



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Getting Angry at God
(*Anger*, pp. 65-72)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Getting Angry at God

Regardless of whether it is safe or adaptive or morally correct, many of us sometimes feel angry at God. Can we be angry at God and still love God? Does being angry necessarily imply a major rift in the relationship?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 42

Reflection

Julie Exline studies the anger that people direct toward God. She does not ask the philosophical question: Is it morally justified? Since “God is incapable of committing mistakes, much less injustices,” she admits, “it could be difficult to see anger toward God as having any sort of legitimate moral backing.” And she does not ask the prudential question: Is it safe to get on God’s bad side? Rather, as a psychologist, she wonders: Why do people become angry at God? How do they deal with their anger? And how can others help them?

Between one-third and two-thirds of adults in Exline’s studies report they have been angry at God – about significant events like “major life crises, deaths, and natural disasters,” or over small irritations like “a stomach virus, a traffic jam, or rain on the day of a picnic.” She discovered:

- ▶ *People become nervous talking about their anger at God.* Believers, especially, worry whether they can be angry at God and also love God. Exline offers a word of comfort: “As in close human relationships, feelings such as love, respect, and closeness toward God often coexist with feelings of anger.”

People who are angry at God also worry that others will shame or reject them. “Most people reported...supportive responses: the people that they told were able to relate to their feelings, or they said something encouraging. But...about half of those who disclosed anger received a response that felt less supportive.”

- ▶ *People handle their anger at God better when they are supported by others.* “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.” Those who received unsupportive responses, however, were more likely to stay angry at God, try to suppress their angry feelings, rebel against God, or use alcohol or drugs to cope.

When people try to suppress their feelings by doing the right things – pray, read Scripture, serve God – but “are afraid to acknowledge negative feelings, a wall can go up,” Exline notes. “Intimacy is blocked.”

- ▶ *A close relationship with God allows people to express their anger.* “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,” Exline writes. But once the decision to rebel and walk away from God was off the table, “these same people...saw it as morally appropriate to do some complaining and to ask God tough questions.” She notes, “If we are



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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.”

- ▶ *Examining one’s anger at God is the best response.* If the anger is clearly unjustified – e.g., because it is “rooted in envy of others, a selfish desire to always get our own way, or expectation of special treatment by God” – then “we can identify it as such and do whatever it takes to pull close to God again.”

If it is a secondary or defensive emotional response that is covering hurt, shame, or fear, then we can identify the deeper source of hurt and focus on it.

But when anger at God is the primary emotion and it seems justified – e.g., “we are troubled by the presence of suffering and injustice in the world” and think that God is at fault – another response is needed. There are no easy answers to people’s questions about the brokenness of the world. “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,” she notes. Instead, she emphasizes the role of trust: “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.”

Study Questions

1. Why does Julie Exline believe that when someone feels angry at God, it is important for them to share this emotion with others? What sort of response do they need from others?
2. Why is it important for people to examine their anger at God very closely? Consider how you could do this, and how you could help others do this.
3. In Psalm 42, how does the psalmist express anger and other negative emotions against God? How are these emotions embedded in a context of trusting God?

Departing Hymn: “God of My Life, to You I Call” (vv. 1 and 2)

God of my life, to you I call;
afflicted, at your feet I fall;
when the great water floods prevail
leave not my trembling heart to fail!

Friend of the friendless and the faint,
where should I lodge my deep complaint?
Where but with you, whose open door
invites the helpless and the poor!

William Cowper (1779), alt.

Suggested Tunes: CANONBURY or OLD 100th

Getting Angry at God

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider why people become angry at God.
2. To highlight the dangers of ignoring and suppressing anger toward God.
3. To discuss how faithful friends can help others deal with their anger toward God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Anger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God of My Life, to You I Call” locate one of the familiar tunes CANONBURY or OLD 100th in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

Julie Exline reports, “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. 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.” (*Anger*, 65-66)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give members confident trust and wisdom when they deal with their or others’ anger toward God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 42 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this series, we are thinking of anger as an emotional response to perceived injustice. Bob Roberts identifies four features of anger: “Anger involves casting blame on someone; wanting that person to be hurt; seeing the person as unattractive; and seeing oneself as in a position to judge” (*Anger*, 13). Lots of people get angry at God. Of course, many of them, upon closer self-examination, come to see this anger as clearly inappropriate or as a disguise for another negative emotion they feel. Yet some continue to think they should be angry with God. How can we best respond? Julie Exline offers pastoral advice about how we should deal with our own anger at God, and how we can help other people deal with theirs.

Study Questions

1. Julie Exline mentions two reasons why people should let trusted friends and believers know about their anger at God. First, people need reassurance that their anger at God is compatible with love for God. Obviously, unresolved anger tends to push us away from God and see God as unattractive, but anger that is acknowledged and resolved can draw us closer to God. Mature believers can model a trusting relationship with God that has room for feeling and expressing negative emotions toward God. Second, those who know the people well can help them examine their anger more carefully than they can by themselves. (More about this in the next question.)

People who are angry at God need to experience welcome and reassurance. If they feel shamed or rejected, they may suppress their anger at God. She explains, "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."

Notice that Exline is concerned about people who *suppress* their anger at God by distracting themselves (and others) from it by doing the right things – e.g., they "pray the right prayers, read the right things, serve God with humility and obedience." This is quite different from acknowledging one's anger, deciding that it is inappropriate or a disguise, and then using these practices to train new habits of obedience, trust, and intimacy.

2. Exline says it is important to understand whether one's anger, on closer inspection, seems clearly inappropriate, is a disguise for another negative emotion, or is an emotional response to one's deep concern for justice and honest doubts about God's goodness in a particular situation. These three conditions require different responses.

You might form two groups – one to approach the problem from the angry person's side, and the other from the helping friend's side. Invite the first group to brainstorm what they would do, and what help they would want from their congregation, to examine their anger. Invite the second group to examine how the congregation currently helps people deal with their anger at God – e.g., through worship, study groups, informal and formal counseling, etc. Compare the groups' reports: How is your congregation prepared to meet the needs of those who are angry at God? If there are unmet needs, how can you address them?

3. The psalmist complains bitterly to God, "Why have you forgotten me" (Psalm 42:9) and allowed my enemies to oppress me? This oppression has been going on for a while, and other people (certainly the enemies, but perhaps even some of the psalmist's friends) have begun to wonder and taunt "Where is your God?" (42:3) Yet the psalmist's complaint about God's absence is surrounded by statements of trust in God (42:1-2, 11). This trust is bolstered, in part, by memories of festival worship (42:4), looking around at the blessing of God through the land (42:6), and moments of personal reflection on God and worship (42:8).

Invite members to share how public worship, personal reflection on Scripture, and a sense of God's presence in their surroundings have helped them respond to their own anger at God. How can they best share these resources with others who are angry at God?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.