

Sermon 9, Praying Through Rebuke, Psalm 6

Proposition: When terrorized and weakened by rebuke, the king doesn't hesitate to call on God to save him from his enemies and not to rebuke him in anger.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this psalm deals with an uncomfortable topic. I'm speaking, of course, about rebuke. When I get rebuked, I get that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I just got told I was wrong, and even when it happens in the nicest way possible, it's still a gut punch. A couple of you have told me recently that none of us love rebuke. That may be true. But here's the thing: rebuke is the path to wisdom. The one who hates rebuke is by definition a fool and a scoffer. The one who accepts rebuke is learning the discipline of wisdom, and he will be pleasing to God.

That is a very quick sketch of the biblical teaching about rebuke. And it is in this context that the king's remarks on rebuke come to us. We will see that rebuke didn't just hit him a little bit and give him a twist in his gut for the rest of the day. Rebuke threw him for such a loop that you might think he was having a full-blown nervous breakdown. We're going to talk more about

his symptoms in just a minute, but let's just cut to the main point of the psalm, which is this: When terrorized and weakened by rebuke, the king does not hesitate to call on God. And when he does, he finds that God answers, rebukes his enemies, and reestablishes his moral authority. The overall lesson: When rebuked, turn toward God. He has told you you're wrong, but He will heal you when you cry out to Him.

I. The King's Situation, vv. 1-3

The psalmist begins by talking about his situation. And it is a rough situation. I would dare to guess that only a few people in this room have been as low as the king is in this psalm.

A. He Is Being Rebuked and Disciplined, v. 1

The first thing to recognize, of course, is that he is being rebuked. Rebuke is confronting someone and saying to him, "You are wrong. Change." You can be rebuked about virtually anything you are doing, saying, thinking, or omitting to do. The topics and severity of rebuke can range across the board, from my magazine editor telling me "I won't publish your review" to the elders pulling me aside and saying "If you don't shape up, this church is going to be asking you to resign."

I don't need to discuss rebuke at length. You all know what it is. You have all been corrected at one time or another, and likely been corrected within the last week because we all make mistakes and we all need to be called out for those mistakes. Some people really like to rebuke and really hate to be rebuked. We're not even going to get into that. But if you are close to one of those people, know that you are getting lots of extra rebukes beyond what the ordinary person gets.

Well, the king places rebuke in parallel with discipline. This, I think, is a much more mysterious concept to most people and even to most Christians. You know the word, I'm certain. But it's very likely that you do not really understand the concept, at least not in a way that you can clearly explain. Many people understand it intuitively and are able to discipline both themselves and those under their authority, even if they can't explain what they are doing. But in our anti-discipline culture, it is rare to find someone who understands and practices discipline discursively rather than intuitively.

What is discipline? I like to say "Discipline is the training that makes punishment unnecessary." Discipline means the support and training that allow the one disciplined to say no to evil and yes to good. Discipline can be preemptive, where you are simply forced (say) to run five miles per day, not because you did anything wrong but in order to toughen you and train you to command yourself and your body. Discipline can also be punitive, as when you mouth off to the drill sergeant and he makes you do fifty pushups. Both the preemptive and the punitive are types of discipline. But discipline is not retributive. It is not the infliction of suffering on someone to make him pay for his crimes. Rather, discipline is ongoing and applies equally to the wicked and the righteous. Put another way, discipline is the social aspect of self-control. Jesus needs to be self-controlled, not because He has an inclination to sin but because you can't be perfect without being self-controlled, that is, without being disciplined.

Well, in the opening verse of this psalm the king is being rebuked and disciplined. God is telling him “You were wrong; change.” And God is putting him through some kind of pain to teach him self-control and obedience.

I need not ask whether God has rebuked and chastened you. I know He has if you are His child: Whom the Lord loves, He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. You have probably been rebuked by your parents and your boss at various times in your life. The fewer rebukes you received from parents and boss, the more you have had to receive directly from the Almighty. A rebuke from the Almighty often looks like things going wrong in your life and leading you to the realization that you are just not doing what pleases Him.

Well, the psalm doesn't stop there. These rebukes and chastenings have been ferocious. Just listen to the three further points the psalmist makes about his sufferings.

B. He Is Weak and Terrified, vv. 2-3

He is weak, he says. He is feeble or pining away. There is no vigorous, “I'm a he-man who thinks nothing of going out and collecting 100 Philistine foreskins” here. David the mighty warrior has become David the bed-ridden, cane-using, skin-and-bones weakling. He can hardly walk across the room, never mind around the block. Now, as I said, I don't think most of us in here have experienced this level of chastening, at least not for very long. But not only is David physically weak, he is mentally terrified. His soul is “dismayed,” as the NAS has it, or “shaking with terror” as the NRSV reads. The terror isn't just mental either. It has sunk down into his body, into his bones. Now, your bones are the toughest and strongest parts of your body, tougher and longer-lasting than your flesh. But that doesn't matter. The rebuke and chastening of God Almighty has riddled David's bones with terror. He is weak, he is terrified.

If we didn't know that David fought a lion, a bear, a giant Philistine, and several major wars and campaigns, we would hardly conclude that this is the psalm of a battle-hardened military man. Come on, David! It's just a rebuke. Suck it up and move on.

But this king is very far from sucking it up and moving on.

C. He Doesn't Know How Long, v. 3b

His prayer breaks down grammatically at the end of verse three, as he simply chokes out “But you, O Lord: how long?” He doesn't need to add details. We know that the question is “How long am I going to endure this kind of suffering and pain?”

Most of us have experienced pain, and many of us have experienced pain bad enough that we have said “I don't think I can live with this for very long.” But that's just the problem here. It seems like the pain may be ongoing and there is no end in sight. The toughest Philistine-slayer among us would quail at such a thought.

D. He Can't Stop Crying, vv. 6-7

The kicker is really in vv. 6-7. The king can't stop crying. He is what we today call an “emotional wreck.” In the face of God's rebuke, he is utterly unable to get it together. He just sits there sobbing, and if he does manage to get up and do something else, the second he is back lying down in bed with nothing to do, the tears come flooding back. He speaks about his bed swimming, dissolving his couch in tears, his eyes wasting away.

What can we say about this? In our age of emotion, it is good to state the obvious: in a certain sense, the king's sorrow and constant tears validate your emotional distress.

We know that the Bible teaches that rebuke is a good thing. One of the other psalms says that being rebuked by the righteous is a kindness. But the king is not ashamed to admit here that God's rebuke has thrown him for a loop and that he has yet to regain his footing.

It's okay to be an emotional wreck, even over things that are good and good for you but that hurt like crazy in the moment.

But I want you to notice two other things too. The king is an emotional basket case who can't stop crying. But

1. He doesn't want to stay there and
2. He turns toward God in his sorrow and pain.

So next time you tell me that you are an emotional wreck but it's ok because Psalm 6, I'm going to challenge you with the rest of Psalm 6. Do you want to stay in emotional wreck territory? Are you planning to just wallow in your misery for months or years at a time, indulging all your sorrow and crying your eyes out on a daily basis? Or do you have a genuine desire to come out the other side of your depression?

Second, then, I'll challenge you like this: Are you doing anything to turn toward God in your pain? We are just about to look at seven practical petitions that the king makes, plus three great desires that he has in the midst of his pain. If you want to model your suffering on the king's, don't just say "Well, I'm miserable and that's it." You also need to draw near to God in hopeful prayer like the king does in this psalm.

II. The King's Petitions, vv. 1-2, 4

So with that, let's look at the seven things King David asks for.

A. Rebuke Me Without Anger, v. 1a

The first is to be rebuked without anger. Notice, please, that he does not say "Lord, don't rebuke me and don't chasten me." He says "Lord, don't rebuke me in your anger." In other words, he accepts the divine rebuke. He is willing to hear God say to him, "David, you're wrong." When God convicts your hearts about how you spoke to your wife, or how you treated your child, or how you spent your money, or how you acted under duress, you as a Christian should respond with gratitude. "Thank you, Lord, for rebuking me. I needed to hear where I was wrong so that I can change!"

But the element to which the king objects is the suggestion that God is angry with him. Don't tell me I'm wrong in a way that tells me that you are mad, O Lord!

How might you know that God is disciplining you in anger? I would simply say that if you are walking with the Lord the way you should, if He is angry, you will know it. You will sense it in the same way that you can tell your spouse is angry. Only, here's the difference. Our spouses can be wrong or working from faulty information. They can be mad over nothing. God is never mad over nothing. You can bet your bottom dollar that if He is mad at you then you 100% deserve it. There is no mistake or error on His part. If He has to rebuke you in wrath, then you have probably royally screwed up or even blown off His repeated rebukes and warnings.

God is slow to anger, but there are some dedicated Christians out there who drive Him to it. If this is you, beware! Yet even though we know that God is angry with the king for valid reasons, the king prays that God would withhold His anger.

B. Discipline Me Without Hot Wrath, v. 1b

He asks this a second time: discipline me without hot wrath. If you are going to be angry, Lord, moderate the heat of your anger. Cool down!

Yes, it's okay to pray this. When you are being powerfully rebuked, when God is thrusting your sins in your face and telling you to get it together, you can ask Him to cool down. David doesn't say that God is wrong or that His wrath is unjustified. He simply asks God to cool down. Of course, if you are going to ask such a thing, you also need to be ready to cool down yourself when someone asks it of you. If you are full of wrath and don't like to be told to cool off, you may not see God be as responsive to your pleas for Him to cool down. But if you listen to those who tell you to calm down, you should pray to the Lord to calm down too when He rebukes you in anger.

C. Be Gracious to Me, v. 2a

The third petition in the psalm is a request for grace. By definition, this is unmerited favor. The king asks for God's favor even though he doesn't deserve it, even though he has made God angry.

Do you have this kind of confidence in the surpassing grace of God? Are you ready to ask Him to be gracious for no reason, or more accurately, for the reason that He loves to be gracious? The king puts forward the reason that he is weak and terrified. Show me favor because I am weak! Normally, we would expect the strongest to be favored the most. The best baseball player gets the highest salary. The weakest player gets to sit on the bench and only come out when all the better players are injured or worn out.

But the very reason that the psalmist uses to plead with God for grace is that he is weak. "I'm not the strongest player, so please favor me." He knows that God loves the weak things, that God is favorably disposed to those who are riddled with problems and sorrows and weaknesses.

D. Heal Me, v. 2b

That's why he asks God to heal him. Whatever is wrong with him, whatever has gotten into his bones, he asks God to heal him. Again, this is not because he's so strong and healthy, but precisely because he is weak and sick. That is the God we serve — a God who loves to heal the one who is weak and failing.

E. Come Back to Me, v. 4a

He also prays for the Lord to come back to him. God has departed from him in a certain sense — presumably in the sense of friendship and joy. God is only present in rebuke and wrath. Hence the psalmist's request for God to come back.

Do you want the Lord to return? Can you say with the psalmist, "The nearness of God is my good?" If you would rather He just stayed away, you are not praying and thinking like the king. But the very reason this psalm exists is to teach you to pray and think like the king.

F. Deliver My Soul, v. 4b

The king also asks God to deliver his soul. From what? Presumably from what he already mentioned — God’s wrath and hot anger. The king’s soul was in danger from the wrath of God, and (as we’ll see in a moment) from the enemies of God. The king asks God to deliver his soul from both the enemies and from God’s own wrath.

This is not just a prayer for God to help him pull himself together emotionally and wade through the rebuke. It is a prayer for salvation from God’s wrath.

G. Save Me Because of Your Unfailing Love, v. 4c

And that is exactly where the king takes it. He calls upon God’s unfailing love and asks God to save him. God’s salvation is what the king needs! And he has confidence that he will get it because of the Lord’s steadfast love.

Do you rely on God’s steadfast love? Is your belief in that greater than your belief in your circumstances and sufferings? Are you able to say no to your despair because you have confidence that God’s love is unshakeable and unbreakable?

III. The King’s Great Desire, v. 5

Well, the king not only makes these seven petitions. He also describes his great desire. The fact that he describes it in negative terms shouldn’t put you off. He is talking about how dead people don’t praise God. He is not denying the afterlife or the possibility of worship in heaven. He is simply saying that worship as we know it no longer happens after death. The body in the grave is not getting up and going to the tabernacle every Sabbath to praise God.

A. To Remember the LORD

Thus, he says first of all that in the underworld or the grave no one remembers the Lord. But the king’s great desire is to remember the Lord, and he knows that God wants to be remembered as well. Thus, he argues against the possibility of his own death by invoking the memory of God. “Lord, when I’m alive I remember you; when I am dead, not so much.”

B. To Praise the LORD

No dead people get up and praise Yahweh. David had never seen any dead people do that, and obviously in his career as a warrior he had seen way more dead people than I have. Yet none of us has ever seen a dead person sit up and start singing Psalm 103. It doesn’t happen.

C. To Live So He Can Continue to Remember & Praise God

Standing behind these mentions of memory and praise is the Psalmist’s overwhelming desire to live so he can remember and praise God. This is what his true desire is — not to wallow in his grief, and to constantly post on Facebook about how miserable he is. He wants to remember God and praise God. That’s what he wants, and that’s why he prayed for all the things we just saw. He wants healing, and God’s return, and all the rest of it precisely because he wants to live and praise Jehovah.

IV. The King’s Renewed Moral Authority, v. 8

Well, in v. 8 the king describes how his prayers have begun to be answered. His moral authority has come back. Far from being weak and terrorized, he now authoritatively commands the wicked. He speaks to them about his weeping, but no longer is he an emotional wreck. His

returning mental and physical stamina is shown in the moral realm. He is able to say to the wicked, “Depart!” That is the king’s job and it is your job too. In every sphere where you exercise authority, it is your job to put a stop to the evil of the wicked. If they won’t stop, you are to kick them out. That’s what the king does here. His moral authority has returned.

That is your job and your privilege. You get to see that those under your charge obey God. If you are carrying the burden of sin, if the consequences of bad choices long ago are still dogging your footsteps, look to Psalm 6. It teaches that when you pray through rebuke, your moral authority returns.

When you are miserable, pray! When your moral authority is gone, pray! God will restore you.

V. The King’s Prayers Answered, vv. 9-10

Not only does he restore the king; He acts against the king’s enemies.

A. God’s Rebuke Moderated

The king tells us three times that God has heard him — his weeping, his supplication, his prayer. He made seven petitions and he tells us thrice that God heard them all. That means, of course, that all seven have been answered to some degree. God’s rebuke has been moderated; God’s steadfast love has acted to save His people.

B. The King’s Enemies Terrorized & Ashamed

And the king’s enemies are terrorized and ashamed. They will turn back and cease attacking the king.

You and I live with enemies. We know that the modern world is an enemy of Christ, that the modern state is largely an enemy of Christ, that the modern project seeks to make it possible to live well within the horizon of this world without reference to God and His Son. Yet this psalm and many others assure us that the enemies of Christ will be turned back and put to shame. They will shake with terror. Yes, in the meantime we are going to be shaking with terror when God’s rebuke afflicts us. But on the far side of that rebuke, and in response to our fervent prayers, our moral authority returns and our God hears us. That is a truth worth celebrating. Don’t fear the enemies. Don’t fear God’s chastening. You are loved and forgiven and welcome in Jesus, even if you can’t stop crying. Don’t stop turning toward God and connecting Him through prayer. He will hear you, and you will be delivered through His steadfast love. Amen.