

Bringing Anger into the Light

BY TREVOR THOMPSON

What is anger's source? What is its aim? How might we be angry without welcoming the devil? How do we let go of our anger? Which biblical figures have modeled an anger that turned holy by sunset? The four books reviewed here can help us sort through these questions from a Christian perspective.

Where did we get the message that God wants us to be happy all the time? Our countless emotions often emerge haphazardly and in surprising mixtures. This seemingly irrational, and sometimes wicked, aspect of ourselves has made many Christians wary of emotions. The stoic, dutiful wife and the judicious, even-keeled husband fill our hagiography, and we have too often equated faith with being “upbeat” and “cheerful.” The darker emotions often have been left without a hearing in our spiritual traditions.

Anger is one such “dark” emotion that Christians struggle to face in the life of discipleship. The Apostle Paul’s exhortations haunt us:

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. ... Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice....

Ephesians 4:26-27, 31

While Paul’s injunctions remain wisdom for the people of God, we nevertheless need a thoughtful lens through which to see and understand our anger. What is anger’s source? What is its aim? How might we be angry without welcoming the devil? How do we let go of our anger? Which biblical figures have modeled an anger that turned holy by sunset?

The following four books, all part of the recent surge of research on the subject of emotions, offer at least a starting point for sorting through these questions from a Christian perspective.



In *Jesus' Emotions in the Gospels* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2011, 255 pp., \$34.95), New Testament scholar Stephen Voorwinde explores how each of the Evangelists portrays the emotional life of Jesus. Acknowledging that references to Jesus' emotions in the Gospels are sparse (there are only sixty such references), Voorwinde aims to unpack each one in a systematic fashion. His approach is neither historical nor psychological but rooted in the narrative-critical methodology in which each Gospel provides a narrative of Jesus in light of the Evangelist's theological concerns and priorities.

Voorwinde first zeroes in on Jesus' anger in his investigations within Mark's theological biography, which reveals the widest range of Jesus' emotions in the Gospels. Jesus' restoration of the man with a withered hand (Mark 2:23-3:6) is one passage where his angry gaze at the Pharisees is striking. Voorwinde explains,

By not allowing Jesus to do good for a man for whom the Sabbath was made, they have overlooked the mercy and grace of God in favour of their own legalistic requirements. Their indifference to divine grace and human needs angers Jesus, as does his awareness of their murderous design. (p. 78)

Behind this look of anger, the passage notes another emotion, a rare Greek compound verb *sullupeomai*, only found in the New Testament, translated as "to be deeply grieved" or "to be deeply distressed." Voorwinde suggests Jesus is not grieved *for* the Pharisees but *at* them. Anger and grief – are these unacceptable emotions in the Son of God? Mark's portrait of the "Man of Sorrows" proposes that we think not. Voorwinde concludes with an insightful reference to Benjamin Warfield that at the root of Jesus' anger was perhaps an experience of deep pain at the Pharisees' inability to recognize God's grace in their midst. Anger, pain, and grief then emerge as related emotions of Jesus' acutely sensitive soul.

The scene that most frequently comes to mind when we think of an angry Jesus is his cleansing of the Jerusalem temple. Voorwinde sees this emotional outburst, however, not as anger but rather as an expression of Jesus' all-consuming "zeal" for his Father's house. Jesus' fervor is of the same color as Yahweh's divine emotion aroused by Israel's idolatry and false worship. Unpacking this passage in the context of the Fourth Gospel, Voorwinde does not stray from John's high Christology where Jesus' emotions can rarely be understood in purely human terms. Voorwinde claims that "Jesus experiences emotions that are extraordinary, paradoxical

and at times also mysterious and incomprehensible. Often they lie beyond the realm of normal human experience” (p. 213).

In the end then, with this emphasis on Christ’s messianic identity and divine foreknowledge shaping his emotional life, Voorwinde’s text does not offer a Jesus to imitate but to worship. While this is an orthodox conclusion, it feels flat when held up against the desire for more clarity on how we should navigate the dark corridors of our emotional lives. For this, Voorwinde suggests disciples go to the Scriptural injunctions that provide this kind of guidance (i.e., the actual teachings of Jesus and Paul) and to the Holy Spirit who will guide disciples to respond to situations in “emotionally appropriate ways in conformity with their God-given temperament and personality” (p. 217).



Robert C. Roberts’s *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 207 pp., \$16.95) offers a guide in integrating human emotions with Christian spirituality. Roberts, a moral philosopher at Baylor University, hopes that by paying attention to what emotions are, how they are formed, and the nature of particular spiritual emotions, we might better form Christian disciples and become better Christians ourselves. Roberts proposes that emotions are “concern-based construals.” Our central concerns shape how we see the world and influence our emotional lives. Roberts encourages the Church to see herself, particularly in her liturgy, as a “school of character,” a place whereby the emotional lives of the people of God are formed in light of central Christian concerns.

These Christian concerns are our hunger and thirst for righteousness, the yearning for an eternal fellowship with God, and the desire for God’s kingdom. With dialogue partners like Sigmund Freud, Leo Tolstoy, and Iris Murdoch, he hopes to convince the reader that the Gospels provide a way of “reading” ourselves, our neighbors, creation, and God. The last section of the book explores the kind of new emotional life that emerges when one’s vision and character are entirely Christ-shaped. Roberts focuses here on the fruits of the Holy Spirit: contrition, joy, gratitude, hope, peace, and compassion. The more we practice these emotion-virtues, as he calls them, the more our character will reflect our Christian commitments.

Roberts treats the emotion of anger in greatest detail in his penultimate chapter on the emotion-virtue of “peace.” He places anger within the context of what he calls the “emotions of upset,” emotions like anxiety, grief, and guilt that make a person frustrated and wishing something were not so. Anger, in his view, is triggered when we get frustrated because we see another person as an offender, as morally bad and deserving of punishment (p. 176). This construal of a person as an offender, however, does not align with the ideal Christian way of seeing the world in terms of God’s reconciling shalom wrought in Jesus Christ. Because of this, the construal of God’s

shalom should mitigate – even eradicate – the emotions of upset. “Christian peace is at odds with the alienation involved in the grammar of anger,” Roberts concludes. “Christian peace, when one really feels it, dispels anger and tends to bring conflict to an end and fellowship to a beginning” (p. 176). Even though our emotional lives often feel more fickle than Roberts allows, his broader efforts at connecting human emotions to discipleship and character formation are nevertheless useful.



The book in this group that offers the most to ponder is Lytta Basset’s *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007, 295 pp., \$12.80). Basset, a Swiss pastor and theologian, explores the constructive role anger can and should play in the structure of identity and faith. While probing the role of anger in the lives of three biblical characters, Basset employs Hebrew and Greek word studies, reflections on French poets and social critics, observations by Jewish and Christian biblical commentators, and modern psychoanalytic theory to create a challenging yet mesmerizing book. Often this work feels like a dream or an art film full of textured images that only hint at meaning and direction. Thus, depending on the reader’s disposition and interests, this psycho-spiritual journey can either feel invigorating or frustrating. Regardless, compelling questions emerge that prove to be vital for becoming emotionally mature disciples.

Holy anger and the OTHER are key concepts in Basset’s study. As she notes in the opening chapters, “By OTHER I mean all that happens to us, all that befalls us and does violence to us, without anyone asking for our consent and without our agreeing to accept it” (p. 12). This OTHER pushes us to react, to take a stand, and to wage a battle against it. This reaction, a kind of vital energy that forces us to face the OTHER, is what Basset sees as “holy anger.” Her chapters then unfold with illustrations of how this plays out in Job and Jacob.

The sections on Jacob are particularly fascinating, with Jacob lifted up as an example of someone who embodies this holy anger in his face-to-face encounter with the OTHER on the banks of the Jabbok river. Jacob, a man full of fears and anxieties, is about to meet his brother, Esau, who has vowed to kill him. Alone and powerless in the wilderness, stripped of all his possessions, he falls into a deep sleep. Only after this all-night psycho-spiritual wrestling match with the OTHER does Jacob receive the blessing of a new name, a new identity, a deeper and surer sense of the OTHER and himself. It forever alters his walk in the world. Basset narrates this absorbing look at Jacob’s courageous and “angry” act of self-differentiation by entering deeply into his dreams and imagining every scene from multiple perspectives.

Is anger always an invitation? Is confrontation with the OTHER always a blessing? Basset does not address how anger can be twisted, directed at the wrong person, or expressed with an off-beam intensity. Nevertheless,

Basset's work fills an important gap, especially for Christians who too often avoid confrontation and anger in the name of peace and happiness before sunset. The haunting counterexample Basset points to is the figure of Cain who, in censuring his anger, loses his opportunity to grow more mature through the necessary yet demanding face-to-face encounter with God and his brother. Instead, through an unholy rage and act of violence, Cain eliminates the OTHER and the possibility for a deeper life of friendship and blessing.



Anger: Minding Your Passion (Nashville, TN: Fresh Air Books, 2010, 96 pp., \$10.80), a collection of short writings compiled and introduced by Amy Lyles Wilson, might be exactly the kind of resource we need to bring anger out of the darkness and into the light. The intended purpose of this collection is to remind us that "anger is natural, anger is human, and anger can be of God. It's what we do with it that matters" (p. 9). The pages that follow are filled with an assortment of personal stories, stand-alone quotes, and short theological musings. Authors range from those nearly everyone would recognize (essayist Frederick Buechner, civil rights leader Howard Thurman, and novelist Madeleine L'Engle) to others who labor in the vineyard as coaches, therapists, and ministers. Not all authors are Christians, nor are all speaking out of a religious lens. Nonetheless, the publishers' intended audience is the demographic of "spiritually curious people." The final pages of this collection provide a list of ten suggestions for handling anger.

Of all that this little book offers, the power of creating meaningful rituals that both provide an opportunity to face the OTHER and invite us to acknowledge and let go of our anger strikes me as the most wise. Take a deep breath. Look in the mirror and offer a blessing. Take a quiet walk down to the river. Watch the way anger constricts the body and gratitude opens it up. Release a good cathartic cry into the universe. Offer a gesture of reconciliation.

As Jesus warns, in our anger, we are liable to judgment (Matthew 5:22). Yet, as these authors suggest, the path to holiness must include our emotions, especially the way anger invites us to live more faithfully into the mercy and love of God.



TREVOR THOMPSON

is Director of Pastoral Ministries at the Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh, North Carolina.