

## **THE CONSTRUCTIVE POWER OF ANGER**

### **1 Samuel 11**

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1 Samuel 11:1-15 (NIV)

“Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, ‘Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you.’

But Nahash the Ammonite replied, ‘I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel.’

The elders of Jabesh said to him, ‘Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you.’

When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul and reported these terms to the people, they all wept aloud. Just then Saul was returning from the fields, behind his oxen, and he asked, ‘What is wrong with the people? Why are they weeping?’ Then they repeated to him what the men of Jabesh had said.

When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, ‘This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel.’ Then the terror of the LORD fell on the people, and they turned out as one man.

When Saul mustered them at Bezek, the men of Israel numbered three hundred thousand and the men of Judah thirty thousand.

They told the messengers who had come, ‘Say to the men of Jabesh Gilead, “By the time the sun is hot tomorrow, you will be delivered.”’ When the messengers went and reported this to the men

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of Jabesh, they were elated. They said to the Ammonites, ‘Tomorrow we will surrender to you, and you can do to us whatever seems good to you.’

The next day Saul separated his men into three divisions; during the last watch of the night they broke into the camp of the Ammonites and slaughtered them until the heat of the day. Those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

The people then said to Samuel, ‘Who was it that asked, “Shall Saul reign over us?” Bring these men to us and we will put them to death.’

But Saul said, ‘No one shall be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel.’

Then Samuel said to the people, ‘Come, let us go to Gilgal and there reaffirm the kingship.’ So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.”

This text today really has two messages. I’m going to take the first one very shortly. I can’t resist. It’s too big a temptation.

#### **I. A classic battle plan for an election.**

Any Christian that follows this plan who is a candidate for a position at any level in this country—city, county, state, or nation—anyone who follows the three steps in this battle plan will win office. The battle plan is this:

**A.** First, there must be, among the people of God, a prevailing assumption that absolutely nothing can be done to reverse the present situation. That happened at Jabesh Gilead. They were in trouble, and nobody really cared or was willing to do anything about it. Only Saul got stirred up. Everybody else was totally apathetic and said, “There’s nothing we can do.”

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When we look at the situation today and review the past several decades of American life, there has been an erosion of Judeo-Christian values in our society. We sit around and ask, “What influence can Christian families have on the school system? What influences can we have, as Christians, on television programming? Why is pornography so pervasive? Can anything be done to prevent the treatment of homosexual behavior as a socially acceptable alternative to heterosexuality? What can be done about abortion?” In all these issues, the Christians are fighting here and there, but we are losing in the courts. We are losing in the legislature. We are losing in the executive arenas. Every once in awhile, we experience victory, but most evangelical Christians show a defeatism or apathy by their actions. That brings us to the second thing that has to happen.

**B.** There must be a person or persons whom the Spirit of God comes upon in power, and that person or persons is going to have to become possessed with righteous indignation and say, “We are not going to tolerate our schools teaching our children that we have descended from monkeys. Neither are we going to tolerate an atmosphere where our schools teach children not only morally neutral values but abhorrent moral values. We are not going to allow politicians who cater to the homosexuals, lobby to get elected if they march in gay rights parades and let a deadly disease become a politically protected disease. We are tired of those who control the media of this country and almost never, ever portray decent Christians in any television program. We are fed up with the absence of decency. We are tired of being branded as old, radical, right wingers just because we are Christians.” We are historically mainstream Americans. We’re out to recover the media and the government from a small, anti-God clique. What we see is an attempt by some to legislate, not simply morally neutral values, but morally abhorrent values on the Christian community. Someone must get upset.

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C. There will never be a constructive nation unless people see it is in their own self-interest to participate. There are enough Christians and decent moral folk in this country who, if they ever showed up to vote, would carry every political office in every city, county, and throughout the nation. What's the problem? Christians and moral people don't turn out en masse to vote. Saul had a very neat way of solving that problem. If we could use his technique, we could solve the problems in this country. He took his oxen, cut them up into meat slabs, and sent the meat slabs all over Israel. And he said, "If you don't show up for this battle, the same thing is going to happen to your ox." There will never be political change for the better in this country until Christians start acting out of self-interest. Until we are sick of having to live with moral values being shoved down our throats which we feel to be abhorrent. I'm not a person to advocate that we're going to have a Christian America. I think that's nonsense. But what we can do is provide a more decent, moral climate in this country than what we're doing. We can also roll back some of the perversion that is publicly accessible and condoned in our culture. We can do something about that.

So you've got to take on something nobody believes you can win at. You've got to be indignant enough to stand up for your position and go at it with all your heart. And you've got to somehow make people believe you that it's in their own self-interest to act. If you can get all three of those working, you can win any political office in this country. There are some issues that transcend politics—they relate to morals, quality of life, and the well being of a whole society and country. Everything we read in the Bible is applicable by transference. And what was applicable for Saul in defeating the Ammonites at Jabesh Gilead is applicable in this culture for winning an election. It's direct transfer. That's what makes the Scripture such an exciting book. That's why you can never get away from it.

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Let's talk about the constructive power of anger in terms of personal dimension. Most of us struggle with anger, and we realize there are times in our lives when we're inappropriately angry. Sometimes, it's just as sinful that we have not been angry when we should have been. Anger is like gunpowder. It depends on how we use it. You can use gunpowder and kill a whole lot of innocent people. Or you can use it at a target that is well defined and have it accomplish something. The key question with anger is, "Will the anger we have help accomplish what God wants done?" That's why there's the admonition in Scripture, "Be angry but don't sin" (Ephesians 4:26). Anger, if it's to be effective, must be done in such a way as to accomplish God's purposes.

Here is this person, Saul, before us in this Scripture today. We know from reading on in Scripture that one of his life-long problems was anger. Ultimately, anger destroyed him. It's interesting that the very thing that destroyed him is what first introduces him on the pages of Scripture. He is using anger rightly and properly, and it galvanizes and puts him on the world scene. Here are three things that constructive anger did for Saul, and three things constructive anger will do for us.

#### **II. Anger stirs us away from apathy.**

Apathy is a state of not having any emotion—being defeated. That's how Jabesh Gilead was, and that's how most of the people of Israel were when they heard about the plight of Jabesh Gilead. To really understand this biblical text, we need to look a moment at the geographical and historical perspective. It sheds a lot more light on the story. In Jabesh Gilead, there was a threat to that Israelite encampment by King Nahash, who was an Ammonite. The Ammonites were people descended from Ammon—the child who was born out of the incestuous, drunken relationship between Lot and his daughter after the fall of Sodom. The country of Jordan today

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occupies the area we know as Jabesh Gilead. Jabesh Gilead enters into a special relationship with the tribe of Benjamin, as told to us at the end of the Book of Judges. Remember Saul is a Benjamite. And Jabesh Gilead is in trouble from an Ammonite.

Judges 19–21 tells a story that is shocking. It's a story that relates an account of a man who was a Levite—a religious person—who lived in Ephraim, the central part of the country. He had gone south to Bethlehem, and now he was on his way back north to his home. He had to come through the territory of Benjamin, and he stopped at a place that later becomes Saul's hometown. There's no place to stay. He's waiting in the town square for someone to be his host for the evening. It's him, his concubine or common law wife, and a young manservant. Nobody invites him in. In Mediterranean society, that's an awful impoliteness. Finally, an old man of Gibeah comes along and says, "You can stay at my house." They go into his house, and they're no sooner inside and sitting to eat than a gang of ruffians start pounding on the door saying, "Send the young man out. We want to have sex with him." The old man of Gibeah says, "No, you can't do that." So he did a very sexist thing. He sent out the man's common law wife instead. Maybe he was thinking their homosexual appetites were such that they'd leave her alone. But they turned on her, and gang raped her. They treated her so violently that when the morning light dawned, she was found dead at the doorstep. The old Levite put the body of his dead wife on his donkey and took her home. When he got home, he sliced her body into pieces and sent the pieces to all Israel and said, "This is what the Benjamites did to my concubine, my common-law wife. Are you going to do anything about those gang rapists down in Benjamin?"

All of Israel turned out and said, "We're not going to tolerate this kind of behavior in our community." All the men of Benjamin were killed, except for six hundred. When the battle was over, they looked around and said, "Who in Israel didn't turn out to fight?" Guess who didn't

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come—the men from Jabesh Gilead. So they said, “We’re going to get them next.” They go up to Jabesh Gilead, and they kill every single male and every married woman in Jabesh Gilead. They leave alive only four hundred young women who are virgins. So they intermarry the six hundred Benjamites and the four hundred ladies from Jabesh Gilead. These were Saul’s relatives—aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers—out of this union of Benjamin and Jabesh Gilead.

This joining of these disparate groups.

What do you think Nabash the Ammonite was up to when he said to Jabesh Gilead “I’m going to poke your eyes out if you don’t surrender”? He’s saying, “I want to disgrace you.” Then they say to him, “Let us have a week and see if we can get anybody in Israel to help us.” Why does he give them that much time? Because he wants to disgrace everybody in Israel and remind the whole nation what bunch of wimps they are. And he also has reason to believe that nobody’s going to turn out to help Jabesh Gilead. A few decades before, they hadn’t helped when they were needed, so who’s going to help them now? In the Middle East, blood rivalry goes back years and years and years.

Here’s the set-up. Saul gets the word. His anger rouses him from apathy. His concern is not only because these people are his relatives. His concern is, as king of Israel, he has to look out for all the people. And all the people are going to go into disgrace because of this. If the Ammonites do this to Jabesh Gilead today, they will do it to somebody else tomorrow. He has the responsibility to act. He’s acting for all the people. He cannot let that disgrace happen. So he acts in a responsible way. He gets angry.

Anger is a God-given instrument in dealing with injustice. Jesus used anger in clearing the temple of those who adulterated its use. The key question that we ask in regard to anger is, “Are we angry for the right reasons?” Saul’s anger was for the right reason. Saul was able to see that

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the threat to the men of Jabesh Gilead was his business. Even though he was safe down in Benjamin, the misery of his fellow countrymen was his business.

That's why Christians have always been on the cutting edge of social reform. That's why, a generation or a century ago, it was Christians who reversed the slave trade. Who reversed the whole idea of minors working in sweat shops. It's because Christians say, "It's not sufficient that we are comfortable and that we have freedom. We want freedom and dignity to be extended to all. And we're concerned about injustice. Even though we are safe, we've got to do something." Anger has that kind of constructive power to get us involved in a cause. Are you angry for the right reasons? Anger stirs us from apathy.

### **III. Anger fills us with a new power.**

Amazingly, after Saul was anointed as king, he did absolutely nothing about it. We saw his anointing last week as we looked at 1 Samuel 10. He did not go back and try to form an administration. He didn't select a headquarters or capital. He didn't try to muster or train an army. He just went back to walking behind oxen. Here he is king, and he's back doing what he's been doing all his life. He was a submissive person who was doing the routine things of life. But it is this report from Jabesh Gilead that ignites and energizes him. To be angry, in a constructive sense, fills us with a new power and determination. Saul's anger was constructive. It was powerful because it came from God. It was the result of the Spirit of God coming upon him in power. He had the right kind of anger, and it energized him. Which brings us to the third fact of his anger—it not only aroused him from apathy and filled him with a new power, but...

### **IV. Saul's anger led to deliberate and successful action.**

I think the key is to use anger without anger using you. The critical question is, "Who is in control?" If anger is in control, then the person is out of control. Anger cannot lead to deliberate

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and successful action. Anger can only be deliberate and successful when you are in control—when something constructive happens as a result of the expression of the anger. Anger, therefore, must be our slave. It must be our servant. It can never be our master.

So we ask, as we tie this together by way of application, “What kind of anger do we have flowing in our life?” Is it constructive or destructive anger? Is it anger which lashes out at another simply because we are frustrated and at our wits end? Or is it anger that has a specific focus and direction? If we look at the Lord’s use of anger, we see the proper way to distinguish between constructive and destructive anger. Jesus never used anger destructively. His use of anger was always constructive. Here’s how Jesus used anger.

**A.** He expressed anger as a way of showing concern for someone. He said to Peter on one occasion when He was very upset with Peter’s behavior, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:23). That expression of sharp anger by Jesus toward Peter was His way of expressing concern.

Is someone in your life—in your personal life—acting in a way that is irresponsible, totally irresponsible? And you try to reach them in every way possible, and still their behavior has not changed? If your anger is directed toward them, it is not all bad—if that anger is a godly kind of anger. You may need to speak very sharply to them. You may need to speak very sternly. You may need to say, “You’re not going to get away with that in this relationship or this house. That kind of behavior will not be tolerated.” You may need anger to really get their attention—as long as your anger is not directed as an expression against them as a person.

That’s what so often happens—we let anger be an escape, and we spew out all this venom on someone. We’re not really interested in helping them. We’re interested in telling them off and

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putting them in their place. Jesus' anger was an anger which focused concern. Anger gets your attention, especially, when you know the person who is angry loves you.

**B.** Another way Jesus used anger was to correct or curtail destructive behavior. But He never used it to destroy the individual. There were people who were angry with Him, and they sought to destroy Him. They thought they did when they nailed Him to the cross. But Jesus' anger is not the kind that puts people on crosses. His anger is directed to change their behavior, not to annihilate the person. He channeled his anger toward the person who He was dealing with. That is to say, He did not diffuse anger.

Some people just live in a kind of ticked-off way. You never know how to approach them because you might press the wrong button. Then out comes all this stuff they have toward everybody—how life has been unfair and they're bitter and all this kind of thing. You were just going to say something nice, and you got splashed with all the acid. You never intended it that way. Jesus did not use anger in that fashion. He treated anger like a laser, not a match. You strike a match, and it sets something on fire. Jesus used it like a laser. He beamed it right to the need. He focused it.

**C.** Jesus used anger in such a way that it never dominated Him. In fact, Jesus lived as a non-angry person, even though He could show anger. He lived in his dominant mood of love and forgiveness. He died praying for His enemies. He didn't live as a ticked-off person. He didn't live as a person who was just waiting for the next discourtesy, so He could erupt and spew out a lot of venom. He was a loving person. His anger did not dominate His life. He used anger to heal relationships rather than to break them. This He did well.

I might add that in a lot of ways, Saul does not have the same maturity of Jesus in handling anger. His anger does some bad things to people. Jesus would have taught us to forgive our

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enemies. But the one good thing about Saul, as this chapter closes, is the fact that when the Israelites haul before him the people who had laughed at him when he became king at the end of chapter 10, his anger cooled. They bring those people before him, after his victory over the Ammonites, and they say, “These guys can now be put to death because they ridiculed you, and now you’re the big power around here.” Saul’s anger had cooled. It was not, at that moment, in control of his life.

God wants to bring peace into our hearts, so that anger winds up being constructive and helpful in our lives, not destructive. It is a sin to be angry in a wrongful manner. It is also a sin not to be angry when one should be angry. Anger must be constructive and healing—helpful and building. It is not meant to annihilate the person. It is meant to change the behavior.

There are people I know that anger is eating them up alive. It’s destroying their relationships, and it’s out of control. It needs to be dealt with. It critically needs to be dealt with. It needs to be brought to the cross, and it needs to be prayed over. It needs to be repented of, and people need to be forgiven. If you’re in that category, forgive your enemies. Don’t try to crucify them.

There are other people who I wish, for one moment in their life, would get mad about something. There are enough causes in this world—enough injustice. You can’t get mad about every one of them, or all you’d ever do is spend every day in anger. But find something where you can use anger constructively, and go to work on it. Ask the Spirit of God to help you change it. Whether it’s in your family, your community, the nation, or wherever it is. Get angry about it. Let the Spirit of God show you what to get angry over. But be angry and do not sin.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, we come to You today, and we realize in You is wholesome personality. That there is a time to love, and there’s a time to show love by expressing anger. I pray for those in our

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congregation today who have been troubled. Their lives have been greatly harmed by the inappropriate use of anger. They've poured hot, scalding water over members of their family with their spewing out of anger. The acid of their anger has eaten away at them, as well as worked to destroy others. Lord, it's time to be angry about that kind of behavior. I pray that You will bring a change and a release in their life.

It is so hard for every one of us to see ourselves. It is so much easier for us to see the need for change in another. Lord, if we're a person who is dominated by anger and our anger is reaching out in inappropriate and ungodly ways, we ask, Lord Jesus, Your forgiveness. And we ask Your healing. And we ask that we can, from our hearts, forgive those with whom we have been angry. Teach us, Lord, how to release anger in an appropriate way. Not just to sit on it, and let it eat us up alive. But to release it—to be healed from it—to be cleansed from unrighteous anger.

As we look around in our relationships and in the world in which you placed us, there are so many things that are wrong, an attitude in our society today of "I don't care. It doesn't affect me. It's not my business. Why should I care?" We should care because You care. Because You care about homeless people. Because You care about the abused and the neglected. Because You care about babies in the womb. Because You care about the well-being of people's emotional and sexual lives. Because You care. You seek to have a society on earth of decency and kindness. Help us, Lord, to identify and be involved in those issues You're calling us to. Help us to be angry but not to sin. We ask these things, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.