

A N G E R

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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A N G E R

CALMING
YOUR HEART

ROBERT D. JONES



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jones, Robert D., 1959- author.

Title: Anger : calming your heart / Robert D. Jones.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2019. | Series: 31-day devotionals for life | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018054203 | ISBN 9781629954769 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781629954776 (epub) | ISBN 9781629954783 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Anger--Religious aspects--Christianity--Miscellanea. | Anger--Biblical teaching--Miscellanea. | Devotional exercises.

Classification: LCC BV4627.A5 J663 2019 | DDC 241/.3--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018054203>

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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR marriage, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

This devotional is just like rain filling up a bucket. It's slow, and it builds over time. Just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Just a few drops of Scripture daily to satiate your parched soul.

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. In fact, it's the most powerful force in the entire universe.¹ It turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Robert speaks directly to you, the reader. Each reading contains reflection questions and a practical suggestion. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. Anger can ruin your life. Fundamentally, any struggle with anger is a worship problem.

You might vent your frustrations at your spouse or friend, or you might give him or her a cold shoulder for days—but either way, the primary issue is not your friend or the injustice that you feel. Anger is first a problem with God. It's all too easy to sit as judge of the wrong and to take God's place as the ultimate judge. "I was wronged, so I'm going to do something about it." "How dare you treat me this way? I don't deserve this." "You're a fool, and I'm going to let you have it!"

Defeating anger is not a matter of seeking anger management strategies (as helpful as some might be) but one of turning back to God for his help. The Word points us to Christ, who rescues us from our anger and reorients our life. The goal of your time in God's Word should always be worship. There are no quick fixes when it comes to defeating anger. Fighting it will require orienting your entire life to Christ.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself how to do battle with your anger.

This devotional is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide to fighting anger. Good volumes are already written for that purpose. Buy them and make good use of them. You'll see several resources listed at the end of the book.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

WELCOME TO A thirty-one-day journey. Like any trip, it begins with the first step. You have taken that step by opening this book and starting down a daily path of biblical reflection, personal application, and communion with God. For the next month or so, we will discuss one of the most common problems that everyone faces: anger.

What anger problems are you facing right now? Maybe you argue with your spouse. You frequently disagree, and your fighting sometimes goes nuclear. Sometimes you criticize, speak harshly to, or even belittle your children. Or, rather than the blazing, red-hot kind, yours might be more the icy-cold kind of anger. You might give your coworker or best friend the cold shoulder for a day or a week—better to ignore, you reason, than to engage. Or you distance yourself from someone in your church, perhaps even resigning one of your ministries.

Anger takes many forms—some of which have specific terms of their own: *displeasure, frustration, annoyance, fury, rage, resentment, wrath*, and so on. Whatever we call it, we all experience it and express it. Anger is arguably the most common problematic emotion that people feel. It is universal—prevalent in every culture and experienced by every generation. No one is isolated from its presence or immune to its poison. It permeates all of us and hurts our most intimate relationships. It's a given part of our fallen human fabric.

But, no matter our situation or the extent of our problem, there is hope. The good news for us is that God has much to say in his Word about anger. From cover to cover, in its narratives and its precepts, the Bible is a book about anger and how to deal with it.

Your Goal: Steady Progress, Not Immediate Elimination

What will make this journey profitable for you? Begin by setting realistic goals. Perhaps God recently convicted you of your sinful anger and you are eager to get rid of it. Don't expect to eradicate all your sinful anger in four weeks and to flawlessly respond with godly replacements every day thereafter. You will quickly be disappointed. Your anger problems did not start in a month and won't be solved in a month.

Instead, focus on the journey itself as you walk with the Lord and as his Spirit teaches you and graces you through his Word. Be grateful for God's amazing grace in Christ—grace that forgives your every angry thought or action and that empowers you to change. Be content to learn where anger comes from, how to go to God with it, how to repent of its underlying beliefs and motives, and how to respond in Christlike ways to the triggers that provoke it. As you learn to depend on the Lord and to practice these biblical skills, you will better handle the constant provocations you face.

What will growing spiritual maturation look like? Suppose that, as a marriage counseling professor, I asked my class what they would think of me if my wife and I had recently had a serious argument and then hadn't spoken to each other for two days. I imagine that the students might want to drop the class. ("Should this guy even teach this course?") But then how might they respond if I told them that my wife and I had had the same kind of severe argument a year ago, and that time we hadn't spoken to each other for two *weeks*? Suddenly the students would perk up and would want to learn how we went from two weeks of not talking to two days.

How might you measure your progressive growth in putting off sinful anger and putting on godly graces?

Look for a decreased *frequency* of angry feelings and expressions. For example, instead of averaging three episodes per week (or per day), you average only one or two.

Look for decreased *intensity* in each expression. For example, instead of punching the wall, you initially clench your fist but then relax it. Instead of upper-decibel shouting, you lower your voice.

Look for a decreased *duration* of angry episodes. For example, instead of stewing for three hours, you go to God more quickly than you used to, and he helps you to get a grip on your anger within thirty minutes.

Look for a decrease in the types of *occasions* that provoke your anger. For example, last month, five triggers provoked your anger: your spouse shared with a friend some embarrassing information about you, your children disobeyed, a church member snubbed you again on Sunday, your boss bypassed you for a promotion, and the highway department did a lane repair during rush hour traffic. But now, as the Lord helps you to grow, you might still have some anger struggles with your wife or that church member, but you find yourself getting less upset when your kids rebel, your boss ignores you, and the orange highway cones appear on the morning you are running late.

Look for change that is both short-term (week to week and month to month) and long-term (from one year to another or one decade to another). By God's grace, what you hope for is *decreasing anger* and *increasing godliness* over the course of your life.

Making the Most of Your Journey

How can you best profit from this book? Let me recommend eight practical steps.

1. Find a workable location where you can be alone with God, your Bible, this book, and either a pen and notepad or a computer. The same place each day is usually best.
2. Plan a regular, daily time to meet with God there—view it as an appointment with your heavenly Father. Investing

ten or fifteen minutes each day will pay huge dividends for you over the course of a month.

3. If you miss a day, relax. Just read the one that you missed. Don't tie your journey to calendar dates, and don't skip a chapter in order to "stay on schedule." The entries generally build on each other, so reading them consecutively is best. Reviewing previous entries might sometimes help. God is in no hurry to rush you through this book.
4. If you already engage in a devotional time of Bible reading, consider putting that on hold so that you can give focused attention to your problem of anger.
5. Begin each session in prayer, asking God to speak to you through his Word and to help you. Consider praying the following verses to the Lord (you can copy them on a 3x5 card and then use that card as your bookmark):

Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18 ESV)

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps. 139:23–24 ESV)

6. While the devotions can profit you as they are, reading the verses in your own Bible that come before each day's reading, for context, might increase the benefit you will derive from them.
7. Record your insights, reflections, prayers, and so on in the margins of your book or in a journal, notebook, or computer file so that you can track your progress and review them later.
8. Share with others—friends, church leaders, small group members, and so on—what God is teaching you and how

he is helping you. This will both bless them with gospel truth and reinforce those truths in your own soul. Better yet, invite a friend or mentor to take the journey with you, both for their sake and for yours.

I am delighted to write this devotional guide. As one who wrote a longer book on anger years ago,¹ I have enjoyed reviewing what God's Word teaches and tailoring its truth to fit these devotional reflections. These biblical meditations have challenged and renewed my own soul, as I too fight against this very common problem. I trust that these devotions will be a benefit to your soul, too.

FOUNDATIONAL
HELPS FOR CALMING
YOUR HEART

DAY 1

You're Not Alone

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. (1 Cor. 10:13–14)

WE BEGIN OUR thirty-one-day journey with four assurances from God—assurances you need in order to fight against your anger.

1. *You will face temptations and trials in this life.* People and situations can make life hard and can tempt you toward anger. Don't be surprised at this—God isn't. He knows your struggles.

2. *Your struggles are not unique.* They are common. You are not alone. The path you now walk has on it the footprints of others. Others before you have been tempted to sinful anger. Scripture records scores of such people—some who succeeded and some who failed. Others around you, even brothers and sisters in your church, are tempted right now. More than thirty-five years of counseling have led me to this statistical conclusion: approximately one out of one people struggle with anger.

Moreover, in your struggle with temptation, you have examples not only in people before you and people around you but also in the God-man above you. Jesus was made like us (see Heb. 2:10–18) and was tempted like us (see Heb. 4:15–16) in every way. Your fully human Savior understands your struggles.

3. *These temptations will not be too difficult for you to handle.* Your faithful God will not let you be tempted beyond your ability to resist. He will not abandon, leave, or forsake you. As Pastor Warren Wiersbe put it, “When God puts His own people into the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the

thermostat. He knows how long and how much.”¹ Of course, this assumes that you are handling life God’s way—the way that this book will show you.

4. *God always provides a “way out” amid these trials.* “Good,” you might say; “that’s exactly what I need. I need a way to get out of this bad marriage or hard job or rising debt or chronic pain or . . .” But notice that God does not promise an escape from the temptation. Rather, he promises to enable you to “endure” it.

So what kind of “way out” does God promise? The next verse in today’s passage tells us. God promises to help you avoid idolatry—the sinful ways in which you are tempted to respond to the trial (including, for instance, anger). Apart from the Lord’s help, these temptations and sinful responses can take you down—all the way down to the point of turning away from the Lord. But as you focus on the Lord and handle your pressures his way, you can learn to live out his method of endurance.

Reflect: Read 1 Corinthians 10:1–14 to see the context of today’s verses. Notice the benefits that Israel had—but also the desert temptations they experienced and the ways they succumbed to idolatry (see also Num. 11). Consider the biblical lessons we can learn from the warnings and assurances that God made to ancient Israel, ancient Corinth, and us.

Act: Write 1 Corinthians 10:13–14 on a 3x5 note card. On the other side of it, write, “Temptations to anger will come. God knows about them. But I am not alone—others before me, others around me, and my Savior above me have experienced them. God is faithful. He will enable me to withstand the pressures and to resist sin by trusting and obeying his Word.” Carry that card around, memorize it, and recite it when you are tempted.

DAY 2

Start with a Person, Not a Problem

*Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.
Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. (James 5:13)*

WHERE SHOULD WE begin our reflections on handling anger? We could start with the varied ways we express our anger—sometimes we vent, and sometimes we stew. We could start with why we get angry—what triggers our anger, and what drives it? Or we could start with the antidote to anger—godly behaviors that should replace it, such as self-control, patience, and forgiveness.

Each of these topics is necessary to address, and we will tackle them all in the coming days. But the best place to begin is with God and his explicit invitation for us to come to him.

In today's verse, James addresses two contrasting categories of human experience: times of trouble and times of happiness. He recognizes that in this fallen world we often face hardship and suffering. Alternatively, we also enjoy happy times—days when life goes well and we experience God's goodness in abundant ways. In these two categories we find "all life's experiences, and each of them in turn can so easily be the occasion of spiritual upset."¹

What should we do, both when things go well and when they go badly? The apostle's answer is amazingly consistent and remarkably simple: go to God! When you face trouble, go to God in prayer, humbly pleading for his help and petitioning him for relief. When you feel happy, you should go to God as well, but this time singing songs of praise.

James's main point? Whatever our situation, whatever our emotional state, we should go to God. As John Calvin put it, "[James] means that there is no time in which God does not invite us to himself. For afflictions ought to stimulate us to pray;

prosperity supplies us with an occasion to praise God.”² Negative emotions like anxiety or sadness can’t keep you from God; positive emotions like happiness and contentment shouldn’t keep you from God. God invites you to come. The third stanza of a famous hymn captures these two opposite experiences: “I need thee every hour, in joy or pain; come quickly and abide, or life is vain.”³ In joy or in pain, go to God.

What does our Bible verse today have to do with your anger? Simply this: *go to God*. Anger easily arises when your circumstances bring suffering or when friends, family, or coworkers mistreat you. But God invites you to talk to him. In the coming days, you will learn much about anger; but for today, commit yourself to praying about your anger and seeking God’s help.

Reflect: When you feel anger arising inside, what is your reflex response? Where does your mind go? To whom do you talk, if anyone? As James tells us, we should go to God. Yet too often we don’t. We neglect, ignore, or forget him. And yet God persistently invites us to come to him. In addition to our verse for today, reflect on the following five passages from the Psalms and on God’s promises to hear you when you turn to him for help: Psalm 40:1; 50:15; 55:16–17; 62:8; 116:1–2.

Act: In a word, pray! Talk to God—today—about your anger. Start by honestly confessing your anger to him. And then humbly ask him for help. “Lord, I can’t fight this on my own. I need you.” Then share your struggle with a mature Christian friend. Begin the habit of relying on the body of Christ to help you fight against your anger.

DAY 3

God's Provision in Jesus, Our High Priest

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb. 4:14–16)

ON DAY 2 we saw that God calls us to go to him, even when we are angry. But how do we turn to God? And what will we receive when we do?

Today's passage provides answers. We go to God through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As God himself, Jesus has boundless power to help you deal with anger.

This Jesus is our Great High Priest, whom God has appointed as the one mediator between us and him. This High Priest did not enter some human tabernacle but went all the way into God's presence ("passed through the heavens," v. 14 ESV) to offer his one-time, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. Even when your anger escalates, you can rest assured that your relationship with God has been forever secured through Jesus's death and resurrection. Furthermore, this Jesus, who was made like us in every way (see Heb. 2:17), has also been tempted like us in every way and can sympathize with us.

Did you notice the double negative in verse 15: "we do not have" and "who is unable"? This construction makes a strong assertion. If you invited me to your home and I told you, "I will be there," you would be reasonably confident that I would come.

But if I said, “There is no way I will not be there,” your confidence would soar.

The point is stunning: there is no way Jesus will not empathize with you. He *cannot not* feel your pain. Like us, he knew hunger and fatigue. (Who falls asleep on a small fishing boat during a severe storm?) He faced poverty, homelessness, and deadlines. He experienced misunderstanding, rejection, and betrayal—both from foes and from family and friends.

Yet, even when provoked to anger and sinned against horrifically, Jesus never sinned. He never gave up, never caved in, and never buckled. His sinless sympathy means that he feels your temptations toward anger and can help you resist them.

Today’s passage ends with a direct invitation for you to draw near to this Savior-Priest in prayer. What will you find when you do? Two provisions that you daily and desperately need. You will find *mercy*—forgiving grace that will pardon all your angry thoughts and words. And you will find *grace to help* you in your time of need—enabling grace that will help you to strip away angry patterns and put on new, God-pleasing ones.

What are you waiting for? Draw near now.

Reflect: When angry, will you “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence,” because of Jesus, in your time of need?

Reflect: Hebrews brightly spotlights Christ’s high priestly ministry. Explore the other images of Jesus in Hebrews 1:1–4; 2:5–10; and 3:1–6. Bask in his powerful, radiant deity; his sympathetic, made-like-us humanity; and his death, resurrection, and ascension that give you both the forgiving grace and the enabling grace that you need today.

Act: Memorize Hebrews 4:16. When you are tempted toward anger, or after you have blown it, ask the Lord for his forgiving and enabling grace.