

Psalm 78:1-8

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 November 2010

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] What do we most aspire for our children? What do you most aspire for your children?

Today, four children will be baptized. What do Sophie and Chan, Andrew and Susie, David and Sarah aspire for their children, for your children? Imagine if we were to conduct a survey at a parent's evening across the road at Gilcompton Primary, where the parents were asked this one question, what do you most desire for your child in 20 years' time? I wonder what answers the parents would give to that question. I imagine some would say, well, I hope that they enjoy health and strength. If they have good health, then, well, that's the most important thing.

Others, especially in the context of a parent's evening, might say, well, I really aspire for my child that they would receive the best education they can, that they would be able to get through their schooling and higher education and do well and fulfill their potential. Maybe some would answer in that way. Others might speak of an aspiration for financial security. Maybe few would be so crass as to say, I hope they're very, very rich, but they might say, well, I hope they're secure. I hope they have enough to live life. Maybe some might speak of family and their aspiration that their child would be able to enjoy a happy family. And indeed, that mention of a happy family leads us to wonder whether some might follow the lead of our prime minister and speak of happiness as their aspiration for their children. I just want my kids to be happy. That's really the most important thing.

Well, for Christians, there is an aspiration. There is a hope. Hope is a better word, really, for it. A hope that transcends all of these legitimate aspirations. And it's expressed for us in a psalm that we're going to be considering this morning, Psalm 78. Jonathan has already made reference to it as he spoke to the children. Psalm 78. And we're going to read verses 1 to 8. And as we read the verses, we will then be able to highlight or pinpoint where in these verses the aspiration of the Christian parent finds very eloquent expression. So, we'll read in Psalm 78 and verses 1 to 8, it's on page 589 in our Bibles. Psalm 78 from the beginning.

O my people, hear my teaching. Listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter hidden things, things from of old, what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children. We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power and the wonders He has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which He commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born. And they in turn would tell their children.

[3 : 4 6] Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds, but would keep His commands. They would not be like their forefathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to Him. The Word of God. Then in verse 7, the aspiration of every Christian father, of every Christian mother, of Christian parents, indeed of the community of faith on behalf of the children that God has placed in our care, that they would put their trust in God, that their hope would be in God, that they would not forget His deeds, that they would keep His commands.

Is that what you most desire for your children? And indeed that question goes not only, is directed not only to parents, but we who form part of this community of faith, of this covenant family, we can also aspire and hope these things for those children that are part of this family, even if we are not the biological parents of them.

For us too, there is this hope, there is this expectation on behalf of the children who form part of this community of faith.

faith. But as we would address particularly of parents this morning, what must you do to make that aspiration or that hope a reality?

And I believe that Psalm 78 and these introductory verses of Psalm 78 identifies three things that you must do, three things that encompass the past, the present, and the future. And we want to consider what these three things are.

[5 : 43] And these words are particularly dedicated to, directed to those parents who today will bring their children to be baptized.

But they apply, of course, to all parents who have at some point brought children to be baptized, and in a more general way can be applied to all who gather here this morning.

What are these three things then that you must do? Well, let me suggest that they are the following. First of all, you must look back in informed gratitude. Look back in informed gratitude.

But then you must also live today in covenant obedience. Live today in covenant obedience. And then finally, you must look forward in expectant hope. Look forward in expectant hope.

These three things we want to consider this morning from the verses that we have read in Psalm 78. First of all then, look back in informed gratitude.

[6 : 53] Very particularly the words that we have read at the beginning of the Psalm speak of that. Indeed, the whole Psalm. We haven't read the whole Psalm. It's a very long Psalm.

But the whole Psalm relates for us the history of the people of Israel. The history very particularly of God's gracious dealings with His own people.

It is a story that is told here by the Psalmist. It is by grace our story. And it is a story that we must listen to.

This story that is told, we must listen to it. The Psalm begins with this call to listen. Oh, my people, hear my teaching.

Give ear to this story that I will tell. The story, the story, the history must be known, must be listened to.

[7 : 53] We must pay attention to the story. The story is important. The story is exciting. The story is true. And it must be heard.

And it must be remembered. It must be understood. And it must be celebrated. We must look back. And we must know our story.

But what is the story? And what should be our response to the story? For that is how we will look back and inform gratitude as we know the story.

And as we respond appropriately to it. What is the story? Perhaps as we read the opening verses, we might say, well, wait a minute.

Is it a story that is being told at all? The Psalm begins, oh, my people, hear my teaching. The Psalmist speaks of teaching. He then goes on to speak of parables and hidden things from of old.

[8 : 55] What kind of story is that? Well, that language really gives us a clue as to the purpose of the story. The telling of the story is for the purpose of instruction.

It is teaching. It is a story. But it is instruction for God's people. And the manner of the telling goes beyond naked narrative.

The Psalmist is not simply going to say, well, this is what happened. This is an accurate account of the events of our story. It goes beyond that.

The manner of the presentation is creative and intriguing and gripping. Parables, hidden things from of old, dark sayings from of old.

And the reason for this is that it would grab the attention of the hearer. This is not dry history. This is something that is to grip the hearer as they hear the story recounted, as they are instructed by means of the story.

[10 : 03] But what is the story? Well, the second part of verse 4 gives us a summary of it. And then the Psalm goes on to relate it in considerable detail.

But there, if we read in verse 4, we will not hide them from their children. We will tell the next generation. And what will be told? The praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done.

And then the Psalm dedicates itself in all that follows to relate many of those praiseworthy deeds, to illustrate with the story the many demonstrations of God's power, the wonders that He has done.

And time does not allow us to go through the whole Psalm and to relate all the story as it is in considerable detail related for us in the Psalm.

But as you maybe on a subsequent occasion or this afternoon take time to read through the Psalm, you will find there that the story that is told is a familiar story.

[11 : 12] The deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt. The parting of the Red Sea. The Lord's protection and provision for His people in the desert as they made their weary way to the Promised Land.

The leading of God's people into the Promised Land. That land flowing with milk and honey. The story is told by the Psalmist. The praiseworthy deeds of the Lord are recounted by the Psalmist.

And the history goes on. Beyond the Exodus and the possession of the Promised Land through to the time of King David and the gracious provision by God of a king after his own heart.

Indeed, the Psalm concludes with this part of the story. There in the very closing verses of the Psalm, He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens.

From tending the sheep He brought Him to be the shepherd of His people Jacob, of Israel His inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart, with skillful hands He led them.

[12 : 23] But all these mighty deeds that are recounted in the Psalm, and many more, are made all the more praiseworthy, for they are performed in the face of constant rebellion.

Again, take this on trust. As you would read through the Psalm, you will find that the account of God's praiseworthy deeds are punctuated constantly with a description of how God responds to their constant rebellion.

But this account of how the people of God constantly rebel against God only serves to highlight the wonder of His grace and the magnitude of His love.

That though He is dealing with a stubborn people, though He is dealing with a rebellious people, though He is dealing with a people who seem so lacking in even the most basic gratitude for His love and goodness and deliverance, yet He will not let them go.

And so, the story of God's praiseworthy deeds, these deeds are all the more praiseworthy in that context. The picture that is painted by the psalmist is of a God who refuses not to save His people, even in the face of incessant provocation.

[13 : 59] His love is a stubborn love. It is a stubborn love. It simply will not go away. His people spit in His face, and He still loves them.

He still loves them. These are indeed praiseworthy deeds. Even the anger that is related to us and described to us in this psalm is an expression of His love.

He is angry with them because He loves them. This anger is a fatherly anger. It is a fatherly anger. It is the anger of one who loves His people and wants the very best for them.

And so, the story is told, and so the psalmist says, listen to the story. Give ear to the story. Look back on your story in humble and informed gratitude.

This is your God, says the psalmist. This is the God that you must tell of to the succeeding generations. And of course, the story did not finish with King David.

[15 : 20] The psalm was written at a point in time. It brings the story to that point in time. But the story continues. In the fullness of time, the good shepherd who would give his life for his sheep, the one with a spotless heart that would be broken for his people, 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 2,000 years ago. And in all of this time, the story has continued, and he has been directing the storyline of a story that is nearing its final chapter with His glorious return.

This is your story. Listen to the story. Listen to the story. And what is our response to the story that is told? Well, our response is, and must be one of gratitude.

We look back in informed gratitude. Gratitude, of course, to God, for He is the God of the story. He is the author of the story.

[16 : 47] He is the central character, 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. God is gracious, and we are grateful. And we are grateful. But as we look back, our gratitude is not only to be directed to God.

We are to also direct our gratitude and express our thanks to our fathers, those who told us the story.

There in verse 3, what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. Why do you know the story? Because your fathers have told you.

For some of us, we can speak with gratitude of how our very own physical fathers and grandfathers told the story and passed the story on.

[17 : 57] And we have been privileged heirs who have received the story to pass on to subsequent generations. For others, perhaps, their own fathers have not told them the story, but there are spiritual fathers who have told the story, have passed the story on.

And in God's good and gracious providence, they too have heard the story. And so, we express our gratitude, yes, in the first instance, to God, for it is His story.

But we are also grateful to our fathers who told us the story. We think of this very congregation and of the generations that have come before us, many unknown to us, but who have faithfully told the story, kept the story alive, that we might be gathered here this morning on this cold, snowy November morning.

Part of the story, hearing the story, celebrating the story. To be a godly parent, you must be a grateful parent as you look back in informed gratitude.

But the psalm speaks not only of the importance of looking back gratefully, It speaks also of the need to live today in covenant obedience.

[19 : 26] We have received from the past. We have received from our fathers, but we must live today as grateful heirs of the covenant.

And what does this involve? Well, the central covenant responsibility that we have is that in humble and grateful obedience, we live and transmit the faith to the succeeding generation.

What does that look like? Well, two elements of what that looked like are identified in verse 4. We read there, We will not hide them from their children.

We will tell the next generation. Two things to notice there that as parents we must do. First of all, we are not to hide the story from our children.

We are not to conceal the truth. We are not to hide the truth. Now, that may seem a strange thing to be told. Well, why would we do that?

[20 : 34] That would be a foolish thing. Why would we ever hide the story? But there are ways in which we can be guilty of hiding the story.

Sometimes it can be due to carelessness in our family life. We take vows to bring up our children in the instruction of the Lord.

We may be at a given point, maybe at the beginning of that privilege of being parents. We have convictions and plans that we will pray with our children.

We will read the Bible with them. We will worship together in our home with our children. But then we're careless about these disciplines.

We're careless about these duties. And time flies. Those of us who have children, who have grown and are no longer we, and many of you are in that situation, can empathize and can understand this.

[21 : 41] And how quickly time flies and those good intentions sometimes fall by the wayside. And so, though it is not our intention, what we have effectively done or are doing is hiding the truth from our children.

hypocrisy in the lives that we live is another manner in which we can hide the truth. Maybe we're very good at telling our children what is right and what is wrong.

Maybe we're very careful about verbal instruction. And yet, when they see the lives that we live, when they see the attitudes that we have, when they identify what is really important for us, there are mixed messages.

There is a hypocrisy that maybe they're not able to identify with that word, but it makes an impression on their impressionable minds.

And in that way, we hide the truth. We preach a great sermon, but we live a mediocre life. And in that way, we can hide the truth.

[22 : 56] We can hide the story from our children. We can hide the truth also as we fail to grow into the likeness of Jesus.

For that, we have been saved. This is God's purpose for us, that we would become more and more like Jesus. And praise God, that will happen. despite ourselves.

But as we would not cooperate with God at this time in our lives, at this stage when we have these parental responsibilities, and as we would fail to become more and more like Jesus, we are effectively hiding Jesus from our children, for we are to model Jesus to our children.

Our children are to see in us something of Jesus. And if they see nothing of Jesus, if they see very little of Jesus, then what are we doing? We are hiding the truth.

We are hiding Jesus from them. The psalmist says, you must today live in covenant in obedience. You must not hide these things from your children.

[24 : 11] Then, of course, there is the positive side of the coin. Not only must we not hide these things, but we are told explicitly we must tell the next generation. We will tell the next generation.

What does this telling involve? Well, the telling involves, obviously, content. We tell the content of the story. We're told in verse 5 of other elements of that which we must tell.

He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach their children. The statutes of God, the commandments of God, those things that God gave to his people long ago, we are to tell them.

We are to teach our children the Ten Commandments. We are to encourage them in the memorizing of Scripture and of the Catechism. These are things that there is content that we must teach, that we must tell the next generation.

But it's not just about content, is it? It's about method. It's about the manner in which we tell the story. And the psalm does speak of the importance of creatively presenting the truth in a manner that is gripping and of interest to our children.

[25 : 30] We have already made reference to that there in verse 2. I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter hidden things, things from of old. the use of parables.

That simply illustrates the importance of being concerned as to the manner in which the truth is presented, in a manner that is appropriate, in a manner that is interesting, in a manner that can be understood.

The importance also of applying the lessons from the past to the realities of the present. That, quite possibly, is the idea behind that in verse 2, I will utter hidden things from of old.

Those things that at face value may not seem that important or may not seem that applicable or the truth of them may not seem very relevant. And yet, as we would present the truth in a careful and in a interesting way and taking care to ensure that these things that we tell from of old can be applied to the lives that we live now, we can teach our children the Ten Commandments.

That's not a difficult thing to do. They're there for us. We can have them learn the commandments off by heart. That is a good thing. But then we must ensure that they understand what they mean.

[26 : 53] Thou shalt not kill. Well, this week in the Scottish Parliament there will be a debate about the end-of-life assistance bill. That is how we can take these truths from the past and say, what does that mean?

Well, it means that this is wrong. It means that God doesn't approve of this. We must apply the content in a way that is relevant, that is applicable, that makes sense, that is contemporary, that our children would listen, that they would see the relevance of it, that they would not simply think, well, that's just an old, old story.

A story of long ago and it's got nothing to do with me. I was speaking to a mother just last week in reference there to the end-of-life assistance bill and she mentioned that one of her daughters who's in first-year, secondary, here in a school in Aberdeenshire, they had a wee debate about this matter of euthanasia or assisted suicide.

And of the 24 first-year pupils that she was part of in a class with, 18, reckoned it was perfectly okay, perfectly okay.

These are the attitudes and the opinions we are exposing our children to as they head off to school in the morning. And there's a whole another issue there that we're not going to go into. But we have a responsibility to tell the story, to communicate the truths in a manner that is relevant and understandable and convincing and gripping.

- [28 : 38] We are to tell the story, we might say, as our example, as our master in these things. Tell the story as Jesus told it. We've read in Matthew chapter 13, it's interesting there, in that passage that we read earlier, we're told that the manner in which Jesus taught was a fulfillment of the very words of this psalm.

And we know that if we can say one thing of the teaching of Jesus, that it was gripping. It caught people's attention. People wanted to listen. He taught with authority.

And that is the challenge for us as parents. And so I do direct this question to myself and to parents in the congregation this morning especially.

Many of you have brought your children in this very church to be baptized. Many of you have promised in this very place that you would, by your prayers and teaching and example, bring up your children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord.

And today is an appropriate moment for us to ask ourselves, are we doing that? Are we keeping our promises?

- [30 : 02] These were and are solemn promises. And we must constantly be reminded and be constantly asking ourselves the question, are these promises that we are fulfilling?

Or are you 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?

Not only must we look back in grateful, look back in gratitude, not only must we live today in covenant obedience, but thirdly and finally, we must look forward in expectant hope.

What is the nature of our hope? Well, as the title of this point suggests, it is an expectant hope. It is a sure hope. And let us give that word hope its full meaning and the solidity that it merits in biblical truth.

Our hope is not some vague aspiration. Well, wouldn't it be nice if our children believed? Wouldn't it be lovely if they followed Jesus? That would be just so nice and so good and we really wish that happens.

- [31 : 25] It's not that kind of hope. It's not the hope that says, oh, I really hope that Aberdeen finish in the top six. That's just not going to happen. Just, I'll tell you that for starters.

I hope they don't get relegated. Well, maybe. That's maybe a little bit more realistic. That's not the kind of hope we're talking about. It is an expectancy that this is what will happen, that God will fulfill His promises, that we will be faithful to the covenant and He will be faithful to us.

He will honor that obedience and our children will believe and they will follow Jesus and they will be disciples of Him. That is the nature of our hope and the object of our hope is our children.

The content of our hope is in verse 7 that we've already noted at the beginning. What is it that we hope? That they would put their trust in God. That they would put their trust in God, that there would be that personal trusting upon God on the part of our children.

Yes, they would hear the story. Yes, they would believe that it is a true story. But as they hear the story and as they believe the story, so in their own lives they would place their trust in the Lord.

- [32 : 41] That their hope would be in Jesus as their Savior. That they would put their trust in God, that they would not forget His deeds. That the story would be so engraved that they cannot forget.

We are prone to forget. But when the story is engraved, when it's part of our very spiritual, personal DNA, then even if we want to forget, we can't forget.

There are many who want to forget, but they can't forget. And praise God for that. Such has been the instruction received that even though they want to forget, they can't forget.

They would put their trust in God. They would not forget His deeds, but would keep His commands. That is our hope, that they would keep God's commands.

Why? So they can tick all the boxes, so that we can say, well, aren't they nice children? No, as we are told when the commandments were first given to us, we want them to keep the commands so that it would go well with them.

[33 : 47] that they would live happy and fulfilled lives in obedience to God. This is our expectant hope for our children.

But as we close, I ask one further question. Are our children the end of the story? The children that God gives us into our family, are they the end of the story?

Well, by no means. Notice in verse 6 how there is a reference to many generations. Let's just notice reading through the verse.

So that the next generation would know them. So we might think of that as our children. The next generation would know them. And then what do we read? Even the children yet to be born.

A reference, I think, not so much as to subsequent children we might have, but to a future generation. And then we read and they in turn would tell their children. So here we're not talking just about our sons and daughters.

[34 : 53] We're not talking just about our grandchildren. It goes beyond to our great-grandchildren. And of course, the implication is beyond to their children and their children and their children's children.

This is the nature of our hope. It extends into the distant future. future. And I would ask you this morning, as in a few moments we will proceed to the baptism, I would encourage you to do this.

That as you are witnesses of this sacrament, that by all means we would celebrate the children who are being baptized and we would pray to God that God would bless them and God would indeed help them and help their parents that they might grow up trusting and following Jesus.

But let us just for a moment in excited expectation think of their children and their children's children that they too would love Jesus, that they too would follow Jesus.

As we look to the future of the church in Scotland, many view the future in a very dark and foreboding way.

[36 : 08] It all looks very dark and grim. Is that the future? Today declares eloquently and powerfully that that is not the future for the church of Jesus Christ.

For there are promises for our children and our children's children and their children. And God will be true to His promises. God will be faithful to His promises.

And so, we look forward in expectant hope. Let us look back in gratitude. Let us live today in covenant obedience and let us look forward in expectant hope.

Let us pray. Bye. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.

Bye-bye. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.