

“Learning From the Past”  
Psalm 78  
(Preached at Trinity, September 4, 2011)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. The superscription of **Psalm 78** is short and simple: “A Maschil of Asaph.” We’ve seen the word “Maschil” before. In fact, there are 13 psalms with this designation. **Psalm 78** is the 10<sup>th</sup> of these psalms. It is the second Maschil of Asaph’s psalms. It designates this psalm as a psalm for contemplation or a psalm of instruction.
  2. **Psalm 78** is first of the historical psalms in the Psalter and the longest. The other historical psalms are Psalms 105, 106, 107, 114, 135, 136.
  3. History is important. The old schoolhouse rhyme must not be our heart: “History is so boring, as boring as can be. First it killed the Romans, and now its killing me.”  
We are fools if we do not learn from history.
  4. The purpose of this psalm is to recount the past history of Israel and their failures in order to encourage right behavior in the present. Of course, Israel did not learn. They would not hear and heed the word from God. This was the purpose of Stephen’s speech in **Acts 7** – they killed the prophets and then killed Christ.  
**Acts 7:51-52** – “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do* ye. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:”
  5. But **Psalm 78** is not just written for Israel. It provides instruction for the conduct of believers in all ages.
  6. **Psalm 78** contains six stanzas, each offering a particular perspective on Israel’s past failures.
    - I. The Importance of the Past – **Verses 1-8**
    - II. A Lesson regarding Ephraim’s Infidelity – **Verses 9-16**
    - III. A Lesson regarding Israel’s Discontent – **Verses 17-31**
    - IV. A Lesson regarding Israel’s Half-hearted Repentance – **Verses 32-39**
    - V. A Lesson regarding Israel’s Forgetfulness – **Verses 40-55**
    - VI. A Lesson regarding the God’s judgment upon Israel’s idolatry – **Verses 56-72**
- I. The Importance the Past – **Verses 1-8**
    - A. **Verse 1** sets the stage for the entire psalm  
**Psalm 78:1** – “Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth.”
      1. God puts His law before all men. The law is God’s standard of righteousness. All are required to obey, all are held accountable for disobeying God’s law.

2. But God speaks most clearly to His people. They have a particular duty to maintain a high standard  
 “Give ear, O my people”
- B. This duty holds true for all of God’s people
1. Israel was ordained to serve as a type. God’s dealings with Israel stand as a living allegory. There is an inseparable connection between Israel and God’s people of all ages.
  2. **Verse 2** declares this –  
**Psalm 78:2** – “I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old:”
    - a. “Parable” – a similitude designed to teach
    - b. The past history of Israel was set along side the present so that those in the present might heed the lessons from the past
- C. They had a duty to teach they law of God, the ways of God and the glory of God to their children so that they would not forget  
**Psalm 78:7** – “That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments:”
1. Israel had a past of rebelliousness – their children must not repeat the sins of their fathers  
**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.”
  2. This must be the duty and desire of God’s people of all ages. We want our children to trust our God. There are many things you can emphasize to your children. Some parents stress sports and every sort of pleasure but give little attention to the Bible or the church.  
 Spurgeon: “Teach him what you will, if he learn not the fear of the Lord, he will perish for lack of knowledge. Grammar is poor food for the soul if it be not flavoured with grace. Every satchel should have a Bible in it. The world may teach secular knowledge alone, it is all she has a heart to know, but the church must not deal so with her offspring; she should look well to every Timothy, and see to it that from a child he knows the Holy Scriptures.”
- D. We must look to the past and be taught by it
1. We must not repeat the sins of our youth
  2. We must set the lessons we’ve learned before our children  
**Proverbs 1:8** – “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:”  
**Proverbs 5:1-2** – “My son, attend unto my wisdom, *and* bow thine ear to my understanding: <sup>2</sup> That thou mayest regard discretion, and *that* thy lips may keep knowledge.
  3. Asaph directed this to Israel and to us that we might heed the wisdom that the past sets before us.

II. A Lesson regarding Ephraim's Infidelity – **Verses 9-16**

- A. In spite of God's rich provision for them they were not faithful to God
1. The accusation comes clear and simple  
**Psalm 78:10** – “They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law;”
  2. They forgot God's wondrous works among them  
**Psalm 78:11** – “And forgot his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them.”
- B. As a result they forfeited many of the rich blessings of God
1. Asaph stated that Ephraim was the tribe out of which the kingship of David should come, but God chose Judah instead and God abandoned the tabernacle that was in Shiloh, which was located in Ephraim's territory, and replaced it with Mount Zion.  
**Psalm 78:67-68** – “Moreover he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim: <sup>68</sup> But chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved.”
  2. Ephraim was the largest of the twelve tribes but by the time Asaph wrote this psalm Judah had surpassed Ephraim.
- C. The lesson here is sin always has consequences
1. Ephraim lost many of God's blessings due to their unfaithfulness
  2. We too may lose God's blessings due to our sin
    - a. Our gifts may be forfeited
    - b. We may lose the sweetness of fellowship with Christ
  3. We must not forget the sin of Ephraim. Sin has horrible consequences

III. A Lesson regarding Israel's Discontent – **Verses 17-31**

- A. Israel was not satisfied with the wondrous power and provision  
**Psalm 78:12** – “Marvellous things did he in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, *in* the field of Zoan.”  
**Psalm 78:17** – “And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness.”
1. Asaph said their sin was putting God to the test  
**Psalm 78:18** – “And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust.”
    - a. The word “lust” describes it well. It refers to an appetite.
    - b. Sinful men have an insatiable appetite. Our flesh is never satisfied
  2. God had delivered them from Egypt. Led them through the wilderness with a cloud by day and fire by night. Their needs were met. But this wasn't enough.
  3. Their problem was that no matter what they had they wanted more. In **Verse 18** we read God gave them water and then they wanted bread and then meat – there was no end to their lusts.
    - a. Asaph says God fed them with the food of angels but it wasn't enough.  
**Psalm 78:25** – “Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full.”

b. God's wrath was kindled

**Psalm 78:29-31** – “So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire; <sup>30</sup> They were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat was yet in their mouths, <sup>31</sup> The wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen *men* of Israel.”

B. This is the problem of humanity, and we must resist the temptation.

1. Never has a people been blessed like the people of America  
We live in mansions. We have food without limit, water in abundance, all of the conveniences you could only have dreamed of 200 years ago. And yet, few people complain as loudly as we do.
2. Christians have been blessed above measure – how wicked it is when we complain.
3. We must not forget the sins of Israel's mistrust and discontent with God. God is angry at the wicked sin of ingratitude

IV. A Lesson regarding Israel's Half-hearted Repentance – **Verses 32-39**

A. As the result of God's judgment upon Israel they repented, but it was not genuine  
**Psalm 78:34** – “When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and enquired early after God.”

1. They understood the consequences of their sin and cried out to God. They renewed their vows of commitment
2. But their heart was still far from God. Their repentance was the repentance of hypocrisy.  
**Psalm 78:36-37** – “Nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues. <sup>37</sup> For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant.”
3. True repentance involves not only a recognition of our sin and confession, it involves sincere turning from our sin. Asaph writes that hearts were not in it. It was not genuine.
4. Hypocritical repentance is the man that confesses his sin to God and then continues in it.
5. Yet, in their hypocrisy, God did not destroy them as they deserved but had pity upon them.

**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.”

B. God deals with humanity with wondrous mercy

1. The earth should be consumed with God's wrath today, yet God is longsuffering
2. The greatest demonstration of God's mercy is in sending Christ to pay the penalty for our sin.  
But God still demands repentance.
3. The day of God's wrath is at hand. The hour will come when there will be no mercy upon sin. God commands all men to repent.

- V. A Lesson regarding Israel's Forgetfulness – **Verses 40-55**
- A. Israel would not remember God's past graciousness  
**Psalm 78:42** – “They remembered not his hand, *nor* the day when he delivered them from the enemy.”
1. They easily forgot their deliverance from Egypt  
**Psalm 78:55-56** – “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. <sup>56</sup> Yet they tempted and provoked the most high God, and kept not his testimonies:”
  2. They forgot God's tender mercies, His rich provision, His powerful protection, His abiding presence – they forgot!
- B. This is the warning for us – we must not forget
1. This is the great warning that surrounds the Lord's Table. How wicked it is to forget the sacrifice of Christ.  
**1 Corinthians 11:29** – “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.”
  2. It is terrible to forget all that God has done. In the midst of trials we must not forget the One who rules all things. We must not provoke Him by doubting His tender mercies. We must not question His love.
- VI. A Lesson regarding the God's judgment upon Israel's idolatry – **Verses 56-72**
- A. Israel's sin eventually led to idolatry  
**Psalm 78:58** – “For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images.”
1. In **Verses 59-66** Asaph records God's horrible judgments
  2. Ultimately it led to the Northern Kingdom, led by Ephraim, to be rejected
- B. Unrepentant sin will only grow
1. Sin is a terrible plague, a consuming cancer that eats away at the soul like gangrene.
  2. We must flee from the treasonous assaults against the holiness of God

#### Conclusion:

1. The wonderful conclusion of this psalm reminds us that in spite of the wickedness of man that continues to pollute this earth, God's redemptive plan is not hindered.
  - A. Although Israel was rejected, God continued His purpose with Judah  
**Psalm 78:68** – “But chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved.”
  - B. He chose David from which the King of kings would come.  
**Psalm 78:70** – “He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds:”
2. God's grace will prevail and He will save His people. His mercy endureth forever!
3. What effect will this have upon you? Will you remember the sins of Israel? Will you heed the warning?  
 But at the same time, praise God for His wondrous mercy, for even with we are unfaithful, yet in Christ Jesus He remains faithful.
4. Tell your children of our mighty God. He is worthy to be praised. He is worthy to be worshipped and adored.