

## CHAPTER ONE

# WHAT ANGER PROBLEM? (Or, A River in Egypt)

**W**HEN MY OLDEST SON, Baden, was small, whenever lovely spring days wafted their way through the windows, I would run around, slamming shut said windows at nap time while he was melting down. What would the neighbors think about our Christian family as I was “disciplining” him (that is, yelling back)?

Perhaps this comes across just as hypocritical as it was. I cared more about what the neighbors thought than about possessing the wisdom to love my son well.

No matter what the neighbors could hear—or how well-behaved my kids appeared—my son and I didn’t respond to each other in ways that

helped us toward understanding, connecting, or changing each other for the better. At the time, both of us were operating from more primal parts of our brains. He wasn't about to come out of fight/flight/freeze, especially with me hollering. In fact, my responses ensured he stayed that way even longer. (. . . But the problem was his, right?)

I wanted control of my kids. I wanted my son's "irrational" behavior to just stop, already.

As a young mom, I had few healthy ideas on how to make that happen.

## Welcome to Fight Club

Question: When did you get the idea that your anger wasn't what you wanted it to be?

I've discovered that talking about parent anger is like joining a secret club.

"I punched the fridge last week in front of my son," one friend confessed. "It has a big dent in it."

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Though I'm not a licensed professional—and certainly won't substitute for one—as I've spoken to groups of Christian parents on this topic, I've noticed that the conversations often morph into a confessional of sorts. Expressions of "You too?" populate the faces of even the meekest mothers. There's often laughter, as we all nod at our reactions to stunning feats of foolishness attempted by our children. (Like the time my then-preschooler pooped in the closet, then blamed it on the dog: "That's just incwedible," he famously remarked, shaking his curly head at our unsuspecting Labrador's thoughtless misdeeds.)

One British poll found that nearly a third of all people indicated having a close friend or family member with an anger problem.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, anger is contagious: It's automatically transferred between people, not unlike other emotions. Several studies have found the ways

we handle anger are “catching” to other family members—even more so than positive emotions.<sup>2</sup> In the long term, our kids pick up our habits of anger management. Or lack thereof.

Granted, anger falls on a wide spectrum, right? Perhaps you’re mild and flexible to the point that someone else in the family always chooses the flick for movie night, and you’re baffled that anger is even an issue for you.

On the other hand, maybe you’ve harmed someone else, even physically, in your anger—or your anger’s gotten you into trouble.

Maybe parent anger was a terrifying reality from your own childhood. Perhaps you grew up knowing how to read every detail of a parent’s mood, from how quickly a cabinet door closes to the angle of a parent’s eyebrows. Perhaps everyone was held responsible for that adult’s anger—except the adult themselves. And now you see indicators that make you wonder if you may be repeating the pattern.

It’s possible that like I did, you fall into the category of simply wanting to be a better mom. Or maybe things are dicey enough that you suspect your family is orienting their lives and coping mechanisms around your patterns of shock and awe—the kids scattering like bowling pins when you’re triggered or even when you walk in the door from work.

If you’re seeking God with your life, perhaps it’s dawned on you that you can’t afford not to invite him into your negative emotions. How we harness our anger—or don’t—disciples our families, for better or for worse.

## “Mom, You’re Mad a Lot”

I’m one of those remarkably fortunate individuals who’s married to their best friend. But you might not have wanted to live on the other side of the cinder block duplex during our first year of marriage. The honeymoon phase ended about a month before we married, and personal refinement had indeed begun.

One night, I raised my early-2000s overplucked eyebrows toward my husband, John, there in the living room—the one where we could unfold the sofa bed only if we moved everything else out.

“You know,” I said, “I never really had arguments like this with anyone until I got married. So the problem is you.”

Maybe you’re smiling at my “logic”—that, certainly, the problem had to lie outside of me. I needed to wait until circumstances—that is, John and his issues—found God-given healing. Perhaps more quickly with his wife graciously flaying open his weaknesses.

Surely our flare-ups weren’t because I was now hitched in a relationship so intimate that all my true cravings, demands, fears, and pain points could no longer escape nor be shellacked. Surely marriage and my husband weren’t revealing character flaws that already existed.

Yet as C. S. Lewis pointed out,

If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am.<sup>3</sup>

It wasn’t until about seven years later that a stick-figure drawing changed my life.

Baden was three or four. Curls bobbling, he produced a drawing in red marker, his favorite color, of our family flying kites. (I was loving the new season when the subject of a child’s artwork was easily discernible without my vague, “Ooooh! Tell me about that!”)

In the picture, my stick hands rested on wonderfully slender stick hips, and hair sprouted in mattress springs all over my egg-shaped head. But my eyebrows arched downward.

“I made you look mad on accident, but you’re really happy,” he explained.

This time, only my left eyebrow arched (the one my teenagers now freely imitate). “Am I usually mad?”

“Well, you’re mad a lot, but not in this picture.”

“I’m mad a lot?”

His eyes flickered, drifted. “Well, you’re mad sometimes. Like when we break stuff that’s important to you.”

I cocked my head.

This might not have stung so much if it hadn’t been one of those weeks anyone over four feet tall would have identified me as hormonal. All my children were shorter at that time. So I just seemed consistently, irrevocably irritated.

But my son’s words were also hard to digest because I had dedicated tremendous prayer and effort to overcoming anger—and because I was starting to realize I had an anger problem.

I could have handed you a card deck of ways I was a gentle, nurturing parent. But those smoke and mirrors would distract your attention from the fact that I was easily angered and typically overreacted in ways hurtful to my children. I was metaphorically toting a gun to a fistfight.

And *typical* does not mean *harmless*.

My anger was like a fire, incinerating my kids’ tender emotions. But did I want my kids to have to protect parts of themselves from me?

## Ounce of Prevention. Pound of Cure.

Licensed marriage and family therapist Sarah Epstein describes the consequences of a family orbiting long-term around one parent’s anger. Perhaps that parent—in this case the father—offers financial or physical security. So no one ever asks:

- Why is Dad allowed to continue acting like this?
- What would accountability look like here?
- Why isn’t Dad tasked with learning to find healthy coping mechanisms?
- What would it be like if Dad learned to channel his anger into other healthier outlets?
- What would it look like if the parents made a point of telling their children that they are not responsible for an adult’s feelings?

- What if Mom started setting boundaries with Dad (assuming she felt safe)?<sup>4</sup>

Similar to how I believed that my anger issues were *outside of me*, “The family can work harder and harder to control their own parts of the puzzle at great personal and collective cost. But only with Dad’s changed behavior and accountability will anything shift in the bigger picture.”<sup>5</sup>

Research tells us that parents lacking the ability to regulate their own emotions are more likely to use harsh punishments (yelling, shaming, etc.) that don’t really work in the long term and can lead to kids having their own self-regulation difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

But those levels of parent anger have other consequences too. Epstein describes clients who

never learned to show their unhappiness because crying or overwhelm upset their volatile parent. . . . To them, anger itself is the enemy. This can lead to extreme conflict aversion, which impacts their ability to have healthy adult relationships that invariably include some conflict. . . .

Hyper-attuned to others’ emotions, . . . they struggle to set boundaries because they learned young that it was their job to accommodate others without ever taking themselves into account. And some enter platonic and romantic relationships in which they feel similarly shut down or abused, because those traits, displayed through anger, do not register as red flags. In fact, they feel a little like home.<sup>7</sup>

Keep in mind the powerlessness kids may feel when an authority figure and provider is angry with them. Maybe it’s similar to a boss yelling at you, when losing your job would mean you’re eating ramen and ignoring eviction notices.

And if kids absorb so much of their impressions of God from their parents, what are they absorbing in our anger about his posture toward them as broken, vulnerable humans?

## When I See You, I Feel . . .

Dr. James Friesen and others describe in layman's terms the developmental issues that can occur in a very young child's brain when their parents' faces, tones of voice, and care make it unclear whether the child brings joy simply because of the child's existence.

Babies who do not see joy on their mothers' faces become full of fear. If they attach to a parent who is afraid or angry *they learn to watch for threats*. If they do not find eyes that are watching them with joy, they will not attach securely, or if there is no one there at all, they monitor the world for anything that could make them feel bad. *They develop fear bonds and fear-based identities*. They live in avoidance because they have no hope of getting to joy from the fear in which they are stuck.<sup>8</sup>

I needed to fervently, forensically examine what was fueling my anger—no excuses or ego allowed—and also the destruction it was causing. Ending harmful anger meant cutting off the source of that fuel so I could handle conflict in ways that actually built up my family rather than destroyed it. As Scripture says, “The wisest of women builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down.”<sup>9</sup>

Conversely to findings like Ms. Epstein's, studies show that parents who regulate their own emotions are more likely to use skills that develop emotionally smart kids. They empower kids to problem-solve, chatting about and showing empathy for kids' feelings and encouraging kids to express themselves in healthy ways.<sup>10</sup>

One scientific review of fifty-three studies conducted over twenty years found that parents who regulated their emotions were more likely to have better parenting skills and kids who were able to regulate their own feelings—to the point that they were able to better avoid anxiety and depression.<sup>11</sup>

So we know our emotional management matters intensely. But still: Is there a place for self-compassion in our anger with our kids? I believe that

despite the very real effects of our anger on our homes and our kids, God has compassion on us and carries deep redemption for our families. His slow anger means we're not consumed by his rage.<sup>12</sup> He's also designed our kids and us as resilient—people who can overcome and conquer, despite the ways we tend to break, well, *everything*. You'll hear me say it more than once: Confession, repentance, and redemption in my home—as well as my own need for Jesus, verbalized—has proven far more powerful than my own flawlessness. Not only that, but lacking self-compassion portrays my failure as bigger than God and what he says about me.

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Author Jackie Hill Perry observes, “We tend to suppose that our closeness to God, holiness, and the like, is all rigidity. Dying to and cutting off. Confession of and repenting for. But what if godliness is elusive (at times) because of our failure to believe that Christ has sympathy?”<sup>13</sup> “Death and life are in the power of the tongue”<sup>14</sup> when speaking to myself too. Does my self-talk, and forgiveness of myself, restate God's life-giving mercy, love,

and grace over my failures? Or is it antigospel, lashing my back with life-sucking fear, judgment, and a lack of belief that he and his righteousness are bigger than every screw-up?<sup>15</sup>

## Describing Your Pain in the Neck

But let's buzz back to the present. I recently woke one morning to searing pain angling across the upper left side of my back. At first, I plugged in the heating pad and opted against the use of my standing desk. But later that morning, I realized I could barely turn my head to the left. And my efforts to look normal through an online meeting left me in tears after.

A Google search eventually led me to the only same-day chiropractic appointment in town. It required postponing coffee with a friend. I prefer a decaf-low-sugar-frap-and-conversation over lying face down in a doctor's office, groaning like a rusty El Camino. But there we were.

To save you a litany of irrelevant health stories when we're just getting to know each other: Some combination of one leg riding higher than the other (and wearing a lift in the wrong shoe, people), structural anomalies, and a potential tear in the soft tissue of my hip from running with my dog, stress, maybe sleeping beneath a cold breeze . . . resulted in unignorable discombobulation.

I tell you this because denial, or even simply assuming my body would right itself, catapulted me to a place of demanding I do something. My body's issues were intricately connected and multifaceted—neck bone connected to the hip bone and all that.

My anger issues require a similar approach. Learning to simply not respond emotionally to my kids would have altered some of the situation. But other issues would be yanking my home out of alignment. I needed—sometimes still need, residing with four opinionated teenagers—the equivalent of physical therapy, an anti-inflammatory diet, and a knowledgeable professional (or three).

Chances are, like me, you've gotten to a place where something is disturbing enough that you long for change. So directing attention to this ache is wise, healthy, and likely preventing further damage, even the need for more debilitating "surgery" in the future.

So take a minute. Describe the pain.

What moments brought you to this book, even if you're hiding it in your nightstand? When you look your situation in the eye, what unvarnished realities would you change—or ask God to? What thoughts, words, or emotions have branded your brain, or even scared or embarrassed you a little?

Don't just look in the rearview mirror. What do you hope your home, your inner world, and your kids' character could look like if you buckled down for the conversations, spiritual X-rays, therapy protocols, and adjustments you need?

Keep in mind, anger regulation involves managing at least four critical components.

1. *Our bodies.* How quickly do we enter fight/flight/freeze, and how do our bodies respond? Not to mention: Are we

hungry? Fatigued? Hot? Afraid? How do our bodies affect our ability to regulate ourselves? What are our brains' strengths and weaknesses in executive functioning? (Executive functioning is essentially mental processes and learned skills allowing us to, among other things, control our behavior, solve problems, think critically, and make decisions. ADHD, for example, is an executive functioning disorder.)

To help us understand how our bodies connect to our anger issues, psychologist Dr. Cara Goodwin suggests we “think of a car. Some people go from 0 to 60 more easily than others (this is biological and emotional reactivity) and lack the brakes, steering, and gear shifting abilities to keep the car under control (this is executive functioning).”<sup>16</sup>

2. *Our emotions.* How do we deal with what we're feeling, including unacknowledged emotion?
3. *Our minds.* Can we yank our thought patterns out of that vortex of negativity and destruction?<sup>17</sup>
4. *Our hearts.* The Bible declares that the heart—as the center of who we are, as well as our will—must be vigilantly supervised as a higher priority than anything else in our lives: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”<sup>18</sup>

## A Strand of My Own Anger DNA

For me, the symptom of my anger has revealed not just one disease to be treated, but layers upon layers of “disease.” For example:

I was (am?) terrible at asking for help. I find tremendous—though unhealthy—self-worth in service, self-denial, and accomplishment. When I discovered my anger issues, I was a perpetually exhausted mom, happy to give the spit-up-stained shirt off my back, even to my toddlers.

Until I wasn't.

I also tend to associate my own needs with shame, so I pretend they're not there—and then experience pain and later resentment when others run over me. (Correction: When I lie down in front of their tires and motion them forward, if not press the gas for them.)

I needed to examine whether I could freely offer myself, time, energy, and resources and embrace my “happy adult choices” to serve or give (or not to). I was rarely serving God with a whole heart when handing others the leash I'd fastened around my neck. Then I'd play the martyr when they took me up on it.

And I may be prone to overreaction from a source I didn't expect. This may sound like I'm passing the buck, but research indicates empathetic mothers (a trait of mine to the point of my embarrassment and my kids') demonstrate higher sensitivity to toddler distress.<sup>19</sup> Those empathetic moms' reactions interfere with their ability to self-regulate, while also producing extra cortisol, the stress hormone.<sup>20</sup>

Get it? Deep empathy can make it harder to regulate all those feelings you feel in response to your kids' emotions.<sup>21</sup> (Empathy in parenting still wins as a powerful force for good in the end, leading to better emotionally regulated adolescents with less inflammation in their bodies.<sup>22</sup>)

Even if that doesn't describe you, studies also show that in becoming parents, we undergo neurobiological, hormonal, and behavioral shifts, increasing our sensitivity to infant cues.<sup>23</sup> (If a child crying seems to bother you more than it used to, it's probably not your imagination.)

For many years, my errant theology of women meant I associated godly femininity with rarely feeling or expressing anger. This meant denying and ignoring my emotions; a lack of opinion; and perpetual concession to others, who wouldn't have even known I had an opinion.

Perhaps in my attempts to be others-focused, I didn't dive deeply into the image of God in me,<sup>24</sup> as a person with important emotions, an essential voice, and strength necessary for the good works God prepared for me.<sup>25</sup> That version of myself scared me. Again: I was externally mild . . . until I wasn't.

I also believed poor theology that devalued and lacked awareness of my body and emotions. I'm frequently underfed and underrested—

decidedly the less holy version of me. I often sped past what seemed like the “un-Christian” emotions like fear, shame, or sadness. As I once read on social media, feelings are like kids: They shouldn’t be driving solo, but you also shouldn’t stuff them in the trunk.<sup>26</sup> And in that “stuffing,” I rocketed beyond any emotional warning signs I could have tended before shot-gunning those feelings toward my children.

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Helen Keller once spoke of the need to “look the world straight in the face.”<sup>27</sup> And God asks that we worship him in truth,<sup>28</sup> delighting “in truth in the inward being . . . in the secret heart.”<sup>29</sup>

That’s what I’ve found my anger problem required: The courage to look at things as they are, not as I wish they were. Nor to look at my children, relatives, spouse, friends, or self as the people I wish we were.

In case it isn’t obvious, my methods of dealing with my anger, including my expectations of others, were straight-up sinful, interfering with my relationship with God. There were vertical implications of my horizontal relationships’ brokenness: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”<sup>30</sup> God longed for my reconciliation with these little image-bearers of his as part of my worship.

## On Potty Training Your Anger

Seemingly random note: You will never (ever) find me writing a book about potty training. I was terrible at it. In fairness, all my children, now young adults, go to the bathroom on their own. Success!

But I did learn one principle that carried over into my anger management (stay with me here). In potty training, kids first have to learn, *I just went*. The next step is, *Hey! It’s happening! Right now!* And finally, *This is about to happen! I need to find a bathroom*. Pro tip: The child who never

realizes they have already gone or are about to go is among the least likely to make it to the potty in time, and you should carry around clean pairs of trousers, or seven, and consider forgoing other life activities for the time being.

Maybe you can see the parallels: As we dive into these next chapters, we're doing the work (and sometimes regression) of "potty training" our anger. From, *Whoa, I just lost it. I would like to control that and not just make a royal mess.* To, *This is happening. I am losing my . . . control right now.* To finally forecasting, *I'm about to lose it. I'd better do what I need to so I don't.*

Bonus: Parenting is going to hand you a lot. of. practice. Welcome to Holiness Boot Camp. (Maybe bring extra pants.)

One last thing: Please don't let this book substitute for a licensed therapist—one who follows Jesus, if you are a Christian. The American Psychological Association suggests finding a therapist when an issue

- causes distress and interferes with some part of life, for example, thinking about or coping with the issue takes up at least an hour each day;
- causes embarrassment or makes you want to avoid others;
- causes your quality of life to decrease;
- negatively affects school, work, or relationships; and/or
- causes you to make changes in your life or develop habits to cope with the issue.<sup>31</sup>

We all know that the three hardest things to say are: (1) I was wrong, (2) I need help, and (3) Worcestershire sauce.

At the risk of freaking you out, here's a little more fine print: Anger is a key criterion (one of many) in larger mental health issues like bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder. It could also be a sign of depression.<sup>32</sup> If you're wondering if your levels of anger and your responses are out of the range of normal, don't hesitate to see a licensed therapist.

Trust me. I've been in a place where I'm afraid of someone I love

receiving a behavioral diagnosis. Sure, a diagnosis can feel like a crutch or pigeonhole. But it can also unlock a beautiful new world of solutions. And while a diagnosis can be scary, not diagnosing a legitimate problem is far scarier.



## The Condensation

Anger doesn't lie in others or our circumstances but within us. When we believe it's elsewhere, we surrender our ability to change.

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The issues leading to our anger may be complex, rooted in our past, our fears, our bodies, our grief, our shame, even our misguided theology.

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Addressing our anger requires looking it in the eye—so we can eventually understand just how and why it happened, and head it off before it happens in the future.

## Hot Tips

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It's one of the first questions I ask moms (and my own kids and myself) dealing with anger: What feeling is underneath?

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Help yourself move out of fight/flight/freeze by turning on some music and dancing. Getting a glass of water. Going on a walk (may need to grab the stroller!). Going into a dark room to settle your sense of overstimulation. Changing your location—even moving to a different room, or standing if you've been sitting.

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I mentioned in a previous book, *Permanent Markers: Spiritual Life Skills to Write on Your Kids' Hearts*, that you can post (maybe in a cupboard) a list of infractions alongside their preplanned consequences. I really like the emotional distance this approach creates from reactive parenting.

But sometimes it's valuable to consider whether a child has had an exceptionally hard day, is being bullied at school, or whether we kept them up too late the night before. First Thessalonians 5:14 highlights the need for different responses to weakness: "Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all." Yes, kids still need to behave when stressed, as we all do. And we can't fail to train our kids at those times. But we can maintain a view of the whole child, the whole situation, when we parent.

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*Isolating the primary emotion* can be key to addressing your triggers and desires and learning to cut off anger at its source. Dr. Carla Naumburg helpfully defines anger triggers as "anything that revs up your nervous

system and makes your buttons bigger, brighter, more sensitive, and way easier for your kids to push. . . . Most folks . . . need to learn how, exactly, to make their buttons as small and dim and pushproof as possible.”<sup>33</sup>

Anger is known to be a *secondary emotion*. If you picture an iceberg, anger is the part you can see. But beneath the waterline might be the primary emotions like the ones listed below; in studies, for example, women admit to difficulty in differentiating anger from hurt.<sup>34</sup> Consider which of these most frequently undergird your anger.

Rejection	Sadness	Depression
Disappointment	Helplessness	Isolation
Injustice	Jealousy	Fear <sup>35</sup>
Hurt	Guilt	
Embarrassment	Shame	

It bears noting that my not-atypical exhaustion makes me far more prone to all those emotions and therefore shortens what could be a four-foot anger-fuse to about four inches—or centimeters, depending on the day. The exhausted version of myself simply isn’t the most holy version—but it may be the most triggered and angry.

Smush this onto the snowball of reasons for moms to look at themselves with humble, sober judgment<sup>36</sup> about what commitments and activities they can actually handle, to vigilantly care for their own souls, and to (kindly) ask for the help they need rather than attempting to be superhuman. Repeat after me: *I’m saying no to the right things to say yes to the vital things.*

Overcommitment, overachieving, and overfunctioning affect what version of Jesus our kids see in us.

As my mom is fond of saying, “God promises green pastures and still waters. It’s not your job to mow the grass and swim laps.”

## SIMMERING DOWN

- In light of some recent or more explosive outbursts, what emotions could have been fueling my rage? What felt precious or worth protecting (“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”<sup>37</sup>)? What did I want?
- What excuses do I make for my anger?
- When I think about not just what I want to move away from (e.g., anger) but the maturity I want to move *toward*—what kind of woman and mom do I hope to be—with what kind of home? (E.g., I want to shape a peaceful home. I want my kids to feel emotionally safe around me. I want my kids to be able to trust me even when I’m angry.)
- What does anger feel like in my body—before, during, and after?
- What does my self-talk look like when I’ve messed up? Is it self-abusive? Read Psalm 103:8–14 and Micah 7:18–19. How do I think God responds to that self-talk and my anger issues?

## COOLING PRAYER

*Creator,*

thank you for knowing me so intimately—  
my story, my motivations, my fears, my losses.

Scary as it can feel, I choose gratitude that  
nothing is hidden from you.<sup>38</sup> You still choose  
to move toward me in my anger like you've moved  
toward the weak, damaged, and sinful throughout time.

I choose to be poor in spirit, rather than  
handing you the résumé of all I've done right.

I need help.

I long for mercy, undeserved kindness, and peace  
to be my legacy, like yours—not anger, trauma,  
perfectionism, fear, or lack of self-control.

I ask for your forgiveness, and for your Holy Spirit to  
assume the rule of my home for generations to come.