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WHAT TO DO WHEN UNDER ATTACK

Psalm 5

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December 28, 2008

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December 28, 2008
2008-09, Psalms, Lesson 3

What to Do When Under Attack Psalm 5

A story is told of four pastors from the same community who got away for a fishing trip together. One night around the campfire, one of the pastors suggested, "We're a long ways from home and from our church members. What do you say that we bare our souls and each of us tell what his secret sin is? I'll go first."

The others agreed, so he began, "Nobody in my church knows this, but every once in a while I slip down to the track and bet on a pony. My secret sin is gambling."

Another pastor spoke up, "My secret sin is an uncontrollable temper. Every once in a while I get mad and yell at my wife."

The third preacher gulped and offered, "I never thought I'd tell anyone this, but here goes. I keep a bottle of rum in the cellar. Whenever I get into a hassle with my deacons, I go down to the cellar and drink a shot of rum."

Everyone waited for the fourth pastor, who had a faint smile on his face. Finally he said, "Brethren, my secret sin is gossip, and I *can't wait* to get home and talk to your church members!"

We laugh at that story, but it's not funny when someone gossips about you! It often happens at work. It happens with people whom you thought were your friends. It even happens at church, where you thought you could trust people. It hurts when you find out what they've been saying about you behind your back.

I read about the president of a Bible institute who was visiting a man who had formerly supported the school. This man had stopped giving because he had heard that the former president of the school had two Cadillacs. Well, the fact was, the man lived a very simple lifestyle and didn't even own one car, let alone two Cadillacs. So the new president couldn't figure out how such a rumor started. But then it dawned on him that his predecessor had had two *cataracts!* Somehow as it went through the rumor mill, two *cataracts* got changed into two *Cadillacs!*

Sadly, Christian leaders often are the targets of vicious attacks from those that profess to be Christians. I know of pastors who have grown discouraged and left the ministry because they could not handle the criticism and personal attacks on them and on their families. Somehow they thought that because they were serving the Lord, they would get an exemption from criticism. I'm not sure how they came up with that idea! Look at David: although he was God's anointed king, he was constantly under fire. It's all through the Psalms. If you serve the Lord in any capacity, you *will* be criticized and attacked. Count on it!

So what do you do when you're under attack? How should you handle it? Psalm 5 gives us some answers. We don't know exactly when David wrote it. Since it occurs just after Psalms 3 & 4, which were written in conjunction with Absalom's rebellion, Psalm 5 may have been written at the same time. Or, Calvin suggests that David could have written it as he reflected back on the years that he ran for his life from King Saul (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on the Psalms, p. 52). Whatever the situation, David's enemies were not nice men! They were spreading lies, they were deceitful, they used flattery outwardly while inwardly they were intent on destroying him, and they were violent (5:6, 9, 10).

What did David do? In a nutshell, he used these trials to draw near to the Lord. As Stephen Neill said (source unknown), "Criticism is the manure in which God's servants grow best." Psalm 5 isn't a comprehensive answer. Other scriptures show that there is a proper time to confront your critics or to defend yourself or your ministry. But Psalm 5 tells us,

When you're under attack, take refuge in the Lord as your
righteous defender.

The psalm falls into two halves (1-7, 8-12), both of which follow the same outline:

Verses 1-3 and verse 8 are parallel as prayers. Verses 4-6 parallel verses 9-10; in both sections David appeals to God as the righteous Judge. Verse 7 parallels verses 11-12; in verse 7 David reverently draws near to God by His grace; in verses 11-12, he exhorts all that take refuge in God to rejoice in Him because of His gracious blessings.

CYCLE 1 (PSALM 5:1-7): WHEN YOU'RE UNDER ATTACK, TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD AS YOUR RIGHTEOUS DEFENDER.

1. When you're under attack, take refuge in the Lord through prayer (5:1-3).

The normal response when you're attacked is to fight back immediately. As the person is accusing you, you're thinking of what you can say to get back at him. If he insults you, you're thinking of a better insult to hurl back at him and you hardly let him stop speaking before you let it fly. But David didn't do that. He took his complaint to the Lord in honest, personal, persistent, expectant prayer.

A. Pray honestly.

David's repeated appeals (5:1-2), "Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my groaning, heed the sound of my cry for help," are not the politically careful words of a man who is trying to project that he has it all together. Rather, they are the honest groans and cries of a man in great need. The word translated "groaning" is used only one other time (Ps. 39:3, "musing") and refers to silent or barely audible sounds. The repetition conveys David's honest, heartfelt cry to God. He wasn't putting on his Sunday best and framing his words in a controlled, restrained manner. He was calling out to God honestly in his pain.

God knows everything about us, so it's ridiculous to try to hide our feelings from Him. As Psalm 62:8 exhorts, "Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us." So pray honestly, even if you're groaning.

B. Pray personally.

David addresses God as "my King and my God" (5:2). The name LORD (5:1, 2) is Yahweh, the personal covenant name of God. Even though David was the king, he knew that he only served under a far greater King, the Lord God. As Matthew Henry put it (*Matthew Henry's Commentary* [Fleming H. Revell], 3:255), "Kings on their own thrones (so David was) must be beggars at God's throne." David knew God personally as "my King" and "my God." He was in a close personal relationship with God. He was not a stranger in God's presence.

Prayer should be a personal, intimate relationship between you and God. You must come before Him as your King, the Lord of your life. You cannot pray rightly unless you are submissive to do His will. You must know Him as your Lord and Savior, who invites you to come into His presence through the blood of Jesus.

C. Pray persistently.

Twice David says that he will pray “in the morning” (5:3). The idea is that David’s first thought on waking was about the threats of these evil enemies. So he immediately turned those thoughts into prayer. Whatever trials God sends into our lives are to cause us to turn to Him in honest, personal, persistent prayer.

I chuckled when I read an exuberant morning person, such as Matthew Henry (*ibid.*), who exhorts us that morning prayer is our duty because then we are the most fresh and most lively! While I do attempt to pray in the mornings, I must say that it is definitely *not* my most lively and fresh time of the day! I don’t understand how anyone can have a morning quiet time without coffee! John Wesley attributed his long life and health to his consistent practice of rising at 4 a.m. and preaching at 5 a.m.! If I tried that, I think it would shorten my life significantly and I doubt if anyone would come to hear me at 5 a.m.! But whenever you pray, be persistent at it. Spurgeon said (*A Treasury of David* [Baker] 1:50), “Prayer should be the key of the day and the lock of the night.”

D. Pray systematically.

David says (5:3b), “In the morning I will order my prayer to You.” The Hebrew word for “order” was used of the priests ordering the sacrifice on the altar and arranging the bread of the presence on the table. Some apply that by suggesting that our prayers should be orderly or systematic, and that may be a helpful approach. I am not as systematic as some, who pray for different categories on different days of the week. But I often follow the outline of the Lord’s Prayer as a pattern for prayer.

E. Pray expectantly.

David also says that he will “eagerly watch.” It is the same word that Habakkuk uses (2:1) when he says, “I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am

reproved." It pictures a guard at his military post, waiting for the messenger that he has sent to return. It implies that when we pray, we should look for the answer. As our King, we can expect God to listen and respond to our needs as His subjects. So when you're under attack, take refuge in the Lord through prayer.

2. When you're under attack, appeal to God as the righteous Judge (5:4-6).

David's reasoning here is that since his enemies are so evil, surely God, who is righteous, will act on his behalf. So David rehearses God's righteousness to encourage himself with the truth that God will right all wrongs.

- A. God is separate from all evil and will judge all evildoers.

When David says that God does not take pleasure in wickedness (5:4) it is a figure of speech that means, He hates it! Far from winking at sin or chuckling about it, God stands apart from it and His Word warns us repeatedly that He will condemn all unrepentant sinners to the Lake of Fire forever. If you think that your good deeds will outweigh your bad deeds and get you into heaven, you're going to be terribly shocked! Just a single sin will bar you from heaven, unless you trust in Jesus as your Savior.

You often hear the cliché that God loves the sinner, but hates the sin. But here David says that God not only hates the sin, He also hates "all who do iniquity" (5:5). "The Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit" (5:6). Jonathan Edwards no doubt had texts like this in mind when he preached his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." There Edwards warned (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:10), "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire...."

That doesn't quite sound like, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life"! So, does God love the sinner or hate him? Doesn't the Bible say that He loves the whole world?

Calvin (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John McNeill [Westminster Press], 2.16.2-4) explains the apparent contradiction by saying that we need the verses about God's hatred of sinners so that we will be overwhelmed with how terrible and of-

fensive our sin is to an absolutely holy God. Only then will we properly appreciate what He did for us in Christ. He cites Augustine who explains that in a sense, God loved us even when He hated us. He hated us for our sin and rebellion, but He loved us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

In my judgment, we err if we are quick to tell arrogant, unrepentant sinners that God loves them. They need to hear that they are objects of His terrible wrath. If a person is broken by his sin and guilt, then yes, tell him of God's love in Christ. But otherwise, he needs to hear of the terrors of the coming judgment.

But in Psalm 5, David rehearses God's hatred of the unrepentant wicked to encourage himself with the fact that God will bring justice for His people. But there is also an inherent warning for believers here:

B. Make sure that you are in Christ and walking in obedience.

As we'll see in verse 7, David didn't trust in his own righteousness to approach God. We can only come into His presence by His grace as we trust in Christ. But, at the same time, before we condemn as sinners those attacking us, we need to take the log out of our own eye! Are they wicked? What about me? Am I judging my own sins and obeying Christ? Are they boastful or hateful or dishonest? What about me? While I can appeal to God to bring justice, at the same time I need to examine my own heart.

3. When you're under attack, reverently draw near to God by His grace (5:7).

As David thought on God's absolute hatred of sin and His holiness, he realized that he could never approach God on the basis of his own righteousness. So he acknowledges that the only way he can enter God's house is by His abundant lovingkindness. The Hebrew word translated "lovingkindness" is the Old Testament word for "grace." Perhaps David's phrase, "abundant lovingkindness" is where Paul got his phrase, "the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7; 2:7). But the only way that anyone can draw near to God is through His abundant grace as shown to us in Christ.

David's mention of God's house and His temple leads some to reject his authorship of this Psalm, since the temple did not yet

exist. But both words are used of the tabernacle (Josh. 6:24; 2 Sam. 12:20; 1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3). They are symbolic of God's presence, where His glory was seen. Thus the only way to draw near to God is with reverence or fear. That's why Jesus told us to pray, "hallowed be Your name" (Matt. 6:9). Although we are told to draw near with confidence (Heb. 4:16), we must also come with reverence.

Thus in the first cycle, when David is under attack, he takes refuge in the Lord through prayer; he appeals to God as the righteous Judge; and, he reverently draws near to God by His grace.

CYCLE 2 (PSALM 5:8-12): WHEN YOU'RE UNDER ATTACK, TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD AS YOUR RIGHTEOUS DEFENDER.

The second cycle follows the same three ideas, with some variations. I must be more brief here.

1. When you're under attack, pray for the Lord to keep you on the righteous path (5:8).

David is painfully aware of the tendency that we all have, when under attack, to respond to our attackers in a sinful manner. When someone sins against you, it is very difficult to follow the command of 1 Peter 3:9, "not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead." So David prays (5:8), "O Lord, lead me in Your righteousness because of my foes; make Your way straight before me." His prayer isn't just that God would protect him *from* the wicked, but also that God would protect him from *becoming like* the wicked. David's critics would have loved to see him stumble, so that they could have more ammunition to throw at him. It also would have brought an occasion for them to further mock David's God. So he asks God to show him His way.

As I said, it is not necessarily wrong to defend yourself against critics that attack you. Paul did this in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. But it requires God's wisdom to know when to defend yourself and when to ignore the critics. And whatever you do, it takes God's grace and wisdom to respond in a gracious, Christlike manner.

2. When you're under attack, appeal to God as the righteous Judge (5:9-10).

David describes the evil of his attackers and asks God to judge them. As with the earlier tension of whether God hates the

wicked or loves them, so here there is a tension: Should we ask God to judge our attackers or to forgive them? Before you quickly conclude that the New Testament way is to forgive our enemies, you need to remember that the New Testament also says (2 Thess. 1:6), "For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you." Paul goes on to say (1:9) that these wicked people "will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power." And in Revelation 18:20, when God judges wicked Babylon, we are commanded to rejoice over her. Even the Lord's Prayer, that His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven, includes His judgment of the wicked.

When evil people who are opposed to God attack me as God's representative, I ask God to be glorified either in saving them or by judging them. Since I don't know His sovereign purpose, I leave it up to Him. He could save them as He saved the persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus. Or, He may send them to eternal damnation if they do not repent.

Note how David describes his attackers (5:9): "There is nothing reliable in what they say; their inward part is destruction itself. Their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue." These were not constructive critics who were trying to help David do a better job. They were trying to destroy him. David asks God to judge them not only because they opposed David, but also (5:10), "they are rebellious against You." If you are walking with the Lord and doing His work and someone attacks you, not with constructive criticism, but rather to destroy you, it may be that the person is rebellious against God. So don't take it personally. You're just God's messenger. The critic is only angry with you because you represent God to him. Let God take care of him.

Before you pray verses 9 & 10 against your critics, you need to remember that Paul cited these verses as an indictment against the sinfulness of every one of us (Rom. 3:13). Even though we have been redeemed, we still have to fight against our old nature, which is prone to all these sins. So, again, we must take the log out of our own eye first.

3. When you're under attack, take joyous refuge in God as your defender (5:11-12).

David broadens the application from himself to all of God's people who may be under attack (5:11-12): "But let all who take refuge in You be glad, let them ever sing for joy; and may You shelter them, that those who love Your name may exult in You. For it is You who blesses the righteous man, O Lord, You surround him with favor as with a shield."

Apparently, David's attackers were still prowling around like a pack of wolves, trying to get him. But David has taken refuge in God and so he is so overflowing with joy in the Lord that he bursts forth in singing. (This is the first of 70 references to singing in the Psalms.) Being glad and joyful in the Lord is our duty, because glorifying God is our duty. As John Piper says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."

The picture of God surrounding the righteous man with favor as with a shield reminds me of a Colgate toothpaste ad that was on TV many years ago. A man was standing near a bunch of kids playing ball. A hardball came flying at him, but it just bounced off an invisible shield. He went on to say that Colgate put that kind of protective shield around your teeth, to keep them from decay. David is saying that the believer can be joyful even when under attack, because the shield of God's favor surrounds him.

Conclusion

So each cycle of this psalm emphasizes the same truths: When you're under attack, take refuge in the Lord through prayer. Appeal to Him as the righteous Judge. And, draw near to Him by His grace, rejoicing in Him as your defender.

Paul and Silas knew that joy when they sang praises to God from the Philippian jail after being wrongly accused and beaten. Hudson Taylor knew that joy on the evening after burying his second wife in China. He sang, "Jesus, I am resting, resting, in the joy of what Thou art. I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart."

Do you know that joy when you're under attack? It is found in God as your refuge and righteous defender. Run to His loving arms!

Application Questions

1. Some Christians allow the attacks of others to drive them away from the Lord, whereas for some it drives them to the Lord. What makes the difference?
2. Should Christians take pleasure or be grieved at the thought of God judging their enemies? How does Rev. 18:20 fit in?
3. I said that it is not advisable to tell an arrogant, unrepentant sinner that God loves him. Agree/disagree? Why?
4. How can we know whether to defend ourselves before critics or just to ignore them? What biblical principles apply?

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