

Miraculous Grace

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: 31 December 2023

Preacher: Geoff Hall

[0 : 00] It'd be great to turn in your Bibles back to Psalm 78. You'll find an outline in what you were handed on the way in. I'm going to use that, refer to that as we go.

This week I've been dog-sitting for some friends. This young border collie is cute, but a bit of a dummy.

Like most dogs, he's obsessed with food and attention. A kibble snack, that's his favourite thing. He'll even do bad things and then stop before punishment in the hope of a snack.

But as much as he likes food, he's got a problem. You see, whenever I go out and put out his dinner, which he's obviously itching for, after I put it down, he's just sort of like watching me.

And what I discovered was, unless I walk away, he won't eat at all. Which is crazy, right? He sort of just stands there watching me. I asked his owners about it and they laughed and said, if you hang around, he actually starts getting hostile and won't eat because he thinks I'll take the food away.

[1 : 16] Isn't that so bizarre? However, his tiny brain says, I want food, but then gets suspicious, even of the person who provides it, to the point that he won't eat.

He's really not helping himself, is he? But he's a dog. No person would do that, right? Resist, reject, become hostile to the one who feeds them?

Surely not. Well, as Ryan mentioned earlier, we're back in the Psalms, book three. And today we're looking at 78. This is the second longest Psalm.

As a reminder, Asaph was possibly a musician in David's time. And masculine, that could mean maybe a song or a chant or something like that.

And it's about remembering. Remember your past. Remember your God. Remember your failures. It's a bit like a lest we forget Psalm.

[2 : 23] You know what lest we forget is, don't you? Keep saying or singing this Psalm, lest we forget, so that we don't forget. And we're not going to look in detail at every verse of this second longest Psalm.

But we are going to see how the Psalm paints a picture of the relationship between God and his people. And what we're going to see is a good, kind and loving God, patiently persevering with the people who don't appreciate him.

So let's have a look. In the opening stanza, verse 1 to 8, the author sets the tone. A challenge to listen and remember. Remember the hidden things from of old.

He calls them parables from the past. Parable is an interesting word here, you might think. They might remind you of those stories that Jesus tells in the Gospel.

Stories which, whether true or not, taught something particular about God and the Kingdom. And Jesus isn't the only one to tell parables. Prophets did too.

[3 : 30] And so here, these parables of the past, though much more clearly based in the truth of Israel's past, you might have heard about the Exodus during the reading or the conquest, they had a special purpose to teach about God and his relationship with his people.

And they weren't only for one generation when it was written. They were to be taught and then passed on. Verse 4 says, We will not hide them from their descendants.

We will tell the next generation. And this was God's command, wasn't it? Even from the start of his relationship with them. Verse 5, He established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children.

So the next generation would know them. That's the commands of God. Even the children yet to be born. And they in turn would tell their children. I think there's at least four generations of passing on the truth about God.

God established a pattern so that his people would remember and know him, so that all generations would know how their ancestors treated their God and how he treated them.

[4 : 47] Not repeating the mistakes of the past. Continuing to trust and obey. It kind of reminds me of the patterns that Jesus and the apostles taught in the New Testament that we even practice today.

Perhaps think of 2 Timothy 2.2, which we use in training. Paul says, And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable people who may be able to, qualified to, teach others.

A pattern passed down from God for his people so that they will know him and trust him. And if this pattern happens today, I wonder what part you play.

Passing on the truth about God? Maybe repeating the mistakes of the past? So what is it that they should pass on?

What do these parables say? Well, I think they describe a relationship that doesn't make sense. The wonders and miracles that God had done for his people were considerable.

[6 : 02] And all throughout the psalm, we see these works with this repetition of the word, he. I wonder if you noticed it. It comes up 64 times in the psalm. And nearly all of them are about how God worked for the good of his people, whether controlling weather, providing food, destroying enemies, or providing mercy.

He did it all for their good. Just listen to some of them. You can follow on the screen. He divided. He guided.

He split. He brought. Some more. He commanded. He rained down. He let loose. He turned.

He sent. He destroyed. He unleashed. He struck down. He was merciful.

He forgave. He restrained. He remembered. All for their good. All for their protection.

[7 : 11] For their salvation. Just think of a parent with young kids. I've been staying with some this week. And while we might expect a parent to look after their kids, their provision and help is just relentless.

Buy food. Make food. Play. Prep food. Go out. Help with climbing. Deescalate sibling rivalry.

Persevere when tired. Go home. Handle tantrum. Prep food. Eat food. Bathe. Read books. Help sleep. Do it again tomorrow.

It's impressive and tiring work. I got tired just watching it. God did it with his people for generations. And unlike a parent with kids, God's children never really grew up.

No matter how much God saved and protected them, they continually rejected him. Like the he repetition, they comes up repeatedly as well.

[8 : 22] And it refers to Israel. And almost every time, it's about Israel's poor behavior and treatment of God. And we see it over and over.

Have a look again. They continued to sin. They tested God. They didn't believe God. They kept on sinning. Their hearts were not loyal.

They rebelled against him. Again, they tested God. They didn't remember his power and redemption. Again, they tested God. They were disloyal and faithless.

They aroused his jealousy with idols. This is a long list of Israel's repeated rebellion in their history.

They didn't treat God the way they should have. They resisted. They rebelled. They rejected. Biting the hand that fed them. Repeatedly showing how little they cared for their God.

[9 : 22] And do you notice how not trusting God is the source of their problems? They didn't think God could or would do what he promised.

They were unwilling to put their lives in his hands. And so, idolatry. These gods, which we can see and control, they feel more real than our God, our real God.

Test him. They stop believing that God can and will save them and provide for them. And they no longer fear him. Disobedience.

They didn't believe that the life God chose for them was better than the one they had, better than the one they wanted. I wonder if these sins feel familiar to you.

They do to me. Idolatry. Idolatry. Putting my hope in something that feels more real. That has a more immediate response.

[10 : 31] One that I can see. That I can work towards. That I can control. Testing. Not thinking God can or will help.

Sometimes this one happens in disguise, doesn't it? Oh, no. I believe that God has the power to save me, to fix whatever situation I'm in. I just don't think he will.

We've never seen a miraculous healing, so I guess it's not that surprising. Yeah, God's great. He does great things. But really, he won't do this.

At least, he doesn't ever seem to. You know, he didn't save so-and-so. He didn't give me what I prayed for. But then these thoughts and feelings, don't they just lead back to idolatry?

Putting my hopes and expectations in what I can see and feel, in what I've seen work in the past. God is good. He's my God.

[11 : 38] But I don't really need him in this situation. I don't turn to him. So I'm going to focus on getting things done.

I'm being very general, but I wonder if you find yourself thinking or feeling along these lines. Don't hear me wrongly. I'm not saying that we shouldn't use medicine or other scientific progress that's for our good.

But these kinds of feelings and expectations about God can pretty negatively affect our relationship with him because it brings our thinking into the human and the physical rather than the heavenly and the spiritual.

That is, what I see as good rather than what God says is good. And so whatever's going on in your life, good or bad, hard or easy, it's good to be wondering, what is it that I want from God?

What is it that I hope God will do? What do I think God should do for me? The third of the prominent issues in Israel's history was disobedience.

[12 : 56] And I think it's easy to find myself there when I'm not checking my attitude toward God, when I'm not asking those questions. Because I find myself second-guessing, sorry, if I find myself second-guessing what God is giving, his wisdom, his decisions, then I'll absolutely be more likely to forget or ignore what God says is important.

Israel had a shocker. They treated God terribly, over and over. And so I begin to wonder, what is God doing in this relationship?

It can't be good for him, can it? Say if I went to another family's Christmas party. What about that massive chew event? And I just behave like a massive tool.

Okay, I didn't bring anything, I tracked dirt in the house, made a mess, ate all the food, didn't say thank you, invited all of my friends, got drunk, made a fool of myself.

It'd probably stretch the relationship a bit, wouldn't it? Oh, but you know, they're gracious, they're patient, they're going to give me another chance next year, but I'd go and do the same thing.

[14 : 24] These hosts would be justified in not extending the invitation in future, wouldn't they? That's not a true story, by the way. When I see this bizarre relationship between God and his people, it makes me wonder.

They owe him their lives and everything else in every generation, and they treat him like rubbish. It's bizarre. Why does God persevere?

What is it about them? Well, it's not about them. It's not about who they are or what they've done.

It's not about their character, some hidden qualities, or prime real estate. It's about God. This parable of the past, it shows us God's amazing and incomprehensible character.

They behave badly, they treat God terribly, and God shows us what he's always been like.

[15 : 34] His power, his love, his patience, his grace. Imagine if I was that kid I mentioned before being raised. Sorry, imagine if, imagine if that kid, not only was he a rat, but over the years he began to taunt and tease his parents.

I don't expect too much from you today, mum and dad. That was the worst meal ever. You say you love me, but, gee, I can't wait to move out of here.

It would put a strain on the relationship, wouldn't it? It would make patience and love hard. Israel acted like this.

They offered empty praise. They lied and flattered out of fear of destruction and then turned back to evil. It was hard for God too.

They deserved destruction, so why didn't he? Why was he merciful? Why did he forgive? Why did he restrain his anger?

[16 : 46] Why did he not stir up his full wrath? He had more right than a parent, didn't he? But even more mercy. Why?

Well, because of his gracious purpose. Because of his miraculous grace. He did pour wrath out at times. Sometimes he was furious.

He even rejected most of his people. Verse 67 says, he rejected the tents of Joseph. That is the favourite child of Jacob.

He didn't choose the tribe of Ephraim, Joseph's son. But 68, he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loved.

He chose David, his servant, and took him from the sheep pens. From tending the sheep, he brought him to be shepherd of his people, Jacob. And why David? He certainly wasn't the most impressive in the family.

[17 : 49] Because God doesn't choose based on merit, but on grace. The relationship between God and his people, it doesn't make sense. He loves them, they reject him.

But God shows his unchanging character. Yes, anger. Yes, punishment. Yes, hatred of sin. But also, mercy, grace, patience, kindness.

This is the meaning in these parables from the past. This is what this current generation ought to pass on. But this passage, I think, could leave you wondering.

It's taught to those in David's kingdom, but what about those after? Yes, they've got good lessons and David was a good king, but it didn't get much better.

They heard, they passed on, but they also continued to sin. And there was serious judgment in their future, wasn't there? The kingdom split, the exile, it almost seemed like the power and glory of God went away from Israel completely.

[19 : 14] And so, here we are, the people of God today, listening to the important lessons from the past about God and his people and I am wondering again, will it be any different?

Will our future be the same as theirs? Because I don't know about you, but I know plenty about me. And if you're anything like me, you probably don't treat God that well.

Will anything be different? Well, yes. In the New Testament passage that was read, we see an example of history repeating itself.

A man keeping the commandments of old, but with no genuine love or knowledge of God. I kept these commands since I was a boy, he said, but he couldn't do what Jesus asked because of idolatry.

So, Jesus said, what's impossible with man is possible with God. This shows that God's people didn't get any better at loving and trusting him.

[20 : 33] So, how is it different? Because of God's wrath. In verse 38, it says, time after time, he restrained his anger.

He did not stir up his full wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh. It was a punishment that they just couldn't take. In his mercy, he didn't do that.

But his people didn't never change. And so, in his mercy, he did completely pour out his wrath, but not on them, on himself, in Jesus.

And so, in answer to the question, what will be different, sometimes it may seem like nothing. Sometimes we'll do pretty terribly.

We'll continue to sin. We'll test God. We'll disobey. We'll be faithless. But unlike the past, God will not be angry.

[21 : 42] It sounds crazy, doesn't it? But it's true, because his anger at our sin is poured out completely on Jesus. That's God's mercy.

That's God's love shown to all and offered to any who will take it. Have you accepted it?

excuse me. It'll also be different because we who've received God's mercy in Jesus have something that they didn't.

In the same passage in Luke 18, Jesus says, truly I tell you, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

Following Jesus is costly. He demands our lives and so he gave us himself and his people to help.

[22 : 50] This is a big difference for us. We, the church, are a source of sustenance and encouragement that God enables for our growth unlike anything else.

God knows we're not perfect and church doesn't always do this for everyone but God uses spirit filled people to speak his truth in love to each other.

Serving, encouraging, teaching, building, sustaining. No temples, no priests, no ritual, no ritual, but still God graciously and miraculously speaking his love and grace through us.

like his people of the past we're challenged to listen and remember that God is the reason that we know him.

God is the reason that he loves us. We will make mistakes but he's completely and finally shown his patience, his kindness, his mercy and his grace.

[24 : 08] Let's remember this together. How about I pray? Our Father, thanks for your goodness and love and kindness and mercy and grace.

Thanks that you have shown us this in the word and most clearly in your son. Thanks Father that even when we mess up and do evil, you are not angry because Jesus took that away.

Father help us to encourage and build each other up so that we may always remember and hold on to you. Amen.