



A PLACE OF PREPARATION

There was a meme doing the rounds a couple of years back, listing the kinds of lessons some kids will only learn the hard way. Here are some of them:

- You can never trust a dog to look after your dinner.
- It's never a good idea to sneeze during a haircut.
- You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.
- When mum is cross, don't let her brush your hair.
- No matter how hard you try, you can't baptise a cat.

We have a name for this kind of steep learning curve: The School of Hard Knocks. And every experience, even a bad one, is an opportunity to learn. But that doesn't mean we will. E.g. take this *Peanuts* cartoon, where Linus says to Sally, "Life is peculiar ... wouldn't you like to have your life to live over if you knew what you know now?" To which Sally replies, "What do I know now?"

So. If we're going to squeeze as much out of our life-lessons as we can, what do we actually need to do (or be)? Hold that thought as we turn to ...

Deuteronomy 8

Why look at Deuteronomy when we're supposed to be thinking about Jesus' time in the wilderness? Because Jesus did. Every response He gives to Satan

comes straight out of Deuteronomy. Is that a coincidence? I don't think so. In fact, if we accept the principle that people tend to talk about the things they think about the most, then Jesus must have been thinking about Deuteronomy – a lot.

Why? What's so important about Deuteronomy? Deuteronomy is a reminder of the training Israel underwent in the wilderness, as prep for the conquest of Canaan – hence words like "test", "teach" and "discipline." In fact, there is a definite correlation between Israel's experience in the desert, and Jesus' experience:

Israel crosses the Red Sea

Jesus is baptised in the Jordan

Israel is led into the desert

Jesus is led into the desert

Israel hungers and loses her faith

Jesus hungers but keeps His faith

Israel repeatedly disobeys God

Jesus repeatedly obeys God

Israel refuses to conquer Canaan

Jesus agrees to die for the world

Can you see the parallels? Israel failed to learn the lessons and flunked the test (and that generation lost the chance to take the Promised Land). Jesus, on the other hand, learned from His experiences and passed the test (ergo, He was everything Israel was supposed to be).

How then might God be training us? To be better not bitter; open not closed; faithful not faithless; more like Jesus and less like Israel? If we turn the above parallels into life-lessons, what kind of learner is God calling us to be?

1) One Who Relies. When Jesus was baptised in the Jordan, He was doing more than just stepping into water. He was handing His life over to His Father. And this isn't just something you do when you become a Christian or you get baptised. It's a 24/7 thing - something you have to do, every single day. The only way to make sense of life is to place yourself in the hands of the Almighty.

2) One Who Pursues. Jesus tailed that dove into the desert, no matter where it led. And we have to do the same. There will be times in our lives when it feels like it's hard work being a Christian; when it seems like we're walking this path alone – at home, at work, at school. But we are not alone – God is with us. And there is a reason for everything, even if it's not apparent at the time.

3) One Who Endures. He kept His eyes on the prize and didn't give up. Too many people say a scripted prayer thinking it's going to be a bed of roses from now on, and when it isn't, they walk away. But Jesus never said it would be (in fact, He said the opposite). Because it's not enough to start the

race – we have to finish it. As it says in Revelation chs2-3: “To him who *overcomes* ...”

4) One Who Obeys. He kept God’s commands and stood firm in the face of Satan’s lies, in a way that Israel did not. We all have our weak points, our temptations – it doesn’t stop when you become an adult (sadly)! We need to place God at the centre of our lives and remember His instructions, His promises, and most importantly, His love. Because ultimately, it’s all for our benefit anyway!

5) One Who Accepts. He said ‘yes’ to God’s roadmap for His life – in this case, being nailed to a cross for the sins of the world. That’s what Jesus was born for – a life of surrender and service and sacrifice. And so were we. But – He was also born for the resurrection! And so were we. You may be in a desert now or at some point in the future – but it won’t last. The best is yet to come!

It is this person – a person who relies, pursues, endures, obeys, and accepts – who is most likely to ‘join the dots’ and work out what it is that God is calling them to do.

Be The Best ...?

So, Jesus’ time in the wilderness was a preparation for the mission He’d come to fulfil. Similarly, every issue, every experience, every relationship, even the negative ones, are a preparation for the plan God has for you.

Think childhood. When learning to walk, you have to be ready to land on your rear. When learning to swim, you have to be ready to get water up your nose. When learning to bike-ride, you have to be ready to go headfirst over the handlebars. When learning to do almost anything, in fact, you have to be ready for the odd bump or 2 (or more).

It might not be easy at the time. But it’ll be worth it in the end.

The late great Judy Garland once said: “Be a first-rate version of yourself, not a second-rate version of someone else.” It’s a helpful motto (as long as you don’t start self-idolising), in that it reminds us that it’s not about being better than everyone else, it’s about being the best version – of *you*. But to be that ‘best version’, you have to be challenged – beyond what you think you can handle.

Because you don’t grow when things are easy and effortless. You grow when things are difficult.

So, this week, may you get out there ... and *grow*.