

Summer in the Psalms: Passing on our God Encounter
 Psalms 78:1-17
 July 24, 2016
 Dan Hoffman

~Cling to what God has done in the past, and pass on the past in the present~

This morning we are in Psalm 78. Please grab your phone, or the Bible in the pew in front of you and follow along. If you are using the pew Bible you will find the book of Psalms in the very center and Psalm 78 on page 417.

If you are visiting with us, we have been taking a look at the Psalms this summer. And what we have seen is that the Psalms are art, and as such rather than primarily instructing us, they seek to lead us, like a worship leader, into an emotional encounter with God. Now we aren't talking about emotionalism – emotion simply for emotion's sake – but we are acknowledging that people are not simply logical beings, and so to honour our Creator involves more than simply knowing and reciting facts about Him.

John Piper, who is one of my favorite pastors, says offering God only our logical side it is like a husband who comes home with a dozen roses for his wife on their anniversary, and when the wife gushes “oh, I love you, you shouldn't have.” Then the husband responds “don't mention it, it was my duty.”

You see God wants more than our obedience, He wants more than our right living, He wants more than duty; He wants our love. And the Psalms are designed to inspire this.

Now Psalm 78 is a Maskil – which was a style of Jewish song used in congregational worship. It was written by a man named Asaph who was a prophet and a poet and the first of David's three chief musicians.¹ So he was the head worship pastor in the temple as it were. And with his two associates Asaph oversaw the ministry of 288 professional musicians – talk about a big job! These people led the nation of Israel into worship.

1 Chronicles tells us that Asaph played the harp, the lyre – which was a hand held harp – and the cymbals, so he was pretty much a walking worship band all by himself. And next to David, Asaph is the most prolific writer of the Psalms, he authored 12 of the 150 that we have recorded. So that's a little on the author.

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As far as the content of Psalm 78 goes, it revolves around the notion of passing on our God encounters instead of keeping them to ourselves. Its goal is to inspire us with the importance of sharing our faith cross generationally.

Now the words “sharing our faith” have become so common in our circles that we take them to mean telling people about God and His plan of salvation. But that isn't actually what sharing our faith is all about. Those are just facts. To share your faith means to pass on something that is real to you – it is your faith that you are sharing; it is your encounter with God that you are sharing.

¹ 1 Chronicles 25:1-8

Now I didn't plan for these two things to correlate, but earlier in the service we heard from Mike who told us a little bit of his journey, and his arrival at a place where he is eager to get baptised later this afternoon. But it turns out this fits perfectly with Psalm 78. People who get baptised are declaring to everyone "I want to live for God, I want my life to be all about His glory. And I want this not because I know some correct stuff about Him, but because I've met Him. And in meeting Him I've realized that He is the Treasure I've been seeking. I've seen myself as a sinner and experienced the sweet taste of His undeserved grace pouring over me. And now there is nothing I want more than to get Him and more of Him in my life. I want to please Him in every way possible; I want to use every ability I've got to expand His kingdom." People who get baptized are saying that.

And this is the kind of faith that Asaph wants to stimulate in us and inspire us to pass on. So as we dig into this Psalm open your heart. Don't focus on learning something new this morning, instead, as we are going to see, let your thoughts drift to how and when God has revealed Himself to you. Think about the encounters you've had with God. And think about the difference between passing on information about God and sharing *your* faith. Let's pick it up in verse 1.

[Read Psalm 78:1-17]

And the Psalm continues in this vein for 72 verses as Asaph draws us into God's incredible faithfulness in spite of Israel's perpetual sin. God just keeps showing up and rescuing His people. Our God is the one who saves sinners.

So brothers and sisters, are you broken? As you look at yourself are you frustrated with your own propensity to fall short of what you know pleases God? Do you recognize how badly you need Saviour? If you do, then this Psalm is for you. Asaph wants to inspire you to pass this realization on because this is the kind of faith God loves.

He's not looking for perfect people. He wants to show up in the lives of people who perpetually need a Savior. And He wants to do this in order that we might pass on our encounter with a Savior to other broken sinners.

On the other hand, if you've got your life all figured out; if you are a pretty good person – nice and kind and thoughtful – and you've been a pretty good person for a really long time, and you are pretty sure you are a good step or two better than most of the people sitting around you; if you know who God is and all the stories about what He has done, but you don't need this knowledge to make much difference in your life because you are already good then this Psalm is really for you. And that's because this is exactly where Asaph says Israel continually found themselves. God showed up huge, but they quickly forgot His miraculous involvement in their lives and grew apathetic and rebelled continually.

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So wherever you find yourself this morning let this Psalm increase your hunger to remember what God has done in your life, and let it fill you with a desire to share *your* faith with those God has placed around you.

Now there two premises that Asaph builds his whole Psalm on, he doesn't go right out and say them, but they lie behind everything else he says. The first one is going to make sense to everyone here, and the second one is going to feel like a slap in the face. And that's because the first premise describes a good thing that everyone in our culture believes is an ultimate thing, but it turns out the second premise is ultimate and relativizes the first.

So are you ready? Here are the two premises behind what Asaph writes. The first premise is that our children are important. They are incredibly important. This is why passing our faith on to them is so crucial. And wouldn't you agree? I mean if you have, or have ever had, children doesn't your life revolve around raising them in the way that is best for them? Haven't you desired to be the best parent possible for your children?... Of course you have. And this is good.

But here is the second premise: Those who follow God do not elevate their children as their highest value. God and His glory and His pleasure alone is our highest value. And so woe to us when we place our family before our commitment to Christ and the increase of His glory and the expanse of His kingdom.

Now this premise is difficult for us to get our minds around. So we shake our heads when we hear of people like Hudson Taylor – for example – who spent his life on mission in China. The end result being roughly 18,000 conversions in a country that previously knew almost nothing of Christ. But the cost was huge.

In 1870, after losing a child on the mission field, Taylor and his first wife Maria made the difficult decision to send their three surviving children home to England. Later that year they had another child, but he died of malnutrition because Maria had cholera and wasn't able to nurse him. Maria died days later. Taylor remarried only to lose a set of twins in childbirth. Later his only surviving adult daughter died while on the mission field leaving four little children, Taylor's grandchildren, to her missionary husband.²

But while Taylor mourned deeply he never turned back from his mission. He lived his entire life convicted by the words of Jesus who said:

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for My sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19:29)

So while the world values children and spouses as ultimate, Jesus relativizes these two great creation ordinances. Now this doesn't mean they aren't great!

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson_Taylor#Family_and_China_Inland_Mission (Accessed July 23, 2016)

So in Genesis 2 we read that “a man shall leave his mother and father and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”³ And God commissioned them “be fruitful and increase in number.”⁴ These are the first commands God gives people. And then throughout the Bible both our spouses and children are elevated to incredibly important positions. But here Jesus says there is one thing more important than even these.

Friends, the supremacy of Christ demands that everything else be secondary. And so the Apostle Paul later said:

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.... I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:7;35)

In this passage Paul isn't saying that being married is bad, but that for the sake of the increase of Jesus' glory and the expanse of His kingdom, there are times when it may be better to remain single.

And certainly the same thing applies to children. This means there are “God-ordained, Christ-exalting, kingdom-advancing strategies for parents that are not built around the ideal comforts and securities and earthly possibilities and pedagogical excellence for children.”⁵

Our children are incredibly important, but they aren't ultimately important – they must not become the gods we serve. And so Asaph builds his Psalm around the premise of the ultimate worthiness of YHWH. Verse 4 says “we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, His power, and the wonders He has done.”

It is only when we are willing to pray “God, let me live to Your glory no matter what the cost. I'll give up anything if it is necessary. I'll live how You want even if that means my wife and children don't get everything they want or our society says they need.” This is the kind of prayer someone who has met God face to face will pray. And this is the kind of faith that Asaph wants to inspire us to pass on. YHWH is praiseworthy, His power and wonders are beyond compare. Amen?

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So what I'd like to do with this Psalm now is walk through the steps Asaph outlines as he seeks to draw us into our own encounter with God, and be filled with desire and conviction to pass this encounter on.

And in this Psalm there are two steps. First Asaph calls us to cling to what God has done in the past, and then he seeks to inspire us to pass on the past in the present.

So first the Psalm calls us to cling to what God has done in the past.

³ Genesis 2:24 ESV

⁴ Genesis 1:28

⁵ John Piper <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/raising-children-who-are-confident-in-god> (Accessed July 22, 2016)

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You probably noticed, as we read, how the Psalm is written looking in the rear view mirror. So in verse 2 Asaph says "I will utter hidden things, things from of old." Then verse 3 things our ancestors have told us." Then in verses 4-8 he talks of how God established that His decrees must be passed down. And then in verses 9-16 he goes on and on about things God has done: "He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors"; "He divided the sea and led them through" "He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water." Asaph is fixated on the past and he calls us to cling to it as well.

Now this isn't a mistake, from the very beginning God has always called us to a faith based on the past.

Exodus 20 is the biggest example of this. This is where we find the 10 Commandments. So we read:

And God spoke all these words:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

- 1.) "You shall have no other gods before Me.
- 2.) "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath... [to] bow down to them or worship them....
- 3.) "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God....
- 4.) "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy....
- 5.) "Honor your father and your mother....
- 6.) "You shall not murder.
- 7.) "You shall not commit adultery.
- 8.) "You shall not steal.
- 9.) "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- 10.) "You shall not covet... anything that belongs to your neighbor."
(Exodus 20:1-17 – numbers added)

This list of commandments was central to everything that made the Jews the people of God. But it is only complete when it starts with verses 1 and 2 where God says “I am the LROD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Without this sentence the rest of the commandments are a meaningless list of morals. But with this first line they become the foundation of our relationship with God. God moved first, and then called Israel to respond.

And friends, our faith always starts with what God has done for us. Christianity is a religion of response. God has always moved first. And He does this in spite of our unworthiness. We call this grace. God reveals Himself as our salvation before He calls us to follow His commands.

So if you are saved today it is because God moved first. Long before you were worth saving God humbled Himself to save. He made Himself nothing. He took on the very nature of a servant. He made Himself into human likeness. God became a man! And from this lowly position He submitted to the death of the cross.⁶ Jesus died for you.

And so the past is everything. The only reason God expects us to make Him God in our lives, to love Him more than even our spouse or our children, is because of what He has done on our behalf. God has wooed first. He pursued us. God sacrificed Himself for us. And it is 100% on the basis of what He has done that He invites us to love Him.

So friends, what has God done for you? Did He save you when you didn't deserve it? Did He seek you out when you were running? Has He revealed Himself as your Provider and Sustainer and Sanctifier and Friend? Did not God move first?

And so first this Psalm calls us to cling to what God has done for us in the past.

Second Asaph seeks to inspire us to pass on the past in the present.

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In verse 5 we read that God “decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel.” This is referring to the Old Testament. But it wasn't enough just to know the Law, God commanded that they teach their children to know them as well.

And this word “know” in verse 5 is a powerful one in the Hebrew. It is the same word used in Genesis 4 where we read:

“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived.” (Genesis 4:1 ESV)

So the point is not that the next generation would be familiar with the Law, but that they would have faith passed on to them in a way that would make them love God.

⁶Philippians 2:6-8

I heard a story of an atheist criminal who was sentenced to solitary confinement and only given a Bible to read. At the end of his term in solitary he was asked what he had learned. And he responded “There are 66 books in the Bible, 27 in the New Testament, 39 in the Old. The longest book in the Bible is the prophet Jeremiah. It contains 33,002 words. The book with the most chapters is Psalms. There are two books in the Bible that do not mention God – Esther and Song of Songs.” And on and on he went reciting facts about the Bible. Here was someone who knew the Scriptures better than most Christians, and yet hadn’t met God in it.

But verse 7 tells us that this is why teaching the Law is important. It says: “then they would put their trust in God.”

So the “knowing” described here is a precious kind well beyond cognitive recognition. It involves learning to see God as the ultimate treasure worth giving up everything to pursue. But it is through our teaching that our children come to know this. So unless we pass on our encounter with God the risk is faith won’t get experienced. ...

Now it is true that while we can make ourselves teach we can’t actually make anyone learn. Ultimately God is the only one who can give the gift of faith to our children or anyone else. But the point here is that God invites us to play a crucial role in this process. Our job is to pass on our encounter with God – we aren’t to teach Bible trivia or morals or stories, we are to pass on our faith. God has ordained that this is the path our kids will walk to meet God and live to His glory.

So verse 7 says “Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds but would keep His commands.”

It’s when people see God for themselves, and taste His salvation offered to them, that they give themselves to doing what He says – obedience never comes first. And so in this way the obedience and morality that occurs isn’t a merely legalistic following of the rules, but an action of love that flows out of a genuine encounter with God. When we love someone we want to do what they say.

And when this occurs then God is glorified. This is our goal as parents, and this is our goal as Christians, to inspire faith in those God has put in our path - because when faith happens God receives more glory.

And this is the reason God created us. Think of this: God was perfectly happy in Himself for eternity – Father, Son and Spirit – before He created anything. And so He didn’t make the world because He was bored or lonely, He created us because He wanted to increase His own glory. But that raises the question “how can an infinitely glorious being increase His glory at all?”

And the answer is: The only way it can happen is for another being to join Him in enjoying His glory. So the Westminster Catechism says “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever” and it is when those around us meet Jesus in us and come to love and worship Him, that God’s infinite glory is increased.

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So first this Psalm calls us to is to cling to what God has done for us in the past. And second Asaph seeks to inspire us to pass on the past in the present.

Now there is a lot more information that I could give here, but I’d like to finish a little differently this morning by calling on Mansour to come and share His coming to faith story with us. It is a story of God moving first to save and give new life to a sinner. And in the next 7 minutes or so Mansour is going to seek to pass his encounter with God on to us.

As you listen be encouraged that God is still moving. And work to remember how God has worked in your life. And be inspired to pass on your encounter.

[Mansour]

Friends, God moves first. He comes to us while we hate Him and are living our lives to our own glory. And He saves. And He breaths new life. And He pours out joy. And He restores what has been broken. And He does all this before He asks anything of us.

But what He asks is everything. He asks that we make Him our God; that we live our lives to His glory. And that we pass on our encounter with Him to those around us. So brothers and sisters, remember – work at remembering; don’t forget like Israel what God has done for you. And when you remember then pass on your encounters with God to those around you. By God’s grace may we at Fort George inspire faith and a hunger for God in those God has placed around us.