

Getting Angry at God

BY JULIE J. EXLINE

Regardless of whether it is safe or adaptive or morally correct, many of us sometimes feel angry at God. But people tend to get nervous talking about it—especially believers. We worry that anger is totally incompatible with positive feelings toward God. Can we be angry at God and still love God? Does being angry necessarily imply a major rift in the relationship?

Does anger have any legitimate place in the life of Christians? One potential answer is that anger may serve us well in response to a clear injustice, where it may provide some valuable motivation and energy to rectify an unfair situation.

Even if we grant that anger can have this moral justification in response to injustice, is anger toward God ever justified? According to most Christian views, God is perfect. God is incapable of committing mistakes, much less injustices. Using this logic, it could be difficult to see anger toward God as having any sort of legitimate moral backing. And to make things worse, getting angry at God also sounds like it could be dangerous: Is it really safe to get on God's bad side?

Regardless of whether it is safe or adaptive or morally correct, the fact is that many of us feel angry at God. Large-scale survey data in the United States suggests a clear pattern: a large proportion of the U.S. population—between one-third and two-thirds, depending on the study—report that they are sometimes angry at God.[1] And when people focus on specific events involving suffering (for example, the loss of a loved one, or a cancer diagnosis), usually about half of them endorse some anger or other negative feelings toward God in response.

Many cases of anger toward God arise in response to major life crises, deaths, and natural disasters. But even smaller-scale events can lead to anger. For example, in our studies of undergraduates, anger toward God often comes in response to stressful but non-traumatic events such as romantic breakups, athletic injuries, or failing grades. In fact, low-level irritation toward God might only require a few pesky daily events: a stomach virus, a traffic jam, or rain on the day of a picnic. Apparently, any negative event that can be attributed to God may seem like fair game. It does not take a tsunami for someone to get angry at the Creator.

QUESTIONING OUR ANGER AT GOD

At some level, simply knowing that a lot of other people are mad at God might take the edge off: "At least it's not abnormal for me to be feeling this way." But the question of whether anger at God is common is still separate from the question of whether it is morally acceptable. And let's face it: in moral terms, the topic of anger toward God is an uncomfortable one. People tend to get nervous talking about it—especially believers. One reason for this reluctance, I believe, is that people worry that anger is totally incompatible with positive feelings toward God.

For believers who want a close relationship with God, this issue of positive versus negative feelings is crucial to address. Can we be angry at God and still love God? Does being angry necessarily imply a major rift in the relationship? Granted, Christians usually report much more positive emotion than anger toward God, even in painful life situations. But it is important to note that the presence of positive feelings toward God do not rule out the possibility of negative feelings, and vice versa. As in close human relationships, feelings such as love, respect, and closeness toward God often coexist with feelings of anger. Even if the predominant feeling is a sense of respect and trust, some negative feelings might still be lurking. But Christians are often reluctant to disclose angry feelings, especially when God is the target.

In interpersonal terms, some of this concern about disclosing one's anger toward God is certainly warranted. There is indeed a possibility that you will be shamed, judged, or at least "shushed" if you take the risk of acknowledging these shadowy feelings to others. A few of our studies have looked at the types of responses that people received from others when they admitted that they were feeling mad at God.[2] Most people reported that when they took the risk of telling someone about their anger, they got supportive responses: the people that they told were able to relate to their feelings, or they said something encouraging. But still, despite the preponderance of positive responses, about half of those who disclosed anger received a response that felt less supportive. Again, as with the anger itself, these negative responses were usually not at high levels of intensity.

But many people received at least some little indication that their feelings were wrong or dangerous.

Our data also suggests that the response of the listener has some important correlates in terms of how people handle their anger toward God. To the extent that people reported supportive responses to their disclosures of anger at God, they were more likely to report that they had approached God and that their faith had grown stronger as a result of the incident. However, to the extent that people reported receiving unsupportive responses, they tended to stay angry. They were also more likely to try to suppress their angry feelings and to do more dramatic things to exit from the relationship, such as rebelling against God or rejecting God. In addition, they were more likely to report using alcohol or other drugs to cope. In terms of helping people resolve their anger toward God, then, a valuable first step simply may be to provide a supportive, non-shaming response if someone reveals such feelings to us.

An important side effect of the taboo aspect of anger toward God is that people may be afraid to admit these feelings: not only to other people and to God, but even to themselves. It can simply seem too scary to "go there." Even if we do not fear the literal lightning bolt coming down from heaven, we do not want to sin. We do not want to disappoint God by turning away.

The problem, of course, is that there are a lot of people out there who do have these feelings but are afraid to admit them. So they try to suppress these scary emotions. They sweep them under the rug. To compensate, they try to do the right things: pray the right prayers, read the right things, serve God with humility and obedience. But even if these behaviors are carried out in an honest and virtuous way, and even if some positive feelings toward God are genuinely felt, the negative feelings might still be hovering there in the background. And if we are afraid to acknowledge negative feelings, a wall can go up. Intimacy is blocked. The anger can become the proverbial "elephant in the room" as we go on pretending that it is not there. When important feelings are suppressed and covered over, our relationship with God can become dry and cold.

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There is an irony here: considering the Christian belief that God knows everything, do we really think that we are covering anything up from God by keeping these forbidden feelings to ourselves? Doesn't God already know? We might realize this intellectually, but in everyday life we might be tempted to keep these areas walled off somehow, as though we can keep them a secret from God.

Yet it is understandable that people would be reluctant to admit feeling angry at God if they see such feelings as being morally wrong. A few of our studies took a closer look at the moral evaluations that people made about angry feelings and other forms of protest toward God.[3] On the surface, it looked as though believers who were more serious in their faith commitments were more likely to see any form of protest toward God as wrong. But when we did analyses that accounted for different types of moral evaluations (rebellion/rejection of God; angry feelings; assertiveness) at the same time, we found something interesting: people who reported the closest, most resilient relationships with God definitely saw it as wrong to do anything that implied rejection of God or rebellion against God's authority. But once we accounted for this decision to not rebel and not walk away, those who saw their relationships with God as being more close and resilient actually saw anger at God as being morally neutral—rather than being in the taboo category. ("As long as it's clear that I'm not walking away, then the angry feelings don't carry a lot of moral weight.") And, importantly, these same people also saw assertive behaviors toward God as being morally permissible. In other words, they saw it as morally appropriate to do some complaining and to ask God tough questions. Having a voice in the relationship was seen as a good thing.

The parallel with intimate human relationships comes in handy here. We know that in close relationships it is important to be honest, to be authentic, and to be heard. And this can be accomplished while still being respectful. In order to express what we are feeling, we do not necessarily need to yell and scream and curse and rage at God. Some people will do these things, and they might later say that taking these risks represented a turning point in their level of intimacy with God. But negative feelings can be expressed in a respectful way, especially if it is clear that leaving the relationship is not one of the options on the table. If we are able to commit ourselves to the relationship and to feel reasonably secure there, finding the freedom to express our thoughts and feelings in an open way can truly free us. And it can provide hope for a closer, deeper, and more intimate relationship with God.

UNCOVERING UNDERLYING REASONS BEHIND ANGER

Once anger toward God has been identified, what are some strategies to help resolve the anger? Often a good rule of thumb with anger, as with

other negative emotions, is to try to pinpoint what exactly is making you angry. In some cases, closer inspection will reveal that our anger does not have such great justification: it might be rooted in envy of others, a selfish desire to always get our own way, or expectation of special treatment by God. In cases like these, where the anger might seem to be an unwarranted response, we can identify it as such and do whatever it takes to pull close to God again. If we perceive that the anger truly is a sinful response on our part, repentance may be a vital part of the resolution process. If we can see that our anger was not warranted and turn away from it, the strong feelings may start to dissipate on their own.

In other situations anger is what psychologists call a secondary or defensive emotional response, one that is actually covering up more vulnerable feelings such as hurt, shame, or fear. If one of these deeper sources of pain is identified, then our best way to deal with the anger will be to focus on the primary area of vulnerability.

But in some cases anger really is the primary issue. We are troubled by the presence of suffering and injustice in the world: things just do not seem fair or right. We may feel what seems to be righteous anger about evil that is allowed to proliferate, bad guys who win and good guys who lose, sickness and losses and death.

SEARCHING FOR A THEOLOGICAL MAGIC BULLET

When I started to do work in this area, I wanted so much to be able to find a theological "magic bullet." I wanted a one-liner or a little story that would give a satisfactory explanation of suffering. I knew that people had been struggling with this problem for thousands of years. But still, I was hoping that I could find some sort of reasonably simple, workable answer—something that I could share with people to help them resolve their anger toward God.

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For a while, I thought that I had a magic bullet: my Bijou story. This was an illustration from my own life that had helped me to make sense of suffering.

When I was in graduate school and would sit at my office desk to write on the computer, I was often joined by our family dog, Bijou—a beautiful

mix of a golden retriever and a Sheltie. Bijou was my near-constant companion, underfoot at my writing desk. Sometimes she would gaze pensively at me while I was typing, with a look that asked "What on earth was I doing, just sitting there tapping my fingers on those keys, looking up at that screen?" And it occurred to me that despite all of the animal-based learning models that are used in psychology (remember Pavlov's salivating pups?), and all of the similarities between Bijou's brain and mine, there was still no way that I could ever explain to Bijou what I was doing tapping my fingers on those keys. She would never, could never understand what I was doing.

And what about those situations that were painful or uncomfortable for Bijou, such as being taken to the vet? What good could possibly come of that? From Bijou's perspective, we simply dragged her into this stinky place with its cold tables and prodding assistants. And then to make things worse, people would stick her with needles. What could all of this possibly be about? Unfortunately, it would do me no good to explain myself to her: "Bijou, I'm doing this to inoculate you against future diseases." Nope, Bijou simply was not going to get it. She would never understand. All that she knew is that the vet's office was scary—and those shots hurt.

In many ways, my brain and Bijou's brain were similar. But, in terms of explaining the reasons why certain things happened, there was a gulf between us that I simply could not breach.

"And yet," I asked myself, "I think that I should be able to figure out what God is doing?" The thought was admittedly sobering. I might be a few notches above Bijou in terms of intelligence, but where is God on the scale? Right here at my level, or a few notches higher? No. God's ways are infinitely higher—I simply cannot grasp them. And yet, at some level, I behave as though I should be able to explain God's actions.

Of course, Bijou is fundamentally different from me. As a mere beast, she can never formulate reasons of her own or understand my reasons. So a better analog for our relationship to God might be children's relationship to the adults who care for them. My own daughter, when she was young, would have been just as mystified as Bijou by what I was doing tapping on the keyboard, or by why she had to get her own painful shots. We are both human beings—just separated by a few years—but given where she was developmentally, there was no way for her to grasp what I was doing; it had to remain a mystery to her, at least for a time. There was indeed a purpose for those painful shots—her dad and I and the doctor knew that—but to her it was a mystery. Both Bijou and my daughter had to trust that my husband and I had a higher purpose, but it was one that we could not explain to them.

So I tried to apply this analogy to my own life. Given how much higher God's ways were than my ways, could I accept that many of God's ways would remain a mystery to me while still trusting firmly in God's goodness and wisdom?

For me this focus on the mystery of God proved genuinely helpful. Theologically, it satisfied me. And I really thought that it was going to be my magic bullet, the story that I would tell people that would cause their anger toward God to dissolve. This all sounded good—until I tried it out on a therapy client whose father had died recently.

The response to my little story went like this: "Well, it's nice if God has his plan. But it sure would be nice if he told me what it was about!" It turns out that my client did not have a strong foundation of trust in God, so she did not share my basic premise that God had her best interests in mind.

Another time I told the story to a colleague and got this retort: "If you told that story to a Jew whose family went through the Holocaust, he would break a bottle over your head!" He protested that in cases of catastrophic suffering and profound evil, there needs to be a guarantee of eventual justice. These are outrageous wrongs, totally off the scale from the trivial pain instanced in the Bijou story. And these horrific wrongs need to be righted. Period.

Needless to say, these were not exactly the responses that I was expecting to my nice little Bijou story. But they taught me an important lesson. When talking about matters of suffering and evil, the deep stuff of the brokenness of the world, it is risky to offer easy answers. Probably no single theological solution will be helpful for everyone. And when people are in crisis, we may serve them better by simply listening and acknowledging their pain, rather than trying to correct their theological views.

It's risky to offer easy answers for the brokenness of the world. No one theological solution will help everyone. When people are in crisis, we serve them better by listening and acknowledging their pain, rather than correcting their theological views.

The problems of evil and suffering are big ones, and I do not have the answers. But that is all right, because I believe that I have a true relationship with God. This is a relationship where I can continue to bring up tough issues. I trust that, over time, deeper truth will be revealed to me in response to these big questions. And if a lot of that revelation has to wait until after this life is over, that is fine with me, too—at least for the moment.

NOTES

1 Julie J. Exline, Crystal L. Park, Joshua M. Smyth, and Michael P. Carey, "Anger toward God: Social-Cognitive Predictors, Prevalence, and Links with Adjustment to Bereavement and Cancer," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100:1 (January 2011), 129-148.

2 Julie J. Exline and Joshua Grubbs, "If I Tell Others about My Anger toward God, How Will They Respond? Predictors, Associated Behaviors, and Outcomes in an Adult Sample," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 39:4 (Winter 2011), 304-415.

3 Julie J. Exline, Kalman J. Kaplan, and Joshua B. Grubbs, "Anger, Exit, and Assertion: Do People See Protest toward God as Morally Acceptable?" *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4:4 (November 2012), 264-277.

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