

Lest We Forget

Psalm 78:1-22

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As I pray for the sermon this morning, I will also pray for our children as they go, and they learn. Turn with me, if you will, to Psalm 78. It is one of the top five longest Psalms, but fortunately for me and you, we're only reading 22 of the 70 or so verses. So, as we turn there, let me pray that the Lord would give His Holy Spirit enabling us to hear and to respond to His word.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for this, your word. We ask that you would bless our children as they gather together for children's church. Lord, we ask that those volunteers who are leading them would find deep joy as they seek to worship you with these young people. And Lord, we ask that you would enable us to have hearts like children that look to you and are ready to believe, ready to receive the good gifts of our heavenly Father. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the ways in which you have used the word to draw us into deeper and deeper faith. But by your Holy Spirit, we ask that these verses would not just be verses that we seek to read over and then forget, but rather we would take their instruction, that we would remember what the Lord has done lest we forget. It is in the power and authority of Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Author Joshua Foer said in his book, "If you want to live a memorable life, you have to be the kind of person who remembers to remember." Pithy statement. However, it's very ironic that Joshua Foer would ever write such a statement. Joshua Foer is a reporter and has been a reporter for the *New York Times* for a long time. And his editors gave him an assignment. They sent him to the National Memory Challenge. That would not necessarily be unusual except for the fact that Joshua Foer among all of his colleagues was notoriously bad at memory, constantly forgetting. And by his own testimony, his wife would constantly get mad at him because he would forget things all over the place. And so, he chuckled, and he said, really? You want me to go to the National Memory Challenge? I think he understood, at that point, it was more than just an assignment. He needed to learn something about memory.

And so, he thought that what he was going to be faced with was a bunch of memory nerds. And he gets there, and he was blown away by what he experienced so much so that over the next two or three years, he would write a book called *Moonwalking with Einstein* in which he would write, "If you want to live a memorable life, you have to be the kind of person who remembers to remember." So, prior to going to this conference, prior to writing this book, heavily problematic with memory. And yet, two years after this, he would become the National Memory Challenge winner.

I haven't read the book. The reason why is I let other people read the book who told me, don't read the book. It's really just about his journey. Watch his TED Talk. But get another book that actually uses the things he learned. And so, that's what I did. I picked up the book called *The Memory Book*. Now, it's not one of the five hacks you have to learn to get good at memory, but it is helpful. It's written by Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas. They said something very interesting early on in the book that struck me that I thought was important. We do not have a problem with memory. If you ask anyone – and this just happened to me last night – someone said, I can remember a face; I can't remember a name. What those people are telling you there is they are not remembering names, but you can remember a face, you can remember a name.

What they learned is that we don't have a problem with forgetting. It's that we never remember to begin with because we often do not practice original awareness. And so, the whole point of the book whether it be an abstract set of numbers, all the states in alphabetical order, or the names that you have at a dinner party, it is actually possible to remember them for the rest of your life by practicing original awareness. It's less about their specific formulas. It's about learning to be there in the moment and to begin putting things into a creative order so that you can remember.

Now, I must profess to you, this is one of the places that people expect that I'm good at. I am not. People say, oh, you're a pastor, you must remember names. Nope. I have a hard time with it. Why? Because I happen to be a person who has a hard time with original awareness. I'm like a little hyper bee that's just buzzing around. And so, the whole practice of getting this book has caused me to slow down. Slow down this thing. And I'm trying. And so, I'm learning these things. And this week is going to be another great opportunity for me to practice original awareness. To a person like me being surrounded by 2,000 people, I think, how many of these people can I actually go up and talk to? As opposed to, how many of these people can I get to know? That's a very different thing. So, I've had to learn and I'm in the process. So, don't test me, but I'm in process.

The reason why I bring this up is because memory is not about your skill at memory, it is about practicing original awareness. What are we actually wanting? What do we desire? It's important that we look at this because this Psalm, this Psalm that is an extended Proverb, is really about calling us to remember lest we forget.

Psalm 78:1-22. Hear now God's word.

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.

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, and 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. They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness? He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?" Therefore, when the Lord heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. May the Lord bless the preaching of His word. Holy Spirit, help the teacher.

So, we turn to this Psalm as a Psalm that, as we've been looking at the different themes this summer of the different genres of Psalms, is an example of many of the Psalms which are really about

history, that tell the history of Israel. But what it practices is history by sort of condensing it down into very pithy ways of taking large swaths of time and putting them together into themes. And this is one of those Psalms. And we will look next week at another very particular historical Psalm, Psalm 106. But this Psalm sort of sets us up for the ways in which we understand these Psalms, what they're meant for, and how we are to appropriate them.

And this is meant for our appropriation as those who have come to faith through the work of Christ as we will see the God of grace and mercy because what is intended here in this Psalm is that this Psalm does work – as I said earlier – as an extended Proverb. So, I want you to see this first point is the wisdom of remembering because this Psalm is a wisdom Psalm teaching us about the history about what God has done. And so, as a Psalm, it works like an extended Proverb meaning it's taking one part of life and comparing it to another. It's taking the example of the history of Israel to shed light on the present tense in which the Psalm is being written. That covers verses 1 through 7. And so, it's meant to give light to the generation that is receiving this, and it is meant to teach wisdom.

And it has a very lyrical flow to it. It is not just a narrative crunching of historical moments. It has a narrative flow to it that is often punctuated by very clear points. In fact, there are four historical themes that have a progression throughout the entirety of the Psalm.

So, work with me for just a moment. What it does is it takes different segments, and then it summarizes those segments by making a comment on how the people responded. So, it goes through several sections where it says, He, the Lord, has done all of these things, yet this was their response. So, if you have a pen and paper, you can write these down. The first thing that is said to us is in verse 10 where it says they did not keep his commandments when it says this, "They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law." So, even though God had done all of these things in response to their disobedience, how they responded was they did not walk in His covenant.

Number two, verse 22 declares they did not believe. In verse 22, it states this, "Because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power," even though it had already said that He had provided a meal for them in the midst of their enemies. They did not believe in His saving power.

Number three, verse 41, it states that they did not remember what He had done. In 78:41, it says this, "They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe," meaning they not only did not remember that His power was the one that rescued them, they didn't even celebrate the day in which He did it. The fourth comes to us in verse 56. In verse 56 it says, "Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies."

And so, there is the quick summary that God had done all of these things. It says they did not keep, they did not believe, they did not remember, and they tested God. Each one of those summary points are in response to what God had done. So, this narrative history is meant to work not merely as a history lesson, but as a Psalm that is calling us to remember. For it says in the opening verses, "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." Now, it's interesting. What he's referring to is these things that I've just summarized, he's telling them at the outset, I'm going to tell you about some very dark moments in the life of your forebearers. I'm going to tell you about some difficult things. But I'm telling them to you because I want you to remember.

And it says here "that our fathers have told us." Now, what's interesting is we do need to emphasize "told." This was a verbal telling because they didn't have books. If they had particular copies of the scriptures, they were very few, and you were likely as a follower of God never to be able to read them if you could read. But you would've heard them, which is why many of our texts in their original context do not have any punctuation marks. Why? Because they were used verbally, and they were memorized. It wasn't until the Gutenberg Bible that we began to really externalize our memory of the scriptures.

Now, I'm grateful for the Gutenberg Bible. I'm grateful for the printing press. I'm grateful for an iPhone. But the realities are, as we've gone on in history, we've continually and more quickly externalized our memory. So, therefore, when we put our memory onto a memory stick or into a book or onto a device, we begin to practice less and less original awareness. I don't need to memorize the books of the Bible because they have the table of contents. Now, what value is it that I need to know the books of the Bible? That's a rhetorical question. But why do I need to remember memory verses? Because there's more going on than just mere cataloging something in here. It's not just here. Practicing original awareness is about heart engagement. And so, he is calling us to saying, remember this. Our fathers have told us this. And I'm about to tell you a dark history of how our forebearers forgot.

Now, the reason why we remember many things is because of how things work with regard to history. In many ways, the present can be very disorienting. Life is, in many ways, more like a riddle and not like an algorithm, right? At this point in time, we cannot see the pattern of history. We need others who have gone before us who have had time and experience who can look back and see a pattern and wisdom of things that happened in history to then pass it on to us to pay attention to. And so, these are the sayings that our parents give us. These are the things that I remember rolling around in my head as an adult that my mother told me when I was a small child. And they're not always things that I wish to remember, but she would tell me. She would often say to me, "Randy, you have a bad case of the can't looks." That's a southern thing for saying, you don't look very well. You're relying on me to find things for you.

Do you know how many times I've had to remember that, that what my mother learned about me that she could see from the outside that I couldn't see about myself? And so, now, I tell that to my daughter. Caroline, you have a bad case of the can't looks which what that means in southern tongue is you go into a closet, you're looking for something, and you go, "I can't find it." And then my mother walks in there and she finds it. It's just because I didn't want to go through the trouble of actually finding it, you see. So, I'm learning something about myself that I would not have otherwise known. I needed someone separate from me to show me.

The same is the case here. The psalmist is looking back into the history of Israel to see the pattern of history. And he's saying, there is wisdom in remembering because watch what happens when we don't. When we don't, we begin to trust in ourselves or we get lost in the disorienting present. We turn not to the anchor of what God has done for us in the past and who He is in His character. We turn to the wisdom of our own hands and our own understanding. And we can't see, and we can't know what we can't see and don't know yet. And we need one who has gone before us. And so, he's saying there is wisdom in remembering which means we remember not only the high points of our life and the Lord's faithfulness; we remember, also, the dark times of our unfaithfulness, yet His faithfulness in the midst of our unfaithfulness.

You see, on the one hand, we might think that, wait a second. God talks about how He responds to their unfaithfulness. The issue is not that they were unfaithful. It's the fact that they forgot about His faithfulness. Yes, they needed forgiveness. Yes, they needed mercy. But in contemptuousness, they not only forgot how God was faithful in the midst of their rebellion, they just continued in their rebellion as if that was the way to go.

And so, I am saying to you, remember your disobedience not because of shame or guilt, but look how great is the grace of our loving Lord. I remember and I will never forget my own personal moments of great failure. And there have been moments where they come at me in ways that I can't always put together as to why, but I remember them. But what I begin to remember, thanks be to God, is not the shame that I felt at the moment, but the loving grace of God that drew me back to Himself. And even more, I remember the dark moments which I deserved not only the wrath of God, I deserved to go to jail, probably. Whether it be speeding, whether I was drinking under age, whether I was stealing, these are things that I want to remember because I do not want to forget not only what I have done not because of

guilt and shame, but because of the fact of God's grace and mercy to a sinner like me. And yet, His grace not only rescued me from my sin, He saved me from myself. Thanks be to God.

And so, it's not about shame and guilt. It's about the wisdom of remembering. And here's the beauty of this Psalm. It's actually not about Israel's disobedience. It's about God's character and what God has done in the face of their and our rebellion.

Then he goes on. He says not only the wisdom of remembering, it's the wisdom for the future. That's what the whole first opening verses are about. And so, he's commanding us to teach them to our children. Verse 4, "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." It's both. It's not only teaching our children about how good the Lord is but acknowledging to our children our sin and how much of sinners we actually are, but how good God's grace is to us.

You see, here's the reality. We want to talk about how good God is, but we're afraid to talk about what kind of sinners we are lest our children might follow in our footsteps. But hello, they're already doing that. I have not had my daughter say to me, well, because my dad did that, I'm going to do that. Because I don't just leave it off with, hey, I've done this; I've been around the block. I didn't just tell her that. I told her about what I learned as I looked back through the wisdom of history, the wisdom of remembering what I saw when I went around that block that I never want to go around again so that she might understand the depths of my depravity but the goodness of God's grace in rescuing me.

What we're showing our children at that moment is that we're showing them that we're sinners too and how we as sinners have sought the forgiveness and grace and mercy of the Lord. And so, he says to them, teach them. Teach them to our children. Teach them our brokenness. But teach them the ways of the Lord and His grace.

Verse 5, "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." We're now generations multiplied on.

So, it's on the one hand, we have the scriptures. That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for me. Yet, let me tell you what kind of sinner I am. And then the Holy Spirit uses both of those stories, the story of our faithlessness, but putting it together with a story of His faithfulness. That's wisdom for the future. We're teaching our children to remember in the future so that they don't forget in the future.

But seminaries have been noticing this over and over again, that each generation with new classes of seminarians, fewer students know the Bible like previous generations as they come into seminary. Yet, the church is sending more students to seminary than any other generation before. Yet, they're coming to seminary with less knowledge of the Bible. How are we passing the scriptures on to the next generation?

So, why is CPC kids, children's ministry, and Sunday school important to this church? Is it because we simply want a program for our children? Yeah, if we're honest. But why? It's not glorified babysitting. And I want to give thanks to those volunteers who have spent Sunday after Sunday, year after year, in teaching our children the scriptures.

Church, we do not want to depart from this practice. We need to be praying for our children's ministry. We need to be praying for our volunteers. We need to be praying that the Lord would provide a director of children's ministry for this congregation so that in the generations to come until the Lord returns, this congregation would stay faithful not in passing on our wisdom, but in passing on the wisdom of the Lord lest they forget. This is why we teach it. This is why we have a sermon.

And as a preacher, I do wonder why people come every Sunday and listen to a sermon. I wonder why I get up every Sunday morning and, why am I preaching a sermon again? It's because I remember, by the Holy Spirit, I'm not expounding myself. I'm expounding the scriptures because this is what we are to remember. Wisdom for the future lest we forget the testimony of the Lord at work in our lives.

But then there is also the wisdom of hope. As we read through this Psalm, and even as we read just the first 22 verses, what is set up for us is a cycle. There is a cycle of the Lord's deliverance delivering them out of Egypt, providing for them a promise land, providing for them victory over their enemies in the promise land. So, at all of this, it also says that the Lord provided for them grain and meat. He provided them water. So, He's done all of these things. And yet, also, the cycle continues by saying this, that they, though they experienced and witnessed these things, they also quickly forgot and continued to walk in their own ways.

And so, what begins to happen in this cycle is one begins to see, perhaps, what the psalmist is wanting us to see. We recall these things so that we understand the internal wisdom of hope, but specifically this, our hope is not in the gift. Meaning, we hear what God does. He delivers them from Egypt. He gives them the promise land. He gives them victory. He gives them water from the rock. He gives them manna from heaven. He gives them quail. He gives them all of these things. But that is not what our hope is, that God is a God of gifts. We are called to have hope in the giver.

What do I mean? This Psalm is a mirror that we are to hold up to ourselves. And while we do so, we begin to see that He begins to catalog not mere miracles of what God has done – and they're legion in this Psalm of the miracles of God – because guess what? The miracles of God did not bring about gratitude in the hearts of God's people which is why Elder Koch read earlier this morning in John where it says in chapter 6, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." You see, they wanted the gift, not the giver.

And so, the point of this is our hope is not in what God gives per say, but in who He is. And the reason why it doesn't illicit much gratitude is because so often, we want what God gives, but not Him. We want the good things of the Lord, but not the one who gives it.

So, here's the question that this Psalm is ultimately asking us and leaves off on, what is your hope in? If you consider for just a moment what the Lord does in response to their rebellion, number one, verse 19, "Yet, he gave to them." Verse 38, "He atoned," He atoned. The Lord responded in compassion. He atoned for their iniquity. Why? Because He provided for the sacrifices for their sin. Verse 52, "He led his people out of Egypt." Verse 72, "He shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand," and He gave them His goodness.

What we're trying to see here is the following. What the Lord responds to in His wrath is contemptuous faith. When they saw what He had done and they reject Him, what He understands is struggling faith. We may have struggling faith. Lord, how are you working? Not, prove to me that you are working. Those are two very different things. And so, in His response, even when He gave them what they were asking for, they still did not erupt in gratitude. And so, the call here even in the midst of our struggling faith is to put our hope in the one who is the giver of all things.

In fact, the Psalm tells us towards the end, verse 70, he said, "He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand." So, even in the midst of all Israel's rebellion, even though God had demonstrated beautiful miracles, He remained faithful to His covenant and He chose David. And He chose David to be that shepherd, and through David's bloodline would come Christ. And even in the midst of the rebellion of Israel, even at the time of Christ's ministry, we see people have not changed. Show us another sign, Jesus.

All of this is telling us that even if we have miraculous signs performed before us this morning, even this morning, does not equate to changed hearts or a people full of gratitude. What we need is we need the shepherd in His faithfulness who has atoned for our sins through the greater David, Jesus Christ. We need the Holy Spirit to enable us to remember His grace and His mercy so that we might walk with Him in humble reliance upon His mercy. We need the Lord lest we forget. His gifts are great and are worthy of praise. But He is the source of all of love. Do you remember? Are you remembering?

As Joshua Foer says, "If you want to live a memorable life, you have to be the kind of person who remembers to remember." Let me translate that. If we want to live the life of faith, we need to learn how to be a people who remember to remember, how has the Lord been faithful to you in the midst of your faithlessness? How has He been present with you in His grace even in the midst of your sin? How has He healed your relationships even in the midst of your hurt? How has He given to you even when all you wanted to do was take? How has He been faithful and remembered you even – Lord have mercy – when we have forgotten Him?

At the heart of it, it is to practice an original awareness. In my heart of hearts, I want to remember me and what's important to me. But I need the Lord to rescue me and to rescue us from ourselves, that we might remember our need and celebrate His provision lest we forget. Amen. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for this, your people. I ask you, O Lord, that by the work of your Holy Spirit and only through the power of your Spirit working together with your word that you would so deeply root us in your scriptures that we would be called to remember and to celebrate your grace, your character, and your salvation, your goodness to us even in the midst of our sin. And enable us to teach it to our children how we have failed and needed forgiveness, how you have been faithful and loving and forgiving that we might teach your word, our testimony to the generations to come that they would not depart from your testimony, that by your Spirit we might walk in your ways and by your grace. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.