

Welcome

What does it feel like when God is angry at you?

Off the cuff, you might wonder if hitting more red lights than usual is a sign of God's wrath. But more seriously, when we hit hard times, it's easy to feel like we made someone up there mad. When we get sick, or when we have one of those weeks, months or years when it's one thing after another, we want to blame bad karma or say the universe is against us or question what we've done to make God mad at us.

It doesn't help that, whenever tragedy strikes, there are plenty of pundits who want to make sure we know God's to blame. Every natural disaster, every national tragedy, you can find at least a few crazy Christians trying to explain how and why we've angered God so God threw a hurricane or tornado or airplane at us.

And in times of personal tragedy, that happens too. Well-meaning people put a gentle hand on our shoulder and ask if we are right with the Lord, implying that we're probably not, and that's why this is happening to us.

Is that what it looks like when God gets angry?

Well... no. Like all the best lies, this one has a grain of truth in it, but the idea that God is essentially Thor, throwing lightning bolts at those who cross him is just plain wrong. Understanding God like that makes us afraid, and it actually keeps us from responding correctly to God's anger.

We're going to talk today about what it looks like when God gets angry, and how we can respond to that anger. Because God's anger - like every other aspect of God - arises from God's love, a perfect love that casts out fear. And ultimately, God's anger is about life and hope.

Message

We're in a series right now called Good Grief. It's about how we respond to tragedy in our lives. We have been talking about how lament moves us from orientation to disorientation to reorientation. We begin in a state of orientation - we just go about our lives, our beliefs and assumptions intact. But then something happens - tragedy strikes. A relationship ends. Someone gets sick. A natural disaster strikes. Life gets turned upside down. We're disoriented.

Disorientation is uncomfortable. Our culture teaches us to medicate or avoid the discomfort of disorientation. But it's in the place of disorientation we have the chance to grow. Because in our lament, we are crying out to God. We're insisting that this isn't right - we're not meant to live in a world of suffering and pain. And we're seeing in this series that it is specifically this movement of lament, this sitting in the pain of the disorientation that helps us reorient - to see where we were wrong, to see where we need to stand up to address injustice, to repent of sin.

The life on the *other* side of lament is better. We find better life, deeper wholeness than we had previously imagined. But only if we push *through* the process of lamenting. We'll never get there if we medicate or avoid.

[Scripture Slide 1] Our guide in the journey of Lament is the book of Lamentations. Turn with me to Lamentations 2. Theologian Soon-Chan Rah describes Lamentations as the pinnacle of Israel's grief. This book was written when God's people were at their lowest point, as bad as bad could get.

The book was written after the Exile, which is how we refer to the event where the Babylonian Empire conquered the nation of Judah. They destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, slaughtered hundreds, destroyed God's Temple and forcibly deported the city's elite - the priests and government.

The Babylonians left behind a smoldering ruin. Famine, disease and destitution were all there was available for the citizens who were left behind. They had no infrastructure, no leadership, no one to help them pray.

Except the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had lived in Jerusalem before the Exile. As the Babylonian armies made their way toward Jerusalem, Jeremiah warned the city's elite not to try to make alliances with the surrounding nations. He warned again and again that what they needed was to return to faith in God, that if they persisted in putting their trust in other nations rather than God, they would be conquered and destroyed.

Jerusalem didn't listen, and Jeremiah's predictions came true.

And now as the city grieves -- as they process what happened and why -- Jeremiah is with them, among them, grieving with them, shaping their grief into lament. We've seen there are two primary actors in this poem. The first is the prophet, who in the poem acts as the friend of the griever. In this poem, the prophet is not the one grieving. He's the one with the griever. The griever is the second actor. In Lamentations, she is a woman, who is a personification of Jerusalem - so really the whole people of God.

Last week, we listened as the woman grieved. We saw that lament requires an honest appraisal of where we are - that rather than rush to fix or explain or avoid, we have to sit with our grief.

Lamentations 2 is a different movement. Lamentations 2 is about God's anger. Let's read some of the prophet's words from the beginning:

The Lord in his anger has cast a dark shadow over beautiful Jerusalem.

The fairest of Israel's cities lies in the dust, thrown down from the heights of heaven.

In his day of great anger, the Lord has shown no mercy even to his Temple.

Without mercy the Lord has destroyed every home in Israel.

In his anger he has broken down the fortress walls of beautiful Jerusalem.
He has brought them to the ground, dishonoring the kingdom and its rulers.

All the strength of Israel vanishes beneath his fierce anger.
The Lord has withdrawn his protection as the enemy attacks.
He consumes the whole land of Israel like a raging fire.

He bends his bow against his people, as though he were their enemy.
His strength is used against them to kill their finest youth.
His fury is poured out like fire on beautiful Jerusalem.

Yes, the Lord has vanquished Israel like an enemy.
He has destroyed her palaces and demolished her fortresses.
He has brought unending sorrow and tears upon beautiful Jerusalem.

He has broken down his Temple as though it were merely a garden shelter.
The LORD has blotted out all memory of the holy festivals and Sabbath days.
Kings and priests fall together before his fierce anger.

The Lord has rejected his own altar; he despises his own sanctuary.
He has given Jerusalem's palaces to her enemies.
They shout in the LORD's Temple as though it were a day of celebration.

The LORD was determined to destroy the walls of beautiful Jerusalem.
He made careful plans for their destruction, then did what he had planned.
Therefore, the ramparts and walls have fallen down before him.

Jerusalem's gates have sunk into the ground. He has smashed their locks and bars.
Her kings and princes have been exiled to distant lands; her law has ceased to exist.
Her prophets receive no more visions from the LORD. -- Lamentations 2:1-9

The prophet describes the destruction of Jerusalem as the actions of God. This is a terrifying, fearsome passage that confirms all our worst fears about God and God's anger. God isn't changing stoplights; God is abandoning his own Temple, destroying walls and tearing down gates.

This terrifying picture of God is exactly why we don't like to talk about God's anger. It's also why in our most painful moments we fear we have become objects of God's wrath.

God's anger presents a curious problem for many of us. Since the first days of the Church, Christians have insisted that God is essentially self-giving Love. But when the Church was assembling the Bible, choosing what books are in and which are not, we didn't cut out all the "God's anger" stuff. We kept Lamentations 2. And there are several places in the New Testament that talk about God's anger.

Those first Christians didn't see God's anger as something separate from or contrary to God's love. In fact, they understood God's anger as a manifestation of God's love. Paul's words to the Church in Rome offer a framework for understanding why God gets angry... and how:

God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

God gets angry at our refusal to worship God - rather than acknowledge God as the creator of the universe, we turn to idolatry, giving our worship and allegiance to things we've created. We'll come back to this in a minute, but look *how* God's anger is revealed:

So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. -- Romans 1:18-25

God's wrath against us is revealed when God gives us over to our desires. God's anger is manifest against us when God gives us what we want.

Huh?

It's easy to hear Paul's description of God as a sort of narcissism. Is God a self-absorbed deity who throws a tantrum when we don't pay attention to him?

Well, no.

God is the creator of the universe, and the one who made you and me. God intended for humanity to be image-bearers. Our holy role in the world is to bear God's image (and idols are images of Gods). We are to be God's images in the world, but instead we worship created things and become warped. This is Sin - refusing to be all God created us to be.

Theologian NT Wright described God's anger at sin as an anger at what Sin does to us. He said it's the same kind of anger a master violin-maker would feel at seeing one of his beautiful creations used as a tennis racket.

God warns us again and again that if we follow the ways of Sin, it will lead to Death for us. God says again and again, "I know the way to life. I created you. I know what will bring your flourishing. Don't follow the ways of Sin. It only ends badly."

But if we persist long enough, the Scriptures say that God will give us over to what we want. God will let Sin have full-reign in our lives and we will suffer the painful consequences.

That's what's happened in Lamentations. To read Lamentations 2, you'd think a natural disaster had struck. God sent an earthquake to tear down the walls and gates. Or a tornado to level the Temple. But that's not what happened. The Babylonians conquered Israel. A foreign nation destroyed them.

But the prophet says it was God, ultimately, who destroyed Jerusalem.

That's because in the years leading up to the Exile, God's prophets warned again and again not to trust foreign nations, not to make alliances with them and their gods. God warned over and over that only by remaining faithful to the Way they had received from God would they remain safe and secure.

But God's people didn't listen. Rather than trusting God and remaining faithful, they kept turning to other nations.

So finally, God gave them what they wanted - a plan for national security that didn't include God or God's way. God stepped away and let the other nations and their gods give it their best shot.

The results were devastating. And Jeremiah and the other prophets lament again and again that this is all evidence of God's anger with them. God gave them what they wanted and the results were devastating.

There comes a time in our pain and grief when we need to do some honest self-examination. Sometimes when our lives have exploded, we need to ask ourselves if we were to blame. If a relationship ended, what part did I play in that? If money is tight, do I need to look at my own spending and saving habits? What is my responsibility in my own pain? How much of this do I rightfully own?

Sometimes we'll learn that God has given us what we wanted, that we refused to follow God's way, and so our sin has been given full reign in our life. Sometimes we have to recognize that God is angry with us.

This is a painful realization. But even in God's anger, there is good news. Because God's anger is grounded in God's love for us. The writer of Hebrews insists that what we're experiencing when we encounter God's anger is divine discipline:

As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all. Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?

For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. -- Hebrews 12:7-11

This is why it is important to recognize that again and again, the Scriptures tell us God is *slow* to anger. The image in Hebrews isn't of a God who has a short fuse, flies off the handle and throws a lightning bolt at us. That would be abusive. No, God's anger is a loving, carefully measured discipline designed to show us exactly what is in store for us if we continue in our sin.

But we have to *listen* to that anger. And this is where the figures of the woman and the prophet in Lamentations help us.

Too often, in the midst of tragedy and pain, we get drive-by judgment. Would-be prophets stand at a distance and tell us it's all our fault, that God is punishing us. But they have no real knowledge of our situation. They're speaking of ignorance. And Scriptures warn us over and over not to do this. We can't judge from the outside.

That's why it matters that Jeremiah, the prophet who wrote Lamentations, is part of the people who experienced the Exile. He's part of the people God is disciplining. And while, as God's prophet, he could stand apart and say, "I told you so," he doesn't. He makes the people's pain his pain. And that gives him the right to explore God's anger with her.

His loving presence creates space for the woman to be honest about her own sin, the part she played in the devastation she now lives in.

And friends, if there is any hope for us, if we are to learn from our sins, if we are to avoid the consequences of our sins in the future, this is our only hope. We have to take an honest inventory of our situation. Because God is always inviting us toward life.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus doesn't stand apart. He becomes one of us and takes the consequence of our sinfulness on himself. He bears it with us and for us, and invites us to experience it with him.

1. Sdfg
2. Sdfg
3. Sdfg
4. Sdfg

Assignment + Blessing

Are you the prophet? Enter into your friend's pain.

Are you the woman? What will it take for you to be honest?