

The Grace of Discipline

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 19, 2023.

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath.
Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.
My soul also is greatly troubled.
But you, O LORD—how long?

Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.
For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who will give you praise?

I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.
My eye wastes away because of grief;
it grows weak because of all my foes.

Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
The LORD has heard my plea;
the LORD accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment (Psalm 6).¹

David was a man after God's own heart and yet was guilty of adultery and murder. The Lord chose David to be king, anointed him to serve, established his kingdom, promised a perpetual throne, and yet allowed the rebellion of David's son, Absalom, to threaten it all. The rise and fall and rise again story of David is a familiar one, partly because of the historical record but also the poetic. We know what happened, but we also know how it felt. The story is recorded in 2 Samuel, and the third psalm accompanies it, as David wrote it during Absalom's attempted coup. The third is a short psalm that describes the Lord's salvation of David from his foes amidst the turmoil of a civil war. What the specific account in 2 Samuel and the third psalm do not reveal is that the rebellion was in fulfillment of what God promised.

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently murdered her husband Uriah, it was as if the man who had enjoyed such an open and vibrant relationship with the Lord could now hide his sins from him. It was as preposterous as Adam and Eve hiding from God in the garden. Who hides from him who sees all and knows all? Sinners, that's who; because sin blinds us to the truth of God's love and impairs how we relate to him.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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And so, David who thought he could hide his sin, learned differently from the Word of God. The Lord said to David,

I anointed you king over Israel ... Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? ... Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. ... Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun" (2 Sa. 12:7-12).

And in that moment, David did not harden his heart or seek to justify his sin but humbly confessed his sin and repented of it. As a result, Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die" (2 Sa. 12:13-14).

As God said, so it happened: David did not die immediately, but the child conceived with Bathsheba did. But that's not all God promised. He also promised continued conflict and rebellion from inside David's family, even humiliation for all the world to see. We know from 2 Samuel that what God promised did happen: inner-family turmoil plagued David, his son Absalom incited a rebellion to take over the kingdom, even committing lewd and shameful acts on the roof of David's home. Just to read it sounds awful. I can't imagine going through it. But in the sixth psalm we get a glimpse of what it was like, a sense of how it felt.

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The sixth psalm is not specifically identified with Absalom's rebellion, but a number of scholars agree that it fits the anguish of it. To the God who promised to punish his sin, David cries out,

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath (1).

It's a prayer to the covenantally faithful Lord God of Israel, who promised to discipline her king. David knows he is to be rebuked, disciplined by God. His prayer is not to thwart God's purpose but to appeal to his mercy: "Be gracious to me, O LORD ..." God may rebuke in anger and discipline in wrath, but for the child of God, they come as a sanctifying lesson. As Moses explained to Israel, "as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deut. 8:5).

The writer of Hebrews helps explain this distinction, when he writes,

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives (Heb. 12:5-6).

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He goes on to explain that when God disciplines us, it is, in the very act, an acknowledgement of our relationship: He is our Father; we are his children. Therefore, “he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10-11). When we consider “that for those who love God all things work together for good” (Ro. 8:28), then we understand “our good” includes God’s discipline, with the ultimate purpose of holiness.

But what is for our good doesn’t always feel good. Or, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:10-11). When David cries, “I am weary with my moaning; / every night I flood my bed with tears; / I drench my couch with my weeping” (6), he indeed in the “moment” where “discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.” But he does not run from God, like he did in his sin, but rather runs to God in his suffering, praying, “Be gracious to me, O LORD.” Nor does David hide how he feels from the Lord, confessing, “I am languishing” (2a). The Hebrew word translated “languishing,” is an agricultural term that describes the process of withering, like leaves on the tree or fruit on the vine. But when the word is used metaphorically it conveys the sense of weakness or vulnerability.² I am “languishing” is like saying, “I am weak,” or “I am frail” (NET).

What David describes is the opposite of sinful pride, when we think of ourselves strong, perhaps invincible, not susceptible to “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life” (1 Jn. 2:16). Perhaps it’s how David felt as he gazed upon the naked body of Bathsheba or when he ordered Uriah to the front line. Sin led David to think he was unseen and unaccountable, but the Lord shows him otherwise, teaching him through languishing. While God knows our frame and remembers we are dust (Ps. 103:14), sometimes we need reminding.

Employing the metaphor of sickness, David prays to be healed: “heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled” (2b). His anguish is deep, bone deep, but “bone” in Hebrew also means “being.”³ The sickness he has is likely not illness but soul sickness, encompassing his entire being. He is suffering under the weight of God’s discipline and pleading, God have mercy: How long will this continue? (NET)

Sometimes how God teaches us can seem like the never-ending lesson. Surely, that’s how David felt as he fled the capitol city of his kingdom, fleeing for the sake of his life and family. And while not all of life’s trials and tribulations are discipline, God is always at work in us, using all of life’s circumstances to conform us to the holy image of Christ. As God is at work in us, amidst the lessons God teaches us, we may wonder too how long? We may even pray, “Lord, let me learn the lesson already, and be done with it.” But who knows what is best for you more than the Lord? As John Calvin reminds us, “. . . we must submit our case entirely to [God’s] will, and not wish him to make greater haste than shall seem good to him.”⁴ And, what seems good to God is

² Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 125.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Calvin, *Heart Aflame* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1999), 9.

always for his glory and our good. Therefore, God's discipline is not only a gift of his grace, but it's also an act of his love.

The Love of Discipline

When we consider the attributes of God, it is easy to pit one attribute against the other. For example, when we think about David's sins of adultery and murder, we expect justice. He preyed upon a vulnerable woman and then manipulated his power to murder her husband to end their marriage. Found guilty, we may see his family turmoil, the trial of Absalom, and the tribulation of civil war as justice served.

But when we consider God's discipline of David, it's harder for us to think of it as love. From our fleshly perspective, it doesn't sound like love. And unknowingly, we may even consider God's justice and love as incompatible attributes. But they're not: God's justice is revealed in his discipline of David, *and* he disciplines him in love.

We see this clearly in David's plea for mercy. He is crying out for help from the very One who disciplines:

Turn, O LORD, deliver my life;
save me for the sake of your steadfast love (4).

God rebukes David, disciplines David, and delivers David, because God disciplines the child he loves. Calvin says, "Men, when they are compelled to feel that God is angry with them, often indulge in complaints full of impiety, rather than find fault with themselves and their own sins."⁵ But David's appeal to God's love does not deny the reason for God's discipline, rather it reveals a right perspective.

It also gives him reason to praise. Although, according to God's law, David was deserving of death, God forgave him and sustained his life. David knows this, and he knows his chief end. But, in *Sheol*, that is the grave, who will give God praise? Plentiful is the praise of heaven, but you must be present to praise him here on earth. David knows he has been shown mercy and received grace. How can he not praise the Lord with the breath he still has? Hearty are the praises when the one deserving death is given life, or at least they should be.

For, every child of God is deserving of death, but in Christ, for the love of God, we are given life. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). How can we not praise him heart, soul, mind, and body? The Lord loves his children, giving us life and keeping safe.

The Protection of Discipline

Have you ever thought of God's discipline as protection? What would happen if God never disciplined us, leaving us to ourselves like a spoiled child? We've all seen that child, but God is not that kind of parent. In David's case, he who anointed David king was at work in him not to

⁵ Ibid.

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make him the perfect king but a sanctified son. God's discipline then protects us from ourselves, but it also protects us from our enemies. In David's case, he fled the capitol city, hid in the wilderness, and fought his foes until the end, but God led his way, kept him safe, and gave him the victory. God even protected him from the wisest man in the kingdom, the traitor Ahithophel.

Ahithophel was David's counselor, a trusted advisor to the king, and whose counsel was like a word from God (2 Sa. 16:23), but when Absalom grew in power, Ahithophel became an opportunist, rejecting the reign of the Lord's anointed. But when David's former advisor became his adversary, the Lord protected David from all but certain destruction. For all of his wisdom and insight, Ahithophel forgot, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Pr. 9:10). In the end, when Absalom died, and with him the rebellion, Ahithophel could not live with himself or the consequences that awaited him (2 Sa. 17:23-25). He ended his own life, but God protected David.

A far greater adversary seeks our destruction, one who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pe. 5:8). Of course, his roar is often in the form of accusations, resounding day and night (Rev. 12:10). For he who is eternally damned delights in heralding our sin, celebrating the continued evidence of our fallen nature. And if he can, he will tempt us to interpret God's discipline as rejection and alienation. Rightly does Jesus describe him as "a liar and the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44).

But what our adversary won't roar is the Lord disciplines those whom he loves. Our enemy hates the holiness of God and endeavors to undue our conformity to it, but the Lord's discipline is a protection, teaching and training us "for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Heb. 12:10). And because the Lord is at work in us, by his grace, we can say to the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, all three:

Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
The LORD has heard my plea;
the LORD accepts my prayer.
All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment

But there is no shame for one who trusts in the Lord, for he is our Father, and we are his children.