



It's the Children

Psalm 78

A popular campaign slogan that was used during a previous government administration was, "It's the economy, stupid!" This slogan, right or wrong, was credited with a successful campaign that ended in gaining the White House. The purpose of the slogan was to remind the candidate and his campaign committee that the most important issue, the winning issue, was the economy, and that they were stupid if they did not make it their first priority.

The title of this article, if you did not already surmise, is a spin-off from that slogan, without the self-deprecating addition of "stupid." Whether that is applicable or not will depend on how well we hear and remember what is important, especially in light of the description we read in Psalm 78:8. i.e., "a stubborn and rebellious generation."

Beloved, our text cries out, "It's the children, people! It's the children, people!" From the very beginning the psalmist demands that we hear what he says: "Give ear, O my people!" Being a prophet, he speaks as God's mouth and demands of the people under his charge that they listen to what God says, i.e., His law & testimony.

The Psalmist says: *"I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old" (vs 2).* "Parables" are teachings of great weight and substance and demand attention. "Dark sayings" does not mean things difficult or hard to understand, for they are generally historical and easy. They are referred to as dark because they are not pretty; they are not nice. They tell of God's transcendent goodness and patience to an unworthy people, and how they, in return, abused those favors and were ungrateful; it tells of their stupid ignorance and insensitivity to the teachings of God's Word and works. Such were, indeed, *dark sayings!* The major portion of Psalm 78 reviews the history of the wilderness wanderings, including their earlier deliverance from Egypt, and it is not pretty--murmuring, disobedience, ingratitude, rebellion, etc. And what was the Psalmist's purpose for uttering these things? It doesn't take the Psalmist long to state it. It comes almost immediately, and "It's the children, people! It's the children!" These lessons of the past were to be passed on to the next generation, to the children: *"Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, showing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done"* (vv. 3, 4).

God had clearly revealed His testimony, His law, His covenant to the fathers. He would give His grace in the line of succeeding generations, but it wouldn't happen automatically. The fathers were to fulfill their covenant obligations: *"For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments: (vv. 5-7).* Again, it's the children! It always has been, right from the beginning when God first established His covenant with Abraham to be his God and the God of his children. Not long after God had called Abraham and established the covenant with him, we read this of Abraham: *"For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him"* (Genesis 18:19).

More specifically, what the Psalmist is referring to in vs. 5, i.e., *"a testimony in Jacob ... a law in Israel, which he commanded to our fathers, that they should make them known to their children,"* is found in Deuteronomy 6. The Israelites had emerged from the wilderness after 40 years of

wandering and were now standing on the edge of the land flowing with milk and honey — the Promised Land. There had been a break-down between the generations in the wilderness. The Psalmist refers to it as a warning in vs. 8: *“And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not steadfast with God”* (vs. 8). That’s why a whole generation had to die off in the wilderness. Now God was about to bring them into the land as he had promised to their forefathers, but first a stern reminder and admonition. There were some things in the new land that were not so promising. There they would encounter the godless and immoral Canaanites. In no way were they to cohabit with them, adopt their gods, or embrace their lifestyle. They were to be a separate people, totally loyal to the one true God. Thus we read in Deuteronomy 6:1-5: *“Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that you might do them in the land whither you go to possess it: That you might fear the Lord thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, you, and your son, and your son’s son, all the days of your life; and that your days may be prolonged. Hear, therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with you, and you may increase mightily, as the Lord God of your fathers hath promised you, in the land that flows with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”* And then, lo and behold, again it’s the children. Dt. 6 continues: *“And these words, which I command you this day shall be in your heart: And you shalt teach them diligently unto your children, and shalt talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. And you shalt bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shalt write them upon the posts of your house, and on your gates”* (vv. 6-9). Here we have what might well be called “God’s Classic on Training Children.” The training must be done diligently, continually, and with a view to preparing the child for life. The words, *“teach diligently”* are a translation of the Hebrew word *shanan*, a verb used of sharpening swords and arrows. So too, should our children be sharpened, i.e., keen and discerning in the face of evil and falsehood. Sharp arrows are useful and effective against the enemy! In order for the Israelites to prepare their children for the real world of Canaan, they needed to keep God’s commands firmly in hand and in the forefront of their minds, like signs pasted on their hands and forehead.

Like with the Psalmist, Deuteronomy 6 also sounds a clear warning: *“Then beware lest you forget the Lord, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. You shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and shall swear by his name. You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are around about you; (For the Lord your God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled against you from off the face of the earth. You shall not tempt the Lord your God, as you tempted him in Masah. You shall diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his testimonies, and his statutes, which he has commanded you. And you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of the Lord: that it may be well with you, and that you may go in and possess the good land which the Lord swore unto your fathers”* (vv. 12-18). And once more, it’s the children: *“And when your son asks you in time to come, saying, what mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord our God has commanded you? Then you shall say unto your son, we were Pharaoh’s bondmen in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: And he brought us out from thence that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he swore unto our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day”* (vv. 20,21,23,24). *“Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come”* (1 Corinthians 10:11).

When we neglect our responsibility to teach our children so that they do not know God and what He has done, we break the covenant. It’s the children. We are to train our children, and our children, their children. We are to place our religion, the one true religion, that faith once delivered to the saints, that great gift, pure and entire, into the hands of those that succeed us. That’s the way the covenant works and continues. If we fail, we become covenant breakers and our children will become an unbelieving generation. It’s a simple fact. If we don’t train up our children in the way

that they should go, they will go the way of all flesh, the way of the world. Satan, as a roaring lion, is always stalking his prey. The only protection and defense is that certain knowledge whereby our children hold for truth all that God has revealed in His Word and a hearty trust in God's saving grace through Christ. All that we must teach them.

We have been blessed with excellent tools to do so: the creeds and confessions of the church, handed down by our fathers: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort — the Three Forms of Unity, forms of unity because they unite us with the past and connect us to the future. How sad it is that for many who profess Christianity and for many denominations, there is no connection between the generations and little church history. Each generation is free to believe as it pleases, because the previous generation handed nothing down to them! That's why being a creedal and confessional church is so important and necessary. It keeps the generations connected! God's mercy and truth doesn't change! It endures to all generations. *"But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting unto everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; To such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them"* (Psalm 103:17,18). God keeps His covenant unto all generations. He does that through the faithful obedience of His people teaching their children. It begins when parents present their infants for the covenant sign and seal of Holy Baptism and claim for them a share in those covenant mercies through Christ.

Beloved, it's the children. It has always been the children. In a former charge where I was pastor, I remember well when the old church building was torn down and construction of the new building began. At the appropriate time, we had a Cornerstone Laying Ceremony. Behind that cornerstone is a copper box containing various items of interest that relate to the faith and life of that congregation. In generations to come, should the Lord tarry, that box may be opened. What will they find? More importantly, what will it mean? I remember the Scripture that was read at the ceremony. It was Joshua 4. There we find a continuation of the history of God's people as Joshua leads them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land: *"And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over Jordan, that the Lord spoke unto Joshua, saying, Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, And command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm, twelve stones, and ye shall carry them over with you, and leave them in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night. Then Joshua called the twelve men, whom he had prepared of the children of Israel, out of every tribe a man: And Joshua said unto them, Pass over before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of Jordan, and take you up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder, according unto the number of the tribes of the children of Israel: That this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean ye by these stones? Then ye shall answer them, That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it passed over Jordan, the waters of Jordan were cut off: and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel forever"*: (Joshua 4:1-7). *"What meaneth these stones?"* Once more, "It's the children!" These stones were a memorial to God's great faithfulness and a means for teaching that truth to the children. In Psalm 127: 3 we read: *"Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward."* These words were written by King Solomon, quite likely when he was old and had tasted life and known both sides: the vanity of striving and the blessedness of fearing God. Solomon wrote to show that after all is said and done, there is in this life one heritage, one trust, one endowment that truly matters, and that is our children. *"There is no greater joy than to hear that our children walk in truth"* (3 John 4).

I don't know which generation or which children will open the cornerstone at the entrance of that new church building. I know that among other things, they will find a Bible and one of our confessional standards, the Heidelberg Catechism. The important thing is whether they will still know what it means and that the faith of their fathers lives on. There is sad and ominous epitaph, as well as a warning, concerning God's people following the death of Joshua: *"And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. And Joshua . . . the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. . . . And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers."*

And there arose another generation who did not know the Lord or the work that He had done for Israel” (Judges 2:7, 8, 10).

So just once more: “It’s the children, people! It’s the children!” May our hope and testimony be that of the Psalmist: *“He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (Psalm 78:6, 7).*

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