

A strong spiritual life

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: 18 August 2019

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0:00] I'm just going to press on. So my question is what is the secret of a strong spiritual life?! And we've talked about this before. Some people look for truth and reality in science-based knowledge! But science-based knowledge is very limited in what it can actually achieve or address.

Yes, some people look within what's happening inside me, the impressions that I'm feeling in my spirit, my feelings and what seems to me to be true. But that also is very limited. It's just me and I could be wrong. I can't persuade others. It has no real objectivity. And if there is doubt and I don't feel so strongly, then where do I turn? Because I must be insecure when that happens. It's just gone wrong again, hasn't it? I'm just going to carry on. Psalm 78, however, tells us we're to look back into the history of what God, the maker of heaven and earth, has done and said. So please turn to Psalm 78.

Psalm 78. I'll just try once again to get this back, but otherwise I shall just press on, I think. Is there any reason why it's doing this? I don't think so. Ah. It's...

So what I'd like us to do this morning, we've been looking at this psalm for three sessions. I'd like us to look at the way it relates to Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and particularly the gear change at the end in verse 65, where it says, Then the Lord awoke us from sleep. He beat back his enemies. He put them to everlasting shame. So something seems to change at the end of the psalm. So what I've got three things, and they may or may not stay up on there, but number one is a provoking challenge. So I've got a little picture of a provoking challenge. Number two, a heavenly provision. So I've got some bread there. And number three, a competent guide. So there's a shepherd leading his sheep. So there's going to be three things, whether or not they're on the back there. A provoking challenge, a heavenly provision, and a competent guide. So let's just remind ourselves before we get into that a little bit about the psalm. It's the longest of the psalms, second longest of the psalms.

[2:51] It's addressed to people. It's not addressed to God. It works by saying you need to go back to history for the spiritual life. It says you don't look to science. You don't look inside yourself. You go back to the history of what God has done and what God has said.

It gives us, it says, the history, verse 4, of his praiseworthy deeds. And in fact, I think it's going further than that. It's saying, if you want to know who God is, this is his fingerprints, really. It's how you can tell who he is. He's the God who does things like, takes his people out of Egypt, leads them through the desert, and feeds them in the desert. He enables them to cross the water, and he feeds them in the desert. The psalm also tells us about the typical responses of the human heart. And it's rather a sad description. It says they did not trust in God. They forgot his deeds. The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows, turned back on the day of battle, verse 9.

Verse 32, in spite of this, they kept on sinning. Verse 17, they continued to sin. Verse 56, but they put God to the test. And it's a withering description of the typical reaction of the human heart.

It's not being anti-Semitic. It's just saying that this particular nation, like a test bed, to show what all people are like, when they're given privileges by God, it's an ungrateful reaction.

And the aim of the psalm is to produce faithful obedience in each new generation. And you might have remembered the bit at the beginning where the fathers tell their children, and then the children tell their children, and the children tell their children. Verse 6, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Well, that's the plan, and that's what the psalm is aiming for, but it's a sad disappointment generation by generation.

[5:02] And of course, as it goes on from one generation to a generation, that includes us. We've been taught things, and we are to teach them to the next generation, and the question for us is, how will we react? Will we be stubborn and rebellious, or will we learn and not forget, and be obedient and grateful? So the psalm has a very punchy application to us today.

And there's one other thing about the psalm, it's unfinished. Do you notice that it gets up to the point of David, King David, but of course there's been a lot of history since then, and the psalm sort of stops halfway through that, rather saying to us, well, let's see what happens now. And that's what we're going to look at that as well. When David comes, the psalmist seems to hope that all those previous problems will be solved. And it asks the question, how will this play out today?

How will this play out today? So let's look at the, number one, a provoking challenge. So I ask the question, what sort of text is this? What sort of text is it? It's a psalm, meant to be sung, which we did. The writer says, verse 1, O my people, hear my teaching. So it's a piece of teaching. Actually, the word is Torah, which you would usually translate law, but Torah actually includes instruction. So he says, I'm instructing you about something. And he says, they are words. Listen to the words of my mouth.

And then he says, verse 2, I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter hidden things from of old. So I just want to stop on that for a little while as my first point. So parables, hidden things from of old. Please turn with one finger to Matthew 13, 34. That's to say, if you know where to look in the Bible, don't get all in a pickle if you can't find it, but I know many of you would know where this is.

[7:23] Matthew chapter 13, verse 34, where Matthew, the gospel writer, says this about Jesus. Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet, quote, I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world, which is, of course, a quote from Psalm 78. So I'd like us to ponder this for a little bit. Why does Matthew say that the ministry of Jesus, particularly his ministry in doing parables, is a fulfilling up, a fulfilment of the very thing we're reading in Psalm 78? We've got something in Psalm 78 and Jesus sort of fills this up and gives it its full weight and follows that on. Now, why does he say that? I suppose you could say, well, it's a bit of a, just a coincidence, parables, parables, same word, but there's no further connection. But I think that's not the case. I think there is a deeper and more illuminating correspondence between Psalm 78 and the ministry of Jesus. And that's what I'd like us to think about as we think of the provoking challenge. So let's stop and look at the word parable and hidden things.

Well, the word parable in the original, it can be all sorts of wise sayings. So the word could be proverb, parable, proverb, riddle, and the word for hidden things is often paired with it. They're very similar. So the word for parable is used for the proverbs in the book of Proverbs of Solomon.

Same word. And some of you will have read the book of Proverbs and you know that it contains wise observations, wise advice, and things like that.

So all words, and this includes words in the Bible, have got a range of meaning. You can be over the left hand side, over the right hand side, or somewhere in the middle, and it has a range of meaning. And it can mean just wise sayings like a stitch in time saves nine. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise. However, it can have a meaning over to one side, which is a negative meaning.

And in Jeremiah 24, 29, and in several other places as well, proverb, parable, I think it's mashal in Hebrew, it says, let me read it to you, 24, 29. This is one of the Old Testament prophets.

[10:45] He says, I think it's 24, can't be 29, can it? It must be nine.

I will make them abhorrent and an offence to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, an object of ridicule and cursing. So let's retranslate that from the authorised version, I think, a reproach, a proverb, a taunt. So there, a proverb, the same word, is used as a very pointed, almost like a condemning word. Look at the mess these people have made.

I can't think of an English proverb that would be quite like that. But this is a taunt, you know, a sort of word in which you go, like that, and you, it's an insulting, perhaps a taunting word to say, look at the mess you've made of this. And you can use the word proverb for that, a very negative word, a slogan used for warning and doom and, if you like, condemnation.

That's how it is in Jeremiah. I'll make it a byword. So in English, byword would mean a word that you try and avoid. Yeah?

Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread. Yeah, that would be a warning type proverb. And the word hidden things, well, I don't know whether the hidden sets us off on the wrong track, but it's a very similar word. It's the same word that was used of Samson and his riddle. Do you remember? Out of the strong comes sweetness, isn't it? Something like that.

[12:43] And out of the eater comes something to eat. And do you remember that was a riddle? It was something they, his hearers couldn't solve it. Do you remember what the solution was? It was a lion's carcass, wasn't it? In which some bees had made their nest and were producing honey. And nobody could get that. They thought about it. They couldn't get it. It was a hard saying. So Samson's riddle was that one. And the Queen of Sheba came to ask Solomon this same thing. Do you remember she came to ask him hard questions? And he amazed her by his wisdom. So this is the realm of these two words. The first one, if you go right over to one side of it, it can be a warning word, a byword. And the second one, a hard question, something to really get your head around, something to puzzle you, make you think. And the psalmist psalmist says, that's what I'm writing. I'm writing some words that are challenging. And in a sense they're condemning because they say, look at the mess your forefathers made of this time and time again. They're quite a provoking challenge in this parable or proverb. And the writer takes the past and challenges the people of the present with the things from of old.

And he addresses this to people who are very likely to fail spiritually. I think that's something that we learn from this. He's saying to these people, I am not at all convinced that you will be any better than your forefathers. So if you've got ears to hear, hear. Here's something for you to take on board quite seriously. Oh my people, hear my teaching, listen to the words of my mouth. I've got a provoking challenge for you from things of old. It's addressed to people who are very likely to fail spiritually. And they're words of strong challenge in fact.

It's not just teaching history, is it? He's saying, look at history, but jolly well learn from it. Don't make the same mistake again. Words of strong challenge. That's the psalmist.

What does this tell us about Jesus? Because Jesus' ministry is the fulfilling of this. When he spoke in parables, he filled up this whole idea of speaking in this sort of way. Now Jesus didn't take history generally speaking in his parables. He did sometimes, but he generally took common subject matter like farming or fishing or growing seeds. But he too was speaking to people on the verge of appalling spiritual failure. I think we only pick that up as we're going through Matthew. We'll be doing the parables quite soon. And that's the context in which to hear the parables. The people are on the verge of appalling spiritual failure. And he speaks to them in parables, in provoking challenge. Words full of challenge saying to those people, look, this is going to make you think, but it is your last chance. You need to think what's being said. You need to accept this challenge. And you need to respond in a way that you're not responding at the moment. So let's take this first point, a provoking challenge. And let's take that for us too. God's word is a now word. God's word speaks to us and does something even as we sit and listen to it as we're doing this morning. We've had it read and now we're pondering its meaning and mulling it over together. And God's word challenges us, what will you do about this today? It's a provoking challenge. Listen to, I will open my mouth in proverbs, in parables, in bywords, to get people to respond. And it's the same for us today. Some of you,

I know, have in your hearts every day to do what the Lord wants to do, whatever the cost of it. Some of you might not. And the parable says, don't fail. Believe the Lord, give your life to him, put your trust in him, from now on, do it. A provoking challenge. Number two, a heavenly provision. So I'm going to skip on down to the reference to God feeding people in the desert. That's in verse 23, 24, 25, around there. He gave command to the skies above and opened the doors of heaven. He

rained down manna for the people to eat. He gave them the grain of heaven. Men ate the bread of angels. He sent them all the food they could eat.

[18:25] So that's what it, it's talking about God feeding his people in the desert. If you're crossing a desert, you need two things. Well, you need at least two things. You need water and you need food. And he opened the doors of heaven and rained down manna. He gave them the grain of heaven. And it is a supernatural and brilliant provision of food to keep them alive in the desert.

I mean, what could be better? That every day God sent them the food they needed. It's brilliant, isn't it? And he sent it supernatural. A wonderful provision. And they gathered it on a day-by-day basis except the Sabbath when they got two days worth the day before. And all the way across the desert, God provided for them what they needed. God's still the same today. And although the people grumbled, and the word grumbling takes part of this, and they said, oh, we're fed up with this.

We would like Kentucky Fried or something a little bit more meaty and juicy. That just shows what people are like, isn't it? Now, this too is quoted in the New Testament. And I'd like you, if you're able to find this place, to turn to John chapter 5 verse 30.

I don't mean John chapter 5 verse 30. I mean John chapter 6 verse 30. Sorry.

In John chapter 6, Jesus has just fed 5,000 people with how many loaves and fish was it? I've lost it. Five small barley loaves and two small fish. And Jesus fed 5,000 people with that little bit of food. That's a remarkable thing, isn't it? To feed people in the desert so miraculously.

[20:31] It sort of sets things going in your mind. And the Jews ask him afterwards, in verse 30, what miraculous sign will you give us that we may see it and believe you? Which seems a very perverse thing to ask. Jesus has just fed 5,000 people and the Jews, meaning the Jews who oppose him in this case, they say, could you do something to impress us? He's just fed 5,000 people. I mean, this is bizarre, isn't it? Can you do us something impressive, perhaps? I mean, something perhaps with food that we may see it and believe you. What will you do? Our forefathers ate manna in the desert, as it is written, as it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Verse 31, as it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. Which is a quote from Psalm 78. They're saying, look what God did in the past through Moses. That was something. Can you do anything like that?

Then we'd be impressed. You see, it is perverse, isn't it? That was Moses. And Jesus picks up on this.

And Derek Kidner, the commentator, says they've picked up a weapon in this quote to try and show Jesus that he's inferior, but it's too sharp a weapon. It will cut them when they're not expecting it.

So, let's just follow this through. So, Moses gave them bread from heaven. Verse 32, Jesus says, I'll tell you the truth, it's not Moses who's given you bread from heaven. Well, he did, didn't he?

Moses gave something vegetable. I presume manna is a vegetable from heaven. The manna gave physical life. So, they're hungry, they had something to eat, and they felt stronger.

[22:36] It was for one specific ethnic group. It was for the Israelites only as they crossed the desert. It was time limited. You could say it's for one day, or you could say it's for 40 years, but it was time limited. And even having eaten this all the days of their life, they still died at the end.

That was what? That was the supernatural, brilliant provision of manna in the desert. And the Jews are saying, you can't do anything like that, can you? And Jesus says, well, actually, let me just explain this to you. Jesus says, that was great, but this is greater. Verse 32, I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven. It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. So, let's just ponder that. This is the Father who does the giving, and the bread of heaven he gives is not a vegetable, but a person. Because Jesus is talking about himself. I am the bread of heaven. The bread gives physical life, just the same way as toast does, or bagels, or fish and chips. That's all it does. Jesus gives spiritual life. When he says he gives life, he means he gives, he means that

he will give spiritual life.

It's not just for one ethnic group. Jesus says, the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. So, not just for one ethnic group, not just for Jewish people, but for Italian people, and Chinese people, and English people, and Welsh people, and Swiss people, and Ethiopian people, and Ethiopian people, for the whole world. And this bread lasts forever.

Verse 35, he's talking about this. I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry. He who believes in me will never be thirsty. It lasts forever. Once you've eaten this bread, you do not die. Once you've drunk of Jesus Christ, you never dry up. It lasts forever.

[25:30] And although bodily, a Christian believer may die, it's a temporary thing, because this bread ensures that people are raised on the last day, which is what Jesus goes on to say in verse 51.

I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world. Did I quote the right one?

Verse 53, I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Verse 54, whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, has eternal life. I will raise him up at the last day, for my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.

This particular recipe for food, for bread, well, he says, I can't really describe it to you just by talking about bread.

My bread, he talks about his body and his flesh, because this recipe for bread requires a death. This food requires somebody dies.

[26:53] Jesus sheds his blood to give life for the world. It's a heavenly provision. And what will we do with this heavenly provision? The Jews, in the Old Testament, they grumbled.

The Jews talking to Jesus grumbled and found fault and said, I'm not impressed. But they should have been impressed.

To eat this provision is simply to put trust in him. So I ask you this morning, you've heard it, will you put your trust in him?

We've had the evidence put before you of who he is. He's the one who feeds his people in the desert. He's the people who leads his people across the desert.

Will you eat of him by believing in him? Those who believe in him have eternal life and never die.

[27:56] Number three, a competent guide. So the final section is this change of gear that we've noticed before.

Verse 65, Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man wakes from the stupor of wine. Well, that's the translation. It might be as a warrior shouts with wine.

Suddenly he wakes up and changes gear. Now, why does it change gear? It changes gear when he begins to think about David, King David, a historical figure.

He wasn't there during the Exodus or the time of the judges. He comes on the scene at a later point. I think the psalmist is doing the same thing that the writer of the Book of Judges does.

He's very pro-David, and he says at the end of his book, the Book of Judges, in those days Israel had no king. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

[29:02] The expectation when the king comes, he'll change that. Now, that's a wonderful expectation. The expectation that the David king would overrule the people's sin and folly and give the obedient people a safe, secure home, a rest for the people of God.

But David didn't do it. He achieved a huge amount, but he did not give them rest. He did not bring them safe home forever.

He had problems with his own sin, didn't he? So it's interesting that even with the failure of the original King David, I keep thinking of the exiles in Babylon who would have sung this psalm, knowing that their king had gone, they were out of the land, but they would still sing this psalm, that God, who didn't let the people go all through those previous generations, still wouldn't let his people go, even in exile.

The promises still stood, and they would still be looking forward to a David-type king of whom you could say, he's actually done it. And they would have sung this psalm in hope and in faith and in expectation.

Now, let's think about David. The David that's described here is chosen to do this. It's in verse 67. God rejected the tents of Joseph.

[30:44] He did not choose the tribe of Ephraim. He chose the tribe of Judah. Verse 70. He chose David his servant, and he took him from the sheep pens. From tending the sheep, he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Israel.

So first off, this would now think about a competent guide. We thought about a provoking challenge, a heavenly provision, and now we're thinking about a competent guide.

And this David is chosen by God to do this. So I want to say that the idea of God choosing brings us into the area of the act of total, divine, sovereign grace.

So this isn't God saying, I wonder who's good enough for this. Anybody volunteer? Come on, you lot. It isn't God doing that. It's God saying, I know you're rubbish. I will do this myself.

I will get you a leader. I will choose a leader. I will take him and send him. I'm going to do it. Just as well, really, isn't it? A total act of divine, sovereign grace.

[31:49] It was not to do with human effort or deserving. It's grace. And this David shepherds with integrity of heart.

Did you notice that? Verse 72, David shepherded them with integrity of heart. This is a very special thing, to have this leader with integrity of heart.

Something totally uncorrupt, heart. A heart that is totally blameless. A good heart, good hearted king.

A good hearted leader. What I've written down here is I've put, unlike Bill Clinton, unlike Boris Johnson.

Of course, nowadays, we've got used to our leaders. We say, well, the only thing that matters is their politics and their political skill. The fact that Bill Clinton committed whatever he committed with that poor girl who he exercised his power over, and the fact that Boris Johnson is into his third divorce and living with his girlfriend now, we say, that doesn't matter.

[33:11] That's their personal life. But the Bible says, the sort of leader we really want has got to have integrity of heart. He's got to be good right through from top to bottom.

And I say, sadly, that's unlike Bill Clinton. It's unlike Boris Johnson. But it's totally like Jesus. Isn't that right?

If you think of Jesus, you cannot find a single flaw from the top to the bottom. You read the things that he did, the way he did things, the things that he said.

Integrity of heart is totally Jesus. Notice the next couple of things that are said. David shepherded them with integrity of heart, and with skillful hands he led them.

So let's just think about skill. Again, this word crops up in various different translations. You could translate it understanding. Or you could translate it wisdom.

[34:21] And it's rather a remarkable word because this wisdom is very closely associated with God himself. So Psalm 136, verse 5, and Psalm 147, verse 5, and Jeremiah 10, verse 12, say something like this.

God, by wisdom, made the heavens. Psalm 136, verse 5, for example.

Do you want to check it? Psalm 136, verse 5. Who, by his understanding, made the heavens. Same word. Understanding, wisdom, skill.

There's something very much to do with the wisdom of God in this word. It isn't totally only God's wisdom. Human beings have access to it.

Beginning of Proverbs says if you seek wisdom, if you ask for it, God will give that into your life. So it's not a totally divine thing as if human beings couldn't be part of that.

[35:25] But it is a very much a thing to do with God. And this David shepherds with wise hands.

With hands of understanding and hands of wisdom. And I want to say this too is totally Jesus. It's said about him that he is Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

If we want to see wisdom, see what wisdom looks like, Paul says, well you can go to universities and you can see some sort of wisdom there. Yep. You can go to watch on the football pitch and you can see some sort of skill there.

But if you really want to see wisdom, you should look on the cross. You should see Jesus, the Son of God, dying for the sins of his people to redeem them and bring them back.

And that's the wisest thing you'll ever see. And this king shepherds his people with wisdom, with wise hands.

[36:43] And he, last thing, he leads them. It says, with skillful hands, he led them. And I want to just pause on this word to lead and say that there's something competent about this.

My third point is a competent guide. He leads competently. Meaning to say, he is able to see people through and to get people home.

home. His ability to see people through and to get people home.

This is totally Jesus Christ. He says in the chapter we're reading, this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

Jesus is totally competent to get his people home. So he doesn't just lead in the sense of saying, it's this way, where are you? Anyway, this was the way anyway.

[38:09] He actually takes his people and makes sure they get home. He leads his people with skillful hands until they get home.

No one can pluck them out of my hands, says Jesus. And Jesus, the son of David, wonderfully achieves what was expected of David, but what he himself was unable to deliver.

A competent guide. So what we've looked at is a provoking challenge. Number one was a provoking challenge, something that we need.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Something's been said, how will you respond to it today?

Number two, a heavenly provision, something supernatural and brilliant, but not actually bread that goes off, bread that spoils, but something, someone who actually gives eternal life which starts now.

eternal life that starts now, a heavenly provision, a person. It seems too good to be true, but it's true.

[39:19] A heavenly provision, and thirdly, a competent guide. A guide who says, I can get you safe home. Put yourself totally in my hands.

I'll lead you, I'll be with you, I'll never leave you nor forsake you, even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll be with you, but I'll get you home.

I ask whether you will personally trust him and put yourself completely into his care. You would never make a wiser choice than doing that.