

Lesson 13: Anger: Dealing with the source

Objective: The student will learn to become aware of anger and underlying emotions and to take action to deal with them.

Sam again speaking to the training group: “Today we are going deal with the issue of anger. Brother A has agreed to come and share with you his journey in learning about anger and the process of making some important changes. He has been in the mission field for 2 years and is back in China for a couple of months before returning to Cambodia.” Sam says: “Brother A, thanks for taking time to share with us on the issue of anger. Anger is an often felt emotion on the field, and it can quickly lead to problems if not dealt with in a healthy manner.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Says A. “It is true that anger can cause many problems on and off the field. I would like to share with you a few verses that were important in my growth and then share with you part of my life on the field at a time when I was struggling with different levels of anger. The verses are: James 1:19 **My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life.**; 1 Corinthians 13:5 in speaking about love the verse states: **...it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.**; Ephesians 4:26 **In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.**; Proverbs 29:11 **A fool gives vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.** These are just a few of the verses I studied to help me understand how to better deal with my anger. As I share my story with you, think about these verses and how they might apply to my situation.”

“When I went to Cambodia, I was young in many ways. I had received Jesus as my Savior three years prior but had only really devoted myself in the last year of that time. Our focus in Cambodia was language learning, Bible study, and developing relationships with locals. At first I was excited about being in a foreign country. As a result of this excitement, I didn’t do much in preparing for this change. I thought I would have few problems because of my excitement. When I arrived, there was a team of ten from China, six women and four men. The first week went well as the spirits were high for all of us. There were so many changes for all of us, and we had to work together. Near the end of the first week, it became apparent that one of the women would be our team leader. She had been to Cambodia before and had been a Christian for eight years. As time went on, I became frustrated, the culture and especially the food was so different that I had difficulty adjusting. Physically, I got sick for about a week and was weak for a couple weeks after that time. Some of the others were having struggles, but it seemed that I was having the most. This really bothered me. In my spirit, I felt lower than the others. I tried to ignore it and didn’t tell anyone what I was thinking or feeling. Some of the routines that the leader chose for us seemed more difficult than they had to be. I began to voice my concerns, but because of my agitation, it came out stronger than I intended. Soon it felt like the leader and I had a wall between us. One morning she informed us that we would be spending the morning time before class as a group in prayer. I told her that we needed to use that time to meet locals, as this was the time that they were out buying food and

meeting each other before the workday. She disagreed and said that we would do things her way. I got angry and told she was power hungry; then I walked out of the meeting. I was so angry at the time, but as soon as I walked out I knew that I had gone too far. I went for a walk, tried to pray, but felt helpless and confused. I didn't want to face God just then; I knew he wasn't pleased with me. Was I so concerned about time with the locals or did I just use it as an excuse to vent my frustrations? I didn't know. By the time I returned, it was time for class. I went to class and most of the team seemed to avoid eye contact with me. At the lunch break, one of the brothers, J, asked if he could talk with me. I didn't want to but knew that I needed to somehow deal with this. We ate a quick lunch and then went for a walk outside. Our conversation went something like this:

J asked: "A., you seemed pretty angry this morning. Are you okay?"

I responded: "I don't know. I just don't like her bossing us around without hearing from us on what we think or how God is leading us to serve or spend our time here."

J shared, "It can get pretty frustrating. There are so many changes we have been going through. It seems like you have been angry for awhile and not just at Sister M. You have gotten angry at how the locals treated you."

"Are you judging me now? You know you're not perfect either." I shot back at him.

"I'm not judging and I am not trying to make you angry. I'm just sharing what I have observed in your behavior and trying to help. If you don't want my help, then I will stop," J said. We walked for a couple of minutes in silence. I didn't want to deal with this, but I knew that I needed to.

Finally, I said to him, "J., thank you for offering your help. This is difficult for me, and I think I do need some help or I won't last much longer here, at least I won't be healthy. I don't know what to do, though. I can't seem to control my anger. What do you suggest I do?"

"Most answers from God start with humility to Him and the authority over us. One verse that comes to mind is in Ephesians where it says to not let the sun go down on your anger. One act of humility would be apologizing to Sister M for how you dealt with your anger. You may have had a valid point, but everyone in the room felt uncomfortable about how you expressed it. If you decide to apologize and want me to come along with you, I will. I think it would be good for me to learn more about dealing with anger, so if you want, we can spend some of our free time to study, talk, and pray about anger. Whatever you decide, you are still my brother, and I care for you."

He was right. And he had risked my getting angry at him to help me. Later that day, I asked Sister M if I could talk with her. I apologized for my outburst. She accepted the apology but looked unsure about how to react. Brother J and I began to share with each other verses related to anger and discuss how we could apply them to our lives. He didn't have a major problem with anger, but most everyone struggles with it some, so we learned together. A couple of days later, I spoke to the group and apologized to them for my outburst and told them that I was wrong to say the things I did about Sister M. After that I felt free, like I had done what God needed me to do so He could connect with me in this area of my life. One morning that week I was reading in

Mathew 5:23, 24 **Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.** I had taken the steps of reconciliation and felt peace afterward. As we continued to study and discuss, we found some interesting results, and God really blessed me with his truth. Anger wasn't wrong, but I needed to be careful with it. Through our study and discussion we came up with two points that helped us understand anger better.

The first was that anger is an internal decision, not something decided by external actions. In my anger, I wanted to blame Sister M, but the truth is that I chose to become angry. If Paul could be beaten and thrown in prison and choose to sing praises to God, surely I could choose to control my anger because a Sister M wanted the group to pray together in the mornings. Now, when I look at the situation it seems simple, but at the time my anger was much like a wild animal.

A second point about anger I mentioned earlier. Anger is a secondary emotion that is set off when vulnerable emotions such as hurt, fear, helplessness, and insecurity increase in intensity. The more I focused on dealing with the vulnerable emotions, the less angry I became. One day, a few months after the incident, Brother J told me he couldn't remember the last time he had seen me get angry. I still got angry, but now it was more in control."

Sam asked: "A., what changes did you make to develop more control over anger in your life?"

For me the key is keeping focus on what is going on inside of me. I can be calm through a storm of other people's emotions if I am focused. However the opposite is also true. When I am unfocused on my emotional state, the smallest thing can set off my emotion. If you were listening closely, you heard a contradiction in what I have said about anger. I have shared that anger is an internal decision so nothing outside can set me off. This is true unless I have let go of the maintenance of my emotions. Without me in charge, I give my environment permission to be in charge of my emotions. So in my opinion, my focus or attitude toward my emotions is the main key for controlling my anger. With that focus there are several things that I can do to help keep it in a healthy, non-sinful state. One of those I learned while visiting my home in the province of Heilongjiang. While visiting my parents, they brought up the topic of my future marriage. They questioned how I would find a suitable wife while living in a foreign country. Initially, I was okay; they had asked many times about my future; what work I would do and when I would get married. This time they were more insistent with their questions. I had traveled by train from Guangzhou. The long trip had tired me out, and I just wanted to rest before having to deal with my parent's questions. I began to feel my patience being strained and happened to have a good focus on my emotions. I knew I wouldn't last without making a change, so I told them I would be back in a few minutes, and I walked outside. It was February and very cold. Outside I began to focus on relaxing my emotions. I was angry and frustrated. Why did they have to pressure me? When I first started walking outside I was warm, not

just from being inside but also because of my anger. Within a couple of minutes, it seemed that my body stole the energy out of my anger to fight off the cold. Very quickly I was able to extinguish my anger and instead of the 'why' question I began to pray and ask God 'how.' How can I comfort my parents? What do they need? God revealed to me that my parents loved me and that this was one of their ways of expressing it to me. It may not be the way I desired, but it was their way. They wanted me to be happy, secure, and to have a good future. They also wanted a grandchild that they could brag about to their friends and care for. By cooling off, I was able to move from anger to care. The time with my parents truly was restful and enjoyable. God would provide for my future; my job was to keep following Him. This focus gave me an opportunity to show my faith in God to my parents. It allowed me to seek out God's thinking, rather than my own. In Cambodia, I had to become more creative in cooling off. I couldn't just step outside into a freezer like I could in Heilongjiang. Taking a shower helps; even sitting in the shade can help some. I remember once I went outside while it was raining without an umbrella. I got soaked, but it worked. I cooled off quickly and was able to think more clearly.

Sam asked: "A. what happens when you can't get away from a situation to cool off?" Brother A. responds, "Slow down and speak softly." When I am angry I tend to get loud and speak fast and forcefully. So for me, I need to slow down the process. If I am talking or more likely arguing with someone, I will pause longer with my responses. Many of my first reactions are not healthy and would only increase the conflict. With my volume down lower than normal, it is more difficult for my anger to elevate. The less intense my anger, the more God can speak into the situation. It reminds me of Jesus when the Pharisees brought to him the adulterous woman. As God, this was his child, his daughter. I would have been enraged if they had used my daughter against me. Jesus' reaction is very helpful to me. He responded with silence. They asked him again, and finally he looked up and spoke one sentence. "He who has no sin cast the first stone." And then went on drawing in the sand in silence. He seemed to work hard at controlling his emotions, and as a result, the woman lived. Our anger will not come up with wise sayings or responses to the troubled circumstances we are in. The Father can. Will we let him share these with us by controlling our anger? I don't always succeed, but I use these basic tools and keep working.

One last lesson I have learned about my anger is that the longer I hold my anger in, the stronger it becomes, and the more difficult it is to redirect. It builds up like a volcano that needs an eruption. Something or someone will give it the excuse it needs to blow up. If I catch myself becoming irritated or mildly frustrated and deal with it at that level, there is no need for an explosion to release the emotion. So, I have looked for clues to my anger. As I have observed my anger from the past, I have found that my anger often takes the same path, and there are clues along the path. My anger has different stages of intensity: annoyance, frustration, irritation, anger, and rage. The expression of rage has always been a sinful expression for me. As I focus more on my emotional state, it is easier for me to catch my anger at the annoyance or frustrated stage and deal with it before it becomes enraged."

Well, I hope what I have shared today will be helpful to you. I am still learning about my emotions, and I am sure there is more that can be said about anger, so I encourage you to be a student of your own emotions.

“Brother A., thanks for being here today and being so open with your life. Now it is time to break up into your small groups.”

Small group discussion:

Brother A. identified five levels of intensity of anger: annoyance, frustration, irritation, anger, and rage. As a group, describe from your own thoughts and experiences what each of these levels looks like.

What are clues that a person is moving from one level to the next?

Share with the group one situation in which you became angry. Which of the methods mentioned by Brother A would or did help you the most in dealing with the situation?

Personal application:

Journal three anger experiences from your past. Identify which level of anger you reached. What could have helped you decrease the intensity? Remember, changing the outside circumstances is not an option for this assignment. What internal change would have helped? How can you apply this understanding to your present life? And, how can it prepare you to handle future issues better?