Dedication

With deep respect I dedicate this book to my sister, Swanee Hunt, who has long been channeling her indignation over social injustice into action. Although we have teased about “cancelling each other’s votes,” we are always in each other’s corner—emphatically—concerning abuse, injustice, and proactive compassion.

Swanee allowed her justifiable anger regarding the worldwide epidemic of sex trafficking to fuel her efforts to combat this horrendous atrocity. Her righteous indignation helped energize the movement, involving world leaders and heads of state, to rescue young women and girls who are victims of inhumane, evil sex traffickers.

Previously as ambassador from the United States to Austria, Swanee saw firsthand the aftermath of brutal savagery from the Bosnian war—the wholesale genocide of almost the entire male population in the town of Srebrenica, all fathers, sons, husbands...murdered. As a result, she assisted in the mobilization of women around the globe to take action, to become leaders, to make their world a far more civil place.

With a vision of what could be, Swanee has empowered the weak to become strong, the timid to become bold, the victim to become victorious. Indeed, she has helped the voiceless find a voice.

Swanee has refused to sit behind her mahogany desk at Harvard University and merely teach about injustices. Rather, she has rolled up her sleeves, marshaled her assets, garnered her allies, neutralized her opponents, focused her intellect, and thrown her energy into making a significant difference in the lives of those who have been disenfranchised. Swanee’s anger propelled her to action...and as a result, she is changing the world.
Acknowledgments

If I were deprived of the opportunity to express in print my deepest appreciation to the dedicated team that helped make this book possible, I might be tempted to become...angry! Therefore, with heartfelt gratitude I joyfully acknowledge...

- The firefighters of Dallas Fire Station #21, Love Field Airport: Who provided significant insights into the essential skills of firefighting.
- Barbara Spruill: Whose vivid recollections of my early struggles with anger surpassed even my own memories—she lovingly sparked personal recollections of my failures and victories, which are candidly revealed throughout these pages.
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  - keying and re-keying  •  proofing and reproofing
  - editing and re-editing  •  researching and re-researching

They not only performed with the utmost diligence but also fanned the flame of loving support. (You are my editorial Dream Team.)

- Kay Yates: Who, as my personal assistant, juggled calendars and single-handedly snuffed out brush fires—enabling the rest of our team to “keep going on all four burners.”

I am genuinely blessed by God to have each of you in my life.

— June
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Introduction

God Has an Answer for Your Anger

I became aware of the extraordinary number of people struggling with anger when I was in Arizona in the mid-1990s at Prescott Pines Conference Center. I had been asked to be the general session speaker for a series of four back-to-basics conferences. This was the first time I had ever brought all of our *Biblical Counseling Keys* from our ministry—100 practical resources that address life’s toughest problems.

For more than two weeks, I kept calling back to our office in Dallas, Texas, asking staff to send us hundreds more of our *Biblical Counseling Keys*. And by far the resource on anger was in greatest demand, and I didn’t even speak on that topic!

After returning from Arizona, I checked to see how our ministry was meeting this need to help people with their anger, and I was surprised at the results. People have been requesting more of our *Biblical Counseling Keys* on Anger than any other topic, just like at the conferences. Clearly, people continue to seek real answers for their real problems. Fortunately, this book has real solutions!

Anger is perhaps the most mystifying and powerful emotion we experience—and potentially the most volatile. There is much confusion about anger. We often become conflicted over the should nots and oughts...like “good people should not have any anger” and “you ought to get rid of all anger—immediately.”

Typically we don’t want to acknowledge any anger within us, so...
we stuff it, disguise it, medicate it, rename it, anesthetize it—but that only adds fuel to the fire burning deep within.

In truth, anger is like a red light on the dashboard of your car—a warning light that indicates something is wrong and needs your attention. God’s design for anger is to caution us, not to control us…and to ultimately cause us to think about options that will bring about positive change.

As uncomfortable as it is, I don’t know of any other way to write this book on anger—with total integrity—without being candid about my own struggle with it…especially in my younger years. This means I need to speak about personal events and painful people from my past. Therefore, when I do so, it isn’t to be dramatic, but rather to be authentic. My intent is not to hurt, but rather to help. That is my sincere prayer.

Learning about anger has been a journey I’ve been on most of my adult life…and oh, what I’ve learned! I’ve walked through the burning embers of my own suppressed anger, and I’ve also learned how to take shelter from the explosive, fiery anger of others. Now I want to help you discover the same invaluable lessons I’ve learned.

From personal experience, I have every confidence that, with God’s help, you can find the answer to anger and enjoy a peaceful life.
Part One

Fanning the Embers:

*The Truth About Anger and How It Affects Our Lives*
The Anger Bowl

The Overwhelming Pain of Our Anger

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger”

(Ephesians 4:31).

It’s TOO MUCH. The pain is just too much!” cried a voice seething with anger. “I’m so upset…so angry…my life has turned into a living hell.”

- The place: the mountains of Prescott, Arizona
- The occasion: a weekend retreat for more than 600 women
- The setting: an outdoor pavilion with a large stone fireplace

On a Friday evening, after I had just finished speaking, a distraught woman came forward, baring her soul. Actually, Brenda was supported—practically carried—by three deeply concerned friends. As she reached out, I took her hands and led her to sit down by me. She was overwrought with emotion.

Initially, Brenda didn’t want to talk with me. In fact, she didn’t want to attend the conference at all. But her friends knew how desperately she needed some kind of intervention—something to pull her out of this emotional “pit,” something to get her back on level ground.

“Brenda, please tell me what happened. I can see you’re in pain.”
Immediately she blurted out, “My daughter died of anorexia*... she was just 22!” Heaving sobs poured out between every phrase. “She meant the world to me... she had so much potential... so much future... she was vibrant... and so precious... then she withered... withered away—to nothing.”

At the word *nothing*, Brenda’s body wilted and she began to wail. I now understood the source of this mother’s agony. It was the tragedy of watching her daughter die of self-imposed starvation—shrinking to skin and bones, unaware of her own distorted thoughts... thinking she was much too fat when instead she was much too thin... thinking she was eating too much when instead she was slowly starving.

Within moments, the picture was plain to me. Brenda was emotionally confined in a fiery pit—a pit of anger. It was as though this pit contained hot coals that she could pick up and hurl at any time, pelting those who angered her. Yet she hadn’t realized she was the one being burned.

Brenda was consumed with agonizing anger, a bitter wrath...

- **at her husband**—for not taking the problem seriously
  — “She’s just going through a phase.”
- **at her friends**—for not showing compassion, but stating trite comments
  — “She’s cute and trim and doesn’t want to be fat!”
- **at her family**—for not understanding the real issues
  — “Just make her eat!”
- **at her doctors**—for not being more proactive
  — “Don’t worry. I’m watching her.”

*Anorexia* is a psychological eating disorder characterized by compulsive, chronic self-starvation.¹ It is a disorder in which the normal function of the mind and/or body is disturbed. Anorexics weigh less than their ideal body weight, which is different for every person (based on bone structure and the amount of muscle). Body weight that is 15 percent below normal poses a serious threat to a person’s physical health.²
• at her hospital—for not supplying lifesaving solutions
  —“We’re doing all we can.”
• at herself—for not knowing what to do sooner
  —“Why didn’t I spend even more time searching for solutions?”
• at her God—for not rescuing her precious child
  —“Why didn’t God stop this senseless tragedy?”
• at her daughter—for not fighting to live, not trying to change,
  for withering away to nothing, for leaving her, for dying
  —“I can’t believe how her destructive choices have forever devastate me.”

“I am so very sorry, Brenda. When did your daughter die?” Her answer surprised me. “It’s been over three years now…but it still feels like yesterday.”

Rarely have I met someone so ravaged by sorrow. My heart hurt for her as I silently cried out to God on her behalf.

For over half an hour, Brenda and I sat together on the first row of that pavilion. Continuing to ask questions, I heard more of her anguishing story—her years of reaching out to her daughter, her countless hours of prayer, her sleepless nights of worry, her failed attempts to find help.

When she finished pouring out her heart, I said, “Brenda, you can find true healing. Though your world feels so painful right now, you can receive real relief from that pain. You may not see it, but there is hope for your heart.”

She looked at me as if she wanted to believe, but she had been disappointed so many times it was difficult for her to trust my words.

At that very moment, the Lord put into my mind a symbolic picture of what Brenda could do with her pain. I asked her to cup her hands together in the shape of a bowl. Then I asked her to imagine writing on slips of paper each specific hurt, the names of each person who had caused pain, and each angering moment. I then instructed her to imagine placing these slips of paper one by one into her “anger bowl.”
Brenda seemed more than eager to get it all out. Together we verbally “wrote down” every feeling of helplessness, hurt, and heartache related to the death of her daughter. Her sorrow, pain, and anger were so extensive, she agonized to recall each incident as we gathered them into her imaginary bowl.

I believed that Brenda had likely been carrying the burden of anger long before her daughter’s eating disorder. My aim was for her to leave the Arizona mountains totally free of the charred memories from childhood on up. I asked Brenda to again imagine writing down the names of the people and events throughout her life that caused her anger and pain not related to her daughter’s illness and death, and to place those slips of paper in her anger bowl as well.

“Ask God to bring every person and event to mind so you can find complete healing,” I gently prodded. “Include even the ‘little’ hurts that could still be lingering.”

When the last “slip of paper” dropped into the bowl, I asked Brenda if she wanted to keep carrying all that anger or if she wanted to release it. “Oh, I want to release it all. I’ve carried this anger far too long as it is.”

**Giving a Sacrificial Offering to God**

“Now I want you to take this anger bowl over to the fireplace,” I explained, “and empty it all into the fire.”

“I really want to empty the bowl,” she quickly responded. “I really need to empty the bowl.”

Putting my hands under her hands, I softly said, “Let me help you.” Carefully we both carried the figuratively heavy bowl. “Brenda, although you felt you had the right to be angry, you can now present all your anger to the Lord as a sacrificial offering.” She nodded. Staring at the fire, she paused, then prayed, “I release my anger bowl to You.”

Slowly separating her hands...then slowly turning them over...she “poured” the contents of the bowl into the fire and allowed her anger to be consumed by the flames. Then, with the palms of her hands still over the fire, she spontaneously began moving her fingers up and
down—making sure no “slips of paper” clung to her, making sure no sliver of anger remained.

As Brenda presented her burnt offering to the Lord, I believe the God of heaven and Earth received it as a sacrifice to Him. He blew away her anger like light ash on a cool breeze. He truly lightened her load.

After the conference had drawn to a close on that Sunday afternoon, Brenda’s friends rushed up to me, full of excitement. “Have you seen Brenda today?”

“No, I haven’t seen her since Friday night.” Then they began gushing, their words overlapping one another: “It’s amazing…she’s joyful…she’s glowing…she’s radiant!”

Then one exclaimed, “Stay here! We’ll bring her to you.”

Off they scurried…and within five minutes, the flock of four returned. No doubt about it—their exuberant words were right. Brenda’s face was beaming—her eyes bright, her countenance beautiful.

The reason? Brenda’s anger bowl was completely empty. She had emptied her heart of all past hurt, all past pain, all past anger. She had yielded her right to hold on to her list of resentments, and had presented her offering to the Lord. She knew He was well pleased.

It was amazing to see how an anger that had smoldered for years could be snuffed out in such a relatively short time. Brenda’s consuming coals of anger had been cooled by the breath of God.

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**Do You Need to Bring a Burnt Offering?**

Has anger seethed in your soul for so long that you sincerely question, “Can it really be contained? Can it be completely extinguished? Can this powerful emotion truly be transformed from adversary to ally?”

The answer is unequivocally *yes*. But, as with Brenda, your starting point will probably be filling your own “anger bowl,” then allowing God’s purifying fire to burn away the blistering pain that for too long has been harming you and those you love.
If you are tempted to think, *But I have every right to be angry! It’s too high a price to let go*, reflect on these words in the Bible: “I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”

Realize that Jesus promises to be your burden bearer. He gives hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless. Instead of casting hot coals on the people who have angered you, do as the Bible says: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

Every time you pick up burning coals to pelt people who have hurt you, know this: It’s like lighting yourself on fire and waiting for the other person to burn.