

Overcoming

ANGER

A biblical guide for becoming patient, tolerant, and slow to anger

Joel James

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by

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Introduction

King Saul was a tall man. In fact, he stood head and shoulders above everyone else in Israel. Unfortunately, as impressive as Saul's height was, he had another characteristic that was even more remarkable: his temper.

Saul's volcanic anger first erupted onto the pages of scripture after David's victory over Goliath. As the men returned from battle, the women greeted them with an improvised song: "Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18:6ff.). Bitter jealousy gripped Saul's heart and he became "very angry." He flew into a rage at being unfavourably compared to a perceived rival.

The very next day, Saul was toying with a spear while David was playing his harp before the throne. Saul suddenly straightened and flung the spear at David with all his might, trying to skewer him. Saul's resentful anger toward David led him to do this, not once, but twice.

So volatile was Saul's temper, David had to devise intricate ways of discovering Saul's state of mind before he dared risk eating a meal at the royal table. When he found out that his own son was part of this message system, Saul grew so furious that he had a go at Jonathan with the spear as well. After these initial blasts of anger, King Saul spent the rest of his reign chasing David over the hills of Palestine, a hound after a particularly elusive fox.

Saul's anger left his kingdom, his family, and his relationship with his most able courtier (David) in shambles. That's how anger is. It's destructive. That's true of the guy who walks into the office he was fired from last month and starts pulling the trigger of his hand gun. It's true of the husband and father who "pulls the trigger" when his wife or kids irritate him. Anger destroys.

You know that. That's probably why you picked up this booklet. You've seen the effects of your anger. The last time you lost your temper (Proverbs calls it "sending out your spirit"), you found out the truth of Proverbs 18:19, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city."

Now you want to change. Can you? Anger has become such a habit, it's like breathing: you don't even think about it, you just do it. Or, perhaps your habit is to be as mild-mannered as Clark Kent (Superman's alter ego), but there are some people who just push your button, and off you blast into geo-synchronous orbit. Can you *change*?

God says you can. It will take some hard, Spirit-directed work (Gal 5:16-23), but you can change.

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

(Gal 5:16)

God has given us the resources—His Spirit—to overcome anger. But how do you go about walking by the Spirit? How can *you* begin to exercise the fruit of the Spirit that is self-control (Gal 5:23)? How can you overcome anger, and be patient, tolerant, and slow to anger? Let's start the process of overcoming anger with some motivation: a review of the tragic results of anger.

The Tragic Results of Anger

Proverbs frowns on anger. It is unwise living. To warn against it, Proverbs repeatedly speaks of the tragic results of anger. Consider the following six examples.

A quick-tempered man acts foolishly.

(Prov 14:17)

More directly stated, that means anger makes you do stupid things. I had a friend who suffered the discomfort of wearing a finger splint for a month because he cracked a knuckle when he punched a wall in a fit of rage. A quick-tempered man acts *foolishly*. Bitterness is just as bad. I once read of a man who resented his divorced wife so much that he sent his monthly alimony payments in five-cent coins. Each payment weighed seventy kilos.

Both explosive, punch-the-wall anger and resentful, I'm-going-to get-back-at-you anger make you do foolish things. Probably the most dramatic example of foolish anger I have ever heard of happened on the golf course. A man was so angry at missing a shot that he slashed his club at a tree in frustration. The head of the club sheared off, rebounded from the tree, and the jagged end severed his jugular vein, killing him in seconds. Ouch. Sin is its own punishment.

After foolishness, a second tragic result of anger is found in Proverbs 25:28.

Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit.

(Prov 25:28)

Anger allows you to be manipulated by others. Solomon's illustration was of a city whose protecting wall had been breached by a besieging army. Once a hole was punched through the defences, the whole city was leveled. According to Solomon, a person who doesn't control his temper is equally exposed to being dominated by others. His defences are down. He isn't thinking clearly. He is easily conquered.

I recall an example of this from my basketball days. There was a guy I often played against who had a tendency to get angry at himself when he made a mistake. Although he was a superior player, I knew that if I could get him to bounce the ball off his foot or miss an easy shot he would get upset. When that happened, he would begin to press too hard and make more mistakes. Eventually he would get so upset he would be liability to his team rather than an asset. His lack of self-control opened him to being controlled by another. When angry on the basketball court, he was a city without walls.

A third tragic result of anger in Proverbs is *strife*. Contention, quarrels, resentment, and bruised feelings follow anger like a shadow follows a man on a sunny day.

A hot-tempered man stirs up strife...

(Prov 15:18)

The scent of a skunk lingers wherever it goes. In the same way, wherever a hot-tempered man goes, the odor of strife is sure to follow. His wife, kids, co-workers, and friends all know, when he comes around, expect a battle, an outburst, or a tantrum.

A fourth tragic result of anger from Proverbs is found in chapter 19. It is a fascinating bit of wisdom from the divinely sharpened mind of Solomon.

A man of great anger will bear the penalty, for if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again.

(Prov 19:19)

Anger produces anger. that's the principle. The angry man will have to be rescued again and again. Why? Like any sin, anger is *habit-forming*. The more you get angry, the more you get angry. That's a tragic result of anger. You get in the habit of responding with outbursts or bitterness, and soon you're in a groove. Any disagreement or disappointment sets you off. You don't even have to think about it. It's a habit.

The world has missed this point all together. Psychology (even that self-labeled "Christian") often promotes *catharsis* as the solution to anger. The word catharsis comes from the Greek word for cleansing. In catharsis, a person is encouraged to "clean out" or get rid of his anger in a furious outburst. For example, the psychologist might encourage the counselee to punch, kick, yell, and even scream obscenities at an object such as a pillow, imagining it to be the person who has offended him.

The assumption behind catharsis is that this outburst will "get out" the anger stored up inside a person. Pour water out of a glass, and the glass will be empty. Pour anger out of your heart, and your heart will be empty. Once the anger has been drained out, it will be gone for good.

That might sound logical, but it's totally unbiblical. First, the original outburst of anger is sin even if directed at a pillow. Second, the Bible says, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other" (Eph 4:32). Raging at someone *in absentia* can hardly be called tender-hearted and forgiving. Third, the concept of catharsis completely misunderstands the nature of sin. Sin is *habit-forming*.

A man of great anger will bear the penalty, for if you rescue him, *you will only have to do it again* [emphasis added].

(Prov 19:19)

Far from "getting out" anger, the outburst of catharsis only builds a habit of rage. The outburst of anger might temporarily make a person feel better (Hebrews calls this the "passing pleasure of sin"). However, all the psychologist has really done is given the sinner practice—practice at responding to personal offences in an ungodly way. Soon the anger habit the counselee is forming

in the secret world of the psychologist's office will spill out of his heart in situations beyond the counseling-room door. Anger produces anger.

Here's a fifth tragic result of anger from Solomon's proverbial treasure trove.

An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression.

(Prov 29:22)

We have already noted that anger brings strife. Consider how the second line of the proverb pushes the thought even further: "A hot-tempered man abounds in transgression." The issue is no longer just strife; transgression of every kind is now in view. Not only does anger produce strife and more anger, it produces a host of other sins as well.

For example, two brothers blow up at each other at a family reunion. They speak harshly. They yell hurtful lies back-and-forth at each other: "You never did care what your mother thinks!" When they get home, they gossip by telephone with the rest of the family about the other brother. Gossip turns to slander. Rage turns to resentment. Lies are spread in greedy hopes of cutting the other brother out of the will. Add it all up and what do you have? Anger is never a lonely sin. Hot-tempered people *abound* in transgression.

Let me give you one last tragic result of anger. It's not found in Proverbs, but it's too important to overlook.

Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.

(Eph 4:26-27)

Literally the original says, "Don't give the devil *a place*." A bitter heart is Satan's toehold. He will work his evil claws into the division caused by bitterness; he will twist and pry and push, widening the breach. Anger gives Satan a place. It is the perch from which he works his destructive schemes.

Anger's results are tragic. It left Saul's mind, family, and kingdom in shambles. It will do the same for you. When you're angry you say and do things you normally wouldn't. According to Proverbs, your anger gives birth to strife, more anger, and an army of other sins. In short, anger is Satan's playground. That's motivation to overcome anger!

The Ugly Source of Anger

I'm sure you've seen a marionette. It's a jointed puppet or doll controlled from above by strings or wires. Normally sinners want to be in control, therefore, we bristle at being compared to a marionette—except when it comes to anger.

We almost always describe anger as if we were a marionette unavoidably responding to someone's string-pulling: "He *made* me angry... It's just my *nature* to debate... I'm just *tired*!"¹ Other people, our personality, our circumstances—are they the puppet masters that pull the strings, forcing us to jerk and dance in anger? Where does anger really come from?

Discovering and facing up to the ugly source of anger is one of the keys to overcoming anger. Look in the mirror and you'll see it, the source of your anger. You've heard all the same excuses I have—everything from hair colour to hormonal fluctuations, from national origins to a bad day at the office. But the fact is, those things don't *force* us to get angry. We aren't *forced* to become angry; we *choose* to become angry.

But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed *by his own lust*
[emphasis added].

(James 1:14)

We try to deflect the pain of conscience by blaming our anger on God the Creator ("That's just the way I am."), on other people ("If *he* hadn't been so rude..."), or on circumstances ("I've had a long day."). However, James 1:14 cuts off our excuses like a kink in a hosepipe cuts off water: each one is tempted by *his own* lusts or desires. In other words, you saw the source of your anger in the mirror this morning when you were brushing your teeth.

Anger is a choice. Sometimes anger is such a habit, no conscious process of choosing is evident. We've done it so often, it has become an automatic response. But, none-the-less, anger is a choice to pursue our desires in a ungodly manner.

Consider a typical marriage spat. Billy calls Susy an "Airhead" because she forgot to pay the phone bill. Now they'll have to pay interest on the amount. Does Susy *have to* respond by calling him "Ebenezer Scrooge" or "Captain Thumbscrews"? She doesn't *have to*. It might be easy to follow her lusts and do so, but she could choose to ask his forgiveness for her carelessness, refusing to return insult for insult. It won't be easy, but she could. If exercising the self-control of the Spirit, she will. We are not *forced* to anger by genetics, circumstances, or people. We choose it.

¹ The difference between popular and biblical terminology highlights our desire to avoid personal responsibility for sin. "I lost my temper," means anger accidentally slipped out of your pocket while you weren't looking. You weren't to blame. Biblical terminology is found in the original language of Prov 29:11, "A fool always sends out his spirit." That means you made a *choice* to get angry.

Amazingly, there is great hope in the discovery that you are to blame for your anger and not everyone else. If you're a marionette set bouncing and dancing by other people or circumstances, you'll never overcome anger. Why not? You have no control over them. If they really do dictate your responses, you'll be their anger-slave, their puppet, for the rest of your life.

But if *you* are the ugly source of your anger as God says, it's another matter. You can change. What you chose to do yesterday, by God's grace, you can choose *not* to do today. No matter how insulted, embarrassed, or inconvenienced, you can choose to respond with self-control.

Look in the mirror. The real source of your anger is right in front of you. Once you stop pointing fingers at everyone or everything else, you'll see it's true. Each one is tempted by his own lusts. Don't be discouraged, however. A plumber can't fix a leak until he finds the offending pipe. We've found the pipe—your choices and responses. Now let's fix the leak.

I have the right!

Why do we become angry? What thinking lies behind the sin of anger? Typically we burst out in wrath or burn with resentment because we believe our *rights* have been trampled. Anger is a response, usually *revenge* for violated "rights."²

When you believe your "right" to control your schedule, your personal belongings, or the destiny of your children has been violated, you strike back with anger. When you believe your rights to good health, peace and quiet, fast service, success, or compliments from your spouse have been violated, you fume or plunge into bitterness.

Of course, biblically, none of those things are *rights*. We just imagine they are. Our pride assures us that we deserve children who never disobey, employees who never mess up, and a spouse who can read minds.

"I deserve never to be cut off on the freeway. Therefore, if I am, I pull up beside the offender and shake my fist at the scum." It is such I-deserve kind of thinking that is the source of anger. We believe our "rights" have been violated and we want revenge. Consider the following examples of anger in the scripture and see if you can pick out the I-deserve thinking driving them. The first is from the parable of the prodigal son. Which of his "rights" did the older brother believe had been violated?

Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your

² Anger is *usually* a revenge response. There are exceptions to this. For example, some people use anger merely as a tactic to get what they want. Johnny knows Mom doesn't like to argue, so he flashes anger to avoid having to tell her why he's late getting home from school. That's a manipulation tactic, not revenge.

brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him.

But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends.

(Luke 15:25-29)

Why did the older brother boil over with resentment? He became angry because he believed he had the right to be *spoiled*. He believed he had the right to a special celebration. Certainly he deserved more than his wicked, unworthy brother! To take revenge for his father's "injustice," he skipped the party and pouted.

In Genesis 4, we find another example of anger.

So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground... And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell.

(Gen 4:3-6)

Cain believed he deserved to be *accepted* by God. When that *right* was "violated," Cain struck out in anger and jealousy against the nearest target, his brother Abel. "Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him" (Gen 4:8).

David's oldest brother, Eliab, gives us another example of anger. Eliab believed he had the right *never to be embarrassed* by his younger brother. Israel was at war, and David had been sent by his father to deliver a care package to his brothers at the battle line. When he arrived, David heard the taunts of Goliath, and wondered out loud what the reward would be for killing the blasphemous genetic freak from Gath.

"What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?"

Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab's anger burned against David and he said, "Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your insolence and the wickedness of your heart; for you have come down in order to see the battle."

But David said, "What have I done now? Was it not just a question?"

(1 Sam 17:26-29)

It's a classic sibling quarrel. Younger brother embarrasses older brother with his dumb questions. Older brother gets angry and insults younger brother. Younger brother is clueless as to what he did wrong. But what was the source of Eliab's anger? His desire for prestige. He believed he had the right not to be embarrassed by his younger brother.³

There are other examples we could consider. Balaam got angry and beat his donkey when it inconvenienced him by stopping in the middle of the road. Saul became angry when his plans for his son to sit on the throne of Israel were threatened by David. What was their thinking in those instances? I have the right to transportation that never inconveniences me. I have the right for my plans to work out the way I want them to. Sound familiar?

What do *you* believe to be *your* "rights"? What sets you off if God, people, or circumstances don't deliver? Think back over the last few months—you'll probably see a pattern. There are certain things you expect. When you don't get them, it's "Torpedoes away!" and heaven help those on the receiving end.

³ Embarrassment and anger often go together. Just think how you respond when your kids disobey in front of the preacher. They get a double dose of scolding on the way home. Why? Your pride wants revenge for being made to look like a bad parent.

A Quick Glance at Impatience

It will have to be a *quick* glance or we'll lose the attention of those who need this section most.

Impatience is a minimising, excuse-word for anger. All the symptoms and motivations of impatience are the same as anger's, just less dramatic. Sharp words, a resentful glare, I-deserve-better-than-this kind of thinking: impatience is the child that grows into the adult of anger.

Unfortunately, many of the most successful and competent people in our world are also impatient people. Therefore, we tend to excuse impatience. However, here's how God views it.

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit,
than he who captures a city.

(Prov 16:32)

The Hebrew language reserved the word "mighty" (*gebors*) for the strongest, most successful, and most capable men in their society. The *gebors* were the warriors and the wealthy, the movers-and-the-shakers. However, more important to God than being a person who "gets things done" is being a person who is patient. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty."

We believe that what we are doing is so important that no inconvenience should stand in our way. God says nothing is so important that we should exchange patient self-control for impatient anger. "He who rules his spirit [is better] than he who captures a city." God puts a high premium on patience.

So, what should you do when you get the Pick'n Pay cashier for whom making change is rocket science? When you get stuck behind the person who thinks the speed limit on the freeway is 12 rather than 120? What you should do is remember 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

Be patient with everyone.

(1 Thess 5:14)

"Everyone? All five billion of them? How is that possible?" You aren't the first one to read that verse with consternation. I'm sure Paul's readers in Thessalonica probably did as well. The Greek word *makrothumeo* (meaning "long to anger") was used in Greek literature about as often as mothers name their children Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In other words, the ancient Greek world was no more inclined toward patience than we are. But Paul said to be patient with everyone.

What is that patience like? Here's a useful definition: patience is choosing to suffer long under even painful circumstances *without retaliation*. Impatience, on the other hand, is retaliation for inconvenience. Like the I-have-the-right or the I-deserve thinking of anger, impatience thinks, "I am

so important that no inconvenience should stand in my way. And if you do inconvenience me, expect a cold stare, some eye-rolling, frustrated sighs, or finger-tapping in retaliation."

It hurts when we put it that way, doesn't it: "I am so important..." But that's really the issue. Who I am or what I am doing is so significant that I deserve free-flowing traffic, a copy machine that never breaks, or a child who doesn't spill his milk.

How can a person overcome impatient anger? Paul gave the solution as he continued in 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.

Be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil,
but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people.
(1 Thess 5:14-15)

Negatively, patience is *not retaliating*. It is the opposite of repaying with evil (glares, stares, and snorts of disgust). Positively, patience is replacing evil responses with *seeking good*. "Be patient...seek after that which is good for one another and for all people." Paul's solution to patience-testing situations was to guard your response: give good to the one who is inconveniencing you.⁴

Instead of snarling at the mathematically challenged cashier, give a smile of encouragement. Instead of melting down your wife for being late with supper, ask her how you can help: "Seek after that which is good for one another." Kindness is the rewarding replacement of impatient retaliation.

Patience is a choice *not to strike back* mentally, verbally, or with body language when inconvenienced. Or perhaps we could say it this way: patience is a choice to strike back with *kind words* and *encouragement* when inconvenienced. Don't repay with evil. Repay inconvenience with good.

Love and tolerance

How can you do that? Impatience is a hard sin-habit to break. To begin responding with good to inconvenient people or circumstances, you're going to have to fill your thoughts with two dominant attitudes: love and tolerance.

Love is patient,...is not provoked, [love] does not take into account a
wrong suffered...
(1 Cor 13:4-5)

Love replaces impatience. When your son can't find his Bible and is making you late for church, you can either respond with teeth-grinding frustration, or you can think, "Love is patient." Love refuses to be provoked by inconvenience or incompetence. "How many times do I have to tell you

⁴ This is a perfect illustration of Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Impatience is not replaced by robot-like tolerance. It is replaced by *active good*.

to put the cap back on the toothpaste?" There's a person who is keeping score ("How many times..."). Love, however, "does not take into account a wrong suffered"—even if it is something as significant as a toothpaste cap.

A second attitude which will help you be patient with everyone is *tolerance*.

As those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart
of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; *bearing with
one another...* whoever has a complaint against anyone [emphasis added].
(Col 3:12-13)

This verses tells us that patience has lots of companions: compassion, kindness, humility, and gentleness. In fact, if you aren't patient, it's because you aren't on speaking terms with those four companions of patience. Compassion feels sorry for the flustered cashier. Kindness gives her better than she deserves. Humility doesn't consider a fifteen second delay to be unacceptable to a "person of *mystature*." Gentleness chooses not to defend its "rights."

All those things add up to *tolerance*. J.B. Phillips translates this little section, "be most patient and tolerant with one another."⁵ Tolerance or forbearance means you choose to suffer long under even painful circumstances without retaliation. Love means you do it ungrudgingly.

Do you remember what fingernails on a chalk board sound like? You'll come across people in life who are just as pleasant. They are blisters on the big toe of life. Or a person you normally get along with will be momentarily insufferable. Circumstances will inconvenience you. Impatient retaliation is the natural (sinful) response. We do it without thinking. Kill it, however, before the larva of impatience grows into the killer bee of anger. Replace impatient retaliation with unprovokable love and gentle tolerance.

⁵ J.B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches* (New York, Macmillan Company, 1957), 125.

Overcoming Anger

In the last section we saw a very common New Testament pattern. Paul told the Thessalonians to *put off* impatient retaliation, and to *put on* loving tolerance. "See to it that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another." Sin is replaced by its godly opposite ("Overcome evil with good" Rom 12:21). That *put off, put on* pattern is always God's plan for overcoming sin.

You *lay aside* the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and...be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and *put on* the new self... [emphasis added].

(Eph 4:22-24)

You can see that Paul applied that plan to overcoming anger at the end of Ephesians four.

Put off:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

(Eph 4:31)

Put on:

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

(Eph 4:32)

Identifying the sin of anger

Let's continue to apply God's put off, put on pattern to overcoming anger. The first step toward putting off any sin is to identify what is sin and what isn't. If you don't know impatience is a form of anger, it's not likely you'll stop doing it. So, where do we find out what is and isn't sin in regard to anger? Ephesians 4:31 is a good place to start. It identifies six different anger-sins.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

(Eph 4:31)

Bitterness was the first anger-sin Paul mentioned. The Greek word *pikria* referred to the taste left in your mouth by bile or stomach juices. Yuck! Eventually *pikria* came to be used of having a bad taste in your mouth toward someone, i.e., bitterness.

Bitterness usually comes from brooding. Brooding is what a mother hen does on her eggs—she sits on them day after day, keeping them warm. Bitterness does the same thing. It broods over the memory of past offences, real or imagined. Rather than overlooking a transgression, it nurses hurts, keeping them warm rather than letting them die. A bitter person is an anger-miser, hunched over his hoard of slights, griefs, and grudges, secretly counting them by candlelight each night.

To counteract hoarded anger, Paul said this to the Ephesians: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Eph 4:26). Bitterness is retained anger. Bitterness is anger that carries over to the next day. It is long-term resentment. Rather than forgive an offence and clear the debt, a bitter person keeps the account open, adding interest daily.

Wrath and *anger* were the next anger-sins mentioned in Ephesians 4:31. If a distinction had to be made, *wrath* would be a momentary outburst, *anger* more sustained. The words Paul used in the original were the common words for anger in Greek. They covered everything from animosity to fury, from exasperation to rage.

Clamour was the next word in Paul's list: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor ... be put away from you." This word referred to the raised voices and boisterous shouting of an angry, back-and-forth argument. Clamour is what happens when men discuss politics or sports—red-faced shouting. Clamour is what happens when two women grab the last skirt at a 75% off sale—hostile threats and verbal karate chops. Clamour is what happens in many homes when mom and dad, parents and teenagers, or brothers and sisters face off. Paul said that all raised-voice arguing is an anger-sin that must be put off.⁶

Slander or *evil speaking* was the fifth anger-sin Paul blacklisted in Ephesians 4:31. The Greek word was *blasphemia*. We normally reserve the word "blasphemy" for words that attack God. In Greek, it referred to any *hurtful, attacking words*. In the context of anger, the King James' translation, "evil speaking," is right on target.

Often *blasphemia* referred to good-old-fashioned insults and name-calling. In the gospels, it was used of the crowds "hurling abuse" at Christ during the crucifixion. That kind of verbal mud-slinging was what Paul had in mind in Ephesians 4:31. Hurtful lies, angry insults, mocking, and name-calling all fall under the anger-sin of "evil speaking."

Malice was last on Paul's list.

⁶ Some people don't raise their voice when they get angry, they silence it. Cold-shoulder, I'm-not-going-to-talk-to-you resentment is just as much sin as high-decibel arguing.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

(Eph 4:31)

This word referred to a desire to cause hurt to another. Malice is what makes a brother put hair remover in his sister's shampoo bottle after she told his girlfriend about his *other* girl. Malice goes out of its way to hurt or upset another. Love seeks the best for another; malice seeks the worst. Angry malice *wants* the other person to fail, look foolish, or be lacerated emotionally.

Application

More could be said about anger, but Ephesians 4:31 gives us a good start at identifying sinful anger. But to overcome the sin of anger, you must identify it in the scripture *and* in your life. Look at your life, your relationships. Do you have a bad taste in your mouth toward anyone, brooding over some past wrong? That's bitterness. Do you get steamed up when your "rights" have been denied? That's wrath and anger.

Do you crank the volume switch when you disagree with someone in your family or a person at work? That's clamour. Do you insult, name-call, or say untrue, hurtful things ("You always..., You never...") when you can't get your way? That's evil speaking. Do you give a half-hearted, second-rate effort when someone else's plan is implemented? That's malice.

In Ephesians 4:31, Paul gave us the basic biblical categories of anger-sin. As usual, identifying the problem is half the battle. But we must still discover anger's godly replacement. That's the purpose of the next section.

Put on

We might mistakenly think that anger is overcome by teeth-grinding toleration: "I'll stay out of your way if you stay out of mine." However, Paul said that evil can only be overcome by *good*, not uneasy neutrality or tight-lipped silence.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Rom 12:21)

Following his list of anger-sins in Ephesians 4:31, in the next verse Paul told the Ephesians that there were three good things that overcome anger: kindness, tender-heartedness, and forgiveness.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

(Eph 4:32)

These are the holy habits we must put on to overcome unholy anger. Let's consider each one.

Kindness: This was Paul's first *put on* replacement of anger. What is kindness? The Greek word was occasionally used of clothing. It referred to clothes that were easy and comfortable to wear. In other words, you might say kindness is 100% cotton. Anger is 100% polyester. Ties and starched collars are not kind; your favourite old track suit is. I think you get the picture. A kind person has a soft, relaxed attitude, not a tight, strained, or tense one.

The word kindness was also used of a drink that had a smooth, pleasant taste. Kindness is like a cup of warm, foamy Milo, not a bottle of cough medicine. Angry people are antagonistic, rough, quick to retaliate, and make you choke. A kind person is easy to be around. He is pleasant, relaxed, and comfortable.

One of the most important uses of the word kindness in the New Testament is in Luke 6:35, which says God "is kind to ungrateful and evil men." Kindness is doing loving things for another person, even when he *doesn't deserve it*, even if he has been ungrateful and evil.

Anger is overcome by the good of kindness—choosing to do something pleasant for the one who would normally be the target of revenge. Rather than roasting your husband for getting home late, cook him the best meal possible to welcome him when he does arrive. Rather than basting your wife for being late with supper, help her by setting the table. That's kindness.

Tender-hearted: The Greek word was *eusplagnoi*. That sounds like something you do to someone with an Italian hand grenade. Actually it meant to be good-hearted. In Luke 10, the word was used to summarise the good Samaritan's willingness to use his time, money, and effort to help the beaten stranger. It was also the word used to describe Jesus' attitude toward the lost sheep of Israel.

Seeing the people, He felt *compassion* for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd [emphasis added].
(Matt 9:36)

When Jesus saw the sin of Israel—the sin He would personally carry on the cross—He didn't say, "How could you do this to me? I'm going to get even." Instead, Matthew says He "felt compassion [*eusplagnoi*] for them."

Compassion or tender-heartedness views another person's sin as something to be forgiven, not an excuse for anger. The prodigal's father could have been wrathful and clamorous when his foolish son returned penniless: "How could you do this to me and our family, you worthless son!" But what was the father's response?

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt *compassion* for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him [emphasis added].
(Luke 15:20)

Tender-heartedness concentrates on how the sin hurts the one doing it, not on avenging its offended pride. Tender-heartedness is a reasoned choice to stop the mental rush toward retaliation. It replaces anger with compassionate, selfless concern.

Forgiveness: Paul said a third *put on* action for overcoming anger is forgiveness: "...forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." Anger retained past sundown is bitterness (Eph 4:26). That kind of anger is overcome by a willingness to forgive.

Biblical forgiveness has three basic steps.⁷ To eradicate bitter resentment, you must first pursue peace with the person who offended you. Second, where sin was done, it must be repented of and mercifully wiped away. Third, to make sure neither person dwells on what happened (brooding), a new and better relationship must be established.

So, *kindness* is good done to someone who may not deserve it; *tender-heartedness* grants compassion rather than retaliation; *forgiveness* wipes away a person's offence and puts the whole situation out of its mind. Those are God's replacements for sinful anger.

What do they look like in action? A few pages ago, Billy angrily insulted Susy when she forgot to pay the phone bill. What could he have done to put off anger and put on its good replacement? He could have given Susy a hug of husbandly affirmation and love rather than call her an "airhead." *Kindness* does good to another, even if she doesn't deserve it.

He could have asked about the pressures that contributed to her forgetfulness. He should have realised that his wife already felt miserable enough about letting down her husband, and treated her gently. *Tender-heartedness* gives understanding and compassion. Billy also could have overlooked or *forgiven* her carelessness, putting it out of his mind rather than brooding on it and the extra expense of the interest.

It's hard work to break anger habits. Like Billy, you'll have to check yourself as you prepare to launch out of the sprinter's blocks of anger, and give kindness, understanding, and forgiveness instead. By God's grace you can do it. Evil can be overcome by good.

⁷ See author's booklet, *Forgiving Like God Forgives*.

A Note on Righteous Anger

Righteous anger exists. God is angry with sinners, but does not sin (Romans 1:18, Numbers 11:1, etc.). In the same way, Jesus was both angered and grieved when the Pharisees silently resisted the Sabbath-day healing of the man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-5). That proves it is possible to be angry, and not sin. In fact, Ephesians 4:26-27 says this:

Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not give the devil an opportunity.

(Eph 4:26-27)

Does that mean it's okay to be angry? This text does seem to say that there is a kind of human anger that is not sin. It is, however, the only text in the whole Bible that speaks favourably of human anger. In fact, five verses later Paul rejected bitterness, wrath, anger, and clamour. That indicates a need for great caution in applying his words in v. 26.

What is the application of verse 26? Most, if not all, students of God's word associate Ephesians 4:26 with the righteous anger of God and Christ toward sin. Righteous anger can be described as a *momentary, internal indignation over sin and its effects*. It is over sin and its effects: the examples of God and Christ establish that. It is momentary: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." It is internal: "Let all...clamor...be put away from you" (v. 31).

It is also dangerous. Righteous anger usually crosses the line into unrighteous anger in about half a second. In other words, what is possible for God is nearly *impossible* for us. God's anger is holy—it is concerned with sin. Our anger is almost inevitably unholy—it is concerned with self. For example, when my children disobey, I might become angry. However, it would be untrue to say my anger is righteous indignation that *God's* standard was violated. It is usually unrighteous anger because *my* convenience, comfort, or control was violated. That's definitely not righteous anger.

Personally, I don't promote righteous anger. It is possible—for example, a momentary, internal indignation over the dishonour caused to Christ by the sexual escapades of a prominent false teacher. However, how would one show that anger? Yelling? Screaming? Throwing things? Lingering bitterness? Those are all ungodly responses.

Suppose someone skips a robot and thumps into the side of your car. Do you think your "righteous" anger toward him is going to be a good testimony for Christ? Do you think your anger is actually righteous at all? Probably it is more concerned with yourself—your car and your family's safety—rather than the fact that God's Romans-13, obey-the-government standard was violated. Let's face it, our so-called righteous anger is almost inevitably unrighteous, self-preoccupied anger.

Proverbs 19:19 points out another danger of supposedly righteous anger: "A man of great anger will bear the penalty, for if you rescue him, you will only have to do it again." Anger is habit forming. Your habit of supposedly righteous anger is going to spill over into unrighteous anger all too easily. It's better to put on the gentleness of Christ and forsake anger all together.

Don't get caught in the deadly trap of excusing your outbursts or bitterness as righteous anger. Once you do that, you'll never overcome anger. You'll just keep excusing your behaviour or attitudes as righteous no matter how grossly unrighteous they are. Switching labels on a bottle of poison doesn't make what's inside any less poisonous. Therefore, avoid labelling your anger, "righteous." It's probably not. If you do have a momentary flash of internal indignation over sin and its effects, you can know you haven't sinned. But don't ever use that to defend I-deserve-better, I-have-the-right outbursts or bitterness. God is not fond of people who do that: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20).

Solomon's Seven Instructions for Being Slow to Anger

If I said you had a long nose, you probably wouldn't take that as a compliment. You should. That's how the Old Testament describes God when He is patient: long of nose. Our translations rightly handle that Hebrew idiom by saying God is "slow to anger." But literally it says, "God is long of nose." Nobody's quite sure how that idiom came into being. Some suggest the Hebrews saw it this way: when a person becomes angry, their nose becomes red or burns; God's nose is so long, it never burns up.

Whatever the case, we want to imitate God; eight times in the Old Testament He is described as being long of nose. That doesn't mean we need plastic surgery to be His children. It does mean we need to learn the secret of being *slow to anger*. Let's do that by looking at Solomon's seven instructions for being slow to anger.

Instruction 1

To be slow to anger, you must first *rule your spirit*. While men might hail the victorious general, God saves His highest regard for the one who has conquered his temper.

He who is *slow to anger* is better than the mighty, and he who *rules his spirit*,
than he who captures a city [emphasis added].

(Prov 16:32)

You can see by comparing the italics in the verse above, that being slow to anger *is* ruling your spirit (your inner man). That makes sense. The key to being slow to anger can't be other people — they're usually outside your control. So are circumstances. By God's grace, however, the one thing that you can dictate in any situation is your response.⁸ To be slow to anger, you must rule your inner man — your attitudes and thoughts—and, therefore, your responses.

The word "rule" in this verse meant to govern, direct, or oversee. To be slow to anger, you must govern your thoughts and attitudes so your circumstances and sinful instincts won't.

Notice another place Proverbs zeros in on self-control as the key to overcoming anger.

A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.

(Prov 29:11)

⁸ As noted previously, self-control is part of the Holy Spirit's work in every believer's life (Gal 5:22-23). That self-control is especially critical in overcoming anger.

Literally it says, "A fool always *sends out* his spirit, but a wise man *calms it down*." To overcome anger, you have to make a decision to control yourself, calm yourself down, and not succumb to the anger habit.

There's no trick or secret pill that magically helps you overcome anger. Prayerful dependence on God is, of course, critical. From there, conquering anger is a God-guided choice to respond differently than you want to—kindness rather than anger.

The key to killing an anger habit is not changing the people or circumstances around you (remember James 1:14). There might be some things you can do to limit your opportunities to become angry ("Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" Romans 13:14). However, the real key to overcoming anger is your application of God's grace to rule your spirit, "calming it down," rather than "sending it out."

Instruction 2

A second principle for being slow to anger is found in Prov 22:24-25.

Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man,
or you will learn his ways and find a snare for yourself.

(Prov 22:24-25)

When I was young, we had a saying: "Monkey see, monkey do." It pointed to the fact that little boys (monkeys) tend to imitate what they see. Unfortunately, monkeys don't change much when they become gorillas (adults). We still tend to copy the bad example of others. Paul said it this way: "Don't be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor 15:33).

In Proverbs 22:24-25, Solomon gave us a second instruction for being slow to anger. Don't spend time around someone who gets angry easily, otherwise you'll learn his ways—monkey see, monkey do. Lots of things can influence you toward anger: books or movies with angry characters, friends who are ruled by their temper, television shows where yelling and screaming is the standard response to pressure, and so on. Don't be deceived, angry company teaches you to be an angry person.

Instruction 3

A stone is heavy and the sand weighty, but the provocation of a fool is
heavier than both of them.

(Prov 27:3)

Proverbs 27:3 shows us that there are some people who provoke us or get under our skin more than others. They are fingernails on the chalkboard of life. Screeeechh! Here Proverbs picks on the fool.

But who is it that provokes you? What situations set you off? What's heavier to you than sand and stones? To overcome your anger you'll have to know. That's why I have called Solomon's third instruction, *scout your anger*.

When the rugby Springboks play in the world cup, do they show up at the stadium on game day and ask, "Whom are we playing today? France? I wonder what they're like? Who are their best players? What strategies do they use?" Of course they don't. They *scout* the opposition beforehand so they are prepared to play against the other side's strengths and weaknesses.

In the same way, you need to scout your anger. Like everyone, you have strengths and weaknesses. There are people or situations that you struggle to handle with self-control. You need to scout your anger, so that you know when, where, and why you usually get angry. Once you have discovered your weaknesses, you can consciously prepare to handle those people or situations with gentleness.

For example, I'm often sharp and impatient when I'm hungry or in the last few minutes before we leave the house to go somewhere. Knowing that, I try to guard myself against impatience all the more closely in those two circumstances.

In the same way, a father who finds that he often yells at his children or is grouchy with his wife when he gets home from work, needs to scout his anger. By eight o'clock he's fine. But when he gets home at five-thirty, he's a bear. Once he has "scouted" his anger, he can put special effort into being patient at that time. He can work harder at setting the stress of the day aside before he pulls in the driveway.

When he walks toward the front door each day, he needs to think, "Okay, I'm going to dump the pressure of my job in the bushes here next to the front door, and be prepared for my family. I don't want them to get the backlash of my hectic day." By scouting his anger beforehand, he can ask God to help him react with kindness, tender-heartedness, and forgiveness in that situation.⁹

Breaking an anger habit takes conscious, direct thought. Whether it is the fool of Proverbs 27:3 that tests your self-control or something else, you can't defeat the enemy of anger until you have scouted it. Once you do, you'll be far less likely to "send out your spirit." You'll be prepared to "calm it down" instead.

Instruction 4

To avoid anger, you must learn to *restrain your words*.

⁹ Perhaps his wife can help by giving him a few minutes to relax when he gets home, rather than immediately giving him the CNN Homefront report—"Johnny set your work bench on fire, Janey drew in your diary, the dog ate your best dress shoes..." But the key to overcoming his anger is still his *response*, regardless of what happens.

He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

(Prov 17:27)

Words are the kindling of anger. Therefore, one of the most effective ways to avoid anger is to keep your mouth shut. Every verbal battle (the sin of clamour, Eph 4:31) has a point at the outset where it can either be avoided or, if the verbal fuse is lit, it can blow up like a keg of black powder. Consider Solomon's illustration of that fact. It involved water rather than fire.

The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out.

(Prov 17:14)

As a pin-hole leak in the face of a massive concrete dam can quickly become a rushing torrent, so unrestrained words can set off a cataract of anger. To avoid a quarrel, you must see the pressure building and restrain your words before it breaks out.

Of course, restraining your words doesn't mean clamming up in silent resentment. It does mean that, "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer" (Prov 15:28). That verse continues by saying, "but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things." To overcome anger you must think before you speak. Restrain your words. Ponder your answer so your thoughtless words or, worse yet, your intentional words don't provide wood for the fire.

Instruction 5

The previous instruction was "Restrain your words." But what if you have to speak? There are volatile situations in which we must say something. Therefore, Solomon's fifth instruction for being slow to anger is *use gentle words*.

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

(Prov 15:1)

Charles Spurgeon once said that when discussing theology, we should use very soft words and very hard arguments. That's a good principle for any discussion—too often the opposite is true: our arguments are soft; our words are hard.

Soft words and gentle answers forestall arguments. Which of the following exemplifies soft words that will turn away wrath? "Son, can I ask you to turn down the volume on your stereo? I'm working on our taxes and I'm having trouble concentrating." Or, "Turn down that garbage! For crying out loud, they can probably hear it in Kimberly!" A quiet tone and soft words bring calm to potential chaos. In fact, Proverbs 25:15 says, "A soft tongue breaks the bone." To change people's minds, soft words are more effective than sledge-hammer blows.

It's early morning as I write this. Last night, my three year-old son didn't want to go to sleep. He got up, cried, or called half a dozen times at least. My sinful flesh wanted to let him have an ear-full of my dissatisfaction with his behaviour. But that's not being slow to anger. Gentle words, controlled volume, soft tones—what hard work! But it's worth it: this morning I'll still have a relationship with my son when he wakes up. Since he's three, he probably wouldn't give me the cold shoulder even if I had yelled at him. But when he's thirteen, it will be another story. I want to build the habit of gentle words now!

Solomon said harsh words *stir up* anger. Can't you see a warty hag hunched over a pot, churning it with a thorny stick? Your harsh words stir up a witch's brew of anger. Gentle answers turn away wrath. Use gentle words.

Instruction 6

Here's another crucial principle for overcoming anger: *overlook a transgression*.

A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.

(Prov 19:11)

A person of wisdom, insight, or "discretion" will be hard to provoke. Why? They know how to overlook a transgression. Now, it's unlikely that Solomon meant wise people completely ignore sin. In other places, Proverbs counsels, "Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed" (27:5). In Matthew 18:15ff., Jesus commanded believers to help each other by graciously pointing out sin and the need for repentance. Wise people gently rebuke sin because of the good it does for the erring person (cf., Gal 6:1). If that's the case, then what did Solomon mean when he said the slow to anger "overlook a transgression"? Let me give you two suggestions.

First, the person of discretion doesn't take offence at the *accidental* or the *inconsequential*. The person who is quick to anger takes everything as a personal attack. He acts as if the accident on the freeway was staged by those involved for the sole purpose of making him late. I used to be convinced that my children purposely waited until thirty seconds before we left for church to dirty their nappies—a malicious effort to make me late! That's quick-to-anger thinking. Wisdom or discretion doesn't take offence at the *accidental*.

That is equally true of the *inconsequential*. The inconsequential are actions or words that might have been sin, but might not have been. "Was her voice too sharp? Was his tone disrespectful?" The patience of the wise refuses to imagine offences. It overlooks the inconsequential.

A second way we overlook a transgression is by *forgiving* a transgression. How else does a godly person "overlook" something done against them? He or she forgives the wrong and moves on, wiping clean the chalkboard of the mind.

Sometimes on my day off it's hard for me to put the work of the week ahead out of my mind. I get restless and quick to anger. I roam the house, pacing like a caged lion. My wife knows me well enough not to take those times as a personal attack on her. She extends even more grace than usual to help me relax. If I step across the line of consideration and kindness into sharpness and impatience, she addresses it, forgives me, and overlooks the transgression.

She could become bitter or resentful, storing up real or imagined grievances in a mental notebook. She doesn't. She knows that the best way to avoid bitterness or an outburst is to "overlook" transgression by ignoring the accidental or inconsequential and forgiving the consequential.

Instruction 7

Generally speaking, anger is retaliation. It is revenge. If you step on my toe, I'll give you a shove. If you skewer my feelings, I'll braai you over the coals of my words. Therefore, to overcome anger, we must be committed to Solomon's seventh principle: *vengeance is the Lord's*.

Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and He will save you.
(Prov 20:22)

Do you wait for the Lord to save you when someone at the office calls you "incompetent" or do you fire off a salvo in revenge? Do you go into deep-freeze mode (the silent treatment) when your spouse says something inconsiderate? "If you say that to me, I'll retaliate by becoming the human glacier!" Anger is revenge. "You hurt, embarrassed, inconvenienced, or hindered me. You have to pay and *I'm* the collection agency." Vengeance, however, is the business of a just God, not unjust men: "Wait for the Lord, and He will save you."

Here's an arresting thought in the context of anger and vengeance: how many things you get angry about will God truly take vengeance for on the day of judgement? Much of our anger is petty. Your sister ate the last chocolate chip cookie. A spiteful comment—"Don't worry, fat will be back in style soon,"—and some pouting is your revenge. Is God really going to take vengeance on so great a sin as eating the last biscuit? Or how about the unpardonable crime of not straightening the hand towel properly after use? Or not putting the mugs in the cabinet in perfectly aligned rows? How petty and selfish is our anger!

But suppose someone has really let you have it. They've put your reputation in the paper shredder and pushed "start." They've lied about you and spread malicious rumours. Is it okay to be angry then? "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the Lord, and He will save you."

David left a good example of refusing to take revenge even when severely wronged. King Saul chased David all over Palestine, tried to murder him, and outlawed him for no good reason. One day, David had an opportunity to slip a knife in Saul's ribs while the king's guard was down. What a

perfect opportunity for sweet revenge! David refused. Later he told Saul, "May the Lord avenge...but my hand shall not be against you" (1 Sam 24:12).

David suppressed his lustful eagerness for revenge. By God's grace, so can you. No matter how badly hurt, you can wait for the Lord to repay. Embarrassment, inconvenience, or petty grievances—"Who took the last biscuit?"—can be ignored all together. Vengeance for real hurts can be left to God. Anger prefers jungle justice. Vengeance, however, is the business of a just God, not unjust men.

Conclusion

Overcoming anger and impatience is a big challenge. Just when you think you have it licked, you'll find I-have-the-right thinking in your mind; you'll find retaliation in your actions. Don't get discouraged. Just go back and start again. Ask forgiveness. Make a new commitment to rule your spirit. Scout your weaknesses and redouble your defences. What kind of I-deserve thinking enticed you?

Go back to restraining your words or using gentle words. Remind yourself to look past the accidental and inconsequential with grace. Forgive the consequential with mercy. Give up revenge. By God's grace you can overcome anger!