

## Angry or Loving?

By [David T. Lamb](#)

*Taken from God Behaving Badly: Expanded Edition by David T. Lamb.*

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Whenever you read from the Old Testament, God is always crabby and snarky to everyone, but the New Testament isn't about anger at all—it's about love."

This observation is made by Sam to her mother (Boopsie) in a 2009 Doonesbury comic strip (May 31) after she heard Rev. Sloan reading from the Bible about the wrath of God. Sam's statement captures the essence of the supposed conflict between the anger of Yahweh in the Old Testament and the love of Jesus in the New Testament. As we look at Old Testament passages focused on anger and love, we will have to decide whether Sam listens badly, Rev. Sloan reads badly or Yahweh behaves badly. So, is the God of the Old Testament really angry, crabby and snarky?

### A Lightning Bolt from God

Two men are playing golf, a pastor and an elder from his church. The pastor tees off first and strikes a beautiful drive straight down the fairway. The elder hooks the ball badly into the lake and yells, "#@\*&%! I missed!" The pastor says to the elder, "Careful, or God will strike you with lightning."

On the next hole, a par-three, the pastor's 7-iron lands five feet from the cup. The elder's tee shot flies over the green into the bunker, and he shouts, "#@\*&%! I missed!" The pastor warns him, "Careful, or God will strike you with lightning." On the next hole, the pastor smashes his drive three hundred yards, and it rolls to within ten feet for a potential eagle putt. The elder slices his tee shot far into the woods and again exclaims, "#@\*&%! I missed!" Immediately the clouds darken, the wind picks up, and a lightning bolt flashes down and hits not the foul-mouthed elder, but the pastor.

The elder looks up and hears a voice from heaven exclaiming, "#@\*&%! I missed!"<sup>1</sup>

If there is one popular image that instantly flashes to mind on the topic of God and anger it would have to be being struck by lightning for doing something (usually trivial) that makes God mad.<sup>2</sup> A quick Google search of "lightning" and

“God” revealed many versions of this joke (variations involve baseball and hunting).

In chapter one, I stated that Yahweh is primarily concerned with love, but the Old Testament also speaks frequently about Yahweh becoming angry and sometimes even killing people in his anger. Doesn't that undermine the idea of Yahweh as loving? This chapter will discuss the tension between divine love and divine anger. We might not completely resolve the problem, but by looking at relevant Old Testament passages we will better understand why Yahweh becomes angry (he doesn't become angry over swearing) and how his anger makes sense.

Support for the view that Yahweh is a God of anger can be found in the story of Uzzah and the Ark, so that's a good place to start.

### **Why Did Yahweh Smite Uzzah?**

The Ark of the Covenant had fallen into the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 4–5), and David was finally bringing back the lost ark to Jerusalem:

*David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark. And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the Lord had burst forth against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day. (2 Sam 6:1-8)*

(When I quote from biblical passages, I will often highlight important repeated words with bold or italics in the text to make them stand out clearly, such as “all,” or “Lord” or “angry” from this passage.)

The festivities basically included a big parade with dancing, celebrating and a marching band. Suddenly, the cart carrying the ark shook as the oxen that were pulling it stumbled. Uzzah, one of the men walking alongside it, reached out to stabilize the ark, but Yahweh got angry at Uzzah and instantly killed him. What prompted this divine display of rage? Wasn't Uzzah doing a good thing by

protecting the ark from tipping over? Surely whatever he was doing didn't deserve a death sentence. Why did God have to kill him? Even David, a man after God's own heart, got mad at Yahweh for the outburst. Stories like this give the God of the Old Testament a bad reputation.

While the story of Uzzah and the ark is deeply troubling, as we begin to examine the causes of God's anger it becomes more understandable. Yahweh was angry here for three main reasons.

Carrying the ark. First, Yahweh told the Israelites how to carry the ark, and they weren't obeying. Yahweh told them that they were not to transport the ark on a cart, but it was to be carried by the priests on poles through rings on the side of the ark (Ex 25:10-15; Num 4:15; 7:7-9; Deut 10:8). Yahweh's directions were not found just in one obscure text, but he made it very clear throughout the law how the ark was to be transported. Previously in the narrative, the ark had always been carried the right way by Israel (Deut 31:9, 25; Josh 3:3, 15, 17; 4:9, 10, 18; 6:6; 8:33; 1 Sam 4:4).

Yahweh's concern with proper protocols for ark transportation may seem a bit OCD (like symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder) to our postmodern, highly casual sensibilities, but an analogy might help us understand the need for precaution.

Handling the ark was inherently dangerous, like handling radioactive materials. If people do not use proper precaution when transporting plutonium, people die. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) gives even more-detailed guidelines about transporting radioactive materials than the Pentateuch does about transporting the ark. (Check out the NRC's website the next time you need to transport plutonium.)<sup>3</sup> Personally, I'm glad the NRC is a bit OCD when it comes to moving nuclear waste through my neighborhood. (BP wasn't OCD enough when drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico on the Deepwater Horizon rig in April 2010, and people died.) God gave the Israelites guidelines to protect them from being reckless with the ark, because God is more powerful than plutonium.

While God had told them in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, maybe they forgot, or perhaps they hadn't been meditating on these books recently, so they didn't know how Yahweh wanted the ark transported. Well, actually it would have been difficult to forget how the ark was meant to be carried, because it had two rings on each side for the poles, so that every time they looked at it they would be reminded that Yahweh wanted it to be borne on the shoulders of the priests. We know that they knew the correct way to carry it, because three months after the tragedy with Uzzah, they carried the ark all the way to Jerusalem just as God had told them to transport it (2 Sam 6:13). The Chronicles version of the incident makes it clear that Yahweh was angry because they weren't carrying it properly (1 Chron 15:11-13).

The timing of Yahweh's anger is also significant here. The text repeatedly informs us that "all" Israel was present (2 Sam 6:1, 2, 5); a crowd of 30,000 people was watching this parade. With an audience of the entire nation, Yahweh did not want to send the message that obedience was optional, since it was disobedience that led to the loss of the ark earlier and the slaughter by Philistines of 30,000 Israelites (1 Sam 4:10). Anger displayed in situations of disobedience gets people's attention. Yahweh's extreme display of anger certainly got the attention of David and the rest of the nation. After the incident with Uzzah, the ark was always carried the right way (2 Sam 6:13; 15:29; 1 Kings 2:26; 8:3).

So it makes sense that Yahweh was mad because the Israelites should have known better. While Uzzah's death seems harsh, Yahweh had warned them. He told them if anyone touched the ark, he or she would die (Num 4:15). Uzzah should not have touched it.

Throughout the Old Testament it was always serious and even dangerous for individuals to come close to the presence of Yahweh (Ex 3:5; 19:16; 33:20; Judg 6:22-23; 1 Kings 19:11-12; Job 41:10; Ps 76:7; Mal 3:2). If Israel's disobedience were the only reason for Yahweh's anger, we might think that he was being petty and harsh, but the next two reasons for Yahweh's anger help explain the severity of the crime.

*Riding in the trunk.* The second reason Yahweh became mad is that their decision to transport the ark on a cart was not only disobedient, it was also insulting. To understand how a method of transportation could be insulting, we need to recall what the ark represented: the presence of God (Ex 25:22; Lev 16:2; 1 Sam 4:4). Therefore, it warranted extraordinary care. What the law prescribed for the conveyance of the ark was basically a litter (a chair or throne for a distinguished person supported by people carrying poles on each side). Royalty was frequently honored by this method of transport, going back to ancient China and Egypt. King Solomon was carried around on a litter (Song 3:7) as was the Syrian ruler Antiochus V (2 Macc 9:8). It was important for Yahweh's symbolic presence to be treated in a royal fashion because he was their God and King. David needed not to forget that even though he was king over Israel, Yahweh was sovereign over him and the nation.

Litters were for rulers, but carts or wagons were for things (offerings: Num 7:3; tabernacle equipment: Num 7:7-8; grain: Amos 2:13). Never for royalty.<sup>4</sup> Placing the ark on a cart was an insult. They were celebrating its return, but by putting the ark on a cart, they were in essence saying the ark was cargo. Also, it was the Philistines who came up with the idea of the ark-cart (1 Sam 6:8-11), so instead of following God's law, they were following the example of their enemies. It shouldn't surprise us that God was mad.

When I was in college, if my friends and I were going to the movies and we didn't have enough spaces in cars, sometimes I would ride in the trunk. I usually found

it relatively comfortable (trunks were bigger then). I liked to crack open the trunk and hang a limp hand out the back to get a reaction from tailgaters. (I no longer recommend this behavior.) Why don't we put people in the trunk? Trunks and carts are for cargo (or dead bodies). Front seats are for humans. Litters are for kings and the ark of Yahweh.

What would it be like if the U.S. president were to come to a town for a parade and the city council asked him to ride in the trunk of a car? He or she would be offended and almost certainly angry. That's basically what Israel was doing with the ark. They should have known better. It was an insult to Yahweh, so he became mad. They needed to treat the ark not simply as a box, because it had a profound symbolic meaning as the presence of God in their midst. It deserved respect. But the ark represented even more than that.

*Losing the ark.* Third, Israel's lack of respect toward the ark was symptomatic of a lack of concern for their relationship with God, and that made him mad too. The ark symbolized not only the presence of Yahweh, but also the covenantal relationship between God and his people. The text frequently calls it the Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh (Num 10:33; 14:44; Deut 10:8; 31:9; Josh 3:3, 11; 1 Sam 4:3, 4, 5; 1 Kings 3:15; 6:19; Jer 3:16). The ark contained a copy of the Ten Commandments (Deut 10:1-5), which told Israel what their covenant with Yahweh involved: to love God and to love their neighbor.

In general, the Old Testament tells the story of a one-sided relationship, in which one partner (Yahweh) is more committed than the other (Israel) to the covenant. Often God is patient and doesn't punish instantly, but eventually he may need to take drastic measures to get their attention. Because of their perpetual disrespect for the ark of Yahweh and the public nature of this transportation ceremony, it was now a critical time and it warranted sudden punishment. Yahweh valued the covenant with his people so highly that he wanted to communicate the message that he would not tolerate disrespect for the object that symbolized that relationship. Those of us who are married have a similar covenantal symbolic object: a wedding ring. I once lost mine for almost two months. I hated being without it because its absence suggested not only that I was irresponsible, but also that I didn't value my relationship with Shannon. Eventually, our dog, Tiglath (named after the Assyrian ruler, 2 Kings 15:29), lost his tennis ball underneath the washbasin in our laundry room. He was too scared of the washbasin to go retrieve it (he's only part retriever), so Shannon got down on the floor, fought past the sea of endless tennis shoes, reached through the concoction of soccer mud, grass clippings, canine fur and laundry lint, stretched out for the ball and found what? My missing ring. It had slipped off my finger while I was giving Tig a bath. Later that day, we had a Dave's-ring-is-back celebration, although ours wasn't as elaborate as King David's theark-is-back celebration (and I kept my clothes on; see 2 Sam 6:14, 20).

For a long time after finding the ring, I was extra careful with it because I didn't want to lose it again. Although Yahweh wasn't the one who had just lost the ark, apparently he felt similarly about it. Yahweh's people had just lost their "ring" (the ark) to the Philistines because of their evil deeds and their careless attitude toward the ark. Yahweh didn't want them to lose it again and, like my concern for my ring, he wanted them to be more careful with it. His display of anger toward Uzzah was effective. For the remainder of the monarchy, they not only carried the ark the right way, but there was never a "sequel" of the incident of the lost ark.<sup>5</sup>

From the Uzzah incident, we learn that Yahweh gets mad to protect his law, his honor and his relationship with his people. Would you want to follow a God that wasn't passionate about his relationship with you? Each of these reasons seems valid. Now we can look at other examples of divine anger in the Old Testament.

### **Slow to Anger**

Anger plays an important role in the story of the Exodus. The Hebrew word 'ap translated as "anger" literally means "nose" (perhaps because anger was thought to be focused in the face, with the nose becoming red). The word appears ten times in the book of Exodus, always in reference to Yahweh or Moses (Ex 4:14; 11:8; 15:8; 22:24; 32:10, 11, 12, 19, 22; 34:6). Let's look at what makes God and Moses mad in Exodus.

At the beginning of the book, Israel has already been enslaved for hundreds of years in Egypt, and Pharaoh begins to undertake a draconian birth-control measure for the Hebrews: male infanticide (Ex 1:8-22). In the midst of this brutal oppression, the Israelites cry out to Yahweh (Ex 2:23). The text tells us that God hears their groans and remembers his covenant with Abraham (Ex 2:24-25). Yahweh then begins the process of rescuing his people from their bondage by choosing a leader for the task, Moses.

During the interaction at the burning bush, Moses offers a series of five objections to Yahweh:

1. Who am I?
2. Who are you?
3. The Israelites won't listen to me!
4. I can't speak well!
5. Please pick someone else! (Ex 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13)

(Exactly what I would have said if someone asked me to be in charge of rescuing a few million slaves from the greatest empire on earth.)



So, how does Yahweh respond to Moses' reluctance? He listens to the first four objections and responds graciously, but eventually he gets angry (Ex 4:14). We need to note three things here about Yahweh's anger.

First, Yahweh didn't smite anyone in his anger. Sometimes Yahweh smites, but often he doesn't (for example, Job 42:7; Ps 78:21; Is 12:1; 54:8). Yahweh expressed his anger and Moses was certainly aware of it, and his anger achieved the desired result. After Yahweh's outburst, Moses offered no more objections, and he dutifully headed back to Egypt to start the process of deliverance (Ex 4:18-20), which leads to the next point. Second, Yahweh became angry because he wanted to deliver his people, but Moses didn't want to help. The Israelite nation was struggling under oppressive enslavement, but Moses didn't want to get involved. God was not only mad that his people were slaves, but also that Moses didn't seem to care that his own extended family was suffering. Later, on Mount Sinai, Yahweh told Moses that his people were not to oppress or take advantage of widows, orphans or aliens, because they were aliens in Egypt, and if they did, Yahweh's wrath would burn hot against them (Ex 22:21-24).

In the book of Amos, Yahweh got angry at Judah for similar reasons, so angry that he roared like a lion (Amos 1:2; 3:4, 8). In Amos, Yahweh's wrath targeted the things that someone with a concern for justice would ideally want targeted: oppression (Amos 1:6, 9; 2:12; 3:9; 4:1; 8:4, 6), violence (Amos 1:3, 11, 13; 2:7; 8:4) and injustice (Amos 2:6-7; 5:15; 6:12). Compared to the things that cause me to get mad (someone taking too long in the bathroom or eating the last of the mint-chip ice cream), Yahweh's reasons for wrath seem more legitimate: the elimination of oppression, violence and injustice. Ultimately, in these contexts God's wrath came from his compassion. This is a good thing. I should get angry about injustice like Yahweh. Third, it took Yahweh a long time to get angry. He didn't get mad after the first, second, third or even fourth objection from Moses, but only after the fifth did he finally mad. Yahweh was slow to anger.

### **The "Long Nose" of the Lord**

The idea that Yahweh gets angry slowly is emphasized throughout the Old Testament. Yahweh is repeatedly described as "slow to anger" (literally, "long-nosed"—one of the few similarities between God and myself). This description of Yahweh is not limited to a specific Old Testament book or Old Testament section but is found across the diverse genres of the Old Testament. It appears in historical contexts (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17), prophetic contexts (Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; Nah 1:3) and poetic contexts (Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8).

Slowness to anger is so much a part of Yahweh's character, he includes it in his name. When Yahweh reveals himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, the text says Yahweh proclaimed his name to Moses, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and

gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:5-6).<sup>6</sup> In the Bible, names mean something significant, representing one’s essence and character. Yahweh is God’s first name in the Old Testament, but his full name speaks of his graciousness, patience and slowness to anger.

Ironically, Yahweh had just become furious at his people (Ex 32:10), which doesn’t seem very patient of him . . . until you read the rest of the story. Yahweh’s slowness to anger can be understood only in the context of the deliverance of his people from hundreds of years of oppression.

If I had just been freed from a lifetime of enslavement, I would hope it would put me in a permanent grateful mood, like a year-round Thanksgiving. But as soon as the Israelites get out of Egypt, they start complaining. When they see the approaching chariots, they complain that Yahweh brought them out to kill them (Ex 14:11). They complain about bitter water, about a lack of food and about a lack of water (Ex 15:24; 16:3; 17:2). The needs that the Israelites have for protection, food and water are certainly legitimate, yet in each complaint they assume the worst about their God—that Yahweh is secretly plotting their deaths. Their grumbling betrays a lack of trust, despite all that Yahweh has done so far to rescue them. But Yahweh shows great patience toward his people. Before Mount Sinai, the only people in the book that he gets mad at are the Egyptians (Ex 15:7-8).

God does get mad at Israel eventually, but this reaction is reasonable given the context. The fifth complaint of the Israelites is addressed to Aaron about Moses’ lengthy absence with a request for Aaron to “make gods for us,” so he makes them a golden calf (Ex 32:1-4). Aaron apparently sees nothing wrong with this behavior, despite the fact that he and all the people just promised to follow all Yahweh’s commands (Ex 24:3, 7), which include specific prohibitions against the creation of and worship of idols and other gods (Ex 20:3-5).

The Sinai covenant was like the wedding between Yahweh and Israel, in which they committed to be faithful to each other (Ex 19:5-6; 24:3-8). But on the honeymoon the Israelites had sex with someone else. That seems like a legitimate cause for anger. So Yahweh’s anger burns hot against his people, and he tells Moses that they will be destroyed (Ex 32:10). Fortunately for Israel, Moses convinces Yahweh to change his mind (Ex 32:11-14; see also chapter seven, “Rigid or Flexible?”).

The Exodus pattern seems to generally fit the entire Old Testament: Yahweh delivers them. They complain. He is patient. They promise to obey. The first opportunity they get, they disobey. Yahweh eventually becomes angry and punishes them. The name “slow to anger” for Yahweh seems appropriate.

Recently, as we were about to fall asleep, we opened our windows to get some fresh spring air inside, but we were surprised to discover that the Daytona 500



was being held in our front lawn. Actually, it was just a Harley-Davidson accelerating on the road in front of our house,<sup>7</sup> but it woke up both my sons. I was furious. (I get mad just writing about it.)

It is easy to get mad instantly. We quickly become enraged if someone pulls in front of us on the road, throws trash on our lawn or makes us wait too long at a restaurant. For many of us, anger is a daily occurrence. Wrath comes quickly and easily. What is difficult is to get angry slowly. It takes patience. Yahweh is patient, but that's not all.

### **The Abundant, Enduring Steadfast Love of Yahweh**

As noted above, the description of Yahweh as “slow to anger” first appears in the context of a divine name revealed after the golden calf incident (Ex 34:6). In the rest of the verse, Yahweh is also said to be “merciful,” “gracious” and “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

While all these descriptors sound positive, one in particular stands out: “steadfast love,” or *hesed* in the Hebrew. Other translations render *hesed* as “lovingkindness,” “kindness,” “love” or “mercy.” It is difficult to fully comprehend all the possible connotations of a word in another language, but *hesed* is the best kind of love one could imagine. It is the love of a devoted parent to a child from infancy to adulthood and beyond. It is the love of a committed spouse to her or his partner over decades of marriage. It is not a word used lightly for a relationship. In light of this, we can now make three observations about the *hesed* of Yahweh.

First, *hesed* in the Old Testament usually describes the behavior of Yahweh. The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament (251 times), and the vast majority of these are descriptions of Yahweh (179 times). Many of the occurrences appear in the Psalms (123), but Yahweh is characterized by *hesed* generally throughout the Old Testament and specifically in most Old Testament books. While Abraham had to wait for a son, while Jacob was fleeing his fratricidal brother and while Joseph was languishing in prison, they were all shown *hesed* by Yahweh (Gen 24:27; 32:10; 39:21). God gave Abraham a son in Isaac, he protected and blessed Jacob, and he made Joseph prosper, eventually promoting him over all Egypt. Yahweh is a god of steadfast love.

Second, not only is Yahweh loving, but his *hesed* is abundant. In the other eight Old Testament verses that describe Yahweh as “slow to anger,” the immediate context includes formulaic language echoing Exodus 34:6-7, with the repetitions of the following words or phrases: “abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*)” (7 times), “merciful” (6), “gracious” (6), “faithful” (1), “forgiving” (2), “relenting from disaster” (2). Interestingly, the description for Yahweh that is most commonly linked with “slow to anger” is abundant *hesed* (Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15;

103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). Yahweh's own name declares that he can be characterized by overwhelming *hesed*. Yahweh's abounding *hesed* combines with a variety of other positive attributes—mercy, grace, faithfulness and forgiveness—making him a deity worthy of worship.

Third, not only is Yahweh's *hesed* abundant, it is also enduring. The phrase "his steadfast love endures forever" occurs 42 times in the Old Testament to describe Yahweh. While 26 of these occur in one psalm (Ps 136, the *hesed* psalm), the other 16 are scattered around the Old Testament (1 Chron 16:34, 41; 2 Chron 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21; Ps 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 2, 3, 4, 29; Ezra 3:11; Jer 33:11). When Yahweh declared his name to Moses, he stated that while he punishes for three or four generations, his *hesed* continues for thousands of generations (Ex 34:7).<sup>8</sup> A similar idea of thousands of generations of steadfast love for obedience is expressed in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:6) as well as in three other texts (Deut 7:9; 1 Chron 16:15; Ps 105:8). A thousand generations would last a long time (about 30,000 years). So, if you are a descendent of King David (he had quite a few, the main reason for all the "no vacancy" signs in Bethlehem during Jesus' birth), you are still reaping benefits from his steadfast obedience three millennia ago.

So Yahweh gets angry slowly and loves abundantly and enduringly, but you might be wondering about the Canaanites or the Egyptians. Did Yahweh abundantly love them?

### **Did Yahweh Abundantly Love the Canaanites and the Egyptians?**

The issue of God's relationship with the Canaanites and the Egyptians is problematic, and one we'll revisit in chapters four and five, but a few points need to be made here in the context of divine anger. While establishing the covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:12-21), Yahweh informs him that his descendants will be slaves for four hundred years.<sup>9</sup> (At that point I might have asked Yahweh, "So how is this covenant a good thing?") In this context Yahweh also mentions the Egyptians and the Canaanites. He tells Abraham that judgments will come upon both the nation that oppresses Abraham's descendants (Egypt) and the idolatrous people who live in Canaan (the Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites and so on).

While I understand why people advocate on behalf of the Egyptians in Exodus (Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Why did God drown them in the Red Sea?), when asking these questions we need to remember the big picture. Egypt was the most powerful nation on the planet and at the top of the Egyptian power "pyramid" stood Pharaoh. He was worshiped as a god. The Egyptians were the ones enslaving and oppressing. Feeling sorry for Egypt is like feeling sorry for Moe, from Calvin and Hobbes, the six-year-old bully who tortures Calvin during gym, steals his lunch money and calls him "Twinky." (Not surprisingly, Moe also

shaves.) Modern-day equivalents to Moses' Pharaoh would be despots like Robert Mugabe or Kim Jong-il, oppressive leaders that most of us would find it difficult to feel compassion toward.

We don't feel sorry for the bully but for the victim, which relates to my big question about Egypt and Israel. Why did God allow his own people to suffer so long under Egyptian oppression? Because he is a God that is slow to anger. He waited four hundred years. My belly doesn't like to wait two minutes for the chili to heat up in the microwave. It's hard to imagine waiting for four hundred years for anything. One of the main purposes of delaying divine judgment is that it gives people opportunities to repent. Because Yahweh delayed the judgment on Nineveh, they eventually repented, and he turned away from his anger (Jon 3:5-10).

Yahweh also waited to punish the Canaanites because, even though they were guilty already, their sin was not yet finished (Gen 15:16). So God waited four hundred years to punish the Egyptians and the Canaanites, and during this period his own people paid the price. Because Yahweh is slow to anger, his people were not only homeless but also slaves and victims of oppression. Eventually, Yahweh got angry at the crimes of Egypt and Canaan, and he finally delivered Israel from enslavement and provided them with a homeland. However, for four hundred years in Egypt, they paid the price for Yahweh's slowness to anger.

### **If We Avoid Them, They Won't Go Away**

I won't be able to discuss in one chapter all the places in the Old Testament where Yahweh gets angry, but I've tried to focus on a few of the more problematic passages. I encourage you to look at some others on your own. Yahweh got angry at Balaam (Num 22:22), at Moses (Deut 3:26), at Solomon (1 Kings 11:9), at Job's friends (Job 42:7), at Israel (Judg 2:20; 2 Kings 17:18; Ps 106:40; Zech 7:12) and even at all the nations of the earth (Is 34:2). Studying the divine anger sections of the Old Testament may not make us feel warm and fuzzy inside like meditating on Psalm 23, but it's important not to avoid these texts. It can be embarrassing for those of us who teach the Bible when other people talk about a story of God getting mad and we didn't even know it was in there. But beyond personal embarrassment, it will take some work to interpret these divine-anger texts correctly. Fear of tough texts won't help. If we avoid them, they won't go away. The only way to understand them is to read, study, discuss and teach them.

If you are troubled by passages in the Old Testament in which Yahweh got angry, here are three pieces of advice. First, ask why Yahweh got angry. Be open to finding a legitimate reason for his anger. In Uzzah's case, Yahweh was mad because his people weren't following his instructions and, as a result,

weren't honoring the relationship. There will be a reason for Yahweh's anger. See if you can find it.

Second, read the whole context. Yahweh did get mad at Israel in Exodus 32, but only after he had freed them from slavery, rescued them from the Egyptian army, fed them with manna, provided water for them and met with them at Sinai. He was mad because they committed adultery on the honeymoon. Given the context, it makes sense that Yahweh got mad.

Third, have reasonable expectations. You won't be able to resolve all the problems. But some work will help you understand these passages better and save you embarrassment over your lack of biblical knowledge and over the behavior of God.

### **WWJW? (Who Would Jesus Whip?)**

The Doonesbury strip quoted at the beginning of this chapter continues as Sam contrasts Jesus to the Old Testament God: "God's only son is this total pacifist—he wouldn't harm a flea. He's just this humble dude who's mellow to everyone—even the Romans. He only really snaps once, right?" Boopsie asks, "Who with, honey?" Sam answers, "The moneylenders, Mom!" Boopsie replies, "Oh, right. What is it about moneylenders?" Rev. Sloan finally chimes in, "They do seem to set people off, don't they?"

Sam brings up the most famous example of Jesus becoming angry, often called the "cleansing of the temple." The Gospel writers apparently thought it was important for the anger of Jesus to be emphasized, since all four of them include this incident (Mt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-46; Jn 2:14-16).

When Jesus saw what was going on in the temple, he made a whip to drive out not just the animals (cattle, sheep, doves) but also their humans (livestock traders and money changers).<sup>10</sup> (I had a whip when I was a kid, but Mom never let me use it on my brothers. I should have responded, "But Jesus used his whip on the money changers.") Jesus also dumped over their tables and coins.

Jesus was angry that people, particularly the Gentiles, were being deprived of the opportunity to pray and worship God. The livestock sellers and money changers were doing business in the court of the Gentiles, and Jesus specifically quoted Isaiah 56:7 that the temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations. Can you imagine trying to pray in the middle of the New York Stock Exchange? Jesus became furious because people were prevented from communing with their God. That seems like a good reason to get mad.

Interestingly, the night before he cleansed the temple, after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus went into the temple and looked around at everything (Mk

11:11). He saw the tables of the money changers and smelled the “deposits” of the livestock, but he decided to wait until the next day to take action and display his wrath. Jesus, like Yahweh, was slow to anger.

While Jesus was clearly mad during the temple “cleansing,” the only time the Gospels state explicitly that he was angry was when he healed the man with a withered hand (Mk 3:1-6). Jesus was angry at the Pharisees because they didn’t want him to heal the man on the sabbath. Ironically, the Pharisees didn’t want a healing on the sabbath, but they had no problem conspiring to kill Jesus on the sabbath. Amazingly, Jesus wasn’t mad that the Pharisees were plotting Christocide, but rather that they had hard hearts and didn’t want him to show compassion on the man. Jesus’ anger was totally legitimate. He and Yahweh both became angry at a lack of compassion.

### **Taking God’s Mercy for Granted**

So Jesus and Yahweh get angry, but Yahweh’s angry responses still seem too extreme. I just wish God didn’t kill people in his anger to punish them. At this point it will be helpful to reflect briefly on what the Bible says about sin and death. Even though it’s not popular to talk about, both testaments teach that death is the just punishment for sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23; Jas 1:15). So the death of Uzzah in the Old Testament and Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament (Acts 5:1-11) really shouldn’t shock us. We are surprised by these intense stories because the vast majority of the time that people sin, no one dies instantly, so when someone does, it seems unfair. If the wages of sin are death, why don’t more people die immediately?

More people don’t die instantly because God is gracious and slow to anger. He decides to delay the punishment for sin and give people opportunities to repent. While severe punishments should remind us that death is the natural consequence of sin, instead we think God is mean. While delayed punishments should remind us that God is slow to anger, instead we think we don’t really deserve death. We end up taking God’s mercy for granted.

### **When Should We Get Angry?**

It will be impossible to fully understand the severity of Yahweh’s anger, but hopefully this chapter helps us understand why Yahweh got angry and how his anger made sense in the context of the Old Testament. Can we, however, use the God of the Old Testament as a model for appropriate anger in our own context? I think we can, and reviewing the two main types of situations in which Yahweh gets angry will show us why.

First, Yahweh gets angry about a breakdown in relationship. As we saw above with Uzzah and the Israelites at Sinai, Yahweh gets mad when his people break the covenant with him. While this reason might not immediately make sense, when it is put in the context of a marriage, it becomes more reasonable. Most people would say it is legitimate to become angry over an adulterous spouse. Individuals should get angry when a spouse is unfaithful, because the marriage relationship is meant to be exclusive. Many things are meant to be shared, but not husbands and wives. If your spouse is committing adultery, you will be angry if you care about the breakdown in relationship. Yahweh cares enough about his covenant with his people to get angry when they break it. Similarly, we should care enough about broken relationships with spouses, family members or friends to become upset and even angry when there's a problem. Because of bitterness, hurt or simply apathy, it is easy to ignore or avoid relational problems. Fortunately, Yahweh doesn't take that path but shows us how to value reconciliation.

Anger is often the first step in the reconciliation process. The story of Joseph is often held up as an Old Testament paradigm of family reconciliation, but interestingly, when Joseph first sees his brothers, he yells at them, treats them harshly and throws them into jail for three days (Gen 42:7-17). If we are tempted to sugarcoat Joseph's motivation here not as anger but as something more noble in light of what he says later (Gen 50:20), recall that his brothers were responsible for his thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment (and you thought your brothers were bad). It would be bizarre not to assume Joseph was seriously upset with his brothers for what they did to him.

He was angry not only because he was hurt but also because he cared about the relationship. Joseph's anger served as a catalyst for reconciliation by prompting Reuben to acknowledge that what he and his brothers did to Joseph was wrong (Gen 42:22). Only after Joseph overheard Reuben's confession did he weep (Gen 42:24). The process eventually culminated in the final reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers (Gen 45:1-15; 50:15-21). The examples of Yahweh and Joseph teach us that anger is often an important first step toward forgiveness.

Second, Yahweh gets angry about injustice. His anger about oppression led him first to deliver Israel from Egypt and then to give his people the command to care for widows, orphans and aliens. Yahweh's anger over injustice is a major theme of prophetic literature, particularly Amos. While it seems like most of the time our world doesn't care about injustice or oppression, and certainly wouldn't get mad about it, many influential advocates for the poor have been people of faith, both throughout history (Saint Francis, John Wesley, William Wilberforce) and in recent times (Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, Bono). All these individuals were influenced by the teachings of both testaments. From the Old Testament specifically, we learn that Yahweh cares enough for the



poor and the oppressed to get angry about a lack of compassion. In his anger he even punishes people who oppress others.

Is the God of the Old Testament angry? Yes. Is the God of the Old Testament loving? Yes. Is the God of the New Testament angry? Yes. Is the God of the New Testament loving? Yes. Anger and love are not mutually exclusive. Love for people can lead to anger over a broken relationship. Love for people can also lead to anger about injustice. The God of the Old Testament and New Testament is both quick to love and slow to anger (Jas 1:19). And we should be too.

To read the complete book, [\*God Behaving Badly\*](#), by David T. Lamb, see the InterVarsity Press webpage.

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