

Refusing to Surrender to Anger *Ephesians 4:17-32 (emphasis on 26-27)*

It was code-named “*Operation Overlord*,” and was to become the largest invasion force in human history. It involved the combined efforts of soldiers from eight countries, including Great Britain, America and Canada. By the time Americans learned about it in the early morning of June 6, 1944, more than 7,000 ships, 12,000 aircraft and 156,000 troops had crossed the English Channel and landed on the beaches of Normandy in northwestern France. Hitler had control of France, and the Allied Forces knew that unless he was stopped, many more lives would be lost. The purpose of the invasion was to drive back the German army by opening a western front in Europe. The key to the invasion was to establish a beachhead, from which they could open a base of operations for further military maneuvers.

And that is exactly what happened. By June 30th, over 850,000 men, 148,000 vehicles, and 570,000 tons of supplies had landed on the Normandy shores. Fighting by the brave soldiers, sailors and airmen of the allied forces on the western front and Russian forces on the eastern front led to the defeat of German Nazi forces. In less than one year, on May 7, 1945, the Germans agreed to a total and unconditional surrender.

While this action by the Allied Forces was ultimately a very good thing leading to the end of World War II, we find a warning from Paul in Ephesians 4 about allowing Satan to establish a beachhead in our lives and hearts. He’s been telling us that as believers and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, our actions and lives should be different than they were before. They should no longer be characterized by the thought processes and lifestyles of those who do not know Christ. So Paul is telling us, “Stop living that way. Stop thinking that way.” In fact, the wording he used, as we’ve seen in recent messages, is that we are to “*put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*” (vv. 22-24) The image that Paul uses, as we’ve already seen, is that of taking off a set of dirty clothes and putting on fresh, clean clothes.

But then Paul begins to describe for us what that really means. That’s why the word “therefore” begins verse 25—“on the basis of this change that is taking place in your lives, here is what you should do or not do.” He tells us in verse 25, “*Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*” Last time we talked about how telling the truth extends to telling the truth about ourselves, about others and about God Himself. But that is not all that he says, and we focus today on verses 26-27: “*In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*”

Let's focus for a few minutes on the word translated "foothold," which is used by most translations. The King James reads, "Neither give place to the devil." The New American Standard words it "do not give the devil an opportunity." The idea here is that we should not give evil any chance whatsoever to make entrance into our lives. The word means any place that has been marked off, such as the boundaries of a city or country, or a jurisdiction. The word also was used to describe an invading army, trying to establish what we could call a "beachhead," such as at Normandy, a secure place from which it could launch further military maneuvers. That's the idea behind the use of the word "foothold." Or this: I'm climbing the side of a mountain, and I need a place to put my foot, so I can advance to the next level. Paul says, "Don't allow Satan the opportunity to advance any further in your life. Don't even give him the smallest chance to influence you or have control over you." The New Century Version captures the feel of this meaning with its translation, "*Do not give the devil a way to defeat you.*"

Of course there are many ways Satan can defeat us. There are many ways we open ourselves up to his influence and power in our lives, most of the time without our even knowing we've done it. Satan has marked off much territory in our lives where he would like to gain control, and once he moves in, it is much, much easier for him to affect us in other ways as well. The Holy Spirit of God directed Paul to identify unresolved, sinful anger as one of the best ways Satan establishes a beachhead on the shorelines of our lives. The reason for that is that "an unhealed breach is a magnificent opportunity for the devil to sow dissension" (William Barclay).

We find that Scripture agrees with Scripture. We can look to the very first incident of anger recorded in the Bible, in Genesis 4:5-7—"*So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.'*" The words are different, but the principle is the same as we see here in Ephesians 4. "If you do not resolve this anger, there is the very real possibility that you will fall into sin. Sin is crouching at the door."

Now picture that—imagine sin as a wild animal crouching outside your door, just waiting for you to come outside. Once you step across the threshold, that beast pounces on you, ripping you apart. God was telling Cain that he needed to deal with that anger pretty quickly, or else it would destroy him. Combine that thought with the warning here in Ephesians 4, not to give the devil an opportunity. Don't allow the devil to camp out on your doorstep. The longer he stays there, the more likely he is to find a way in, and once inside your heart and life, he will establish headquarters from which he can do all sorts of damage in your life.

And Scripture continues to agree with Scripture. Psalm 37:8 tells us, "*Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.*" The problem with anger in all its forms is that it very often leads to something else, to some deeper and more insidious evil. And don't

make the mistake of thinking that you've got to throw open the door and invite him in. Don't think you've got to offer him a four-lane highway to bring his army into your life. He only needs a small area of your heart to establish his beachhead. We don't want that to happen, and Paul tells us that it is foreign to the life Christ gives us.

So let's look at it a little more. "*In your anger do not sin,*" we read in verse 26, or in the words of the King James, "Be ye angry, and sin not." We read that, and we think that Paul is commanding us to be angry. And we think, "Well, I can certainly do that," and most of us do a pretty good job at it, don't we? There are some things in our world and society over which we must get angry, that it would be sin not to be angry in those situations. Bede Jarrett once wrote, "The world needs anger. The world often continues to allow evil because it isn't angry enough." Someone has said that if we would be angry and not sin, then we must be angry at nothing but sin.

But look again, because that's not the end of the sentence. The command is not to **get** angry—the command is to get angry **without sinning**. That is something we can't always do! Most of the time when we get angry, the problem is that we enjoy it too much! Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking Transformed by Thorns*, shared this insight:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Billy Sunday was a famous evangelist many years ago. A woman came up to him once after he preached on anger, and tried to justify her angry outbursts. She explained, "There's nothing wrong with losing my temper. I blow up, and then it's all over." Sunday replied, "So does a shotgun, but look at the damage it leaves behind!"

An ancient Chinese proverb says, "If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow." So we shouldn't make excuses for our unresolved anger or outbursts of temper. We shouldn't even try to excuse the anger we allow to smolder. It burns beneath the surface, festering until it controls us and poisons us. We may make excuses for it, even trying to justify our feelings to ourselves and others. We say "I've got every right to feel this way!" Well, it depends on your perspective, and that's Paul's whole point here. If you are living like those who don't know Christ, then yes, you do have every right to harbor that anger and bitterness and resentment. But according to the Word of God, no, you don't. The Holy Word of God has a totally different viewpoint on the subject. Paul told us in verse twenty that that's not what we learned from Christ. Unresolved anger and bitterness is a stubborn holdover from our former way of living, from the time before we began to follow Christ. And if we make the choice to

allow anger to fester in our hearts and minds, then we are also making the choice to allow Satan to set up a base of operations. Do we want that?

Paul tells us at the end of verse 26, “*Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.*” I want to point out a couple of things here. If we apply this principle incorrectly, we will get into a lot of trouble. If the thing that causes my anger occurs early in the morning, then I’ve got all day to deal with it. But someone in that situation could say, “Well, I’ve got several hours still to be mad at him before I have to forgive him.” You could say that is being obedient to what Paul wrote, but is that the right way to deal with anger? So what if you get angry at noon, or just before the sun goes down? Are you being disobedient if you get angry *after* the sun goes down? What do you do then? So let’s look at the larger principle here.

The principle is that of allowing anger to continue in our hearts and minds without dealing with it. It may be one hour or several hours until sundown, but that’s not the point. Two brothers got into a fight one morning, and the older one very easily overpowered the younger, smaller brother. He took quite a beating, but it was his pride that suffered the most. He was so bitter about it that he refused to talk to his brother all day long. When bedtime came, their mother, wanting to see them patch things up, said, “Don’t you think you should forgive your brother before you go to sleep? Remember, the Bible says, ‘Do not let the sun go down on your wrath.’” The little boy looked perplexed, as he thought for a few moments. Then he blurted out, “But Mom, how can I keep the sun from going down?”

Phyllis Diller had a similar attitude. Her advice was, “Never go to bed angry. Stay up and fight!” That’s not quite what the verse means! The verse means that we are to resolve the issue that caused us to get angry in the first place. And if we do not, we are in sin. In fact, we are choosing to sin. We are choosing to break fellowship with God! We get angry at someone, and we allow that anger to take up residence in our hearts. Over time, everything that person does is interpreted through that feeling of anger we are harboring. We think about that person, and those feelings of anger are rekindled all over again. We drag it up and think about it, and mull over it, and we are feeding that anger. The longer we are angry, the less likely we are ever to resolve the issue. The only way to deal with a broken relationship or fellowship is *at once* (William Barclay).

A husband and wife find their marriage in danger, and it’s because of unresolved anger and bitterness. One of them says or does something that upsets the other and it is allowed to fester beneath the surface, causing the kind of damage that neither of them wanted. Two friends who have known each other for years suddenly find that their relationship has been ripped apart, and it’s because of anger that is not dealt with. The sun goes down on it, so to speak, and it is not handled properly. It is allowed to smolder and fester until much damage has been done to their

relationship. People who are members of the Body of Christ and even attend the same church can sometimes find themselves embroiled in the midst of unresolved resentment and anger.

So let's be very clear here—there's no way around it. If I am deliberately holding on to the memory of some insult or some event that didn't go my way, and allowing it control me, there will be great emotional and spiritual damage. Relationships can be destroyed. Churches have been destroyed because of this. Sometimes they continue to meet and go on doing what they've always done, but they're dead just the same. And more than that, if I deliberately harbor this kind of thing in my life, then I am choosing to sin. I am choosing to allow that poison to stay in my life, and it's doing me a whole lot of damage. Someone has said that resentment is like taking the poison and waiting for the other person to die.

James 1:19-20 reads, *“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”* So that passage is saying that if we allow ourselves to fall into anger, we may find it harder and harder to live the kind of life that pleases and honors God. Our brand of anger does not look like God's anger, and we should be very slow to fall into it, because it is very, very hard to get out.

But I want to point out something else here. When Paul tells us, “Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry,” he is telling us that this is a **choice** we are making. We may not be able to control our emotional responses to a perceived wrong, but we are the ones who decide whether or not we are going to allow that anger to fester.

Listen, folks! Is that the choice you're making? Is that the way you're going to live? We refer once again to James 1, in the next few verses. *“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”* There it is again—that idea of putting off something—*“get rid”* of it. Have nothing to do with it. The solution, James wrote, is by humbly accepting the Word planted in you. Today, I am attempting to plant the teaching of the Word of God on this whole subject of anger and allowing Satan a beachhead in our lives. The first step to dealing with our unresolved anger is to accept what God's Word says about it, and stop making all kinds of excuses for it. But continue in James: *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*

If we listen to the Word of God, and obey it, we will be fortifying our defenses against Satan's attacks. One thing we need to remind ourselves of is that Satan's power is limited. He can only establish a beachhead in our lives if we allow him to do so. If we *“put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness,”* as we read in verse 24, then Satan cannot get in! He cannot penetrate the armor of God's Word in our lives unless we let him.

So how do we deal with it? We've been talking about dealing with it, and we've come under conviction that we've allowed anger and resentment to reside in our hearts far too long. We have allowed Satan to sit at the table, to establish a beachhead, to set up camp just outside the door. And we want to get it resolved. How? The Scriptures make that very plain, as well, and it is our choice as to whether or not we are going to allow the Word of God to take root in our spirits.

We are told in 1 Peter 4:8, *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”* You see, love enables us to overlook a lot of sinful things that others do. The literal meaning of these words is that we are to “love earnestly,” or to “pursue love,” “don't give up the quest to love others because it's so important.” It covers over a multitude of sins. But it does much more than that. We're so familiar with the words of 1 Corinthians 13 that we may not even see them anymore. We are told in that chapter, *“love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, **it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.** Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*

One pastor in Haiti once told this parable to his congregation: “A man in Haiti wanted to sell his house. Another man wanted very much to buy it, but because he was poor, he couldn't afford the full price. After much bargaining, the owner agree to sell the house for half the original price with just one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door. After several years, the original owner decided he wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So the first owner found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon the house became unlivable, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail.” Then the Haitian pastor made this application of the parable: “If we leave the devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ's habitation.”

“In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Instead, pull out the pegs Satan has pounded in, and choose the life that Christ offers you.