

“Why Does God Get Angry?”

Tough Questions, part #2

Romans 1:16-23, 1:28-2:4

Welcome

God, we worship you this day. We tremble before you in awe of your greatness. We wonder at your loving-kindness. We want to know you more, so that, through our testimony, others will come to know you as well. Thank you for your Son, Jesus, who died to be our Savior. Thank you for the Holy Spirit, who guides us even now as we seek to understand your Word. Meet us in this place, Lord. We are ready. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few weeks before my 18th birthday, I did something that made my father upset: I crashed our family’s car. I was on my way home from a long trip, and I took a short-cut off the main highway. I hit a patch of black ice and rolled the car upside-down in the ditch. I was OK, but as I waited for an ambulance to come, I had to call my dad. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: Dad, I am so sorry. I just crashed. I put the car in the ditch.

Dad: Are you OK? Can you drive home?

Me: Dad, the car’s upside down. I’m going to the hospital.

Dad: ...We’ll come right there.

What I remember most about that day was, even though my dad was angry at me for wrecking the car, his primary concern was for my safety and well-being. Believe me, my father was upset. As a family, we had to figure out what to do for another vehicle. And for graduation, he bought me a bicycle. But that was it; no lecture about safe driving, no grounding. I simply received the logical consequence of my action: my car was gone.

Most people know that their relationship with their parents—especially their father—influences their image of God. This was certainly the case for me. However, there is one aspect of God that we struggle with, especially if you had a bad relationship with your earthly father. This is my topic today. How are we to understand God’s anger?

First, we have to decide if God even gets angry. I certainly think so. I have read the stories of the Old Testament – the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), Noah’s

flood (Genesis 7), the ten plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-11), and so forth. Each of these stories indicates that God displays passionate anger against those who disobey him. And honestly, that makes us uncomfortable.

We are not alone. In the 2nd century, a theologian named Marcion decided that he could not tolerate the image of God he discovered in the Hebrew scriptures, so he flat out rejected them. Instead, he maintained that the only true God was the Father of Jesus Christ as described in the New Testament. Marcion rejected the majority of the scriptures we read today, editing out anything he thought portrayed the “old” God of Judaism.

Fortunately for us, the early Christian church rejected Marcion’s ideas, instead giving us the current canon of scripture and the Nicene and Apostle’s Creeds, all affirming the Triune God of the Bible as One, from beginning to end, Genesis to Revelation. Yet Marcion had a good point. How do we reconcile these seemingly opposite images, one of an angry God, and another of a compassionate God who offers his Son up for us?

I think part of the answer is found in Genesis 1:26, which says that we are made in the image of God. Although we are not gods, we share many characteristics with God; specifically, our emotions. All humans, including fathers, can be loving, intelligent, and protective. They can also get angry, sad, and frustrated. (Mothers, too!) I know I experience all those myself. Shouldn’t it be natural to think that God, who made us in his image, would also have a similar range of emotions?

God is not one-dimensional. God experiences joy, sorrow, love, anger, and more. God is passionate in both the Old and New Testament. So, yes, I believe God does get angry, sometimes. So then, we can ask, why does God get angry?

I chose Paul’s words in Romans as our reading today because I did not want to shy away from a hard scripture. Paul says it quite clearly. God gets angry because people reject him and do not thank him. In Romans 1:18, Paul says people are suppressing the truth of God. In verse 21, Paul says these people know God but do not glorify him or give thanks to him. You can read for yourself the list of actions people commit when they ignore God.

God being jealous makes sense to me. How would you feel if everyone just turned their backs to you and refused to speak to you? You would be angry, embarrassed, frustrated, and more. So how much worse is it when people ignore the Creator of the Universe?

Paul lays out some good reasons why God gets angry. And just when we start nodding our heads at this, Paul says something else. After laying out his argument of why God gets angry at the people who have rejected him and sinned, Paul says, “You, therefore, have no excuse...because you who pass judgment do the same things.” (Romans 2:1) Paul includes us in the people who have messed up and rejected God. Actually, he includes himself in that list, too. In Romans 3:23, Paul says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Paul does not excuse himself or any of us. So before we start judging others, we need to realize, we are all in the same boat. Even in Ephesians 2:3, Paul tells us that by our sinful nature, all of us were objects of wrath.

That is a hard truth to swallow. We want to think the best of ourselves, to say that we have never done anything to upset God, but the Bible is clear that we have, even if we do not believe it at first. God is perfect. God is holy. God made us and wants us to worship him. God loves us. When someone you love ignores you, it upsets you, too. Sin and rejection anger God.

This anger is not restricted to just God the Father. Jesus displayed righteous anger in the temple in Jerusalem. (Matt 21:12-16) Jesus cleared the temple courts of those buying and selling. He uttered these scathing words: “It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers.’” (Matt 21:13) Jesus was passionate about worshiping God the Father, and when others did not do the same, he lashed out.

Now, before you all go looking for caves to hide, understand, God is not always angry. Furthermore, God does not display his anger like we do. When we get mad, we want to lash out and hurt someone. We want payback. Our goal is to make someone feel worse than we do. That is not how God operates. God’s anger is always holy, always righteous. God’s anger is his love in action. Proverbs 3:12 says, “the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.”

Most often, God expresses his anger by letting us have our own way. Paul says in Romans 1:24 that God gave people over to their sinful desires. The purpose was for all of us to feel the effects of our sin. God chooses to take his protection away, hoping the pain and regret of our sin will draw us back.

A while ago, my friends' son committed a crime. As a result, he had to serve jail time. His parents did not want him to go to jail, but they accepted the sentence because it was the natural consequence of his actions. While he was in jail, they prayed for him, visited him, and wrote to him, doing everything possible, so that, when he got out, he knew he had a home to return to.

Difficult times can draw us back to God, or they can harden us. The choice is ours. Sometimes, punishment influences us to make better decisions. As a teenager, I did not want to make my father mad. But more importantly, I wanted my dad to be proud of me.

So what motivates us to please God? Is it simply that we do not want God to be angry at us? Maybe. But there are better reasons to serve God. Things like our gratitude for our salvation and enjoying the presence of God.

We need to get the right idea about God's anger. God does not throw temper tantrums. When God gets angry, it is because we have denied his love and chosen our own selfish ways. God knows that our sin leads to death. Like any good parent, God wants what is best for us.

The good news is, God's anger does not have the final word. God's anger against sin motivates God to find a solution. Sin harms God's beloved children. So instead of abandoning us, God sent his own Son to die for us. 2nd Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Usually, when we are angry with someone, we do not sacrifice something precious to us so that we can win the other back. Yet this is exactly what God did for us.

Does God get angry? Yes. That is the undeniable conclusion of scripture. Read the book of Revelation, for example. God's anger will be on full display at the end of history. But to say God is only angry is incorrect. God is also patient, slow to anger, and full of compassion. (Psalm 103:8) In 2nd Peter 3:9 it says, “The

Lord is...patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Being slow to anger is not the same as never getting angry. If God could not get angry, we could not know how good God’s grace is. If God was completely passive, never letting us feel the effects of our sin, we would not know how good God’s forgiveness was. If God never got angry, we could not know the depth of his love for us. We would not understand the power of the cross, which stands as our symbol of conquered sin.

Yes, God does get angry, but only when people reject his love and commands. And God always gives us the freedom to choose: we can continue to reject him, or we can confess our sin and repent, turning away from the things that harm us and turning back to God, who offers forgiveness through Jesus Christ. I believe God’s anger is a good thing, because it proves that his love for us is fierce. It proves that God cares about justice. And God’s anger can actually be a blessing for us, since we don’t have to give in to our own anger; instead we can trust that God’s purposes for us will be accomplished in the very end.

Let’s pray.

Memory verse

“For the LORD disciplines those he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights.” Proverbs 3:12 (NET)

Reflection questions

1. Describe your relationship with your own parents.
2. What images do you have of God? Do you see God as angry? Loving? Something else? All of the above?
3. How do you make sense of the stories in the Bible where God displays his anger? Do you think God is justified in punishing those who reject him? Why or why not?
4. Does it surprise you that Jesus expressed anger? Do you see Jesus as a passionate person?
5. How does God’s love provide a response to God’s anger? How does God see us after the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross?