

“Be Angry, and Do Not Sin”

A Study of the Hebrew Word *Ragaz*

By Kyle Pope

In the fourth Psalm, David charges us, **“Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still.”** (Psalms 4:4, NKJV). The apostle Paul quotes the first part of this verse in his epistle to the Ephesians, and offers either additional instruction or a paraphrase of the last part of the verse, declaring, **“Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath”** (Ephesians 4:26). This text is often applied in one of two ways.

First, we understand it to refer to our behavior when we are angered by something. That car pulls in front of us on the highway, and in our fear of an accident we are enraged. A repairman cheats us by charging too much, leaving the job undone or lying to us about work that was done. This leads us to feel angry and resentful of the fact that someone has taken advantage of us. Perhaps it is the unkind and hurtful word that is spoken to us. Our blood boils, our pressure rises and the anger builds within us. We look at the instruction of the psalmist and the apostle as warning not to allow this sudden anger to lead us to sin.

We also, use this text as justification for “righteous indignation.” We consider the fact that Jesus, on occasion, was angered by sinful, hypocritical behavior. Jesus drove out the money-changers with a whip (John 2:15,16). Yet, Jesus was **“without sin”** (Hebrews 4:15). We see from such examples, the psalmist and the apostle pointing out that anger alone is not sin, but must be controlled lest it lead us to commit sin.

These applications are true, but they do not address all that Psalm 4:4 would teach us. The word in the Hebrew translated “angry” is the word *ragaz* (רָגַז), defined, “to be agitated, quiver, quake, be excited, perturbed” (BDB, p. 919). While the New Testament, in Ephesians 4:26 uses

a word that more narrowly addresses anger¹, *ragaz* is used variously in Scripture in reference to fear (Exodus 15:14), earthquake (I Samuel 14:15), dislocation (II Samuel 7:10), tumultuous waters (Psalm 77:16) and rage (Isaiah 37:29). The New American Standard Bible renders this literally, **“Tremble, and do not sin.”**

There are many things in life that lead us to agitation and uneasiness. These might include fear, worry, frustration, persecution, hardship, weakness or anger. What do we do when we feel such uneasiness? It is so easy to allow agitation, anxiety or distress to lead us to sin! We allow ourselves to see sin as justified. We might say to ourselves, “they wronged me, I’ll wrong them.” Or, we lose our self-control. The trembling agitation of the moment robs us of the good sense we would normally have to avoid sin. Although it is easy at such times to sin, the Psalmist tells us, “Don’t do it!” Instead, do two other things: 1. **“Meditate within your heart”** (i.e. think about it), and 2. **“Be still.”** This is not apathy or a refusal to address a problem. It is simply a matter of calming the raging motion of the moment in order to allow a cool evaluation of the situation. How often is the good motive of the heart short circuited by the hasty movement of the tongue or body, as the mind has become disengaged in the process?

James tells us the same thing in charging us to be **“swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath”** (James 1:19). Only a few verses before this he taught that all sin has an internal germination (James 1:15). Jesus addresses this in its broadest terms. He explains to those interested only in external cleanliness, **“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man”** (Mark 7:20). Listing a variety of sins, Jesus explains, **“All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”** (Mark 7:23).

We will face many things in life that lead us to feel unsettled. The Lord would have us to realize that when we experience these things the challenge for the child of God is not to let these things lead us to sin. We will tremble, shake, be agitated, be angry or perturbed, but it can and must be that we, **“tremble, and do not sin.”**

¹ The Greek word in Ephesians 4:26 is *orgizo* (ὀργίζω) defined, “to provoke, to arouse to anger, to be provoked to anger, be angry, be wroth” (Thayer). Unlike *ragaz*, which refers to unsettled motion of an object or emotion, *orgizo* always refers to passionate emotions.