

1. Telling Our Children

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let's turn to Psalm 78. And if you have our Pew Bible, the big hardback Bible, you'll find this on page 488.

488. Now, I'm due to be here for the four Wednesdays of the month of April, and I thought we would look together at this psalm under the title Past, Present, and Future.

It is, I think, the second longest of all the psalms, the longest being Psalm 119. And in this psalm, the author, you'll see from the title that his name is Asaph, the author takes in a great sweep of Israelite history from the Exodus, which took place in about 1440 BC, the 15th century BC, right through to the reign of David in the 10th century BC.

So nearly 500 years of history is taken in by this. Most of the psalm is to do with the traumatic events of the Exodus. So we have reference made to the plagues, the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea.

And then we have various incidents which took place during the next 40 years as the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness before finally arriving in the land of Canaan. The reign of David himself doesn't actually appear until the very final part of the psalm, just the last half a dozen verses.

[1 : 24] But those verses form an important conclusion to the psalm, and we'll plan to look at them in the last of these four studies. So let me read from verse 1.

I just want to take the first eight verses today, but I will read a bit further so that we can get a little bit more of the feeling of the context of the psalm. So Psalm 78, a maskil of Asaph.

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching. Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable.

I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done.

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments, and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

[2 : 54] The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them.

In the sight of their fathers, he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. He divided the sea and let them pass through it. He made the waters stand like a heap.

In the daytime, he led them with a cloud and all the night with a fiery light. He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers. Yet they sinned, still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert.

We'll leave it there. Johnny, am I booming a bit? You're looking a bit anxious and I'm feeling a bit worried. Is it okay? All right. We shall launch forth and not worry then. Now, friends, here we have this great historical psalm, which, as I said a moment ago, takes in a sweep of history nearly 500 years long from the time of the Exodus through to the time of David.

[4 : 09] So let me ask, does the idea of historical Old Testament study seem a little bit daunting? I know that some people find history fascinating.

I'm sure that some of you find it fascinating, but other people find history rather hard going. But if you do find it hard going, do stay with me, because history is not only important to Psalm 78.

History is fundamental to understanding the whole Bible. In fact, it is one of the great distinguishing characteristics of the Christian faith. To understand the gospel, the gospel of our Lord Jesus, we need to understand how God has acted in history, supremely, of course, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, but also, very importantly, in the events and story of the Jewish people before Christ came.

Now, it's interesting that just a few days ago, I think it was on Thursday or Friday of last week, there was quite a hoo-ha in the House of Commons over the way in which history is being taught in our schools, at least in the schools in England.

It may not apply to Scotland, but you'll have heard it on the news how Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, is wanting to change the way in which history is taught and the syllabus. And on the airwaves, various academics have been chewing over the pros and cons of teaching history this way or teaching history that way.

[5 : 37] But I think we all recognize that if a nation can understand something of its past, it's going to be better equipped to make wise decisions about its future, and not only nations, but churches as well.

Now, let's begin by noticing the psalm's title, A Mascul of Asaph. Now, nobody knows for certain what a Mascul was, and you'll see from the footnote that it simply says probably a musical or liturgical term.

So we needn't worry too much about that. Nobody really knows what a Mascul was. But Asaph, Asaph is interesting. He's a man who appears several times in the course of the books of Chronicles, and he's described in Chronicles as one of David's leading musicians.

So he's a contemporary of David, a kind of master of the king's music. But he's not only a musician, he's also a writer. And he's described in 2 Chronicles chapter 29 as Asaph, the seer.

Now, a seer is a prophet, somebody who sees a revelation from the Lord. Samuel, you may remember, is described as the seer. So Asaph's words are treated as oracles.

[6 : 52] These are true messages, true prophecies, you might say, from God. And if you flick over a page or two, you'll see in your Bible that every psalm, from Psalm 73 to Psalm 83, inclusive, is written by Asaph.

Psalm 50 also comes from his pen. So as well as being the master of the king's music or something like that, he's also something of a poet laureate. You might almost call him a prophet laureate.

And naturally, we can take his words as the very words of God, just as we do everything else that is written in the Bible. And this is why he has the authority to say to us in verse 1, Give ear, O my people, to my teaching.

Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. Tune your ear to listen to me. That's what he's saying. There is a wonderfully fitting correspondence between the human ear and the divine mouth.

The one was made for the other. So what is Asaph's message in the first eight verses of this psalm? Let's notice two strong encouragements which he gives to his readers.

[8 : 07] First, he's saying to us, let us learn from history. Let us learn from history. Now, verse 2, at first sight, seems a little bit impenetrable.

I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings from of old. Now, we're bound to ask, what are these dark sayings from of old? Are we out on some wild heath with Macbeth's witches?

What are these dark sayings from ancient days? Well, really, the force of verse 2 is to say, I want to open up for my readers the meaning of history.

The word which is translated parable there literally means a comparison. So Asaph is saying, I want to take an important piece, a crucially important piece of past history, so as to compare our present situation with various events from the past.

Why? Because there are lessons to be learned. Our people, he's saying, behaved pretty badly during those 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, although that was nearly 500 years ago.

[9 : 12] But our people behaved badly. They were a godless bunch very often. They forgot the Lord. They sinned against him. They rebelled against him time and again. And we today, in the 10th century BC, we today, Asaph is saying, are in danger equally of behaving just as our forefathers did.

So let's learn from their mistakes and not just repeat them. So what Asaph is going to do from verse 9 onwards is to describe the events of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings, but he is also going to interpret them.

He's going to help his readers, his own contemporaries in the 10th century BC, and he's going to help readers like us in the 21st century AD. He's going to help all his readers to understand what was really going on in the minds and hearts of the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness.

Asaph is not assuming that the true pattern and meaning of history is obvious. It needs to be interpreted. And he's now going to give a true, because God-given, interpretation of that highly significant period of Israel's ancient history.

This is why he says at the end of verse 2, I will utter dark sayings from of old. What he means is, I will retell the old-time story, which does seem very dark and incomprehensible 500 years down the track, but I will illuminate the darkness and help my readers to understand that period of history, so that we don't fall into the same traps that our ancestors fell into.

[10 : 52] Well, now, what about us today? What are we to take from this? Well, there is a lesson for us about the importance of reading history, about knowing our own history. It's obviously good, it seems to me, that we should study the history of the 20th century, especially the sorry tale of its tyrannies and totalitarianisms, in the hope that we might not simply repeat them in the 21st century.

But the much more important point is that we need to learn not just from history in general, but from this history, from the interpretation of the Exodus that Asaph gives us in this psalm.

Because although the Exodus took place some three and a half thousand years ago, it is perennially important for Christians to learn the lessons that Asaph teaches us from it.

This psalm is in our Bibles, and therefore it is here for Christians as well as for Jewish readers. So there's the first thing. Let's learn from history, and especially let's learn from the history recorded in the Bible, which is sometimes referred to as salvation history.

You're probably familiar with that term, salvation history. Just think of the history of the world as much as it has been recorded and known. I guess there's not much history that dates from some any time earlier than about 2000 BC.

[12 : 16] But if you think of the history of the last three or four thousand years, that history all over the world is extraordinarily complex. But of the many, many threads that make up world history, there is one golden thread running through the midst of it all, which we people do well to cherish and study.

And that is the history recorded in the Bible. Salvation history, the history of God's dealings with Israel and with the church, and supremely his dealings with us through the work of his son, Jesus Christ, who is the central figure of Bible history and of all history.

So there's the first thing. Let's learn from history, and especially this history. That's what Asaph is saying. Now, second, Asaph is encouraging us to teach Bible history to our children.

Sermons from modern churches, including our own, have a wonderful way of winging their way out into cyberspace. You'll be aware of that. You can tap into our website, can't you, and listen to sermons over the last week or two, even the last year or two.

Can you go back even earlier than that? You can pick up sermons from all over the place. We never quite know where our sermons end up. Occasionally, emails come from Alaska or Tokyo, and somebody says, oh, I was listening to your sermon the other day, and it's rather amazing, isn't it?

[13 : 40] But if there should be anybody out there in cyberspace who happens to have the ear of Mr. Michael Gove, do get Mr. Gove to read at least the first eight verses of Psalm 78.

He might be too busy to go further, but get him to read at least the first eight verses because it might help him to include an essential element in the syllabus of our modern schools, and that is Bible history.

Now, friends, look with me at verse 4, which I'm going to read, but I'm going to change it slightly as we go on. Verse 4. We will not hide from our children the principles of mathematics nor the cunning arts of information technology.

We will diligently teach English language, literature, and grammar. We will press on with biology, physics, and chemistry. We will teach Chinese, both Cantonese and Mandarin, not neglecting to teach German, Spanish, and French, nor overlooking psychology, sports science, sociology, and a dash of environmental studies.

And, verse 4b, the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done. Because only by teaching our children the syllabus of verse 4b will they understand the real meaning of human life on planet Earth.

[14 : 55] Now, the educational syllabus of our nation is something that you and I, I guess, are not likely to be able to influence, at least not directly.

But we can do a great deal for our own children, and perhaps our grandchildren as well. Though, in truth, it's the parents rather than the grandparents who bear the real responsibility to pass all this on to our children.

Asaph is teaching believers who have children not to hide from their children the truth about the glorious deeds, the might, and the wonders done by the Lord.

So we have a responsibility to teach our children the Bible and the Gospel. And it's a lovely responsibility to have, because it means that we teach them the faith that will bring them to salvation and finally bring them to the eternal kingdom of God.

And there's no greater desire, surely, that biblically taught parents can have than to see their children saved by the Lord and growing up to be enthusiastic, serving Christians.

[16 : 02] Now, just how families are to do this, it's going to vary. It's not as though there are hard and fast set rules for this. Some families will have family prayers and Bible instruction at mealtimes.

And all Christian families, it seems to me, should have plenty of talk and discussion on Bible-related topics as parents and their growing children pick up themes from the Bible and applications of them to our life in the world.

And there'll be plenty of encouragements from Christian parents to their children to learn from an early age to be unashamed of the Gospel. That's something which we parents need to teach our children.

It's pretty difficult in schools these days, isn't it? You think of teenage Christians, age 14, 15, 16, 17, and the kind of pressure that they're under at schools and the ridicule which is sometimes thrown at them, not simply by their own peers, but sometimes by teachers.

We need to teach our children to be able to stand up for the Lord and also to begin to be evangelists, to invite their contemporaries, their friends, to come to Christian events and to begin to explain the Gospel to them.

[17 : 07] Now, I know, friends, that this can be tricky. It's not easy. It doesn't always work out happily. I guess all of us will know very godly Christian couples who have a child or perhaps children who have rebelled against the Bible's teaching and drop out of church.

As I say, there are no infallible rules which will ensure that our children grow up to be Christians. What we do is to pray, to trust, and then to do our best to teach them.

And in the case of rebellious children, we're wise to take the long view and to trust their future to the Lord. Now, as we look at verses 4 and 5 together, 4 and 5, I think we can distinguish two basic strands of instruction for parents to give their children.

The first, in verse 4, is Bible history, and the second, in verse 5, is Bible ethics. Or if you like, verse 4 is about what God has done, and verse 5 is about how we are to live in response.

So let's look at verse 4. The glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done. The works of God evoke a sense of wonder and astonishment in Asaph.

[18 : 26] Now, it's possible that Asaph is thinking of the wonderful works of creation, the works of Genesis chapter 1. But surely what he chiefly has in mind are the wonders of God's deeds of judgment against the Egyptians and rescue of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus.

The works that he is about to describe in the next 50 or 60 verses as the psalm unfolds. It is to Asaph a wondrous passage of history to think over again and again how God chose to protect his people, to rescue Israel, to save her dramatically at the Red Sea, and how he then provided for his people's needs of food and water in those 39 and a half years in the wilderness.

And then how eventually he brought Israel into the promised land. And as we teach our children, we teach them all that, plus, of course, the even more wonderful works that God achieved in his son Jesus Christ.

How God was willing to put forward his own son to be a sacrifice, to be the Passover lamb, so that the father's anger against our sin should be fully propitiated by the blood of his son shed in death.

And then we teach the resurrection of Jesus, the astounding demonstration of the power of God, both the Father and the Son, over the forces of death and hell. It is the history, the history, that defines the gospel.

[19 : 55] gospel. The gospel is good news because of what God has historically done. And this distinguishes, separates Christianity from all other faiths.

All other religions are man-made. And their message will always be, do, do this, do that, do the other. But the message of the gospel is done.

And that's why we must teach our children the history of the Bible. If they don't understand the history, they won't understand the good news. The good news is about what God has objectively achieved.

C.S. Lewis, on one occasion, made this point in a rather unusual way. Apparently, there was a group of Oxford academics who were seated together in a room and they were discussing different religions of the world.

And Lewis came through the door into the room. And one of these academics looked up and said, ah, here's Lewis. Let's ask Lewis' opinion on this. So the question was put to him, come on, Lewis, what is the difference, if there is a difference, between Christianity and the other religions of the world?

[21 : 07] And he replied, I can answer that question in one word. Grace. All other religions say that you have to do endless things.

So you do your cycles of prayer and fasting and pilgrimage and almsgiving and good deeds and penances and many other things. But the gospel says God has graciously, freely done all that needs to be done.

It is done. What did Jesus cry just before he died? Done. Finished. So as we teach our children and ourselves the history of God's acts recorded in the Bible, we're teaching our children the gospel, the record of God's gracious acts done to save us.

And just look at the long view that Asaph takes. Look at verse 5. God commanded our fathers. That's, well our fathers there is not simply our immediate fathers.

He's thinking really of our forefathers back in the days of Moses. So Asaph is saying God commanded our forefathers 500 years ago to teach their children so that the next generation, verse 6, might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise to tell them to their children so that they should set their hope in God.

[22 : 34] Now this is a powerful strand, a powerful element in Bible teaching that the great truths of all that God has done are to be handed on from one generation to another to another to another.

And doesn't that give us great strength and security in the midst of a rapidly changing world? Our world is changing very rapidly and I hardly need to say this but the governments they come and go don't they every few years.

Intellectual fads come and go. Medical fads come and go. What was healthy for you this year not going to be healthy next is it? All that sort of stuff. Electronic gadgets that comes and goes so quickly we're left breathless buying the next G whatever it is thing that you've got to have so that you can communicate with whoever you're in touch with.

All that stuff breathless and our own lives they're really very short aren't they? You appreciate that as you get older you get to 50 plus and you realize that it's very short.

You think of the generations of your own family back to your grandparents and perhaps on to your grandchildren it all comes around so very quickly but the thing which gives us unshakable security in the midst of all this rapid change is the history of God's deeds recorded in the Bible.

[23 : 53] His dealings with Old Testament Israel his wonderful achievements in the work of Christ and then his teaching about how to live life a life pleasing to him which is given by the prophets and the apostles and Asaph is saying to us teach these things to your children.

There is no such thing as parental neutrality. Don't abdicate your responsibility. Don't rely on your church's Sunday school or youth groups to do the teaching. They may be very good in some churches but the point is that fathers and mothers must do this themselves.

And finally what will the consequences be if we do teach our children about the Lord's wonderful deeds in history? Well Asaph tells us in verses 7 and 8 tell them to your children he says so that verse 7 so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God but keep his commandments and that they should not be like their fathers a stubborn and rebellious generation a generation whose heart was not steadfast whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Now look at just how clearly Asaph expresses himself here. Verse 7 so that they should and then verse 8 so that they should not.

So there's going to be a positive consequence and a negative consequence. The positive consequence of teaching Bible history verse 7 is that our children should learn to set their hope in God.

[25 : 25] not to set their hope in riches or in cleverly crafted career choices or educational attainments but learning to stake everything they are, their future in this world and in the world to come on God.

But that verse 7 is a verse with a big compass. Do you see how it deals with the hearts of our children that their hearts should be set in hope and trust upon God?

It deals with the minds of our children that they should not forget but think often about the works of God and it deals with the wills of our children that they should learn to keep God's commandments.

So if our children can learn to set their hearts and their minds and their wills upon God they will live secure and really useful lives. And then there's a negative consequence in verse 8 and that is that if they learn their Bible history they will not be like their fathers.

And doesn't verse 8 give us a gruesome list of characteristics? Stubborn, rebellious, whose hearts are fickle and not steadfast, whose spirits are not faithful to God.

[26 : 40] Fickleness and infidelity. So friends we have a great challenge before us in our generation and that is to teach the glorious history of the Bible to our children.

If we will do this it will be the making of them and our children will be verse 7 children and not verse 8 children.

Those who belong to other churches do encourage your ministers to teach the young parents in the congregations to take very seriously this task of teaching their own children.

children. I have an old friend in the south of England who is a very capable and very thoughtful pastor and he's spent the last 20 or 25 years building up and teaching a strong congregation down in Sussex.

And I happened to run into this old friend just a few weeks ago and we were talking together and he told me that he is seeking to appoint a new member of staff who is to be a minister for families.

[27 : 42] Now we're used to ministers appointing youth workers and evangelists and so on but this is to be a minister for families. So my friend is looking for a mature Christian family man probably aged 50 or 55 who has brought up children and who knows something about the rough and tumble of family life and this man's main responsibility in the congregation will be to get alongside the families in the church and to teach the parents how to teach the Bible to their children.

Now I thought that was a very fine idea. I'll just pass it on. Again one doesn't know where these things end up but just think of the effort that so many Christian parents put in to provide training for their children in music and sport.

Just think of the hours of taxi driving their children around to different venues. Just think of the hundreds perhaps even thousands of pounds spent in trying to turn our sons and daughters into musical or sporting stars.

Trying to get them to be the next Andy Murray or the next Nicola Benedetti. Well let's listen to the voice of Asaph because what he has to say is so much more important.

Verse 4. We will not hide these things from our children but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done.

[29 : 06] Well let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. We rejoice our dear heavenly father in the glorious history of all that you have done and have recorded for us in the Bible.

We do thank you for this man Asaph and the way that you inspired him and taught him how he should read and interpret the history of the Exodus. And we want to pray for ourselves and our churches our congregations and our pastors.

We thank you so much for them and we do pray that you will help them to take with renewed seriousness this task of teaching the gospel and the Bible and the history of your great deeds to our children and our grandchildren.

Have mercy upon us dear father and we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.