One day in college, while I was enjoying a *quiet* lunch in the cafeteria, a fellow student from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, came up to me with Bible in hand, a rare sight.

He said, "Hey, can I show you something in the Old Testament?"

And I thought, *Oh, fun! I love talking about God and the Bible.* And encouraged him to take a seat.

I don't remember the exact passages he showed me. But it probably started with something like **1 Samuel 15:3**: "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

Followed up with **Deuteronomy 7:1–2**: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess… and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy."

I do remembered that as he shared passage after passage, something shifted inside of him. His tone hardened, more anger and more smugness emerged.

And then, with what felt like the epic mic drop of my college years, he asked something to the effect, **"How can you love a God who kills everyone? How can you trust a God who is wrathful and angry?"**

I know I sputtered some kind of response, and I also remember being shaken to the core.

And like a burr inside my sock ever since—pricking and irritating with every step—that question has stayed with me.

I still ask it sometimes: Why did God tell his people to destroy entire cities? Men, women, animals…infants even? And what about with Noah?

How can the God of love we meet in the New Testament be the same angry God we encounter in the Old? How do we live with this seeming discrepancy?

And maybe just maybe…nobody cares!?

Here is why these questions matters.

It matters because people really do walk away from faith over this. That guy never came back to InterVarsity. And I wonder if he is still open to God?

Maybe he was just being stubborn, but others are probably just trying to be honest.

It matters because silence, avoidance, or overly simple answers can make God sound either cruel or irrelevant. And we sound a little shallow and disconnected from reality.

It matters because when the church refuses to wrestle with hard texts, others are more than happy to do the wrestling for us—and often with overly simplistic black and white thinking and scary agendas.

We don't need airtight answers. But we do need reasonably thoughtful ones. We do need responses that are humble enough to admit mystery and strong enough to resist ramped up rhetoric.

Because while God is beyond our full understanding, God is not beyond being known.

And friends, God longs to be known by us, longs for us to draw near. This is why we do THIS on Sunday! God died to be in a dynamic relationship with us every day.

If we don't engage these passages carefully, we risk forming a faith that only works when the sun shines. We do not want the kind of faith that folds like a cheap card table at the first sign of struggle.

We do not want a faith that collapses the moment suffering enters our lives, or when violence erupts in our world, or moral complexity and arrogance sits down with us at lunch.

And as much as this isn't about winning an old argument with a witty and devastating comeback. Okay…maybe it is a little.

It is more about learning how to speak honestly about God without warping God into our own image—or dismissing God as a monster we can no longer love.

It is about seeing God more accurately, removing coke bottle glasses that distort and blur God's face. And seeing God more clearly, accurately, as God truly is.

So, in what quite possibly could be the longest delayed comeback to an argument ever recorded, thirty-six years too late.

My response…distilled from David Lamb's response in God Behaving Badly, is hopefully thoughtful and faithful to scripture and honors God.

Hopefully, we can answer the question, "Is God angry or loving?" a little bit by the end of our time in the Word.

In first Samuel chapters four and five, the Ark of the Covenant had fallen into the hands of the Philistines. And now in second Samuel, King David was bringing it back to Jerusalem.

It was during a big parade, they were celebrating with all their might, with dancing and music. David was clothed!

When suddenly the oxen stumble, and Uzzah who was walking alongside the cart, reaches out his hand to steady the ark, and…

"The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore, God struck him down, and he died…"

Okay…wow!

What prompted this divine rage? Wasn't Uzzah just trying to do something good?

Why did God have to kill him?

And now we have a story that gives God a bad reputation and pastors hives.

This story is deeply troubling. But as we dig deeper, we begin to see how God's anger is more understandable. Yahweh was angry for three main reasons.

First, God was angry at how they were carrying the ark.

God had told them how they were to carry it but they weren't obeying. Yahweh's instructions were not found in one obscure book but all throughout Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. And remember their Bible, the Torah, was only five books in total. So, lots of instructions in three of the five books. Plenty of instructions.

Instructions carefully explaining how the ark was to be carried by poles on the shoulders of the priests.

But maybe they hadn't been reading those instructive texts lately? All you had to do was look at it.

It still would have been difficult to forget HOW it was to be carried since the Ark had four huge rings at each corner, for the poles to go through.

And we know they knew the right way to carry it but weren't obeying. Because three months after Uzzah's death, they carried it on to Jerusalem in the correct way.

God had warned them if they touched the Ark they would die. In the Old Testament it was always serious and often dangerous to draw near to God. Uzzah had touched the ark, and deserved death.

Still need convincing? The next two reasons might help.

Second, the way the Israelites carried the ark was not only disobedient it was insulting.

To grasp a sense of how this could be insulting, we need to remember what the ark represented – God's very Presence. Therefore, it warranted extra care.

Carrying a king on a litter was a well-known practice in those days. A distinguished person, like Egypt's Pharoah, was carried in a litter on the shoulders of others.

King Solomon experienced this. Other royalties are documented as being transported and honored this way.

And God was their God after all.

Litters are for kings while carts are for things…equipment and food, but never royalty. They were treating the ark like cargo.

And to top off the insult, it was the Philistines that had come up with the cart idea in the first place. So instead of following God's law, they were following the advice of their pagan enemies who had stolen the ark, another mistake of the Israelites.

They knew better and they should have behaved better. It was insulting in many ways. And Yahweh's patience finally wore out.

Third, Lamb writes, "Israel's lack of respect toward the ark was symptomatic of a lack of concern for their relationship with God, and that made God mad too."

The ark symbolized not only God's Presence but also the covenantal relationship between God and his people Israel.

In general, the Old Testament tells the story of a mostly one-sided relationship, in which one partner (Yahweh) is more committed than the other (Israel).

God had finally gotten fed up with their disrespect for the objects that symbolized their relationship with God. God had finally gotten fed up with their disrespect for their relationship with God.

As humans, we do the same thing.

Those of you who are married have a similar sacred symbol of your relationship, the wedding ring. And I have heard horror stories from men and women who have lost their rings.

Yes, they know they have lost something financially valuable. But they have also lost the symbol of their relationship.

They feel guilty about being irresponsible. But they are also concerned about communicating that they didn't value the relationship enough to protect the ring. And they know it has meaning to their spouse.

Lamb summarizes that from Uzzah we learn God is passionate to protect his law, his honor, and his relationships. And he asks a better question, **"Would you want to follow a God that wasn't passionate about you?"**

But is God truly loving?

Maybe thinking on God's passionate love for you and me will help close the gap in our understanding of God's anger.

In this I see God's guidance in creating context for us, we are book ended as Christians between two seasons about God's passionate, intense, unfailing love for us.

Now we are living between Advent when God the Son comes to be born, in the flesh to be with us.

And on the other end, soon we will be entering into Lent. When God the Son willingly empties himself of his rightful power as God. And makes himself humble and vulnerable to the Father's will, embracing the torture and death that we deserve.

Two seasons prepared and planned by, prompted by and sustained by a passionate and personal love of God for each one of us.

So maybe the better question isn't *why is God sometimes angry*? Because God does get angry. But maybe a better question is to wonder is why God isn't angry more often?

If God is truly holy… If God is truly just… If God is truly committed to love, truth, and relationship. Then the astonishing thing is not God's anger—it is really God's patience.

Because how often do we treat God casually? How often do we ignore what we already know is right in following God?

How often do we put God on a cart or leave God at church instead of carrying God on our shoulders, honoring God in our hearts.

But instead, we use God when it's convenient and then sidelining God when it's costly?

And still—God waits. Still—God invites, calling out to us by the Spirit. Still—God draws near.

Exodus 34:6 tells us who God is, **"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."** Slow to anger. Not absent of anger. But patient. Measured. Purposeful.

God's anger is never explosive or petty. It is always relational. It flares not because God is fragile, but because God cares deeply.

God gives time. Time to reflect. Time to repent. Time to realign our hearts. Time to choose reverence over convenience, relationship over routine, love over apathy.

And ultimately, that patience takes on flesh.

In Advent, God draws near as a child—vulnerable, gentle, waiting for welcome. In Lent, God absorbs violence rather than unleashing it, choosing love over retaliation.

So today, the question before us is not whether God is angry? The question is whether we will draw near and receive God's patient love?

And even now, God is giving us time—not to be afraid, but to draw near. Let us become a people who are willing to draw near to God. Amen.

Time of Reflection:

1. Where might I be treating God casually—like cargo instead of King?

2. How is God's patience with me right now an invitation—not to fear, but to draw closer and realign my heart?