

June 25, 2006
 Getting Mad At God—A Sign of Hope in the Despairing!
 Psalm 44:9-24 / Psalm 35:11-25 / Job 10:1-7

One of the most noticeable (and even startling) things one realizes as they make their way through the Book of Job, is that it's one of those books that just seems to break all the religious rules!

As a child who grew up with a Christian mother, and went to Sunday School and church most of my life, reading the Bible, and hearing many sermons, I somehow came to the distinct conclusion that it was just plain wrong—at ALL times, and on ALL occasions—to ever be ANGRY AT GOD (or at least to ADMIT you were angry at God, or in any way DISPLAY that anger in your words or actions).

To do so (I had come to believe) was the epitome of arrogance, irreverence, foolishness, pride, and self-centeredness! Something that would cause God to smite the person down on the spot for such a show of disrespect. That's the message I clearly received from my early years at church—you just don't do it.

Then I stumbled across Job! Or I should say the middle of Job. I mean I'd always heard of Job—at least chapters 1-2, and 42. Job was godly and blameless, suffered the loss of all his things, and with a stiff upper lip said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Period. Then on to chapter 42 starting is verse 12 where we are told, "The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first—essentially giving him twice as much as he had lost at first." End of story.

And the principle to take away from the book? Hang in there righteously, respond piously, just like Job did, and in the end God will rain down blessings on you for keeping that stiff upper lip in the face of suffering.

Then when I got older I took a foray into the dark, mysterious, middle of the book that no one ever talked about—and was I shocked!!!! Because what I found was that Job didn't keep that stiff pious upper lip at all!

And I don't know if the ministers I heard simply didn't read that far into the book, or whether they purposely skipped over that part because it went against what they thought and believed.

I mean it's one thing for God to bless a righteous sufferer who endures all that pain and still says "God may do as He pleases with what He's made—I'll praise Him in spite of my sufferings." But it's quite another thing to see God blessing a man who looses it; gets mad at God; essentially yells at Him; accuses Him of being unfair; takes sarcastic jabs or pot shots at God in anger; and irreverently accuses Him of being mean to good people and smiling down on the wicked! (v. 3)

Most evangelicals I know would be very uneasy preaching to their people that God (in the end) richly blesses an individual who buckles under the pressure, says things that most church goers would gasp at, and seemingly fails the test! We don't like to set forth failures as people whom God rewards abundantly! (It's not the American way!)

That may be why most preachers tend to jump from chapter 2 to chapter 42—because then they can skip over all Job's failures, paint him as a man who held it together straight through his long affliction, and thereby justify why God would reward him with twice as much as he had before his trials began! He had earned it (they can say) by uncomplainingly and righteously accepting his suffering. *(Something those who read chapters 3-41 will realize he didn't do!)*

But that's also why it's good to read more than chapters 1, 2 and 42! Because only then do we see that that image of Job just isn't true! Only then do we see that Job loosens that stiff upper lip, gets mad at God, and says things most of us would never dare say TO God, let alone ABOUT God.

And Job is by no means alone. For as we saw in our two readings from the Psalms, David dares do such a thing as well — the same David whom God Himself called "A man after His own heart."

That's the most interesting thing of all. It's NOT just the arrogant, irreverent, proud, foolish, and self-centered (that is, the wicked and unbelieving) who we find voicing their anger toward God in the Scriptures. It's also the godly hero's of the faith! It's also the saintly and God-loving — like Job, and David, and Jeremiah, and Moses, and Elijah, and other Patriarchs, and Matriarchs (like Naomi) as well!

That's why I'm just a little bit leery when I hear people say things like this (and the author will remain unnamed):

(Quote) "Anger at God is commonplace. The Bible speaks of it scores of times. It's one of the most logical of human reactions given the nature of sin, but it's a deadly wickedness.

What Job's wife said was terrible advice, but at least she had her facts straight [when she said to him]: 'Curse God and die.'

You see, I struggle with such a statement. I DON'T deny that anger toward God CAN INDEED BE an expression of sinful, sinful wickedness. Surely it's all too true that much anger toward God is often nothing more than an expression of "malice and mistrust toward God," as the same author goes on to point out. That much is true.

Yet we must also ask, is it always so? Is anger at God ALWAYS an expression of deadly or sinful wickedness? And if it is, why are there so many examples of people doing it in Scripture—and not just ungodly, foolish and irreverent people, but those who seem to be the most righteous and godly—like Job and David?

In fact, if it's so wrong, why doesn't the Bible insert a clarifying statement after each example of it — something which says: "Though Jeremiah and David and Naomi do express their anger toward God, it is NOT something anyone else should do, for it is always wrong to question God, or verbalize your anger toward God."

If it's always wrong, why does Scripture include such outbursts in Psalms for worship? And why isn't David rebuked for doing it, or us warned against doing it?

My personal conviction is this: We don't find such rebukes or warnings precisely because God didn't want them there! God doesn't want us (in our times of agony and pain) to be so scared of expressing our anger that we are forced into taking the route many do—of denying its even there when it is, or repressing it only to have it come out in other ways—the habit of pretending all is well when it's not, or piously smiling when inside we're battling real and often intense feelings of anger.

Though actually encouraged in many sectors of the church at large—the Bible itself does not seem to encourage such denial or pretending.

Ruth Graham (daughter of Billy Graham) sums up my opinion best when she says, *"God is not threatened by our emotions. He is not shaken by our asking 'why?' He did not strike Jeremiah down for expressing frustration and despair [the same Jeremiah who said to God, "O Lord, You have deceived me...", "and again, "Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?"]. God works with honesty. He invites honesty. We cannot throw anything at Him that He hasn't heard before. He is bigger than our feelings, thoughts, and perceptions."*

Thus, what I'd like to do today is address the whole issue of anger toward God, because I believe that everyone (at one time or another) has had to struggle with it. There are few people I know who have not (on occasion) felt or experienced anger towards God, or had to wrestle with what they should do with it — especially if they have seriously considered all the ways that anger manifests itself in our affections, attitudes, and actions.

As I once pointed out in a Seminar on Anger at the U.S. Embassy in Honduras:

1.) Violence is anger vented. 2.) Put downs are anger expressed in words that seek to demean or hurt others. 3.) Depression is often anger repressed or turned inward. 4.) Sarcasm is anger mingled with humor. 5.) Irritation, annoyance, and frustration are anger that doesn't want to accept that things didn't go as we had planned, or people didn't respond as we had hoped. 6.) Judgmentalness is anger at self vented upon another. 7.) Going into an emotional shell is often anger dwelling upon itself. 8.) Temper tantrums and yelling are anger seeking to control others. 9.) Prejudice and Bigotry are anger seeking a scapegoat to despise. 10.) Rape is anger at the opposite sex seeking revenge. 11.) Murder is anger seeking to destroy its enemy. 12.) Vengeance is anger seeking to punish a wrong done. 13.) Bullying is anger trying to cover up a deep-seated insecurity. 14.) Narrow-mindedness is anger that feels threatened by change. 15.) Self-abusive tactics are anger vented upon the self. 16.) Disobedience is often anger getting back at some authority figure that has let us down. 17.) Hateful thoughts and nightmares are often subconscious attempts to resolve unresolved anger. 18.) Criticalness is anger at imperfection. 19.) Shunning or Avoiding people is anger at a person we wish would change, or simply go away. And 20.) General Negativity is often little more than anger at how God's providence has worked itself out in our lives (and that's only half of them!) Which means that many people who ARE angry at God, don't think they're angry at God, because they've never really given any serious thought to all the ways anger manifests itself.

So, let's look at the two major causes of anger toward God, and how can we move beyond that anger, since unresolved anger toward God is one of the major causes of spiritual apathy, prayerlessness, disobedience toward God, refusal to read His word, defection from the faith, and indifference toward spiritual things in general.

So **FIRST**, we must understand that much of our anger toward God stems from the fact that we have often laid our own (unjustified) expectations upon God and His promises to us. Many Christians (and I shamefully include myself in that category) — have become angry at God for

failing to do for them, something that He never agreed or promised to do for them in the first place!

For instance, I read a story not long ago about a missionary who went to a difficult foreign field believing (on the basis of God's promises in His Word), that if he was obedient to the call, and went to that field as he felt God was leading him to do, then God would in turn protect his family from the inherent dangers and diseases in that place.

It's what many of us do. Make a "contract with God" in which we say to God (either consciously or unconsciously): "I will do this for You God, but in return, I expect You to do this for me." And then we somewhat presumptuously bind God to a contract He didn't even agree to!

Thus, when that missionary's young child died of an illness, it's easy to understand how he felt that God had gone back on His Word, broken His promise, and betray-ed both him and his family — eventually leaving the mission field — angry that God had failed him, by not keeping His side of the bargain. We do it all the time.

Yet, it must be asked: Does God ever promise His followers that if they obey Him, and faithfully follow His leading, He will so watch over them, and all their loved ones, that they will be kept from all pain, or harm, or unhappiness—especially death?

No. A mere skimming of the Bible will make it perfectly clear that such an idea cannot be derived in any way, as a GENERAL PROMISE TO ALL CHRISTIANS—though many have tried to make it just that—doing great damage to the faith of multitudes.

Which means what? *Which means that much of the anger that people have toward God is really UNWARRANTED.*

It's anger that stems from a belief that God promised to do something for them, and then failed to come through for them AS HE HAD PROMISED — when in reality, HE NEVER PROMISED ANY SUCH THING! (At least, not in the way, or with the various stipulations people somewhat whimsically choose to impose upon those promises.)

It's true. The people of God often take the liberty of imposing upon the promises of God their own subjective dreams and desires; interpret them to fit with something they've always wanted or yearned for; and then say to God (either consciously or unconsciously) "I now expect you to honor this promise"— thereby obligating God to fulfill a promise He NEVER made, honor a contract He NEVER agreed to, and then getting angry at Him for failing to make good on a promise He didn't make.

As an example, Iain Murray tells the true story of John Newton (writer of the hymn “Amazing Grace”) who in the early days of his ministry was asked to go and preach in the city of Warwick (England).

“He secretly hoped to get a call to be the pastor of the church in that city,” says Murray, “which was then vacant. In fact, he was more than hopeful, because he was convinced by a text that he had recently read in the Book of Acts, (where God said to PAUL “I have many people in this city”) that he would have a successful ministry there. John Newton took that text to Warwick with him,” says Murray, “but when he came away from Warwick he said, ‘I had to learn that PAUL is not John, and WARWICK is not Corinth.’”

How often we do that very thing—take a promise made to some specific biblical character, as if it were made as a promise to US, presumptuously bind God to the fulfillment of it, and get angry with Him when it doesn’t come to pass! Such thinking is rampant in evangelical circles. The belief that God has promised:

“That if I seek to live a godly, blameless life, God will in turn, bless me with financial prosperity, or a good marriage, or obedient children, or deliverance from some calamity, or protection from, or the healing of, some sickness.”

Yet when we make the MISTAKE of doing that (which is the cause of much unwarranted anger toward God) the only remedy is to BE HONEST, and REPENT for getting mad at GOD for failing to do something He never promised to do, and for unfairly binding Him to a contract he never agreed to!

Because if we don’t do that, then that unwarranted anger will eat away at our soul like a cancer, deaden our religious affections, convictions and faith, and we will soon find ourselves indifferent to the things of God, and even hostile to God Himself.

Which teaches us a very important lesson: ***That much rebellion and disobedience in Christians, stems from unwarranted and unresolved anger toward God. From somehow believing God didn’t come through for us when we most needed Him, or that He didn’t keep up His end of the bargain He made with us (or I should say, the bargain we presumptuously bound Him to without His approval)!***

And as a result we sinfully reason: “Well, if God doesn’t keep His end of the deal, why should I?” And so anger at God becomes an excuse for disobedience toward God. It’s one of the major causes of sinful and premeditated disobedience toward God. It’s our childish way of getting back

at God for letting us down, just as disobeying parents is often the way children get back at their parents for letting them down.

Which is precisely why we need to see that so much of our anger toward God is completely unwarranted, repent for it (as Job eventually does) and then release God from a contract He never signed, or ratified, anywhere but in our minds.

Then **SECONDLY**, it must be pointed out that much anger toward God stems from the fact that MOST PEOPLE DO INNATELY BELIEVE that God is (as the Bible declares) sovereign over all things. And because they do believe that God exercises sovereign control over all things, including the painful things of life, they (like Job) end up blaming God for not using the omnipotent power they know He possesses, to intervene and stop the bad things that happen to them, thereby fueling their anger at Him for the pain they experience.

We see Job express this in verse 3 where he says to God: "Does it please You to oppress me, and spurn the work of your hands, while You smile on the schemes of the wicked?"

Satan, the Sabeans, the Chaldeans, and the weather (as we know) were the actual instruments responsible for carrying out the evils Job suffered. Yet in another sense Job is right to direct his anger toward God, since God could AT ANY MOMENT (as He eventually does) put an end to Job's suffering as quickly as He allowed it to come upon Him in the first place.

As the One who possesses all power, and is indeed in ultimate control of all that happens (NOTHING in this universe happening apart from God either ordaining or permitting it) it is only natural that God would bear the brunt of Job's anger (and everyone else's anger) when painful things happen to them or those they love. Which means it is Job's belief in God's sovereignty was the very thing which fueled his anger at God!

And that's precisely why Rabbi Kushner, and Greg Boyd, and John Sanders, and others, have actually written books trying to get people to reject their innate (and may I say biblical) conviction that God is sovereign and all-powerful. Because **it is** the source of much anger toward God, and in some cases the reason people reject God.

Because they rightly see that much of people's anger at God stems from their belief in His sovereignty, such people try to persuade them instead, that God is not sovereign. That He would like to stop those things but can't (limited as He is by His lack of power and knowledge). Better (they feel) that one feels SORRY for a WEAK GOD who would like to stop things and can't, than that one feels ANGRY at an ALL-POWERFUL God that could stop things, but doesn't.

And here I do have to admit it's not a dilemma that's easily resolved. Yet I can say this as well: The answer to that dilemma does NOT lie in dismissing the vast and overwhelming amount of Scriptural material that undeniably affirms the absolute sovereignty and omnipotence of God. Whether we like it or not (and many don't) the Bible does declare from beginning to end that God is sovereign, all-knowing and all-powerful.

In fact, the Book of Job itself ends with one of the most unequivocal declarations of God's sovereignty found anywhere in Scripture! In chapter 42, verse 2, Job looks back on everything that's happened to him, and instead of suggesting that God was somehow limited in knowledge and power, he does just the opposite and declares:

"I know that You can do all things—no plan of Yours can be thwarted."

Which means that the answer to our anger at God lies in working through it, and learning to trust in the goodness and rightness of God's sovereign choices (even if they do cause us pain)—RATHER than seeking to remove that anger by trying to convince ourselves that God being weak and impotent, could do nothing to stop it anyway.

Isn't that what Job does? EXPRESS and WORK THROUGH his anger at the God he KNOWS is sovereign, rather than seeking to DO AWAY WITH HIS ANGER by denying that God is sovereign.

To quote Ruth Graham again:

"I encourage you to talk to God about what you're going through. Be specific. Start by describing how you feel. Be honest about your emotions, fears, confusion and questions... God wants us to talk to Him about everything... Healing is available even as we simply express ourselves to God. In doing so we grow closer to Him, and the closer we get to the Healer, the healthier we become."

My friends, if you're angry at God, HE KNOWS IT! And what He's waiting for you to do (like Job) is admit it, bring it before Him, express it to Him, and leave it with Him—remembering the whole time that that anger is in some ways (as it was with Job) an affirmation of the fact that you do believe He is sovereign over all things.

It's an affirmation of faith to which you merely need to add an abiding (and anger diminishing) trust, that He who IS sovereign, is also IMMUTABLY GOOD, and only allows to enter the lives of His children, that which passes through the filter of His love for them.

Job didn't feel loved by God while he was suffering—but he was—even in his anger. And some day, regardless of what it is that God has allowed to strike you, or how painful it is at the present, you will also see that that it was out of love.

And then **LAST**, as my sermon title notes, Getting Mad at God is often a sign of Hope in the Despairing, and NOT a sign that their relationship with God is beyond hope, or unraveling at the seams.

Anger, as many of you know, is often a sign of life and hope, and not a sign of doom and despair. As one of my professors once said, when teaching on the topic of marriage (and I'll summarize it as best I can remember):

"Do not think that just because husband and wife fight, or get angry with each other, the marriage is doomed. God loved His bride Israel, but He was also, on occasion, driven to anger at her sin—not because He hated her, but precisely because He loved her. The opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. Not anger, but callous, non-caring indifference. Anger is often a sign that there's still something there to build on! Anger is often an attempt to lash out at behaviors, attitudes or actions that damage the relationship. It's a way of saying, "If this would stop we could make it work—and I want it to work—so stop doing it!" It's an attempt to stop behaviors which make the relationship bad. Where there is anger, he said, there is hope. It's the relationships where they can't even muster up the ability to get angry at each other that are the least hopeful, because in them all affection is dead, and all desire to make it work is gone. Love has given way to indifference—and that indifference or apathy is a worse sign than anger or quarreling."

I believe the same is true in relation to God. Indifference and apathy toward God are much worse conditions than anger toward God. Anger is a sign that there is still life! It's a way of saying, "I want things to be better, or different." It's far better than reverent yet hopeless despair that has resigned itself to a "whatever" type attitude that doesn't even seem to care whether the relationship improves or not.

You see, Job is angry because he wants things to be like they used to be (and he doesn't know why they're not)! So don't misinterpret his sarcasm. It's a sign that there's still some life left in him! That he hasn't given up! That he wants to hear from the God he knows is there!

In fact, it's almost as if he's trying to provoke a silent God into DOING or SAYING something, because the SILENCE is killing him!

He used to be so close to God, and intimate with God. He had surely felt God's presence, and knew times when God had spoken to him, and guided him, and led him. But for months it's been nothing but silence and it was killing him!

Which means that for Job, even an angry response from God would be preferable to no response at all! His anger is faith saying, "I know your there Lord, speak to me! Say something! Do something! Anything would be better than nothing!"