

## Psalm 78

Maschil of Asaph.

Psalm 78: One of two historical psalms (see also 105), this psalm traces the history of God's mighty acts on behalf of Israel. The psalm begins with a call to learn from the nation's mistakes in the past (verses 1-11). Verse 7 especially expresses the main point of the psalm: "That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God". Besides a general appeal, the psalmist cites the example of Ephraim (verses 9-11), the most important tribe from the time of Joshua to the accession of Saul (compare Judges 3:27; 7:24; 8:1-2; 10:9). Ephraim had failed in the day of battle, not because of a lack of weapons, but because of their forgetfulness of God's law and works. The special occasion is not given. The next 57 verses contain three cycles of God's wonders and the people's unbelief. The Lord wrought miracles at the time of the Exodus (verses 12-16), but the people refused to believe in His sufficiency in the desert (verses 17-22); the Lord provided miraculously for them in the desert (verses 23-31), but they still languished in unbelief (verses 32-42); the Lord destroyed their enemies and brought them into Canaan (verses 43-55), but they still turned against Him (verses 56-58). Because of these repeated acts of unbelief and faithlessness, God punished His people (verses 59-64). Finally, He rejected the house of Saul and instituted a man of His own choosing, David, of the line of Judah (verses 65-72). The moral of the psalm for Israel and for believers today is simple: forgetfulness of God's deeds and law is disobedience and leads only to defeat.

Verses 1-72: This didactic psalm was written to teach the children how gracious God had been in the past in spite of their ancestors' rebellion and ingratitude. If the children learn well the theological interpretation of their nation's history, hopefully they would "not be as their fathers" (verse 8). The psalmist especially focuses on the history of the Exodus.

I. Exhortation on the Instruction of Children (78:1-11).

II. Lecture on the Graciousness of God (78:12-72).

A. Rehearsal of Israel's History (78:12-39);

B. Reiteration of Historical Lessons (78:40-72).

Verses 1-8: These are called dark and deep sayings, because they are carefully to be looked into. The law of God was given with a particular charge to teach it diligently to their children, that the church may abide for ever. Also, that the providences of God, both in mercy and in judgment, might encourage them to conform to the will of God. The works of God much strengthen our resolution to keep his commandments. Hypocrisy is the high road to apostasy; those that do not set their hearts right, will not be steadfast with God. Many parents, by negligence and wickedness, become murderers of their children. But young persons, though they are bound to submit in all things lawful, must not obey sinful orders, or copy sinful examples.

**Psalm 78:1 "Give ear, O my people, [to] my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth."**

By recounting the history of Israel within this psalm, Asaph hopes that the current generation would not repeat the sins of their predecessors.

This Psalm is to instruct all people who believe in God on how to please God. Even though the penman of this Psalm is probably Asaph, these instructions are from God. God, throughout all ages, has put the words into the mouth of those He would have to speak to His people for Him. This is saying, open that inner ear of your understanding to my law. Incline thine ear, means that they are leaning toward the message and want to hear what it is saying.

**Psalm 78:2 "I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old:"**

“Parable”: The word is used here in the broader sense of a story with moral and spiritual applications.

“Dark sayings”: Puzzling, ambiguous information. The lessons of history are not easily discerned correctly. For an infallible interpretation of history, there must be a prophet. The specific puzzle in Israel’s history is the nation’s rebellious spirit in spite of God’s grace.

I have said over and over that the Bible, besides being actual happenings, is a parable itself. God did this to keep people from reading the Bible and believing with their mind. God wants us to believe, because we have faith, not because of facts.

Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

If you can see something with your natural eye, it takes no faith to believe. God is a Spirit. Since God was the author of the Bible, it is written from a spiritual standpoint. Natural man cannot understand what it is saying. Even the parables that Jesus told, had to be explained to Jesus' disciples. The Holy Spirit of God is our Teacher now. The Spirit reveals to the believers what the Bible is saying. These dark sayings, are just things that have not been revealed by the Light.

**Psalm 78:3 "Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us."**

Which have been communicated to us as certain truth.

"And our fathers have told us": That is, we have heard and known them by their telling us. Or, this is the means by which we have known them. They have come down to us by tradition from ancient times.

As to no other people in the world, God had given His law and His covenant to the Israelites. The main way of learning had been for the father to tell the children.

**Psalm 78:4 "We will not hide [them] from their children, showing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done."**

The children of the Jewish fathers, but faithfully publish and declare them, as Christ and his apostles did. Or the children of God and Christ, their spiritual seed and offspring.

"Showing to the generation to come": And so in all successive ages, by the ministration of the word, and the Spirit attending it (see Psalm 22:30).

"The praises of the Lord": What he has done in predestination, redemption, and effectual calling, which is to the praise of the glory of his grace (Eph. 1:6). And so all other truths of the Gospel, which are to the praise of Father, Son, and Spirit, and engage men to show it forth.

"And his strength": In Christ, the man of his right hand, made strong for himself, and in the redemption wrought out by him, as well as in the conversion of sinners by his mighty grace, and in the preservation of them by his power.

"And his wonderful works that he hath done": In providence and grace. The miracles wrought by Christ, which were the wonderful works given him to finish. As proofs of his deity and Messiahship, and are testified in the Gospel for the confirmation of it. And especially the wonders of redeeming love, and calling grace, which are peculiarly to be ascribed unto him as the works his hands have wrought. And the wonderful decrees of God he made in eternity concerning these things.

This is explaining how, from generation to generation, the message was handed down. We must always look at these Scriptures and see if there is a lesson for us in them. We see that not only then, but even now, we should instruct the children coming up in the ways of God. Now we are blessed to have Bibles, but we must teach our children how to study and get the most out of these teachings. Christians should be in the process of building Christian leaders of tomorrow. This is one of the purposes of these Bible studies. We should constantly tell of the wonders of God, to even the very small babies.

**Psalm 78:5 "For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children:"**

So the law is called, being a testament of the divine will (Exodus 25:16). And the Scriptures, the writings of the Old Testament, which testify of Christ, his person, office, sufferings, and death (Isa. 8:20). And particularly the Gospel, which is the testimony of God, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of his apostles (2 Tim. 1:8). Which bears witness to the love and grace of God in the salvation of men by Christ; to the dignity of Christ's person, to the fullness of his grace. This is established in the house of Jacob, as the Targum. In the church, which is the pillar and ground of truth, among the saints and people of God, to whom it is delivered, and by whom it will be kept, and with whom it will remain throughout all ages. For it is the everlasting Gospel:

"And appointed a law in Israel": The law given on Mount Sinai was peculiar to them, and so were the word and oracles, they were committed to them. And not only the writings of Moses, but the prophets, are called the law (John 10:34). But the Gospel seems to be here meant (see notes on Psalm 78:1). This was ordained before the world for our glory, and is put and placed in

the hands and hearts of the faithful ministers of it, and is published among, and received by, the true Israel of God.

"Which he commanded our fathers that they should make them known to their children": That is, the testimony and the law, and the things contained in them. The Jewish fathers were frequently commanded to teach their children the law of Moses (Deut. 4:9). And it was their practice to instruct them in the knowledge of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15). And it becomes Christian parents to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, by making known to them the principles of the Christian religion, and the truths of the Gospel (Eph. 6:4).

The name Jacob is used in the first part of this verse to show that a family went into Egypt (Jacob's), and a nation came out (Israel). Jacob is Israel. The testimony was of God miraculously delivering them out of Egypt. The law was given to them at mount Sinai on the way to the Promised Land. These were a separated people for God. One of the things that made them separate from all the other people, was the fact that God had given His law to them. The very oracles of God were given to this people that God had chosen for His own. They were to live by God's law themselves and teach God's law to their children and grandchildren.

**Psalm 78:6 "That the generation to come might know [them, even] the children [which] should be born; [who] should arise and declare [them] to their children:"**

That people in future times might enjoy the benefit of them as their fathers had done, and that they should then send them forward to those who were to succeed them.

"Who should arise and declare them to their children": Who, as they appeared on the stage of life, should receive the trust, and send it onward to future ages. Thus the world makes progress; thus one age starts where the previous one left off. Thus it enters on its own career with the advantage of all the toils, the sacrifices, the happy thoughts, the inventions of all past times. It is designed that the world shall thus grow wiser and better as it advances; and that future generations shall be enriched with all that was worth preserving in the experience of the past (see notes at Psalm 71:18).

They were not to live like the rest of the world. They were to live a life separated to God. The Word of God is fresh and new every day and should be taught to every generation. The Bible is like a road map to lead us through life victoriously. Without following the teachings in the Bible, we will be a failure of life. When we study the Word of God and live by the teachings in it, we are victorious and have eternal life at the end of this life to look forward to.

**Psalm 78:7 "That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments:"**

That by the consideration of God's gracious promises, and wonderful works wrought by God for his people, they might be encouraged to trust in him.

"And not forget the works of God": Which the Gospel declares. Not only the miracles of Christ recorded by the evangelists, but the works of grace, redemption, and salvation. The remembrance of which is kept up by the ministry of the word, and the administration of ordinances.

"But keep his commandments": The commandments of Christ, and which are peculiar to the Gospel dispensation. And are to be kept in faith, from a principle of love, through the grace and strength of Christ, and to the glory of God by him (see John 14:15).

The world without God, has no hope. Those who live by the instructions in the Bible and believe in Jesus, have hope of the resurrection.

Romans 10:17 "So then faith [cometh] by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Romans 10:9-10 tell us what we must do to be saved. The very first statement is believe.

**Psalm 78:8 "And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation [that] set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not steadfast with God."**

This chiefly respects the Jews in Christ's time. Though it also is an admonition to them in succeeding ages, and especially in the latter day, when they shall be instructed, called, and converted. And even to us, to whom the Gospel is preached, on whom the ends of the world are come. Not to be disobedient, as the Jewish fathers were, and to take care we do not fall after the same example of unbelief. This opens the whole scope and general design of the psalm (see 1 Cor. 10:6).

"A stubborn and rebellions generation": As the generation in the wilderness was (Deut. 9:6). And so were their posterity in Christ's time (Matt. 12:34).

"A generation that set not their heart aright": To seek the Lord, serve and obey him. Their hearts were removed far from him, and they were hypocritical in their prayers to him, and service of him.

"And whose spirit was not steadfast with God": Did not continue in the faith of God, in the true religion, but departed and apostatized from him (see Psalm 78:37). Apostasy is generally the fruit and effect of hypocrisy; all the following facts support the character which is here given of them.

This is speaking of the murmuring generation that turned against the teachings of God over and over. They were stubborn and rebellious. God forgave them over and over and gave them another chance. Some of them finally had so little faith in God, that God let them wander in the wilderness 40 years, until that generation died off. That generation played the spiritual harlot. They did not place their trust and hope in God.

Verses 9-39: Sin dispirits men, and takes away the heart. Forgetfulness of God's works is the cause of disobedience to his laws. This narrative relates a struggle between God's goodness and

man's badness. The Lord hears all our murmurings and distrusts, and is much displeased. Those that will not believe the power of God's mercy, shall feel the fire of his indignation. Those cannot be said to trust in God's salvation as their happiness at last, who cannot trust his providence in the way to it. To all that by faith and prayer, ask, seek, and knock, these doors of heaven shall at any time be opened. And our distrust of God is a great aggravation of our sins. He expressed his resentment of their provocation; not in denying what they sinfully lusted after, but in granting it to them. Lust is contented with nothing. Those that indulge their lust, will never be estranged from it. Those hearts are hard indeed, that will neither be melted by the mercies of the Lord, nor broken by his judgments. Those that sin still, must expect to be in trouble still. And the reason why we live with so little comfort, and to so little purpose, is, because we do not live by faith. Under these rebukes they professed repentance, but they were not sincere, for they were not constant. In Israel's history, we have a picture of our own hearts and lives. God's patience, and warnings, and mercies, embolden them to harden their hearts against his word. And the history of kingdoms is much the same. Judgments and mercies have been little attended to, until the measure of their sins has been full. And higher advantages have not kept churches from declining from the commandments of God. Even true believers recollect, that for many a year they abused the kindness of Providence. When they come to heaven, how will they admire the Lord's patience and mercy in bringing them to his kingdom!

**Psalm 78:9 "The children of Ephraim, [being] armed, [and] carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle."**

"Children of Ephraim": The act of treachery or apostasy of this largest of the northern tribes is not specifically identified in Israel's history.

They were actually to lead the battle and they fled. I have said so many times that we must see a message in this for us. Christians, we are God's army. We have the most powerful weapon known to man, the Bible. Are we going to stand and fight for God, or are we going to retreat in fear? The world is headed for total destruction. Are we trying to pull as many as we can from the fires of hell? Why aren't we? Are we going to be like Ephraim above? Will you run, when the trials get seemingly too big to handle, or will you stand up for Jesus? The battle is all the same, it is just different circumstances.

**Psalm 78:10 "They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law;"**

Their cowardice was the effect of their unbelief and disobedience.

"And refused to walk in his law": Their disobedience was accompanied with obstinacy and contempt of God's laws.

These covenant people were God's people, as long as they kept His law. The covenant was conditional. They must live separate from the world. They were not to intermarry, or worship false gods. They turned away from God and wanted to be like all the countries around them. They insisted on having an earthly king, when God wanted to be their only King. They broke His law, as if it were nothing at all. They promised to keep the law of God, but they soon forgot and lived just as all the other people around them in idolatry. Christians, God has separated us out to

be His people. We must live exactly the way it pleases Him for us to live. We must not compromise with the world. He has taken us out of the world, don't go back into the world. Christians are in this world, but we should not be of this world.

**Psalm 78:11 "And forgot his works, and his wonders that he had showed them."**

The works which he had performed in behalf of the nation. These works are referred to in the verses following.

"And his wonders that he had showed them": The wonderful works in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness; the miracles which he had performed on behalf of the nation.

Each time a crisis came, they started complaining, instead of depending on God. They soon forgot the Red sea parting and the bondage they had been delivered from in Egypt. It was as if they were saying, what have you done for me today?

**Psalm 78:12 "Marvelous things did he in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, [in] the field of Zoan."**

"In the field of Zoan": That is, in the territory of Zoan, which was an ancient city of Egypt (Num. 13:22). The metropolis of the land where Pharaoh kept his court; hence we read of the princes of Zoan (Isa. 19:11). It is the same with Tanis, and so it is called here in the Septuagint and Vulgate Latin versions. And also in the Targum; it is said to have been two miles from Heliopolis, and one from Memphis. And at this day these three cities are become one, which is fifteen miles in compass, and goes by the name of Alcair. In this great city, the metropolis of the nation, before Pharaoh and all his court, were the above wonders done.

God delivered them out of Egypt with his mighty Hand. He brought 10 plagues on the Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and finally the Pharaoh let them leave. The Pharaoh was so upset about the last plague (the death of the first-born), that he actually insisted on them leaving Egypt. The field of Zoan is another way of saying Egypt.

**Psalm 78:13 "He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through; and he made the waters to stand as a heap."**

"Waters to stand as a heap": The parting of the Red Sea at the beginning of the Exodus, which allowed Israel to escape from the Egyptian armies, was always considered by the Old Testament saints to be the most spectacular miracle of their history (compare Exodus chapter 14).

We can see from the following Scripture the exact detail of how this came about.

Exodus 14:21-22 "And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go [back] by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry [land], and the waters were divided." "And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry [ground]: and the waters [were] a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left."

**Psalm 78:14 "In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire."**

Which was in the form of a pillar, and went before them. And the Lord in it, and directed their way, and protected them from heat (see Exodus 13:21; Neh. 9:12). This was typical of Christ, who is a shadow and security from the heat of a fiery law, the flaming sword of justice, and the wrath of God, which is poured forth like fire. The fiery darts of Satan, and from hurt by any enemy whatever (see Isa. 4:5). And who leads his people through the wilderness of this world by his Spirit, and by his word, and his own example. And who is the best and safest guide to follow.

"And all the night with a light of fire": Which also was in the form of a pillar, and went before them, and gave light in the night. And the Lord was in it; and this also was typical of Christ, who is the light of his people amidst all their darkness in this world.

This was the presence of God that went before them. When it stopped and stood over the camp, they were to camp until the fire or cloud moved again.

**Psalm 78:15 "He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave [them] drink as [out of] the great depths."**

"Clave the rocks": Twice in the wilderness, when Israel desperately needed a great water supply, God brought water out of rocks (compare Exodus 17:6; Num. 20:11).

Exodus 17:6 "Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel."

This Rock is the Lord Jesus Christ. This is water from God. Jesus told the woman at the well, if she drank of the water He gave her, she would never thirst again. This miraculous water is from God.

**Psalm 78:16 "He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers."**

Which is expressed in the singular number as also in (Psalm 78:20). Because the children of Israel were not come to Kadesh, and the second rock was not smitten when they lusted after flesh, and murmured against God, and tempted him, as is after related.

"And caused waters to run down like rivers": From the descent of the rock, which followed them all the way in the wilderness. This was a most marvelous thing, that water should flow from a flinty rock upon striking it, from whence fire rather than water might have been expected. And that it should flow in such great abundance, and that from a rock in a wilderness.

We must remember that there were nearly 3 million people drinking this water that God provided. The real miracle of feeding so many water is, that God fed them miracle water for 40 years in the wilderness. There is a river that flows from God above that never shall run dry.

Revelation 22:1 "And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb."

**Psalm 78:17 "And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness."**

Or, "and they added yet to sin against him"; which was great ingratitude. They had sinned before, and it might have been hoped that the goodness of God to them would have engaged them to have sinned no more. At least at such a rate, and in such a manner, as they had done. But instead of sinning less, they sinned more and more. They added sin to sin; such is the corrupt heart of man, notwithstanding the grace of God, and the blessings of it granted unto him.

"By provoking the most High in the wilderness": Everything is aggravating; the object against whom they sinned was the most High, which betrays their impiety, folly, and vanity. And they did not slightly sin against him, but did those things which were highly provoking and exasperating. And that in the wilderness, where they received so many favors, and where they must have been starved or dying of thirst. And could have died without immediate provision, support, and protection, from the hand of the Lord.

Even though God had brought them out of bitter bondage in Egypt, they sinned against God over and over in the wilderness. One of the worst things they did, was build the golden calf and worship it.

**Psalm 78:18 "And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust."**

"Meat for their lust": Instead of being grateful for God's marvelous provisions of manna, the Israelites complained against God and Moses. God sent them meat, but also judged them (Num. chapter 11).

They tired of eating the manna that fell from heaven to feed them, and they insisted on meat. God rained quail on them and made them eat.

Numbers 11:31 "And there went forth a wind from the LORD, and brought quails from the sea, and let [them] fall by the camp, as it were a day's journey on this side, and as it were a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits [high] upon the face of the earth."

These quail were 3 feet deep all over the camp. They ate them as God commanded, and many of them died.

**Psalm 78:19 "Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?"**

"Furnish a table in the wilderness"? The answer was "yes," but the question implied a sarcastic lack of faith.

To question the ability of God who brought them out of Egypt and parted the Red sea; would be blasphemy. This is as if they are saying, He is not really God. What a foolish rebellious people they really are. What would God have to do, for them to realize that He is truly God?

### **Psalm 78 Questions**

1. What is the purpose of this Psalm?
2. Who is the penman?
3. What does it mean to give ear?
4. What does incline thine ear mean?
5. In verse 2, he says he will speak in a \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Besides being actual happenings, what does the author believe about the entire Bible?
7. God is a \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Since God was the real author of the Bible, it has to be written from what standpoint?
9. Who did Jesus explain the parables He spoke to?
10. How can we understand the Bible?
11. What are the dark sayings really saying?
12. What had been the main way for Israelites to know about God?
13. What lesson can the Christian learn from verses 3 and 4?
14. He established a testimony in \_\_\_\_\_.
15. He appointed a law in \_\_\_\_\_.
16. Why were Jacob and Israel mentioned separately in verse 5?
17. What was different about Israel and the rest of the world?
18. Who have hope of the resurrection?
19. The Bible is like a \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ to lead us through life?
20. Where do we find the Scriptures that tell us what we must do to be saved?
21. What kind of generation were the Israelites, who came across the wilderness, called?

22. Why did they wander in the wilderness 40 years?
23. What did the children of Ephraim do, in verse 9, that disappointed God?
24. How long were these people the covenant people of God?
25. The covenant was \_\_\_\_\_.
26. Christians are in the \_\_\_\_\_, but not of the \_\_\_\_\_.
27. Name some of the marvelous things God did for them.
28. How did God lead them?
29. What miraculous thing did God do to give them water?
30. What does Revelation 22:1 tell us about where the river comes from?
31. What was one of the worst things these Israelites did to provoke God?
32. What was the desire for meat called in verse 18?
33. Who asked, can God furnish a table in the wilderness?