

**“Receive your discipline with joy”**

**<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea,<sup>a</sup> to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”**

**<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.**

**<sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.**

A couple of Sundays ago, I was at church, preparing for the service. It was about 7:30am. I saw two young men walking across the front of our parking lot. Suddenly, a white SUV came flying in front of them. A man, dressed in his ACU's (action combat uniform), jumped out and began yelling at them. They immediately sat down on the ground, heads down. Pretty soon four or five more vehicles were on the scene, and out jumped more soldiers, wearing their drill sergeant's hats. I could guess that these two young men were in training on Fort Knox and decided, against better judgment, to go AWOL – absent without leave. You can bet that those two young men were disciplined with more intensity than what I witnessed in the safety of our public parking lot.

Our lesson from Numbers 21 describes a general giving disciplinary action to an entire nation. Before we get to our lesson, let's rewind 40 years. The people of Israel had just left Mount Sinai, where we were in last week's sermon. Before the nation marched into the Promised Land, the LORD commanded Moses to send 12 spies into the land. When they returned, 10 of the 12 spies came back with a negative report, saying that the people of Canaan were too strong and too numerous. The Israelite army wouldn't stand a chance. Because these 10 men led the people of Israel to complain and rebel against God, the LORD disciplined his people. They would wander the desert for 40 years, one year for each day the spies were gone. Not one of the people, 20 years and older, would set foot in the Promised Land, because of their disobedience. Their bodies would fall in desert till that generation was gone.

Now, at last, the 40 years were complete. The nation is on its way to Canaan. The LORD directed them to travel around the nation of Edom, east of the Salt Sea and head north. It was a longer route to Canaan and the people thought that they knew better than

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<sup>a</sup> Hebrew *Yam Suph*; that is, Sea of Reeds

God. Our lesson tells us that the people grew impatient, and spoke out against God and his divinely appointed leader, Moses. They complained that there was no bread, no water – which was a farce. The LORD had graciously provided water for his people. He caused bread to fall from heaven, called manna, six days out the week, every week for 40 years... enough to feed 2 million people every day for 40 years. Now they were complaining about their food. They grumbled that this was a hopeless existence, an endless desert journey, ending with a miserable death in the midst of this dreary wasteland.

Their problem was impatience and they were unappreciative of the undeserved gifts given by the LORD's gracious providing hand. He had done everything for them. Had they forgotten that the whole nation of Israel had left Egypt, by God's grace, after over 400 years in slavery? Had they forgotten that God fed the nation for the journey with the Passover meal? As the nation marched out of Egypt, God ordered things so that the Egyptians supplied the Israelites with worldly wealth and valuable possessions. Had they forgotten that Israel had safely crossed the Red Sea while Egypt suffered the opposite fate? Had they forgotten that God had already provided military victories over the Canaanites, for example, the nation of Arad in the verses immediately preceding our verses today? No medals of valor given to the Israelites. God truly won the victories by his almighty power. Yet, in the middle of all this grace from God, they complain.

So, the general disciplined his soldiers for failure to follow orders. The LORD sent venomous snakes into the Israelite camp. When they bit the people, many died. You might think, "Isn't that a bit severe?" God wanted to impress upon his people that there were consequences for their sins – and that God would discipline. He wanted to show them that he was serious about sin. This was not the first time God disciplined his people. After the golden calf incident, God sent the Levites into the Israelite camp with swords and 3,000 people died (Ex 32). In Numbers chapter 11, the people complained about their hardships to the LORD. He sent fire which consumed the outskirts of camp. In Numbers chapter 16, three men by the names of Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their families were swallowed up by the earth, 250 of their followers were consumed with fire from the LORD, and an angel of death brought a plague among the people so that 14,700 died in addition, all because these three men decided to rebel against Moses and the LORD. And now the snakes. They should have gotten the hint.

Didn't they get it? It would be like those two young men who went AWOL, were to walk in front our church parking lot every Sunday and get busted by their same drill sergeant's every Sunday. Don't they get it? Where does this stubborn rebellion and refusal to listen originate?

The last three Sundays we've been blessed to witness four baptisms. The rich dialogue in the Baptism Gathering Rite reminds us that from infancy, we are without true fear of God and true faith in God and are condemned to eternal death. We inherit a sinful nature from our parents, who inherited it from theirs. The human race will never change that fact and will never fix the situation. That sinful nature shows itself in our impatience, and with our insolent remarks like "my way" or "according to my time" or "I think" or "I believe,"

instead of saying, “Thus says the Lord.”

Our ideas and plans become better and more important and of greater priority than God’s. We make statements like, “I don’t need to worship every Sunday. I don’t need to study God’s Word with my fellow believers much less every day in my home. God will be there when I need him.” There are other times when we don’t follow God’s schedule for things, when God doesn’t work fast enough for us. We are like a person who wants to play an instrument perfectly without any practice; but we don’t want to take the necessary time. We grow impatient when God doesn’t work a change in the heart of someone quickly enough for our liking. God doesn’t send help when we are in distress or blessings when we think we need them right now and we grow impatient. God becomes a piece of play-dough that we mold into whatever we need, and then return him to his canister for later.

Then God disciplines us for our lack of faith, for our failure to trust in his promises, for thinking that we know better than he. God may not send poisonous snakes into our homes, but he could send an illness, a disease, an accident, he may take something from us, he may allow frustrating and emotionally draining circumstances to come into your life. This doesn’t mean that every time these things happen to us that God is disciplining us. But God uses these things as a way to discipline us.

The discipline that we face for our sins of impatience and thinking we know better than the holy God is deserved and for a purpose. You can probably bet that those two young men who were caught going AWOL were disciplined, “They were smoked,” as my 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant brother-in-law would say, but for a good purpose. Did your father ever wallop your backside when you were a child? Why did he do that? Because he loved you and he was teaching you a lesson; actions have consequences. And today, you and I look back on our childhoods and we respect our fathers for that discipline. In Hebrews 12 the author tells us that in the same way, **God disciplines us for our good. It is not pleasant at the time, but that discipline produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.** Poisonous snakes may sound like a severe form of discipline, but God will do whatever it takes to get his people’s attention and bring them closer to himself. That’s exactly what happened in our lesson. The people admitted their guilt and repented. They said to Moses, “**We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you.**” Discipline is unpleasant yet necessary from a loving God so we, by his grace, return to him and remember how much we need him. Discipline brings us to our knees. That’s where God wants you to be, on your knees, hands folded, head down, in humility and submission. He moves us to repent, that is, to feel sincere sorrow over what we have done, to admit that we have sinned against God, and to turn away from those sins and turn to him.

But we don’t just need God to bring us to repentance through discipline, we need him to cause us to look up, and see that he has forgiven all the sins we have committed against him. Again, that was the purpose of the snakes, to bring the Israelites back to the saving grace of God. We see the grace and love of God as he sends a rescue for those who did repent – the bronze snake. When they looked at that snake and believed the promise of

God connected to that snake, those who were bitten lived. They were to trust that this was the means God wanted to use to heal his people.

In the same way, when we are brought to our knees, God tells us to look up. Jesus said, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so also the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”** (John 3:14) Look up at the cross, at the one whose heel was bitten by the ancient serpent, who suffered the torments of Satan and hell, who suffered and died, so that by his death he in turn would crush the serpent’s head and destroy his power and the curse of sin he brought into the world. Look at Christ on the cross and believe that he was punished for your sins. Christ invites you to gaze at his cross through his Word. There he promises, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”** (1John 1:7-9) Like the Israelites who looked at the bronze serpent, we look at Christ on the cross and live.

This may confuse us, “If we are truly repentant and our sins are forgiven, why does the discipline continue?” Why did the snakes remain? The people asked, “Take the snakes away!” The snakes remained in the camp, BUT SO DID GOD! Today for us, the effects and consequences of our sin remains, but so does our God. We need to be reminded every day that we need God and God alone to forgive our debt of sin. We need to be reminded every day that God lifted up his Son in our place, so that we might gaze on him and be saved.

When we are disciplined, we need not find fault with God. Our discipline comes because we have accused him, it is us who have grumbled and complained, we have grown impatient, we are at fault. When we are driven to our knees, we will look up to him and remember his promises. We may say, “Just get rid of the snakes!” But God lovingly replies, **“Be still, and know that I am God. (Ps 46) I will be with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20) Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. (Heb 13:5) Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)”**

I suppose that it was not a good day for those two young men who decided to go AWOL. But their discipline was deserved and for their good. Our general, Christ Jesus, disciplines you and me, his soldiers, and for good reason: to lead us to repentance, to move us to look up, and seek his forgiveness and to receive it with joy. I pray that the Holy Spirit will move you to receive your discipline with joy, to repent, and to always look up at the cross of Christ. May he grant it to you for his sake. Amen.

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*In His Service,*

*Pastor Paul Horn*

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*"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen!" 2Timothy 4:18*