

WHAT GOOD PARENTS DO

A Devotional Meditation on Chukat (Decree) and Balak

Numbers 19:1-25:9; Micah 5:7-6:8; Exodus 4:22; Leviticus 26:44-45; 1 Chronicles 5:1-2; Jeremiah 6:30-34, 31:8; Matthew 6:9-13; John 3:16-21, 17:1-26; Colossians 1:15-20

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All new parents are unprepared. Even those who have planned and studied and helped with other peoples' children find that there are things they don't learn until they have children of their own. It helps to prepare, but sometimes a child comes without much advanced notice. That happens with the foster families I know. They may get a call late in the afternoon that a child will be placed in their home that evening. It happens with adoptive parents as well, such as with friends of mine who were on a list to adopt, and found out one day in advance that there was an infant boy who needed a home. He is now thriving, along with his sister, who also is adopted after having been welcomed into the family as a foster child.

Whether parents come into the role through the birth of their biological children, or through other means, it's love that motivates them – eventually. Sometimes mothers and fathers need time to adjust to this new little person in their lives. They may not recognize their love immediately, but the fact that they choose to make the adjustment and orient their lives around the new member of the family indicates the presence of love. It's this love that helps even the most unprepared of parents grow into the role, and carry it out to the best of their abilities.

Even the best parents can push things too far at times. That's when love without boundaries generates unintended consequences, such as when indulgent parents can't say no to their child's craving for sweets. On the other end of the spectrum are the parents who want to see their child succeed, perhaps in sports, academics, art, or dance, and push the child so hard that they end up causing serious harm. Then there are overprotective parents, who go to great lengths to shield their children from harmful outside influences, and defend their children against anything they interpret as a threat – even if it's the threat of a teacher or another parent pointing out something harmful in their child's behavior. Those who act like their children can do no wrong and take little action to correct their behavior risk a different kind of harm by setting up their children for a life of unmet expectations.

We all can tell stories about parental failures, both our own and those we have observed. Even the failures can be redeemed, though, as we allow our mistakes to teach us better ways to approach parenting. We want to teach our children to stand on their own against whatever the world throws at them, so we try to find the right mix of



A father walks with his daughter near the Tidal Basin in Washington, DC. Photo by Kevin Harber, March 19, 2011, [via Flickr](#).

encouragement and correction, while continuing to defend them from threats to their physical, mental, and emotional health. That's what good parents do.

The best parenting skills come from our Creator. Yeshua taught us to pray to our Heavenly Father, and talked much about the relationship with the Father He wanted all His disciples to share. Like so many things we learned in church, though, we don't seem to give much thought to the meaning behind that phrase, "our Heavenly Father." What examples does the Bible give us of God fathering people? If all we have is the New Testament account, then we might come to think that He is a cruel, indifferent father who willingly sent His Son to the execution stake as a tradeoff for other people's children. Are we supposed to understand from this that good parents should be willing to sacrifice their children?

No, of course not. Child sacrifice is a thing God says never even entered His mind, and was among the many abominable practices for which He pronounced severe judgment on His Covenant Nation of Israel. That's one reason my Jewish friends take issue with our understanding from scripture that God sent His only begotten Son to take the penalty of death for the world's rebellion. However, if we have correctly understood scripture to demonstrate how God's Son Yeshua is fully God and fully human, and therefore able to return from death to life, then we begin to see why our Heavenly Father was willing to go to such extremes.

It's in the macro view that we discern our Creator's parenting skills. We know that Yeshua is His "only begotten Son," but that's another phrase we don't really understand. We do understand *firstborn*, and that's what Yeshua is: the firstborn of all creation, and the firstborn from the dead. If He came first, then others will follow. If He is first, then no one else has a right to His honor. However, Messiah is not God's only firstborn. Israel is His firstborn among the nations, and Ephraim is the firstborn among Israel's tribes – although Judah is the ruler of all the tribes.

How did God parent these firstborn among the nations and the tribes? With a mix of encouragement and correction, all while defending them from external and internal threats until they could stand on their own. We don't see that in isolated stories, such as when the people complained again about lack of food in the desert, and God responded with poisonous snakes to remind them Who is boss. Then there's that incident when Moses and Aaron got disqualified from entering the Promised Land simply because Moses brought water from the rock by hitting it instead of speaking to it. We would say that wasn't fair, because the people had complained so much that they drove Moses into a rage.

It doesn't seem fair if we can't look beyond the isolated incidents and see how they are connected into one long story. That's when we see God corrected His children, sometimes with extreme measures, while He was also defending them from their enemies. That's what He did when Sihon and Og, powerful Amorite kings, contested Israel's wilderness journey to the border of Canaan, and when King Balak of Moab hired Balaam the prophet to curse Israel on his behalf. It was God Who fought the battles in which Israel utterly defeated Sihon and Og, and it was God Who made sure Balaam spoke only blessings over Israel.

The Hebrews knew some of this, but not all. Having been involved in the battles against the Amorite kings, they saw God at work on their behalf, but they may never have known about Balaam until long afterward. It's possible that, even as God was acting on their behalf with Balaam, they themselves were grumbling and complaining and rebelling against Him. It certainly took no time for them to turn from righteousness and indulge their fleshly desires with the enticing Moabite women who invited them to wild parties in honor of their false gods.

That was then, and this is now, we might say, but not much has changed. Our Heavenly Father still fights for us, even as we fight among ourselves, and whine and complain about His provision. Like our Hebrew ancestors, we long to enter the Holy Land, but like our toddlers, we have no concept of how mature citizens of the Holy Land are supposed to act – and very little self-control to help us become mature. We don't even know we're still in a kind of cosmic time out because we still can't get along with each other, or obey our Father consistently.

He's not going to smite us out of existence, of course; He's our Heavenly Parent, He loves us, and He has too much invested in us to let us perish in this wilderness of the people. As with our ancestors in this Covenant of Redemption, He continues to remember the Covenant for us, although He does make us pass under His rod to purge the rebels from our midst. He doesn't want bad influences corrupting His kids, but sometimes He has to deal with the bad influences we spread like measles to the rest of the family. We don't like His discipline, but if we want to grow up and walk into the eternal dreams He has for us, then we had best learn from it. After all, He's only doing what all good parents do.