, the tenseness, the excitement, the heat of anger, and in turn these hormones affect the heart rate, blood pressure, lung function, and digestive tract activity.<sup>2</sup> So as Ken sits in the conference room listening to his boss, he can feel his face flushing, his stomach churning, and his fists clenching. It is these physiological changes that give people the feeling of being overwhelmed by anger and being unable to control it.

Then the anger spills over into action: Brooke shakes her preschooler, Bethany throws a tantrum, Rich kicks the lawnmower, and Ken returns to his cubicle and starts to compose a furious email.

We can't control our bodily reactions; however, we *can* control our mental and physical responses to anger. We'll look at that in upcoming chapters.

## WHY ANGER?

But first, let's look again at the roots of anger: where it comes from and why we experience it.

I believe that the human capacity for anger is rooted in the nature of God. Please do not think that I am being disrespectful of God. On the contrary, I stand in deep reverence of God when I suggest that human anger is rooted in the divine nature. Further, I am not suggesting that anger is an essential part of the nature of God. I am suggesting that anger derives from two aspects of God's divine nature: God's holiness and God's love.

The Scriptures proclaim that God is holy. (See, for example, 1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44–45.) The word *holy* means “set apart from sin.” Whether we are talking about God the Father, God the Son, or God the Spirit, there is no sin in the nature of God. The New Testament writer said of Jesus that He “faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

A second fundamental characteristic of the nature of God is love. The apostle John summarized the whole teaching of Scripture when he said simply, “God *is* love” (1 John 4:8, italics added). Love is not to be equated with God; rather, in His essential nature God is loving. This is not simply the New Testament concept of God. From beginning to end, the Scriptures reveal God as committed to the well-being of His creatures. It is God's nature to love.

It is from these two divine characteristics that God's anger is derived. Please note: The Scriptures never say, “God is anger.” That statement is not, in fact, true. Anger is not a part of the essential nature of God. However, the Bible often indicates that God *experiences* anger. The word *anger* is found 455 times in the Old Testament; 375 of these refer to God's anger. In fact, the psalmist

said, “God is angry with the wicked every day” (Psalm 7:11 KJV).

God’s anger was not limited to Old Testament times. Read the life of Jesus, and you will see numerous occasions where Jesus demonstrated anger. (For example, see Mark 3:1–5; John 2:13–17.) *Because* God is holy and *because* God is love, God necessarily experiences anger. His love seeks only the good of His creatures. His holiness stands forever against sin. All of God’s moral laws are based upon His holiness and His love; that is, they are always aligned with what is right, and they are always for the good of His creatures.

God desires humans to do what is right and enjoy the benefits. He said to ancient Israel, “Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. For I command you this day to love the LORD your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy” (Deuteronomy 30:15–16).

Knowing the detrimental effects of man’s sin, God’s anger is kindled. It is God’s concern for justice and righteousness (both of which grow out of His holiness and His love) that stir God’s anger. Thus, when God sees evil, anger is His logical response to injustice or unrighteousness.

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**THE SCRIPTURES NEVER SAY, “GOD IS ANGER.”**

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### **“THAT’S NOT RIGHT”**

So what does all of this have to do with human anger? The Scriptures say that we are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). Though that image was marred by the fall, it was not erased. People still bear



the imprint of God's image deep within their souls. Thus, even though we are fallen, we still have some concern for justice and rightness. Find the most pagan man you know and follow him for a week, and you will hear him make such statements as: "That's not right. He shouldn't do that to her. She treated him wrongly." Steal his car and see if he expresses anger. Slander his daughter or wife or girlfriend and you will find that suddenly he is an extremely moral creature, condemning your action outright.

Listen to the young child who is beginning to put words into sentences, and you will soon hear the child say, "That's not fair, Mommy." Where did the child obtain that moral judgment? I suggest that it is stamped deep within his nature, tempered by parental teaching, to be sure, but the child knows when he or she has been wronged and will express it freely.

Anger, then, is the emotion that arises whenever we encounter what we perceive to be wrong. The emotional, physiological, and cognitive dimensions of anger leap to the front burner of our experience when we encounter injustice.

Why does a wife experience anger toward her husband? Because in her mind he has disappointed, embarrassed, humiliated, or rejected her. In short, he has "done her wrong." Why do teenagers experience anger toward parents? Because the teenager perceives that the parents have been unfair, unloving, unkind—that the parents have done wrong. Why does a man kick his lawnmower? Because the lawnmower is not "working right." The machine, or its manufacturer, has done him wrong. Why do drivers honk their horns when the traffic light turns green? Because they reason that the person in front of them "*should* be paying attention to the light and not texting and should have accelerated two seconds earlier."

Try to remember the last time you experienced anger and ask the question: Why did I get angry? Chances are your answer will mention some injustice. Someone or something did not treat you fairly. Something was wrong. Your anger may have been directed toward a person, an object, a situation, yourself, or God, but in every instance someone or something treated you wrongly. We are not discussing whether your perception of wrong is valid or invalid. We will deal with that in a later chapter. What we are establishing is that anger originates in the perception that something is wrong and that this sense of morality (some things are right and some things are wrong) finds its root in the fact that we are created in the image of a God who is holy and has established moral law for the good of His creatures.

Anger is not evil; anger is not sinful; anger is not a part of our fallen nature; anger is not Satan at work in our lives. Quite the contrary. Anger is evidence that we are made in God's image; it demonstrates that we still have some concern for justice and righteousness in spite of our fallen estate. The capacity for anger is strong evidence that we are more than mere animals. It reveals our concern for rightness, justice, and fairness. The experience of anger is evidence of our nobility, not our depravity.

We should thank God for our capacity to experience anger. When one ceases to experience anger, one has lost her sense of moral concern. Without moral concern, the world would be a dreadful place indeed. That brings us to our second major question: What is the purpose of anger? More to the point, what is *God's* purpose for human anger?

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A man is about as big as  
the things that make him angry.

**WINSTON CHURCHILL**

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