

# Being Angry at God

## Psalm 13:

*How long, O Lord will you continue to ignore me? How long will you not pay attention to me?*

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have grief in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look at me! Answer me, O Lord my God! Revive me, or else I will die! Then my enemy will say, "I have defeated him!" Then my foes will rejoice because I am upended.*

*But I trust in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord because he has been good to me.*

## SERMON

When I was about 5 years old, I had a small suitcase about twice the size of a child's plastic lunch box. One day, I was particularly cross with my mother and I announced that I was leaving home. So I began to pack my little suitcase with some clothes and toys that I needed. I remember my mom laughing at me, which only made me more determined. My dad returned to the house and asked "What was going on?" So I explained I was leaving home. He asked: "What would I do for food?" I thought about it for a moment and said "I would be back for meal times!" Dad then asked my Mom for an explanation and she said that I had been "moaning" about something or another. To which I chirped up: "The Bible says: 'blessed are those who moan'!" Dad tried to explain to a 5 year-old the difference between 'moaning' and 'mourning'! And then instructed me to go and unpack my case. I didn't leave home that day!

Clearly, I felt something was deeply unfair and I was moaning at my lot, or at my Mom, or both!

Are there times you want to MOAN at our heavenly parent, to God? Just to groan and bewail to God about life being unfair, perhaps especially when, just like Job, you have done absolutely *nothing* wrong!

Let's move beyond moaning to anger. Is it OK to be mad at God, I mean really angry? Some people would not want to provoke God in that way - in case a lightning bolt was the response! Some *Christians* don't think that being angry with God is appropriate at all. Does the Bible have anything to say on that matter?

One of the most haunting statements of grief and anguish in the New Testament is recorded for us in Matthew 27: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" says Jesus while dying in agony on the cross. This, as many of you know, is a direct quote from Psalm 22:1, which is a psalm of lament. The Gospel writer uses this quote to imply many things that we will not discuss today. But what I want to

do is to speak about psalms of lament in general and to give permission, if that were needed, to be angry at God.

When we think of psalms, we often think of hymns of praise – when we sing psalms in worship, we tend to only sing the joyful, adoration psalms. We overlook the fact that *most* psalms are referred to as ‘psalms of lament’, either personal or communal, that cry out to God for help. Clearly, the Jews had no problem in vocalising – even in the synagogue – their disappointment, frustration and anger at God.

Such psalms are so numerous that they have a characteristic poetic style all of their own. Typically they include the following:

1. They often evoke the holy name for God – YHWH; in effect the psalmist is saying: ‘Hey, God – remember you made a covenant with us!’
2. They make a direct petition - or plea - to be heard and helped.
3. The trouble they are in is often spelled out.
4. They often justify why God *should* hear and respond to the petition; in short, telling God *why* he should vindicate or save them.
5. There is also usually a statement of confidence and trust in God.
6. And there may be a promise or sacrifice to round off the prayer.

To summarise: *Complaint, Petition and an Expression of Trust and Praise.*

**Listen to Psalm 13 again:**

*How long, O Lord will you continue to ignore me? How long will you not pay attention to me?*

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have grief in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look at me! Answer me, O Lord my God! Revive me, or else I will die! Then my enemy will say, "I have defeated him!" Then my foes will rejoice because I am upended.*

*But I trust in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord because he has been good to me.*

Let’s just briefly go through this psalm together:

The question – *how long?* – is repeated four times. It is not with the expectation that God will answer with a specific time period, but it is simply a groaning expression of deep distress. Its repetition brings an increasingly louder cry of protest, a growing demand for God's urgent attention.

The psalmist begins by spelling out his trouble.

1. *How long, O Lord will you continue to ignore me? How long will you not pay attention to me?*

The psalmist asks: 'God have you simply forgotten about me?' In his experience God is clearly absent right now and there is no evidence that God cares. Worse, has God intentionally turned away from him? This, in Old Testament times, was seen as a sign of God's anger.

2. *How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have grief in my heart?*

In God's apparent apathy or anger – the psalmist is anxious – he is wrestling in his mind and has continual and profound sorrow, as if someone had died. Head and heart are both deeply unsettled.

3. *How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

Who is the psalmist's enemy? We don't know in this case and there is no point speculating. Whoever or whatever the enemy is, it has displaced God, who is the traditional source of help for a Jew. The enemy clearly has the *upper* hand, not God, just how bad can this situation get!

4. *Look at me! Answer me, O Lord my God! Revive me, or else I will die! Then my enemy will say, "I have defeated him!" Then my foes will rejoice because I am appende.*

Here is a *commanding* plea for God to respond. The psalmist reminds God the he is God's covenant partner and God *needs* to answer. It is a life and death crisis to the psalmist. He then reminds God that God's *honour is at stake*.

The next sentence shifts gears so suddenly we wonder what has happened. It says:

5. *But I trust in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord because he has been good to me.*

How does this moaning, distressed and angry psalmist leap to this position? Did God speak words of comfort to him that he omitted to tell us? Did he take a break and come back to finish of the psalm later, when life was better? We don't know, but both are unlikely as this kind of abrupt jump is characteristic of all psalms of lament. Although it may seem very weird to us, the psalmists had no problem in merging together *Complaint* and *Petition* with a statement of *Trust and Praise*. **This is, I suggest, the take home message for Christians who wonder if it is OK to be angry with God.**

The structure of psalms of lament informs us *how* to be mad at God.

Firstly, God is big enough to handle our anger. He sometimes is the only one who can handle it! Moreover, to be angry at our God is a statement of *faith*! We can only get truly mad at someone with whom we have a *relationship*. It is evidence that we still want to communicate with our Maker and Sustainer even when there is no evidence that he is interested in us! That takes some faith *and* also contains the *seeds of hope*. It is that hope that the psalmist proclaims at the end when he abruptly shift gears. The psalmist gives a simple a statement of trust in the steadfast love of God, of God's faithful character, and an acknowledgement that God has been active in his life in the past. And because of *that*, he will trust in God for his life and future.

In between, the psalmist shouts his complaint about life's circumstances and explains to God why God should respond to his plea, which in many cases sounds like a forceful demand. Often our prayers are like that. We see God as a wizard and we are telling God precisely what to do!

One of the things about these psalms is that they are raw, real, and honest. It is a cry from the heart; note we don't have to have it all together to pray to God. We are allowed to be emotional! It is precisely because the psalm *is* an emotional outburst of anger and frustration that we should not see the petition as particularly logical or literal. We often say things we don't mean literally when we are mad. Unlike in our human relationships, God will not hold that outburst against us! Thank God for that!

As I said earlier, the structure of psalms of lament - *complaint, petition* and a statement *of trust* - informs us *how* to be mad at God. Nevertheless, I don't think that God wants us to live in a state of anger for long. If you find that that you are, then perhaps you are struggling to forgive *God* for something you deem *him* to have done. That kind of situation may require the wise counsel of a pastor, or someone else, to address and resolve.

If we are to be angry with God, don't forget the important caveat the psalmist gives: the clear and bold statement of trust. In our anger and disappointment with God, let's not forget the rock steady, ever present love of God towards us, regardless of what we are experiencing.

As Paul proclaims in Romans 8:

I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels, nor heavenly rulers, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.