

The question of God's anger perplexes many of us when we read the Old Testament. There are many references to God's anger and wrath, but what is his anger? To answer this question, it will be enlightening to look at some examples in the Bible. The first mention of God's anger was when he commissioned Moses to lead the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage to freedom. What were the circumstances that compelled God to manifest his anger at that time?

And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the LORD said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? ... have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say. And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send. (Ex. 4:10–13)

Moses was fearful of going in before Pharaoh alone and requested a spokesman. How did God respond?

And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee: and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart. (Ex. 4:14)

How did God express his anger? By giving Moses what he wanted. Let's look at some other Bible passages with references to God's anger:

And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? Then Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent: and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly; Moses also was displeased. And there went forth a wind from the LORD, and brought quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth. And the people stood up all that day, and all that night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails: he that gathered least gathered ten homers: and they spread them all abroad for themselves round about the camp. (Num. 11:4, 10, 31–32)

In this incident, we again find God's anger mentioned. What did he do? He gave the people what they wanted. [Compare this with Psalm 78:26-29].

And it came to pass, when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel ... And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment. Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Harken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. (1 Sam. 8:1–7)

God sent a message to the people through his prophet Samuel giving many reasons why it would not be in their best interest for him to grant their request for a king. Did they listen to Samuel?

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles. (1 Sam. 8:19–20)

How did God respond to the people's insistence? "And the LORD said to Samuel, Harken unto their voice, and make them a king" (v. 22). How do we know that God gave them a king in anger? The prophet Hosea, looking back on this historical event, gives us God's perspective on the role he played in granting the people's request:

O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help. I will be thy king: where is any other that may save thee in all thy cities? and thy judges of whom thou saidst, Give me a king and princes? I gave thee a king in mine anger, and took him away in my wrath. (Hos. 13:9–11)

These three scriptural accounts clearly show that God's anger was synonymous with him giving the Israelite people what they wanted when it was not in their best interest for him to do so. This should be enough, at the very least, to suggest that God's anger can be defined, from the Bible, as something decidedly different from the definition found in the dictionary. However, there is much more than this. What happened when Jesus got angry?

And he entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might

accuse him. And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other. And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him. (Mark 3:1–6)

This is an encounter Jesus had with the Pharisees. Their legalistic restrictions prohibited healing on the Sabbath day. Jesus, reading their hearts, "looked round about on them with anger." What kind of anger did Jesus have? The kind that is described as "being grieved for the hardness of their hearts." Jesus was experiencing grief or deep sadness at the lack of love and sympathy demonstrated by these pitiless religious leaders for the man with the withered hand. What more can we discover in the Bible about God's anger and wrath?

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. (Rom. 1:18)

How is the wrath of God revealed?

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts. (Rom. 1:24)

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections. (Rom. 1:26)

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind. (Rom. 1:28)

God's **wrath** is defined here as God **giving them up or giving them over**—in other words, God is giving the people freedom to separate from himself. Not exactly the wrath of revengeful destruction we often credit to God's account. Let's look at some more Old Testament passages.

... Do they provoke me to anger? saith the LORD: do they not provoke themselves to the confusion of their own faces? Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, mine anger and my fury shall be poured out upon this place, upon man, and upon beast, and upon the trees of the field, and upon the fruit of the

ground; and it shall burn, and shall not be quenched. (Jer. 7:15, 19–20)

God asks, “Do they provoke me to anger? ... do they not provoke themselves to the confusion of their own faces?” **The people’s troubles were brought about as a consequence of their idolatry not as punishment from God.**

And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah ... (2 Sam. 24:1)

When David numbered Israel he was demonstrating pride and distrust in God by looking to human numbers and military might to protect Israel. God “moved David against them.” Could there be a problem understanding this statement just as it reads? Was God whispering in David’s ear to number Israel so he would have a good excuse to turn against them?

God doesn’t take an active role in destruction, and he doesn’t stir up evil, but there is someone who does. Is it possible, in this incident, that God “moved” David to number Israel by not preventing him from doing so? And would it be going too far to suggest that it wasn’t God whispering in David’s ear but Satan? How can we know? We can read about this same incident in the book of 1 Chronicles: “And **Satan** stood up against Israel, and **provoked** David to number Israel” (1 Chron. 21:1).

We might wonder why the Bible doesn’t just come right out and say exactly what took place in every encounter within its pages; wouldn’t that make Bible study much simpler? Yes, it would. However, the communication problem between God and humankind has never been because of God’s lack of understanding, but because of ours. God, in his wisdom, gives us the choice to either accept or reject the truth about him. The Bible was written with this important principle in mind. When we have the opportunity to understand saving truth about God and we reject it, more light will only drive us further from him. The Bible’s surface ambiguity allows for opposing interpretations for that reason. **It is not in God’s character to convince us, against our will, to believe in him and his uncompromising love.** At the same time, the Bible provides abundant evidence for those who are looking for our gentle God to find him.

Have You Ever Wondered?

In legal language, a disaster that is due entirely to the forces of nature and could not reasonably have been prevented is referred to as an *act of God*. This phrase is often included in insurance policies. Where did we get the idea that God is responsible for bad things that happen in our world? Does he arbitrarily decide when and where events such as tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and other natural disasters occur? Does God do something to make these things happen? Does he manipulate the natural world to bring about his desired outcome? And why doesn’t he do more to prevent suffering in our world? Finally, was God responsible for the violence we read about in the Bible? Did he resort to violence himself?

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Acts of Our Gentle God

*The Glorious Dawning of a New Day
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Is This God’s Anger?



“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

~ Isaiah 55:8-9 ~