

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**Psalm 78:3-6**

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The 18<sup>th</sup> Century literary genius, James Boswell was the son of a Scottish lord who ruled his family with an iron fist. His father hardly ever spoke to him except to criticize and scold. Desperately lonely, little James retreated into the world of books and discovered a talent for writing. He also grew up to be an alcoholic, suffering severe depression.

But there was that one day in his childhood when his father took him fishing. Forever afterwards that fishing expedition was fixed in his mind as the greatest day of his life. He reminisced about it incessantly. It seemed that anything worthwhile in his life could be traced back to the only day that he ever felt loved by his father.

Years later someone found the diary of James Boswell's father. Having heard so often about this famous fishing trip, he searched the journal to find out what Boswell's father had to say about that day. Turning to that date, the reader found a single sentence:

"Gone fishing today with my son; a day wasted."

Did Bosworth ever see that line in his father's diary? I hope not. It's so gut-wrenchingly sad. This Scottish lord never understood that putting a worm on his son's fishing hook was perhaps the most significant thing he ever did in his life. A day given to sons and daughters is never a day wasted. There is no more significant investment than that poured into the next generation.

Certainly Asaph was convinced that building a bridge from the past to the future is critical. Asaph wrote many of the praise songs that were sung during King David's reign. Psalm 78 is one of them. This is an urgent song with a passionate plea:

"O my people, hear my teaching, listen to the words of my mouth."

Put in contemporary terms, Asaph is saying, "Listen up, people! This isn't just another praise song for church as usual. What is

about to come out of my mouth is *really* important!” And what is it that’s so critical to the people of God? Look at verses 3&4:

“What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from our children; we will tell the *next generation* the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.”

What the Holy Spirit is saying through Asaph some 3000 years ago is as relevant to us as tomorrow’s headlines:

**As recipients of a rich heritage  
we have a sacred responsibility  
to give the same legacy to the future.**

Please understand Asaph’s urgency. In verse 9 he refers back to when Gideon led the Israelites into a battle critical to their survival as a nation. But the men of the tribe of Ephraim didn’t join the fight. Verse 9 says, “...though armed with bows, they turned back on the day of battle.” Ephraim was the largest tribe in Israel, and the best armed. The great military leader, Joshua had come from that tribe. But Ephraim got fat and lazy. Judges 2:6 says that after Joshua died, “...another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.” Every nation is only one generation away from losing everything.

Asaph writes this shortly before Solomon ascends to the throne, and Israel reaches her zenith of power and prosperity. But even now Israel is only a generation away from being plunged into civil war and chaos. Asaph is warning his generation to build a bridge to the future while there is still time. We cannot afford to be lazy like Ephraim. We need to prepare our children to fight battles yet to come. Asaph tells us three things about a bridge to the future:

**1. The legacy of the *past*: the bridge to the future is anchored to the faith of those who have gone before us.** Look again at what Asaph says in verses 3&4: “What we have heard and

known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide from our children..." And, what have they told us? Look at verses 4&5:

"...the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children."

Not all of the founders of America were Christians, but they all held a Judeo-Christian world-life view. They established one nation under God, rooted in the laws and precepts that Asaph talks about verses 4&5. Our American ancestors were flawed people who did things that still embarrass us today. But they also held convictions that created the greatest democratic republic in history. They purchased a better world for their children by spilling patriot's blood at places like Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, and Omaha Beach. Today we stand at history's crossroads. Will our generation give to our children what our parents left for us? Or will we, like the tribe of Ephraim, walk away from the battle?

I believe that the only hope for our future is in the church of Jesus Christ. We know "the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, and the wonders he has done." We have learned from our spiritual ancestors "...the statutes of Jacob..." Some 40 years ago a group of visionaries started this church called Covenant. They believed that the best hope for Naples was a Bible-believing church grounded in the great truths of the Protestant Reformation and committed to spreading the gospel. They couldn't imagine that a sleepy fishing village in Southwest Florida would grow so large, and be filled with so many young people. Nor could they have guessed the challenges that our postmodern culture faces today. We have received from them a great spiritual legacy that is needed more than ever today's rapidly-changing world.

**2. The opportunity of the *present*: we are the bridge that links a visionary past to a changing future.** Verses 3&4 say, "...what we have heard from our fathers we will not hide from our children..." It is beyond dispute that moral values are unraveling

in our postmodern world. By every statistical measure, the next generation is functionally illiterate when it comes to biblical knowledge. Things that would make our grandparents blush with shame are now primetime fare on television. At a time when forces like militant Islam are hardening their resolve to destroy us, we are growing softer both in the church and in society at large.

I'm not here to find fault with the next generation, but to challenge the present generation. Notice again the words of Asaph: "...what we have heard from our fathers *we will not hide* from our children..." If the next generation doesn't possess the values of our ancestors, it is because *we* haven't passed them on. In the words of Asaph, we have hidden them from our children. We are the critical link in a bridge over troubled waters. Older folks must show younger folks the secrets of the past successes. No day investing in the next generation is a day wasted. Every ounce of time, talent, and money that you invest in the next generation is a repayment on a debt you owe to ancestors who were determined to leave a better world for you.

By definition a bridge takes us from where we have come from to where we are going. Without anchoring ourselves in the solid foundation of the past, we will collapse. Without a focus on the future, we are a bridge to nowhere.

**3. The hope of the future: there is an urgency to build a bridge to generations desperately in need of the same strong foundations.** Again, verse one captures the urgency of Asaph: "O my people, hear my teaching: listen to the words of my mouth." Notice here that Asaph says "...*my* people..." We live in an age when people want to insulate themselves from the pain of the wider community. In a world of uncertainty, we are tempted to hoard what we possess for our own *personal* peace and security. When King Hezekiah heard from the prophet that the Babylonians wouldn't invade Israel until his great-grandchildren's lifetime, he breathed a sigh of relief and said, "That's good! At least there will

be peace and security in *my* lifetime!” May God spare us from Hezekiah’s selfishness!

But Asaph says, “O *my* people...” He sees the whole nation as *his* family. More than that, he has a *personal* stake in the history of his people. He *personally* owes a debt of gratitude to those who have gone before him. He *personally* owes a debt of responsibility to those who will follow behind him. He is the bridge between the past and the future. He feels a sense of urgency.

Hezekiah doesn’t care what happens beyond his own lifetime, but Asaph wants us to invest in generations yet to be born. He says in verse six,

“...so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they would tell their children...”

Not only are we a bridge from the past to the future, Asaph wants us to remember that we stand on a bridge made strong by God’s *statutes* and *laws* and held together by “...the trustworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the deeds he has done...” This bridge will take us over troubled waters and through scary days ahead.

Last week I saw a living illustration of Asaph’s bridge to the future. I conducted the funeral service for Romona Coleman’s Aunt Jean. Jean was an old timer in Naples back in the early 50s when there were about 3500 people in Collier County.

After the funeral we all trekked over to the far side of the cemetery where the gravesites of Bud and Romona Coleman’s family are clustered together. As we waited for everyone to gather, I noticed a grave marker nestled between the roots of a tree. On it were etched words that caused a catch in my throat:

Shawn Kelly Coleman  
1960-1971

I asked Bud if this was the grave marker of his and Ramona's little girl. He said, "Yes, it is. But after 37 years I still can't talk about it." My heart ached for my dear brother as we stood there together. I thought about how desperately I love my daughter, Rachael. And I remembered the words of Elizabeth Stone:

"Making a decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart walk outside your body."

After the tragic death of their daughter, Ramona embarked in earnest on a search for spiritual answers. It was then that Winnie Stanley invited her to come to Covenant Presbyterian Church.

A bridge to the future was in the making. But that bridge was also connected to the past. Bob Palmer had answered a call from the first founders of Covenant to be their pastor. But, even more important to Bud and Ramona, he led Judge Dick Stanley to the Lord. And now Judge Stanley's wife, Winnie was reaching out to Ramona. It was through the ministry of Covenant that Ramona came to Christ. The bridge to the future didn't stop there. It wasn't long before Bud came to Christ and joined a men's Bible study with Judge Stanley and other guys who had come to Christ. Together with other young families at Covenant, like Bink and Ginger Webster, they started Naples Christian academy to ground future generations of kids in Christ. Over the years Bud and Ramona have been part building bridges to the future because of a legacy they received from people who came before them.

It was Ramona who first called me in New York and asked if I might be willing to meet with the pulpit committee of Covenant. I spent my first night in Naples at their home. And today, if you look into our baby and toddler nurseries you will see walls covered with murals painted by Romona.

On the other side of the tree, opposite little Shawn Coleman's grave is the grave of Aunt Jean's mother. After, we committed Jean's body to the ground, four of Aunt Jean's great-grandchildren

released heart-shaped red balloons into the air, symbolizing the family's belief that her spirit had already ascended into heaven and one day her body will be resurrected to meet Jesus in the air. As I watched those children, I looked again at the grave marker of Aunt Jean's mother. Though she died years ago, great-great grandchildren she never knew were expressing values that she held dear and passed on to her children.

Asaph was right: when we invest in the future we build a bridge to generations not yet born. Days given to children are never wasted.

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