

A-1 Does the Lord Get Angry?



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

We read in the Word about various ways people are led by the Lord. Sometimes the Lord appears to be angry—such as when the Children of Israel made a golden calf to worship at Mount Sinai. We also read about the Lord's apparently harsh responses to the scribes and Pharisees in the New Testament. Is the Lord really angry with these people—or does He only appear that way? The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church helps us understand the psychology of anger and shows us how a loving God can sometimes seem angry.

Readings from the Word

As you read these passages from the Word, think about how they help you answer the question: Does the Lord get angry?

The Consequences of Making the Golden Calf

The Children of Israel are in the wilderness waiting a long time for Moses to return after receiving the Ten Commandments. They become impatient and ask Aaron to make them gods. Aaron makes a golden calf from their jewelry, and the people celebrate. But then Jehovah instructs Moses to go down from the mountain and tells him what the people have been doing in his absence:

“I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them....” But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “O Lord,” he said, “Why should your anger burn against Your people...? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on Your people....” Then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened (Exodus 32:9-14).

When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai he sees the golden calf and throws down the tables of stone, shattering them. Moses asks all who are on the Lord's side to come to him. The Levites (Moses' tribe) come forward and Moses tells them:

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died” (Exodus 32:27).



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Moses approaches the Lord to try to make up for their sin and the Lord responds:

“Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. Now therefore, go, lead the people to the place of which I have spoken to you. Behold, My Angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit punishment upon them for their sin.” So the Lord plagued the people because of what they did... (Exodus 32:33-35).

Although Jehovah’s message appears to be angry, He also expresses His love, saying:

The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion (Numbers 14:18).

Speaking Out Against the Scribes and Pharisees

The following picture of the Lord’s harsh teaching is from the New Testament. Jesus tells His followers that they should not behave like the Scribes and Pharisees:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men.... [Y]ou pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.... Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.... Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? (Matthew 23:13,23,25,33).

But Jesus ends with words, and a tender picture, that convey His love and caring:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!... I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matthew 23:37-39).

What the Heavenly Doctrine Says About Anger

The Heavenly Doctrine can help us understand the psychology of anger. Anger wells up inside us when something attacks or threatens what we love and want.

Everyone is angered when his love and the delight of his love are attacked. This is the cause of all anger. Everyone’s love is his life, consequently to hurt the love is to hurt the life, and this causes commotion of mind and anger. It is similar with good people when their love is attacked, but they have zeal, not anger. This zeal indeed is called anger in the Word, but still it is not anger.

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Inwardly it is nothing but charity, goodness, and mercy. Therefore zeal does not, like anger, continue after the person towards whom it was kindled repents and turns away from evil. Anger with evil people is different. It conceals hatred and revenge inwardly in itself (see *Apocalypse Explained* 693.2).

The Heavenly Doctrine also makes it clear that it is impossible for the Lord to be angry (*True Christian Religion* 56, see below). He is good itself and cannot act in a way that is different than He really is—even when we think He seems to be angry. He cannot even look at us with a stern expression!

OPTIONAL READING

[God] has...all power; while all others have power only from Him. His power and His will are one; and *since He wills only what is good He can do nothing but what is good*. Moreover, God is good itself, therefore in His doing good He is in Himself, and *to step out of Himself is impossible*. From these few statements it can be seen how deluded those are who think that God can be angry or punish. He cannot even turn Himself away from a person, *nor look upon him with a stern countenance* (see *True Christian Religion* 56, *emphasis added*).

Anger occurs or is aroused when some person or some thing stands against a person's love. Through a person's love a link exists with a person or with a particular thing. When this link is broken, the person becomes angry, as if something from his life that gives him delight, and thus something of his own life, has been lost. This sadness is turned into grief, and the grief into anger (*Arcana Coelestia* 5034).

God's truth becomes that which engages in conflict when it is joined to those who are truly zealous. Those who are zealous engage in conflict; yet they do so not because they are moved by any feeling of enmity or hostility, but rather by charity. Zeal is different from anger in that zeal holds the good of charity within it, and therefore when zeal goes into battle it merely removes those ruled by falsity and evil to prevent them from harming those governed by goodness and truth. Anger however not only removes them but also pursues them in a spirit of hatred and vengeance. For zeal, because of the charity within it, desires the welfare even of those ruled by evil and falsity, and also works towards it provided that they cannot do any harm to those who are good. But anger, because of the hatred and vengeance within it, wishes harm to all with whom it engages in conflict, whether they are good or evil (*Arcana Coelestia* 8598:2).



Focus Points

1. Compare Moses' response to the Lord's apparent anger (Exodus 32:9-14) with the Lord's response to the anger shown by Moses (Exodus 32:33-35).

<i>Moses' Response</i>	<i>Lord's Response</i>

2. Does this picture of the Lord appear like the way parents sometimes treat their children?
3. Do you think that parents are expressing love their for children when they are treating them this way? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the ways we can respond when someone gets angry?

The Heavenly Doctrine tells us that anger boils up inside us when something challenges what we love or want (*Arcana Coelestia* 5034; *Apocalypse Explained* 693.2).

5. How can knowing this help us understand our own anger?

The Heavenly Doctrine also tells us that when the loves of good people are attacked, they respond with zeal, not anger. It is called anger in the Word, but inwardly it is “charity, goodness, and mercy” (see *Apocalypse Explained* 693.2).

6. Does this help us understand why the Word sometimes portrays the Lord as angry?
7. What is the difference between anger and zeal?
8. When we are angry, how can we tell whether good or evil loves are motivating our own feelings?

Activity 1

Exploring Appearances

Brainstorm things that may have a different appearance from the reality. These can be appearances in the natural world (such as that the sun revolves around the earth), ways people behave (for instance an adult yelling at a child who is in danger of being hit by a car), or what a passage in the Word is teaching us (such as Exodus 32, when the Lord says “Leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them...”).

Brainstorm alone or in groups. For brainstorming in groups, have each group take turns sharing an appearance and its reality.

<i>The Appearance</i>	<i>The Reality</i>

When the loves of good people are attacked,
they respond with zeal rather than anger.
Inwardly, this is charity, goodness, and mercy.
(see *Apocalypse Explained* 693:2)

Zeal Masquerading as Anger

- Brainstorm a list of situations in which a person's actions might look like anger but are actually motivated out of concern for another's well-being. An example might be the way a mother responds when a little child is lost and then found or the way a coach talks to his team at half-time.
- Make up a skit to illustrate one of the scenarios, then perform it for the group.
- After each dramatization, you can discuss whether there are other ways a person can communicate concern without seeming to be angry.

Replay!

- If there is time, you could also take turns dramatizing situations in which a person is angry and *not* motivated solely out of concern for another's well-being. An example might be a friend borrowing clothing without asking permission or a younger sibling damaging something that belongs to you.
- After dramatizing the scenario in a way that illustrates an angry response, call out "Replay!" and reenact this situation again with a more appropriate response.

Activity 3

God's Great Love

The Word provides many illustrations of God's love for the human race.

- He "lays down His life for His friends" (John 15, *etc.*).
- He calls us not servants but friends (John 15).
- He promises to be "with us" and never to leave us (Matthew 28:20).
- He preaches mercy and forgiveness *as well as* the importance of keeping the commandments and doing what is good.
- While He wants us to obey Him so we can be most happy, He always loves us. Jesus even forgave His enemies from the cross, saying they didn't know what they were doing (*True Christian Religion* 539, 409).
- He promises to bless us (Numbers 6:24).
- He protects us like a mother hen protects her chicks (Psalm 91:4, Luke 13:34).

1. Which of these illustrations do you find most comforting?
2. Which would you mention to an acquaintance who believes that God is always angry with us?
3. Choose a word (in green) or phrase (in bold black and green) describing God's love and write it on a smooth stone. Keep it with you to remember God's great love for you.

God is my Friend

God cares

God is merciful

God blesses

God is powerful

God is always present

God protects

God keeps me safe

God brings happiness

God loves everyone

God never leaves me

God forgives

God gives peace

God loves me

God accepts

Taking It Home



Here are a variety of activities that can help you bring this lesson into your life.

Ideas for Journal Entries *(choose one)*

Use one of these journal ideas to help you think about the Lord's love.

- ◆ Reflect on the Lord's love by writing about a story or parable in the Word that shows His love for all people.
- ◆ Look for passages in the Word which reflect the Lord's love. Write them on a page in your journal.

For Reflection

Can you remember a time when one of your parents, a teacher or another adult was angry with you? Do the teachings about anger and zeal shed a different light on what happened?

Quote Card

Cut out this quote card and put it where you will see it each day.

The Lord's Love

The Lord loves everyone, and does good to everyone from love.

(Apocalypse Explained 392:4)

**The Lord is gracious and full of compassion,
slow to anger and great in mercy.**

The Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works.

(Psalm 145:8,9)

**The essence of [God's] love consists of three things, namely,
to love others outside of Himself, to desire to be one with them,
and from Himself to render them blessed.**

(see Apocalypse Explained 355:1)

Further Reading

Questions Asked by God

A Newspaper Article by the Rev. Donald L. Rose

God asking questions? We are the ones who do the asking. And so we should, for the Bible tells us to ask, to seek and to knock. From God we seek answers. But does God in truth ask questions? Yes.

Questions asked by God can be so helpful. They can change our perspective and our attitude. At the end of the book of Jonah God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry?" In the story of Cain and Abel questions are especially striking. "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" Not heeding those questions, Cain killed his brother, and God said, "Where is Abel your brother? . . . What have you done?" (Genesis 4).

"It is a common thing in the Word for God to question someone, and for people to reply, although God knew all beforehand." This is from *Heavenly Secrets (or Arcana Coelestia)* paragraph number 1931. In this book theologian Emanuel Swedenborg invites us to notice the questions asked by God.

Actually the very first saying in the Bible addressed to a person is in the form of a question. When Adam had eaten of the fruit, God called to him saying, "Where are you?" It is at this point that Swedenborg begins to discuss the reasons why God asks questions. To quote, "It is common in the Word for someone to be first asked where he is and what he is doing, although the Lord previously knew all things; but the reason for asking is that a person may acknowledge and confess" (*Arcana Coelestia* 226).

We usually ask questions because we do not know. God asks questions because He does know. In the Sermon on the Mount we read, "Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye" (Matthew 7). If we pause and are willing to hearken to God's questions we may become aware of motives and causes in human relationships which we did not before see.

God's questions are not only to help us see our own faults. God uses questions to comfort us. Jesus had a way of asking the disciples why they were fearful. "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (Luke 24).

The Sermon on the Mount is deeply affecting partly because of its use of questions. "Look at the birds of the air . . . are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing?" (Matthew 6:26-28).

There is a story in Genesis about a woman named Hagar who was in despair in the wilderness. The angel of God said to her “Where have you come from and where are you going?” (Genesis 16). Later God called to her in her distress and asked this question: “What ails you, Hagar?” Swedenborg observes here that God has intimate knowledge of our thoughts and affections. When He asks what is wrong it is so that “people may have comfort from being able to express their feelings, which often proves a relief” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2693).

It is from love that God asks questions. He knows where we are and how we are and whither we may go.