

Psalm 78

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[0 : 0 0] is an independent preparatory school in Robertsbridge, East Sussex. Now, I would wager that not many people knew that. It's not the kind of information you're likely to have. But you may have heard about it, because there was a news item about it on, I saw it on the BBC website, just earlier this month, maybe two or three weeks ago. And the reason that this posh school in the south of England came to the attention of the wider public is that earlier this month, they were advertising an open day. And they came up with an advert to encourage parents to attend, presumably with prospective pupils. And so they took out this full-page advert, I guess it was in one of the local papers, and the advert consisted of a wee boy, wistfully looking into the distance. And next to that, there was the text of the advert. And I'll just read you what the text of the advert said. The Volvo estate, your dad's pride and joy, suddenly swung left into a long drive. You saw open day signs, and your eyes widened.

You pointed to the beautiful dark blue Jaguar parked by a sign saying, Headmaster's Parking. You said you wished your dad had one. Your dad looked wistful. The Volvo had to do a few years yet. You did well at Vine Hall and have fond memories. You were very successful in business.

You bought your dad a Jaguar when he retired." Now, I'm not making this up. This was the advert for the open day. Now, the advert came to the attention of the public because thankfully it was ridiculed.

I would have been very concerned had it not been ridiculed, but it was ridiculed, and that's why it became a news item. Indeed, the open day was dubbed by your dad a Jag day. That wasn't in the original advert, but that's how it was mocked by some who were, you know, commenting on it.

Now, I think, I hope that we recoil at the crass materialism displayed by the advert that a young boy's great ambition would be able to buy his dad a Jag, or that somehow you should be embarrassed if your father drives a Volvo. Like, it really, it's hard to work out who makes these things up.

[2 : 3 6] And so, I think we do recoil at the crass materialism displayed by the advert, but I think the advert does identify a serious question. What do we as parents most aspire for our children? The advert was about aspiration, and it was presenting one particular direction in which your aspirations might be heading, that of success in business, that of wealth, that of the power that wealth brings to buy what you want and to, you know, please others with your capacity to purchase. So, it was thinking about that matter of aspiration, but in one very narrow direction. But what do we aspire to? If we're parents, what do we aspire for our children? Is it that they be successful, that they be wealthy? Or if not wealth, at least a measure of financial security? Or maybe our aspirations for our children go in another direction. Our great aspiration for them is that they be healthy, that they enjoy health and strength. Perhaps we aspire for them that they have the opportunity to have a good education, that they, in due course, be able to build a solid family. Or maybe we just want them to be happy. That's really what we most aspire for them.

We want them to be happy. That's what we want for our children. I think for Christian parents, there is an aspiration, a hope that transcends all of these legitimate aspirations. Most of the things I've mentioned are legitimate in and of themselves. But I think we have a hope, an aspiration that transcends them. I think it's expressed for us by the psalmist in verse 7 of the psalm. Then in verse 7, and of course, what is said in verse 7 follows on from all that has been said concerning the matter of instructing our children, but it leads to a conclusion. In verse 7 we read, Then they, that is our children, and indeed our grandchildren, then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds. They would put their trust in God. Our aspiration for them is that they would hope in the Lord, that they would follow Jesus, that they would be disciples of Jesus. That is what we desire for them above all else. Well, is that indeed the case? Is that what you most desire for your children? Is that what you most desire for the children of this church? You may not have children of your own, or they may be already grown-ups or adults, although you can still have aspirations for them even at that stage in their lives. Well, you maybe don't have children, but you're part of this church, and the children of this church are the responsibility of all of us.

Of course, they're the particular responsibility of their parents, but they're the responsibility of us all. What do we aspire for these children? This morning we're going to be baptizing Alexandra and Jacob. What do we aspire for them? What is it that we most want for them in the life that lies ahead of them? What must you do to make that hope that they would indeed trust in God, make that hope a reality? And again, I repeat, this is especially directed as a challenge to parents, but it is a challenge that we all in some measure participate in. Well, Psalm 78 that we've read part of identifies in these opening verses, identifies three things that you must do, and these three things encompass the past, they encompass the present, but they also encompass the future. And let me just say what they are, and then we'll think about each of them in turn. You need to, first of all, look back in gratitude. But then you also have to live today in obedience, and you then need to look forward with hope. So, let's think of each of these. First of all, you need to look back in gratitude, or we might say in informed gratitude. The whole of the psalm, we haven't read the whole of the psalm, but the whole of the psalm is about looking back at the history of Israel, the history of God's gracious dealings with His own people. It's a story. It's our story, and it is a story that we must listen to. Oh, my people, hear my teaching, listen to the words of my mouth. The psalm begins with that call to listen, to give ear to the story, to pay attention to the story. The story is important. The story merits our concentration and our time. It's an exciting story. It's a true story. It must be heard, and it must be remembered. It must be understood, and it must be celebrated. Well, what is the story, and what should be our response to the story? Well, maybe we need to take a little step back and say, well, is it really a story that is being told? And in verse 1, for example, the language there is of teaching. Oh, my people, hear my teaching. It doesn't say listen to the story. It says, oh, my people, hear my teaching. And then in verse 2,

I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter hidden things, things from of old. So, is it actually a story? Well, I think it is. Indeed, if you read the whole psalm, it clearly is a story that is being told.

But the telling of the story is for the purpose of instruction, hence the use of the language of teaching. So, it's a story, but it's a story that teaches. But also, the manner of the telling of the story goes beyond bare narrative. It's not simply a collection of historical events that are identified.

[9 : 12] The manner in which the story is presented is creative, it's intriguing, it's gripping, and hence the language of parables, the language of hidden things of old. So, it's a story, but it's told in this dripping and creative way and for the purpose of instruction, hence the kind of language that we're confronted with in the first couple of verses of the psalm. But what is the story? What's the story about? Well, verse 4b tells us very clearly the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. What is it that will tell the next generation? Well, there we're told the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. That is the story that we are to tell, and it's the story that is recounted in what follows. The deliverance of God's people from their slavery in Egypt. Much of the psalm is dedicated to many of the events that surrounded that deliverance. The parting of the Red Sea, the Lord's protection and provision for His people in the desert, His leading of His people into the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. All of these events recounted for us in the verses of this psalm. And then the psalmist moves forward in history, and he closes the psalm speaking of God's provision of a righteous king in the person of King David, a king after his own heart, who is described in such beautiful language there in the final verse of the psalm. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart, with skillful hands he led them.

And so you have this psalm telling this story that is to be told, that is to be told to the next generation of the mighty deeds or the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. But of course, this psalm was written at a given point in history, and the psalmist could only speak of those events that had already taken place. But we look at the psalm from a different perspective. We can look forward from the psalm to what God has continued to do in the matter of praiseworthy deeds. Because these mighty deeds that the psalm speaks of, and many more that the psalm chooses not to mention, there are deeds that are made all the more praiseworthy for the fact that they are performed in the face of constant rebellion. The picture that we have or that we can draw from the psalm is of a God who insists on saving His people even in the face of incessant provocation.

If we had read the psalm, we would find how it's constantly referring to rebellion, to disobedience, to stubbornness on the part of God's people. But God insists on saving them even when they behave in such a manner. His love is presented, comes across as a stubborn love. It simply will not go away.

His people reject Him. His people spit in His face, and He still loves them. Even the anger that the psalm speaks of, and it does speak of God's anger at different points in the story, even His anger is an expression of His love. He is angry with them because He loves them. It is a fatherly anger towards disobedient children. It is the anger of a father who knows where their disobedience will lead them, the pain it will lead them into, the harm that they will come to if they don't turn back from the way that they're going on. But as I commented just a moment ago, the story did not finish with David.

King David, the one who is spoken of in these beautiful terms as the one of integrity of heart, who with skillful hands led his people, King David pointed to another king who would shepherd his people with integrity of heart. And we know, of course, from our standpoint in history, we know that in the fullness of time, the good shepherd came in the person of Jesus, the good shepherd who came to give his life for his sheep.

[13 : 33] The one with a spotless heart that would be broken for his people. He would come. He would erupt on the stage of human history. Jesus, the eternal Son of God. He came. He tabernacled amongst us. He lived a perfect life and died a sinner's death. He rose again triumphant from the grave and ascended to the right hand of the Father. He sent His Holy Spirit, and for the best part or more of 2,000 years, He's been directing the storyline of a story that is nearing its final chapter with His glorious return. This is the story. This is the story that is to be told. And what the psalmist does at the very beginning of this psalm is urge us to listen to the story. Oh, my people, hear my teaching.

Listen to the words of my mouth. But what is our response to be to this story? I said that at this point we were thinking about the need to look back with gratitude. Well, what is our response to the story? Well, our response is to be of gratitude, gratefulness of heart. We are to be grateful, first of all, of course, to God, the God of the story, the author of the story, the central character in the story, the God whose irrepressible love would not and will not be quenched despite wave after wave of mindless rebellion from His very own loved people. God is good, and we are grateful to Him for His goodness and His loyalty. But as we look back, our gratitude is not only to be directed to God. Again, if we turn to the psalm and the opening verses in verse 3, we read, what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. So, this story that is being told, it's not being told for the first time.

Those who are telling it, indeed those who are urging others to tell it, they first heard the story from others. They heard the story from their fathers. And so, there is to be an acknowledgement and a gratitude to those who God has used to tell us the story. Now, for some, that will be our own physical fathers. And we're grateful, if that is indeed our reality, that our own fathers and mothers told us the story of God's salvation. Perhaps for others, the storyteller was a spiritual father or a spiritual mother who told you the story of Jesus, who told you the story of salvation, who shared with you the good news. And we are to acknowledge and recognize and be grateful to those who told us the story. If you are to be, if we are to be godly parents, we must be grateful parents as we look back in informed gratitude. So, that's the first thing that we need to do. We need to look back in gratitude. But the psalm also in these first verses urges us to live today in obedience.

Or we might amplify that or extend that a little and say live today in covenant obedience. We have received from the past. Our fathers passed on to us the good news, told to us the story that they had heard from their fathers. And we must live today as grateful heirs of the covenant. And what does this involve? What is our great responsibility as those who have received, as those who have inherited from previous generations? Well, our central responsibility is that in humble and grateful obedience, we live and transmit the faith to the succeeding generation. We are a link in this gospel chain. And it is for us to live the faith, but also to transmit the faith to those who follow. And in verse 4 of this psalm, that is stress in two ways. Two ways are, you might say in answer to the question, well, what does that look like, this transmission of the faith? And there are two elements identified in verse 4. Notice what it says there. First of all, it says, we will not hide them from their children. So, one way in which we transmit the faith is presented in negative terms. We will not hide them. We will not hide these deeds.

We will not hide this story. So, that's one way. And then, more positively, it immediately goes on to say, we will tell the next generation. And so, though the two things are clearly very related, I think we can think of them distinctly. First of all, we are not to hide them from our children. Let's think about this a little bit. How can we be guilty of hiding the truth, of hiding the story? You might say, well, I would never do that. Why would I hide the story? It's a great story. Well, how can we sometimes be guilty of that, of hiding the story? Well, I think there's a number of ways. I think perhaps the most common way, and there would be an acknowledgement that this has been true in our home, in my life, one way we hide the story is by carelessness. We're simply careless in not taking the time to tell the story. We presume that our children know the story. We imagine that they're picking it up.

[19:27] You know, they come to church, they go to Sunday school, and, you know, we make passing references to the story, and, you know, they'll pick it up. And yet, we're careless in terms of carefully and in a disciplined way, in a careful way, ensuring that the story is told, is communicated to our children. Now, that may be giving little importance to family worship. It may be not simply giving the time of day to our children to sit down and speak with them and spend time with them.

And so, carelessness is not some deliberate intent in our part, far from it, but we're careless. And so, but the outcome is that we hide the truth. We hide the stories from our children. I think another way that we hide the truth from our children is hypocrisy, a failure to live what we say, to practice what we preach. And so, our children see that. They know who we claim to be. They know who we claim to follow. They know that we say that we believe the Bible, but they're seeing us in a way that nobody else does, and they see that at home it's a different story. You know, we don't do what the Bible says. We don't live what we urge to others, if that's something that we do. And so, that hypocrisy serves to hide the story, certainly the impact of the story on our children. Our failure to grow into the likeness of Jesus. This is our calling as men and women, and it's true of fathers and mothers, that we should be like Jesus. And in the measure that we're not like Jesus, well, in that measure, we're hiding

Jesus from our children. As parents, that is one of our responsibilities, to model God. It seems a very onerous responsibility, but it is our responsibility. And if we're not doing it, then effectively we're hiding Him from them. And so, the psalmist says, don't hide the story. Don't hide the story by carelessness, by hypocrisy, by half-heartedness. And so, I guess the question that I pose to myself as a father and to fathers and mothers here gathered this morning, and indeed to all of us in the measure that we have a responsibility for the children of the congregation, are you, are we hiding Jesus in some way from the next generation? But then there's another element identified in what this looks like, this transmission of the faith, and it's stated in very plain terms there in verse 4.

We will tell the next generation. We will tell them. Now, this telling clearly involves content. There's something that needs to be told, the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power. In verse 5, He decreed statutes for Jacob. He established the law in Israel, and He commanded our fathers to teach their children. So, there's a curriculum, there's content, there are laws, there are statutes, there are illustrations of what God is like in the manner in which He has dealt with His people, and we could go on. There's content that needs to be communicated, and that is clear. But as well as content, there's method. As we've already mentioned just in passing just a few moments ago, the language used speaks of a creative and gripping presentation of the story, the parables that were employed to make the truths that were being communicated more easily understandable or more gripping to the hearer.

But then you also have the application of lessons from the past to the realities of the present. You know, the psalm begins by speaking of hidden things. Well, what are these hidden things, and what do they have to do with me today? You know, we read about these things that happened 2,000 years ago, or 3,000 years ago, or 4,000 years ago, and you say, well, yeah, that's all fine, but what does that got to do with me today? And our responsibility is to take the story from so long ago and bring it into the present and make it real for our children today, for this generation. We are to tell the next generation in a manner that is gripping, in a manner that is relevant, in a manner that is true to the story, in a manner that will capture their attention and mold their minds and their thoughts and their wills. Well, in summary, we are to tell the story as Jesus told the story. It's striking that in Matthew's gospel, these verses in Psalm 78 are used to describe Jesus in the manner in which He would tell the story. Let me just read what it says there in Matthew 13, and in verse 35, there we read, or from verse 34, Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables.

[24 : 29] He did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet, I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world. So these words taken directly from our psalm. So I address the question to parents, what's the deal? Many of you in this very building, or if not in this building, in some other building, have promised that by your prayers, teaching, and example, you will bring up your children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord. Parents will make that promise again this morning. How are you doing? How are we doing in keeping that promise, in being faithful to that promise? Are you, are we, in some measure, in some way, hiding the truth? Are you failing to tell the story in a gripping and coherent manner? Are we sometimes boring our children out of their inheritance? So live today in covenant obedience. Tell the story. Don't hide the story. But then finally and briefly, let's notice also that the psalm, or these first verses of the psalm, encourages us to look forward in hope, to look forward in expectant hope. What is the object of our hope, or who are the object of our hope? Well, our children. We have a hope for our children. This psalm is about our children. They are the object of our hope. But what is the nature of our hope? Well, it is a sure hope. It is an expectant hope.

Not in the realm of, well, I hope things go well, or I hope Scotland qualify for the Euros, or I hope, you know, something that may happen, and if it does, well, that's great. No, this is to be a sure and expectant hope. But what is it? What's the content of our hope? Well, it's the verse that we mentioned almost at the beginning of the sermon in verse 7. Then they would put their trust in God.

Because we haven't hidden the truth, because we've told the story, because we've exemplified the story, and with all our failings and our limitations, because of that, we look forward with this hope.

Then they would put their trust in God. This trust in the Lord, it's about personal experience. It's about our children coming to the point where they, of their own mind, embrace the Savior. We believe that our children, by the very fact that they are our children, already enjoy tremendous privileges as covenant children. But we also recognize that there comes a time when they need to embrace those privileges. They need to embrace the Savior for themselves.

They need to demonstrate in their own lives and with their own decisions that this is the way that they will go, that they will not be the ones who break that chain, that they will follow in the ways of the Lord. They will keep the faith, and indeed, in due course, pass it on to subsequent generations.

[27 : 28] And of course, as I've just suggested or hinted at, and the psalm does more than hint at, speaks of very powerfully, our children, this immediately next generation is not the end of the story.

Notice the generations that are referred to in verse 6, where we read there, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Indeed, if you try and count the generations in these first few verses, there's several of them, because there's the fathers who told us, then we tell our children, then they tell the next generation what you've got three, four, maybe five generations just mentioned or referred to in these few verses. We are, as God's people, we are links in an unbroken gospel chain that goes from generation to generation to generation, and that's our confidence. We know that God will not allow that chain to be broken. The good news will be passed on. The faith will be passed on from generation to generation. That is our confidence, and we are assured of that. But in that, we have our responsibilities, as the psalmist highlights. And so, as we reflect on that, and as our minds are focused on this in a particular way, in a very visible way today, when we baptize those who will be baptized this morning, and when we baptize Alexandra, and when we baptize Jacob, even as we witness that, even as we participate as witnesses, may we be reminded of these truths, grateful for all that God has done for us, but also conscious of the responsibilities that He has laid upon us. And may God help us so to do. Well, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the story. We thank You for the story of Your dealings with Your people. We thank You that You're the God who has created us, that You're the God who has fixed Your eyes upon us to love us. You have chosen us, and You provide for us. And we thank You for that unbroken chain, that even as we look back, not only centuries, but millennia, we can identify those who are part of our family, those who are united to us in our common relationship with You as our God. And we thank You for that. We do pray that You would help us, as those who have been privileged to receive that great inheritance, to guard it carefully, to transmit it with care and with love. And help us also to know the joy and the satisfaction of seeing that faith being passed on to subsequent generations. We acknowledge that we fall short in these matters, prayers. And we pray that You would forgive us, that You would be patient with us, and that You would bless us. We pray that You would be with our children. We thank You for those who have embraced the Savior, who are walking His ways. But we also pray for those of our children who have chosen to go in other directions. Lord, we do pray that You would be the one who would graciously draw them back to Yourself. We pray that You would be the one who, in Your good providence and by the work of Your Spirit, would help them in due course to see the wonder of the story and to embrace it for themselves. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.