
Anger Against God

by Robert D. Jones

Is it okay to be angry with God? Is it permissible to hold in our heart, or voice with our mouth, anger against God? Surely the Church of Jesus Christ shows much confusion on this matter.

On the one hand, some people paste on plastic smiles when they face serious trials. They advocate a Pollyanna, "grin-and-bear-it" stoicism that refuses to question God or voice fears, doubts, and struggles about His dealings. After all, "good Christians don't complain."

In reaction, many contemporary Christian psychologists counsel an opposite approach. It is not only okay to be angry with God; being angry with God is healthy and right. The sentiment emerges: "Tell Him how you feel. Tell Him if you're angry. Be honest. Don't hide your feelings. Be transparent with Him. He'll understand. He's a big boy. He can handle it."

Of course, such counsel is somewhat refreshing. It liberates people to go to God with their struggles. Unfortunately, it arises from misconceptions about God and the nature of faith. It reinforces unbelief and separation from God: "I will never trust a God who let that happen to me."

Consider the views of one such proponent, Mark P. Cosgrove, in his book, *Counseling for Anger*.¹

Is anger at God a sin? The answer to this question will guide us in working with those who are angry at God. If anger at God is not necessarily sinful, and if such anger can be expressed properly and can serve the communication between God and human beings, then we should be careful before we chastise those who suffer for expressing their honest feelings to God.

In the Bible God does not forbid or condemn the expression of anger toward Him,

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¹Mark P. Cosgrove, *Counseling for Anger*, Resources for Christian Counseling Series, Volume 16 (Dallas: Word Books, 1988) pp. 151-152.

especially during times of great suffering. In fact, God seems to encourage man's honest outcries of agony.

The writer fails to distinguish between anger against God and "honest outcries of agony." Moreover, he suggests that those who view anger against God as sin have no wise, loving way to minister a life-giving rebuke except to "chastise" suffering people.

Are we then left with only two options? Must we choose between stoically denying our soul's struggles and carelessly venting our demands before God? No. The Bible offers a third way, a middle ground that

Is it okay to be angry with God?

encourages honesty without promoting blasphemy. Let's state this in two propositions and then examine each in turn:

- It is always wrong to hold in your heart or voice with your mouth anger against God.
- It is always right to bring your doubts and questions to God in a holy and humble way, out of a heart of fundamental faith.

Proposition #1: It is Always Wrong to Hold in Your Heart or Voice With Your Mouth Anger Against God.

I define anger as a whole-personed, negative reaction that arises from a moral judgment against perceived wrong. This definition guards against popular notions of anger as morally neutral, as mere emotion inherently without beliefs, affections, or motives. Instead, anger is a function of judgment. We perceive something or someone to be wrong, and we respond accordingly.

Framed this way, the answer to our question becomes clear. No, being angry at God is not right because to do so is to accuse God of wrongdoing. It is to apprehend some evil in God and His ways.

Kay Arthur² insightfully cuts to the core issue. You get angry with God, she observed, "because God did not do what you thought He should or the way He

²Kay Arthur, "But I'm So Angry!" in *Lord, Heal My Hurts* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1989).

should do it or when He should do it." It is telling God, "You're wrong!" Notice the ingredients in her observation: We accuse God of not doing what He should do or in the manner or timing in which He should do it.

Biblical Examples

Let's consider some biblical examples of people who were angry at God. Genesis 4 records God's rejection of Cain and his offering and God's acceptance of Abel and his offering.

The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it. (4:4b-7)

Why did Cain become angry with God? His sinful motives and beliefs drove his anger. He wanted God to accept his sacrifice on his terms, and he believed God should do so. When God in His sovereignty and holiness refused Cain's demand, Cain reacted in anger against God. He also displayed depression, along with jealousy, anger, and murder against his brother.

Was Cain's anger justified? Was it okay for him to be peeved with the Almighty? Did God err in refusing to accept Cain? The answer is obvious. Cain's anger against God was sinful. He needed to repent of the sin that was seeking to master him and instead do what was right.

David

In 1 Chronicles 13, tragedy interrupted David's plan to return God's ark to Jerusalem. While en route, Uzzah touched the ark to steady it, thereby disregarding God's holiness and violating Numbers 4:15.

David and all the Israelites with him went to Baalah of Judah (Kiriath Jearim) to bring up from there the ark of God the Lord, Who is enthroned between the cherubim—the ark that is called by the Name. They moved the ark of God from Abinadab's house on a new cart, with Uzzah and Ahio guiding it. David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God....When they came to the threshing floor of Kidon, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, because the oxen stumbled. (13:6-9)

God responded with wrath against Uzzah.

The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah, and he

struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God. (13:10) In turn, David responded with anger against God. Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. David was afraid of God that day....(13:11-12a)

What ignited David's anger? Probably, as most commentators suggest, David believed that God's wrath was too harsh. One wonders if David at this

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point fell prey to the "after all I've done for you, this is the thanks I get?" mentality that often pervades counselees who are angry with God. They believe that God owes them something better than the providential hardships they face.

The operative clause in all such lies is this: God should have...."Surely, God, *you should have* overlooked Uzzah's well-intentioned mistake." Or, "*You should have* punished him later, or in private, lest you undermine the morale of the mission—the mission for You, I might add. Talk about raining on our parade!"

While the narrative cites no explicit condemnation, the context implies divine disapproval of David's anger, especially in light of David's fearful response and unwarranted decision to abort the mission. One can hardly conclude from this text that it is okay to be angry at God.

Jonah

Or consider Jonah. God called His prophet to preach salvation to pagan Nineveh, the enemies of Israel. Jonah reluctantly complied. Nineveh repented, God remitted His wrath, and Jonah became angry at God.

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now,

O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

But the Lord replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 3:10-4:10)

What produced Jonah's anger? His evil heart. He craved the destruction of his enemies more than the glory God would gain through this mass conversion. Jonah did not love his neighbor as he loved himself. Neither Christlike love for his enemies nor compassion for the needy ruled him. Jonah believed that God had not acted the way God should act.

What was God's attitude toward Jonah's anger? God disapproved. He undercut Jonah's supposed "right" to be angry. It is difficult to concur with Cosgrove that "nothing God said indicated that he was censoring Jonah's uninhibited expression of his true feelings."³ Indeed, Jonah's "uninhibited expression" was the venting of his sinful flesh, and God exposed it as such. It was not okay for Jonah—or anyone—to be angry at God.

We could cite other biblical examples of anger against God: the rebel kings of Psalm 2, Job's wife in Job 2, King Asa in 2 Chronicles 16 (against God's prophet), and the Jewish crowd against Jesus in John 7:23. Each of these reveals the same themes as the pas-

sages above. Anger against God is always wrong in that it accuses God of evil.

Accusations Against God

John Calvin's pastoral insights into this matter remain unsurpassed. In his sermon from Job 1:21 ("Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God," NIV) Calvin declares:

Why is it that men fret so when God sends them things entirely contrary to *their* desire, except that they do not acknowledge that God does everything by reason and that He has just cause? For if we had well-imprinted on our hearts "All that God does is founded in good reason" it is certain that we would be ashamed to chafe so against Him when, I say, we know that He has *just* occasion to dispose thus of things, as we see. Now, therefore, it is especially said that Job attributed to God nothing without reason, that is to say, that *he did not imagine that God did anything which was not just and equitable.*⁴ (Emphasis added)

Here lies the root problem beneath our anger against God. We accuse him of injustice. Calvin continues:

As soon as God does not send what *we have desired*, we dispute against Him, we bring suit, not that we appear to do this, but our manner shows that this is nevertheless our intent. We consider every blow, "And why has this happened?" But from what spirit is this pronounced? From a *poisoned heart*; as if we said, "The thing *should have been otherwise*, I see no reason for this." Meanwhile God will be *condemned* among us. This is how men exasperate themselves. And in this what do they do? It is as if they *accused God* of being a tyrant or a hair-brain who asked only to put everything in confusion. Such horrible *blasphemy* blows out of the mouths of men. (Emphasis added)

Is it okay to be angry at God? No. It is to call God a "hair-brain" and to utter "horrible blasphemy." How should we counter this tendency?

However, the Holy Spirit wished to tell us that, if we wish to render glory to God and to bless His name properly, *we must be persuaded that God does nothing without reason.* So then, let us not attribute to Him either cruelty or ignorance, as if He did things in spite and unadvis-

³Cosgrove, *Counseling for Anger*, p. 152.

⁴John Calvin, *Sermons from Job*. Selected and translated by Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1952), pp. 29-30.

edly, but let us acknowledge that He proceeds in everything with admirable justice, with goodness and infinite wisdom, so that *there is only entire uprightness or equity in all that He does.* (Emphasis added)

The solution to sinful anger at God lies in continuously repenting of our remaining unbelief and rebellion. We must reject the lies that deny God's goodness, power, and wisdom. We must reaffirm His righteousness, love, sovereignty, and justice. We must repent, knowing that "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

God's Sovereign Purposes

Before turning to our second proposition, we must consider those who are indeed angry with God but don't recognize it. Carla was frequently upset with the fluctuations of her life circumstances. She was quick to blame her misery on her ex-husband, her parents,

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and her lower back injury (and the resulting physical and financial problems). She was angry at others and "just upset at life overall."

In one sense Carla was committed to the Lord. She was regularly involved in worship and sought to pray and read Scripture daily. That is why she protested my suggestion that she was, in fact, angry at God but did not know it.

Carla, like many, failed to see that behind her life hardships was the hand of a sovereign God. Her problems were not random occurrences of blind chance. They came to her as the providential dealings of the omnipotent, all-controlling Ruler who "does whatever pleases Him" (Psalm 115:3). Carla had not seen that God is the ultimate and final cause of every hardship and that He uses every trial to make us like Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28-29; Genesis 50:20; Job 1-2, 38-42).

The turning point came when Carla saw the sovereignty of God. God had placed her precisely where He wanted her to be. The result, ironically, was that for a brief time she became angry at Him. For Carla this was a step of progress: She had moved from ignorance of God's sovereignty and anger at others to an awareness of His sovereignty and anger at Him. The next

step in the counseling process came as we studied God's good purpose in sending such trials. She saw that the sovereign God who stood behind her ex-husband, her parents, and her back pain was her loving Father. She began to repent of her anger against God.

Proposition #2: It is Always Right to Bring Your Doubts and Questions to God in a Holy and Humble Way, Out of a Heart of Fundamental Faith.

If anger against God is sin, then how do we deal with our doubts and questions about His providential dealings, especially amid our sufferings? Must we stoically, silently stuff our struggles? Thankfully, God presents another option, the path laid out for us through the lamentation portions of Scripture.

Believers in Christ are sometimes baffled by God's ways, bewildered by His providential dealings and confused by His apparent inconsistencies. Yet Scripture teaches us the art of holy lamenting—learning how to complain in faith—to God about the calamities He sovereignly sends/permits.

We see this in Job 1-2. The careful student cannot avoid the conclusion, reached by the biblical writer and each of the main characters he records, that God Himself is the ultimate cause of Job's misfortune. In the ensuing chapters we hear Job's bitter complaints and heart-wrenching questions. But he never crossed over into a settled state of accusation against God. The God he came to know in bolder and fresher ways in Job 42 was the same God he had trusted from the beginning.

We see this in Jeremiah's book of Lamentations. He winces as he recalls God's sovereign, active hand of judgment on his own nation. He attributes the devastation to God's decrees. Yet he never denies God's covenantal loyalty or essential goodness to His people. He does not impugn God's motives nor accuse Him of malice or capriciousness. Jeremiah rests in God's faithful promises of restoration and blessing.

Consider also the prophet, Habakkuk, on the eve of the Babylonian invasion, c. 600 B. C. His honest complaints (Habakkuk 1:1-3, 12-2:1) arise not out of anger against God but out of his conviction that God was indeed both a sovereign, powerful Judge and a loving, compassionate Savior (3:18-19).

Of course, the largest deposit of biblical lament lies in the psalms. Listen to David's cries in Psalm 13: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my

eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me.

David wrestles with God's apparent distance from him in the midst of enemy attacks. He questions God's seeming neglect of him. He complains about God's felt absence. Yet David does not accuse God of wrongdoing. Instead, his fourfold "how long" lamentation (verses 1-2) leads to petition (verses 3-4), which yields confession of trust (verse 5) and commitment to praise (verse 6). He resolves to trust in God's loyal love (*hesed*), salvation, and goodness.

Laments of Faith

What common denominators can we glean from these biblical laments?

1. Each of these believers was experiencing intense confusion and bewilderment over apparent inconsistencies between God's revealed character and His current, providential dealings.

2. Each voiced his questions directly to God Himself. These saints moved toward God, not away from Him. They sought His face in prayer and refused to settle for less.

3. Their laments arose from fundamental, although imperfect, faith. Down in the trenches they submitted to God and clung to basic truths about God's person and work. In fact, it was their belief in God's absolute sovereignty, power, wisdom, and goodness that produced their complaints in the first place! The mindset goes like this:

Father, it is precisely because I know that you are all-loving and all-powerful that I am struggling with the seeming absence of these qualities in your dealings with me. It is because I am convinced that you are good that your chastisements confuse me. It is because I believe in your covenantal love that your apparent distance baffles me.

4. These believers expressed their laments in holiness and humility. They avoided the kind of blasphemy and accusation found in pagan religious literature.

5. These saints reached some resolution of their struggle, a measure of renewal in their faith. The closing sections of Job, Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Psalm 13 all echo a mature faith, tried and tested.

God's Agenda in Suffering

Let's apply these truths to Alex, a committed Christian worker. Alex came to biblical counseling after three months of therapy with a Christian inte-

grationist counselor. He presented depression, withdrawal, and recurring nightmares and memories surrounding a childhood incident of homosexual rape. They affected his marriage and ministry.

At the root level Alex doubted God's goodness because of this abuse. He had mistakenly interpreted God's heart by God's providence. As we looked at his life through a biblical lens, based on Job and Joseph in Genesis, Alex gained a more accurate and robust view of God.

Viewing the rape incident under the biblical category of trials opened a new vista of insight and hope. Alex saw some of God's purposes for this trial through studying James 1:1-12; 2 Corinthians 1, and Genesis 37-50.

*God inclines His ear to His people
amid our struggles.*

One question—an anger-against-God question—continued to nag Alex. The integrationist counselor sought to sell him the "It is okay to be angry with God" approach. He urged Alex to let out his anger and even to forgive God. Fortunately, Alex's theological instincts raised red flags.

Using Psalm 77 as a model, Alex composed his own prayer of lament in which he honestly voiced his struggles. On the one hand, his growing grasp of God's goodness and grace kept him from accusing God of wrongdoing. On the other hand he could raise the hard questions typical of biblical lamentations: "Where were you, God, when this happened? And how did you feel? Could you show me how you responded?"

These questions propelled our agenda for several sessions. We realized that God had been on site, sovereignly, in Alex's life all along. Although he was not then a believer, the doctrine of election assured Alex that he was already in God's mind. We beheld God's righteous anger against the older perpetrators and His promise to judge such evil. We saw how God compassionately wept for the abuse that happened to Alex and that God had good purposes in sending such a horrible trial.

What gracious purposes did we identify? God's agenda was to lead Alex to Christ; to teach him to trust in God and not in himself; to develop his compassion; and to equip him for an effective ministry to others.

Conclusion

What should you do when tempted to blame God for your suffering? How should you counsel those who are angry at Him? How can you steer a middle course between stoical denial and fleshly venting?

First, reaffirm your belief in God's sovereignty, power, wisdom, and goodness toward you in Christ. Begin by meditating on the passages listed in Proposition #2. Books like Jerry Bridges' *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*⁵ and booklets like John J. Murray's *Behind a Frowning Providence*⁶ are valuable resources.

Second, as in Proposition #1, reject as blasphemous any such temptations to accuse God of evil or cast aspersions on His character or purposes. Spurn the "It is OK" counseling voices of our day.

Third, with this recognize your limited ability to fathom God's decrees. Your finite, fallen mind is simply incapable of comprehending His providential ways. Do not seek, as one wag put it, to "unscrew" the inscrutable! You are not responsible for figuring out God; only for knowing, trusting, and pleasing Him.

Fourth, learn to practice the "Three A's":

⁵Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988).

⁶John Murray, *Behind a Frowning Providence* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1990).

1. *Acknowledge honestly* your thoughts and feelings to God. Be honest before Him. "Pour out your hearts to Him" (Psalm 62:8). Be transparent in His presence. Express your thoughts and feelings, your doubts and questions, your joys and sorrows, your groans and sighs.

2. *Analyze biblically* those thoughts and feelings. Evaluate them in light of Scripture. Sort out your beliefs and motives. Confess to God any anger you might be holding against Him. Don't vent it; repent of it!

3. *Act obediently* despite your thoughts and feelings. Do what God commands even if it differs from your desires. Similarly, consider the wise counsel in D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' sermon on "Feelings."⁷

Thankfully God has not left us to the extremes of silent stoicism or boisterous blasphemy. He opens the door for us to voice our concerns to Him wisely. He inclines His ear to His people amid our struggles. May the Lord spur us to renewed faith, holiness, and humility as we undergo honest dealings with Him.

⁷D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Feelings," in *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1965).