

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Anger

When Jonah is mentioned, we usually think of his disobedience. In reality Jonah was a cross-cultural missionary whose ministry was incredibly successful. After some hesitation, he went into the large, important city where God had called him and preached the message God had given him. The people, including the king, responded by fasting, praying, and giving up their evil ways. However, instead of returning to his passport country with exciting reports of the salvation of 120,000 people, he sat down to pout.

Jonah's attitudes did not match his successful ministry. He became angry, and his anger generalized to many different categories of people and things.

- He was angry with the people group to whom God had called him to minister. It was an evil city, one which a fellow prophet had pointed out was filled with liars, killers, and thieves (Nahum 3:1). Jonah's anger had turned to hatred, and though he preached to them, he really wanted them destroyed because they had been so cruel to his people.
- He was angry with God. He said to God, "I knew it! That is why I didn't want to come in the first place. I knew that you were a loving, compassionate God who would forgive them!" God did not destroy the people as he had hoped; Jonah asked God to take his life; and then he went outside to city and sat down to see what would happen (4:1-5).
- He was angry with the vine when it withered and no longer gave him shade (4:6-9). If living today, he would be angry with the electricity when it went

off, with the computer when it crashed, and with the car when it quit.

Like many people you know, perhaps including yourself, Jonah had a problem with anger. Let us consider whether or not anger is sinful, why we get angry, what we can do with the anger, and whether or not we can change people who make us angry.

## Is anger sinful?

Some Christians maintain that if we are truly spiritual, we will never become angry, or never express it if we do. However, the Bible approves of anger in some instances, but with warnings about it. We must never forget that "anger" is only one letter away from "danger." Even as Jonah was praying to God and mentioning his grace and compassion, he pointed out that God was slow to anger (4:2).

- Jesus was angry on occasion, but also warned about it. When people were watching him to see if they could accuse him of healing on the Sabbath, he "looked around at them in anger," was distressed about their attitude, and went ahead and healed the man (Mark 3; 1-6). However, he also said that people angry at someone (perhaps without cause) were subject to judgment (Matthew 5:22).
- Both Old and New Testaments tell us, "In your anger, do not sin." (Psalm 4:4; Ephesians 4:26). Paul tells the Ephesians to get over their anger soon, and continues on telling them to "get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger" (4:31).
- Both Old and New Testaments point out the importance of being "slow to anger." As noted above, Jonah said that God was slow to anger. James notes that we should be "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow

to become angry" if we want righteousness (James 1:19).

Anger is one of those things that may be sinful at some times and not at others, so we must be very careful of the danger of falling into sin when we become angry.

## Why do we get angry?

Here are a few of the many reasons people become angry.

- Genetics. Just as some people are born with a predisposition toward depression (another emotion), some people may be born with a predisposition to respond with anger. Things that would be shrugged off by most people result in anger.
- Learning. Others see the expression of anger modeled inappropriately as they are growing up and/or are rewarded for angry behavior themselves, so they learn to respond with anger.
- Control. Still others have discovered that when they respond with anger, they can manipulate other people, so they use it as a means of control.
- Frustration. One of the responses to having something, or someone, keep us from getting what we want is anger.
- Injustice. Of course, most people have experienced anger being aroused when they perceive injustice being done, especially to someone for whom they care deeply.

## What do we do with anger?

Cultures vary widely in their prescriptions for how to handle anger, and those prescriptions change with time and place.

- Suppression. From the time of Plato through the Puritans to the present, some people in western culture have said that you must suppress anger at all costs. You can control it; therefore you must control it. Living in silent submission changes nothing, and such people may progress to chronic bitterness—or occasionally even to a sudden outburst.
- Catharsis. Likewise, others have said that it is unhealthy for you to control your anger, so you should not be expected to control it. In fact, if you do control it, you may become physically ill or emotionally disturbed. If you just express your anger and get it out of your system, you will feel relieved and all will be OK. Phineas (Joshua 22:13-20) is a good example of this approach. He was ready to go to war with the other tribes (reminiscent of his action in Numbers 25), and he launched into a "How could you, how could you" tirade. Unfortunately, research shows that expressing your anger may become a habit. Your relief is short-lived, and you become more likely to respond with rage in the future.
- Both. What is needed is neither complete suppression nor unbridled expression, but a controlled expression. Rather than the result being bitterness or rage, anger can result in appropriate confrontation. A good example of this is found in the answer to Phineas (Joshua 22:21-29) as shown in the next section.

## What are some guidelines for expressing anger?

Phineas had unjustly accused the people of building another altar, displeasing

God, and perhaps bringing destruction on everyone (Joshua 22). We do not know the name or names of the persons who answered him, but their principles can be expressed in a double acrostic of the English vowels AEIOU.

- A: Affirm the Almighty (v. 22). They began by declaring their allegiance to God. This means that the goal of pleasing God is one that both groups have in common.
- E: Explain your Excogitating (a big word for thinking that starts with an "E") (vs. 23-29). They elaborate on their thinking to explain their motivations and intentions. They seem to overdo it and go through the explanation too many times, but often that is necessary if the other party is also upset.
- I: "I" messages (not "you" messages) on the Issue (vs. 23-29). Their presentation is done in the first person with "we," "us," and "our" (plural of "I") occurring 21 times. They talked about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, rather than pointing their fingers and saying, "You...." They also stuck to the issue of the memorial, rather than accusing Phineas and his group of offending God themselves by what they were doing.
- O: Open to being the Offender (v. 23). They also remained open to the possibility that they had done something wrong, "If we have...." Remember, you may be the one in the wrong, and you may be the one who has to repent.
- U: Unity before Unanimity (v. 30-31). They were not trying to persuade Phineas and his group that their position was right, but really to get back into fellowship with them. It worked. Everyone was pleased, placated, and praised God.

## How can we change people who make us angry?

You can't change anyone else, but you can change yourself. The anger is yours, and only you can determine how you will react to what other people do. Your anger can serve you, or it can destroy you. Anger, like other emotions, involves your mind, your body, your spirit, and your behavior.

- Mind. Change how you perceive and interpret things. For example, instead of blaming the other person, consider how you have reacted inappropriately in similar situations in the past. For example, instead of thinking how bad the other person is, think about how his or her day may be going badly.
- Body. Learn some relaxation and cooling-off techniques that will calm your body down. For example, pause, take a few deep breaths, and intentionally relax the muscles you feel tensing throughout your body.
- Spirit. Missionaries, like other Christians, would know that things such as prayer, reading scripture, and meditation are spiritually uplifting, helpful with anger.
- Behavior. Learn new habits and skills to help you respond in an anger-producing situation. For example, instead of raising your voice, silently count to 10 (or 20, or whatever it takes). Instead of sulking or pouting, get some exercise by taking a walk or jog. Instead of arguing, engage in some enjoyable distraction (hobby, game, etc.) for a while.

We do not know if Jonah ever resolved his anger, but we do know that we do not have to leave our anger unresolved and become bitter as he did.

This brochure is one of a series, and you are invited to suggest other topics you would like to know about to the following:

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