

ANGER MANAGEMENT EPHESIANS 4:26-27

For the last several weeks I've been reading the major prophets as part of my daily Bible reading--Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel. Like most other twenty-first century American Christians, when I have my quiet time in the Word, I am looking for encouragement and inspiration. I'm looking for truths that endear me to my heavenly Father and principles and promises that provide affirmation and hope.

But those things have fairly eluded me as I have read the prophets, for probably the thing that has made the biggest impression on me is the enormity and the intensity of God's wrath. I'm not talking about irritation or annoyance; I'm talking about full-blown, fully developed rage. And most of this anger is directed toward His very own people because of their sin and idolatry. After decades of rebellion and defiance, God has finally had enough, and there is nothing left to do but express that anger through captivity and judgment.

A couple of days ago I was reading Ezekiel 7 in which the Lord said to Israel, *"The end is upon you and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity or spare you...I am about to pour out my wrath upon you and spend my anger against you..."* (7:3-4; 8).

I assure you that these are not isolated texts that I've extracted to make a point. The outpouring of God's anger upon His people is one of the major themes of the prophets. It's as if God's anger had been simmering for all those years, and it finally boiled over.

What do you make of that? Let's be honest. Reading about God's anger doesn't exactly inspire us to want to sit in His lap during our morning devotions. It's unsettling. It creates some dissonance and raises some questions, one of which is how do we reconcile God's wrath with God's goodness?

That's a question we cannot ignore. It's a theological issue we *must* try to resolve. And, by the way, it's a cop-out to say that God was different in the Old Testament than He is in the New Testament. I assure you, He's not! Yes, His wrath against sin has been appeased (satisfied) through Jesus' death on the cross, so that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. But that doesn't mean He doesn't get angry anymore. Read Acts 5 about Ananias and Sapphira. Read Hebrews which says, *"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (10:31) and *"Our God is a consuming fire"* (12:29). Read about the fate of those who have rejected Christ on the Day of Judgment.

If we have a hard time reconciling God's wrath with God's grace and goodness and love maybe it's because we've been selective about the things we emphasize about God. We've chosen to emphasize the things we consider to be positive, the things that endear us to Him and make us feel good.

Or maybe it's because we've allowed our twenty-first century American culture to influence us. I wouldn't be surprised if some of us have the opinion that anger is always a *bad* thing--that it's always negative, always destructive, and nothing good could ever come from it.

But if God gets angry and God is good *all the time*, then His anger must be *good*, His anger must be beneficial, His anger must make some positive contribution. I'm not suggesting that His

anger is pleasant or enjoyable, or that we should *want* to be the recipients of it. I'm merely saying that His anger is good.

And if God's anger is good, if His anger is ultimately an expression of His righteous and just character, then is it possible that it might be good and appropriate and beneficial for God's people to be angry?

I can tell you unequivocally that the answer is "yes". Look at **verses 26-27**. "*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.*"

That first phrase, "*Be angry and do not sin*", is a quotation from Psalm 4, and, yes, it is a command. The *NIV* tries to soften it by translating it "*In your anger do not sin*", which is certainly part of what Paul wants to communicate. But he's actually saying more than that. He is saying that there are certain things that we *should* be angry about, so go ahead and be angry about them.

Please note that he's not commanding us to have an angry demeanor or disposition; he's not advocating that Christians be known or characterized as angry people. Anger is *not* a fruit of the Spirit, in case you didn't know. "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control*" (*Gal. 5:22-23*).

Furthermore, in verse 31, Paul tells us to get rid of all rage and anger. Anger is not something that should reside in us or control us. And so the command in verse 26 simply means that there are times when it is appropriate and beneficial for God's children to be angry or to express anger, but that we need to be able to manage that anger. Because anger is such a highly flammable emotion, we need to handle it with extreme care and be able to deal with it in a timely manner. More on that later.

But you should also know that the word translated "be angry" does not refer to a mild expression of anger, like irritation or annoyance. It most often describes an intense kind of anger. It is translated elsewhere, "to be very angry", "to be enraged", or "to be furious", which leads me to conclude that it must be the same kind of anger that we read about in the prophets--the kind that God poured out on His people when He sent them into captivity.

Which raises the all-important question: What *are* those times that we are supposed to be angry? When is it appropriate?

Let me clarify something first. There are clearly two kinds of anger--*righteous* anger and *unrighteous* anger, and the only kind that is good and appropriate and beneficial is *righteous* anger. Unrighteous anger, anger that emanates from the remnants of our sinful nature, is evil, destructive, and never appropriate. So the key is discerning which is which, and then making sure we're not crossing the line into sin.

I want to be as simple and straightforward as I can here, because this is a very important distinction to make. Typically you can identify anger as *unrighteous*, if it is in response to something about *you*. Your rights, your reputation, your wants, your ambitions, your preferences, your expectations, your ego. If you get angry when someone criticizes you or something you've done, or disagrees with you, or ignores you, or gives you a dirty look, or doesn't treat you like you think you should be treated, or disappoints you, or does something you don't like, that's *unrighteous* anger, and it's wrong--it's sinful. If you get angry because you didn't get your way, or because you didn't get what you want, that's *unrighteous* anger, and it's never justifiable and never appropriate.

Now, there are *some* exceptions. It's appropriate to be angry when your spouse cheats on you, because God established marriage and made you and your spouse one flesh, and He has

commanded that husbands and wives be faithful to each other. It's right and appropriate to be angry when your child lies to you, because God established you as the authority in your family, and has commanded that children be obedient to their parents. In both cases, even though *you* are the one who has been betrayed, the primary sin is one of rebellion against God.

Suffice it to say, however, that unrighteous anger is *typically* a response, when someone has done something to offend you personally, and you react out of pride or selfishness.

Righteous anger, on the other hand, is a godly response to attacks on God's name, God's character, God's reputation, God's decrees, God's Word, God's church, and God's kingdom. It's an anger that ultimately emanates from a deep love and reverence for God, and a longing to see Him honored. And when He is dishonored, disregarded, disobeyed, or defied, it hurts deeply. And that hurt is expressed in legitimate, appropriate anger.

I read recently about Ezekiel's call to preach to the rebellious Israelites who were already in exile. As God was giving instructions to Ezekiel, He told him be prepared for the fact that these Israelites would not listen to him for they were hardened and obstinate (3:8). And when God was finished commissioning him, Ezekiel says this: *"The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the LORD upon me: (3:14).*

It seems like a contradiction for someone to be controlled by the Spirit with the strong hand of the Lord upon him, while at the same time filled with bitterness and anger. But Ezekiel's emotions were precisely a reflection of the Holy Spirit's emotions; it was evidence that Ezekiel was in sync with God.

Likewise, when you read Paul's letter to the Galatians, you can't help but conclude that he was furious with them for abandoning the gospel of grace and freedom and reverting back to the law, with all its bondage and self-reliance. Why was Paul angry? Not only was it false teaching that contradicted the truth, but it was a slap in Christ's face. He said, *"If righteousness could be gained through the law then Christ died for nothing!" (2:21).*

But our supreme example of someone who expressed righteous anger is Jesus. Referring to His trial and crucifixion, Peter says, *"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23).* In other words, He *didn't* get angry when He was personally attacked. On the contrary, He prayed for His attackers, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do".

And yet there were a few occasions when Jesus *did* become angry. Remember when He went to the temple during Passover, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple courtyard? Why did He get so angry? It wasn't about Him, it was about His Father. His Father's house was being corrupted by swindlers, and it was dishonoring His Father's name and reputation.

Once again, it is appropriate to be angry when God and the things that are precious to Him are dishonored, disregarded, disobeyed, or defied. And so let me give you a few modern day examples of when it is appropriate to be angry.

On Christmas morning Muslim terrorists bombed three churches in Nigeria, killing and injuring dozens of worshipers. Those attacks on Jesus' followers are an attack on Jesus Himself. (Do you remember when Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus and said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" Jesus so identifies Himself with His church that when His church is attacked, it's an attack upon Him.) So, it's appropriate to be angry. It's not appropriate to retaliate, it's not appropriate to curse those attackers, but it's appropriate to be angry.

It is appropriate to be angry when we see people being exploited; when the unborn are aborted, when children are abused, when the poor are oppressed, when women are battered, when reputations are trashed, when slander is spread and lies are told, when people are persecuted, when there is racial discrimination, when there is violent aggression against innocent people. That's because God created all people in His image, and He insists that all people be treated with honor and dignity.

It is appropriate to be angry when false teaching is taught or spread, because it is an attack on God's truth, and it is only the truth that can set people free. Ultimately false teaching creates bondage.

"Go ahead and be angry", says Paul. But he goes on say, "be careful that you do not sin", which suggests that even righteous anger can turn into unrighteous anger, if it is not managed properly. There are people sitting in prison right now for killing abortion doctors, because they didn't manage their righteous anger, and it turned into unrighteous anger. There are Christians in Nigeria who have burned mosques and attacked Muslims, because they did not manage their righteous anger, and it turned into unrighteous anger.

We are commanded to be angry, but we are immediately warned not to sin, and I'm pretty sure the reason for that is because anger is such a powerful, mind-altering emotion that we can easily be controlled or overcome by it. And when we are controlled or overcome by anger we have crossed the line into sin, and we are vulnerable to Satan's control. More on that in a few minutes.

But first, Paul gives some very practical instruction about how we are to manage our anger. He simply says, "*Do not let the sun go down on your anger*". In other words, don't let it simmer; don't let it escalate; don't let it get out of hand. Deal with it in a timely fashion.

Are we to take this literally? Certainly, the phrase, "*Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry*" is a figure of speech, and I'm pretty sure Paul was *not* saying, "If you get angry at 10:00 in the morning, you've got about eight hours to work through it and get over it, but if you get angry at 5:30 in the evening, you've only got half an hour." I think he was telling us that we ought to be intentional about dealing with our anger and not let it linger in us for too long.

But I also think he was instructing us to literally deal with our anger before the day ends, at the very latest, before we go to sleep.

There are some very practical reasons why we need to do this. Remember, anger is a highly flammable emotion, and it can turn toxic in a relatively short amount of time, eating away at us from the inside out, corroding our minds and hearts and distorting our perspectives and our judgment. The longer we hold on to it, the more it eats away at us, and the more vulnerable we are to becoming resentful or bitter or hateful. And that's where verse 27 comes in. When we hold on to our anger, even for one night, we give the devil an opportunity.

I like how the *NIV* translates this. "*Don't give the devil a foothold*". Don't give the devil an opportunity to latch on to you, and get leverage in your life. Because if he can get a foothold, if he can get some leverage, he will do everything in his power to conquer you. For he's not content with a foothold; he wants a stronghold.

And you wouldn't believe how easy it is for him to do this through unmanaged and unattended anger. I can't tell you how many people I know who are spiritual invalids because they wouldn't let go of their anger, and the devil got a foothold in their lives, turned it into a stronghold without them even knowing it, and it has destroyed their witness, their relationships, and their ministries.

And in almost every one of the cases that I know of, when you talk to these people about it, they either deny that they're angry, or they try to justify their anger, calling it righteous anger. Some are actually convinced they are expressing God's displeasure and God's wrath, and that they are the instruments of God's judgment when, in fact, they're being used by the devil to divide and destroy.

Anger is a highly flammable emotion that can quickly turn toxic, which is why Paul tells us to deal with it in a timely fashion. And how do you deal with it?

1. Talk to the Lord about it. "Lord, I'm angry about such and such. Lord, I feel I have a right to be angry about this--I think it's righteous anger. But Lord, I don't trust my emotions and Lord, you know, my perceptions are not always accurate. Lord, would you give me your heart, would you let me feel what you feel about this. If I am out of line, reveal that to me. If I'm overreacting, show me. I want to have your heart.

"And Lord, I am aware that anger is a highly flammable emotion that can quickly turn toxic and corrode my mind and heart, so help me to release this anger to you in your time, by your power, in a way that is most constructive. And if there is any action you want me to take or any conversations you want me to have, please direct me. I cast this care upon you, I release my anger into your hands, I lay this burden at your feet".

This is a prayer according to God's will, and it is a prayer that He would be delighted to answer. He wants to help us with this. So ask Him and trust Him to do so. And be very careful about trusting yourself to manage your anger. This is such a delicate matter and requires such caution and care, that even the most mature of us can be burned by it. Let the Lord help you.

2. Second, obey what the Lord may prompt you to do in response to your anger. If He's directing you to take action, don't procrastinate. For example, if He's prompting you to pray for the comfort and protection of our Christian brothers and sisters in Nigeria, do it. If He's prompting you to pray for the salvation of those Muslim terrorists in Nigeria, do it. If He's prompting you to stand up for the rights of the poor, or the unborn, or the exploited children in the sex slave industry, do it. If He's directing you to confront the person who is spreading gossip or slander, so that it can be nipped in the bud, do it. If He's directing you to write to your congressman about legislation that defies God's decrees, do it.

3. Finally, be alert to the condition of your own heart. If you are a cynical person, then it's a pretty good indication that you haven't resolved your anger constructively. If your heart is hard toward someone or towards a group, you can be sure you haven't resolved your anger in an appropriate or godly way. If you feel the need to keep justifying your anger, you probably have held on to it too long and it's turned toxic.

And don't be afraid to ask your spouse or your friends to evaluate the condition of your heart, and let them be honest. Don't be defensive. Those that have to be around you a lot know if your heart and mind have been corroded by anger, believe me.

And if you have, then go to the Lord, and turn it over to Him. Let Him remove that toxic crust around your heart and make it soft again. He can do it. He wants to do it.

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EPHESIANS 4:26-27

MAIN IDEA: Anger is a highly flammable emotion that can quickly turn toxic, so we need to manage it in a timely fashion

THE COMMAND TO BE ANGRY
THE MEANING OF THE WORD

TWO KINDS OF ANGER
RIGHTEOUS ANGER

UNRIGHTEOUS ANGER

DISCERNING WHICH IS WHICH
WHEN IT'S YOU

WHEN IT'S ABOUT GOD

EXERCISING CAUTION

TIMELY RESOLUTION

THE DEVIL'S FOOthOLD