

Covenant Parenting

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[0 : 00] The setting could hardly be more dramatic. The people of God have wandered for 40 years in the desert, and now they stand on the threshold of finally taking possession of the promised land.

Now, as we know, they had stood at this point before, only to fall short, and the tension is palpable. Will it be different this time?

They can see the promised land. They can practically smell and touch it. It's that close. But will they enter and take possession of the promised land?

And before the people stands a man who has become a national institution, the only leader they have ever known. He has spoken to them more times than they care to remember.

But this day is different. Today he has gathered them together for what will be his final discourse. And there's a mixture of emotions.

[1 : 09] There's sadness. There's fear. There's trepidation. There's excitement. But all are filled with a sense of expectation regarding what the big man will say.

What he says today, like the words of a father on his deathbed, will remain with them all their lives. And what of the big man himself?

What of Moses? Well, he once stood tall and dominant, but the wandering years have taken their toll. His mind, though, is sharp.

And his love for the people before him is deep and tender. And what will be his parting gift? Well, he will give them the very best he has.

He will give them words. Not just any words, but words of life, words of God. Listen to what Moses himself says about the words that he is to give them at the end of the discourse.

[2 : 12] We read in Deuteronomy chapter 32. Let me read again how Moses concluded and summarized all that he had said to them on this august occasion.

He said this, Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law.

They are not just idle words for you. They are your life. Isn't that a powerful way of summarizing this discourse? They are not just idle words.

They are your life. Life-giving words. I think in prayer I mentioned that we live in an age of idle words, and in fairness, probably every age has been an age of idle words.

We're surrounded by idle words. We ourselves are the manufacturers of many idle words. I think it was Calvin that said that a man's heart is an idle-making factory.

[3 : 14] Well, I think a man's heart and mind is a factory of idle words. Well, in a day of idle words, when we're surrounded by idle words, Moses told the people then, and he repeats it to us today, that the words before us are not idle words.

They are your life. And let's consider them in that perspective or with that understanding. These words, properly received, understood, and obeyed, will result in tremendous blessing for the people.

And Moses knows this, and driven by his deep and tender love for them and their children, he lays out this alluring prospect, a full and happy life, a generation, indeed generations, that know and fear God.

This is the purpose of his words. As we read in verse 3, Obey, listen to these words, so that it may go well with you.

Again, a very simple thing for Moses to say, but it covers so much, and it dispels so many misconceptions about God's purposes for us, to restrict us, and to limit us, and to not allow us to live full lives.

[4 : 30] And here we find the contrary is the case. Obey. Why? That it may go well with you. And he goes on, so that you, your children, and their children, after them, may fear the Lord your God.

Words we find there in verse 3. Children who fear God. That is one of the prospects that he sets out before the people. And maybe we do need to just step back for a moment and ask, well, is that such an alluring prospect?

That it may go well with you. Well, who doesn't want it to go well with us? But the children who fear God, what do we make of that? Listen to what Moses said the first time he shared these words 40 years before, when they messed up and they didn't take possession of the land.

In Exodus chapter 20, in verse 20, we read, and Moses is speaking to the people and he says, Do not be afraid. God has come to test you. So that the feet of God may be with you to keep you from sinning.

When you kind of read that and think about it, at one level, it almost doesn't seem to make sense. Don't be afraid. Be afraid. But of course, properly understood, it makes perfect sense.

[5 : 41] To fear God is to be freed from all other fear. Fear God that you might fear no one and nothing else. To fear God is to have a deep respect for God, to understand who He is in all His glory and majesty and holiness.

Like a child who fears the frown of his father, when that frown is evidence of concern for the child's welfare and his knowledge that the sin he forbids will bring pain and hurt.

And so the child fears the frown, but also longs for and cherishes the approving smile. There could be no greater heritage to pass on to your children than that they, as they model you, learn to fear God.

And so as we continue with the message this morning, we address parents in the congregation, particularly, but also to the congregation at large. You have promised this morning to participate in the upbringing of Elisa.

And so there is a responsibility for the congregation as well as the particular responsibility that rests upon parents. And as you think about the inheritance that you will pass on to your children, what will it be?

[7 : 08] By all means, provide for them a caring and a loving home. Secure for them a first-class education. Mold them into responsible and conscientious citizens.

Seek to inculcate in them a respect for others. But above all these, teach them to fear God. And if you do that, all these things will be added unto them.

They will come by good and necessary consequence. So we must teach our children to fear God. But how can we do this?

And that's really the question that I want to pose and try and answer in the light of the passage this morning. How can we teach our children to fear God? Well, we need to listen to the words.

These words that are not idle words, they are words of life. Listen to the words. Listen to the words and what the words say concerning what you can and must do.

[8 : 08] And your God-given parental duties can be summed up in three responsibilities. Know your God, live the life, and instruct your child.

These three responsibilities really sum up what God requires of you and what God promises that if we fulfill these responsibilities, He will honor that obedience.

Know your God, live the life, and instruct your child. And as we do fulfill these duties, we can and should expect our children to grow into an appreciation of their covenant privileges, a fulfilling of their covenant responsibilities, and an embracing of their covenant God.

This is our desire. This is our prayer. This is our hope that our children would appreciate their covenant privileges, fulfill their covenant responsibilities, and embrace and put their trust in their covenant God and in God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

So let's think of these three responsibilities. First of all, know your God. Notice in the passage the language of our and your. There in verse 4, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[9 : 30] Then in verse 5, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Our God, your God. This is the language of relationship.

The people are not simply to believe in God, but to experience and enjoy a personal relationship with God. We are to know God in that relational or personal way.

Now what do I mean by that? We're still in the platinum Jubilee year and maybe we can illustrate what we're saying by reference to our noble queen.

I could ask you, do you know the queen? Well, I think all of us here, I imagine, know something about her. Maybe some of you know a lot about her. We've heard her speak. We've maybe appreciated her Christmas addresses over years or decades.

We know a lot about her family. We probably all have an opinion regarding her. I would imagine that most of us have a positive opinion, but you have every right to have whatever opinion you choose of the queen.

[10:39] But do you know her personally? I believe she's in Balmoral. How many of you will be popping in for afternoon tea over the next couple of weeks as she's, you know, just a stone's throw?

Well, a little bit more than a stone's throw from where we're gathered this morning. I don't imagine many will, but if I'm mistaken, well, all power to you. Pass on my greetings if you do pop in for a cup of tea with the queen.

Knowing God is a relationship where we do have the opportunity and the privilege of conversing with him, of speaking to him, of listening to him, of being in his presence.

It is a father-son relationship, a son-daughter-father relationship. To speak of God as your God is to speak of one with whom you have a relationship.

Now, how is that possible? How can we enjoy that kind of intimate relationship with God? Well, we can turn to John chapter 1 in verse 12, which is a verse I'm sure many are very familiar with that sets out how that is possible in very concise and straightforward terms.

[11:55] In John chapter 1 in verse 12, we read, Yet all, rather yet, to all who did receive him, that is, who did receive Jesus, to those who believed in his name, in the name of Jesus, he, God, gave the right to become children of God.

Children of God. Sons and daughters of God. Members of his family. We can know God, be related to God in that way through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, this knowing God in that personal way, of course, also involves knowing about him. It's not just knowing about him, but it certainly must involve and does involve knowing about him, who he is and what he is like.

And verse 4, the first half of verse 4 in our passage is really a distilled confessional statement of the faith of Israel, presenting who their God is.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And in those few words, there's so much packed in there that we're not going to unpack adequately, but just notice some elements of truth concerning God that we find even in this distilled confessional statement.

[13:12] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And here we have God's name, Yahweh. And so, we discover that God has a name, that he is a personal God.

And as a personal God, he is a God of relationships. But his name, the very name that he enjoys, reveals something of who he is, Yahweh.

I am that I am. The self-existent, self-sufficient, eternal God. God, we discover that he is one, there is no other. In him, there is perfect unity.

And yet, in the light of the further revelation of Scripture, unity that does not preclude plurality in God. And so, we know about this God and wonder of wonders, we have the opportunity to know him personally.

Know your God. Covenant parents, this is your duty and privilege. Know your God. Cultivate your relationship with him. I'm sure, as parents, we aspire to a good relationship with our children.

[14:18] Especially as they grow, our hope and aspiration is that we would have a good relationship with them. And of course, that's a good thing. But as believing parents, the relationship we must be most concerned with is our relationship with God.

Because as we cultivate that relationship, so we will lay the groundwork for the kind of relationships we aspire to have. with our children.

How can you aspire to your children knowing God if you hardly know him yourself? So, the first duty and responsibility that we have as covenant parents is know your God.

The second is live the life. That's how I'm kind of paraphrasing it or summarizing it. Live the life.

Verse 5, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

When I use the language of live the life, we're concerned with the way in which we teach by example of being role models for our children. And we are role models for our children whether we like it or not.

[15 : 23] It can be a burdensome responsibility to identify ourselves or recognize ourselves as role models. But we are. It's simply, there's no escaping it.

We will be good role models. We will be so-so role models. We will be bad role models. But we will be, whether we like it or not, role models. So, how will that go for us?

What is involved in living the life? Well, living the life follows on from knowing God. Indeed, it is a necessary consequence of true knowledge. But what does it look like?

Well, verse 5 that we've just read really tells us what it looks like. It's all about loving the Lord your God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Living the life is a life of loving God. A command where the evidence that we are keeping the command is demonstrated in the obeying of all the other commands.

[16 : 25] We remember the words of Jesus that are recorded for us in John chapter 14 and verse 15. John chapter 14 and verse 15.

We listen to what Jesus says in this regard. If you love me, he's addressing the disciples, if you love me, keep my commands. How do we know and how can we measure if we are indeed loving the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength?

Well, we evidence that even for ourselves by keeping his commands. And loving obedience will have some of the following features just as we draw them out from the passage before us.

This loving obedience will be, in the first instance, broad in scope. What do we read there in verse 2? So that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you.

Keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you. This obedience is broad in scope. This loving obedience, not burdensome obedience, but this loving obedience is broad in scope.

[17 : 41] We don't have the option. We don't have the prerogative of picking and choosing and saying, well, here are some laws that I'm comfortable with and I can go along with, but these ones, well, they don't really fit in with my life and with my values, so we'll just leave them to one side.

We can't do that as churches. We can't do that as individual believers. The loving obedience that we are exhorted to in Scripture is broad in scope.

But not only is it broad in scope, it's also, we could describe it as persistent and permanent. Again, in that same verse 2, we're commanded not only to keep all the decrees, but that we are to do so for as long as you live.

Fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all His decrees. And this is a marathon. This is something that we are to engage in and be true to throughout our lives.

And we are to live the life as we role model that life to our children in this persistent and permanent way. On good days and on bad days. When things are going fine and when things are going pear-shaped, may God help us that our loving obedience as well as being broad in scope would be also persistent and permanent.

[18 : 59] Another characteristic, and these are all kind of intertwined, is that the obedience that we are exhorted to is to be meticulous in nature. In verse 3, Hear Israel and be careful to obey.

Especially that expression that Moses uses, be careful to obey. What does that speak of? It speaks of giving considered thought to these commandments, their implications, and how they apply to particular situations that we're in.

Being careful to obey. Being concerned that we don't fall short even inadvertently. Why? Because we're being careful to see just what is God requiring of me on this occasion and in this circumstance.

Meticulous in our obedience. As I was thinking about this characteristic of the obedience, the loving obedience that we're exhorted to, the character that came to my mind was Noah.

There's a verse at the end of Genesis chapter 6. You don't need to look it up. And the chapter is about the instructions that God gives Noah for building the ark. And you'll remember it. They're very precise. The measurements, the materials, very precise instructions.

[20 : 06] And then the final verse of chapter 6 says that Noah did everything just as God commanded him. And it's always struck me that summary of Noah's obedience.

He did everything just as God commanded. He was careful. If God had said 450 feet or whatever it was, he didn't make it 455 or even 451.

It was 450. Maybe his sons complained, oh, Dad, why are you so legalistic, so precise, this piece of wood will do. And he would say, no, God has instructed that it be this measurement and it will be

this measurement.

Meticulous in his obedience. That's a challenge for all of us as believers. But for Christian parents, that as we model obedience to our children, that we would be meticulous and carefully obeying our God.

But of course, above all, and in some ways, underpinning all of the above, loving obedience is wholehearted. As the verse expresses so eloquently, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

[21 : 15] If you love in this manner, your children will notice. It would be impossible for them not to notice. It will be impressed upon them in a way that they don't even realize if that is what they are witnessing, if that is what they are seeing day by day in their home in you.

So know your God and live the life. And then the third responsibility that we have is to instruct our child or instruct your child. Verses six to nine speak a little bit of the manner of that instruction. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates. Now this instruction of our children and we have to be clear and it's maybe a very obvious thing to say but I'll say it regardless. It's really not possible to instruct your child without the first two. If you don't know God and if you don't love God, you will not be able to adequately instruct your child.

[22 : 26] Even if that is something that you desire or aspire to do. Now God is gracious and God can use the instructions of those who don't know Him, who don't live the life and yet who by whatever means they endeavor to do so, seek to instruct their children.

God is gracious and can use that instruction. But I think it's very evident that that instruction for it to be and to have the impact that we could anticipate, it is to be instruction given by those who know their God and who are seeking to live the life.

What are some of the characteristics of this instruction that we find in this passage? And again, we'll simply note them without delving into them in any depth at all. The instruction that we are to give in these, as it's presented to us here, one of the characteristics is that it is to be diligent and repeated in nature.

There in verse 7, it says, impress them on your children. These words, these words that are your life, these words that are not idle words, but life-giving words, you are to impress them on your children.

I think this language of impressing upon your children carries the idea of repetition. While it is commanded in verses 8 to 9, it implies constantly bringing before our children God's Word.

[23 : 53] You have all these very beautiful examples of real-life situations in which you can repeatedly impress upon your children these truths, these words that will bring them life.

This must be done from the very beginning of their lives, and it's never too early. I hope that nobody here would be so foolish as to buy into the folly of waiting until they can decide for themselves.

I don't know if you've ever heard people speak like that. Oh, yeah, you know, I don't want to impose anything on my children. I don't want to brainwash my children. I want them to decide for themselves, utter folly. It is your responsibility, your privilege, from the earliest age to impress upon them these words that are life-giving words, diligently and repeatedly.

We mentioned earlier about living the life, one of the characteristics being persistent and permanent, and that ties in a little bit with this, and I think as Christian parents we can acknowledge how we can fall short in that persistence, in that permanence, and I can speak from personal experience and with shame and with sadness to a certain extent acknowledge that maybe, you know, when we first had children we were more careful in the matters of instructing them in the faith.

You know, and then as the years go by, and poor Joseph was one who missed out, you know, the years go by and you kind of just, you know, you just kind of relax a little bit and you kind of just don't have the same maybe diligence in these matters.

[25 : 24] Don't make that mistake. Meticulously, permanently, persistently, diligently share these words with your children.

The language also speaks of this instruction being natural and personal. Sit at home, walk along the road. When you lie down at mealtimes in our everyday activities and spontaneous conversation,

your home is the principal classroom.

We value church, we value Sunday school, but that is not the principal classroom where our children are to be instructed in the faith. It is the home, it is the family. That is where the instruction must be given.

And maybe one other thing I would say about this instruction or one feature of this instructing your child that I would encourage to be part of your instruction is that it be, that you would do so expectantly.

Now I'm sure all teachers in whatever context have a measure of expectation as to the instruction that they're giving, the teaching that they're imparting, that the pupil would learn, would reach a certain level, would pass an exam.

[26 : 35] There's an expectation as you instruct, as you teach. And as Christian parents, we too should have a measure of expectation, trusting in God. And as we fulfill our duties imperfectly, we are to expect that our children will, to use the language that we used a few moments ago, that they will come to appreciate their covenant privileges, fulfill their covenant responsibilities, and embrace their covenant God.

Now, of course, we have to acknowledge, and we do so because it's the reality that that is not always so. It is a reality, and it can be a heartbreaking reality when our children do not appreciate their covenant privileges, and who do not fulfill their covenant responsibilities, and don't embrace their covenant God.

And that happens. It is a reality, and we're not blind to that reality. But the fact that that's a reality should not take away from our reasonable and legitimate expectation that as we trust in God and fulfill our duties, God will honor that.

And for those who don't, we continue to pray. And we pray to God that God would graciously draw them back to himself. So I say to the parents, in the congregation, but indeed to the whole congregation in the measure that we all have some responsibility for the children of the congregation.

Do you want your children, do you want the children of Bonacore to live a full and a happy life? Do you want your children to know, fear, and love God? Then listen to the words.

[28 : 16] Listen to the words. Words that are not idle words, but words that give life. Know your God. Live the life. Lord instruct your child. And as we kind of draw things to a close, we can't do so without also reminding or noting a solemn warning in this regard.

The sermon that we're considering, this discourse from Moses, this final discourse to the people as they're about to enter the promised land. A great sermon delivered by a great preacher.

And I imagine, and I don't think this is undue speculation, I imagine that all who heard that discourse, that sermon, all were moved. Some were in tears.

Mothers and fathers exchanged concerned, annoying looks as they were reminded of responsibilities they were perhaps not fulfilling. Maybe many parents solemnly determined that they would do as they had been instructed.

From this day on, it will be different at home. And yet, listen to what we are told in the book of Judges in chapter 2 and verses 8 to 10. Judges chapter 2 and verses 8 to 10.

[29 : 25] And we read as follows. Joshua, son of Nun, Joshua, of course, Moses' right-hand man, he was there listening to this discourse.

Joshua, son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance. At Timnath-Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gash.

Well, all biographical so far. But then what does verse 10 say? After that, the whole generation, sorry, after that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

It's quite an astonishing statement of fact. It's almost difficult to process and believe. How can it be that this generation who had received this instruction, who had been told that these were words of life, they weren't idle words, to listen to them, to command them and pass them on to the next generation.

And when that generation was gathered to the fathers, there rose up another generation who did not know the Lord or the things that he had done. Our responsibility and desire is that when our generation has been gathered to our fathers, another generation will grow up who know the Lord and who know and who celebrate what he has done for Israel, who know who Jesus is and what Jesus has done and who delight in knowing Jesus.

[31 : 01] And what must we do? What must you do? That there would indeed be that next generation. Know your God. Love the life. Instruct your child.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that they are words of life. Forgive us when we treat them as idle words.

We would never describe them as idle words, but in practice, we treat them as idle words as we listen to them and soon forget them. Or as we listen to them and grant mental assent to their truth and then walk in a different direction.

Forgive us for the folly of that. And help us rather to increasingly acknowledge them and recognize them as words of life for ourselves and for our families, for our children and our children's children. We pray that you would help us, all of us gathered here, whether we are parents or whether we're not parents. For all of us, there is this challenge to know you and to live a life that is pleasing to you and in the measure that we have opportunity to give instruction to the next generation that is following from us.

[32 : 14] Lord, we do pray that you would bless this congregation with children who are brought up in homes where you are known and honored and with children who at an early age embrace Jesus as their Savior.

We do pray for the children of the congregation, some who are now teenagers or young men and women, some maybe more than that, who have drifted from the faith, who have chosen not to fulfill their responsibilities, who have chosen to embrace what the world has to offer rather than embrace you.

Lord, we pray that by your Spirit you would graciously and by whatever means you see fit draw such back to yourself and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.