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Glad, Sad, Bad, and Mad: Anger at God in Christian Life

by MOCKINGBIRD on Mar 12, 2019 • 10:36 am

Here is Bonnie Zahl's piece from the Faith & Doubt Issue. Pick one up here before they're gone!



There's an episode in the second season of *Ally McBeal* where the main character Ally goes to the hospital to see her boyfriend, who is a doctor, and ends up meeting his eight-year-old patient, Eric. Life hasn't dealt Eric a fair hand: first his father dies, then he has leukemia, and his insurance won't come through for experimental treatment. "If I wanted to sue somebody, could you help me?" he asks Ally. "Well, who'd you have in mind?" she answers. "God," he responds, matter-of-factly. "I want to sue God."

Anger is a natural response when we experience something that feels unfair, and if we have some reason to feel that God played a role in that injustice, we may come to feel angry at God. While suing God might only happen in sitcoms, large-scale survey data indicate that between one-third and two-thirds of American adults from a range of religious traditions report sometimes feeling angry at God. And when the same people are asked to think about specific events involving suffering, about half of them report experiencing anger and other negative feelings toward God because of those events. If you feel angry at God now, or if you have felt angry at God in the past, you are not alone.

Anger at God can make some of us feel uncomfortable because we have been taught to think that it is wrong. Some of us might have been told that we have no logical grounds to blame God or to be angry at God: if God is good, perfect, powerful, and just, then it would be illogical and wrong of us to think that God could be responsible for causing anything that is bad or unfair. Even though there are also examples in the Bible of complaint, lament, and wrestling with God (in the Psalms, with Job, and with Jacob), we reason that *they* might be justified in being angry at God, but *we* certainly don't have any good reasons to complain. We may have also learned from church that anger is something to avoid, since the Bible doesn't seem too keen on anger: "anger resides in the lap of fools" (Eccl 7:9); "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil" (Ps 37:8). As a result of these apparent admonitions, we find little motivation to understand what our anger and other negative emotions might mean, and it is no wonder that we don't always know what to do

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"Mockingbird Sally"
Mbird March 19 Playlist
LITTLE RICHARD

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1. **"Mockingbird Sally" — LITTLE...** 3:41
2. "Ain't Got No Money" — FRAN... 2:53
3. "Momma" — BOB SEGER 3:23
4. "Wild One" — THIN LIZZY 4:19
5. "Just Another Love Song" — T... 2:45
6. "Could It Happen To Me?" — ... 3:37
7. "It's My Life" — TALK TALK 3:56
8. "Seventeen" — SHARON VAN E... 4:26
9. "California Dreamin'" — JAPA... 3:00
10. "Like Water" — STEVE MASON 4:02
11. "Too Late to Turn Back Now..." 3:19
12. "House On the Rock" — ROB ... 3:27
13. "St. Elmo's Fire" — BRIAN ENO 3:02
14. "Amazing Grace" — BRYAN F... 4:01
15. "Break the Spell" — BLUE SW... 3:36
16. "Quality of Mercy" — MICHE... 3:38
17. "Lay My Burden Down" — C... 3:27
18. "The Transfiguration" — SU... 5:19

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with negative feelings in the context of our Christian life. (I use the words “positive” and “negative” to refer to the valence of the emotions, rather than their moral nature.)

This is such a shame, because I think negative emotions are so much more interesting than positive ones. There are considerably more words in the English language to describe negative emotions than positive emotions; some psychologists even argue that this is because negative emotions have greater functional value for our survival, so we have developed ways of accurately describing them in order to respond appropriately to them. When we do describe these feelings—regret, nostalgia, grief, embarrassment, angst, pity, sorrow—they may even be a complex combination of positive emotion, too, but with a stronger negative tug.

Negative emotions are also more noticeable, more likely to be remembered. They require more of our cognitive and social resources to deal with; in fact, we humans have a tendency towards what psychologists call a *negativity bias*, where negative experiences have greater impact on our behavior and cognition than positive experiences of the same level of intensity. Because of their complexity and the way they function in our lives, negative emotions tell us much more about ourselves, and about how we relate to our experiences and to people around us, than our positive emotions can. In particular, anger has signal value: it tells us, sometimes loudly, when something in our relationship is unfair or out of balance.

People feel angry at God for all sorts of reasons. The untimely death of a child; the destruction of one’s home because of natural disasters; the loss of one’s job and dignity in being able to provide for family; a fracturing marriage that can’t seem to be fixed; physical and emotional exhaustion from years of infertility; the destructive effects of addiction on a child—all of these can be reasons for feeling angry at God. But it is not only the major, painful, or traumatic events which trigger anger; people can also become angry at God because of a series of unrelated disappointments, perceived injustices, or repeatedly unanswered prayers over long periods of time. These experiences can throw into sharp relief the challenge of believing in a good God in a world where evil seems to triumph, where there seems to be no healing for brokenness, where sin takes such a heavy toll. Anger at God is our response to the world not being how we had hoped it might be, a response to God for not helping when we believed he could have (and perhaps should have).

Churches are very good at reminding people to count their blessings, to focus on God’s goodness when things go wrong, to remember that God owes us nothing. This is not wrong advice: they are correct to think that gratitude can be a motivator, they are correct to say that God’s goodness does not depend on whether our lives are going well or poorly, and they are correct to teach us not to have exaggerated expectations. But whether something is *correct* does not always correlate with whether it is *compassionate*, and some churches can be so focused on the former that they forget about the latter.



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In my many years of speaking with people who are angry at God, I have never met a person who told me that what they needed was a reminder of how to *think correctly* about their situation. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest the opposite: studies show that if people are made to feel judged, ashamed, or guilty about feeling angry at God, they are more likely to continue feeling angry at God, to reject God, and to use alcohol and other substances to cope. In contrast, people who said they were supported when they disclosed their anger reported greater engagement in their spiritual life and more spiritual growth as a result of the difficult experience.

When bad things happen, we have an innate need to make sense of it by searching for causes. Based on our pre-existing beliefs about what people (and God) are like, we may attribute causality either directly or indirectly to God. Our causal reasoning can be simple or complex: we may think God caused the negative event to happen, or we may think, based on our theories about how God interacts with the world, that God desired to prevent the suffering but refrained from doing so because of some reason that we may or may not find sufficient. Our appraisal of the situation affects our anger at God, just as it does our interpersonal experiences: insofar as the event *feels* damaging, intentional, and preventable, we are more likely to feel angry at God. Our anger may come with doubt, disappointment, frustration, betrayal, sadness, all in different measures and maybe all at the same time; each of these emotions may wax and wane.

At the same time, if we are able to experience any assurance that God is fundamentally present—even if we do not agree with his choice of actions—and if we are able to feel even a thread of dependence and vulnerability in the context of the anger, we may find that our anger motivates us to seek God out, to “wrestle” with him. What we may find in doing so is that God doesn’t seem the slightest bit offended, is not fazed by our strongest protests, our loudest screams, even our threats to walk away altogether. What we may find is that he knows what is deep inside of us—the well where all of our anger, aggression, woundedness, and indignation sit. Over time, we may even find, as many others have, that these experiences of anger have shown us more deeply what is true about our relationship with God.

But not all of our experiences of anger at God are like this. What is much more difficult, perhaps the most difficult, is when God doesn’t seem to be there at all. For some of us, God’s silence comes suddenly. For others, God’s voice might diminish slowly, almost imperceptibly, until one day we suddenly realize that speaking to God feels like speaking into emptiness. Prayers truly feel unanswered when the answer is not “no” or “not yet” or “not this way,” but deafening silence. This silence can be traumatic because it is as if *God* is severing the relationship, undoing all that we have ever known to be true about God.

When this happens, we may protest. We may try to do what we know we *should* do: pray, read the Bible, go to church, ask to be prayed for, speak to a spiritual director or pastor. But when God is utterly silent, none of these things bring comfort; they only magnify the gulf between how we want (and how we think we ought) to feel, and how we *actually* feel. “What have I done that is so wrong to deserve God’s *silence*?” we might ask. This feeling of injustice comes from our belief that God knows we are hurting, and our belief that God could respond at any time and in any number of ways, but hasn’t. God’s continued silence feels like a deliberate turning of the back. After a while, we might wonder if we could still bear to believe in God, because trying to believe without experiencing the reality of God is too painful. Belief becomes a hollow reminder of what used to be, until eventually we wonder if what we believed in before was ever real at all.

Mother Teresa wrote of this sort of experience in letters to her friends and spiritual directors. For over fifty years of her ministry, God felt silent, and she was given no relief from God’s silence until close to the end of her life. “The place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me—when the pain of longing is so great—I just long and long for God—

and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there,” she wrote. St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish monk, describes this kind of experience as the “dark night of the soul,” a “dark fire” by which God refines the souls of those he loves.



We see this silence too in the book of Job, where Job is reeling from the total loss of his world as he knew it, trauma from his family’s death, and the decay of his body. For thirty-five chapters of this book, God is silent while Job cycles through despair, injustice, grief, self-pity, anger, indignation, and maybe even resignation. It is only when Job and his friends have exhausted their logic and arguments, when Job has finally and fully expressed his anger and his ambivalence about God, that God finally speaks. But he does not speak to explain or to reason. He speaks simply to assert his sheer reality.

In response, Job says, “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have *seen* you.” When Job was blameless and close to God before his calamity, he only heard God; his senses were limited. Somehow this experience of trauma and suffering, of argument and reasoning and anger and rage, opens Job’s eyes to God. He is finally able to see God.

We like to emphasize that Christianity is about *relationship*, not religion, but we often expect that relationship to be a certain way all the time. We forget that the dynamic nature of genuine relationships can both bring us great joy but also make us vulnerable to great pain. We also forget that when people are hurting, it is precisely relationship, not religion, that helps. This means that when someone is angry at God’s silence, we do not try to teach, or remind them to pray and read scripture, or encourage them to “press into God.” We do not try to explain their experience to them by appealing to God’s mysterious ways, or God’s desire to “refine those he loves.” The soul in a very dark night does not care for human explanations because it is fundamentally yearning to know that God is still really there at all.

People instead need compassion, which we give by having our hands open and sharing in their vulnerability and pain. This might mean having to be uncomfortable with not having an answer to their very difficult questions about why God might inflict or permit such suffering. It might mean sitting with them and simply being with them, with no expectation on them to think or feel any differently, but with complete faith in God to bring what feels dead back to life. We become a point of connection for the person who is experiencing disconnection. We silently pray, when they cannot, for God to have mercy, and bring their dark night to an end as soon as is possible. And we hope that through their experience they might once again be able to see God, just as Job did.

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