Anger at God

by DAVID POWLISON

Most attempts to understand and solve anger problems don’t mention anger at God. They are right to address such things as interpersonal conflict, road rage, vengeance, or bitterness. But when anger is understood only as an inward experience or something happening between people, then a very significant dimension is being ignored. Anger at God is profoundly significant, but it is often overlooked. And even when it is noticed, it is frequently misunderstood and mishandled by would-be helpers.

To mistake what goes on in anger at God is to have a significant blind spot. Enmity toward God is an underlying and defining characteristic of humans. It’s the active dynamic at work in the fallenness of mankind. But this abiding enmity usually operates quietly in the background. It’s like gravity. You rarely notice it, but it’s always there. When provoked, it shows its teeth with a surprising degree of hostility. The Bible often flags this anger. For example,

- People will often blame God when what they have lived for comes up empty. “When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart
angers against the Lord” (Prov 19:3).

- When God’s children wandered about in the wilderness, he summed up their attitude as, “They grumble against me” (Num 14:27). Quarreling with God is a baseline human characteristic.
- When hardships seem overwhelming, God is often a scapegoat. Job was in unrelenting pain, and his wife’s reaction was, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2:9).
- When God blesses someone we wish he would curse, anger can erupt. God showed mercy to Nineveh, and “it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry” (Jonah 4:1).
- When men and women reap what they sow, they often harshly judge the One who rightly judges them. People “cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds” (Rev 16:11).
- Hostility directed toward God often lands on his servants. For example, David and Jesus owned the words, “The reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me” (Ps 69:9; Rom 15:3). The Gospels go on to bear witness to the continual animosity that Jesus faced—at his birth, throughout his ministry, and in his betrayal and death. “The world . . . hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil” (John 7:7).

Human nature has not changed.

There is something instinctive, irrational, compulsive, and virulent about anger at God. It makes no sense to bite the hand that feeds you, to hate the Father who gives and sustains life. He is good, and he does good. He is compassionate, gracious, patient, full of loving-kindness and faithfulness. He freely forgives. His mercies are new every morning. But we instinctively hate him anyway because he insists on one thing: “Listen to me.”

His insistence insults our pride and self-will. We are like teenagers with an authority allergy. Our self-exalting desires are the engine of sinful anger. By loving ourselves and loving the world, we don’t listen. We operate at enmity to the Lord whom we were created to love. This article will explore what operates at the heart of anger at God, and will help you to rethink the advice that is commonly given to Christians who experience it.
The Core Issue—“I’m big and God is small.”

Anger at God is not first an emotion. It is the stance a person takes against God. It is the core commitment of the self-willed heart. We act big, as if “I am God.” This god-playing motive gives birth to anger at the real God. Sometimes this anger erupts into hostile words, angry feelings, and violent actions. As mentioned earlier, Jesus continually faced these firestorms of aggression. That’s why so many psalms pray for God’s protection.

Anger at God is the core commitment of the self-willed heart.

But most often people who are deep-down angry at God simply go their own way, building a kingdom with themselves at the center. They go about the business of inventing a virtual reality. They act as if mere human creatures have the power and right to define our identity, purpose in life, worldview, meaning, sexuality, sense of right and wrong, and so forth. Normal life silently and steadily suppresses the fact that we will each give account to the One who actually defines reality. The virtual realities are sand castles, washed away in the next tide.

And yet this Father, and Lamb, and life-giving Spirit alone can save us…from ourselves. Our steady, persistent resistance to God is usually an unspectacular madness. But it is the essence of sin, the inner heartbeat of evil. If I might borrow a pungent phrase from Sigmund Freud and turn its meaning upside-down: Pride is the “universal obsessional neurosis” of humankind.¹ And Jesus Christ performs the one psychotherapy that cures our souls.

I suspect that few of my readers are angry at God as a core commitment! We are brothers and sisters whom redeeming love has claimed. But we still struggle, don’t we? What about our double-mindedness, the instinct to pride that still works in us who have been humbled by Christ’s mercies? Our true self longs to yield wholly to the Lord’s will, but what hope is there

¹ Freud believed that religion is the universal obsessional neurosis of mankind.
for us when we find the seeds of resistance to God still very alive in us? When we feel disappointed or disillusioned because life in Christ is harder than we imagined? When we feel indifferent and dull—“Whatever”—to the things of God? When someone promises us that this one truth, or this one spiritual discipline, or this one accountability relationship, will offer the secret that will make everything different, but it doesn’t work? When God’s people let us down, or do outright wrong to us, and we are rightly angry at what they do, and our anger spills over toward the God and Father of us all? What do we do?

Think with me about two things: a one-liner from the Bible, and then the life story of one of the greatest pagan kings who ever lived. Listen for the theme they share.

First, consider the one-liner. “He gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (James 4:6). This is a message of correction and hope for when we are in conflict with other people. We need the same message when we find ourselves fighting against our God. When you are angry at God, know that he gives more grace. He calls us out when we get proud and angry. And as we listen to him, as we humbly seek him, we find that he does, indeed, give mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. He softens our hearts and teaches us to trust him.

Second, consider the life story of Nebuchadnezzar, a great king with a long history of proud hostility against the Most High. God repeatedly cut him down to size. At one point the king forbade his subjects from worshiping anyone or anything except the golden image he had made. Three men disobeyed, worshiping the LORD and refusing to bow down to the golden image. In a rage, the king ordered them burned alive. But a fourth man, the LORD, appeared in the fire, walking with his loyal friends through their trial by fire. Nebuchadnezzar was awestruck.

But he subsequently forgot what he had learned. His insane pride soared again, and he attacked the God of glory by proclaiming his own glory, majesty, and greatness. Heaven struck him down with madness. But after seven years, something remarkable took place, and the king bore witness.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason
returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever. ...Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble. (Dan 4:34, 37)

His sanity and his kingdom were restored in his humility. In the end, Nebuchadnezzar actually became a role model of desirable humility to his proud son, Belshazzar (Dan 5:18–22).

The King of Kings is able to humble those who walk in pride. The Most High delivers us from the madness of our enmity, anger, and aggression. He is able to make us sane. We become our proper size, earthbound creatures and dependents, who recognize the glory of God.

Scripture invites proud hearts to turn to God for mercy. But when it comes to anger at God, other counsel often drowns out that call.

**When Advice about Anger Misses the Core Issue**

We’ve flagged how our Lord discusses anger at him, both in its “pure” form among unbelievers, and in the mixed form that we his children can and do experience. But how does what we’ve considered from Scripture compare to the self-help advice that Christians often hear about anger at God? This advice tends to miss the heart of what’s going on in anger and proves less than helpful. The standard advice sounds something like this:

1. Remember anger just is—it’s neither good nor bad. It’s OK to feel angry at God. He created us to have angry emotions.
2. God often lets us down and disappoints us. How else can we explain the heartaches of life, when hard things happen? He could have stopped it, and he didn’t, so your anger is understandable.
3. You can vent your anger at God. He’s a mature lover and mature love can absorb the anger of the beloved. Don’t be afraid to tell him exactly what you feel and think. God wants an honest relationship. Many of the psalms portray anger at God, so if other godly people have let out their rage at him, you can too. Don’t censor your feelings and language; say it like you feel it so you won’t be a hypocrite.
4. You need to forgive God. Forgiveness is the opposite of anger, and
you need to let go of the hostility in order to be at peace in yourself and start building a trusting relationship with God. Forgive him for the ways he let you down.

Is this advice plausible? Many people find it so. Coherent? It does hang together. True? No, these four doctrines are not true (I will say more about them later). They confuse rather than clarify and certainly do not urge us to turn to God in humility to ask for mercy. Instead, godly advice must address the core issue of how our self-willed hearts breed and hold on to anger.

**We are angry at God when we do not get what we want.** When we don’t get what we want from another person, what is our normal reaction? Anger. The same is true between us and God. So to get to the core issue, normalize your anger at God. Treat it like any other anger event in your life. This means, ask yourself what it is that you are not getting.

- Which of your expectations have been met with disappointment?
- What demands are you making of life—of God—that are not being answered?
- Which of your firm beliefs is God contradicting?

When you normalize anger at God, you will invariably find particular, life-dominating demands that have been asserted against God and substituted for God himself. To use Bob Dylan’s penetrating words, God becomes “an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires,” but he refuses to run our errands.²

Sometimes our unmet desires are simply wrong. An atheist is angry because God’s claims fundamentally threaten the ground on which he bases his life. He insists on personal autonomy and the supreme authority of his own opinions and willfulness. If we want to control the world, want independence from the one on whom we are made to depend, want to make up our own meaning of life, then we are fools. In these cases, the anger at God is wrong because the desires are intrinsically and entirely wrong.

Other times our unmet desires are for good things. For example, a child prays for her father, who is dying of cancer. She gets angry at God when her father dies. She wanted him to live, and God did not give her what she asked. A single woman longs to be married. She gets angry at the true God

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because he has not given her a husband. A parent with a rebellious teen gets angry at God because he is supposed to make our kids turn out the way we want. A man rages against God because a church leader sexually molested him when he was a youth. In these cases, anger at God is a more subtle wrong. The object of desire is good: life, marriage, thriving children, trustworthy pastors. But this desire for something good has gone bad by becoming all-important. Some desirable good gift has replaced God, the truly good Giver. He has been reduced to the means to an end.

The Lord wants us to rewind both the bad desires and the good desires gone bad. The Giver of good gifts gives mercy and wisdom as his finest treasures. In giving us mercy and wisdom, in giving us Jesus Christ, he is giving us himself. “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift” (2 Cor 9:15).

But it can still be hard to understand why God does certain things and not others.

**We are angry at God when we don’t understand his ways.** Anger at God can be compelling. In 1979 I met a seventy-year-old man named Armen. Intense anger at God had haunted him since childhood. His wild hatred was driving him into madness and raving. He was from Armenia and had immigrated to the United States as a young man. When he was a child he had witnessed the murder of his people. He remembered his mother and other women praying fervently in their church for God to spare their lives. Ottoman soldiers came into the sanctuary and butchered the praying women. God had failed to protect people at the very moment they were calling out for his protection.

Is Armen’s blind, consuming anger toward God an understandable human reaction? Yes. Is it wrong nevertheless? This is a hard truth, but yes. It was surely not wrong to plead for safety. It is surely not wrong to be shattered, unglued, distraught in the face of atrocities. It would surely be right to rejoice in those times when we find safety. (Armen himself was spared when an uncle scooped him up and bolted for the hills.)

God never promises to protect us from all violence. Jesus himself pleaded, “Let this cup pass from me” in the face of imminent torture, violence, and death. But he embedded his plea of faith within deeper faith: “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” Then Jesus was cruelly butchered.
God’s other children have often experienced what Paul described so vividly: “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (Rom 8:36). But God does promise that death is unable to separate us from his love, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. God is working out a bigger purpose. We will not find heaven on earth until heaven comes down.

Countless people have faced brutal death while loving the God whose actual love is bigger than death. Armen’s lifelong grievance against God was based on insisting on something God had never promised. Normal, shattering grief (in which hope remains) had degraded into abnormal, maddening grievance (in which all hope was lost). God has promised more than what Armen demanded—not less: the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Armen never embraced the reality that we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

We do in fact have good reasons to trust God even when we don’t get what we want, even when we’re bemused and broken by our circumstances. Though we instinctively reject him, he pursues us. He teaches us to trust him. And we can grow in trusting him.

**Faith Seeks and Trusts God—Instead of Getting Angry**

The Bible’s God is a grown-up God. Faith is childlike in its directness of dependency. It is not childish either in superstitious fears or in comforting magic charms. Grown-up, yet childlike faith is bluntly realistic. Job looked his sufferings in the eye and said, “Shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?” After losing her husband and sons, Naomi said, “The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” After the desolation of all earthly good, the psalmist said, “How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? Remember how short my time is! For what vanity you have created all the children of man!”

Unbelief blames God for the bad things, curses him, walks angrily away, and sets about manufacturing other gods who might give us what we want. But faith is unafraid to credit God with controlling both the delightful and

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3 Job 2:10; Ruth 1:20; Psalm 89:46–47
the bitter things that happen to us—and faith continues to seek the help of the One who alone can help us. In the first twenty verses of Lamentations 3, Jeremiah agonizes under sufferings that he identifies as coming from God’s hand:

He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light…He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation…He shuts out my prayer…He turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces…He has made my teeth grind on gravel…I have forgotten what happiness is. (vv. 2, 5, 8, 11, 16–17)

This is a painful passage, the prophet experiencing a taste of Christ’s subsequent suffering. But Jeremiah then finds profound comfort:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lam 3:21–23)

That’s grown-up medicine. It makes your soul healthy.

With the Bible’s positive vision in mind of how faith seeks and trusts God, let’s consider how the typical advice misses the mark of helpfulness.

**Rethinking the Advice You Hear**

The self-help option is not good for you. Let’s look briefly at the four doctrines we mentioned earlier: anger “just is”; God lets us down and betrays our trust; you need to vent your anger at God; you need to forgive God.

First, anger is never neutral. It never “just is.” It’s not a neutral capacity that is neither good nor bad. Instead, every anger event comes loaded. It is either right or wrong (or mixed and mixed up!). The first piece of advice ducks the moral dilemma of anger at God.

Second, does God let us down when we suffer? We certainly experience disappointments in life. But one would be hard-pressed to find any evidence that God somehow betrays us. He says what he does and does what he says. Until heaven comes down, this world is a hard place to live. The Christian faith is explicit that believing does not grant immunity from suffering.

When the Bible portrays and discusses suffering, God always embeds the hardships we experience as a subset of his larger purposes. These may
not be at all obvious in the moment. But in the long run, all tears will be wiped away and we will live in a world with only love, joy, and peace. Meanwhile, people may seriously let us down. Abusers heinously betray trust, and if hell has gradations, the atrocities they commit merit the deepest pit. That’s to cite the worst-case scenarios. Many people who are angry at God have suffered more routine hardships: disappointment in love, financial disaster, a life-threatening illness, death of a loved one.

Afflictions are hard. Sufferings hurt. People who are angry at God typically suffer the exact same kinds of pain (and enjoy many of the same blessings) as people who love God! Groaning about our sufferings (to God, in faith and hope) is heartily warranted. But God has never promised freedom from tears, mourning, crying, and pain—or from the evils that cause them—until the great day when life and joy triumph forever over death and misery.

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It is curious how people who don’t believe that God sovereignly rules all things become embittered hyper-Calvinists when they face sufferings and say, “God could have changed things for me and he didn’t. He had the power, and he didn’t use it. It’s his fault.” But to actually believe that God rules for his glory and our welfare is to gain an unshakable foundation for trust and hope, in the midst of hellish torments, as well as amid the milder pains and disappointments.

The belief that God lets us down reinforces our self-righteousness and validates our schemes for earthly joy. This congruence with our fallenness makes the teaching plausible and attractive. But it also means that because self-help advice does not identify the sinfulness within anger at God, no true hope can be offered to the disappointed, disillusioned, and angry. The gospel of a sin-bearing Savior who will deliver his beloved children from the condemnation of their sins, from the corruption of their sins, and from the pain of other people’s sins, finds no logical landing place in a person whose
bad feelings are simply OK.

Third, you do not need to vent your hostility at God in order to deal with it. Instead, name your sin of anger for what it is. Turn away from it. Turn toward God for mercy. It helps a great deal when we come to understand the demands, false beliefs, and self-righteousness that produce and drive our anger. No psalm encourages the venting of hostile anger like the self-help advisers encourage.

In the supposed “vent your anger” psalms—for example, Psalm 44—what comes through is how faith in who God is and what he promises cries out when it is justly agitated. It’s not hostility; it’s a passionate cry for help. The writers essentially say, “Things are not going well. In fact, what’s happening is terrible. Where are your promises? Why are you so far away from our need? Your enemies—our enemies too!—are walking all over us. We are crying out to you in our dismay, hurt, complaint, upset, grief, grievance. Help us!” In Psalm 44 the sons of Korah are really upset at how bad circumstances are. They really want God to intervene. Their displeasure is the constructive displeasure of faith, however, not destructive raging. It’s needy, not dismissive. It’s hopeful, not hostile. It’s faith speaking out, not pride and self-will passing judgment on God. They yearn for the wellbeing of people whom God has promised to love, people who have entrusted themselves to his care.

The psalms where faith is upset yearn for God’s name, goodness, and power to be publicly displayed. They yearn for wrongs to be made right. They yearn for him to be merciful to us. Such loving unhappiness and believing complaint yearns for the Lord, our only hope, to eliminate the sufferings we currently experience. The intensity of the complaint arises from the intensity of faith. It contains no cursing, no malevolence, no lies, no hostile belittling. It is an appeal for help, not a damning judgment. Psalmists become dismayed because they know and trust that God is good, because they love God, and because they struggle to reconcile God’s promises with current affliction.⁴

Psalmists move toward God in honest faith because they need him and

⁴ Outside the Psalms, Habakkuk most intensely does the same.
they are anguished about their circumstances. But people who are angry at God shove him away. They don’t believe in him or believe in his help. Psalmists want God’s glory and want evil to go away. They groan and complain in their faith. And typically a psalmist’s words also show that he is aware of his own guilt and sin—something ignored by the self-help teaching. A complex awareness of our responsibility coexists with loathing the evil intentions of those who afflict us. When the Bible teaches how to voice distress to God, it teaches a cry of faith, not a roar of rage. The self-help teaching fails to help troubled people complain to a God they love.

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Finally, the notion that we need to “forgive God” heads entirely in the wrong direction. The person who really deals with anger at God by repentance and faith will no longer feel angry at God. He will feel overwhelming gratitude because he has found forgiveness, not because he has granted forgiveness. God is good. He never stands in the dock as the accused—even when sinful rage seeks to put him in that place. Who does the forgiving so that a trusting relationship between a human and God can be rebuilt? Does the initiating mercy arise from the man or woman who feels disappointed and angry? Or does it arise with the Lord whose mercies are generous and well-adapted to our complicated need?

The Psalms and Job give no warrant for teachings that we ever need to forgive God. The redemption of “anger at God” comes as we learn how much we need him, not because we get something off our chest. Job, a godly man of honest faith, repented for his own particular strand of self-righteousness. To the degree that he had blamed God and sought to justify himself, he admitted that he was wrong.

The person who is honest about his or her anger at God—and gets to the truth about it—will walk a different route from the one prescribed by the popular formula. The repentant and believing heart will not settle for some uneasy truce between past sufferings and current willingness to toler-
are some sort of relationship with the God who let me down. The believing heart will find truth, joy, hope, and love unspeakable. The believing heart will find God.

**Mercy for the Angry**

Anger at God is wrong. It overflows with mistrust toward God. It firmly embraces and stubbornly proclaims lies about what God is like. It rationalizes any number of self-destructive and sinful behaviors. However, anger at God also presents a wonderful opportunity for profound personal growth. Handled rightly, it is the royal road into the dark disorder of the human heart. Like any other commonplace wrong, it must be faced and acknowledged. There is no temptation that overtakes us that is not common to all, but God is merciful. He is faithful to help us come clean. He is faithful to help us when we do come clean. By the grace of God, those who are angry at him discover (often for the first time) who he actually is and who they are.