

Psalm 78

The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible by a wide margin. It has 150 psalms that cover a wide variety of topics. Half of these psalms were written by David, while the rest were written by a collection of other people. Besides David the person who wrote the most psalms was a man named Asaph, who has 12 psalms attributed to him.

The Bible tells us that Asaph was a Levite who worked in the administration of King David. Not only was he a singer, but 2 Chronicles 29:30 tells us that he was also a prophet. This means we should not be surprised if we find prophetic content in his writings.

The psalm that we are studying today, Psalm 78, was written by Asaph. Now, when we think of the psalms we usually think of hymns of praise, or perhaps hymns that cry out to God for help and salvation in times of trouble. This psalm isn't either of those things – instead it is actually a history lesson. I realize that people don't usually think about history when it comes to the psalms, but this book actually contains many different types of literature. In Psalm 78 Asaph gives us an overview of Israel's history from the time of the Exodus from Egypt until the reign of King David. The reason he does this is because he has a very important message that he wants to teach to the children of Israel.

I mean this literally: Asaph specifically wanted to teach the *children*. He wanted the next generation to know the great things that God had done for Israel:

Psalm 78:4: “We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.”

You see, Asaph already knew what the Lord had done. His generation was familiar with the Lord and remembered their history – but unless someone taught that history to the children, they would grow up without knowing the Lord. They would not know the great things that God had done for them and they could easily be led astray by idolatry. Asaph knew that Israel was just one generation away from leaving God. That is why he wanted to raise the next generation up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. He did not want Israel to become apostate.

If you have ever read through the Old Testament then you know that God blessed Israel in countless ways. The Lord gave them gifts that He did not give to any other nation. Not only did God deliver them from their oppressors in Egypt but He also led them to Mount Sinai, where He gave them His law:

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:”

No other nation had the Ten Commandments. No other nation had the oracles of God. No other nation heard the voice of God speak to them from the darkness that surrounded Sinai. God gave Israel tremendous gifts – and the Lord commanded the people to pass them on to their children. After all, how would their offspring ever learn these things if no one taught them?

God wanted each generation to be taught about Him so that they might keep His commandments and walk in His ways:

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

God has not changed His position on this matter. The Lord still requires us to teach our children about the great things that the Lord has done. God commands us to teach each new generation His gospel and His commands so that they might love the Lord and walk in His ways. If we do not teach them then the world around us will – and the world has no intention of telling them about God's great power and love.

Asaph wanted to do more than just tell the next generation about Israel's history. He also wanted the children to learn from the example of their ancestors, so that they would not repeat their disastrous rebellion:

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.
9 The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle.”

In a few verses Asaph will begin to recount Israel's history, but first Asaph brings up one of the most painful moments of Israel's past. You see, God delivered the Israelites from Egypt using ten incredible, miraculous plagues. When the Lord freed them from slavery the nation *should* have been grateful – but they weren't. They *should* have served the Lord and trusted Him – but they didn't. Instead they complained, and whined, and tempted God, and were rebellious at every opportunity. When God brought them through the wilderness to the border of Canaan and told them to go in and possess it, the entire nation refused. Joshua and Caleb told them that the Lord would be with them and give them victory, but not a single person believed them. Instead the nation of Israel clamored to stone Moses to death and go back to slavery in Egypt. The nation was armed and ready for battle but they refused to fight. Instead of accepting the gift that God was offering to them they turned back. They were stubborn and rebellious, and their faithlessness cost that entire generation the promised land. Every one of them was forced to wander around in the wilderness until they died. Their children inherited the land, and they lost it all because they refused to trust in God. Asaph wanted the next generation to learn from this and not repeat the same mistake.

It's remarkable what short memories that generation had. The Lord did incredible things in the land of Egypt, but the Israelites forgot them immediately:

Psalm 78:10: “They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law;
11 And forgot his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them.
12 Marvellous things did he in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.”

No one alive today has ever seen God do anything like what He did in the land of Egypt. In a short span of time the Lord devastated that country by sending ten remarkable plagues that showed His divine power. If we skip ahead a few verses we will see that Asaph recounts the astonishing miracles that God did in Egypt:

Psalm 78:44: “And had turned their rivers into blood; and their floods, that they could not drink.

45 He sent divers sorts of flies among them, which devoured them; and frogs, which destroyed them.

46 He gave also their increase unto the caterpillar, and their labour unto the locust.

47 He destroyed their vines with hail, and their sycamore trees with frost.

48 He gave up their cattle also to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts.

49 He cast upon them the fierceness of his anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, by sending evil angels among them.

50 He made a way to his anger; he spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence;

51 And smote all the firstborn in Egypt; the chief of their strength in the tabernacles of Ham:”

God turned all of the water in Egypt into blood – from the river Nile itself to the water in jars in houses. God brought a plague of frogs upon the land, and a plague of lice, and a plague of flies. The Lord killed all the cattle in Egypt. The Lord sent boils upon man and beast. He sent deadly hail mingled with fire. He sent a plague of locusts. He plunged the entire land of Egypt into supernatural darkness for three full days – and He killed all of the firstborn throughout the land, save for those who were protected by the blood.

That generation saw all of these astonishing miracles things firsthand. They were eyewitnesses to a demonstration of God's power that was greater than anything that had ever been seen in the history of the world. Yet, in spite of all that – in spite of seeing the tremendous wonders that God had done – they still refused to have faith in Him. They refused to trust Him. They refused to serve Him. They saw these mighty miracles but they refused to have faith. It didn't matter what miraculous things God did. They were never going to serve Him no matter what.

The miracles didn't stop after they left Egypt. This generation was treated to a display of God's power that was just staggering. In the Church Age we simply don't see anything remotely like this. We have to live by faith – but these people saw the power of God firsthand, over and over and over again. When Pharaoh chased them God literally parted the sea so that they could walk across on dry land:

Psalm 78:13: “He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through; and he made the waters to stand as an heap.”

God made the waters to stand up as a heap so that His children could be saved from the Egyptians. God then drowned the Egyptian army that was chasing them *in those very same waters*. After a display like that you would think that Israel would have tremendous confidence in God and would believe that God could give them the victory over any enemy – but that's not what happened. Even though the Israelites saw God kill the *entire Egyptian army* without any of them having to lift a finger to fight, they still refused to believe that God would be with them in the battles in Canaan. They saw God's power but they refused to believe.

But God didn't stop there. None of us have ever seen God; we believe in a God that we have never seen, and we have faith in someone we have never met. But that wasn't the case for this generation. God led the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night:

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

They could literally *see God leading them* through these miraculous manifestations and they still refused to believe. If anyone doubted they could have just looked at the pillar of miraculous fire that was *right there*, but it didn't make a difference. No miracle, however great, would ever make them believe.

But God didn't stop there. Even though Israel was in the wilderness He gave them water out of solid rocks:

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

16 He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers.”

When His people were thirsty He gave them water from a *rock*, and yet the nation still refused to trust Him. They literally did not care that God was miraculously keeping them alive in a land that had neither food nor water. Even that wasn't enough to get them to trust in God.

How did the people respond to all of these miracles? Why, by sinning against Him:

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

The Israelites decided it wasn't enough to get water from rocks and food from Heaven. They demanded more – arrogantly acting as if God was their butler and they had every right to push the Most High around:

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

19 Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?

20 Behold, he smote the rock, that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed; can he give bread also? can he provide flesh for his people?”

God was giving them *food from Heaven* and yet they still spoke against God. They were like a bully taunting someone on the playground: “Sure, you can do that, but can you do this other thing as well or are you some kind of loser?” They weren't asking in faith. They weren't being humble. They weren't grateful for *the miraculous food that was keeping them alive*. They were rebellious and wicked and determined to attack God no matter what He did for them. So God punished them:

Psalm 78:21: “Therefore the Lord heard this, and was wroth: so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel;

22 Because they believed not in God, and trusted not in his salvation:”

God was indeed angry with them. He killed them by the thousands – but they still refused to fear God and repent. They still refused to take God seriously. God did miracles, but the people ignored them. God poured out His wrath upon them, but the people ignored that as well. It didn't matter what God did; they weren't going to take the Lord seriously, and they *certainly* weren't going to put their

faith in Him or obey Him.

Asaph points out that the Israelites were literally eating the food of angels:

Psalm 78:23: “Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven,

24 And had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven.

25 Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full.”

God gave them plenty of food to eat – and the very best food, at that – and made sure that no one went hungry or starved. God miraculously provided the entire nation with food every single day, in a place where there was no food. He gave them the corn of heaven, the food of angels – and in response the Israelites only despised God even more. They didn't care that they were getting free food from Heaven. They just demanded more, like a spoiled brat. They demanded that God provide them with meat – and so He did:

Psalm 78:26: “He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven: and by his power he brought in the south wind.

27 He rained flesh also upon them as dust, and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea:

28 And he let it fall in the midst of their camp, round about their habitations.”

God used His great power and might to provide all of the millions of Israel with meat to eat. This was miraculous meat in the wilderness, where there was no food; it was meat they did not have to work to obtain. So what did the Israelites do in response to this magnificent gift? Why, they sinned even more:

Psalm 78:29: “So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire;

30 They were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat was yet in their mouths,

31 The wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel.

32 For all this they sinned still, and believed not for his wondrous works.”

The Israelites ate and were filled – and responded by continuing their sin. So God poured out His wrath upon them and killed some of them. Israel responded by *sinning even more*. Israel sinned when God blessed them and Israel sinned when God punished them. That generation was never going to follow the Lord.

Oh, they would pretend to repent – for a short while. They would do just enough to get God to stop killing them. But their heart was never in it:

Psalm 78:34: “When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and enquired early after God.

35 And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer.

36 Nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with

their tongues.

37 For their heart was not right with him, neither were they steadfast in his covenant.”

When God punished them, what did they do? They lied to God. They flattered the Lord. They had a lot of great and flowery words to say but their heart wasn't in it. Their heart was not right with God, nor did they care about the covenant they had made with Him. They were willing to say all the right things, but their words were just lies.

God knew all of this, of course. It is impossible to deceive God. Yet the Lord still had mercy on them, in spite of their great wickedness:

Psalm 78:38: “But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath.

39 For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again.”

God knew they weren't sorry and yet He still had pity on them. God knew that they didn't trust in Him and yet God still drew back His hand. God could have killed them all in the wilderness; He could easily have struck them all dead, but He didn't. He had mercy. He gave them chance after chance to repent of their sins and trust in Him. He gave them many opportunities to obey Him and put their faith in Him. He led them all the way to the promised land and urged them to go in – but they refused. That was when He condemned them to die in the wilderness and gave the promised land to their children.

These people saw firsthand the power of God but they would not step into Canaan. This was in spite of the fact they had seen God destroy their enemies in Egypt:

Psalm 78:40: “How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert!

41 Yea, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.

42 They remembered not his hand, nor the day when he delivered them from the enemy.”

It had only been a short time ago when these very same people had been delivered from the Egyptians and saw God kill the entire Egyptian army, and yet they still refused to believe that God would keep His promise and give them the land of Canaan. Since they lacked faith in God they lost the promise and it was given to another generation. That new generation inherited the land, just as God said:

Psalm 78:55: “He cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents.”

God had promised to give them the land of Canaan and God did exactly that. God showed Israel His mighty power and God gave them all of the blessings that He promised to give them. So what did the Israelites do in return, once they were in the land and living a bountiful and blessed life? They forgot the Lord and turned to idols:

Psalm 78:56: “Yet they tempted and provoked the most high God, and kept not his testimonies:

57 But turned back, and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers: they were turned aside like a deceitful bow.

58 For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images.”

Israel knew how powerful and great God was and yet they *still* abandoned Him for idols. The only reason they were in the land of Canaan at all was because God had delivered them from slavery through mighty miracles and had defeated the nations that used to live in the land, and yet they still abandoned the God who saved them for useless idols that were incapable of saving anyone. They exchanged the glory and power of a God who loved them for a stone idol that could not see or hear or save.

So what did God do? He punished them:

Psalm 78:59: “When God heard this, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel:

60 So that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men;

61 And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand.”

Asaph is talking about something that happened in 1 Samuel 4. This took place when Samuel was still young and Eli was the high priest. At this time Israel was given to idolatry, and Eli's two sons – Hophni and Phinehas – were wicked people who despised the offerings of the Lord and used His sacred sacrifices as an all-you-can-eat buffet. God warned Eli but Eli refused to do anything about it – and so God promised to judge the people for what they had done.

One day the Philistines invaded the land of Israel. When that happened the Israelites decided to use the Ark of the Covenant as a good-luck charm to magically win the battle for them. Eli's two sons carried the Ark into battle – but God was not with them. God was angry at their idolatry and lack of faith. God killed Eli's two sons in battle and allowed the Philistines to capture the Ark. Due to Israel's sin, God forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh (which is where the tabernacle was in those days), and allowed His Ark to be captured by the enemy. God gave the land over to the Philistines and used Israel's enemies to send wrath upon that wicked generation:

Psalm 78:62: “He gave his people over also unto the sword; and was wroth with his inheritance.

63 The fire consumed their young men; and their maidens were not given to marriage.

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

Eli and his two sons all died on that day. (Interestingly, 1 Samuel 4 tells us that the widow of Phinehas really *didn't* mourn for her husband – because on that day she died in childbirth.) But the story does not end there. In spite of everything the Israelites had done God did not abandon His people. Instead He raised up a new king for them – one out of the tribe of Judah:

Psalm 78:67: “Moreover he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim:

68 But chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved.”

King Saul had come from the tribe of Benjamin. His great sins against God cost him and his children the kingdom, and God replaced him with someone else. When God chose a different king He selected one out of the tribe of Judah. The man that He chose was David:

Psalm 78:70: “He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds:
71 From following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance.”

David was a shepherd – one of the lowest of the people. David was so despised that when Samuel came to visit his family his father didn't even think to include him. David was held in low esteem and yet God used His power to raise him up and put him on the throne of Israel.

The reason Asaph is telling us all of these things is so that we would remember what God has done for us and would learn from Israel's example. Israel saw the miracles of God and refused to believe, and so they lost the promises. Their lack of faith cost them the promised land. It was given to someone else – someone who *did* believe. The same is still true today. God has done great things for us. If we believe then we will inherit the promises – promises of forgiveness and everlasting life. But if we do *not* believe – if we ignore God's miracles and live as we please – then we will lose the promises as well. Instead of a life and joy and peace we will face the endless wrath of an angry God.

Asaph does not want us to be faithless idolaters, like the generation that lost the promises. He wants us to learn from their example so that we will not follow in their fate.