

# The Loving Discipline Of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're getting to a point in the book of Judges now where the stories are getting longer, and that's allowing us a unique opportunity. In fact, this particular text, these 10 verses, allow us to have a very narrow focus on something that up to this point we've only really dealt with in passing, and that is the loving discipline of God.

In each and every one of the stories of this book, the judgment of God is present. That's very clear. You don't have to look very far to see that, but there is a uniqueness to how it's addressed here at the start of the Gideon cycle, which would be the next judge that we'll cover.

Not only are we confronted once again by the reality of God's judgment, but here in these 10 verses, we begin to gain a clearer understanding of God's intentions with judgment.

What His purpose is in it, and I think that we'll find it to be quite instructive to consider the nature and the process and the purpose of God's disciplinary action.

So up to this point, we've taken the stories really in larger sections, and to give you a bit of a reprieve this morning from an hour-long sermon, we're going to take just a small section with a narrow focus, and I think that it will be helpful for us to think about God's discipline.

[ 1 : 28 ] In chapter 3, I spoke briefly about distinguishing between two dynamics of God's judgment. On the one hand, we have what we would call retribution.

Retribution is God's punitive action against those who persist in sin and unbelief. So it's purely punitive. You know what I mean by that? It is really just focused on punishment.

It is you did this, therefore you deserve this, and I'm going to give you the fullness of that consequence. That's what we're thinking about in terms of retribution. In the Gideon story, the objects of God's righteous retribution, his punitive action, is this Midianite coalition. We're just introduced to them here, and we're going to get to how the story unfolds in the next three or four weeks, but what we find right here, what we at least need to acknowledge, is that Israel is not the object of God's retribution. Midian is.

And Midian receives the retribution, the punitive action of God, by ultimately being destroyed. Okay, so that's what we see unfolding in their lives.

Being outside of the covenant relationship with God, Midian faces the Lord's retribution, which we would say is judgment apart from grace and mercy.

[ 2 : 53 ] But as we read through these ten verses, we find that God's judgment against Midian stands in stark contrast to God's judgment of Israel, who is, in fact, in a covenant relationship with God.

Israel is not destroyed like Midian is, though they do endure a tremendous amount of hardship, more hardship than we've seen them face at any point in Judges up to now, which is, that's saying a lot.

But they're not destroyed. God doesn't deal with them in the same way that he deals with Midian. They were even guilty of the same kind of sin as the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east.

But instead of facing God's retribution, Israel faces what is best described as God's discipline, his discipline.

Barry Webb is helpful here. He describes these distinctions this way. This is on the screen if you want to follow along with the quote. Retribution, he says, which is pure punishment, unmitigated by grace, is for those who are and remain outside of his covenant.

[ 4 : 07 ] And he quotes Ephesians 2, they have no hope and they are without God in the world. But within God's covenant with his people, a different kind of judgment takes place.

The most appropriate term for it is discipline, because it's corrective rather than retributive. And it is always tempered by grace.

It can be severe, but its aim is always to reclaim rather than to destroy. That's an important distinction that we need to understand.

Now, what unfolds in terms of God's judgment in these passages, we need to realize on the surface, is purely physical. Israel and Midian, they are real historical nations.

The judgment they are facing in Judges 6 is a physical form of judgment that's related to their existence as a nation and their flourishing as a people.

[ 5 : 11 ] So we need to keep that in mind. What God is doing to them, it's purely physical at this point. But the physical judgment that is recorded here is meant to point us forward to a more significant and eternal spiritual judgment.

Like these two nations, all of us are guilty before God. As Romans 3 says, we have all sinned. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. Solomon even says in the Old Testament, there is no one who does not sin, which means that there is no one who doesn't deserve the retribution of God's righteous anger.

That's all of us. And God must judge our sins. If God doesn't judge sin, then God isn't truly holy. He's not truly just. And what we must determine, and the question that we must ask ourselves this morning, is to which of these two groups do we actually belong?

[ 6 : 26 ] Do we belong to the group that is outside of God's covenant? The group that is destined only for God's eternal retribution, his anger, and his wrath in eternal hell?

Is that the group that we belong to? Or do we belong to this group that is inside the covenant, represented by Israel here? That isn't perfect and still falls and still disobeys and still even faces the discipline of the Lord to some extent, but they are still safe within the covenant, having their judgment put on the sinless Son of God instead.

I want you to just think about that for just a second. Just contemplate sincerely in your heart for just a moment. If the Lord were to return today, and we were to all stand in that final judgment before God, do we stand in the line with the people that are in the covenant?

Or do we stand in the line with the people who are outside of the covenant? Eternal retribution comes to those who, through sin and unbelief, are and remain outside of a relationship with God. Their destiny is eternal hell, a pure punishment, unmitigated by grace, in the words of Barry Webb.

[ 7 : 57 ] And of course, we find this all in the Scriptures. We find it especially in Revelation chapter 20. John says that the lake of fire, what we often refer to as hell, or our concept of hell, is the second death.

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. Now what does John mean by a name being written or not written in the book of life?

It's just a different way of saying, you're in the covenant, or you're out of the covenant. You belong to God as his child, or you are an enemy of God, left in your sin and unbelief.

Which leads us to an important question, doesn't it? If being in the covenant is what determines whether or not I face ultimately the retribution of God's wrath, or whether I just experience to some measure the discipline, the corrective discipline of the Lord in this life, but ultimately I'm justified, and heaven is my home, and I've been forgiven, and mercy.

But if the covenant is what matters, then the question is, how do I get in the covenant, right? How do I get there? Who wouldn't want to be in the covenant with God?

[ 9 : 17 ] And here's the awesome thing about it. We've seen it in so many different passages already today. The way you get in the covenant is by faith. This is why Jesus is so important.

We understand our sin. We understand that God must judge our sin. We understand that the wages of sin is death. The second death. The lake of fire. So why does Jesus matter so much to us?

Because Jesus, the sinless son of God, comes to this earth, willingly lays down his life, in order that he might take that retribution for us.

That's what's amazing about it. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, God has made Christ to be sin for us so that in Christ, we might receive his righteousness.

There's this exchange that takes place at the cross where Jesus, the righteous one, is imputed unto him. Your sin. Your sin. Your sin.

[ 10 : 21 ] Is imputed unto the sinless son of God. And in return to that, when you come to Christ by faith, his righteousness is then imputed unto you.

So that when you stand in that judgment on that great day of the Lord, the final judgment after the resurrection, when you stand before the Lord on that day, the question is not, did you do your best? The question is not, did you try your hardest? The question is not, did you go to church and did you give money and did you remain a good little virgin until the day of your wedding?

That's not the question. The question is, are you paying for your sins or did Jesus pay for your sins? And God invites us into this covenant of grace.

And he invites us into it through faith. Isn't that what Jesus said? He said, I'm the bread of life. We just read it. I'm the bread of life. If you're hungry, spiritually hungry, if you're spiritually thirsty, just come to me.

[11:24] Believe in me. It's the will of the Father that the Son be lifted up and that all who look to the Son and believe will have life. It's amazing.

You say, well, how do you know that Jesus' death 2,000 years ago on a cross is actually that significant?

How do we know that his death actually does provide forgiveness so that we should believe in him? I'm glad you asked. Because three days later, he rose from the dead.

The resurrection changes everything. Literally, it changes everything. Peter says in Acts chapter 2 as he's preaching on the day of Pentecost, he points to Jesus and he points to Jesus' resurrection who at that point, people couldn't deny.

There's too many witnesses at that point. They're trying to come up with reasons to explain it away. But the truth is, they knew something was fishy going on and the disciples were saying, no, he's alive and we've seen him.

[12:33] Peter says, the grave could not hold him. Why? It had no claim on him. Why did the grave have no claim on him? Because he had no sin. The resurrection of Jesus proves that his death was a sufficient payment for ours.

It proves that God was appeased in his wrath by what Jesus did on the cross. You say, I don't want to face the retribution of God.

How do I get into the covenant? You believe Christ. You trust him. You trust what he's done. You turn from your sin. You cry out to him.

You follow him as Lord and Savior. Jesus himself said in John 3, we quote this verse all the time, don't we? God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, should not die, but instead should have eternal life.

For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, he says, because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God.

[13:54] What's the significance here? What else we do? Believe. Believe. Just turn from your sin and believe, and he will give you this life.

Now, all of that being said, the focus of our attention this morning is not on God's retribution. The focus of our attention this morning in this text is actually on the nature, process, and purpose of God's discipline toward those who are in the covenant.

We would say, in New Testament terms, those who are Christians. That's what we're really focused on, and looking at how the Lord worked in and through Israel, we can more clearly understand how he works in and through us, and I think you'll find this instructive.

Just three main points that I want to point out to you as we go through. The first thing is this. I want you to see the nature of divine discipline. The nature of divine discipline.

And I have three things underneath this, okay? The first one is this. Here's what you need to acknowledge about divine discipline. It is real. Divine discipline is real.

[15:03] Look at verse one. The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.

All right? It's very simple, isn't it? Israel sinned, and God corrected them. He gave them into the hand of Midian. Now, here's the thing. We face hardships and difficulties in our lives, and so many Christians interpret every hardship in their life as one of two things.

They'll either say, this is Satan that's just really on my back right now. You heard people, maybe you've said that before. You've heard people say it. You say, how's your week been, John? And John might reply, well, you know, Satan's just really been after me.

It's been a tough week. Right? We make statements like that. Or we would say, we wouldn't necessarily blame Satan for the hardship that we're facing, but we would just say, well, you know, this is just life in a fallen world, right?

And maybe I'm just going through it right now because it's just, I'm going through it, and that's all that there really is. Now, here's the problem. It's not that those things aren't true. They are true.

[16:09] They actually have a role to play in our lives. The problem is, we always try to, as Christians, we seem to always take the hardships and the difficulties that we face and put them into one of those two boxes.

But the fact is that there's a third category. And a third category for our hardship and our difficulty in life or our circumstances is that God does actively discipline his children.

He disciplines us. Now, I want you to notice it in the text in verse one. Notice that nothing about Israel's circumstance was coincidental. No. It's not coincidental.

This wasn't just bad luck. Right? This wasn't, that what they were facing with Midian was not just the result of living in a fallen world. That's not what's happening with Israel here.

Neither is Satan said to have been involved in the process. This is not an oppression that they are facing similar to what Job dealt with in the book of Job.

[17:10] You remember, it wasn't that Job had sinned against the Lord. It's that the Lord was testing him and he was allowing Satan to actually do this work to test his servant Job. Okay? That's not what's happening here either.

What's happening then? Their circumstance was the direct result of them doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord and God himself delivered them into the hands of Midian.

It's clear as day. They did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian for seven years. And here's my point with all of that.

Divine discipline is a reality that we need to acknowledge if we're ever going to grow and mature as God's people.

If you never acknowledge the fact that God actively disciplines you in your life, how are you ever going to learn to turn away from the sinful behaviors that he's judging you for?

[18:19] If everything we face is just automatically put in one of those other two boxes, how are we going to grow and mature as Christians? Answer, we won't. We need to acknowledge that God's discipline is a reality.

The next time you're tempted to say that the devil's been on your back, stop to consider whether or not it's actually God who's afflicted you. Number two, divine discipline can be severe.

So we're underneath the nature of divine discipline still. Okay, sorry about that. First, divine discipline is real. Second, divine discipline, it actually can be quite severe. Verses two through six, look at it with me.

the hand of Midian overpowered Israel. Because of Midian, the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. Whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them.

They didn't camp against them and devour the produce of the land as far as Gaza and leave no sustenance in Israel, no sheep, no ox, no donkey. for they would come up with their livestock and their tents.

[19:28] They would come like locusts in number. Both they and their camels could not be counted so that they laid waste the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian.

And they cried out for help to the Lord. Divine discipline can be severe. Look, the discipline of God in this text, it is far more than a slap on the wrist. This is not a slap on the wrist kind of judgment.

It was the shortest time frame of judgment that we've seen thus far in the book of Judges. But it's also the worst oppression that we've seen so far in the book of Judges.

There's this coalition of eastern nomadic tribes led by the Midianite people. They differed from all of Israel's other enemies.

They didn't seek to occupy and conquer the land as the others had done. Instead, they functioned like marauders. For seven years straight, they entered Canaan with more people and camels than could be numbered.

[ 20 : 34 ] This is a show of force that would be foolish for the simple Israelite people to attempt to fight against. That's what this is about. The writer says that they came in like locusts.

If you study other parts of the Old Testament, you'll see that locusts is often a judgment from God. When these waves of locusts came in, how is it normally described? You see this described even in modern times.

It's like the sky darkening. There's so many of them, right? When they finally pass through and leave, what's left? Nothing. That's how the author is describing this Midianite coalition.

Every year for seven years straight, harvest time comes and guess what? Israelite knows. It's like clockwork. More people than they can count. They come into the land, they set up their camp, they steal all their food, they steal all their sheep, they take all their donkeys, they take all their oxen, they leave nothing behind.

The Israelites have to abandon their homes, they have to go live in caves. This is a miserable existence for seven years. Kicked out of their houses, left nearly to starve.

[ 21 : 40 ] So that in verse six, the author just says, they were brought very low. They're brought very, very low. And it was all the result of God's discipline.

God did this to Israel. God did it to Israel. You see, sometimes divine discipline can be severe. Sometimes we go through circumstances in our lives that we would never, never really understand, never really quite fathom exactly or imagine how hard things have actually gotten in our lives. Sometimes it's severe. Sometimes God has to bring us very low to get our attention. Third thing underneath the nature of divine discipline, it's real.

It can be severe. Divine discipline, this is going to blow your mind, you're going to disagree with me at first. It's offensive, isn't it? Divine discipline is loving. It's loving.

How in the world is that actually possible? Look at how difficult and miserable their lives were. You see, it's a misunderstanding of love that leads many people to conclude that love and discipline are incompatible with one another.

[ 23 : 02 ] This starts when we're just really young kids, doesn't it? From very early in our childhood, we equate love with expressions of affection, don't we? Harper, come here.

Harper, if you were to come in today, Harper's my daughter if you don't know, I'm allowed to do this, and I just walked in, you didn't say anything to me, and I just said, Harper, you know what? Come give me a hug, I just want a hug.

Now, why would I do that? Because I love you. Now, if you came in and I immediately spanked you instead, what would you say?

Why don't you love me anymore, Dad? What happened to the hugs, Dad? What happened to the fun things that we did, Dad? Why are you harming me now, Dad? Where'd the love go?

Right? You can go sit down, sweetheart. When we're kids, we start to equate love with expressions of affection, and then as we become teenagers, it gets even worse, right?

[ 24 : 02 ] Because now we actually start to say things like, I hate you, and you don't love me, you never did love me, you're just a big liar, and all the kinds of things we say those things as teenagers, right? And then we get to be adults, and we do the same thing, don't we?

It's so hard for us, even when we're adults, to recognize that sometimes authentic love involves confrontation, sometimes it involves disagreement, sometimes it even involves carrying out the consequences of an action.

Remember years ago, someone in our church, our previous church, they had an adult daughter that was just really struggling with a lot of drug addiction, and stealing, there's just a lot of things going on in her life, and over and over and over, her parents just kind of bailed her out, and finally she got caught again, and they said, you know what, we're just going to let her sit in jail now.

You know, that was a loving act on the part of those parents. We don't think of it that way often, do we? So it's not surprising that when facing hardship, we're tempted to question the genuine love of God.

We go through something difficult, we get really terrible news, or we find out that there's an issue in our bodies maybe, we're sick, or we find that something's just not going right in our marriage, or it's not going right with our kids, or something's not going right with our finances, or our home, or whatever it is, and we think, God, why don't you love me?

[ 25 : 22 ] You're supposed to care about me, why are you letting these things happen to me? And really that comes from a misunderstanding of what love really is. We need to understand that God

disciplines us, not as a cruel tyrant, but according to the scriptures, he does this as a loving father. Proverbs chapter three, my son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, do not be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father, the son in whom he delights. It's God's love that drives his discipline, it's his desire for what's best for us that brings about his reproof, and if you face his discipline as a believer, rejoice, he treats you as a son, not an enemy. Wouldn't you rather be Israel? The Midian in this circumstance? The nature of divine discipline. Number two, the process of divine discipline. Now God does something really weird here, doesn't he?

Verse seven, when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, look what the Lord does, this is so weird. The Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel.

[ 26 : 38 ] Don't you find that curious? He sent a prophet before he sent a savior. A sermon before salvation.

This is like the talk that you get from your parents when you get in trouble as a kid. This is the worst part of it, isn't it?

Isn't the worst part about being disciplined by your parents? It's not the actual disciplinary action mostly. It's when you're forced to go and sit down in the living room across from them in the other chair and for an hour, two hours, however long it is, you just gotta listen.

You just gotta hear why you're wrong and why it was wrong and why you need to change and why you shouldn't have done that and all those. Isn't that the worst part of it? It's painful, isn't it?

We just want to take our punishment. We want to be relieved of the punishment and move on with our lives. But good parents, they take time to expose and confront the error that led to the consequences, right?

[ 27 : 44 ] In God's plan, what we see unfolding here, in God's plan, the consequences are meant to get us to that conversation where we have to actually deal with the issue of our sin.

Israel comes to God and they say, Lord, help us. Send us a deliverer. And so God says, okay, here's a prophet. Listen to a sermon first. It's so important for us to understand the necessity of this part of God's process because we're typically only interested in our circumstances getting better and so we attempt to leapfrog God's message to get what we think will be a quick and easy solution.

You know, the times that we're really struggling with sin in our lives are going through a difficulty, you know, often those are the hardest times to go to church, aren't they? Those are the hardest days to open up your Bible and have a private devotional time with the Lord.

Those are the hardest days to pray sometimes. Those are the hardest times to actually be around other Christian people. You know why? Because we know what's going to happen. We know that to actually have to sit across the table from the Lord with the word open means that we're going to have to be confronted.

We're just going to have to deal with what we've done. We don't want to deal with what we've done. We just want to get to the solution, right? We need pastors to help us view our circumstances through the lens of God's word.

[ 29 : 20 ] That's what this is about in application. We need pastors and elders to help us see our lives not just simply through our perspective but through God's perspective through the word.

We need mature Christian friends in our lives who will use their Bibles to lovingly say to us the things that are hard to hear.

Because often it takes a prophet to point us toward the Savior. Often it takes a sermon to get us to the true message of salvation. We desperately need to be confronted by God's word in this process.

We can't overlook it. We can run to lawyers when things are going bad. They'll just take advantage of our pain. We can run to a therapist when things aren't going very well but they're not going to deal with the heart of the problem of our pain.

We can run to unbelieving friends because we know that they're probably going to justify our decisions no matter how bad they actually are. But what happens when we come to the word and to other people of the word?

[ 30 : 33 ] It's hard. It's a struggle. But it's best. Of course we can't discount the Bible's role in simply helping us to evaluate our circumstances.

See there's another layer to this isn't there? In this text we're referring to corrective discipline. You know there's another type of discipline that belongs to God? There's corrective discipline. That's mainly what we think about.

There's also what we would call formative discipline. Formative discipline is what the athlete does to prepare their body for competition. They go to the gym every day.

They're like Brian Baker. They're up at like 3.30 in the morning to go pump the iron or whatever it is and they go to the gym. They punish themselves not because they've done something wrong.

They're disciplining themselves aren't they?

Why? So they can be stronger. So that they can perform better. There is a type of discipline that the Lord takes us through. It's not corrective. It's formative. Sometimes this is what James was talking about in James chapter 1 when he said count it all joy when you fall into various trials and temptations because the Lord brings us through difficult times sometimes.

[ 31 : 44 ] Sometimes he allows us to go through really hard things in order to make us stronger, in order to make us more faithful. There's a formative kind of discipline that the Lord takes us through.

Now, formative discipline and corrective discipline, what comes as a result of those things often look the same, don't they? If we're just trying to evaluate it on our own, how are we going to know whether or not the Lord's just trying to build me up right now through formative discipline or there's actually something in my life that he's trying to get my attention about?

How will you know unless you have a pastor or a Christian friend or somebody you can sit down with who will take the Bible and help you look at your life and circumstance through the lens of God's word?

We need the prophet before we need the deliverer. We need the sermon before we need the solution. The process of divine discipline is not complete without a confrontation from God's word. And we need to stop trying to circumvent God's process. There's the nature of divine discipline, the process of divine discipline. Finally, and this is the best part, there's the purpose of divine discipline, the purpose of it.

[ 33 : 01 ] Look with me at verses 8 through 10. The prophet said to them, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery.

I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, I am the Lord your God. This is an identifying marker. I am Yahweh your God. You shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell, but you have not obeyed my words.

Now if you'll hang with me, this gets good here, okay? I want to summarize God's message in two simple statements, okay? Here's what God is saying to Israel through this and what I believe he's saying to believers through this, through his discipline.

Number one, he says, you are mine. You're mine. Look at it. Thus says who?

[ 34 : 03 ] The Lord. This is the covenant name of God. This is Yahweh. And then what does it say? How is Yahweh described? The God of Israel.

Look again at verse 10. And I said to you, I am the Lord, your God. First thing God says through corrective discipline, he says, you're mine.

You belong to me. I belong to you. This is that covenant relationship, right? Notice that God's correction is based on his relationship to Israel.

He does not deliver a message like this to Midian. He delivers it to his people. And twice he reminds them that he is their God. They are his people.

God chose them. He revealed himself to them. He delivered them from bondage in Egypt. He fought for them as they journeyed into the land of promise.

[ 35 : 07 ] That's what he says. He says, you're mine and remember what I have done for you to make you mine. Their relationship with God was the foundation of his correction. And it should have been the motivation for their repentance.

Is this not how God intends to speak to us through discipline? Is not his discipline of us who are in Christ, is not that discipline rooted in his relationship with us?

Just like Israel, he chose us by his grace. Just like Israel, he revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

He delivered us from the bondage of sin through the power of his Holy Spirit. And he fights for us as we journey on our way to the ultimate promised land, to the heavens in this life.



