

Retelling what God has done

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[0:00] You have told us that your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. You have told us that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from you. You have told us that as we meditate on the word of the Lord, we will be like trees planted by streams of water, not dying and withering, but bearing fruit in due season. So even as we sinners ask this of you, we do ask that as we meditate in your word, you will fill all your promises and feed and bless and strengthen and grant repentance and even conversion and faith. So come and speak to us, we pray, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

So let me first ask you a general question about where do you find the secret of true life? And of course there are many answers that people give to this. So some people would go down the scientific route and say that science provides us with the secrets and the realities of life. And science deals with what can be put in a laboratory and measured, what can be tested by repeatable test. And of course the problem with that sort of truth is that it only works for some parts of life. It puts most of life out of reach because you can't take beauty and put it in a test tube and measure it. You can't take courage and repeat it time and time again. Integrity is something you can't measure with a laser or anything like that.

And science of course has no understanding or way of measuring good and evil or even people. So science gets us somewhere but it can't give us the secret of true life. Now many people would look to their feelings and intuitions to get the secret of true life. So we're talking about the new age sort of thing, perhaps the hippie sort of thing, the mystical sort of thing, perhaps the post-modern sort of thing. I'm not being very rigorous here, am I? But you get the idea.

It's what I feel to be good and what I feel to be right and what I feel to be true for me. Of course that has its limitations as well. What is true for me, you might not say, well I don't feel that's true for me. So we end up with things that are true for one person but not true for another and sort of wonder what true means. So it's not objective. I can't see the way of proving anything to somebody else because all they say is, well it's not true for me. It makes communication and community rather difficult. And of course when doubt strikes, when you're not quite sure whether it is true for you, you've got nowhere to turn to back you up, to give you solidity and certainty in life. Those are some thoughts. We're going to look into this psalm that Rosemary read part of and ask this ancient text, what is your wisdom on this matter? The secret of true life. And the psalm has a, what I think to us is a curious insistence, that the answer lies not in scientific experiment, nor inward inside myself, but in history in the past. And not any history and not all history, but one particular history. And it says if you look at that history, there you find the secrets of life, the universe and everything. This history is what the Lord, the God of Israel, has done for his ancient people. And that's what the psalm is full of, isn't it? What he did. It says, we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, verse 4.

So that's what we're going to look at this morning. Let's just give us some first impressions as we did last time, this psalm, just so we get the general feel of it. It's actually a long psalm, it's the longest, second longest of all the psalms. And you were very bright last week because you knew which the longest one was. Which was? Which was 119. So I decided we look at it over three Sunday mornings, so this is number two of three. We noticed last time that some psalms are addressed to God.

[5:00] This psalm is addressed to the listeners. It says, O my people, verse 1, hear my teaching. It speaks to us. It's something we sing to one another.

It's direct from the wise one whom God appointed to write it to us. So it says, listen up, give ear to my teaching.

We've got ears to hear, let them hear, as somebody else once said. And the method of this is to work by telling us history. Now to us this is ancient history.

That's the history. The history of God's praiseworthy deeds. And as we'll see, there's a particular focus to this. And this history is highly significant.

Because I think we could almost say it defines who God is. If you want to know who God is, look at the history of what he's done. If you were to ask him, who are you? He would say, I am the God who did these things.

[6:07] So he is the God of redemption. Redemption meaning to buy back from slavery or captivity either with a payment of a great price or with the expenditure of large effort.

He's the God of redemption. He's the God of providence. Meaning providingness. He's the God who looks after people and gives them the things they need. He doesn't give them cricket bats, but he gives them not necessarily he gives them cricket bats.

But in this psalm he gives them food. He gives them water. He gives them guidance. He is particularly the God of patience. If you notice the number of hundreds of years the psalm covers. And there are hundreds of years of God constantly being patient with his people. And that's why I picked up on the idea of steadfast love because that's one of the ways the Bible characterises God's patience.

He is a God who loves promises to love and keeps on loving through thick and thin. And he's also a God of severity. In the New Testament the Apostle Paul talks about the goodness and severity of God.

[7:27] And in this psalm we also see his severity. And he's looking back to the Exodus in fact. The psalm tells us about the privileges he gives the people that he has chosen.

He saves them from oppression. He sustains them day by day. It also tells us the typical responses of the human heart. And this really is quite a withering analysis of human makeup.

The typical reaction in this psalm is of ingratitude. Ingratitude and disloyalty and general obnoxiousness.

And the writer tells that he is rehearsing repeating these things with the aim of each generation learning.

And it's a sort of patient thing isn't it? It says Psalm 78 the things our fathers told us will not hide them from their children but will tell the next generation the praise worthy deeds of the Lord.

[8:41] His power and the wonders he has done. He has decreed statutes for Jacob. He established the law in Israel which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children so that the next generation would know them.

Even the children yet to be born. And they in turn would tell their children. And each generation is invited to get it right. Not like their forefathers a stubborn and rebellious generation whose hearts were not loyal to God whose spirits were not faithful to him.

It sort of says well get it right this time. And of course that's still the situation isn't it? He's speaking to us and saying learn from the mistakes of the past.

Don't repeat the mistakes of the past. It's aimed to produce faithful obedience in each new generation and that of course includes us.

And we're in the business of trying to teach the next generation aren't we? But it is a very existential psalm because it says right now this minute where are you in this?

[9:46] What sort of response do you have to the God who's done these things? And the other thing we noticed this last week was that the psalm is sort of unfinished.

It doesn't go through the whole span of the things God has done. It stops when it gets to King David and that's only part way through the story and it's sort of like a rollercoaster I suppose it takes you through and then very abruptly stops and you go shooting off the end.

Where are we going to go as we shoot off the end? There's a step change, a gear change in the final section it says then the Lord awoke from sleep as a man wakes from stupor and you think right

now something's going to happen and that's where the psalm sort of finishes.

It finishes with King David and again asks the question how does that play out today? Right, so a little recap that we looked at the history.

The history is a history of redemption. This is Exodus. In case you're not familiar with Exodus it was when the children of Israel were captive slaves in Egypt and God said to the king of Egypt to Pharaoh Israel is my firstborn son let him go so that he may worship me.

[11:09] And Pharaoh said no I'm not going to do that. And so God says well I do mean this and I will strike you if you don't let my firstborn son go. And in a sort of measured and careful and increasing set of plagues God said let my son go.

Let my son go. And it ended up with a plague in which God took the life of the firstborn son of all the families.

He said if you won't let my firstborn son go then I'll take your firstborn son. But for Israel God said I'm going to make a provision for you every family take a lamb and kill that lamb instead of the firstborn son.

Take the blood put it round the door posts and when I see that I will know a death has already occurred and I won't go any further with you. And so the whole thing of the lamb as the method of redemption goes down in the Bible as being a key category a key way in which God saves people. He took them across the Red Sea. The Egyptian armies followed behind but they got drowned in the Red Sea. God took them through the desert. He led them and fed them in the desert.

[12:36] The people were constantly ungrateful and rebellious and in the end he led them home. I don't seem to have written that down. He took them to the promised land. So that's what we looked at in the past.

My plan is to look at three objections and how many examples? Four examples. So let's look at three objections. So just standing back a little bit from this psalm, just looking at the way it works.

It teaches listeners to live spiritually today by actively considering the past. Here's an objection.

I don't care for this history. It's unfair that God would choose to work in one nation's history. I refuse to listen to this. It was a Swiss National Day I think last week wasn't it?

Happy Swiss National Day belatedly that a Swiss person might say we have an excellent history.

Why can't we think about Swiss National History? Why have we got to think of Israel's national history?

[13:39] And here's the answer. This objection has been called the scandal of particularity. it means why does God just choose to work with one nation or some people?

Why doesn't he throw this open for everybody? Why does he do that? It's the same sort of objection that a Syrian soldier called Naaman who had leprosy he came to God and said can I be healed?

And the answer was yes you can be healed. You have to go and bathe in the river Jordan. I think it was seven times was it? And he said I'm not going to do that we've got better rivers at home. Why can't I bathe in my own river?

And the answer came back to him if God had asked you to do something really difficult you would have done it. He's just saying bathe in this river. It's Israel's river.

Can't you just bring yourself to do that? And he did and he was healed. Why this history? Well God has the right to choose any history he wishes. Or none at all.

[14:46] I mean why did God bother to get involved with such obnoxious people anyway? And this nation he says to them I've chosen you not because you're numerous because you're not and not because of your righteousness because you're not righteous.

I've just chosen to use you and bless you and that's what pleases me to do. And incidentally he says of the other nations pardon me probably including Switzerland but certainly including everywhere else as well.

He says the nations are blind, perverse, infuriating, treacherous and insulting. Those are my words but that's the general idea about the nations.

So why should God choose to use any nation? But he has chosen in his will to choose one family and to work through them and one nation.

So I think it's a miracle that God should be involved at all actually. And the truth of the matter is we have to humble ourselves to hear what God says in this way.

[15:52] He says this is the way you learn, we have to go there. Okay, second objection. Second objection, it is impossible to learn from history. It's all uncertain and biased and useless.

This is a rather, I think it's a rather post-modern objection to history, saying we can't learn anything from history. Why bother trying? Well, here's my answer. I think it is unnecessary and unnatural to be so sceptical.

We know intuitively, don't we? Doesn't everybody know that there is a past? There is such a thing as the past? Incidentally, you can't prove that scientifically. There is a past.

We have access to the past via memory. Memorial objects like the photo of my dad. Places in which I remember the field in which he gave me the cricket bat.

Places that have memories attached to them and testimony. I saw this. I experienced this. And the testimony can be spoken or it can be written down.

[16:59] But we have access to the past. The past is important. It says something. And history is there whether we like it or not. There are facts of history which are not just true for me if I like it or not true for me.

They're there. They are facts and we can't actually get round that. And God chooses to work in history and chooses to show himself through human history.

And he says, well he says in this psalm, remember, don't forget. he says in Deuteronomy chapter 8 verse 2, here's the key to your spiritual health.

Remember how the Lord your God led you through the desert. And actually this morning many of us joined here for communion which Jesus says, here's the secret of your spiritual health.

Remember, do this in remembrance of me. And we had, we eat, excuse me, we had bread and wine, reminding us of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, which is a historical event.

[18:10] So, it's not impossible to learn from history. Learning rightly from history is the key to spiritual life.

And Jesus says it, the Bible says it, and we're to do that. Third objection. I would like my own personal sense of right and wrong and truth to be the ultimate guide in things spiritual.

Hold on, I'm going to be a bit insulting as I get towards the end of this. Here's somebody saying, I would like my own personal sense of right and wrong and truth to be the ultimate guide in things spiritual.

I don't want the Bible, don't want history, don't want any of that, don't want to be told anything. I would like to be the ultimate guide myself.

And my answer is I'm not surprised that you say that, because somebody else said that before. And that's actually what Adam and Eve said in the Garden of Eden.

[19:18] There was a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God said, don't eat that tree. God was saying, when it comes to the knowledge of good and evil, the truth of what is good, what is evil, all those sorts of things, you depend on me for that.

What Adam was saying is, no, I'm not going to depend on you, I'm going to take that for myself, and I'm going to be my own judge of what's good and evil. The fruit which brings the ability to judge good and evil, I'll eat it myself, and I'll become like God.

It's a fundamental crime of the human race, actually, to say, in effect, I want to be God. I won't let God be God. I want to be God.

I want to decide these things. I want to be the ultimate guide. In matters spiritual. And God said, it will be your complete undoing.

You're free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the day you eat of it, you will die. There's a profound truth here, that human beings were not made to be God.

[20:45] Human beings were made to depend on God. And that's how we live. And to go against that is actually to die.

So to the person saying, I want to be my own ultimate guide in things spiritual, I have no further answer except to observe this is what God would say self-centered and proud and ultimately

suicidal line to take.

Anyway, those are the three objections as follows. I don't like the history. Well, I'm saying, here actually is the one place in the whole world where God has chosen to reveal himself rather than objecting.

Let's go and read it. Let's find out about it. Let's feast upon it. Objection two, you can't learn from history. It's all uncertain and unbiased. And I say, actually God has chosen and equipped men and women to see things with their own eyes, hear with their own ears and write down sure testimony. It's there for us. If we have ears, let's hear it. And the third objection was, I want to be my own personal guide and I say, how helpless and hopeless we'd be if we were the ultimate divine guide in this world.

[22:09] How good it is to know that there is actually somebody wiser than us, better than us, more kind than us, more patient than us, the real God and he is the one who determines these things and he was willing to share it with us.

I say, let's go and get that. Okay, those are the three objections. Right, pause for breath. Four examples. I apologise for putting learnings, I was a bit late at night and I couldn't think of another way of putting it.

What four things do we learn? Four examples of this. So I'm going to be a little bit more into the text here. Number one, God shows himself in some specific historical events of our world.

He shows himself in some specific historical events in our world. God. So the one in the psalm is the exodus from Egypt.

The psalm says if you go and look and see what God did there, you will see what God is like. You will see what his character is.

[23:30] He shows himself in the exodus, the plagues, the lamb, taking his people through the Red Sea, keeping them through the desert, bringing them safely into the promised land.

He shows himself and he speaks about it. It is interpreted to us by the word of the Lord through the prophet Moses.

So Moses says, do you know, when those plagues hit Egypt, it wasn't just bad luck. And it wasn't just a statistical variation in climate change.

What it was, was the hand of God. God. So the word interprets those events. Why are these things happening to you, Pharaoh? Oh, it's just chance. It's just luck.

No, Pharaoh. This is God. This is the hand of God. And another particular place where God has shown himself is the cross of Jesus Christ.

[24:32] Look at the cross with this wandering Palestinian teacher nailed to it. Now, how do we to interpret that?

Is this simply a disgraced Jew on a Roman cross? Or is this the biggest and best and most amazing display of who God is?

Jesus. And Jesus would say it's the latter. In fact, his words interpret the cross. He prayed before he went to the cross. He says, Father, the hour has come.

Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. And there, as Jesus dies on the cross, the Son glorifies the Father.

Father. And he says, this is the deep nature of God. This is what he thinks of sin. See what he thinks of sin, how abominably that gets treated when Jesus dies.

[25:47] And see how kind he is to people, that he is willing to send his Son to bear that instead of them, and to offer them forgiveness through what happened on that cross.

God. There is the glory of God in the most profound and moving way. God shows himself through events on earth, like Exodus, and most particularly like the cross of Jesus Christ.

Excuse me. St. Paul was later to say about his preaching, we preach this, we tell people Christ crucified. And people look at it, and the Jews say, ah, that's not God, that's, it can't be, and they stumble over it.

And the Gentiles, the Greeks, say, well, that's not very clever, it's not very impressive, and they don't get it either. But for those who believe, he says, they actually see what's really going on.

that when Christ dies on the cross, it's not weakness, but power. The power of God. And it's not foolishness and stupidity, but the deep wisdom of God. And God shows his power, and his glory, and his wisdom, and his mercy, and his grace, in the events of the cross of Jesus Christ.

[27:18] And let me just draw that thought out a little bit before I go on to the next one. Do you know, this gives what you might call religion solidity and stability. It's not based on human philosophy, what clever people have thought up.

Not even the best human philosophy. And if you've ever looked on YouTube, you can see there's some pretty crummy philosophy around, isn't there? But this is, even the best philosophy, this is better than that.

It's not the best human insights, nor even the best human aesthetics and creativity, nor what people choose to believe. This is what God has done.

It is solid, objective. It's there whether you like it or not. Objective truth, historical actions. And I think this is of immense comfort to the believer.

If you're anything like me, your moods go up and down. The sense of faith can ebb and flow. But we're not trusting in our moods.

[28:25] We're not trusting in our faith. We're trusting in what Christ did for us objectively when he died on the cross and rose from the dead.

That's solid. That's true. No matter how we feel. The songwriter said, I dare not trust the sweetest frame, meaning frame of mind, but holy trust in Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand. It's immense comfort to the believer and it's actually an extremely uncomfortable challenge to the unbeliever.

Because people will typically say, well, there's no evidence for this. It's all in the mind. But it isn't. This is evidence.

This is God doing stuff in measurable, objective human history. People saw it. People wrote it down. If I may be so bold, to deny that is escapism.

[29:25] I thought we were going to be evidence-based in some sense. There's evidence. It's an extremely uncomfortable challenge for the unbeliever. So, number one.

That was one example. So, number two. The Lord shows himself in this psalm and in other places too, to be a God of, a God who relates in a personal way.

He's a relational God. Now, I'm not an expert in comparative religion. But my understanding of, say, Buddhism is that the ultimate reality is not personal and not relational.

the God of the Bible relates personally. So, in other words, if you react to him, then he will react to you.

He relates. Even now, as you're sitting and thinking what you make of this, you're, in a sense, relating to what his word says. And he relates back to you in that. So, one of the things that the psalm says is quite sobering is that he relates to people in their rejection of him.

[30:39] He relates to people and that they, in some sense, have a knowledge of him in relationship. So, the psalm is talking about the way that, one of the things it talks about is the way that Egypt refused to let the people go.

So, God, it says, if you've got it open there in front of you, Psalm 78, verse, 43, he displayed his miraculous signs in Egypt, his wonders in the region of Zoan.

He turned their rivers to blood. They could not drink from their streams. He sent swarms of flies that devoured them and frogs that devastated them. He gave their crops to the grasshopper, their produce to the locust.

He destroyed their vines with hail, their sycamore figs with sleet. He gave over their cattle to the hail. It's a long, long list of God's angry reaction rejection that Pharaoh offered him.

So, the Lord said to Pharaoh, notice this is a relationship, let my people go that they may worship me. And it was a very reasonable request. Just let them go for a couple of days, they'll come back.

[31:53] It's a very reasonable request. And Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, in his arrogance said, who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I don't know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.

That was his biggest mistake. He rejected. God said, well, I care about that and I will demonstrate that. Second chance, let my people go.

Still wouldn't do it. And the chances ramped up and Pharaoh's heart got harder and harder. And if you're interested, Pharaoh in the Bible is the sort of icon of hardness, of a hard heart.

Gets one chance, refuses that. Gets a second chance, refuses that. Gets a third chance, refuses that. And goes on and on until he runs out of chances. And actually, God in his sovereign, in his mysterious sovereignty, says, do you know, I'm not taken by surprise by that.

But I've raised you up for this very purpose, to show my power. And Pharaoh is the icon of stubbornness. And he knew the Lord in this sense.

[33:13] God says to him, you will know who I am. You will know something of my power. You will know that I am the Lord, but you will know it because when you reject, I will strike back at you.

And I want to say, there's something really very sobering here. If we set our hearts to resist the Lord, we don't beat him.

There's an interaction going on there. He interacts with us. And things like abandonment. If you say to God, go to a distance, God will go to a distance and leave you in that sense.

He might give you many chances in his patience, many second chances, but there's such a thing as a final chance. It's a very awful and dangerous route to take to resist God and to keep on resisting him.

And to put it very mildly, Pharaoh became a spiritual shipwreck. And you would put a sort of marker, a boy, on top of it saying, don't go near here, this is a shipwreck here.

[34:34] Don't go near there. And don't become a spiritual shipwreck yourself. So that was a second example.

And actually this psalm is full of that. It's saying don't make the mistakes that that generation made. Or that generation. Or that generation. Don't make those mistakes.

Don't be stubborn and rebellious. Take warning. Third example. The Lord shows himself to be personally relational in his love.

Do you remember I said the goodness and the severity of God? We've talked about the severity. He is the goodness of God. And what this psalm is full of is this steadfast, patient, kind, love.

The Hebrew word is hesed. It's full of that. I don't think it uses the word so often but it demonstrates it, doesn't it? He gave them stuff.

[35:38] They rebelled. He forgave their sin. They turned back to him. He gave them stuff. They rebelled and were ungrateful. He didn't cast them off. They turned back.

He forgave their sin and so on and so on. This constant ingratitude from people and the constant patience of the Lord. He's incredibly patient.

There's hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of patience. I don't know whether you're that patient. I don't think I am. Israel had received God's promises of deliverance based on earlier promises of grace.

Actually it goes back to Abraham when God chose one man and said, excuse me, I'm going to bless you so much that you would hardly believe it. That's what I'm going to do.

This is Abraham and he says to Abraham, I'm going to show you a land and I'm going to give you a land and I'm going to give you children. And I'm going to make it so that your children's children's children will be more than the grains of sand on the sea or the stars in the sky.

[36:49] And through you all the families of the earth will be blessed. Through your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed. I guess Abraham is saying, but that's where it all starts.

Sheer grace. What have I done to deserve this? Nothing. I've just decided to bless you. And that blessing goes on down through the generations when Abraham's children were slaves.

God says, I noticed that. I have seen the misery of my people. I have heard them crying out. You see, God is a God who sees and hears. And of course, this is covenantal.

This is making promises. God is so And what he looks for is a reciprocation. Can there not be some gratitude from the people who receive this blessing? Can there not be some willingness to try and please the one who's blessed them so much?

To be grateful for their lives being saved? To draw near to God and to learn the things that he likes and to learn to be like him? And the psalm says, you know, God is so patient and so loving that people are just not faithful.

[38:02] They were not faithful to his covenant, yet he was merciful. He forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. God's amazing patience, his amazing faithfulness, that he will not let his promises get broken.

He's promised that he will bless all the nations of the earth and he will not let that promise be broken. Now, if you just think about it a little bit, as time goes on through the courses of history, as St.

Paul says, Israel had these privileges but in the end, I should say almost, I put there completely, failed to respond.

And these promises have gone, I say ballistic, is that the right word? the promises that were made just to one nation have now gone wide to all nations.

And those who believe are given these privileges in full. Sonship, redemption, provision, love, being brought safe home.

[39:19] We have these privileges of our Christian people. How much we have to be grateful for? let us not be forgetful.

Let's not let the internal world of our ups and downs loom larger than what God has done in history for us. Chosen, redeemed, kept by grace, promised to arrive safe in heaven, and everything along the way designed for our good.

That is pretty amazing, isn't it? We stand in grace. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. All our sins are washed away.

That's what we have. Let's not forget it. number four. The Lord shows himself to be even more at work than this psalm contains.

So in other words, the psalm is bigger than the psalm, or the psalm sort of spills out over the end of it. It is unfinished, obviously. When it gets towards the end, we'll look at this, not next week, the week after, God willing.

[40:41] It seems to imply there is a massive step change in God's saving power, and David comes to the throne. In other words, you've got all this sort of weary cycle of sin and grace and forgiveness and it just goes on and on, but it's all going to change.

So it would appear when David comes onto the scene. Now, whether that actually works quite like that, the psalm doesn't say because it stops.

I'd say subsequent history shows that actually David himself couldn't do enough to cure the root problem of the hard human heart.

But, no, not but, the psalm was still waiting for the massive step, and it isn't actually David.

The massive step change with the person who has the power to put all this right, the person who is able to change the human heart, the person who is able to bring people safe home against the world, the flesh, and the devil, powers, principalities, whatever it may be, the one who can do this, well, the psalmist was still waiting for that.

[42:03] He was waiting for the cry of a woman in childbirth, in a stable, with shepherds on their way, to find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

That was what the psalmist is waiting for, and when he comes, things really do change. God really is roused from sleep, as the psalmist says.

Now we're cooking with gas, you might say. Now redemption, look up, your redemption is at hand.

And that's what we'll talk about next time. Finished.

Let's join together. Ah, I haven't put the number.