**God Behaving Badly – Week 3 – Angry or Loving**

**Message Big Idea**: When we read certain stories in the Old Testament, it’s hard not to wonder… Is God angry or loving?

**Scripture:** 2 Samuel 6:1-8, James 1:19-20

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**Introduction: God, the Smiter**

*(Series Graphic)* Do you think God is angry?

If there’s one popular image that comes 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.

You’ve heard people say it before, haven’t you? That if you…

* Curse at your golf shot or…
* Cheat at Monopoly or…
* Enter a church building after not being there for a very long time…

…that God is going to strike you down.

Some of us think the idea of a lightning strike is ridiculous. After all, in this modern age, *(Picture)* certainly God has updated his methods. Maybe you remember this Far Side cartoon? God sitting at his great PC in the sky with his finger hovering over the “smite” button. Except we know that can’t be accurate. God is most certainly a Mac guy.

For some of us, Jim Carrey’s view of God in *Bruce Almighty* is not too far off base.

**Video: “Smite me, Almighty Smiter”**

*(Series Graphic)* “Smite me, Almighty Smiter.” Do you think God is angry?

If you read through the Old Testament in the Bible, you’ll likely wrestle with this question. Sure, there are many times God is portrayed as loving and gracious, but turn the page and you come across a God who seems to be teeming with rage. In fact, it’s the stories of God’s wrath that can make some people not want anything to do with him. If God can be gentle and loving one moment and seemingly harsh and cruel the next, is the best thing is to stay away from him?

**Series Recap**

We’re in week three of our series, **God Behaving Badly**. During this series, we’re looking at passages from the Old Testament that lead some people to believe that God is harsh, unfair, and cruel. Without minimizing the challenges in these biblical narratives, we’re trying to make sense of the God we discover there.

Let me remind you that during this series, we’re using the personal name for God, Yahweh, that is the primary way he is referred to in the Old Testament. We believe that it is significant that he is most often referred to as “Yahweh,” rather than simply “God” because it tells us something about the kind of intimacy he desires with his people. There is something personal about calling someone by their first name.

And today we’re asking the question: Is Yahweh **Angry or Loving?**

But, before we go there, let me say something at the onset. There’s no way, especially in 25 minutes, that we’ll be able to resolve all of this. In fact, scholars have spent decades wrestling through these texts and many have disagreed passionately about how to understand them. Our goal today is not to tie everything up with a nice, perfect bow; but instead, to enter into a dialogue about texts that we’re often more inclined to run from.

With that said, let’s dive into a pretty confusing story…the story of Uzzah and the Ark.

**Word: Uzzah and the Ark**

We find today’s story in the book of 2 Samuel taking place during David’s reign as king over Israel.

Now, when I say “Uzzah and the Ark,” don’t think of Noah’s ark with all the animals. The “ark” in today’s story was known as “The Ark of the Covenant.” *(picture)* This Ark was a gold-covered wooden chest with a lid called the atonement cover that contained the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments.

However, what was so significant about this Ark was not the historical items it contained, but rather, it was the place where Yahweh chose to manifest his presence during this time in Israel’s history. During the Exodus, Yahweh tells his people:

**“I will meet with you there and talk to you from above the atonement cover between the gold cherubim that hover over the Ark of the Covenant. From there I will give you my commands for the people of Israel.” –Exodus 25:22**

The Ark of the Covenant represented the very presence of God.

As we fast-forward in history to the time of David, the unthinkable has happened. Because of their disobedience, Israel is defeated by their enemy, the Philistines. 30,000 Israelites are slaughtered in the battle, and the Ark falls into the enemy’s hands.

But as we turn to 2 Samuel 6, the tide has turned. David has just defeated the Philistines who agree to return this sacred object to the people of God. A huge mass of 30,000 soldiers gathers for the momentous occasion. Let’s pick up the story in verse 1:

**“Then David again gathered all the elite troops in Israel, 30,000 in all. He led them to Baalah of Judah to bring back the Ark of God…They placed the Ark of God on a new cart and brought it from Abinadab’s house, which was on a hill. Uzzah and Ahio, Abinadab’s sons, were guiding the cart that carried the Ark of God…David and all the people of Israel were celebrating before the Lord, singing songs and playing all kinds of musical instruments—lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals.” -2 Samuel 6:1-5**

This may be the first historic record of a marching band. Any band geeks in the crowd? Picture a parade, with 30,000 people cheering, shouting, and singing. The story goes on…

**“But when they arrived at the threshing floor of Nacon, the oxen stumbled, and Uzzah reached out his hand and steadied the Ark of God. Then the Lord’s anger was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him dead because of this. So Uzzah died right there beside the Ark of God. David was angry because the Lord’s anger had burst out against Uzzah.” -2 Samuel 6:6-8a NLT**

**Why was Yahweh so Angry?**

So much for the parade. This story is deeply troubling, is it not? What prompted Yahweh to do such a thing? After all, wasn’t Uzzah doing a good thing by keeping the Ark from tipping over? Surely whatever he was doing didn’t warrant Yahweh killing him. Most of us would stand with David, angry with Yahweh for what happened. Is Yahweh a “smiter” after all?

Admittedly, this story is difficult. I don’t want to minimize that. But I want to spend some time reflecting on this question:

**Why does Yahweh become angry?**

As we examine this story in light of the whole narrative of Scripture, I think Yahweh got angry for a number of reasons.

First, if we go back to the time of the Exodus, after Yahweh gave the Israelites instructions on how to build the Ark, he gave them very clear directions about how the Ark was to be transported. *(Numbers 4:15)* It was to be carried by the priests. The Ark was never to be transported on a cart. He had warned the Israelites that if anyone touched the Ark, he or she would die. And Yahweh didn’t just give this command once; he repeated it several times recorded in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

*(Ark picture)* Even all these years later, it would have been difficult to forget how the Ark was intended to be carried because it had two rings on each side of the chest with poles that were never to be removed. Every time the Israelites looked at the object, they would be reminded that Yahweh wanted the Ark to be carried on the shoulders of the priests.

Yet, Yahweh’s concern for Ark transportation might seem a little OCD to our postmodern, casual sensibilities, but let’s put ourselves in Yahweh’s shoes for a minute, hard as that might be.

Remember, it was Israel’s disobedience that led to the capture of the Ark and the slaughter of 30,000 people in the first place. Now, another crowd of 30,000 soldiers is watching this procession. Yahweh did not want to send the message that obedience was optional. Too many lives had already been lost!

Still if disobedience were the only reason Yahweh got mad, we might think he is being petty and harsh. There is another reason Yahweh got angry.

To understand how Yahweh might have felt, let’s imagine this. Let’s imagine you were going to give our wonderful Community Pastor, Eric Metcalf, a ride home after services today. Eric has worked hard all morning, well not too hard, but still, hard enough. So after the service you go out to the parking lot and upon reaching your car, you pop the trunk and tell Eric to get in. It’s not that there isn’t room in the passenger seat; you just decide that Eric is not shotgun material and so you ask him to ride in the trunk. Ridiculous? Of course it is. But it’s something else too… it’s disrespectful. No one, not even Eric Metcalf, should have to ride in the trunk.

And yet, by how the Israelites were transporting the Ark of the Covenant, they were in essence telling Yahweh to ride in the trunk.

Remember, the Ark represented the very presence of God. The reason Yahweh instructed the Ark to be carried on poles by the priests was because that is how royalty was honored in that culture. You’ve seen that in the movies before, right? The king, sitting on a throne, being carried by his servants. It’s called a litter. It was important for Yahweh’s symbolic presence to be treated in a royal fashion because he is Israel’s King. Litters were for royalty. Carts were for things. Placing the Ark on a cart as a mere “thing” revealed the attitude of the people’s hearts toward their King. It was disrespectful. It was an insult to Yahweh.

Which leads to what I believe is the primary reason Yahweh got mad. Yahweh got mad because his people were not valuing their relationship with him. Their lack of respect for the Ark was symptomatic of their lack of concern for their relationship with God. The Ark of the Covenant symbolized not only the presence of Yahweh, but also the covenantal relationship between God and his people. Yahweh valued the covenant with his people so highly that he got angry when the people didn’t treat the object that symbolized that relationship with the utmost care.

Now, I know these reasons don’t answer all our questions, but they do give us some understanding. In essence, **Yahweh** **gets angry about a breakdown in relationship.**

Maybe a helpful way to see this scene is to remember that God is a loving father, who desires to protect his family. Yahweh is trying to spare his family what happened before, and, like a good father, he possesses foresight and perspective that a child simply doesn’t have. Yahweh knows that if he doesn’t step in, his kids are headed for an even more significant pain. Sometimes parents have to make impossibly difficult decisions.

Think about it like this.

Imagine an intruder came into your home in the middle of the night. A terrifying situation none of us ever wants to be in. But, when push comes to shove, would you do something to protect your family? Would a threat to your family move you to anger? As difficult as it may be for us to understand, for Yahweh, his anger is an expression of his love.

And let me ask you this: **Would you want to follow a God that wasn’t passionate about his relationship with you?** It seems Yahweh gets mad when there is some action or decision that pushes against the close bond he desires to have with his people.

When I compare what makes Yahweh mad to what makes me mad…

* I get mad when someone takes too long in the bathroom.
* I get mad when my cable goes out for an hour.
* I get mad when I can’t get those little plastic bags in the produce section of the grocery store open.

Seriously, compared to the things that cause me to get angry, Yahweh’s reasons are a whole lot more honorable. Yahweh gets angry about a breakdown in relationship.

And we haven’t even talked about the times **Yahweh gets angry over injustice.** If we had more time, we could look at examples of Yahweh getting angry over…

* Violence against the innocent.
* Discrimination against entire people groups.
* Oppression of the poor.

Unlike me, Yahweh gets angry over the right things.

*(Matthew 21:12-13)* In fact, Jesus gets angry too. In Jesus, we see the fullness of God, and sometimes Jesus gets quite mad. He flips over tables in the Temple when profiteers were disrupting the place where people would come to meet with God. He cracks whips over the exploitation of the vulnerable. Jesus isn’t flying off the handle. He gets upset when there is a breakdown in relationship. He gets angry over injustice.

In the end, we can be mad that God took Uzzah’s life, but we need to remember that God cares about relationships, he is passionate about justice. So much so, that he was willing to give up his own life to protect his people.

**Slow to Anger**

And there is something else about Yahweh’s anger that is really important. Yes, Yahweh gets angry, but over and over again all throughout the Old Testament he is described as *(heading with verses below added one at a time)* **Slow to Anger**. Here are just a few places:

* Moses, the leader, declares: **“The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.” –Numbers 14:18**
* Jonah, the prophet, says: **“I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” –Jonah 4:2**
* David, the king, declares: **“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” –Psalm 103:8**

I find it interesting that the people in the Old Testament who knew Yahweh best all describe him as someone who is **slow** to anger.

I don’t know about you, but when I get angry, it isn’t typically a slow process. In fact, about the only thing I can do faster than get angry is eat dessert. I can go from zero to sixty pretty quick when it comes to getting angry.

* Cut me off in traffic, instant anger.
* Carry too many items into the express lane at the grocery store, immediate hostility.
* Take the last brownie, quiet, but internal rage.

Getting mad is not something I do slow.

And yet, Yahweh is repeated described by those who knew him best as **slow** to anger.

In fact, if you read through the Old Testament, you’ll find a repeated pattern. It goes like this:

* Yahweh delivers his people.
* They complain.
* He is patient.
* They promise to obey.
* The first opportunity they get, they disobey.
* Yahweh eventually becomes angry and punishes them.
* Finally, his people repent and Yahweh delivers them.
* And the cycle continues.

Yahweh’s anger is not fickle or unpredictable or spiteful. His anger is tied directly to his love. *(Point to Screen)* Did you notice in all three of these verses that the people who knew Yahweh best say that not only is he slow to anger, but also that he abounds in what? Yes, he abounds in **love**. Yahweh abounds in love.

Anger and love are not mutually exclusive.

* (Yahweh gets angry about a breakdown in relationship.) It’s Yahweh’s love for people that leads to his anger over broken relationship.
* (*add* – Yahweh gets angry about injustice.) It’s Yahweh’s love for people that leads to his anger over injustice.

It’s important for us to remember this when we come across these stories in Scripture that are troubling. Listen, I won’t dispute that passages about God’s anger are difficult. Sometimes it is downright hard to make sense of them. Sometimes no amount of careful reflection will be able to resolve all the problems.

But when we encounter a story that is troubling, we need to ask, “Why did Yahweh get angry?” Look for a reason connected to relationship. Look for a reason having to do with injustice. Remember to view the story in the context of the entire Old Testament.

God is both quick to love and slow to become angry. Yahweh is not a “smiter.”

**Challenge: Getting Angry**

Before we conclude today, let’s make this personal. How can God’s anger be a model for us?

First, some of us, myself included, need to be challenged about getting angry over stuff we shouldn’t get angry about.

I’ve joked about the things that make me angry, but the truth is I often get angry over the wrong things. Things like:

* Not getting my way.
* Being inconvenienced.
* Having my pride wounded.

Unlike God, who is quick to love and slow to become angry, I am often quick to become angry and slow to love. My anger puts wedges in relationships rather than seeking to protect them.

Some of us need to be challenged about getting angry over stuff we shouldn’t get angry about.

And others of us, interestingly myself included in this one too, need to be challenged to get angry over the stuff we should get angry about.

**God gets angry about a breakdown in relationship.** What is it that keeps you from growing in intimacy with God? What is that behavior or obsession or object that you know needs to be rid out of your life in order for you to fully surrender to God? Are you willing to get angry over that?

Let’s get angry at anything that is hindering us from going deeper in our relationship with Jesus. And may that anger well up into action until we are fully surrendered to the one who abounds in love for us.

God gets angry about a breakdown in relationship, and *(add)* **God gets angry about injustice.** The people who end up making the biggest difference in this world are usually the people who get mad about the right things. From Mother Teresa to Martin Luther King Jr. to everyday heroes fighting racism, sexism, homelessness, human trafficking, addictions, and everything else that goes against what God dreams for our world. Let’s be people who get angry about injustice because we follow a God who gets angry about these things.

**Conclusion**

Does God get angry? Yes. Is God loving? Yes. Anger and love are not mutually exclusive. His anger always flows from his love.

The passages in Scripture about Yahweh’s anger are understandingly troubling, but if we look beyond the surface we find a God who is full of love and slow to anger.

We do not have to be afraid of Yahweh. He is not out to smite us. On the contrary, he desires to welcome us with open arms.

**Communion Idea**

If you ever doubt the love of God, just look to the cross. There you will find the love of a God who absorbed every angry blow as he was nailed to a cross because of how much he loves you and me. For God, Yahweh, so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, Jesus, that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have ever lasting life.

In Communion, we remember the abounding love of Yahweh as we receive the bread that represents Jesus’ body broken for us and the cup that represents his blood shed for us.