

## INTRODUCTION

Any parent can agree that raising children is a tough task. You do not only need to provide food, clothes and education opportunity. You have to invest time and energy to nurture a person. We Chinese jokingly say that you bring up your first child according to the books. You read every manual to learn how to be a dad or mom. After your first child, you raise the next one like a pig. You take it easy. The child will grow as long as you feed him/her. As I look back, I treated my older son like a lab rat. I tested different ways and observed what worked the best. Then I used the experimental results to deal with my second boy like a person. Of course, I made tons of mistakes as a first-time dad. I would love to share my failure with future parents. One area I am still learning is how to discipline my children. Some of you know that the Proverbs teaches us to discipline disobedient children with a rod. Some parents wonder if we should hit our kids' behind if they misbehave. According to the Bible, discipline is more than punishment. Spanking is not the only one way to discipline either. The ultimate goal of discipline is to correct rebellious actions and attitude. We as adults do not like to hear it, but our Heavenly Father also disciplines us when we go astray. The second half of Numbers chapter 14 is an example of God's discipline. The Israelites did not believe that God would take them into Canaan. They preferred to go back to Egypt and remain as slaves. Therefore, God intended to use a plague to wipe them out. But Moses stood between God and His people to beg for the rebellious people. God listened to Moses' prayer. However, God's forgiveness did not waive the Israelites the consequence of their sins. It is a heavy subject when we talk about God's discipline. But since it is in the Bible, we should study it. From the experience of the Israelites, we shall learn that God shows His grace even when He disciplines us.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. 神的指控 God's Indictment

The Israelites sinned against God. It was as if God took His people to the court for a trial. First, God spelled out His indictment. He told Moses in **verses 20-21**: 20 ... "I have forgiven them, as you asked. 21 Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth." The Israelites sinned and violated God's glory. God loves sinners but He hates sin. Once I was shopping at a discount clothing store. I picked up a shirt from a rack. There is a logo at the front. When I turned to the back, I saw a hole. I wondered if anyone would buy that shirt because of the logo on the chest and ignore the hole at the back. No one will! The glory of the brand has been tarnished. Sin crushes God's heart because it blemishes His image in us. God continued His indictment on the Israelites as He specified their sins. God said in **verse 22**: "not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times-" God did not allow them into Canaan. The people clearly witnessed God's mighty work but they still tested Him. God was being patient. The Israelites rebelled against Him ten times. I listed the 10 incidents in your sermon outline. You can look them up yourself. Whether in the Old or New Testament, the word "test" can have double meaning. It can refer to a verification process. The same word is used in Genesis 22 when

God “tested” Abraham. God asked Abraham to offer his only son Isaac as an offering on the altar. Through the test, Abraham’s faith in God was verified. God can test His children to see if they trust Him. However, we should never test God. He is always faithful to us. One of the 10 tests is recorded in Exodus 17. The Israelites complained because they did not have water. God asked Moses to hit a rock with his staff. Water thus gushed out. There is a comment after the miracle in **verse 7**: ... the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” They sinned by testing God. They doubted that God would provide for their needs. Besides testing God, God’s second indictment is in **verse 23**: “not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.” The word “contempt” means “disrespect.” They disrespected God for not trusting His words. Therefore, they disobeyed God’s clear order to march into Canaan. A common expression of their contempt was grumbling. They complained why God put them in a difficult situation. They concluded that God mistreated them. In contrast, Caleb and Joshua were credited for their faith in God. Read **verse 24**: “But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.” God rewarded Caleb, and also Joshua later in the chapter, for their faith. They would enter Canaan and their descendants would have a share of the land. God praised Caleb for having “a different spirit.” Caleb’s heart was fully devoted to following the Lord. He believed in what God said and he took actions accordingly. All the 12 spies heard the same messages from God. The difference was whether or not they reacted with faith. Caleb and Joshua saw the wonderful work of God, and they concluded that God was trustworthy. God wants our faith to grow. If we learn to trust Him in little things, we will also believe in Him when we face a bigger crisis. When the author of the book of Hebrews looked back to their ancestors, he reiterated the importance of faith. He said in **Hebrews 3:19** - So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. He then used the lesson their ancestors learned to encourage the readers of his letter. Read **4:2** - For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. It is a blessing to hear the gospel. But you will not receive God’s blessings unless you believe in Him and follow Him. It is like when your friend tells you that a department store is closing its door. Everything is on sale like crazy. If you do not trust the message, you will not go to the mall. I am not saying that you should stock up on your clothes just because it is cheap. You should not buy anything more than what you need. In the spiritual realm of things, many people will hear the gospel but only a few of them will receive Christ. Some of them may say: “Show me where God is. If I can see Him, then I may believe.” Well, the Israelites clearly witnessed God’s power on multiple occasions. They knew that God was real. But they still did not believe Him. We can also consider the Pharisees in Jesus’ time. They knew the Old Testament thoroughly. They even taught the Bible. But they did not believe that Jesus was the Savior. They even rejected Jesus to the point of sending Him to the cross. Seeing does not necessarily lead to believing. Even when God actually appears in downtown Memphis, some people may still question: “How can I know that He is the real God?” But that does not mean that Christians believe with a blind faith. We have objective proofs that the Bible is true. We can do research to verify that the people, places and events in the Bible are historical facts. When we observe the wonders of nature and examine the complexity of our human body, we can discern that there has to be a Designer. Also, we can ask why we are different than animals. We have a conscience. We have a moral standard of right and wrong. We show emotions through love, compassion and sorrow. We have curiosity to pursue knowledge, creativity to express in art and

ambition to invent new things. All that demonstrate that we are created after God's image. We believe in a God whom we can discern with an objective mind. To believe that a rock or a tree is a god is superstition. But to harden one's heart to reject God despite so many evidences is spiritual blindness. One day, Jesus will return to judge the world. His indictment to non-believers will be the same as toward the Israelites: why do you not believe with all that you see and hear?

## 2. 神的審判 God's Judgment

God indicted the Israelites for their sin of disbelief. Next, God announced His judgment. There were a few successive stages in God's judgment. First, God wiped out the ten spies immediately. **Verse 37** says: These men responsible for spreading the bad report about the land were struck down and died of a plague before the Lord. They were the main culprits who led others to rebel against God. Next, God would deal with the other Israelites. There would be death. Look at **verse 29**: "In this desert your bodies will fall – every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me." God repeated the same message in **verse 32**. Those adult males were supposed to be future soldiers. But they would eventually pass away in the wilderness. Some perished in future wars, while others were struck dead in later rebellious incidents. Eventually, the rest of them would die of old age. But God would protect the women and children. Read **verse 31**: "As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected." Contrary to what the grumbling people had expected, God would preserve the women and children. It is a strong indication that it was not through the swords and strength of men to defeat their future opponents. It was the power of God working in them. However, all the people would endure a period of discipline. God continued in **verses 33-34**: 33 "Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert. 34 For forty years – one year for each of the forty days you explored the land – you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you." The 12 spies spent 40 days to research the land. Now everyone would wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Here God described their sin as "unfaithfulness." The word can be used to define immoral relationship outside marriage. In the Old Testament, God used the image of a husband and a wife to depict His relationship with Israel. When God's people worshipped idols, it was like a spouse being unfaithful in a marriage. It only takes a few weeks for the Israelites to go to Canaan. But for the next 40 years, they had to run around the area in circles. We can imagine younger children asking their parents: "Are we there yet?" The parents sighed and answered: "Keep walking." Then a few months later there would be another question: "Dad, haven't we been here before?" The father would respond: "You are right. We still have to pass through here many times." The feeling is like being sentenced to prison. The inmate marks on the wall: one day, two days, a month, a year and so forth. A major difference is, the criminal longs for the day to be free. But for the Israelites, they would not leave the wilderness. It is a sad feeling of helplessness. We may wonder: why did God have to discipline His people so severely? Isn't He full of love? The Bible tells us that God is merciful, patient and all the rest. But He is also holy and righteous. We as parents are so afraid that we may appear cruel if we spank our kids. Worse still, what if our kids hate us as they grow up? Our Heavenly Father never has those dilemmas. He shows us His love even when He disciplines us. He gives us a perfect model of parenting. Let me refer you to **Hebrews 12:5-6** – 5 And have you forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he

rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” The author was quoting from the Proverbs. Our Heavenly Father disciplines us because He loves us. Any earthly father will discipline their children because of a loving relationship. How much more will our Heavenly Father use discipline to bring us back to the right path? The author then stated the goals of discipline in **verses 10-11**: 10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Discipline is never a fun thing. Your child will not say: “Dad, you barely scratch the itch. Hit a few more times and hit me harder.” It hurts when God disciplines us. But God’s discipline will only last until it achieves its results. What results? The author highlighted three things: a share in God’s holiness, righteousness and peace. God wants us to realize our sins. We will not ask Him for forgiveness if we do not admit our sins. A true repentance must also include turning back from sin and turning toward God. Then we will pursue God’s holiness, righteousness and peace in our life. Let me share a few words about how we can apply the same principle to parenting. No extra charge! As parents, we have to show our love as we discipline our children. They are smart enough to know that they are disciplined because they did something wrong. Tell them that you discipline them because you love them. It goes without saying that if you are being so logical and rational, then you must control your own emotions. I grew up in an environment where my parents hit me when they were angry at my misbehavior. Did I know that I was wrong? Absolutely. But did I feel their love? Not really. Please do not follow the negative example of my parents. But thanks to the Lord, after suffering so much whacking, at least I become a decent man now. In case you wonder, the law allows parents to spank their kids as long as the punishment is reasonable. Of course, we can only spank a child up to a certain age. But there are other tricks we can use on older children. You can give them a time-out, reduce their allowance or take away their favorite toys. For teenagers, if you confiscate their game console or computer, take away their phone or car-key, it will be worse than plucking their hair. Perhaps we parents can sit down and exchange ideas on how to nurture our kids.

## CONCLUSION

God shows His grace even when He disciplines us. The Israelites learned a hard lesson. They knew that God’s glory was not something they should take lightly. But if you think deeper, it is not difficult to see God’s grace in His discipline. God did not get rid of all the Israelites in an instant as they deserved. Yes, they had to pay a huge price for their sins. They would wander in the wilderness for the next 40 years. But God would continue to provide them manna and water, and protect them against danger and enemies. God’s promise of Canaan did not fall through the crack, though it was delayed for 40 years. Can you imagine what messages the parents will teach their children and grandchildren in the days to come? They would explain what had happened and why they were running in circles. The main lesson would be: “Children, don’t betray God like us. Trust in Him!” Also, Caleb and Joshua would be encouraging the kids too: “Young people, don’t give up. God is faithful. He will take us there.” To us, God is always a God of second chance. We will fall in sins. We will suffer from the consequence of our sins. But God is always waiting for us to get back.