

Asaph's sermon uses the five hundred year history of Israel from the Exodus to King David as evidence for the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh and the hardhearted, stubborn rebelliousness of Israel. Leave it to Asaph to boldly tell the not-so-pretty tale of a people who willfully put God to the test. We picture this psalm preached at the city gate or the village center as a grave warning to the people of God not to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors. This is not a patriotic sermon given to inspire proud feelings for the historic heroes of the past. As Israel's worship leader, Asaph joins the ranks of the prophets in leveling a scathing rebuke of a people who refuse to remember the Lord's unforgettable and miraculous acts of redemption. "Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power – the day he redeemed them from the oppressor" (Ps 78:41-42).

This sequence of psalms began with Asaph's personal struggle with apostasy (Psalm 73), followed by a communal lament over the total devastation of the Jerusalem temple (Psalm 74). Psalm 75 stresses the nearness of God's faithfulness and the certainty of his judgment and vindication. Psalm 76 continues that theme by celebrating the victory of God's power and justice in a final judgment that will break "the spirit of rulers" and the kings of the earth will submit to him forever (Ps 76:12). Psalm 77 captures the personal struggle of faithful souls who to no fault of their own are caught up in God's judgment. They make their appeal to the Most High and remember the deeds of the Lord. Psalm 78 picks up on the theme of remembering and chronicles Israel's history of woeful and willful forgetting in the face of God's unforgettable acts of redemption.

The thrust of Asaph's sermon is that believers do not want to repeat this sad history of disloyalty, faithlessness, rebellion, unbelief, hypocrisy, duplicity, disobedience, and idolatry that was played out by the Israelites, first in the wilderness and then in the Promised land (Ps 78:8, 17, 22, 36, 56, 58). The apostles drew on Psalms 78 and 95 to emphasize this same concern for Christ's followers. The apostle Paul wrote in reference to Israel's rebellious history, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Cor 10:11-12; see Hebrews 3:1-4:11).

This psalm is unique in that it tells an epic story in two overlapping parts. Part one is the story of the Exodus and Israel's wilderness rebellion (Ps 78:9-40). Part two repeats the story of the Exodus, with an emphasis on the plagues, followed by Israel's apostasy in the Promised land (Ps 78:41-72). Both parts end with a description of Israel's rebellious ancestors as a warning to all believers. Through it all God remains faithful, leading and providing for his people. Asaph introduces his sermon-psalm by explaining his pastoral and prophetic pedagogy. He intends to warn believers against falling away, even as he seeks to encourage faithfulness (Ps 78:1-8).

Wisdom's Legacy

My people, hear my teaching;

*listen to the words of my mouth,
I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old –
things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation
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 ancestors
to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
They would not be like their ancestors –
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts are not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.*

Psalm 78:1-8

Psalm 78 begins with a personal plea. Right from verse one the impassioned tone of a caring prophet is set. “My people,” implies solidarity and endearment; “My teaching,” implies ownership and investment; “My mouth,” implies integrity and relationship. The double emphasis on reception is stressed with two key verbs: hear and listen. The introduction calls for attention without any claim of authority other than the shared solidarity of “my people” and the sincerity of personal integrity. This is the basis for Christian communication shared by pastors, prophets, parents and friends. All we can do is invite a hearing based on the Word of God. We open our mouths and the Spirit of God fills us with his message.

Asaph introduces his epic as a parable wrapped in history. This may impress us as a strange convergence of genres. We are not in the habit of linking history, seasoned with times and places, with the literary genre of parable, which we tend to associate with creative stories designed to tell the truth slant. The word “parable” is made up of “para” which means “alongside of” and “ballein” which means “to throw.” What Asaph seeks to do in his epic is to set up a comparison between history and meaning. History as simply a collection of dates and events yields little insight, but when those facts interface with God’s revelation – the hidden things – world-changing, salvation-shaping meaning is communicated. This is why “parable” or Hebrew “mashal” has come to mean “wisdom.” The plural form of “mashal” entitles the Book of

Proverbs. The comparison of life and revelation yields life-transforming meaning.¹ So, alongside the miscellaneous ins and outs of history, Asaph tells the “the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord” (Ps 78:4). He presents the “decreed statutes for Jacob” and testifies to the established law of God. He is not breaking new news. Asaph is not revealing anything new that the people of God did not already know. But it is precisely these unforgettable actions and commands of God that Israel’s ancestors had rejected and forgotten along the way because they were a “stubborn and rebellious generation” (Ps 78:8). His purpose for writing was to remind the people of God to be faithful and obedient to the steadfast covenant love of the Lord.

Asaph’s wisdom strategy meant putting life and meaning, history and revelation, in tension in order to emphasize the believer’s true response to the faithfulness of God. His method, life and meaning in juxtaposition, is related to Jesus communicational strategy. Matthew says that Jesus “did not say anything” to the people “without using a parable,” adding, “So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world’ (Matthew 13:34-35; see Psalm 78:2, LXX?). Both Jesus and Asaph “make the past hold up a mirror to the present” in order to reveal the truth of salvation history.²

Wilderness Warning

*The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows,
turned back on the day of battle;
they did not keep God’s covenant
and refused to live by his law.
They forgot what he had done,
the wonders he has shown them.
He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors
in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan.
He divided the sea and led them through;
he made the water stand up like a wall.
He guided them with the cloud by day
and with light from the fire all night.
He split the rocks in the wilderness
and gave them water as abundant as the seas.
he brought streams out of a rocky crag
and made water flow down like rivers.
But they continued to sin against him,
rebellious in the wilderness against the Most High.*

¹ Calvin, Psalms, 227-228. Calvin concludes that the reference to using parables “denotes grave and striking sentences, such as adages, or proverbs, and apophthegms.” Calvin implies a degree of sophistication and eloquence lies behind this effort: “The inspired penman affirms that it is his purpose to utter only striking sentences and notable sayings.” This misinterpretation of the term distorts his understanding of Christ’s reason for speaking in parables. Calvin writes, “Christ’s object in doing so, was to prove that he was a distinguished prophet of God, and that thus he might be received with greater reverence. Since he then resembled a prophet because he preached sublime mysteries in a style of language above the common kind, that which the sacred writer here affirms concerning himself, is with propriety transferred to him.”

² Kidner, Psalms, 281.

*They willfully put God to the test
by demanding the food they craved.
They spoke against God;
they said, "Can God really spread a table in the wilderness?
True, he struck the rock, and water gushed out,
streams flowed abundantly,
but can he also give us bread?
Can he supply meat for his people?"
When the Lord heard them, he was furious;
his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel,
for they did not believe in God
or trust in his deliverance.
Yet he gave a command to the skies above
and opened the doors of the heavens;
he rained down manna for the people to eat,
he gave them the grain of heaven.
Human beings ate the bread of angels;
he sent them all the food they could eat.
He let loose the east wind from the heavens
and by his power made the south wind blow.
He rained meat down on them like dust,
birds like sand on the seashore.
He made them come down inside their camp,
all around their tents.
They ate till they were gorged –
he had given them what they craved.
But before they turned from what they craved,
even while the food was still in their mouths,
God anger rose against them;
he put to death the sturdiest among them,
cutting down the young men of Israel.
In spite of all this, they kept on sinning;
In spite of his wonders, they did not believe.
So he ended their days in futility
and their years in terror.
Whenever God slew them, they would seek him:
they eagerly turned to him again.
They remembered that God was their Rock,
that God Most High was their Redeemer.
But they would flatter him with their mouths,
lying to him with their tongues;
their hearts were not loyal to him,
they were not faithful to his covenant.
Yet he was merciful;*

*he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them.
Time after time he restrained his anger
and did not stir up his full wrath.
He remembered that they were but flesh,
a passing breeze that does not return.
How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness
and grieved him in the wasteland!*
Psalm 78:9-40

A reference to Ephraim begins and ends Asaph's epic review of Israel's history from the Exodus to David (Ps 78:9, 67). Ephraim was one of the twelve Jewish tribes named after the younger of the two sons born to Joseph (Gen 41:50-52). Against his father Joseph's objections Ephraim received from the hand of his grandfather Jacob a greater blessing than his older brother Manasseh. Ephraim's prominence grew because Joshua, Moses' successor, was an Ephraimite, and the Tabernacle was erected in Shiloh in the territory of Ephraim. The ark of the covenant remained there until the incident alluded to by Asaph when the Ephraimites were defeated in battle by the Philistines and the ark of God was captured (1 Sam 4:1-11). Asaph discloses the "hidden" reason for Ephraim's defeat. "They did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law" (Ps 78:10).

Asaph's theme throughout his account is God's great faithfulness even when Israel proves faithless. But Asaph is also honest with the sad and unnecessary consequences for willful disobedience and sinful craving. Ephraim was exhibit A, a tragic causality of spiritual negligence and rebellion. "They forgot what he had done, and the wonders he had shown them" (Ps 78:11). Asaph implies that God "abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh" (Ps 78:60), "rejected the tents of Joseph," and "did not choose the tribe of Ephraim" (Ps 78:67), because the Ephraimites were found faithless. This is how Asaph begins and ends the psalm in order to emphasize the high cost of disobedience and idolatry.

Asaph describes the Exodus twice (Ps 78:12-13; 43-53). The purpose of this parallel description was to emphasize the power of God to overcome the preeminent super power of the day. The people of God witnessed first hand the power of God to overrule Egypt in the land of Zoan.³ They saw the miracles: the great escape, the divided sea, the cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night. Up until the cross of the crucified Messiah and the empty tomb of the risen Christ the Exodus was the epicenter of God's redemptive mercy. However, the power of God to redeem, lead, and provide was not enough for the Israelites. "They willfully put God to the test by demanding what they craved" (Ps 78:18; see Exodus 16:1-17:7; Numbers 11:4-32; 14:22). The problem was not that they needed food and water. God knew their need. The problem was their ingratitude and unbelief.⁴ When Jesus fed the more than five thousand, the people invoked this very same wilderness experience to make Jesus prove himself. They said, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (John 6:31; see Exodus 16:4; Psalm 78:24-25). They had already eaten their full, but that wasn't enough.

³ Zoan is identified with Raamses, the capital city that the Israelites helped build (Exod 1:11).

⁴ Boice, Psalms, vol.2, 647.

They wanted more. Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32-33). The physical need for nourishment was never in question, but Jesus pointed to a deeper need, the need for the bread of life. But like the Israelites the people grumbled and complained and ridiculed the notion that Jesus was the bread of life that comes down from heaven.

The people’s inexcusable ingratitude and their insatiable hunger for more and more infuriated the Lord and “his fire broke out against Jacob” (Ps 78:21). We might reasonably conclude that this “fire” was a vivid metaphor but Numbers describes an actual “fire from the Lord that burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp” (Numbers 11:1-3). But even this fire did not quell their craving for quail. They wanted meat so bad that God gave them meat, literally tons of meat. He used a strong east wind to drive in-land tens of thousands of low-flying quail from the sea. The greed of the people knew no bounds and they consumed the meat like there was no tomorrow. Moses tells us that “while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the Lord burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague” (Num 11:33). Kidner writes, “The swift judgment of [God] (Ps 78:30-31) shows not that God acted prematurely but that this behavior was symptomatic, this attitude contagious and this moment crucial.”⁵

As much as we might like to think that Asaph’s description of persistent sin, shallow repentance, hollow confession, and pseudo-faithfulness applies only to the Israelites in the wilderness, we have to admit that what he says is sadly true of many professing believers today. Asaph draws out the dramatic irony of the situation. The people “kept on sinning” (Ps 78:32) whether God judged them for their sin or miraculously did wonders for their benefit. The results were frustratingly similar. Even when they truly remembered “that God was their Rock, that God Most High was their Redeemer,” they persisted in ostentatious sacrilege and ethical duplicity (Ps 78:35-37). Yet, in spite of everything, God remained merciful; “he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them” (Ps 78:38). We should not minimize the tragic cost of disobedience and faithlessness that many suffered because of God’s just judgment, but as Asaph emphasized God’s mercy far exceeded his righteous judgment. The apostle Paul makes a similar point when he quotes a trustworthy saying in the early church: “If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

Idolatry in the Promised Land

*Again and again they put God to the test;
they vexed the Holy One of Israel.
They did not remember his power –
the day he redeemed them from the oppressor,
the day he displayed his signs in Egypt,
his wonders in the region of Zoan.*

⁵ Kidner, Psalms, 283.

*He turned their river into blood;
they could not drink from their streams.
He sent swarms of flies that devoured them,
and frogs that devastated them.
He gave their crops to the grasshopper,
their produce to the locust.
He destroyed their vines with hail
and their sycamore-figs with sleet.
He gave over their cattle to the hail,
their livestock to bolts of lightning.
He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath,
indignation and hostility – a band of destroying angels.
He prepared a path for his anger;
he did not spare them from death
but gave them over to the plague.
He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt,
the firstfruits of manhood in the tents of Ham.
But he brought his people out like a flock;
he led them like sheep through the wilderness.
He guided them safely, so they were unafraid,
but the sea engulfed their enemies.
And so they brought them to the border of his holy land,
to the hill country his right hand had taken.
He drove out nations before them
and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance;
he settled the tribes of Israel in their homes.*

*But they put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High;
they did not keep his statutes.
Like their ancestors they were disloyal and faithless,
as unreliable as a faulty bow.
They angered him with their high places;
they aroused his jealousy with their idols.
When God heard them, he was furious;
he rejected Israel completely.
He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh,
the tent he had set up among humans.
He sent the ark of his might into captivity,
his splendor into the hands of the enemy.
He gave his people over to the sword;
he was furious with his inheritance.
Fire consumed their young men,
and their young women had no wedding songs;
their priests were put to the sword,*

and their widows could not weep.

*Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
as a warrior wakes from the stupor of wine.
He beat back his enemies;
he put them to everlasting shame.
Then he rejected the tents of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;
but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loved.
He built his sanctuary like the heights,
like the earth that he established forever.
He chose David his servant
and took him from the sheep pens;
from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd
of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance.
And David shepherded them with integrity of heart;
with skillful hands he led them.*

Psalm 78:41-72

Asaph recalls the many times the Israelites “put God to the test” and “vexed the Holy One of Israel” (Ps 78:41; Num 14:22). He found their willful incapacity to remember God’s redemptive power inexplicable. How could they forget the unforgettable? Once again Asaph remembers the epicenter of God’s redemptive power: the Exodus. He recalls the wonders that freed Israel from her oppressor by sending plagues of blood, flies, frogs, locusts, hail, and lightning. God unleashed “a band of destroying angels” and “struck down all the firstborn of Egypt” (Ps 78:49, 51). The ten plagues exposed the emptiness of evil and the weakness of the Egyptian superpower. God worked wonders “to purge the Hebrew minds of all envious admiration of evil, to systematically demolish every god-illusion or god-pretension that evil uses to exercise power over men and women.”⁶ God exercised his sovereignty. He overcame Egypt, guided Israel safely through the wilderness, and drove out the nations of Canaan. But in spite of what God did, Israel rebelled. They put God to the test and became disobedient, disloyal, and idolatrous. Israel was no better in promised land than they were in the wilderness.

Once again, Asaph focuses on Ephraim as a symbol of Israel’s apostasy. Their idolatry infuriated God and led to their defeat at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 4-5). Disaster followed disaster. God abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh and so many young men died in battle that young women had no one to marry. Even the priests were massacred and their widows were too weary to weep. But then, inexplicably, God steps up to defend his people. The abrupt reversal is characteristic of Asaph’s style. As Kidner remarks, “By this point in the psalm such a development is utterly unexpected, and shows the steadfast love of God in the most robust and unsentimental colors.”⁷ The Lord is likened to a warrior who is aroused suddenly from his wine

⁶ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 162.

⁷ Kidner, *Psalms*, vol.2, 285.

induced sleep. He is ready to do battle and he “beats back his enemies” and puts them to “everlasting shame” (Ps 78:66). The sovereign Lord rejects the descendants of Joseph and the tribe of Ephraim and chooses instead the tribe of Judah. Mount Zion becomes his sanctuary and David his chosen servant (1 Sam 16). He gives the people a new beginning and new leadership. Like Abraham and Moses before him, David does not merit this selection. God takes him from the fields and puts him on the throne. “One day he was caring for the ewes and their lambs, the next day God had him shepherding Jacob, his people Israel, his prize possession” (Ps 78:71, The Message). The psalm ends on a positive note of good news and hope. By God’s grace, a man after God’s own heart has been appointed to rule his people (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). Psalm 78 tracks salvation history from the Exodus to David’s reign bearing witness to God’s great faithfulness even when his people are faithless. Asaph calls us to remember the unforgettable grace and mercy of God.