

Pay it Forward: Leaving a Godly Inheritance

On March 14, 1986, Wayne Woodrow “Woody” Hayes stood before the graduating class at The Ohio State University. In this commencement speech the former football coach with a career spanning 33 years, 13 Big Ten championships, five national championships, and three Heisman trophy winners; implored the students to be mindful of the lessons learned from history and determine to leave a lasting impact on their world. He noted famously that the students should “take that attitude toward life because so seldom can we pay back – those whom you owe – your parents and other people – will be gone.” Citing Ralph Waldo Emerson Hayes went on to add “you can pay back only seldom. But you can always pay forward, and you must pay line for line, deed for deed, and cent for cent.”

Today we are going to be exploring the first eight verses of the 78th Psalm. It rhythmically retells the history of Israel; from rebellion to redemption, from sin to forgiveness, from wrath to mercy. It tells the ugly story of Israel breaking God’s covenant and God’s faithfulness in keeping it. The author speaks as a prophet, urging his audience to learn a lesson from those who have gone before and leave a legacy for those yet to be born.

Please turn with me to look at the first eight verses of Psalm 78 now, if needed, you can find this Scripture on page 579 of the Bible in the pew in front of you.

Psalm 78:1-8 (ESV)

- 1 Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth!*
- 2 I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,*
- 3 things that we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.*
- 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.*
- 5 He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,*
- 6 that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,*
- 7 so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;*

*8 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.*

As we dig into these eight verses there are a few things we are being called to do...
First, we need to:

1. Listen to God's Story Personally (1-3)

Asaph tells us in verse 1 to "Incline your ears." He is saying, sit down and be quiet for a while, I need you to focus only on what I'm saying and listen to something important. The seemingly strange part is that **in verse 2 he notes that he is going to be speaking in "parables" and "dark sayings."**

We are familiar with Jesus' use of parables in his ministry. A parable is simply a comparison, a story laid alongside your life to show a bridge between the two. Dark sayings were riddles, but the wisdom the psalmist was preparing to pass down was not hidden from the hearer, it was a reminder of the oral history of Israel.

In verse 3, the psalmist notes that we've already heard what he's going to tell us. Why then was it so important that he says in verse 1 to listen carefully? Because we don't remember what we don't review. If you think you can effectively shape the behavior and thinking of a person without reminding them of what you want them to know, you need to remember what it's like to raise children. **Additionally, we are meant to feed on God's word;** you never choose not to eat dinner because you've had that particular meal before, God reminds us of what we need to hear through a regular diet of being fed on His Word.

When you read the words of Psalm 78, think about King David in 2 Samuel 12 following his sin with Bathsheba. The prophet Nathan came to David to tell him a story. David, at first viewed Nathan's story through the eyes of the one who would bring judgment into the situation. It was Nathan who then turned that thinking upside down with the words "you are that man!" Just like King David in 2 Samuel 12, we do not stand in judgment of the wrongdoings of Israel in Psalm 78. Just like Israel, we are prone to wander, prone to leave the God who personally sacrificed so much to be in a relationship with us.

Therefore, after God has communicated to us what we need to receive from him, our next job is to:

2. Teach God's Story Diligently (4-5)

A good way to think about the theme of the first three verses would be to think about soaking up God's word like a sponge soaks up water. So, if the first three verses are about soaking up the water, verses four and five are about squeezing the water back out of the sponge.

William Gurnall, a 17th-century English author and Anglican clergyman once said that “Children are their parent’s heirs; it would be unnatural for a father, before he dies, to bury up his treasure in the earth, where his children should not find or enjoy it. Now the mercies of God are the best part of a good man’s treasure, and the best part of his children’s inheritance.”

If we fail to teach our children the truth, if we fail to pass along the story of God’s Word to the next generations; we don’t just neglect them, **we are hiding from them the most precious treasure and possession in the universe.**

In verse 5, fathers are “commanded to teach” their children. John Calvin wrote that “these things should be published from age to age without interruption; so that being transmitted from father to child in each family, they might even reach the last family of man.” As verse 3 tells us, the testimony of our children should be that “our fathers have told us” and our unflinching legacy will be “we did not hide the truth from our children.”

The idea of cross-generational training was not new with Asaph here in Psalm 78. Notice with me, again, the words of verse 5.

*He established a testimony in Jacob
And appointed a law in Israel,
Which he commanded our fathers
To teach to their children*

What are the testimony and law? They are the records of God’s work.

Remember the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-7

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Parents bury the seed of faith deep in the soil so the tree will stand strong through every storm of life. The point in these eight verses is not for the typical, traditional family unit. These verses are flowing with generational language:

- Fathers – 3x (3,5,8)
- Children – 3x (4,6 twice)
- Generation – 4x (4,6,8 twice)

The point is that scriptural stories, covenant truth, biblical commands, and what God has done in your life – the gospel of grace – are the life’s blood of our multi-generational community.

Since we all have these amazing life’s stories that we seldom ever reveal to people, we are called to:

3. Tell God's Story Faithfully (6-8)

Christian author and theologian Allen Ross wrote that “the overall point of [Psalm 78] needs to be made clear: the people of God must remember his marvelous works on their behalf and tell them to their children. And that telling will necessarily include the rebellious acts of people because God's most marvelous works are his compassion, patience, and forgiveness of sinful people.”

Notice the words again in verse 4 that “we will not hide them from their children.”

The problem with adults is that we don't like to share our failures and shortcomings with people younger than us; especially our kids. The temptation is to hide our difficult past not to expose them to our ugly history. The problem this creates is that when we hide the ugly parts of our story, we rob the Holy Spirit of the opportunity to use our story to teach a lesson in the future.

Grandparents and older saints need to recognize that you are rich in stories. You have a lifetime of experience that needs to be passed down. We need to hear of your trials and temptations, about your sin and God's grace in your life. You need to share your greatest challenges; about the hardest lessons you have had to learn in life; about how the Scriptures have sustained you; about how God has put people in your life to strengthen you in times of need. We need you to keep studying God's Word every day and to disciple us and those that come after us.

Look at the words of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Look at the merciful goodness that God promises here. He will “forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Think of this, God allows you to remember your sinful past for a reason; not to remind you about what a horrible person you have been or the awful things you might have done. The Holy Spirit wants you to look at your sinful past through the lens of the person He has made you today; He wants you to be reminded of how far he has brought you out of your failures.

As we look at verse 5, we see that God commanded our fathers to tell us, in verse 6, we are called into action. Arise! Get up! Tell your children! **Why is it so important for us to pass along a godly inheritance to future generations?** It should be obvious – if we don't pass along our faith to the next generation, we risk our family falling away from God forever. Verses 7 and 8 show us **three things we pass down to the next generation as we share our faith.**

- Verse 7 – they should set their hope in God – This means we pass down hope – our inheritance is that we raise generations of people faithfully looking forward to the fulfilling promises of God.
- Verse 7 – they should not forget – This means we pass down obedience – If future generations forget the works of God, they begin to fall away from him. As they fall away, they become disobedient. As our children and grandchildren watch us live out our testimony and live faithfully according to God's word, they see the Holy Spirit at work in us, and that begin to soften their hearts.
- Verse 8 – they should not be like their fathers – This means we pass down the wisdom learned from past mistakes so that future generations and other people

will be able to learn from our mistakes, shortcomings, and failures; not to repeat them.

The handing down our of faith is an encouragement to faith and obedience, and a warning against unfaithfulness.

God has designed every wave of discipleship to shape the distant shores of future generations. If you throw a small rock into a calm pond, you will see how the ripples flow far and wide from where it initially landed.

There are four different types of stories that God has given every person here that can benefit future generations:

1. **Stories that show God's wisdom** - Parents can share the wisdom of their life's experience. Not every story has to be about how you walked uphill both ways in six feet of snow every single day to school. There is wisdom to be found in the stories of your family. Parents and Grandparents can share the wisdom they have gleaned from reading the Scriptures.
2. **Stories of God's work** - Woven through Scripture we find God intimately at work in the lives of people. Parents can go a step farther and tell how God has been at work in their life. Tell your kids and grandkids the awesome things God has accomplished in your life.
3. **Stories of God's power** - These are different than just telling about what God has done. These stories are about how God provided for you even in the most difficult times; stood by you when no one else would; provided a path for you in the darkness. Those "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" moments.
4. **Stories of God's miracles** - The Bible is full of miraculous stories. God did not stop doing miracles after the Bible was written. We need to share with our children and grandchildren the miraculous things God has done in our lives. Tell them about the time when God healed you physically or emotionally; about a relationship that you thought was lost forever but saw Him restore. It is our responsibility to share with them God's greatness.

Can you have a lasting impact on your family? Absolutely. Within the span of just three verses in Psalm 78 we get a glimpse of a legacy that can last for at least FIVE generations. We see in verses 3-8 six different references that span FIVE generations:

- Our fathers (3,5)
- Us (3)
- Our Children / Their grandchildren (4)
- Children yet to be born – This would be our grandchildren and our father's great-grandchildren (6)
- Their children – These are our great-grandkids and our father's great-great-grandkids (6)

The question is, what kind of legacy will you leave?

In the same way that nothing can disqualify you from being able to come into a relationship with the savior, nothing disqualifies you from being able to speak truth into the lives of other people. Have you screwed up? Sure, you have, we all have. The questions you need to ask yourself after such a fall are:

- What did I learn from this experience?
- Is there anything from my experience that I can share with others to keep them from making the same mistakes.

George Santayana once famously wrote that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” That’s the point Asaph was trying to make here. Look through the book of Judges sometime. Israel’s history went in a cycle. They would go from having a close, intimate relationship with God to straying and turning their back on him in favor of sin and idols. God would then turn His back on Israel for a time, and they would spend a few hundred years under oppression. God would then raise up someone to lead Israel forward out of oppression and back into relationship with him.

We are no different! We have times where we begin to stray from our relationship with the Savior and begin to live according to our ways. We will hopefully begin to discover the error of our ways and thinking and begin to return to Him. He opens his arms wide and welcomes us back with a warm embrace.

While we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God, sin does not have to be generational. Maybe a specific type of sin has chosen to perpetuate itself in your family line. Maybe there happens to be a long line of alcoholics in your family. You don’t have to be an alcoholic simply because it “runs in the family.” God wants more for you than that! Jesus wants to come alongside you and through the power of the Holy Spirit change not only your life but also the lives of generations to come. Then maybe someday one of your great-grandkids will tell their children about the godly example you set through your life. The beauty of Psalm 78 is that you can learn from your past and that you don’t have to make the same mistakes that your family has been making for generations. Just commit to a fresh start.

If you want to leave a legacy in the faith that could potentially last for the next several generations, start now. Befriend, mentor, and disciple younger Christians. Teach your children, your grandchildren; teach other people’s children and grandchildren about Christ. Set for them an example that will stand as a guidepost pointing them to Christ for the next 200 years.

Psalm 78 serves as a call to action for not only parents and grandparents, but for the Church as a whole. Martin Luther, some 490 years ago, said “We are plagued by the miserable fact that no one perceives or heeds this truth. All live on as though God gave us children for our pleasure or amusement, as though He gave us servants to use, like a cow or a donkey, for work only. As though we were meant to live with our subordinates only to gratify our whims, ignoring them, as though what they learn or how they live were no concern of ours.”

Luther continued, “no one wants to see that education or training is the command of the Supreme Majesty, who will strictly call us to account and punish us for its neglect, or that they need to be seriously concerned about young people is so great.”

Parents, ask yourself today what plan you have that imparts Godly wisdom and knowledge to your children? What plan do you have that will aid them in being able to stand firm in the hope of the gospel when faced with the grief, pain, challenges, and temptations life inevitably throws at them?

Grandparent’s, ask yourself today what your role is in the life of your grandchildren. Are you just the fun grandparent that occasionally babysits and spoils your grandkids because that is the role society has told you to play? Or are you taking your role seriously to have a godly impact in the life of not only your grandkids?” What legacy are you leaving for future generations?

Through the Church, I commit to using the children’s and youth ministries to do more than entertain your kids. I am committing myself to spend the small amount of time I have with your children and grandchildren to providing them the tools they need to build a godly foundation. I am committed to aiding you as you seek to raise godly children and grandchildren. If you feel called to do more in the lives of the “future generations” but don’t know where to start, come talk to me. I will do everything in my power to provide you with the tools you need to be empowered to fulfill God’s call and command.

Langley, Virginia is home to CIA headquarters—our Central Intelligence Agency. In the central atrium, there’s a white marble wall engraved with 129 gold stars. This is the Memorial Wall, and these 129 stars remember CIA agents who’ve died in service to their country since 1950. Below the stars, a black Moroccan goatskin book is encased in stainless steel and topped with an inch-thick plate of glass. In this book, names representing 91 of the 129 stars are written. For security reasons, the rest must remain anonymous, still protecting their country in death.

In 2010, Michael Morell became the deputy director of the CIA. And he made an early leadership decision. He insisted that the swearing-in ceremony would be moved to the main lobby at the main headquarters building so that it could be held in front of the stars. He got a lot of pushback because it would take a lot of work to set up that space for each ceremony. But he kept saying, “I don’t care. Just do it.” That ceremony now takes place in the shadow of that wall, and every new CIA employee raises their right hand and takes their oath in the light of those stars.

Michael Morell made a wise decision. He wanted to soften people’s hearts to the story they were joining. He was calling them to commit their days to their sacred duty of protecting their nation and its citizens. And he was filling their minds and their motives with the heroic deeds of those who had gone before them. “I worked by a simple motto,” he writes: “that what I did every day needed to live up to the sacrifices represented by those stars.”

Don't leave the teaching and training to the seminaries and the Bible colleges. Don't leave the evangelism for the campus ministries and the parachurch organizations. Don't leave the discipleship to the paid pastors or the church staff. Don't leave the parenting to a kids' program or your local Christian school. Listen to God's story personally; commit to teaching God's story diligently; and tell everyone you get a chance God's story faithfully. If you can do these three things you will leave a godly inheritance that will last long after you are gone.