



ASK THE
CHRISTIAN
COUNSELOR



ANGRY
~~AT~~ GOD
WITH

AN HONEST JOURNEY
THROUGH SUFFERING
AND BETRAYAL

BRAD HAMBRICK

STARTING YOUR JOURNEY: GRIEF STUCK IN THE ANGER PHASE

No one gets mad at God for silly reasons, such as, “I wish I had blonde hair instead of brown.” When we’re angry with God, it is because we’ve faced something immensely painful. Despite our hesitancy to admit how we feel, being angry at God reveals something quite good about us. It reveals that God is important to us. We don’t get and stay angry at inconsequential people in our lives. Often, we wish we cared less about God because we have a sense that it would abate the turmoil in our soul. But it is hard to care less about someone as significant as God.

In this opening paragraph, I’ve established two things: (1) you are hurting, and (2) God is important to you.

If you feel safe acknowledging these two things, this opens a number of possibilities. But don’t feel rushed by the “if.” As you read through this book, if you feel too much ground is being covered too quickly, pause. If you were rehabbing an ankle injury and had a sharp pain, you would take a break. Same thing here. The goal is recovery. The pace of recovery is determined by what facilitates your journey best.

To orient you to the journey ahead, here is a summary of the key themes we will cover:

1. Anger with God is usually a response to profoundly painful events in our lives.
2. A healthy response to profoundly painful events involves grief, and anger is an often-overlooked part of grieving; but it's possible to get stuck in the anger phase and not be able to get past it.
3. Angry grief is morally different from selfish anger; it calls for comfort, not repentance.
4. When we feel as if God is condemning us for angry grief, we feel doubly far from God: first, because of the pain, and second, because of the belief that God is upset with us because of our anger.
5. The invitation of this book is to be angry *with* God rather than *at* God—that is, to realize God wants to come alongside us to comfort us. We want to realize God is a trusted friend empathizing with our angry grief, rather than a friend-turned-enemy offended that we can't “just get over it.”
6. Accepting this invitation will require courage on our part, the courage to be vulnerable again.
7. God is a good shepherd who is patient and willing to move at the pace of his sheep. God can be trusted in places that merit the name “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23).

My prayer is that this book will patiently walk with you through the process of being honest with God (and hopefully a Christian friend or two) about your pain, and that, thereby, you will find your relationship with God restored. I hope your prayers become more authentic and honest through this journey. I hope your friendship with God (Exodus 33:11) becomes stronger as you and God navigate this terrain together.

SECTION 1: IT'S SAFE TO TALK ABOUT YOUR ANGER

The goal of section 1 is for you to feel safe talking about painful things and the emotions that emanate from these experiences, including your anger. Sometimes, as Christians, we think we should never get angry. But God gets angry, so this can't be true.

When anger is part of our response to suffering, it is an emotional affirmation of how God sees things. Anger calls bad things bad. Not experiencing any anger in our grief is a form of dissonance between what we think ("this is bad") and what we feel ("it upsets me"). In section 1, we'll strive to resolve this dissonance.

Chapter 1

YOUR PAIN IS NOT A RIDDLE

When we're angry with God, there may be no question we ask more than "Why?" and nothing we like less than people's attempt to answer. The disorientation of painful experiences naturally takes the form of questions: Why did my child/sibling die? Why did my spouse leave? Why was that ministry leader so duplicitous? Why did my business partner betray me? Why _____?

It is as natural to ask why after painful experiences as it is for us to pull our hand back from a searing-hot pan. Putting our pain in the form of a question invites those around us to put the remedy (if that's what we're looking for) in the form of an answer. But answers may be both unsatisfying and offensive. Life is never as simple as the theological formulas we're given to reconcile the goodness of God, the power of God, and the presence of evil. Even if our Christian friends are right, their answers may not be helpful.

That's why I'm saying, "Your pain is not a riddle." Riddles have answers. Riddles start as puzzling questions. With a little deduction, the answer becomes clear. Once we see the answer, we can't unsee it. Once we know the answer, the riddle loses all its angst. It's solved.

For example, take this riddle that Gollum asks Bilbo in *The Hobbit*.

“This thing all things devours;
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats mountain down.”¹

Initially, it seems complex. What is capable of doing all of these things? Then you hear the answer, “Time,” and you can’t unhear it. The riddle is solved. It is powerless to create unrest again.

When we approach pain like a riddle, we keep waiting for the answer that will disempower our pain. Usually, we expect the answer to come in one of two forms: (1) what we have done that is so bad to deserve this pain, or (2) what God is doing that is so good that justifies this pain. Most of our friends’ responses are speculations in one of these two directions.

We can get locked into a discussion of “Why do bad things happen to good people?” The gotcha retort might be, “That only happened once [Jesus on the cross as the only fully innocent person to suffer], and he volunteered.” That may be a great line in a sermon, but it doesn’t answer the experience of suffering in a way that creates relief as an answer does for a riddle.

There is a clear reason it doesn’t satisfy. Pain isn’t a riddle. Pain is an *experience* to be processed and assimilated. Pain isn’t a question to be answered. Pain is a *journey* to be traversed and endured. Trying to resolve pain with an answer is like trying to resolve appendicitis by

explaining what caused the inflammation. The explanation may be accurate, but it's not helpful.

In this book, we will approach pain and the questions that emerge from it as an experience and a journey. We will grapple with biblical and theological truths along the way. There is no way to face intense pain and not grapple with a litany of God-questions. But I won't purport to give answers that result in an "aha moment" that makes things all better.

Admittedly, that may all seem a bit theoretical. Don't let that be a reason to give up. At this point, what you need to understand is this:

- I am not going to try to resolve your pain with an answer, as if it were a riddle.
- We are going to approach your pain as a life-shaping (but not necessarily life-defining) experience and a difficult journey.

If that sounds better than what you were afraid I would try to do, this has been an effective first step on our journey together. My goal in this chapter was to earn enough trust that you permit me to be a companion on the journey ahead.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What have been the most frustrating or hurtful examples of people treating your pain like a riddle? How did that make you feel?
2. How does approaching your pain as a life-shaping experience or journey better fit and honor what you've gone through?

Chapter 2

PACING AND PREPARING YOURSELF

The idea of relief is exciting. If you've thawed to the possibility of this book being beneficial, you might be tempted to move through it too quickly to try to get relief faster. We don't want to do that. We want to be good stewards of this early hope so it does not become hope-deferred and make our heart sick (Proverbs 13:12).

In this chapter, we want to answer two primary questions:

1. *A Preparation Question:* How do you put yourself in the best position to complete the journey ahead?
2. *A Pacing Question:* What indicators do you need to monitor to ensure you are moving at a healthy pace?

PREPARING YOURSELF

If we know a journey is going to be strenuous, it makes sense to think through our preparation. We will consider five ways to wisely prepare for the journey ahead.

1. *Honor Your Pacing Indicators:* If you're an efficiency-oriented overachiever, it is easy to assume that if you ace

the preparation strategies, you can ignore the pacing indicators. While this assumption is tempting, it is inaccurate.

2. *Exercise*: Most of the pacing indicators come down to managing one thing: stress. Grief intense enough to stagnate in the anger phase is stressful in a variety of ways. Few things are more effective at mitigating the effects of stress than cardiovascular exercise. Getting out for a walk, jog, or swim several times per week can do wonders for managing the stress of this journey (see the Additional Resources appendix on page 158 for more guidance on good mental health habits).

3. *Focus on Process More Than Destination*: Don't let that little voice in your head become the proverbial child in the back seat of the car repeatedly asking, "Are we there yet?" Perpetually comparing where you are to where you want to be is discouraging. So instead of disparaging yourself for how much road remains ahead of you, notice and savor each bit of progress you make. Such appreciation builds morale to continue your journey.

4. *Engage in Enjoyable Activities*: You may have heard the modern proverb, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." There is a counseling equivalent, "All growth and no play makes God seem like a demanding tyrant." To offset this dynamic, identify healthy things you enjoy (the outdoors, art, reading, sports, etc.). As you engage in them, remind yourself that God delights in seeing you enjoy them—similar to a good parent watching a child play with a present.

5. *Expand Your Tolerance for Quiet and Stillness*: Both anger and pain cause us to resist quiet and stillness. The echo of what is difficult rings loud when our mind and body are still. But constant stimulation oversaturates and exhausts us. Begin with only five minutes of quiet each

day. Increase the amount as you're able. Sit still. Try not to ruminate; just let your mind settle, comparable to letting sediment fall to the bottom of a swirling glass of water set on the counter. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10) is an invitation to stop wrestling against life. Accept that invitation in increments as you are able.

NOTICING YOUR PACING INDICATORS

If you learned to drive a stick shift, you remember watching the RPM gauge to see when the engine was being stressed too hard. When the RPMs rose, you learned to change gears to avoid overheating the engine. Similarly, five types of indicators reveal you are moving too fast on this journey. Remember, God is more concerned with your health than how quickly you arrive at the destination.

1. *Physical Pacing Indicators*: Listen to your body. Jesus recognized that when the body is depleted, it negatively impacts our soul (Matthew 26:40–43), and he was compassionate toward this limitation. Two of the best physical indicators are our sleep patterns and appetite. If you notice significant changes—an increase or decrease in sleep or appetite, or irritable bowel—take that as a sign to slow down.

2. *Cognitive Pacing Indicators*: Your brain can take in only so many things at a time, especially weighty things. When you have a hard time focusing, take a break. If you have a difficult time remembering important content from what you've read, allow yourself to reread that chapter without punishing yourself. Focus and retention are important cognitive indicators of how we're responding to the stress of processing painful experiences.

3. *Emotional Pacing Indicators*: Admittedly, we need to tread lightly here. You chose to engage this material because you're hurting and angry. So, use the level of agitation you've experienced recently as your baseline. If that sense of agitation spikes, give yourself the freedom to pause. Indicators of agitation might include how you respond to mistakes by others, how quickly being sad defaults to being mad, or how difficult it becomes to feel compassion for others who are experiencing hardships.

4. *Social Pacing Indicators*: When we feel overwhelmed, we tend to pull away from people. But isolation serves as insulation for our emotions. Think of a thermos; it keeps hot drinks hot and cold drinks cold. Isolation has the same effect on our emotions; it keeps intense emotions intense and muted emotions subdued. In chapter 5 we will consider how to identify good companions for this journey.

5. *Spiritual Pacing Indicators*: Arguing with God is a form of prayer. If you find yourself arguing with God, be encouraged—your prayer life may be better than you thought. But you can tell when you are arguing in hopes of a meaningful response and when you're arguing just to punish or spite the other person. The more your prayer life resembles the latter, the more this indicator is revealing you are pushing yourself too hard.

This raises the question, What should I do if an "indicator light" is flashing? First, don't freak out. You're paying more attention to these indicators now, so you can be more intentional in your response. That's good. Second, give yourself the freedom to take a break. God isn't rushing you. Don't rush yourself. Third, if a break doesn't result in the indicator lights turning off, consider talking with a counselor or mentor. There can be

immense benefit to getting outside your own head when processing anger emerging from profound pain (see the Additional Resources appendix on page 158 for help finding a counselor).

Now that you've finished this chapter, rest. Don't rush to your next activity or create an implementation strategy. If you have identified a couple of ways to prevent yourself from disrupting your progress on this journey, be content and feel encouraged.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Which of the five preparation strategies do you anticipate being the most valuable for you?
2. Which of the five pacing indicators do you anticipate being the most important for you?