

## Is Israel the Chosen People?

Exodus 23:20–33, Ephesians 6:1–4

When my children were very young I had high hopes. *What a beautiful baby, I'm sure you will be a model child!* But parenting happens in real life; we have to deal with the effects of original sin. As we heard in our New Testament text this morning, fathers particularly are charged with disciplining and training their children, a difficult task: “you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” Good parenting does not happen automatically; it requires diligence, hard work and constant attention. Because of original sin, “foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Prov. 22:15). Our generation has a rash of absent fathers, and this is tragic. Fatherhood is a calling, and fathers must be proactive. If we are inattentive and let our children raise themselves, they will be lost.

In Scripture God is not a distant creator but a *father* to his people. “Thou, O LORD, art *our father*, our redeemer” (Isa. 63:16). Moses was told: “Thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, *Israel is my son*, even my firstborn” (Ex. 4:22). Note well: God saw Israel, his covenant people, as his *son*. This is not some vague notion of what theological liberals used to call “the fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man.” No! God had a special relationship to *Israel*, not to the human race in general. “Israel is my son . . . my firstborn.” This was not said of the nations—only of Israel. Only Israel, the covenant people, could sing, as we ourselves sang this morning in Psalm 103, “His love is like *a father's* to his children.”

If God is Israel's father, then we should expect that God would train his people as a committed earthly father trains his children, and this is exactly what we see in Scripture. We see it in our Old Testament text this morning; the term *father* is not used, but the LORD specifically holds out blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Is this not just what good fathers do? “If you all clean your rooms and don't tease one another, and mind mommy and daddy, then we'll go out for ice cream.” “If you hit your sister, I'm going to spank you.” A good father trains his children by blessing their obedience and correcting their disobedience—admonishing, rebuking or punishing them, as the situation demands.

Being a father is hard work—sleepless nights, constant prayers, many tears—but fatherhood is a high calling, as fathers shape the next generation for the Lord's service. A good father, more than anything else, wants to see his son or daughter in *heaven*. God likewise says to his people, “I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:18). This is the truth I want you to see in our text today.

Notice that our text promises specific blessings. “If you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then *I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries*. For *My Angel will go before you* and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and *I will cut them off*” (Ex: 23:22–23).

Three things:

“I will be an enemy to your enemies.”

“My Angel will go before you.”

“I will cut off [the Perizzites and Canaanites, etc.]” (the nations of Canaan).

The text continues—notice the specific blessings: “So you shall serve the LORD your God, and *He will bless your bread and your water*. And *I will take sickness away from the midst of you*. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; *I will fulfill the number of your days*. *I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you*. And *I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you*. . . . until you have increased, and you inherit the land. And *I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River*. For *I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you*.”

These promises—I will be an enemy to your enemies, my Angel will go before you, I will cut off your enemies, I will take sickness away from the midst of you, no one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren, I will give you long life, I will send My fear before you, your enemies will be on the run, I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Canaanites, I will enlarge your borders, I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand—these promises are massive, measurable, extensive, valuable. God wants the best for his people, and these are the things that his people need. He wants them to be truly blessed, to be the head and not the tail, to be the leader among the nations.

But note: these promises are not automatic, whether the people obey or not. These promises are promised to an *obedient* people: “*if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak . . . You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars . . . So you shall serve the LORD your God . . . You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods*.” The God who promises great blessings expects his people to be faithful to him, to obey, to worship him alone, to keep themselves from idols, to live in covenant with him.

God is not buying their loyalty. He is not bribing them. Rather, he wants his people to worship and praise him because he is *good*, because he has graciously chosen the smallest nation on the face of the earth to be his special people. Not only is he a father to them, as we saw earlier (“Israel is my *son*, even my

firstborn”), he is also Israel’s *husband*. He is in covenant with his people, as he would tell Jeremiah: “Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown” (Jer. 2:2), or as it is rendered in the ESV, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness.”

God is reminding his people how he entered into covenant with them at Sinai, and how they, so recently delivered from Egyptian slavery, willingly received him as their spiritual husband and deliverer, when they said, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). Like a young woman growing up in poverty and neglect might gladly accept an offer of marriage from a hardworking, successful man, in hopes of a better life, so Israel, smarting from the sting of living as slaves of Pharaoh, had, in effect, gladly accepted the offer of marriage from the God of heaven, in search of a better life—the best life—in covenant with the God from whom all blessings flow. So now that Israel, as a nation, was in covenant with God, God rightly demand their wholehearted and unreserved loyalty.

And so it is with us. We, undeserving sinners, spiritually dead with no hope of heaven, have been specially pursued by the God of heaven. When we were yet without strength—hopeless, hell-bound—God pursued us by his Spirit. He sent his beloved Son, with whom he had enjoyed perfect fellowship and blessedness from all eternity, to come to earth, become man, and die on the cross for the sins of men, to redeem us to God by his blood. We were spiritually dead, oblivious to the doom and peril that awaited us, but Christ, through his Spirit, regenerated us, giving us spiritual life, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, renewing our wills, persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel. He enabled us to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, giving us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places through the knowledge of Christ. He brought us into covenant with himself and placed us among his covenant people, his spiritual sons and daughters, his heavenly bride. He gave us hope in place of hopelessness, love and belonging in place of alienation, acceptance in place of fear. He gave us his very body and blood, spilled on the cross to cleanse us from all our sins. In a word, he gave us *himself*. He didn’t have to do this. He was under no obligation to be gracious. He could have let us go to well-deserved destruction, but he intervened. Now, he who is life itself and our greatest treasure calls us to live for him. He has delivered us from hell. That is the least that we can do.

In our Exodus text God goes into detail regarding the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience that are part of our spiritual childtraining. Here is a preview of the blessings and curses more fully delineated in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, where he will go into much more detail about these matters.

This is the pattern all throughout Scripture. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: *‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’*” Note well: here is a promise that comes with a blessing. God is saying, “If you honor your father and mother in obedience to my command (the *fifth* commandment, but the *first* with an explicit promise) then it is going to go well with you; I will bless you; all things being equal, you are going to live a long, full life.” This does not mean that there will be absolutely no exceptions, for God is sovereign over history and has his own reasons for doing what he does. As our Shorter Catechism puts it, the reason joined to the fifth commandment is “a promise of long life and prosperity (as far as it shall serve for God’s glory and their own good) to all such as keep this commandment.” A godly man, fully committed to Christ, might be suddenly taken out by a murderer’s bullet in the prime of life. When such happens, it is not a failure of God’s promises. His ways are higher than our ways. In his secret will he sometime allows evil to flourish—just as the man born blind was not so afflicted because of the sin of his father or mother, but “that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). Here was a tragic case—a baby born without the capacity for sight, a baby boy who never saw the light of day, who never could look into his mother’s eyes, a boy who could not earn a living or support himself or his family but was consigned to beg. Here was a boy who would never see—who had no idea what light is, or color, or intensity or brightness. By human accounting it was a tragedy—something that no doctor on earth could remedy. But God withheld from him the gift of sight so that the works of the incarnate God—deity in human flesh—could be done in him. For many years this young man had to be led around by the hand, wherever he went. But one day Jesus “passed by,” and his life was changed forever. He had no idea that morning of what was going to happen. He ate his meager breakfast and was led out to his usual place to beg. He held out a cup, crying out, “Help me, help me,” hoping someone would take pity on him and put in a few coins. Instead, Jesus of Nazareth “passed by”—the verb is so commonplace, so nondescript. But that “passing by” was intended by the God of heaven. The *Light of the world* was passing by the poor beggar’s spot at the side of the road! Jesus gave the command, and the poor beggar received, not a few coins, but the precious gift of sight. Suddenly the poor beggar knew why he had been born in such a condition. It was so he could be at that exact spot at that time so that the Son of God could display his divine glory by restoring his sight. Humanly speaking, it was impossible. But that’s the point. Jesus was no mere man but the God-man, the Lord of glory in human flesh. *Man* did not come to his aid; the incarnate *deity*, the Lord of heaven, came to his aid and restored his sight.

When you're a father, you learn that you can't necessarily tell your child one time, and expect the child to get it. Sometimes you have to go over and over and over the same lessons. Christian fathers have to be prepared for the long haul. Fatherhood is especially challenging.

I think of a man who stood for his ordination exams yesterday. He was asked what biblical principles might guide a parent—particularly the parent of children on the autism spectrum—in understanding how to help their children worship. In asking the question, the questioner acknowledged that the man standing for ordination himself has such a child. How would he bring theology to bear upon his own parenting?

The examinee—who passed his examinations with flying colors and will be ordained and installed next month—was very articulate and had an excellent grasp of theology—his was one of the finest theological exams I have ever heard—but when he opened up his mouth to respond, he broke down in tears and began, “I’m sorry you asked that question, but on the other hand, I’m glad you asked that question.” He had to keep wiping away his tears as he was overcome with emotion. This man has several children, but the oldest is severely autistic and may not even be capable of making a profession of his own faith—and this fact weighs heavily upon him. A good father loves his children and wants to see them confess Christ. The apostle Paul, who considered the younger men whom he discipled as his sons in the faith, wrote to the church at Thessalonica: “ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, *as a father doth his children*” (1 Thess. 2:11). John chimed in: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my *children* walk in truth” (3 John 4). Church elders are spiritual *fathers*, and want more than anything else to see their spiritual children confess and live the faith once delivered to the saints. A good father would *not* say, “I won’t make my child go to church; I’ll let him grow up and then make up his own mind.” No!!! A good father does not say, “It doesn’t matter to me if my child becomes a Christian or not.” He, like Joshua, says, “as for me and my house, we will serve the *LORD*” (Josh. 24:15). As long as the children live at home and eat at the father’s table, they will worship with the family.

Though parenting has its challenges, God is a faithful Father who demonstrates his love for his children by disciplining them. As the writer to the Hebrews put it, “. . . *whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth*, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. . . . Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Heb. 12:6, 11).

As we endure the challenges of parenting let us keep the end goal in mind. Let us bathe our parenting in prayer, begging God to be faithful to his promises. There is a general pattern in the Bible: *blessings for obedience, cursing for disobedience*.

It is not rocket science: obedience brings blessing, disobedience brings God's curse. This pattern is valid both in the natural, temporal world, and in the spiritual, eternal world to come. God promises that if we obey him, it will be well with us and we will live long on the earth. But he is sovereign, and knows what is best for us. Sometimes a committed saint is taken home to heaven early. As followers of Christ we say with our Savior, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless *not my will, but thine, be done*" (Luke 22:42).

We were dead in trespasses and sins with no hope of eternal life. Christ took the initiative and saved us by his own precious blood. Now, he calls upon us to live for him, to present our bodies a living sacrifice.

Some dear friends of ours in a southern state adopted three children. Two of them are sweet, obedient and well-adjusted, but the other one has been defiant and resolute and continually challenged their authority. She was belligerent, combative, confrontational. No matter how severe the punishment, she persisted in evil. She was positively hateful toward her adoptive parents who saw her plight, rescued her from Child Protective Services, and generously gave her a home, a family, a better life, and a Christian upbringing. Her extreme disobedience brought great grief to godly parents. So were many of us to our heavenly Father.

In the case of Israel, Israel transgressed the covenant, and so came under his chastening, and ultimately his judgment. This is a recapitulation of what happened to Adam, who transgressed the covenant and was cast out of the garden of Eden. So Israel transgressed the covenant and was ultimately cast out of the land in 70 AD.

Christian teachers of the dispensationalist persuasion teach that God made an unconditional covenant with the children of Israel to give the land of Canaan to them and their descendants in perpetuity—no conditions attached! Many well-meaning evangelicals have adopted that view. But think through what we have seen in our Old Testament text today. Is it an unconditional covenant? No! As we saw, the magnificent promises of Exodus 23 are not automatic. God does not promise to bless his people whether they obey or not. God promises to bless his people if they obey him: *if you indeed obey my voice and do all that I speak, if you do not bow down to their gods, or serve them, if you utterly overthrow them and completely break down their idols, if you make no covenant with the pagans, and do not worship their gods, if you faithfully serve the LORD your God*. Did Israel obey? Did Israel keep the conditions? Clearly not. The Old Testament is the record of Israel's unfaithfulness, as well of God's faithfulness.

God divorced unfaithful Israel according to the flesh and sent his Son to save the *true* "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), the church, those washed in the Savior's blood, whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life, who worship Christ both now and forevermore. Let us be faithful fathers, mothers, children. Amen.