

# WHEN GOOD MEN GET ANGRY



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# INTRODUCTION

*He who is slow to anger has great understanding.*

—PROVERBS 14:29, NASB

MY CELL PHONE vibrated. I flipped it open, placed it to my ear, and said hello.

“Bill, it’s Kevin. You won’t believe what I’ve done. I need to come over . . . like now!”

“What’s so urgent?”

“I’ll be there in five minutes,” he said. The phone went dead.

I’ve met few men with more fascinating life stories than Kevin’s. He grew up in Seattle and ran away from home when he was fifteen. While sitting in a diner in Lake Union, the ship-building area of Seattle, he met the captain of an Alaskan fishing boat. When the captain realized Kevin had no intention of returning home, he invited him to join his crew. Without a moment’s hesitation Kevin moved to the village of Oak Harbor on Kodiak Island—250 miles southwest of Anchorage. During the next two summers he worked on fishing boats; he attended

school the rest of the time. After graduating from high school, he joined the Marines.

While Kevin looked like Robert De Niro, unlike the actor he didn't have to pretend to be tough. He had the size, speed, and meanness to do serious damage to anyone crazy enough to take him on. And whether it was because he started trouble or attracted it, Kevin got in a lot of fights.

And then his life changed. During the end of his military service a friend told him about Christ, and he became a devoted follower. When he was discharged from the Marines, he started his own business in Portland, Oregon.

As I pondered Kevin's story, I figured he was about to tell me another outlandish tale. The doorbell rang. I opened it, and Kevin stepped in—not waiting for an invitation.

“What's so urgent that it couldn't wait?” I asked.

“I just got in a fight,” he said as we entered my office. “I could have gotten in serious trouble.”

“What happened?”

“I was driving my pickup south on 205 when three guys in a souped-up black Trans Am sped past me. The driver tossed a Coke can out his window, hitting my windshield and splattering it with Coke. He and his friends looked at me and laughed. I laughed too and acted like it was a big joke. I slowly eased past them and pulled into their lane. When they were right behind me, I slammed on my brakes.

“The guy almost rear-ended me. If they had just figured we were even it would have ended there, but they signaled me to pull over. I followed them onto the shoulder of the road. I guess they thought they were tough guys. The driver jumped out of the car, pumped up his chest, stomped over to me, and took a

swing with his right hand. But I blocked his punch and hit him with three quick jabs that bloodied his nose. When his friends realized someone would get hurt—and it might be them and their friend—they broke it up.”

I stared at Kevin, dumbfounded. “Kevin, you’re thirty-five years old. You’ve got a wife and two kids. What were you thinking?”

“I guess I wasn’t thinking,” he said.

“Do you feel better now that you’ve punished the guy?”

“No. I feel terrible. I could have hurt someone and ended up in jail. Besides, I’ve got that ‘I Love Jesus’ bumper sticker on my back fender, and the guy in the Trans Am almost wiped it off. I wasn’t the best example.”

For years Kevin had bridled his anger and avoided such idiotic conflicts. And then a single event triggered the beast within. He didn’t rein it in until it was almost too late.

Kevin’s story illustrates the kind of foolish and harmful decisions some men can make when angry. Of course, most guys don’t resort to physical violence when they’re mad. More men use sarcasm, the withdrawal of affection, or verbal debates to express their anger. Amazingly, a small percentage of men deny they ever get annoyed or angry. I suspect that a handful of men call anger another name, like frustration or excitement. Or it may be they view anger as such a terrible evil that they refuse to admit it’s an emotion they experience.

Regardless of how often you get angry or how you express it, I’ve written this book to provide you with both the insight and the biblical strategy you need to process and express your anger in a healthy way. When I wrote this book I didn’t have in mind men like Bruce Banner, who morphs into the Incredible Hulk

when he gets angry. Instead, it's written for ordinary men who occasionally hurt people when they lose their cool. It's for men who want to manage their anger in a godly way.

*3 percent of surveyed men said they never  
get annoyed by what other people say or do.*

*80 percent say they get annoyed  
a few times a day.*

*15 percent say they get annoyed  
many times a day.*

*One percent say they're annoyed all the time.*

This book has two parts. In the first, I'll take you inside anger so you can discover some foundational truths: what it is, where it comes from, how Jesus expressed anger, and why I'm confident the new and good man in you can learn to control it.

The second part of the book deals with the six issues I think are crucial to understanding, processing, and expressing your anger in a godly way. The six issues are:

Identity  
Respect  
Control  
Pride  
Forgiveness  
Blessing

Each of these issues is fleshed out with stories of men who have successfully battled their anger. All of the stories are based on actual events, although I've changed some details and added fictional material to disguise the men's identities. Also, I've placed each situation within the context of counseling sessions as a way to better illustrate how anger is often exhibited and rationalized, as well as how it can be addressed and effectively managed.

After I had written the book I realized, with advice from the editorial team at Tyndale and some women who had read the manuscript, that a chapter was needed to help women encourage their husbands or boyfriends as these men learn to process and express their anger in a godly way. I hope your wife or girlfriend will read the entire book so she'll better understand you. But the final chapter is written specifically with her in mind.

Throughout the introduction and chapters 1 through 8, you'll find italicized statistical information that I derived from surveys I e-mailed to almost five thousand men. These men receive my weekly e-mail and live across the United States. I surveyed them to determine what makes men angry and how they respond when angry. I have included their responses in the book because I think they will provide you with a gauge to see how you compare with other men.

The response to the different surveys was varied, but the sampling was substantial. And while the surveys are not scientific, I think they provide a reliable reading of the men who took them. The questions were developed with the assistance of a licensed psychologist, and the data was analyzed by James C. Hassinger, an operations research and systems analyst in Saint Charles, Missouri.

The data for the statistics in chapter 9, the one written for

women, was derived from almost three hundred women who responded to a survey sent to over 3,700 households via the Internet.

In order to help you think through the issues that surface in each chapter or talk about them with other men who are reading the book, I've provided discussion questions at the end of each chapter. You'll also find a summary of each chapter under the heading "Truths to Live By." Because I think Scripture meditation is crucial to internalizing what you'll learn, I've provided you with a few key verses under the heading "Strengthen the Good Man."

As I wrote this book I thought repeatedly about the words of Solomon in Proverbs 16:32:

*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,  
And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures  
a city. (NASB)*

I pray as you read this book God will make you:

slow to anger;  
better than the mighty;  
ruler of your spirit;  
better than those who capture a city.

I'm convinced my prayer will be answered because the four statements above describe the new and true you—who you are in Christ. The rest of the book will help you understand this new identity and discover how good men process and express their anger.

PART ONE

# INSIDE ANGER



## GETTING AT THE CORE OF ANGER

AS A BOY I loved starting fires. And by the time I was only eight years old, I had become adept at it—though getting my hands on matches or my mom’s cigarette lighter required great cunning since my parents didn’t leave them lying around. And once my parents realized they had a “fire bug” living in their home, they kept them hidden.

I started my most impressive fire in a vacant lot across the street from our home on Juniper Street in Roswell, New Mexico. What prompted me to light the fire was a pile of debris that someone had dumped in the middle of the lot. This was no trash can full of garbage but a sizeable truckload of paper, tin cans, paint buckets, planks of wood, and other junk.

Every day my dad complained about the pile of trash. He even called the city and forcefully demanded they clean up the mess. But nobody lifted a finger or a foot to remove the rubbish.

My eight-year-old mind heard the garbage heap calling to me like the sea nymphs of ancient Greek mythology whose sweet singing lured mariners to their destruction on the rocks

surrounding their island. Of course, I didn't know about Greek mythology at age eight, but that pile of rubbish seemed to be begging me to use it as fuel for a fire.

One day my mom left me under the supervision of an older sister. When my sister's friend called and asked if she could come over, I urged her to leave, promising to behave. Once she was gone, I grabbed the five-gallon gas can from the garage. With the focus of a superhero out to save the world, I carried the can of gas over to the rubbish pile and doused some of the paper, wood, and other junk with the fuel. I then lit a match, tossed it on the gasoline, and ran back to my house, where I called the fire department.

*69 percent of surveyed men said that  
as children they lit fires without adult  
supervision just for the fun of it.*

A few minutes later the red fire truck, its siren screaming and red lights flashing, raced down Juniper Street. Curious neighbors formed a small crowd as the firefighters hooked up a hose to a fire hydrant and began spraying the flames with a powerful torrent of water.

Once the fire had bowed to the will of the water and turned into steam and smoke, I casually approached a firefighter and asked, "How do you think it got started?"

He looked down at my freckled, angelic face, rubbed his chin with his right hand, shook his head, and said, "Don't know for sure. Probably spontaneous combustion."

In that moment I felt a surge of pleasure because my misdeed had gone undetected and I saw my neighbors gazing at the remaining puffs of smoke with the wonder of children at

the zoo. I felt even more joy a few days later when the city sent out a crew to clean up the mess.

## MY FINAL FIRE

That experience inspired me to plan an even more daring blaze later in the year. Behind our house ran a dirt-and-gravel alley that a sanitation company drove down to pick up garbage left in aluminum trash cans. During the spring and summer, Mini Cooper-sized tumbleweeds grew just behind our four-foot-high white wooden fence, which lined the alley.

I didn't know much about gas meters, but since the one for our home rested under the tumbleweeds, I figured I might trigger an explosion. I waited until late in the summer when the tumbleweeds were as dry and flammable as gunpowder. I then crammed some crinkly old newspapers under their branches, being careful not to scratch my hands or arms on the tiny needles that ran up and down the tumbleweed spines. Adrenaline raced through my body as I quickly swept the wooden match across the sandpaper edge of the matchbox. The tiny flame appeared and quickly exhaled a small puff of sulfur-smelling smoke. I heard a dog bark in the alley to my right and thought I had been caught. But when I looked up he wasn't in sight, so I held the match to the bottom edge of the paper. With a sudden *swoosh*, an orange fireball jumped higher than the fence.

Surprised, I backed to the other side of the alley, as unaware of the danger as a moth inspecting a lit candle. Meanwhile, inside the house my mother was washing dishes at the kitchen sink. When she looked out the window she saw the flames shooting into the air just behind the fence. I heard her yelling

as she raced out the door, turned on the water spigot, grabbed the garden hose, and ran toward the fire. I watched in stunned silence as she quickly put out the fire before it could ignite the fence or cause a gas explosion.

In less than a minute she had undone all of my plotting and planning. She had doused my dreams of flammable fun. If she had simply nodded an acknowledgment of my presence and respectfully said, “Boys will be boys, but you must be more careful,” I would have been disappointed but not mad. But since she was my mother she felt a responsibility to discipline my misdeed. And so with the quickness of a cat after a rat she grabbed me by the right wrist and pulled me across the yard, up the back porch, and into the kitchen. “I’m going to give you a spanking you’ll never forget!” she screamed.

Looking back I realize I should have lowered my head and said nothing. But the tighter she squeezed, the harder she dragged, and the louder she yelled, the madder I got. Of course, my mother’s threat didn’t concern me. Because I had learned that she lacked the will or the strength to hurt me, I said, “Go ahead and spank me. Please, Mother, spank me as hard as you can. I want you to.” I then bent over and patted my rear with my right hand, indicating where I wanted her to spank me.

*68 percent of men surveyed  
considered their relationships with their  
mothers to be good or excellent.*

At that precise moment I heard a sound behind me that caused me to lose my breath—as though I were being held underwater and drowning. I turned my head and saw my dad

standing behind me. He had heard my outrageous outburst of boyish anger and disrespect.

As a boy I adored my dad. He played catch with me, taught me to ride a horse, and told me amazing stories about his childhood. At the time I saw only his strengths and none of his weaknesses. And while he never disciplined me in anger—and he didn't appear angry on this particular day—I had a healthy fear of what I knew he would do because of how I had spoken to my mother.

“So you want a spanking?” he asked. I realized it wasn't a question but a reminder of what I had just told my mother.

“No, Dad. I don't! I was kidding . . . just kidding.” I pleaded with my dad not to spank me. I promised never to do anything else wrong if he would just forgive me this one mistake.

*86 percent of surveyed men  
were spanked by their dads.*

*79 percent were spanked by their mothers.*

*70 percent said they would rather  
have their mothers spank them.*

My dad, a man with Popeye arms, took off his belt and made a loop with one end in each hand. “I promise you, when I'm done you'll never talk to your mother like that again, no matter how mad you get.” And he was right. After that well-deserved and memorable experience, and the conversation that followed, he had cured me of starting malicious fires *and* talking to my mother like that.

## THREE CORE ISSUES

Do you think if I had known my dad was standing behind me I would have expressed my anger differently? When I'm speaking before a men's group and ask them that question, the crowd usually responds with a round of laughter—the answer is that obvious.

And then after a long pause, I ask them, “So the issue of anger management boils down to my relationship with my heavenly Father, doesn't it? If I live with an awareness of his presence, I can and will control what I say and how I act when I'm angry. Not because I fear him in an unhealthy way, but because I want to please him and know he won't shield me from the consequences of my sinful choices.”

Since that's the case, why don't we, as Christian men, control our anger?

I think there are three core issues that we must address. First, we must learn to understand our new and true identity in Christ. Second, we must live with an ongoing awareness of the presence of God. Third, we must understand the source of our anger and how we can process and express it in a healthy way that accomplishes good and not harm.

I realize those three statements may seem like an oversimplification of a complex matter. And, yes, understanding, processing, and expressing anger in a healthy way involves tangled and complex issues. But these three issues make up the core of the problem and its solution.

At the moment you became a believer, you became a new man in Christ. (I discuss this more extensively in chapter 3.) This *new you* is your *true* identity. Even as a believer, however,

you still possess the flesh—that part of you that craves gratification apart from Christ. Whenever you allow your flesh, with its unbridled anger, to control your thinking and drive your behavior, you’ve suffered the worst kind of identity theft. You’re no longer acting in accordance with the new and true identity you have through Christ, but you’re allowing your flesh, with its destructive anger, to define how you think and act.

*94 percent of surveyed men said they would like to know how to process and express their anger in a godly way.*

From your childhood, the flesh has dug a deep channel of thoughts, feelings, and actions that direct your response when you’re angry. When something triggers your anger, you probably react, not from your new and true identity, but from the flesh. You may even think that you have no choice in the matter.

This book is written to help the good man in you—the man who is being transformed into the image of Christ, the man who possesses God’s Spirit—learn how to process and express your anger in a way that’s consistent with your true identity in Christ. And I’m certain if you put into practice what you’ll learn in the following pages, you’ll live like the good man you are—even when you get angry.

### **TRUTHS TO LIVE BY**

- As I understand my new and true identity in Christ, I will think and act more like Jesus.
- As I live with an awareness of God’s presence, I’ll control how I process and express my anger.

- I can learn how to use my anger in a way that accomplishes good and not harm.

### STRENGTHEN THE GOOD MAN

*When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (JOHN 14:20)*

*I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. (JOHN 15:9)*

*I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. (PHILIPPIANS 1:6)*

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you were a child, did you ever get into trouble because of a bad behavior, such as lighting fires?
2. As a child, how did you express anger?
3. How do you express your anger now?
4. What sorts of things make you angry?
5. How would an awareness of God's presence affect the way you deal with your anger?
6. How can you cultivate that awareness?
7. How do you hope this book will help you?