

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, ² and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. ⁴ Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ⁵ He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. ⁶ The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. ⁷ The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. ⁸ You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. ⁹ Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, ¹⁰ if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 30:1-10)

God's Discipline has a Purpose

Do you like getting in trouble? Silly question, right? When I was a kid, I absolutely hated getting in trouble, but it seemed to happen a lot. I went to school before spanking was banned. When I was in the public school, every teacher had a paddle that was usually hanging from the side of her desk. When they used them, the teachers would take the student out into the hall and the class would become dead silent. We could hear the proceedings loud and clear. Once, when I was in third or fourth grade, I got taken out into the hall on two consecutive days. My biggest fear was that my older brother would tell my parents what had happened. My mom or dad weren't going to call and complain about what those teachers did to their little darling. I was afraid I'd get it again at home. There's a funny thing about all the times I got in trouble with my parents or with teachers: it always made me mad at them for disciplining me. That really shouldn't us. If parents are doing their jobs, they discipline their children to help them learn where the line is between right and wrong and to help them to keep their sinful natures in check. But that doesn't mean their kids like it or even appreciate it, at least not when it's happening. Parents and teachers aren't the only ones who discipline us. God does, too. Our Old Testament lesson for today is really a prophecy of God's future discipline for his people and what it would accomplish. We can examine that Old Testament history and draw a conclusion for our lives today: **God's discipline has a purpose.**

I.

That purpose is repentance. Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy, which was really a speech or perhaps a series of speeches that he made just before he died. The children of Israel were about to invade the Promised Land after forty years in the desert. Moses would not live to join them, so he reminded his people of all that God had done for them and all that God had commanded them and how difficult they had been about both points. He told them that if they were not faithful to God, eventually, God would send a foreign nation to conquer them and take them into exile. Of course, that's exactly what happened. Now it took over 900 years for God's patience to become so exhausted that he actually sent that heathen nation to conquer them. But it did happen.

Our reading tells what would happen in exile. God's people would remember all that God had told them and they would take those things to heart. Then they and their children would return to the LORD their God. They would repent. When they remembered all that God had said and they examined their lives and their attitudes in the light of his word, when they confessed their sin and came to God for forgiveness, he gave it, freely and joyfully. Now, he did look for more than just going through the motions. He spoke about them returning to his way of life with all their hearts and souls – but that's what real repentance does. It changes us so that we live for God.

What does all this have to do with us? God is teaching us why he disciplines us. Israel deserved the exile and more. Through them, God shows us that he uses the consequences of our sin to work for our faith. All of us have those moments in life when something bad happens to us because we were sinning. Whether it's getting a ticket for speeding or being fired for losing our temper at work or sleeping on the couch because we didn't think before we spoke to our husband or our wife, we're all sinners. We all deserve God's punishment, starting already with consequences here in this life and continuing on to death and hell.

But God still loves us. He sent Jesus to suffer death and hell in our place. So now, for us believers – and only for us believers – there is no punishment left for our sins. St. Paul says, **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** But God does discipline us. He does sometimes let us suffer real and painful consequences for our sinful words and actions and even sometimes for our sinful attitudes. So why does he do that if we aren't punished anymore? To lead us to repentance. The hurt and sorrow that comes from my bad choices forces me to face just how sinful I have been. It forces us to examine our lives and our attitudes and confess to God and to each other that we were wrong, that we deserved the consequences that we suffered, and even more. That gives us the opportunity to hear from God and from each other that we are forgiven. Jesus died and paid for all our sins. Jesus suffered all that we owe. God has taken our sin away. He promises that the day will come when he will rescue us from all those justly deserved consequences even here.

God uses that experience then to help us return to him with our whole heart and mind. True repentance doesn't stop with sorrow. The heart of repentance is faith that Jesus has forgiven us. So true repentance is also a time of finding comfort and joy in God's love, even if we have to pick up the pieces of our lives. That joy and comfort lead us to rededicate our lives to God. True repentance brings forth fruits. The first fruit is wanting to turn from sin – to strive not to commit that sin again or stop it, if it's still going on. Next to that, comes the desire to make things right – to restore what I have stolen and to foster healing for those I have hurt. That leads to the fruit of rebuilding relationships: fixing damaged marriages or parenting better or finding a new measure of love for parents. And of course, the constant fruit of repentance is the thirst for the gospel, for the comfort of God's love and the power that comes in his promises.

God doesn't want to smack us down. He wants to draw us closer to him. He wants to grow our faith. He wants to teach us to live a new and holy life. All that is only possible through the gospel, through the good news of what Jesus Christ has done and won for us. Discipline drives us back to Christ, so it's first purpose is to lead us to repent.

II.

That points us to an underlying truth: **God's discipline has a purpose. That purpose is love.** By love, I don't mean some kind of mushy feeling. I mean a commitment to doing what's best for the person I love. My least favorite part of parenting was always disciplining my children. I liked being the fun dad, the dad who read to them when they were little, the dad who took them on vacation and did cool stuff with them. But I absolutely hated being the guy who had to confront their sin and disobedience. Because I'm a sinful dad, I'm sure there are lots of dad here today who did a better job with discipline than I did. But there are probably dads in this world who did worse. There are at least two ways to mess discipline up. One way is to go overboard and be nothing but the scary guy who whacks your kids when they're wrong, but never lets them know that you love them, never explains why this has to be done, never lifts them up or forgives them. I think a lot of fathers in previous generations made that mistake and it still exists in our society today. But we 21st century parents are perhaps more susceptible to the other mistake: refusing to do real discipline. We try so hard to be our children's friend that we forget to be the one who calls them to account and applies the consequences. We allow the temporary unpleasantness of administering the consequences to outweigh the long term damage that will come if no one ever teaches our children where the line is and the importance of repentance. Or worse, we do it so weakly that our efforts are laughable and ineffective.

Why do discipline? Because we love our children. We force ourselves to engage in the most unpleasant part of parenting because at that moment, it's what those children need. The same could be said about church discipline. We confront sin, for example, we tell couples that living together is a sin, because we love them and we don't want to let sin run rampant in their lives and destroy their faith. If my children wind up in hell, that is the worst indictment possible of my parenting. If our fellow members wind up in hell because we did nothing to call them to repent, that is the worst indictment possible of our love for each other.

Well, God loves us enough to discipline us. I don't think he likes doing it any better than we do. But unlike us, he never hesitates to do it. He sent his chosen people into exile for seventy years to purify their faith. And it worked! When Israel came back from exile, the problem of idolatry was pretty much over. Nine hundred years before he did that, God showed the love that would motivate that action by promising that when they repented, he would bring his people home. God even promised them more prosperity after the exile than they knew before. Why did he say those things? In part, because under the Mt. Sinai covenant, God taught them that he would bless their obedience with physical prosperity and protection. He would punish disobedience with poverty and conquest. So when they repented and returned to him, he promised that he would again treat them as his chosen people and take care of their physical needs. But there's another part to it. God promises to undo what the discipline did. He promised to undo the punishment.

That points us to the far greater implication of these verses. God promises to undo all that sin does to us here. God promises to free us from the sorrow and pain we have to face in a broken world and even from the hurt he uses to call us to repent. God promises to give us a new and perfect world. All that only comes through Jesus. When he returns all that is wrong with this world will be undone.

But before that day comes, God made one other promise here. Moses said, **“The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”** Physical circumcision was originally a sign of faith. The Jews made it into a symbol of legalistic righteousness that God condemned. But here, God uses it to point to a deeper reality. God would give his people a new heart, a heart that was devoted to him. Why? So that they would love him and live for him. God had to do that. No matter how bad they felt about their sin, only God could change their hearts.

It's no different for us. God makes us face the reality of our sin, but then God sends pastors and teachers and fellow Christians to point us to Jesus who took all our sin away. God calls ministers to forgive us again and again. Through that message, he reaches into our hearts and he changes them. The discipline doesn't actually make the change. The gospel does. But the discipline drives us to the gospel so that God can use it in love to build up our faith. It has to be that way. Only God can change our hearts. No matter how bad we feel about our sins, only God can give us the power to live for him.

God restores us. In this life, he may even undo the damage our sin has done. We certainly can pray for that. But in the life to come, all that we have suffered here, all the scars of all the hurts we have inflicted on ourselves, will be healed. We will live in perfect joy. We won't be haunted by our own stupidity or guilt anymore. I think that is the most important lesson of repentance that God teaches us. Personally, I know how hard it is to let go of our sin. When we sin, especially, when there are consequences, we can beat ourselves up and engage in “if onlies” – “If only I had not done that.” “If only I had been a better parent.” “If only I had shown more love or been more patient or more willing to do the hard thing.” “If only I hadn't waited so long.” In heaven, we will have no “if onlies” in our hearts or minds. We will have perfect peace in Christ because we will trust perfectly that he has wiped away all our sin.

Until that day comes, God calls us back to Jesus again and again and reminds us of his love. That's why we'll celebrate communion this morning. That's why we keep coming back here. Our sinful hearts are really good at making God's discipline something we hate. But God has even forgiven all our sin. And he loves us enough to drive us back to the gospel and then work through that gospel to help us understand his love in all that he calls us to face here. Trust God's love in Christ. Amen.