# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“God’s Discipline”**

**Jeremiah 46:27-28**

**August 18, 2019**

The Bible tells us that God is our heavenly Father and we are his children. What do you suppose God desires for us, his children? What does he want for our life on this earth? Success? Greatness? Comfort? A good time? Happiness? Wealth? These are often the things that earthly parents want for their children and, in and of themselves, they are not necessarily wrong. But our heavenly Father focuses on something different, and it is in the life and ministry of his Son, Jesus, that we see most clearly what God wants for us – he wants us to become like Jesus. His desire is that we, like Jesus, daily walk in his presence, trust our lives to his care, obediently follow his Word, and do all things in such a way that God’s character is reflected in us.

What, then, does God do when his desire for us is not being fulfilled? When we are wandering far from him, living lives that have little if any resemblance to that of his Son? When we, like the prophet Isaiah puts it, “Like sheep have gone astray, each one of us turning to our own way”? This is when God disciplines us, and the purpose of his discipline is to bring us back to himself.

In our journey through the book of Jeremiah, we have seen again and again how the people have gone astray from God. For forty years Jeremiah has been warning the people of Jerusalem that unless they turn back to God, unless they impose self-discipline and step away from their evil practices, God will discipline them. They refused to turn, and God did what he had promised. He disciplined them, using the Babylonian empire as his instrument. For two long years Jerusalem lay under siege. Hunger and disease were rampant, the water cisterns ran dry, but they would not repent. Finally, the Babylonians were able to break down the walls and take the city, destroying the temple and burning the homes of the people. Most of the survivors were taken into exile in Babylon.

In Babylon they wonder what will happen to them as a people. Has God abandoned them because of their disobedience? Is it too late to return to him? Will they die in this strange land, far away from their homeland and far away from their God? Once again, the word of God comes to them through God’s prophet. I invite you to turn with me to Jeremiah 46:27-28 to hear God’s response

“Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant; do not be dismayed, Israel. For I will bring you home again from distant lands, and your children will return from their exile. Israel will return to a life of peace and quiet, and no one will terrorize them. Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant, for I am with you,” says the Lord. “I will completely destroy the nations to which I have exiled you, but I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you, but with justice; I cannot let you go unpunished.”

 God has not abandoned them. In spite of their disobedience, their worship of foreign gods, and their ongoing disregard for God’s commandments, God has not given up on them. Considering that there have been about 1,000 years of disobedience, that’s rather remarkable. God gave his commandments to his people somewhere around 1,500BC when Moses brought them down off Mount Sinai. The very first and most important commandment was: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The second was: “You shall make no idols nor bow down and worship them.” So, what have they been doing all these years? They have had other gods, made idols to those gods, and worshiped them. And, they have ignored the Scriptures, the holy Word of God recorded for them in order to teach them how to follow God.

 So, God disciplined them, not because he had rejected them but in order to bring them back to himself. Did it work? Was God’s Babylonian discipline effective to bring about what God desired? Here are some of the results of God’s discipline as recorded by other books in Scripture and by non-biblical historical documents. First, the Jews stopped worshipping other gods. No matter their faults and failures in later periods of their history, the Jews never returned to the idolatry of their fore-fathers. For 2,500 years, the only God they have worshipped is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That began in the Babylonian exile. Second, the Scriptures were revived and studied. A new order of Scribes began in Babylon who not only made copies of the Scriptures, but produced written commentaries based on the biblical teaching of yet another new group, the Rabbis. Places for assembly called Synagogues were institured in order to conduct formal reading and study of Scripture, and to provide schools for religious education. The Scribes, Rabbis and Synagogues were critical vehicles for the Jewish people’s return to the worship of the One and Only God, and their return to his Holy Word.

 In the discipline of the people of Judah, we see three distinct reasons for why God disciplines his people – not just those who lived 2,500 years ago but for us today, as well. First, discipline emphasizes that what God says needs to be taken seriously. If God never disciplined us for our disobedience, we would become comfortable with not taking him seriously. Is that not what happens with our children? Warnings alone will not change their behavior – it requires discipline for them to take seriously what we say to them and for them to act accordingly.

 The second purpose of God’s discipline is to teach us the difference between right and wrong. If we are continually doing what is wrong in God’s eyes and never being disciplined for it, we will soon come to believe that it must be right, that God is okay with it. God disciplines our wrong to teach us to recognize that it is wrong.

 The third reason God disciplines is to establish his justice “on earth as it is in heaven.” The world has all kinds of ideas about how to judge right and wrong between people. For example, “might makes right.” If you are stronger than another, then whatever you want is right. Or, “if it feels good, do it.” Whatever you want for yourself, if it pleases you and makes you happy, then you should be able to do it. Or, “right and wrong are whatever most people think it is.” There is no higher authority than us human beings as to what we should and should not be able to do. When God disciplines us for behaving according to one or more of these false ways of practicing justice, we come to understand and begin to live his justice. Jesus summarized God’s justice as: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and, love your neighbor as yourself.”

 The love of God for us is his unswerving commitment to do what is best for us, even if it means using difficult circumstances in our lives to get our attention. When I look back at my life, I am aware of times when I was dragging my feet when it came to doing what God was calling me to do. Comfortable in my current situation, I didn’t want to go where God was leading. So, God allowed hardship to enter into the situation, some discipline to remind me that the best place to be is always where God wants us to be. I was unwilling to go on my own – unwilling to use self-discipline – so God’s used his discipline as a way of giving me a push out the door. At the time it was painful, but now I see how God used it in my life to bring about his very best for me. As God has done and continues to do in my life, he will do in your life as well. Because he loves us!