

A CORNER ON THE BEACH A Devotional Meditation on D'varim (Words)

Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22; Isaiah 1:1-27; Daniel 9:4-5; Matthew 21:28-32; 2 John 5-6

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Done with the beach. Photo: Kevin Dooley, February 11, 2007, [via Flickr](#).

Long before we had children of our own, my wife and I learned about parenting by watching friends raise their little ones. Our closest friends had two young daughters. Their mother introduced us to several creative disciplinary techniques that often proved more effective than corporal punishment. Time out was a favorite tactic. Both girls spent time in corners, missing out on family fun while they calmed down and pondered the errors of their ways. Our friend could find a corner anywhere to put her children if they misbehaved. Even the beach was no

sanctuary; she once drew a corner in the sand, and there her unruly child stayed until she was ready to rejoin the family.

Adults who have experienced the trials of raising children find that funny, but to the children it's not funny at all. That's why I still remember some of the discipline my parents administered to my brother and I. By God's grace, we learned our lessons. The discipline we endured imparted principles that guided our steps into adulthood. As husbands, fathers, workers, and members of our communities, we have walked out those lessons every day, and have done our best, in partnership with our wives, to pass them on to our children.

Sadly, not everyone learns those life lessons. I know more than one story of children who never grew up. Oh, they became adults in the physical sense, but they never outgrew the childhood foolishness that is common to us all. Some of those stories end tragically, with lives cut short due to overindulgence of some kind. Some just continue tragically for decades, with lives never amounting to much. They exist, and they even know some success and happiness, but they never tap much of the potential the Creator built into them. That's the kind of tragedy that slips from one day into the next, often with constant complaining, endless shifting of blame, and perpetually unfinished daydreams. If there is a promised land in building a happy home of one's own, these people are still a long way from it. As they continue circling the same mountain of exile, onlookers cease trying to help them do anything more than survive. It won't do any good showering them with money, material help, or job opportunities. Such things just go to waste. That's why concerned parents and friends shift their focus to the next generation in hope that the children of the perpetually complaining underachievers might do better.

What makes this so difficult is that those underachievers are our flesh and blood, our friends, and members of our community – even if they happen to dwell on the edges. So much of their suffering is self-inflicted, but they may not recognize it. Their complaints and blame shifting obscure from them the reality that they are enduring the consequences of their poor choices. Sometimes that can be outright rebellion, and sometimes it's passive-aggressive dodging of responsibility so they can continue indulging in whatever behavior pleases them. They never realize they're still in the wilderness, partially because they don't know what joys await them if they take the path of responsible maturity, and partially because they are too busy finding fault with the fact that they are essentially on life support until they die.

I know this because I have walked that road myself from time to time. We all have. It's the road of the exile. Yeshua had a parable about that:

“Now what do you think? A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go work in the vineyard today.’ The son answered, ‘I won’t,’ but afterward he had a change of heart and went. The man went to the second son and said the same thing. But he answered, ‘I will, sir,’ and didn’t go. Which of the two did the will of the father?”

“The first,” they said.

Yeshua said to them, “Amen, I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going ahead of you into the kingdom of God. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and even after you saw this, you had no change of heart to believe him.”

Matthew 21:28-32 TLV

This is a Kingdom parable. Too often we miss that point because we are trying to figure out whether we are the good son or the bad son. Honestly, we're all the bad son because both sons were bad. It's just that one didn't hide his intentions. We don't know what caused him to change his mind, but it could have been the disappointment in his father's face when he realized his son was refusing to live up to his calling. If he were a discerning son, he might have understood that he could never enter his father's good graces, enjoy his confidence, and, in time, reap the rewards of the vineyard if he continued on his rebellious path. His repentance ensured he would gain these things eventually, provided he built on that repentance in ways that demonstrated a changed heart worthy of the father's trust. We want that to happen for him because we want it for ourselves, but are we willing to pay the price? Both sons, after all, were part of the father's family, but only one demonstrated that he was actually paying attention to his father and taking his life lessons to heart.

That's how our Heavenly Father has always dealt with His people. It's why our spiritual ancestors died in the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land. God did everything for them, as Moses reminded them, but they still didn't trust Him. When He finally gave them the command to take possession of Canaan, they acted the part of that son who said, “I will sir,” but didn't go. It didn't matter that they had enough to eat and drink in the desert, and that God had brought them there in the first place through mighty, miraculous means. All they saw was a task too great for their expectations – or maybe they saw an annoying interruption to their somewhat comfortable daily routine. That's why that

generation died in the wilderness – a slow death like a creeping autoimmune disease that devoured them incrementally over the next 38 years. True, they never lacked food, water, clothing, shelter, and all the other necessities of life, but they never achieved the fullness of what they were created to be. In fact, their crowning achievement seems to be the value of their tragic stories in helping all of us who followed them know what not to do.

The tragedy, of course, was not only theirs, but their children's. Those little ones grew up in the hardship of wilderness exile, never knowing either the oppressive comfort of Egypt, or the blessed freedom of the Promised Land. When they came of age, they had the same choice their parents had: trust God and seize their Kingdom destiny, or remain content in their respectable wilderness mediocrity. Some chose the latter, but enough took the challenge to prove to us that God really does keep His promises to those who love Him and keep His commandments.

And every generation after them faces the same choice, and every generation after us will face it also, until the Kingdom is finally here. But that's just it: the Kingdom is here now, manifested to the extent that we walk it out. Yes, we're still waiting for our Messiah-King to finish the work, just as our Hebrew ancestors were waiting for Joshua to lead them into the Promised Land. Will we be ready when the time comes? That's the question for our here and now. Our answer determines whether we expand our present measure of the Kingdom, or simply endure in our little corner on the beach.