

Psalm 78 • God's Faithfulness to Israel

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Psalm chapter 78. Psalm 78 is a fairly lengthy Psalm. It's the longest of what we call the historical Psalms, and the reason it's fairly lengthy is that it takes the time to recount the history of Israel. But it does this for a reason: the purpose of this Psalm is to highlight God's faithfulness while at the same time highlighting Israel's unfaithfulness and apostasy.

I'll be honest with you. When I read this Psalm, you know what I think of? I think of what Stephen the martyr said to the people that were gathered around him right before they killed him with stones. Because he, you'll remember, Stephen made this very lengthy recounting of their history to show that they had a history, even in the midst of God's mercy, of being hard-hearted and stubborn and stiff-necked, right? And that's what he showed in Stephen's address to the people. And of course, he made them so mad, they all picked up rocks and killed him on the spot (Acts 7:51-60). But this Psalm bears a striking similarity to the things that Stephen said.

It outlines how God is faithful even in the midst of man's unfaithfulness. And then at the very end of the Psalm, you're going to see that it outlines how God chose the lineage of David through the southern kingdom and not over, and over and against the northern kingdom of Israel. Verse 1:

"Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth!" (ESV)

Now you're going to hear a verse that is quoted in the Gospels as a fulfillment of the ministry of Jesus. Verse 2:

"I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,"

And that is actually quoted in the Gospels of Jesus, saying that it was fulfilled in Him ultimately because He spoke with parables (Matthew 13:35). But the psalmist is using the same form of storytelling by way of comparison. And he says in verse 3,

“things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.”

He's not now in this case, the Psalmist says, I'm not telling you anything new. These are things you know, and he says,

“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 (why?), 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.”

These are some important verses here. And he begins to establish the fact that the testimony that was given by God in the nation of Israel was given in such a way that the people would remember it and pass it along to their children and their children's children so that the people would learn from their mistakes. And that's the ultimate lesson that we get from the Old Testament.

I mean, the Old Testament is full of all kinds of wonderful types and shadows, but ultimately it is an example to us of how not to live most of the time. I mean, most of the time, let's face it, it's a negative example, but the Bible has been given to us in this way as an example. And we'll actually look at a passage that talks about that in a little bit. Look at verse 9, he says,

“The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. ¹⁰ They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. ¹¹ They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them.”

And you'll notice that he refers to the Ephraimites, or, if you will, the tribe of Ephraim. Now, the tribe of Ephraim was one of the largest tribes of Israel, and sometimes, on occasion, God would use the name Ephraim to describe the entire nation of Israel. Sometimes He would, and you just have to flow with this, sometimes He used Ephraim to describe just the northern kingdom, and sometimes it was used to describe the entire nation. You just have to see it from the context.

But you'll notice that he speaks of Ephraim as having turned back on the day of battle, and that's a reference to Israel's history of retreating rather than obeying the Lord. And so he goes on in verse 12, and he says:

“In the sight of their fathers he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.”

And now he's going to recount the many ways the Lord revealed His power and glory to Israel. So we'll read through these. Verse 13:

“He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. ¹⁴ In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light. ¹⁵ He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. ¹⁶ He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers.”

So he's recounting things that you and I can read in the Book of Exodus, (Exodus 14 and 17) and so forth, as the people were taken care of: passed through the Red Sea, taken care of, given water to drink from a rock, and so forth. And yet, what did the people do? Verse 17:

“Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. ¹⁸ They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. ¹⁹ They spoke against God, saying, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?”

In other words, they were struck with unbelief. The people were people of unbelief, even seeing all these things. It almost boggles the mind, doesn't it? To think of the nation of Israel passing through the Red Sea, watching the waters open up. I mean, I've seen that in movies.

Can you imagine being there in real life and seeing that happen? Passing through that area and then seeing that body of water come down upon Pharaoh and his whole army, destroying the whole army. And then, every day, there's a pillar of cloud that leads the nation of Israel. Every night, that pillar of cloud turns into a pillar of fire—a divine nightlight, if you will, to show the presence of the Lord is always with them.

And then, when they started saying, we want to eat the food that we used to eat, they're complaining. And then God, and he's going to talk more about this here as he goes on, He took care of them miraculously. And what did they do? They responded with unbelief: Can God really set a table in the wilderness? Can He

really do it? Good grief, He just opened up the Red Sea. What do you mean, can God do it? Of course, God can do it. But this is the stuff going on. Verse 20:

“He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?” ²¹ Therefore, when the Lord heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel, (Why? Look at verse 22.) because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power.”

That is a very important verse. And when it says they didn't believe in God, it doesn't mean they didn't believe that He existed. Of course, they knew God existed. They weren't trusting in Him. That's the point. You can believe in God without trusting in Him. There are all kinds of people who believe in God, but they're not Christians. They're not even what you and I would call believers because, in the New Testament, a believer is someone trusting in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

So if somebody says to you, yeah, I believe in God, your response should be, big deal. Yeah, it doesn't matter. The Jews believed in God, and yet it says here that they didn't trust. They didn't trust Him. They didn't trust in His power. They didn't put their lives in His hands. They just sat and bickered and complained.

And so believing in God, it's like, good grief, what does James tell us? The demons believe in God. They know that God exists, believe me, and they shudder (James 2:19). So, I believe in God, who cares? Satan believes in God. How do you think things are going for him?

You can see there in verse 22 at the end, what is really going on? It was unbelief. Verse 23: And yet in the midst of all that unbelief, what did God do? It says,

“Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, ²⁴ and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven.”

Crazy as it may sound, he says in verse 25, as he goes on, *“Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance.”*

And I don't know if manna is truly what angels eat; I doubt that angels eat. But it—speaking of it as the bread of the angels—he's basically just saying it came from the heavens, yes, in a sense, and He sent them this food in abundance. Verse 26, and as if that wasn't enough:

“He (then) caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by his power he led out the south wind; ²⁷ he rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas; ²⁸ he let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings. ²⁹ And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved.”

Yeah, I mean, isn't that crazy? They were eating this manna every day, and they were like, we're tired of this stuff. I hate it. We want meat. Where are we going to get meat? And God caused this wind to blow in these quail, and it says they flew very low to the ground where they could just grab them and stuff (Numbers 11:31-32). But it wasn't all good, because it goes on here and recounts the fact in verse 30:

“But before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, ³¹ the anger of God rose against them, and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the young men of Israel.”

You'll remember that the anger of the Lord lashed out against the people, and many of them died because of their attitude and their unbelief (Numbers 11:33-34). But when they saw that, do you think they got down on their knees and repented?

Verse 32:

“In spite of all this, they still sinned; despite his wonders, they did not believe. (Okay, that's a choice on their part.) ³³ So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror. ³⁴ When he killed them, they sought him; they repented and sought God earnestly. ³⁵ They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer.”

But even that didn't last long. Verse 36 said they eventually,

“But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. ³⁷ Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet (verse 38) he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath. ³⁹ He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again.”

So he's talking about the brevity of human life, and God remembered our frailty, or the frailty in this case of the Israelites. Verse 40:

“How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! ⁴¹ They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel. ⁴² They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe, ⁴³ when he performed his signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan. ⁴⁴ He turned their rivers to blood, so that they could not drink of their streams. ⁴⁵ He sent among them swarms of flies, which devoured them, and frogs, which destroyed them.” And he was talking about the plagues that came upon Egypt.

“⁴⁶ He gave their crops to the destroying locust and the fruit of their labor to the locust. ⁴⁷ He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamores with frost. ⁴⁸ He gave over their cattle to the hail and their flocks to thunderbolts. ⁴⁹ He let loose on them his burning anger, wrath, indignation, and distress, a company of destroying angels. ⁵⁰ He made a path for his anger; he did not spare them from death, but gave their lives over to the plague. ⁵¹ He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the firstfruits of their strength in the tents of Ham.”

Speaking of the Egyptians as the descendants of the son of Noah, Ham. Verse 52:

“Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. ⁵³ He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid, but the sea overwhelmed their enemies. ⁵⁴ And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won. ⁵⁵ He drove out nations before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.

So, what did they do? *“⁵⁶ Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies, ⁵⁷ but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow. ⁵⁸ For they provoked him to anger with their high places (which is a pagan place of worship); they moved him to jealousy with their idols.*

⁵⁹ When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel. ⁶⁰ He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, ⁶¹ and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe.

⁶² He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage. ⁶³ Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song.

⁶⁴ Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation.

⁶⁵ Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a strong man shouting because of wine. ⁶⁶ And he put his adversaries to rout; he put them to everlasting shame. ⁶⁷ He rejected the tent of Joseph; he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim,

Again, it speaks of the rejection of the northern 10 tribes referred to as the kingdom of Israel. But verse 68 tells us,

“but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. (Or the southern kingdom of Israel which is called Judah.) ⁶⁹ He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever. ⁷⁰ He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; ⁷¹ from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance. ⁷² With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.”

Over and over again, this Psalm highlights the faithfulness of God and compares it to the unbelief and faithlessness of the people of Israel. But you'll notice it ends on a positive note, talking about how God raised up a man like David to lead his people and so forth.

But again, we need to remind ourselves that the stories we've just recounted here in the Psalms, which, of course, we can read about elsewhere in the Old Testament, are given to us as an example. Let me put that up on the screen now where Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 10:6, he says,

1 Corinthians 10:6 (ESV)

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.

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This is one of the great purposes of the Old Testament: to read through it and say, yeah, well, they were really dumb. That was really stupid. I need to be careful not to make that same mistake.

Lord, save me from unbelief. Save me from a bitter attitude. Save me from hard-heartedness and stiff-necked attitudes toward You, and so forth. Because I see in the example of the Old Testament that these are things You are warning me about. And I think the best thing that You and I can do is admit that this could be me; this could be my life. You know, it's in my heart.