

Psalm 6

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS; ACCORDING TO THE SHEMINITH.
A PSALM OF DAVID.

I. Psalm 6:1 — O LORD, do not, in your wrath, reprove me,
nor in your burning anger,* discipline me.

I think the first thing we need to see is what David does not pray. He doesn't pray: "O Lord, do not reprove me, nor discipline me." David knows that both reproof and discipline are good and necessary things for all of God's children. They are expressions of God's love.

To reprove is to prove someone wrong. It means to *expose* what is faulty or wrong in someone's thinking, or words, or actions.

✓ 2 Kings 19:4 — It may be that the LORD your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will **reprove** the words that the LORD your God has heard.

For God to reprove the **words** of Rabshakeh, would be for God to **prove** Rabshakeh **wrong**.

✓ Proverbs 30:6 (cf. Job 32:12; 13:15; 40:2; possibly Hab. 2:1) — Do not add to [God's] words, lest he reprove you and you be found a liar.

Sometimes the word for "reprove" is translated "accuse" or "find fault." The point of reproof is not simply punishment, but rather the opening of our eyes to see the *faultiness* and the *wrongness* of our thinking, our words, or our actions.

So sometimes, God's reproof may be in response to specific sin in our lives. God may work through difficult, painful times of suffering to expose the true nature of unconfessed sin in order to bring us to repentance.

✓ 2 Samuel 7:14-15 (cf. Psalm 141:5; Prov. 9:8) — I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. **When he commits iniquity**, I will **reprove** him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him.

But reproof doesn't always mean that we're guilty of some specific, unconfessed sin – like we might usually think. Since we are sinful, fallen human beings, there is a sense in which reproof can *always* be a needful and good thing in our lives. When we face difficult, painful times of trial or suffering, we may often find the reason in the broader, general reality that we *are sinners* – that our flesh is fallen, and has a natural *tendency* to the pursuit of our own fallen ways. When we understand this about ourselves, then we will understand that there is *never* any time in our lives when we are beyond any *need* for reproofing – or when we could not benefit from God's reproof. And as we think about this, we should always be remembering Proverbs 3:12 which says, "the Lord reproveth him whom he **loves**, as a father the son in whom he **delights**." So our goal should not be to get our act so together that we no longer have any need of God's reproof.

* Burning anger (NASB); raging fury (NET; cf. YLT; Goldingay)

Instead, our goal should be to humbly submit to God's reproof so that we might daily be gaining understanding and growing in true wisdom. (cf. Prov. 9:8; 15:31-32; 19:25; 25:12) God uses difficult, painful times of trial and suffering in order that we who *are fallen* and *sinful* might be refined and purified – in order that the dross of our *sinfulness* might be more and more and more removed. Reproof is one of God's redemptive tools in the life of every Christian, not only in those times when we are guilty of committing specific sin, but also in those times when He would expose and put more and more to death that constant, ever present reality of our remaining sin nature. This is especially important to remember here in Psalm chapter six because in David's prayer, he never once mentions any specific sin of his own. There is no penitence or confession. David doesn't seem to be conscious of having *committed* iniquity. (Contrast Psalm 38)

We could say that reproof is one side of the coin, and discipline is the other side. In the context here in Psalm 6, reproof and discipline both assume something that is painful.

✓ Hebrews 12:11 — For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.

But while the emphasis in reproof is the exposing of our faulty and wrong thinking (proving us wrong), the emphasis in discipline is the replacing of our faulty and wrong thinking with God's thinking, and a growing delight in God's ways (proving God right). So "discipline" very often has more the idea of "instruction." (cf. Prov. 1:2-3)

Just like with reproof, discipline can often be God's response to specific, unconfessed sin in our lives. (cf. Ps. 39:11) But also just like with reproof, there is a sense in which discipline is *always* a needful and good thing in our lives. Even if we aren't guilty of some specific, unconfessed sin, we never cease to exist in this world as sinful, fallen human beings who, in our flesh, do not naturally think God's thoughts after Him. So listen to what Moses said to the people of Israel:

✓ Deuteronomy 4:36 — Out of heaven [the Lord] let you hear his voice, that he might *discipline* you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire.

You could say that there was a certain "painfulness" for Israel in hearing God's voice because it caused them to be terrified and to fear for their lives. (Exod. 20:18-19) But Moses said to the people:

✓ Exodus 20:20 — Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.

Israel was not at that moment guilty of a specific sin, but as a sinful and fallen people who did not naturally fear the Lord, Israel was still in need of God's discipline so that they might learn the fear of the Lord. Later on, in Deuteronomy, Moses said this to the people of Israel:

✓ Deuteronomy 8:2-5 — You shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart... And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does

not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD... Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God *disciplines* you.

To be hungry in the wilderness was a painful trial for the people of Israel. They were experiencing God's discipline. But *this* discipline wasn't the result of some specific national sin. Instead, it was the result of the simple fact that the people of Israel were fallen, sinful human beings who did not naturally live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. When we understand these things about ourselves, then we will understand that there is never any time in our lives when we are beyond any *need* for discipline. But once again, we need to remember Proverbs chapter three:

- ✓ Proverbs 3:11–12 — My son, do not despise the LORD's *discipline* or be weary of his *reproof*, for the LORD reproves him whom he *loves*, as a father the son in whom he *delights*.

See how discipline and reproof are put together here, as well? Our goal should not be to get our act so together that we no longer have any need of God's discipline. Our goal should be to always be humbly submitting to God's discipline so that we might daily be having our own fleshly thoughts and ways more and more replaced with God's thoughts and God's ways. (Prov. 1:2-7; 12:1; 23:12)

- ✓ Psalm 119:71–72 (cf. 119:67) — It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

The pain of discipline is one of God's redemptive tools in the life of every Christian, not only in those times when we're guilty of specific sin, but even more generally when we are simply guilty of *being fallen, sinful human beings* who are not yet perfectly conformed to the image of Christ. Once again, this is especially important to remember here in Psalm chapter six, because David doesn't seem to be conscious of any unconfessed sin.

David doesn't pray: "O Lord, do not reprove me, nor discipline me." Instead, he prays: "O LORD, do not, *in your wrath*, reprove me, nor *in your burning anger*, discipline me."[†] David has begun to feel as if God's reproof and discipline, rather than being redemptive tools used for his good, are rather just the condemning punishment of God's *wrath* and His *burning anger*. (cf. Ezek. 5:15; 25:17) Think of Job, who certainly wasn't guilty of any specific sin in his life, and yet as he experienced God's reproof and discipline, he complained and lamented:

- ✓ Job 16:9 (cf. 19:11) — [The Lord] has torn me *in his wrath* and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.

Why did Job feel this way? Why is David feeling this same way in Psalm chapter six?

[†] The word order of the Hebrew is unusual, and it's unusual for a reason. (see sermon; cf. Goldingay; VanGemeren)

II. Psalm 6:2–3 — Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are dismayed.
My soul also is greatly dismayed.
But you, O LORD—how long?

David has begun to feel as if God’s reproof and discipline, rather than being redemptive tools used for his good, are rather just the condemning punishment of God’s *wrath* and His *burning anger*. And why does David feel this way? Because the suffering is so intense. Because the pain is so severe. He cries out that He is “languishing.” In other places, this word for “languishing” describes the “decay” of the vine and the “withering” of the fig tree. (Isa. 24:7; Joel 1:10, 12) The psalmist, too, feels as if he is decaying; he is fainting and withering away (cf. ASV; NIV; cf. NASB) When he goes on to refer to both his “bones” and his “soul,” the point is his whole being. Even if his suffering is physical, it’s affecting him deep down, so that even his innermost being is “greatly dismayed.” In the Bible, “dismay” almost always conveys the idea of being terrified.

- ✓ Job 22:10 (NASB) — Therefore snares surround you, and sudden dread *terrifies* you.
- ✓ Job 23:15 (cf. Ps. 48:5; 2:5) — Therefore I am *terrified* at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him.

David is not only dismayed – he is *greatly* dismayed.[‡] The NIV translates: “My soul is in deep anguish.” These are words that only someone who shares in the suffering and pain of the psalmist can fully appreciate and comprehend. When we’re living in days of happiness and ease, it’s hard for these words to make sense to us. We might think that David is taking poetic license – until we find ourselves in the same place with him.

And so it’s in this extremity of pain and anguish that David prays, “Be gracious to me, O Lord... Heal me... O Lord.” David still seems to be unaware of any specific sin that he has committed. But that doesn’t mean that he’s unaware of the fact that he is *sinful* and *fallen*, and wholly undeserving of any good from God. (cf. Goldingay) To be unaware of specific, unconfessed sin does not make us deserving. This still doesn’t give us any claim upon God, because we are still sinful human beings with fallen sinful natures. So even though David feels as though God’s reproof and discipline have exceeded all boundaries – and even if he feels that he has done nothing to deserve this anguish and terror – he still does not pray as though he “deserved” anything better. Instead, he asks the Lord to be “*gracious*” to him – to give him the “healing” and the relief that no human being can ever say that he deserves.

We need this same attitude of humility before God – this same recognition that in ourselves we never have any rightful claims upon God. We could never possibly “deserve” anything better than whatever pain or suffering we are ever called to endure. *However*, that doesn’t mean that God is giving us this pain and suffering *because* we deserve it! Can you see this?!? And so David cries out with words *here* that he never dares to use in those Psalms where he’s confessing specific sin in his life (Ps. 25, 32, 38, 51, 143; cf. 130) — “But you, O LORD—how long?” If God’s reproof of David is *not* the expression of His wrath, and if His discipline of David is *not* the expression of His burning anger, then *why* is David’s pain and suffering so severe? And *why* does there seem to be no end to it?

[‡] “Absolutely terrified” (NET); “struck with terror” (NRSV); “shaken with terror” (HCSB)

“But you, O LORD—how long?”

III. Psalm 6:4–5 — 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?

What David seems to be asking is that God would remember that he is “but dust.” David is asking that God would “cease and desist” from this reproof and discipline, and give him a reprieve, because if He doesn’t, David will surely die. But how do you ask the Lord for what you know that you don’t *deserve*? On what basis can we come to the Lord and ask that He be “*gracious*” to us? There is only one answer to that question.

David prays: “Turn, O Lord, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your *steadfast love*.” The Hebrew word is “*hesed*,” and we saw this word when we looked at Psalm chapter five. (5:7) Just as “*Yahweh*” is uniquely God’s *covenant name*, so also “*hesed*” is the *love* that God uniquely associates with His covenant commitment, and faithfulness, and loyalty to His people. You see, when David appeals to God’s “*hesed*”, he isn’t just appealing to a feeling, or to an emotion in God. He’s appealing to God’s covenant – to God’s own loving *choice* to *commit* Himself in everlasting faithfulness to His people. Of ourselves, we will never have any claim on God. Any claim on God can only be the result of His graciously and undeservedly committing Himself to us in covenant love. This is the *only* leg that David has to stand on. This is the *only* grounds that David has for making these bold requests. And yet what better ground could David possibly ask to stand on? What other ground could we want to have?

And if David could appeal to Yahweh’s “*hesed*”—His steadfast love—then how much more can we, who look back now to the cross of Jesus Christ where Yahweh actually became one of us, and shed His own blood to seal, once and for all, His covenant love, and commitment, and faithfulness to us? (cf. Mat. 26:28; Rom. 8:32) Every time we pray in the name of Jesus, we are confessing that all that we have asked of God, we can only ask “for the sake” of His “*hesed*” – His steadfast, *covenant* love. Is this how we pray?

It’s in light of this appeal to God’s covenant love that we should understand what David says next: “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?” David is not denying that the saints who have died enter immediately into God’s presence. But this is something that wasn’t fully revealed until *after* the death and resurrection of Jesus. David’s point here is just that in the Old Testament, the *experience* of God’s covenant love was especially associated with this life – with calling to mind all of his past deeds of faithfulness and then coming to publicly praise and worship God at His temple. And the fact is that the dead were those who could no longer come into the temple. The dead could no longer testify to their experiences of God’s covenant love in the congregation. David isn’t bribing God. He’s not saying: “If I die, you’ll have one less mouth to praise you.” What he’s saying is that in death, he will no longer have the joy of celebrating *in life* all of his experiences of God’s covenant love, and commitment, and faithfulness to him. David is not ultimately praying this prayer in selfishness, but out of his deep *love* for the one who loved him first.

If God's reproof and discipline is motivated by His covenant love for us, then so also are all those times when He withdraws His "rod" and, as it were, restores us to "health." David has appealed to Yahweh to be *gracious* to him and heal him; and he has carefully grounded this appeal *only* in God's own *covenant commitment, and loyalty, and love*. Now he still appeals to this same covenant love, but in a different way.

IV. Psalm 6:6-7 — 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 provocation;[§]
 it grows weak because of all my foes.

David appeals to God's steadfast love, *now* by graphically describing for God just how pitiful, and just how miserable, and just how anguished he is. Once again, when we're living in days of happiness and ease – when God has withdrawn His rod of reproof and discipline – it's hard for these kinds of words to make sense to us. We might think that David is taking poetic license – until we find ourselves in the same place with him. These are the kinds of words that defy any kind of commentary. To be *weary* with *moaning*? To *flood* your bed *every night* with *tears*? To *drench* your couch with your *weeping*? Suddenly, the bicolon of two parallel lines per verse gives way to the tricolon, underlining even more so just how distraught the psalmist is. (cf. Goldingay; Jacobson)

And then in verse seven, all of a sudden, we hear about the psalmist's eye wasting away because of "*provocation*," and growing weak because of all his *foes*. Where have these foes been for the first six verses? Why, *now*, do we hear about "provocation" and "foes"? It seems most likely that these foes were just adding the final touch to David's anguish. Perhaps they were taunting David in his suffering, saying that he was being punished for some sin and that he was therefore *cut off* from God's covenant love. For David, the pain of these accusations, added to everything else he was already suffering, was almost too great to bear. In other places, the "*light of the eyes*" is a way of describing abundance and fullness of life.**

✓ Psalm 19:8 — The precepts of the LORD are right, *rejoicing the heart*; the commandment of the LORD is pure, *enlightening the eyes*.

But here, David says that his eyes are "wasting away" and "growing dim." (cf. Ps. 38:10; 13:3) One person sums it up simply: "The... expressions in these verses portray the utter despondency of David." (VanGemerén) David has begun to feel as if God's reproof and discipline, rather than being redemptive tools used for his good, are rather just the condemning punishment of God's *wrath* and His *burning anger*. And then, suddenly, there's this:

[§] Cf. The translations and commentary of Jacobson, Goldingay, and Wilson as well as the general meaning of this Hebrew word everywhere else in Scripture.

** As it feels more natural to me in context, I prefer this explanation (cf. Jacobson) to that of Goldingay, who suggests that the psalmist felt like his eyes were "wasting away" and "growing weak" because of the constant, unfulfilled strain of looking to Yahweh for vindication. (cf. Psalm 141:8; 25:12; 69:3-4; 119:82, 123)

IV. Psalm 6:8–10 — 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.

Oh, what a wonderful, blessed, feeling of relief. “***The Lord has heard*** the sound of my weeping. ***The Lord has heard*** my plea; ***the Lord accepts*** my prayer.” But how has David suddenly become so confident? *What happened*, that he should suddenly move from lamenting and crying out in pain and anguish to now confidently anticipating the Lord’s gracious healing and the continuing experience of His steadfast love? Some people think this is artificial, but then I wonder if they’ve ever prayed as David prayed. It was only *as* David was lamenting and crying out in his deep pain and anguish—it was only *as* David prayed—that he could come to know that blessed, full assurance that God *heard* his prayer – and therefore, that God would never, ever cease to deal with him according to His covenant love and faithfulness. It was ***in*** the asking that David became assured of God’s listening. It was ***in*** the anguished cries that David became assured of God’s acceptance.^{††}

And so it is for us. It is ***in*** the asking that we become assured of God’s listening. It is ***in*** and ***through*** our anguished cries that we become fully assured that God accepts our prayers and will never fail to deal with us according to His covenant love and faithfulness. “When grace penetrates into the depth of an anguished soul, joy in the Lord anchors faith, which no one can remove.” (VanGemeren)

^{††} “It may have been the case that as the psalmist progressed in prayer, he eventually reached a point where faith and confidence outstripped anguish and despair.” (Craigie)