

LEARNING

LIFE

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ONE

ANGER ISSUES

Ever had one of those days that seemed to go so well until one little thing took over and destroyed the whole day for you? Yeah, we probably all have. My wife, Gail, and I were on a bike ride one day many years ago. We were still newlyweds and still blissfully thinking this world was marvelous. The sky was blue, the grass was green, and life was wonderful. About ten miles into the ride, we needed to stop, drink some water and eat some food. We pulled into a small parking lot beside what looked like an apartment building. We found a grassy spot near the road where we could sit, stretch our legs, and get ready to start the remaining ten miles home.

After about ten minutes, we grabbed our bikes and prepared to head for home. Gail got on her bike first and began riding toward the parking lot exit. I was a few seconds behind. In those very few short moments, a

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car drove up beside my wife, and two people, an elderly man and woman, rolled down their window and began yelling at her!

Now, if you want to get me fired-up mad, just go after someone I love.

As it turns out, this was a private residential community, and the parking lot was off-limits to non-residents. However, we had not seen any signs when we rode up and stopped. And it could hardly be considered that we were even in the parking lot. Of course, at that moment, no sign would have made any difference whatsoever. I had no idea, nor could I see any logical reason, why they would be yelling at my sweet wife. I stepped up into high gear and came up to them, skidding both tires between Gail and the car. As I deftly slid into position, I leaned down near their window and face-to-face with the screaming lady, and in a very (ahem) Christian-like, pastoral manner, screamed back, “YOU GOT A PROBLEM?”

This only escalated the confrontation. About two minutes later, they sped off in a huff, and we rode away. After getting over her initial shock, my wife went back to enjoying the bike ride—checking out the scenery, noting the flowers, and getting her exercise. Me, on the other hand—well, it ruined the rest of my day. I could not stop fuming and ranting. I rode pretty hard on the way back home, mumbling to myself about what I should have said and being exasperated about what had been said. The nerve of those people!

I was still grumbling about it that evening when I

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went to the church to lead a meeting where my topic was God's grace and forgiveness! I grumbled about it all the way home after the meeting. (Clearly, something had not clicked with me about the grace-and-forgiveness talk I had just given.) As I write these words today, I realize that I have told that story countless times in sermons, to friends, and to myself to show how awful those people were and what they had done wrong. Somehow, I missed *what I was doing wrong*. All I knew was you better not attack someone I love, or my wrath would come out pretty hard. It honestly never even crossed my mind that yelling and escalating the issue was just as wrong. I thought it was the right thing to do. It turns out I was dead wrong. I was making a small issue large.

My problem was anger. Anger is an interesting thing. It can take over. Even when your rational mind is saying, "Do not go there," your lips, voice, and face take over, and the anger spills out. For some of us, that anger comes out too often and too easily. In my case, the anger came way too easily for me.

It troubled me. I had been a Christian since I was twelve. I was now about twenty-five. Why wasn't it making any difference in my anger issues? Why wasn't it changing me? I wondered at times why my anger was so explosive, and I thought about how that wasn't really reflecting Christ. And, of course, I certainly didn't want my church members to ever notice this character trait.

The book of James talks about anger in very clear terms:
"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19, 20, NIV).

If we are slow to speak and quick to listen, it will make us also slow to anger. That’s good because, as James says, it does not produce anything we really want out of life. David, in Psalms, says the same thing: “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil” (Psalm 37:8, NIV).

There are more writers of Scripture that have something to say about what anger does to you:

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26).

“Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9).

“A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression” (Proverbs 29:22).

Jump ahead with me about three years after our bicycling incident. Gail and I were going down to Coquille, Oregon, to look for housing. It seemed pretty obvious that the denomination was going to transfer us there, and we wanted to get a jump-start on the move by looking

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for housing.* On the way back from our fruitless house-hunting trip, we stopped at the only place along the way to get something to eat. Dairy Queen. Now, DQ is not noted for fine dining. But we were hungry, and anything would do. We were not in the mood for ice cream; we were hungry. As our luck would have it, they offered a bean burrito. I ordered two, along with something cold to drink. When the order was complete, I happily grabbed the bag and whistled as I headed to the car with visions of savory bean burritos in my head. Ah!

We were about two miles away when after Gail's first bite, she said in disgust, "This is not a bean burrito." Now, to be sure, I was thinking that she was wrong. This is Dairy Queen. It's a national chain. They do not make mistakes. I took a bite of mine to show her that she was clearly wrong, and as I chewed, we meandered down the road further. Gail relented and took a second bite, and said just as adamantly as the first time, "This is meat!" She handed it to me to look at, and sure enough, there was a hunk of meat, big enough to choke a horsefly. It was unmistakable as it sat on top of the burrito.

I reluctantly turned around. It took a while on the winding backwoods highway. Honestly, if it had been my burrito, I probably would have just swallowed and moved on. I was not raised as a vegetarian and therefore was not repulsed by the thought of eating something that formerly had a face. Gail, on the other hand, had only

* We never did move there, but that is another story.

tasted meat once and was profoundly disgusted by it. She had no intention of eating a meat burrito. She also has a strong sense of justice that prevented us from exchanging burritos. She was prepared to just stay hungry and did not want me to turn around. Even though I knew she would not eat mine, she was as hungry as I was.

I should have known better. I should have known I was not good with confrontation. I should have known that this backwater Dairy Queen which looked like a local greasy spoon, was not going to like some vegetarian complaining about a little meat. However, I was clueless that day. I should have listened to Psalm 37:8 and realized that complaining would lead only to greater problems. But I did not think of that at the time. I drove to the DQ and into the same parking spot, got out and walked calmly up to the ordering window, and said as politely as I could that the order we had received was incorrect.

The lady looked at me with mild disdain as if to say, “Your order wasn’t wrong; I made it myself.” Instead, she asked rather coolly, “How was it wrong?” I politely told her about the issue, and all she said was, “That’s a bean burrito.” I held up the burrito with the little quarter pounder perched on top so she could view it through the glass. She was obviously mistaken. “Please look. This is not a bean here.”

At this point, the veins in her neck began to bulge, and she became irate and yelled, “I said it is a bean burrito!” Honestly, I was a bit surprised by this reaction. I mean, I was being nice up to this point. But I do not like getting

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yelled at, and I did not respond very well. I reached into the burrito and held up that nasty little piece of flesh and held it straight up for her to see. Yet, she never took her eyes off of mine, thereby avoiding any eye contact with that little bit of cow. She yelled again, "IT'S A BEAN BURRITO!" Then she shut the little sliding window between us and stared at me.

Here's where I got very "pastoral" with her. I nearly pulled the window out of its slider as I (ahem) "calmly" but rapidly slid it way past the usual open stopping point. I thrust my face through the window, held the burrito under her nose, and just as calmly screamed back at her through my spittle, "THIS IS NOT A BEAN! IT IS NOT A BEAN BURRITO! TAKE A LOOK, AT LEAST!"

She took the burrito from my hands, but she never took her eyes off of me, therefore never laying eyes on the hunk of wilting flesh resting on top of the burrito. She screamed back at me, "IT'S A BEAN! IT'S A BEAN!" Then she shut her window again and turned and stomped into the back-room office and slammed the door on me. Conversation over.

I was dumbfounded. Not only had a calm discussion turned into a screaming match, but now I did not even have the burrito that I paid for. I finally acknowledged defeat and went back to the car. I griped and complained the rest of the way home. My poor wife was so embarrassed that I would even ask for an exchange of the order in the first place, and then to see *that* happen—wow! It ruined my whole day. I vowed I would never eat at a

Dairy Queen again. I actually looked up the address of that store and wrote them a letter of complaint—and that was before Google when it still took a bit of time and effort to find the address. I never heard back. I have since forgiven Dairy Queen but have never been back to that particular location.

As you may be able to tell, there were some rather glaring un-Christian-like issues hiding deep in my life. Anger, not one of the better virtues, seemed to boil over in my life. Where did it come from, and how should I deal with it? Those are big questions that are not often solved by years on a counselor's couch. Yet, when I was honest with myself, I knew it needed to be dealt with. No one would say that screaming about a burrito is in any way Christlike or Christian. My anger was going to destroy me if I did not get a handle on it.

Where am I going with these stories? I tell you about them simply to show that I had some deep-seated anger issues that, in the seventeen years since I had become a Christian, had never gone away. To say that my Christian experience was small is to state the obvious. Yet, I was a pastor seeking to lead others into a deeper spiritual experience.

What I want to address in this book is that there is a way to make Christianity work. It is a method that deals with your own personal issues, allowing God to take them up and fight the battles for you. And I can testify that it works for me! I am excited to tell you that although my anger issues are not completely gone, I have taken

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incredible leaps forward toward a more positive attitude, and I believe the anger will all go away. I have become convinced that I will someday die with a smile on my face because a smile has become my usual expression and my common response.

When I say I expect to die with a smile on my face, I am not saying I will die while doing something incredibly fun that is making me smile. I am simply saying that when I die, I want to have a smile permanently etched on my face. I want my default aging look to be a smile. Many people default to a frown as they age. It is a product of gravity. The idea of defaulting to a smile has motivated me to embark on a journey of understanding and applying tenderness, humility, and compassion to my life. I read quotes and promises reminding me to stay on this journey daily. As I begin each day going over my prayer list, I am reminded to keep smiling, be tenderhearted, and stay humble. Powerful quotes lead me to become a more spirit-led Christian.

How does this happen? Read on. This book describes a story of personal spiritual growth that needs to be told over and over again. It is a story of the journey that has changed my life forever and helped me love the God of Scripture like I never have before. It is the story of tackling my anger issues head-on and seeing God win. I believe it's a story worth telling because not only have I seen my life changed, I've seen the change in hundreds of others on this same spiritual journey.