

Sweet Rebuke: the phenomenal experience of divine discipline (a précis)

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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 (Hebrews 12:11).

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent (Revelation 3:16).

In the first section of the paper, I lay out a broad theological frame for understanding how it is that God acts and reveals himself to human creatures via mediation. In the second section, I highlight the difficulty in evaluating and articulating any experience of God given (1) the subjective nature of experience, (2) the involvement of God not merely as the one experienced, but also as one participating in the experience, and (3) the gestalt nature of experiences of God. I conclude that experience *with* God and not merely *of* God is often direct, novel, disruptive, and corrective. In section three, I look at four specific examples in the biblical text through the lens of what I am tagging divine rebuke to show that there is a sort of pattern or roadmap available for identifying, reflecting on, and even testing whether one is experiencing divine discipline. First, God gets the attention of the creature; second, God reveals something about his nature; third, the creature experiences the fear of God; fourth, the whole of the phenomenon—not merely the content of the revelation of God, but one becoming acquainted with this God through experiencing Him and experiencing the proper affective state—moves the creature, reorienting or recontextualizing all of reality in light of who God is and who the creature is. (This is not strictly causal or sequential).

It is important to note, first, I am not arguing that all experiences of God are best tagged as divine rebuke. Actually, I am not even arguing the phenomenon—or *experience*—I am attempting to narrow in on *is* a case of divine rebuke. My use of the term rebuke is not to say that God *is* harsh in His correctives, but that they *feel* harsh (maybe *severe* is a better word), given the gravity of one experiencing a Holy God who speaks—a Holy God who, at times, speaks to that solitary one. I think that we often forget who it is that is dealing with us when we have an experience of God. When standing in the presence of God, there is a proper affective state one should experience, *fear of Him*. And given our fallenness, and the fallenness of the creation, that affective state—*fear of God*—is experienced as divine rebuke. One is exposed, humbled, undone—experiencing one’s finitude, coming to know how narrow, lacking, and possibly wrong one’s knowledge of God is. And yet, tis so sweet, for this God

condescends to meet the creature. He lifts the eyes of his creature to himself, and he is –beautiful, inexhaustible, yet incomprehensible without his self-revelation. And though she, his creature, may be pierced to the very core of her being, given she has misunderstood and misrepresented her Beloved...his kindness, mercy and intimate attention towards her produces a sense of wholeness and clarity—a sort of recontextualization of all that life encompasses—God, self, and all that is not God—she is reorientated, has a transformation of mind, and is moved to walk in fidelity to Him. How could this not be a *sweet* rebuke!

Section I: revelation and moved movers (theology)

In section one, I lay out a broad theological frame for understanding (1), the human creature as not merely a thing that is moved, but a moved mover, i.e., the human creature seems to be the sort of thing that can (given its capacity for rationality) willfully participate in the attainment of the ends for which the creature was created, and (2) the necessity of God's revelatory condescension to the creature. First, any act of the creature is not done by the creature alone given the creature's absolute dependence on God. Second, the God of the Bible shows himself intricately involved in the movement and formation of His people in ways sometimes perceivable by the creature and sometimes not. Third, we creatures are often distracted by the means of revelation and miss the reality that those instruments of mediation function to merely point, reorient, or draw one's attention to that which they should be attending to—God Himself. And finally, the mediated means of revelation need not be only external to the creature. Somehow the faculties of the human creature can be attuned to God such that she can identify God as speaking even if she hears nothing; thus the creature is mediated means of revelation. She is aware of God's direct address to her, and yet she is also confounded by the experience itself as God mediates Himself—unbound and free—through mere creaturely means, condescending to the creature. God somehow makes himself present with the creature and to the creature with the effect of moving the *moved mover*.

Section II: experiencing God (difficulties of the phenomenon itself)

In section II, I highlight reasons why it is difficult to identify, understand, incorporate into one's thinking, and articulate experiences of God.

Ultimately, the most fundamental difficulty is that the creature is experiencing God—i.e., experiencing the One who we know through mere mediation and talk about in mere analogy. First, experiences of God always involve an unconstrained and non-qualifiable agent—the Spirit of God. Second,

experiences of God involve unique and complex human creatures. Therefore, any experience of God requires the Spirit of God work within the complex mereology of the human creature. God makes use of all the prior experiences, configurations of thought, memories, conscious, unconscious, and embodied bits of the human creature to communicate with him such that the human creature receives that communication/revelation properly, i.e., the human, via the illumination of the Spirit of God, receives, grasps, and responds to experiencing God as intended by God. The Spirit is at work as (at least) the internal principle and possibly an external principle within the experience. As internal principle, the Spirit, in some way facilitates the experience and imparts some sort of revelatory content regarding God (external principle) through the mediation of the human creature itself. And yet, God is not a mere *part* of the experience; the Spirit of God is somehow *the whole of the experience*: facilitating, maintaining, and uniting the experience while also being that which the experience consists of. The Spirit of God is *in* the experience *with* the human creature while also being *that which is experienced*. Because an experience of God is a phenomenon in which the whole is greater than the parts, it is gestalt in nature.

However, if one believes one has experienced God (specifically in the disciplinary sort of way) one might be able to identify and test that experience given it includes (1) novelty (i.e., a violation of expectation), (2) an awareness of some sort of direct address, and (3) the human creature being moved to a particular affective response that is fitting to divine discipline and correction. That is, the experience of God is in some way unexpected by the human creature and has a unique ‘texture’, i.e., *possibly authority or severity* (as in cases of divine rebuke), which requires the one experiencing it to contemplate not merely the communicative parts or mediated means, but also the way in which it *feels* to experience the direct divine address of God. God somehow makes himself present *to* and *with* the creature, moving the *moved mover* by way of the creature experiencing the proper affective state of *fearing of God*.

Thus, divine rebuke can be understood as an experience of God in which: (1) God reveals himself to a particular human creature via a sort of direct address, making use of any mediating means he sees fit, such that (2) the experience violates the creature’s expectations, (3) as the human creature experiences the affective state *fear of God*, due to the revelation (i.e., the experience of God) having a particular type of authority (qualia) in that it is an experience *of* God, *with* God and *toward* a singular creature.

Section III: biblical warrant

I offer the examples of Elijah, Isaiah, Job, and Paul (there are many others) to evidence what this might look like using real ‘on the ground’ life occurrences. Further, as witnessed especially in the case of Paul, these encounters with God in which he corrects and reorients the creature via a quite direct, intimate and revelatory means are not necessarily extra-ordinary occurrences for the redeemed. All revelation of God is corrective in some way. When God reveals himself, the creature becomes aware of first his creatureliness or relation to God, and then her own wrong, twisted, or distorted understandings about God, herself, and the world. The revelation of God via an experience which includes the creature being in a proper affective state, exposes and corrects wrong thinking. We see this in the case of Elijah, who believes he alone is faithful; in the case of Job, who believes that some sort of injustice has taken place; in the case of Isaiah, who believes he is somehow distinct from the uncleanness of the people; and finally, in the case of Paul, who believes his weakness negatively effects his witness and ability to serve God. Yet, God meets these men in their circumstances to address not their circumstances as expected but their hearts. He shows himself to be the Keeper of the faithful; the Arbiter between creatures and God, Holy God, Cleansing God, Forgiving God, all-sufficient God. These are not new propositions about God that these men are just coming to know and believe for the first time. However, it is not until this moment of encounter, and direct divine disclosure, that each becomes acquainted with God as such *towards them* at a particular moment, in a particular place, and this violates their expectations moving them in the *fear of God* to fidelity to God. In a sense, God writes himself on their hearts afresh.

Moving Forward

- (1) When contemplating an experience of God, of first importance is not what it means for you or your circumstance, but who God has revealed himself to be.
- (2) Knowledge of God and wisdom in life, begin in the fear of Him. (Interestingly that fear is not because he condemns but because he forgives, which in itself is a sort of unexpected violation of expectations).
- (3) The rebuke of God should be desired. It is necessarily revelatory, it is intimate, it evidences His love of you, and will increase your love of him, as you experience Him in fear and trembling.
- (4) Possibly, the more conformed to and zealous for the Lord one is, the more divine rebuke grows in both its severity and its sweetness.

I believe, practically, that reflecting on experiences of God, given this framework of divine rebuke can be helpful to identify experiences of God, evaluate experiences of God, and discuss experiences of God in a way that is theologically sound. Questions one might pose to oneself are: (1) Did this experience reveal something about the nature of God appropriate to whatever unique situation I find myself? (2) Did I experience the fear of God (the undoing and merciful clarification) given the authority of God who speaks, such that I might know that I was properly responding and evaluating the experience while experiencing it? (3) Did this revelation of God disrupt my prior understanding of Him, and myself in this situation such that, given a new or deeper understanding of God via this new acquaintance with Him, I must now think differently about myself and my relation to God and my relation to the situation? (4) Did this experience of God act to further my formation and transformation into the image of God? (5) Did this experience increase my love and fidelity to God?

If one can answer these questions in the affirmative, I think one can identify it as an experience of God, specifically an occasion of sweet rebuke. Evaluating experiences of God through the frame of sweet rebuke, helps us (1) to realize our need for God to speak clearly and directly for us to walk in love and fidelity with God, (2) feel the weight and authority of God's voice, and (3) be overwhelmed in gratitude that God does condescend to discipline us producing the righteousness and holiness of God. Often, like how we treat Paul's situation of the thorn, we do not fully experience the lament and shock we should when we receive a merciful truth like his grace being sufficient and his power being perfected in weakness. We forget what it feels like to be in the presence of God; we forget that he is a God to be feared. The Psalmist writes, "With you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope" (Psalm 130:4-5). Proper fear of God is a consequence of our relation to the God who forgives. It is necessary and foundational to one truly knowing and loving God. We need to take time and reflect on this. For divine rebuke, though it pierces to the division of our soul and lay us bare before God, is sweet because we have been united to Christ not only in life, but in death. Further, I believe, given this framework, one can then fill out the content of those answers not merely with the affirmation, yes, but through narration of the experience itself such that one can share the experience with another. Maybe, as one saint shares with another how God so loved her that he disrupted her wrong thinking, stirred in her a fear of God, and disciplined her through a revelation of Himself, God might again, through the mediation of that saint's testimony, speak sweet rebuke.