

Resolving Spiritual Struggle of Anger Toward God: Christian Counseling Approaches

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【Abstract】

Anger toward God is the one of common spiritual struggles among Christian clients. Specifically, clients who experience traumatic events such as car accidents, sudden death of loved ones, or natural disasters of natures may feel anger at God. At that time, an existential question such as “Why me?” will be occurred with anger, confusion, or feeling of abandonment. However, clients may deny or repress it because they fear God’s punishment, feel guilty about their lack of faith. Denying or repressing it will leave them with unresolved anger at God. Unresolved anger toward God is the most harmful factor of destructing one’s relationship with God that can lead to ‘emotional atheism.’ Therefore, dealing with unresolved anger toward God is an important matter for recovery of their relationship with God. To provide effective interventions for resolving anger toward God, biblical understanding of anger, causes and consequences of anger at God are explained first. Examples of biblical characters who honestly expressed feeling of abandonment or anger to God provide good insights to encouraging clients to openly process and cry out to God. Counseling techniques of exploring the anger, and rebuilding trust in and intimacy with God can help clients to experience spiritual growth like Job (Job 42:5).

Key words: Spiritual struggle, anger toward God, unresolved anger toward God, counseling techniques, rebuilding relationship with God

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I. Introduction

Recently, there have been efforts to understand anger from the Christian and psychological perspectives in Korea. However, most of the studies focus on theme of general anger or anger of particular group of people. Such studies include Christian anger control, Christian perspectives of anger, Christian counseling method for the anger, anger & self-reflection. The other big theme that is often studied in Korea is anger of elderly, middle aged women, adolescence, college students, couples, and pastors. However, studies on dealing with anger toward God seem rare in the field of Christian counseling. Anger toward God is one of the common spiritual struggles. When negative incidents such as life-threatening events and stressful situations occur in Christians' life, it is a common phenomenon to experience anger at God. People may feel abandoned by God and questions, "Why me?" and "Why did God allow this to happen to me?"

Even though anger at God is a common spiritual struggle, people tend not to address their anger at God properly or disguise their anger because doing so could seem to be their lack of faith and an unacceptable feeling, or because it is taboo in society.¹⁾ Exline points out that "fear of the dreaded 'lightening bolt from heaven' is alive and

1) Alyssa N. Bryant & Helen S. Astin, "The Correlates of Spiritual Struggle During the College Years," *The Journal of Higher Education* 79, no. 1(January/February 2008): 12; Julie Juola Exline & Alyce Martin, "Anger Toward God; A New Frontier in Forgiveness Research," in *Handbook of Forgiveness*, ed. Everett L. Worthington, Jr. (New York: Hove, 2005), 73; Mark P. Cosgrove, "Counseling for Anger," in *Resources for Christian Counseling*, ed. Gary R. Collins (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988), 148.

well.”²⁾ Those beliefs and fear affect people to repress or deny their anger at God and their anger leave unresolved. There are two Korean cultural backgrounds that may possibly affect Korean Christians to repress or deny their anger at God. First, Koreans’ Kibok faith(Health and Wealth Gospel) may influence Korean Christians to believe that they should not be angry toward God because it may bring them misfortune. So, Korean Christians with Kibok faith are more likely to deny their anger at God than others. Second, related to Korean cultural value of anger, the term Hwa-Byung³⁾ well describes on unique type of Korean’s anger. Thus, there are possibilities for Korean Christians to repress their anger inside, then experience unresolved anger toward God. Unresolved anger toward God is the number one killer of relationship with God, which can eventually lead serous problem with God-emotional atheist.⁴⁾ Thus, resolving anger at God or not is the very important matter for one’s relationship with God.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide some ideas of Christian counseling interventions for pastoral and Christian counselors to help Korean Christian clients who feel anger at God in times of their difficult life to resolve their anger so that they experience authentic relationship with God.

2) Julie Juola Exline, “Anger toward God: A Brief Overview of Existing Research,” *Psychology of Religion Newsletter* 29, no. 1(Winter 2003-4): 1.

3) In Korean cultural values, expression of anger has not been accepted. So, Koreans tend to repress their anger until they became sick with heart or stomach problems. This is Hwa(means anger)-Byung(means illness). Their repressed anger causes their somatic problems. Hwa-Byung is internationally recognized as a culture bound syndrome. Hwa-Byung is as a unique Koreans mental illness. Sung Hwan Kim, “A Review of Pastoral Counseling for Hwa-Byung-Focused on Psychiatric Exploring-,” *Journal of Counseling and Gospel* 23, no.1(2015): 11-12.

4) Pat McCloskey, *When You Are Angry with God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 86.

This study discusses theological understanding of anger, causes, and consequences of anger at God. Following the discussion, one finds illustrations of bible characters who wrestled with their anger toward God. For dealing with anger toward God in proper ways, the paper presents counseling interventions.

II. Body

1. Theological Understanding of Anger

Anger is a complex and difficult emotion. It is a common, natural, and understandable emotion that occurs in stressful and threatening situations. In Christianity, anger has been misrepresented by a traditional ‘anger-is-sin’ theology. The emotion of anger itself is not sinful and a morally neutral stance. Sin of anger depends on ways of a person’s choice to express anger and how anger directs him. The Apostle of Paul warns that “In your anger, do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry (Eph. 4: 26).” The Bible does not condemn anger itself, but explains anger is a dangerous emotion that might result in sinful behavior. Oh (2010) points out that Paul prohibits anger(Col. 3:8; Eph.4:31) not because of anger itself, but because of possibility of committing sin from anger.⁵⁾ The Bible warns that anger can be a dangerous emotion because it destroys relationships, hurts other’s feelings, and controls or manipulates others. Destructive anger leads to violence, abuse, and hostility.

5) Yoon Sun Oh, “A Study on the Christian Counseling for Anger Control of Adolescence,” *Journal of Counseling and Gospel* no. 14 (2010): 22.

Ahn(2011) argues that most of domestic abuse is caused by destructive ways of dealing with anger.⁶⁾

Even though anger itself is not sinful, the root of anger can be connected to human sinful nature. Most of human's anger is not from human justice or righteousness, but from his/her own matters such as conflicts in relationships, jealousy, or desires. Biblical perspectives on anger should not be explained simply by "anger-in-sin" tradition. Whether one's anger is sin or not will be judged by scrutinizing one's origin of anger and his/her ways of expression of anger: destructive or constructive.

2. Causes of Anger toward God

Several researchers have attempted to find why people become angry toward God.⁷⁾ Answering the question is not simple because the causes are related to theological and psychological factors. In this section, undeserved suffering, parental relationship, insecure attachment, and narcissistic personality are going to be demonstrated briefly along with the examples from the biblical cases.

1) Frustration from undeserved suffering

When People face suffering, especially, undeserved and unexpected suffering, they may attribute responsibility to God. People are

6) Kyung Seung Ahn, "Violence: Its Beginning, Extending, and Control," *Journal of Counseling and Gospel* no. 16 (2010): 20.

7) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 73; McCloskey, "When You Are Angry with God," 3-4; Ramey, "God in the Hand of Angry Sinner," 41; Brendan Riordan, "Anger at God," in *Anger; Issues of Emotional Living in an Age of Stress for Clergy and Religious; The Tenth Psychotheological Symposium*, ed. Brendan Riordan (Whitinsville: Affirmation Books, 1985), 104.

frustrated with life's suffering such as family tragedy, illness, experience of abuse, and loss of job and loved one. McCloskey points out, "Frustrated men and women often seek relief by blaming 'the system'- that maze of institutions and rules which seems to restrict people's freedom without offering the support they need when they encounter a tragedy beyond their ability to certain."⁸⁾ People experience anger toward God because they view God as willing to cause undeserved suffering and failing to protect them from suffering.⁹⁾ Job in the Bible also experienced undeserved suffering and he was angry at God without sin in his life. His anger was related to great fear, hopeless, and helplessness.¹⁰⁾ People may be angry toward God because of an experience of injustice inflicted by the world. When people experience specific painful events such as the Virginia Tech massacre, September 11, 2001, and Tsunami disasters, they may ask God, "God, how could you allow these unbelievable things happen?"¹¹⁾ In these cases, injustice became the core trigger of anger toward God. Harmful experiences lead people to feel a sense of injustice.¹²⁾

Jesus experienced the most undeserving suffering in the World. In the last moment on the cross, Jesus had a poignant question to God, which is "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"(Mat 27:46). Hagner points out that Jesus clearly experienced feeling of abandonment and authentically expressed his feeling by using Ps

8) McCloskey, *When You Are Angry with God*, 5-6.

9) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 74-77.

10) Cosgrove, *Counseling for Anger*, 148.

11) Michele Novotni & Randy Peterson, *Angry with God* (Colorado Springs, CO.: Pinon Press, 2001), 167.

12) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 75.

22:1.¹³⁾ However, Jesus' feeling of abandonment from God did not affect the ontological relationship with God because of his entire trust in God that He would not be abandoned forever.¹⁴⁾

2) Parental Relationship

An individual's anger toward God can be associated with his negative experience of relationship with his parents.¹⁵⁾ Gaultiere explains: "People commonly transfer onto God the characteristics of parents and significant others because a relationship with an invisible God is by faith and is developmentally preceded by relationships with parents and significant others."¹⁶⁾ From the objective relation theory, unresolved anger toward father or mother can be a root of anger toward God. A negative experience related to the parent can be projected onto one's image of God. It may cause an individual to have a distorted image of God.¹⁷⁾ For example, the experience of sexual abuse by the father is related to a negative image of God and mistrusting God.¹⁸⁾

3) Insecure Attachment

13) Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28, World Biblical Commentary*, vol. 33B.(Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 844.

14) Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapid, MI.: Zondervan, 2004), 903.

15) Riordan, "Anger at God," 106; Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God, 77; Ramey, "God in the Hand of Angry Sinner," 53.

16) William Gaultiere, "A Biblical Perspective on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 8, no.3 (Fall 1989): 40.

17) Riordan, "Anger at God," 106.

18) Nichole A. Murray-Swank & Kenneth I. Pargament, "God, Where Are You?: Evaluating a Spiritual-Integrated Intervention for Sexual Abuse," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 8, no. 3 (September 2005): 196-199.

Attachment theory offers a very useful framework for the prediction of religiosity. Many researchers have tried to apply attachment to religiosity, such as relationship with God and religious behaviors. Insecurely attached people are more likely to experience an insecure “attachment to God.”¹⁹⁾ Insecure attachment affects not only one’s psychological distress but also makes one’s relationship with God difficult.²⁰⁾ Insecure religious attachments also lead a person’s negative feelings toward God. Pargament and others explain that Christians who present insecure attachment such as anxious-ambivalent or avoidant attachment tend to view God as inconsistent, unpredictable, distant, disinterested, and uncaring.²¹⁾ When they face difficulties in their lives, they are likely to experience God’s abandonment, anger, anxiety, or guilt.

Christians may feel ambivalent feeling because they sense that God is absent or abandons them in their life time. In the study “God, Where Are You?” a survivor of sexual abuse by her step-father describes, “I hope to gain a better understanding of abuse and God. Why God abandoned me and why I can’t feel him beside me now. I want a relationship with God back. I blame him for what happened

19) Lee A. Kirkpatrick & Phillip R. Shaver, “Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3(1990): 316.

20) Exline & Martin, “Anger toward God,” 77; Ramey, “God in the Hand of Angry Sinner,” 53; Lisa S Elwood & Nathan L. Williams, “PTSD-Related Cognitions and Romantic Attachment Style as Moderators of Psychological Symptoms in Victims of Interpersonal Trauma,” *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology* 26, no. 10(December 2007): 1191.

21) K. I. Pargament, N. Murray-Swank, G. M. Magyar, & G. G. Ano, “Spiritual Struggle: A Phenomenon of Interest to Psychology and Religion,” in *Judeo - Christian Perspectives on Psychology: Human Nature, Motivation, and Change*, eds. William R. Miller & Harold D. Delaney(Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2005), 252.

and I am very angry at him.”²²⁾

There are several scriptures in the Psalms relating how David felt angry at God and expressed his anger(11:3;13:1-6;35:17-18;42:9-11). He had a spiritual struggle related to God such as the feeling of abandonment. Psalms 42:9-11 reads:

I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?” Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?

When young, David did not seem to get much attention from his parents or be cared by his family because of his older brothers. He spent most of the time in the field with sheep isolated from his family. His feelings of insecurity and abandonment might be preceded by his feeling of abandonment from the insecure attachment with his parents. That may be why David felt God’s complete silence and absence although he had trust in God. The Hebrew verb *azabtani* in “you have forsaken me” seems God’s complete and final abandonment.²³⁾

4) Narcissistic Personality

As Schiraldi and Kerr mention how one’s cause of anger can be related to his sense of entitlement,²⁴⁾ a predictor of anger toward God

22) Murray-Swank & Pargament, “God, Where are You?” 196.

23) Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapid, MI.: Zondervan, 2002), 22-23.

24) Shiraldi & Kerr, *The Anger Management Sourcebook*, 13.

can also be connected to one's specific personality: narcissistic sense of entitlement.²⁵⁾ Narcissism has two main problematic characteristics: sense of entitlement and lack of empathy. Regarding entitlement, Emmons states, "Narcissistic persons believe they are entitled to special rights and privilege, whether earned or not. They are demanding and selfish. They expect special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities and express surprise and anger when others do not do what they want."²⁶⁾ A narcissism is a significant predictor for negative emotions such as anger after failure,²⁷⁾ it is also a predictor for negative emotions toward God. A person who has a sense of entitlement may more attribute responsibility to God about his failure.²⁸⁾ The other core problematic feature in narcissism is a lack of empathy toward others. A narcissistic individual has difficulty recognizing another's feeling, needs, and desires.²⁹⁾

Cain's anger with God resulted in the murder of his brother, Abel. He was disappointed at God's acceptance of Abel's offering but not of his. His angry feeling implies, "I am right, but you are wrong." In Genesis, God asked Cain why he was angry although he had not done the right thing. Cain seemed the first person who had a narcissistic character in the Bible.

The story of Jonah also demonstrates Johna's lack of empathy or

25) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 75.

26) Robert A Emmons, "Personality and Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. Kenneth I. Pargament, Michael E. McCullough & Carl E. Thoresen (New York: The Guildford Press, 2000), 163.

27) Tanja S Stucke & Siegfried L Sporer, "When a Grandiose Self-Image Is Threatened: Narcissism and Self-Concept Clarity as Predictors of Negative Emotions and Aggression Following Ego-Threat," *Journal of Personality* 70, no 4 (August 2002): 509.

28) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 75.

29) Emmons, "Personality and Forgiveness," 162-163.

compassion. Jonah was angry at God when God did not destroy Nineveh. God had compassion on the people of Nineveh because they repented of their sins and turned to God. Jonah was angry at the Lord's compassion: "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry" (Jonah 4:1). The Hebrew word *harah* ("angry") in this verse means "burning, as with fire."³⁰⁾ When Jonah expressed his out of control anger with "Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die and to live (Jonah 4:3)." God responded, "Have you any right to be angry? (Jonah 4:4)" Bruckner comments that God tried to connect to Jonah's distress with the question, but Jonah did not respond it and just avoided having conversation with God. God did not judge Jonah's expression of anger, but taught Jonah about His heart and compassion for Nineveh's people by letting Jonah experience the shade-giving vine.³¹⁾

A lack of empathy produces a problem of restoring one's relationship. Entitlement and lack of empathy are associated with a difficulty with facilitating forgiveness. Such unforgiving attitudes lead one to hold his anger toward people and God.³²⁾

3. The Consequences of Unresolved Anger toward God

Such unresolved of frequent anger toward God negatively affects an

30) James Brucker, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2004), 109-112.

31) Cosgrove, *Counseling for Anger*, 152.

32) Frank D. Fincham, F. Giorgla Paleai & Camillo Regalla, "Forgiveness in Marriage: The Role of Relationship Quality, Attributions, and Empathy," *Personal Relationships* 9 (2002): 28; Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 74; Exline, "Anger toward God," 2.

individual's physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being.³³⁾

1) Physiological Effects

Researchers found that unresolved anger toward God is related to poor physical recovery and a low level of physical functions.³⁴⁾ Related to the study of religious struggle as a predictor of mortality, Pargament and others investigated longitudinally the relationship between religious struggles with an illness and mortality among medically ill elderly patients. In their findings, a higher religious struggle such as feeling of abandonment or questioning God's love increased the risk of mortality. Those negative feeling toward God exacerbated illnesses among medically ill elderly patients.³⁵⁾ Religious struggles such as anger toward God, feeling of God's punishment were associated with poorer health among medically ill hospitalized older patients.³⁶⁾ Fitchett and others found that anger at God was related to poorer physical recovery among medical rehabilitation patients³⁷⁾.

2) Psychological Effects

Anger toward God may increase an individual's depression, anxiety,

33) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 78.

34) Pargament & others, "Spiritual Struggle," 256.

35) Kenneth I. Paramen, Harold G. Koenig, Nalini Tarakeshwar, & Juan Hahn "Religious Struggle as a Predictor of Mortality among Medically Ill Elderly Patients: A 2-Year Longitudinal Study," *American Medical Association* (2001): 1882-1883.

36) H. G. Koenig, K. I. Pargament & J. Nielsen, "Religious Coping and Health Status in Medically Ill Hospitalized Older Adults," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (1998): 513.

37) G. Fitchett, B. D. Rybarczyk, G. A. DeMarco, & J. J. Nicholas, "The Role of Religion in Medical Rehabilitation Outcomes: A Longitudinal Study," *Rehabilitation Psychology* (1999): 44.

and problems of forgiving oneself and others. Additionally, feelings of abandonment and punishment from God have been related to one's poor mental health.³⁸⁾ Pargament and others researched correlation between anger at God and mental health among three groups: Roman Catholic church members, college students who had experienced the death of a family member or friend, and people who has experienced a personal injustice. The results of the three groups showed that anger at God negatively correlated to self-esteem, negative mood, and anxiety.³⁹⁾ Frequent or prolonged anger toward God affects one's psychological distress and poor adjustment.⁴⁰⁾ Mickley and others researched ninety two primary caregivers of a terminally ill patients to determine the relationship between religious and nonreligious appraisals with mental health outcomes. They found that caregivers who interpreted their situation as unjust and as unfair God reported depression, anxiety, and low level of life purpose.⁴¹⁾

They presented psychological problems or emotional distress such as depression, downcast, anxiety, and frustration which was attributed to their anger toward God. Their anger affected the chemical balance of the brain. For example, Jonah's anger toward God caused his frustration and him to want to die. Job also expressed his painful feeling to God, "You bring new witnesses against me and increase

38) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 78; Murray-Swank & Pargament, "God, Where are You?" 192.

39) K. I. Pargament, B. J. Zinnbauer, A. B. Scott, E. M. Butter, J. Zerowin, & P. Stanik, "Red Flags and Religious Coping: Identifying Some Religious Warning Signs among People in Crisis," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 59, no. 12(2003): 1344.

40) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 78.

41) J. R. Mickley, K. I. Pargament, C. R. Brant, & K. M. Hipp, "God and the Search for Meaning Among Hospice Caregivers," *The Hospice Journal* 13, no. 4 (1998): 13.

your anger toward me; your forces come against me wave upon wave.” (10:17)

3) Spiritual Effects

Anger toward God may lead to spiritual struggles such as feeling punished by God, feeling guilt and experiencing interpersonal conflict related to religious issues. Consequently, it negatively affects one’s belief in God: doubts about God, denial of the existence of God, and a broken relationship with God.⁴²⁾ Particularly, there are interesting findings on anger toward God related to one’s belief in the existence of God: A group of “atheists” or of “unsure” showed more anger toward God than religious people. It was questioned how unbelievers could be more angry toward God than believers. Conflicted unbelievers who have a past belief in God but eventually no belief in God, showed more anger at God than believers. Exline reports that some religious people temporarily feel anger toward God and return to their faith. However, some other people may conclude that there is no God in the world. Their way of resolving their anger toward God is becoming an atheist: stop believing in God.⁴³⁾ This phenomenon is called “emotional atheism” which tried to resolve anger toward God through the denial of God’s existence.⁴⁴⁾ People’s way of revenge is to stop believing in God and to leave God out of their lives.

In sum, repressing or denying anger toward God blocks a person from resolving his anger toward God, and then it eventually causes him to experience an emotional atheism, or other problems in his belief. Gaultiere observes, “The consequences of holding onto anger

42) Exline & Martin “Anger toward God,” 79.

43) Exline, “Anger toward God,” 5.

44) Novotni & Peterson, *Angry with God*, 38.

are quite unpleasant and self-destructive. Repressed anger at God becomes resentment and bitterness, which is not only miserable to carry around, but leaves the individual feeling distanced from God and his love.”⁴⁵⁾ McCloskey points out that unresolved anger at God is “the number one killer of our life with God.”⁴⁶⁾ On the contrary, an honest expression of anger toward God eventually leads a person to resolve his anger at God, and then it leads him to have an authentic relationship with God.⁴⁷⁾

The Bible introduces two main kinds of characters who felt anger toward God and dealt with it in different ways. The first kind of the characters tried to distance from God and deal with their anger in their own way. Those characters include Cain, Jonah, King Saul, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed and sold Jesus. On the other hand, the second kind honestly cried out to God, and recovered the relationship with God when they experienced their negative feelings toward God. Those characters are Job, Jonah, the Psalmist, and Jesus. Job who underwent great suffering never gave up his faith even though every time he cried out his righteousness and God’s unfairness. Jonah who avoided from God changed and expressed his anger to God directly later. David also praised God who gave answer to him and resolve the situation after having great suffering. Even he became more faithful after realizing how God has held him by His hand all the time and treated the wicked at the end. These examples instruct us that if we never give up our relationship with God regardless of our negative attitude, God finally

45) Gaultiere, “A Biblical Perspectives on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God,” 45.

46) McCloskey, *When You Are Angry with God*, 86.

47) Cosgrove, *Counseling for Anger*, 153; Novotni & Peterson, *Angry with God*, 40; Gaultiere, “A Biblical Perspective on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God,” 42.

answers and gives us hope. Therefore, the main job of Christian counselors' should be to help clients who has anger toward God to never give up the relationship with God.

4. Counseling Interventions for Resolving Anger toward God

As mentioned previously, unresolved anger toward God negatively influences one's physical, psychological, and spiritual health temporarily or permanently. Then, how can a Christian counselor help clients who are angry at God to resolve their anger, and how can a counselor help them to take their anger as a positive chance to have an authentic relationship with God?

1) Counselor as an Ambassador of God's Love

In order to facilitate the therapeutic relationships, Christian counselors need to consider themselves as ambassadors of God's love who help clients to deal with their anger toward God. The biblical characters presented above resolved their anger without others' help, but not all people are able to do like that. In case of Job, his three friends tried to help him but failed because they gave advice to Job rather than comforted him who was terribly distressed and painfully expressed his anger. God did not condemn Job for his anger toward Him, but for his friends. Collins mentions that Christian counseling is a ministry of reconciliation for helping clients to restore their relationship with God and with others.⁴⁸⁾ Being a representative of God's compassion and love for the clients will facilitate them to feel

48) Gary R. Collins, *Biblical Basis of Christian Counseling for People Helpers* (Colorado Springs, CO.: Navpress, 2001), 121.

safe to express their anger at God as if Jesus and Palmists asked “why” to God. Especially, Christian counselors should be aware of the clients’ difficulty to admit their anger and allow them to express it based on strong rapport. Therefore, within the counseling session, giving clients permission to express their anger to God eventually helps them see that their repressed, internalized, and intellectualized anger is real.⁴⁹⁾

2) Assessing the Clients’ Anger toward God

At first, it is essential to explore how they think about negative feelings especially anger. Some people tend to ignore anger itself because they believe it is harmful or messes up their life. It will be helpful to discuss their attitude about negative feelings. As previously mentioned, Christian counselors have to keep in mind that Korean cultural backgrounds affect Korean Christians to repress or deny their anger at God. Discussing this issue with clients enough will be helpful to open their mind. If they have tendency to deny or avoid feeling anger, the counselor first needs to educate them on the biblical origin and role of emotion as well as the positive and negative effects of negative feelings in our life first.

As a next step, Christian counselors need to assess clients’ angry thoughts even though they do not mention their anger toward God explicitly. Some clients, especially devout religious people, may not want to probe their angry thoughts. Assessing the clients hidden angry thoughts related to their situations will help them to admit their anger at God. Some examples of angry thoughts are:

49) Gaultiere, “A Biblical Perspective on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God,” 44.

[1] It isn't fair that God allows bad things to happen to me. [2] I feel that God is so distant from me. [3] I'm afraid to ask God for what I really want. [4] God lets me suffer and doesn't come to help me. [5] It seems as if God is waiting around the corner to trip me up. He's out to get me! [6] It seems that God is never satisfied with my efforts to please him. [7] I feel so bad about myself. God can't see any value in me. [8] God must be mad at me. He seems to enjoy punishing me. [9] I don't want to pray to God anymore because he doesn't answer my prayers anyway. [10] God doesn't seem to care about me and my problems.⁵⁰⁾

Although clients deny their angry feeling, if their story telling contains the angry thoughts, Christian counselors need to keep the clients' repressed anger in their mind for the intervention. In addition, they need to assess the clients' anger associated with another feelings such as pain, frustration, or fear.

Next, it is necessary to assess what causes of client's anger at God. Clients' angry thoughts and underneath anger at God are closely connected to their personal tragic experience, life's suffering and general injustice(natural disaster or bombing), their personality (trait anger or narcissism), insecure attachment, negative parental relationship, and etc. The probing of these causes are important to achieve the counseling goal successfully. For example, the biblical characters such as Job and Jonah experienced traumatic incidents that other people did not experience. God had praised Job, "there is no one on earth like him," but when experiencing the traumatic incident, Job kept defending his righteousness and appealed God's oppression.

50) Novotni & Petersen, *Angry with God*, 166.

Because of limited ability of reason to understand what happened to them, Christians often do not understand and complain their undeserved suffering. In this case, Christian counselors should be very careful not to confront them or deter them from complaining too soon. Instead, by assessing clients biblical understanding of anger(e.g., if they have anger-is-sin traditional theology), counselors can explore their core beliefs on anger. Providing right biblical concepts of anger are necessary for them to move forward.

In his clinical experience, Gaultiere found some clients projected their anger onto God because of their unresolved or hurt relationship with an important parental or authority figure.⁵¹⁾ Therefore, Christian counselors need to explore clients' past relationships, especially in childhood and how their previous experiences are related to their current or repressed anger. Insecurely attached people with anxious-ambivalent attached type express their ambivalent feelings toward God and tend to complain about God's abandonment, anger, anxiety, or guilt. In assessment, it is also helpful to investigate clients' personality to understand them and to know how to intervene them effectively. People with narcissistic personality maybe often angry at God because they believe that they are entitled to special rights and demand special favor.

Additionally, some clients experience transference reactions of anger to counselors. In this case, the therapeutic role of counselor is to critically deal with transference; it is the role of an ambassador of God. Gaultiere suggests that first, accepting their anger patiently is an important factor. Second, at a proper time, the counselor offers his/her

51) Gaultiere, "A Biblical Perspective on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God," 44-45.

interpretation of the client's anger toward the counselor related to his unresolved anger at God or others.⁵²⁾

In conclusion, it is necessary to assess whether the clients think expression of anger at God is appropriate or not.⁵³⁾ Some clients may deny or feel hesitant to express their anger at God in a counseling session. Discussing their moral issues in expressing anger at God will facilitate them to deal with their anger. Counselors also need to assess what kinds of beliefs hinder them to express their anger even in counseling.

It is associated with frustration from undeserved suffering, attachment style, relationship with their parents, and narcissistic personality. Offering some examples of biblical characters who expressed anger honestly will encourage them to admit their anger and allow expressing it in counseling sessions.⁵⁴⁾

3) Counseling Techniques for Rebuilding Trust in and Intimacy with God

The ultimate therapeutic goal of Christian counseling for resolving anger at God is to restore a relationship with God. Subjective goals can be resolving anger toward God by using "Crying Out" techniques and rebuilding trust in God.⁵⁵⁾ For achieve this goal, first, 'crying-out' techniques that the Psalmist often used(Ps. 22:1-6;42:9-11) facilitate clients to explore their repressed anguish to God. Offering some healthy ways of communication with God invites the clients to talk

53) Julie Juola Exline & Ephraim Rose, "Religious and Spiritual Struggle," in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, eds. Raymond Paloutzian & Crystal Park (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 318.

54) Novotni & Peterson, *Angry with God*, 28-30.

55) Exline & Rose, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles," 318.

their negative feelings and thoughts directly to God. Specific “Crying Out” techniques are: Writing a letter God or writing own psalms, and empty chair technique.⁵⁶⁾ Verbalizing emotions are important to lead interaction between their thoughts and feelings. Verbally expressed anger feeling may facilitate the clients’ encounter or confront their anger feeling.⁵⁷⁾ One of the techniques can be writing a letter to God or their own psalms as a home assignment.

Utilizing prayer is fundamental intervention method of pastoral/Christian counseling. Prayer is an important of way of communicating with God. However, It would not be easy for clients to communicate with God because they may think that prayers in anger may not be nice communication with God. As prayer is a decision making that a sign of one’s attitude of turning to God,⁵⁸⁾ Christian counselors need to observe their responses of using prayer in the session.

Likewise, the practice of communication with God with counselors will be connected to their prayer in daily life. Clients may not have much experience with honest expression to others including God. The counselor not only accepts and understands them but also help them communicate with God. After seeing some examples of the Psalmist, the clients can specifically and concretely write theirs. In this way, they may release their anguish and distress to God and realize God’s unfailing love to hear their anger.⁵⁹⁾

After the clients realize their anger toward God and express it in

56) Exline & Martin, “Anger toward God,” 82.

57) Cosgrove, *Counseling for Anger*, 153.

58) McCloskey, *When You Are Angry with God*, 76.

59) Gaultiere, “A Biblical Perspective on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God,” 44.

counseling, the next step is working toward rebuilding trust in God and restoring a close relationship with God. In this process, counselors can use cognitive therapy and help clients convert their possible distorted thoughts on God and reframe clients' perspectives on their difficult situations. These interventions are related to deal with clients' cognition in relation to their feelings. For this intervention, Christian counselors should encourage their clients to discover their distorted images of God in a deeper level. Counselors can ask their automatic thoughts first and draw them to explore underlying thoughts following those thoughts. Reframing refers to an one's ability to redefine stressful situations more positively. By reframing a stressful situation, he/she gains confidence to overcome their current problems. Through this process, they can relate their feeling and thoughts and learn how to express them in a healthy way.

If their distorted thoughts are related to their past experiences in childhood, it should be dealt with before moving forward. It is highly possible that their distorted image of God is closely related to their distorted image of parents or other important figures. They can change their distorted image of God through the authentic relationship with others. Christian counselors play the role of loving parents who are different from clients'. The cure of their hurtful experiences from others should be preceded although it takes long time. Counselors can use self-disclosure if they have similar experiences. However, the right timing is important.

Christian counselors not only accept all the feelings that their clients expressed but also draw a line not to accept misconceptions or wrong behaviors. It represents God's love and justice. As God showed His justice on the cross, counselors have to show God's justice in a humble way. To find God's positive attributes, the counselors can use

prayer, imagery, and meditation.⁶⁰⁾ Image of God's unconditional love and acceptance may decrease one's anger at God.⁶¹⁾ Imagery of having conversation with God through the empty chair technique will help the clients to reconstruct a relationship with God.⁶²⁾ Through meditation on scriptures related to God's positive characteristics, the clients rebuild their trust in God and change their negative perceptions of God.⁶³⁾ Counselors suggest clients to read the specific Bible verses about God's love or prepare inspiring verses.

According to a survey, people who had 'passage of time' reported reduced anger at God.⁶⁴⁾ If the clients agree, counselors prepare inspiring Bible verses about God's love (e.g., Ps.86:15; Zeph. 3:7; Rom.5:8; Eph.2:4-5) so that the clients may not feel overwhelmed where to start to read in the Bible. Since having passage of time is personal, counselors can give a homework to write the verses or just to read. The counselors need to assess if their 'passage of time' is effective or not. Further process will be depend on their different responses.

Through the counseling sessions, clients have opportunity to reframe their time of anger toward God as a spiritual growth time. Like Job had spiritual insights to understand God after he went through all his spiritual struggles and grudge God, the clients need to know they also can obtain spiritual insights to know God and build an

60) Exline & Rose, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles," 319.

61) Exline & Martin, "Anger toward God," 82.

62) Pargament & others, "Spiritual Struggle," 261.

63) Exline & Rose, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles," 319; Novotni & Peterson, *Angry with God*, 95.

64) Julie Juola Exline, "Rifts and Reconciliation between Humans and God: An Overview," Presentation at an annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, IL., 2002.

intimate relationship with God. Job's honest expression and wrestling with his anger toward God eventually led him to see God. In Job 42:5, Job confessed, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." The 'eyes' means "the spiritual perception that comes from a life changing encounter with God."⁶⁵⁾ The case of Job teaches the lesson that although Job was angry toward God and unable to understand his suffering, he did not lose his faith and trust in God. His honest expression to God led him to have a more intimate relationship with God.⁶⁶⁾

In addition, clients can find the meaning of their suffering like Joseph who was abandoned by his brothers. Joseph used reframing to perceive his traumatic experience as being God's plan (Gen 45:4-8) to save his family. Several verses reveal his positive perceptual orientation: "It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you(v.5); God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives(v.7); It was not you who sent me here, but God (v.8)." Thus, his family resolved their broken relationship and terminated twenty-two years of non-communication(v. 15)⁶⁷⁾ Ultimately, Joseph's positive ways of interpreting his undeserved suffering can be theirs, too. Facilitating clients to recall their experience of positive making meaning in their stressful situation is helpful empowering their ability to exit from their fixed negative thoughts. The recovery of the relationship with God is the final goal of Christian counseling for those who are angry with God.

65) David L. McKenna, *Job, The communicator's Commentary*, vol. 12(Waco: Word Books, 1986), 314.

66) Gaultiere, "A Biblical Perspective on Therapeutic Treatment of Client Anger at God," 42.

67) Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis16-50, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2(Dallas: WordBooks,1982), 428.

III. Conclusion

In time of painful situation or life crises, people may experience spiritual struggle of anger toward God. It is negative religious coping in time of suffering. Generally people are afraid of admitting their anger at God because it is related to a moral issue, lack of faith and spiritual maturity, and sin. Anger at God negatively affects an individual's physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Especially, unresolved or repressed anger toward God is the root of emotional atheism and disconnection from God. It is the most problematic consequence of anger toward God. Therefore, as a Christian counselor, it is important to encourage clients to honestly express their anger to God in counseling sessions. By encouraging them to rethink their distorted images of God, counselors can reframe the client's anger to be a positive chance to rebuild an authentic relationship with God.

Turning negative religious coping into a positive one is part of the counselor's job. God wants to have a relationship with people and does not want to lose his people because of their unresolved anger at him. Wrestling with their anger and honestly expressing it in proper ways will continually preserve the relationship with God and give spiritual insights to understand God. Through observing God's ways of responding to anger toward him in the Bible, a person may be inspired by God's unconditional love toward His people. God's acceptance and understanding of the feelings eventually open a person's spiritual eyes to see God.

There is a limitation of this study. Since the study covers the issue of Christians' anger toward God in generality, the assessments and interventions of the study tend to be too broad. Therefore, it is

suggested for the further studies to limit to psychological causes and interventions.

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【 국문초록 】

하나님에 대한 분노의 영적갈등 해결하기:
기독교 상담적 접근들

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하나님을 향한 분노는 사람들이 흔히 경험하는 영적갈등들 중의 하나이다. 특히, 트라우마의 경험 또는 삶의 고통 속에 있는 사람들은 하나님께 분노 또는 버림받은 감정을 느낄 수 있다. 그러나 사람들은 하나님께 벌을 받을 것에 대한 두려움, 믿음 부족의 죄책감, 또는 “하나님께 화를 내는 것이 괜찮을까?”라는 도덕적 문제의 갈등으로 그 분노를 부정 또는 억압하는 경향이 있다. 따라서 그들의 분노는 미해결된 채 마음속에 남아있게 된다. 미해결된 하나님을 향한 분노는 하나님과의 관계를 파괴하여 ‘정서적 무신론자’로 만들 수 있는 가장 해로운 요소 중의 하나이다. 그러므로 기독교 상담에서 내담자들의 미해결된 하나님을 향한 분노를 다루는 것은 하나님과의 관계 회복에 있어서 매우 중요한 주제이다. 먼저, 하나님에 대한 분노에 대한 이해를 위하여, 분노에 대한 신학적 정의, 하나님을 향한 분노의 원인들과 미해결된 하나님에 대한 분노의 결과들에 대해 설명한다. 하나님에 대한 분노나 버림받은 느낌을 정직하게 표현한 성경적 인물들의 예들은 사람들이 그들의 분노를 인정하고 하나님께 정직하게 표현하는데 통찰을 줄 것이다. 하나님과 소통하고 하나님에 대한 신뢰와 친밀감을 회복하는 개입의 제공은 내담자들이 욱처럼(욥 42:5) 영적 성장을 경험하는데 도움을 줄 것이다.

중심단어 : 영적갈등, 하나님을 향한 분노, 미해결된 하나님을 향한 분노, 하나님과의 관계회복, 기독교 상담