

THE PAST

Psalms 78:5-8, 32-39

What is the proper balance in doing things the “tried and true” way versus taking a “new and innovative” approach to solving problems or getting work done? We keep seeing changes to about everything and the changes keep coming faster and faster. Some of us will hold on to the traditional ways and other just can’t wait to get the latest gadget. We have heard about the “new math” and other new ways to educate people and the reports are not exactly positive.

The idea of electricity-powered cars would have been ridiculed 40 years ago. Many are still skeptical today. Some people are predicting that we will not be using carbon-based fuels for energy or transportation in the future – I think speculation is that the replacement will be geothermal energy that can be gotten from the molten metal core deep within the earth. Almost everyone uses cell phones and it is suspected that land-line-based telephone service will be gone in a few decades. Computers and artificial intelligence innovations are changing the way we function in many areas and robots are replacing workers who do repetitive manual labor which will result in an increase in the number of people who are unemployed.

Beyond the technology innovations, we are also seeing significant changes in social and moral views that people are accepting as the “new normal.” Sometimes we will hear arguments and explanations on various subjects from people that cause us to wonder if they are coming from another planet. The idea of open borders for a nation is argued to be the morally responsible approach to the way everyone in the world should operate. We see that this does not work in a real world since the value systems and ideas of “right and wrong” of many from other areas are so radically different that chaos results.

If we were building a house, it may not matter a lot if the house has one level or two (or more), it may not matter a lot if the exterior is wood siding, vinyl siding, or brick veneer. It really doesn’t matter what color it is painted or if it has decorative shutters and a variety of other options. What does matter is that the foundation is properly built and the ground prepared to withstand the weight of the house.

We could apply this same logic to how we should embrace or resist the changes that are happening in the world today. We need to do a careful examination to see if the foundation of what is happening is based on unchanging and absolute truths. We understand that these truths are found in the Word of God. To ignore them or to deliberately violate these truths is to invite disaster and failure.

Parts of God’s word come to us from a time in the history of Israel when many people relied on oral communication. In oral tradition cultures in which many did not have ready access to written documents, poetry and songs were convenient ways to assist people in remembering accounts of their history. The Israelite people had the Psalms and we have hymns that can help us learn.

Teach for the Future – 78:5-8

⁵ For He established a testimony in Jacob And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers That they should teach them to their children, ⁶ That the generation to come might know, *even* the children *yet* to be born, *That* they may arise and tell *them* to their children, ⁷ That they should put their confidence in God And not forget the works of God, But keep His commandments, ⁸ And not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not prepare its heart And whose spirit was not faithful to God. Psalm 78:5-8 (NASB95)

It is fairly easy to have a mind set of just live for the moment without any consideration of the past or the future. This is where many people are today. The perspective of some extends

about as far as the next meal or the next marijuana joint and the next text message – all of which can become addictive.

This particular psalm was to inform, encourage, transform, and conform behaviors. It is practically impossible to learn from the past if we are ignorant of history. We have raised a couple of generations of people in our nation who are almost totally ignorant of history. They can tell you who won the latest competition on “The Voice” or some other similarly trivial amusement show but they don’t know why there was an American Revolution, who fought in the Civil War, etc. If we can separate people from their pasts and the lessons to be learned, then it becomes much easier to manipulate their present thinking and behavior and they will be totally clueless as to what the future should be.

Many people today have a fairly bleak outlook for the future since they do not have the benefit of knowing how God had led our nation through difficult times and brought success in so many areas. This same problem was a continuing threat to the Israelites and Asaph used this psalm to remind the people of all the things that God had done for them in the past and how God had been gracious to them in their past failures. Beyond just informing them, they should have also been encouraged to put their confidence in God (looking to the future).

With all the abilities we have in communicating with people, we might think that people would be well informed and know the truth about things that are important. According to the latest Barna survey – there is a hodgepodge of beliefs among those who identify as being “born-again believers.” More than 60 percent believe that a person can earn his way to heaven. Only half believe that Christ live a sinless life while on this earth. Almost a quarter supports same-sex marriage. The most troubling thing about this is that parents with these mistaken spiritual ideas are teaching a flawed Christian faith to their children. The result is a predictably gradual movement away from absolute truth to relativism and a faulty foundation which can only end in disaster.

The purpose of much of our Bible Study and the hymns we sing is to remind us of and to pass along the old stories of God’s judgment and redemption to future generations.

We start with the past as we remember what has happened recently and even a long time ago. However, we must be careful to avoid misinterpreting the lessons of the past. As we can appreciate, different people will come up with different lessons to be learned from the same historical accounts. The way to avoid reaching the wrong conclusions is to view those events through God’s perspective. This should apply not only to global historical events but also to our own personal experiences. This should apply not only to the things for which we were thankful and enjoyed at the time they happened but also to the troubling and sorrowful experiences. It is usually only in retrospect that we can come anywhere close to viewing the past from a “big picture” perspective. It is difficult if not impossible to come away with a Godly viewpoint unless we have a good understanding of His nature, His character, and know the general scope of His plan for humanity.

If we look at the specifics of these verses, we see that the present generation has the responsibility to pass along the truths that are contained in the long-standing traditions to the next generation. It seems that we do a better job of passing along the fairy tales and the pagan world ideas that have adulterated the sacred traditions that God established.

The content of what we teach is extremely important. When we minimize the truth and maximize the fables associated with traditions from the past we strengthen false narratives and when our children grow up and discover that the fable is just that (a made-up story), then they literally have problems embracing the truth of the deeds and words of the Lord as fact rather than

fiction.

Just as the content of what we should teach is twofold (words and deeds of the Lord), the benefits of the present generation teaching the next generation are also twofold. The most obvious benefit is that the coming generation would put their trust in the Lord and not repeat the errors of the past. The second benefit is that the present generation is challenged to conform their behavior to align with Bible truths. This examination of our own behaviors and alignment of our actions to be consistent with what we are teaching the next generation gives immense credibility to what we are teaching our children and grandchildren.

God knew what would be needed for His people to grow closer to Him with each succeeding generation. God's laws and commandments are provided for us so that we do not need to do things by trial and error to determine what "works" and what "doesn't work." If we start our children out very early with a respect for God and His word, then they will be better equipped for life. Our children should not have to repeat the same mistakes of the preceding generation. The wise learn from the mistakes of the foolish.

Remember the Past – 78:32-37

³² In spite of all this they still sinned And did not believe in His wonderful works. ³³ So He brought their days to an end in futility And their years in sudden terror. ³⁴ When He killed them, then they sought Him, And returned and searched diligently for God; ³⁵ And they remembered that God was their rock, And the Most High God their Redeemer. ³⁶ But they deceived Him with their mouth And lied to Him with their tongue. ³⁷ For their heart was not steadfast toward Him, Nor were they faithful in His covenant. Psalm 78:32-37 (NASB95)

The background for these verses was that after the Israelites had been given manna for their food, they complained about it because they wanted meat. This was the time when God brought in quail and the people gorged themselves on the quail and in their overindulgence many became sick and died. They had already forgotten all that the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of Egyptian slavery, providing water for them and giving them manna for food.

They should have learned an important lesson regarding demanding their own way and failure to trust God and His way. Sometimes that lesson is learned by God granting what we demand and then discovering that there are dangers and complications and unintended consequences. God's ways are always best for us. It seems that many of the improvements that have been developed over the years carry with them the possibilities of grave dangers if they are not properly used. Many of the conveniences we enjoy have the possibility to kill us if they are misused or if we over indulge in them. An example all of us can appreciate is the amazing innovations in transportation which we enjoy. These also have resulted in multiple thousands of deaths every year because of abuse and misuse. Another example that is currently in the news is that of opioid-based drugs for pain relief. There is a current epidemic of abuse of these drugs that have ruined the lives of thousands of people. We have an abundance of health care facilities and in some cases people's lives can be ruined when they get infections and other diseases when proper sanitation practices are not used in some hospitals.

In the case of the Israelites, they would demand their own way and then discover (the hard way) that getting what they demanded could result in bad outcomes such as people dying. They would then have a short-term period in what they would turn back to God and embrace His ways. As we know from their history, those times would not last and they would forget or fail to remember and return to their sinful ways and they would experience another set of problems.

It is interesting that the abundance of rich foods and our over indulgence of these has led to significant health problems and deaths for many. It seems as if we "just don't get it." We

wander away from God and trouble comes and we come running back to Him only to wander away again. This is what “religion” does for us. When we attempt to live in our own strength and earn salvation by doing good works or take a “balance sheet” approach to our relationship to God, then we have fail to realize the truth of salvation by grace through faith.

Compassion in the Present – 78:38-39

³⁸ But He, being compassionate, forgave *their* iniquity and did not destroy *them*; And often He restrained His anger And did not arouse all His wrath. ³⁹ Thus He remembered that they were but flesh, A wind that passes and does not return. Psalm 78:38-39 (NASB95)

Even today, our church membership rolls are full of people who want to “be good” but to do it on their own terms. They have “joined the church” but they have never been born again of the Spirit of God and do not know what is meant by a “personal relationship with Jesus.” Yet in all of this, God is still merciful to us and continues to draw us to Himself and to the truth of His word.

Even for those who say they are “born-again” believers, there can still be problems of understanding God’s way and failure to grow in spiritual maturity. Just as God was patient and compassionately merciful with Israel, He has restrained His wrath against our nation as so many people work against the basic principles of the Kingdom of God. When we see the deliberate disregard for righteousness and the deliberate disrespect for the church and for Christ in our nation, we have to wonder how long this can go on without the consequences of such actions causing a total collapse of the fabric of our society and culture.

Asaph noted that whenever the Lord punished His people, they turned to Him as their Rock and Redeemer, even though their hearts were not right. But God forgave them, repeatedly restraining His anger, because He remembered . . . they were mere humans with fleeting lives. I believe that we can see multiple evidence that God acts in redemptive punishment or judgment against us to try to get us as a nation to repent and turn back to Him. It seems that a couple of decades ago, when something disastrous would happen that it would spark some semblance of conviction among many people and there would be a brief time when we would “turn to God.” It seems that we are seeing less and less of such a response as disastrous things continue to happen. It almost seems that terrorism, tornadoes, devastating fires, riots, and other traumas have become the new normal. Those things do not sound much like what should be going on in a nation whose God is the Lord.