



Psalm 78 - God's Goodness and Israel's Ingratitude

A Maskil of Asaph.

Introduction

This is a 'historical psalm' (as are Psalms 105 and 106) recounting events from Israel's past that show how God persevered with his people, even when they disbelieved, while at the same time he cleansed his people by purging them of the unbelievers along the way. The psalm has selected events primarily from the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges and Samuel, ending with the reign of David. The psalm is clear about its purpose: to recount these events in song so that future generations of God's people might take the lessons to heart, particularly that they not be unbelieving and rebellious like the generations described here. The emphasis is on the people as a whole and the members' obligation to embrace the covenant faithfully in each generation. Terms for 'remember' and 'forget' run through the psalm; the psalmist hopes that those who sing this will never again forget.

The psalm opens with its purpose statement (vv.1-8), followed by several episodes of sin and unbelief, each new section beginning with 'they sinned' or 'they rebelled' (v.17, v.32, v.40 and v.56), followed by a final section on God's gift of David as the pinnacle expression of his enduring commitment (vv.65-72).

Christians will of course see the final section on David as important: Jesus is David's heir and the One who now occupies his throne. At the same time, they should not overlook God's patient preservation of his people, the descendants of Abraham – the people into which God has engrafted Gentile Christians. Christians may properly see themselves as the beneficiaries of God's patience: without it, there would be no people for them to be part of! And God will continue his purposes for his people until the very end.

Psalm 78:1-8 - I Must Recount the Past Deeds So that Our Children Do Not Forget.

The song begins by calling for attention and explaining what it aims to do: to tell of the glorious deeds of the Lord so that the next generation might know them and that they should not be like their forefathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation. The parable and dark sayings (v.2) are not secret teachings; they are things that have been heard and are known (v.3), which must be passed on to the next generation (v.4).

The OT describes the people of God as those whom God has chosen to receive his particular revelation, i.e. his testimony and the law (v.5), with the responsibility to teach to their children: <<***I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you***>> (Genesis 17:7), <<***No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him***>> (Genesis 18:19), and: <<***Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates***>> (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

The process does not bring its benefits in any automatic way: each of the members must take the provisions of the covenant as their own, embrace God's grace, set their hope in God, and keep his commandments. Sadly, far too many Israelites, and too many generations, received the covenant as an external arrangement but did not embrace it from their hearts; thus they were stubborn and rebellious, their heart was not steadfast and their spirit was not faithful to God. These phrases describe a condition of unbelief or apostasy, not simply the sins that even genuine believers commit. However, if each generation will take to heart the lessons of this psalm, they need not repeat these episodes of unbelief.

- 1 Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
- 2 I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
- 3 things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.

- 4 We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

Psalm 78:1-4

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching. Psalm 78 is a wisdom psalm, written to instruct God's people. The theme is the goodness and kindness of God to his stubborn and rebellious people. Asaph began by asking for the attention of God's people for the wisdom he would speak. Psalm 78 begins with a principle sometimes neglected among those who would speak wisdom to others: 'you must first gain the attention of your listeners if you would teach them and reach them.'

Parables and dark sayings or riddles (v.4) are the tools of wisdom teachers and require imagination to unlock their meaning. Here the stories of Israelite history are the vehicle of this wisdom teaching. Psalm 49 is another wisdom psalm with reference to the parable and the dark sayings. The phrase dark sayings does not have in mind hidden or mystical knowledge but in things that can simply be difficult to understand; riddles that are good topics for instruction. Jesus uses v.2 to describe his own practice of telling parables: <<*This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world'*>> (Matthew 13:35). He may simply find this text a convenient summary of what a wisdom teacher does, in order to challenge his audiences to apply themselves to his wisdom; but he may also be suggesting that at least some of his parables are like this psalm in drawing lessons from Israel's history, for example 'The Parable of the Wicked Tenants' recorded in Matthew 21:33-44.

Things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. Asaph will not bring up new things for discussion but things already within the mind of Israel, as Gideon reflected upon: <<*Gideon answered him, 'But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian'*>> (Judges 6:13).

We will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord. Asaph knew what followed in Psalm 78 came from events and themes received from their forefathers. He also knew that what they had received they had to pass on to the next generation; they had a responsibility to not hide them from their children: <<*Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and*

when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise>> (Deuteronomy 11:19).

The glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. Asaph was concerned to pass on at least three things to the next generation:

- The glorious deeds of the Lord - teaching them that God was worthy of their adoration and gratitude.
- God's might - his power and greatness are above and beyond everything else.
- The wonders that he has done - that is, God's power and greatness in active assistance to his people.

These three things are just as important today. Charles Spurgeon believed them to be relevant to the Christian church and he commented, "Those who forget God's works are sure to fail in their own."

⁵ He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
⁶ that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
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 ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Psalm 78:5-8

He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel. Using poetic repetition for style and emphasis, Asaph described first one of the greatest of God's wonderful works - the giving of God's Word to Israel. Centuries later the Apostle Paul would explain that one of the great advantages God gave to Israel was

that he committed to them his Word: <<*Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God*>> (Romans 3:1-2).

Which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children. Then and now, God gives his Word that it would be transmitted to following generations. In theory, the revelation of God's Word can perish or become utterly irrelevant if not passed on to the next generation.

And rise up and tell them to their children. Not only should the children be taught, they should be taught to teach their children so that the Word and the work of God continue throughout the generations. Close examination shows that five generations are given. However, the text implies that it should be ongoing to every generation yet to come.

So that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God. The goal of communicating to the next generation is so that they would learn to trust God for themselves, never forgetting his wonderful works.

But keep his commandments; and that they should not be like their ancestors. To the psalmist, losing trust in God and forgetting his works leads to disobedience. If the younger generation is well instructed they might be more obedient, avoiding many of the errors of their ancestors: <<*Do not be like your ancestors and your kindred, who were faithless to the Lord God of their ancestors, so that he made them a desolation, as you see*>> (2 Chronicles 30:7).

A stubborn and rebellious generation. Asaph described the sins of previous generations in Israel. They were stubborn and rebellious; they did not keep their hearts steadfast, and their spirit was not faithful to God. These have some direct reference to action but are more focused on heart and attitude.

Psalm 78:9-16 - God's People Forgot His Great Deeds of the Exodus.

The first historical section recounts an otherwise unknown incident in which the Ephraimites turned back on the day of battle; presumably this was a battle in which Israel was defending itself and in which all Israel was expected to participate, each tribe serving the others because of their bond as God's people. Their failure, then, was not simply a failure in patriotism but also in brotherhood and faith; they did not keep God's covenant and the reason is that they forgot God's works. This is not a simple mental lapse but a deliberate turning away from the implications of these great deeds, which marked them out as the body of God's chosen people, under obligation both to God and to each other. Verses 12-16 mention some of these deeds, such as the exodus from Egypt (vv.12-13) and God's care for the people in the wilderness (vv.14-16). Israel in every generation should have learned from these works of God but often they did not.

- 9 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 what he had done,
and the miracles that he had shown them.

Psalm 78:9-11

The Ephraimites were one of the larger tribes of Israel, and sometimes God called Israel 'Ephraim' and in 2 Chronicles 25:7 God used the phrase <<*all these Ephraimites*>> to refer to the people of Israel as a whole.

Armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. Because it is difficult to match this with a known instance in Israel's history, perhaps the sense here is of a spiritual battle. Spiritually speaking, God equipped Israel for conflict. They were armed and had bows. Yet they often failed in the day of battle, because they did not keep God's covenant.

There is no specific historic battle in which it is recorded that Ephraim turned away; therefore this incident remains unidentified. However, some point to the occasion when the Ephraimites complained to Gideon that he had not called them to arms to fight the Midianites and this nearly came to a conflict between Gideon and Ephraim; refer to Judges 8:1-3. Similarly, Ephraim complained when Jephthah did not call them to fight against the Ammonites and this did lead to a conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites, who lost the subsequent battle; refer to Judges 12:1-6.

God makes spiritual resources available to his people for the spiritual conflicts they face; refer to Ephesians 6:10-18. However, the effectiveness of those resources depends in some regard on their decision to actually make use of them. Ultimately, God's people are assured of victory in Jesus. Day to day there may be defeats and setbacks - being turned back in the day of battle - because available resources are not used. Spiritually considered, there are many who are turned back in the day of battle, although in different ways:

- Some turn back before the battle begins.
- Some turn back as soon as the battle is engaged.
- Some turn back when the first injury is received.
- Some turn back when the battle becomes long with no clear victory in sight.

They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. This was losing the battle. Disobedience and ignorance among God's people were examples of being turned back in the day of battle: <<*For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord*>> (Isaiah 30:9). This is a warning to all generations: the spiritual battle may be lost.

- 12 In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels
in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.
- 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 night long with a fiery light.
- 15 He split rocks open 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.

Psalm 78:12-16

In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt. Asaph remembered the how God helped his people as described in the first part of the Book of Exodus. Through a series of miraculous plagues and demonstrations of God's power, Pharaoh was compelled to let Israel go from their slavery and they left rewarded with riches from the Egyptians; refer to Exodus Chapters 5-13.

Zoan is a city in Egypt: <<*Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt*>> (Numbers 13:22b), not far from where the Israelites lived. It is paired with Egypt again in v.43, as a place where God's marvels, i.e. his signs and wonders upon the Egyptians would have been visible to the Israelites. Zoan is also referenced in Isaiah's oracle against Egypt: <<*The princes of Zoan have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded; those who are the cornerstones of its tribes have led Egypt astray*>> (Isaiah 19:13).

He divided the sea and let them pass through it. As Pharaoh's armies pursued Israel, God miraculously brought them through the Red Sea as they walked on dry ground for God made the waters stand like a heap; refer to Exodus Chapter 14.

In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light. As Israel came into the wilderness of Sinai, God assured them and guided them with

the two demonstrations of his presence - the cloud by day and the fire by night: <<*Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey*>> (Exodus 40:36-38).

He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. Often in the wilderness the nation of Israel needed water and many times God miraculously provided. One occasion was at Meribah where Moses struck the rock and it presumably split, bringing forth water: <<*Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.'* These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarrelled with the Lord, and by which he showed his holiness>> (Numbers 20:10-13), and: <<*They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split open the rock and the water gushed out*>> (Isaiah 48:21).

Psalm 78:17-31 - Yet They Sinned Still More in the Wilderness.

The next section advances the people's worthiness of blame with yet they sinned still more against God in spite of the deeds they had seen (vv.12-16). The verses that follow stress the people's disbelief of God's continued ability or commitment to care for them as they demanded food and God provided manna (vv.21-25 in reference to Exodus 16:1-21) and quail, for which they suffered a plague (vv.26-31 in reference to Numbers 11:31-34, which corresponds to the description better than Exodus 16:13 does). These acts of provision preserved the covenant people, although God cut off the disbelieving along the way.

- 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?

20 Even though he struck the rock so that water gushed out
and torrents overflowed,
can he also give bread,
or provide meat for his people?’

Psalm 78:17-20

Yet they sinned still more against him. God repeatedly did great and amazing things for Israel in bringing them out of Egyptian slavery and preserving them in the wilderness. Yet Israel’s response was to sin even more and to rebel against the Most High: <<*Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses?*>> (Hebrews 3:16).

They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. God provided Israel’s needs in the wilderness but sometimes they demanded more. He gave them manna but they soon demanded meat as in Numbers 11:4-10, 11:18-23, and 11:31-34. This tested God.

God promises to meet his people’s needs and not the things they crave. Spurgeon observed, “Alas, how have we also quarrelled with our mercies, and querulously pined for some imaginary good, counting our actual enjoyments to be nothing because they did not happen to be exactly conformed to our foolish fancies.” In this, Israel had two key sins:

- They were dissatisfied with what God provided.
- They thought the reason why God did not give them what they wanted was because he could not; that it was beyond his power.

Can God spread a table in the wilderness? With these words they spoke against God, they tested him, expressing their lack of faith in his power and lack of trust in his care. They did not believe that God could give them a banquet in the wilderness.

Can he also give bread, or provide meat for his people? Repeatedly God showed Israel that he could do all this and more. They asked these doubting questions with the miraculously provided manna for their daily sustenance.

21 Therefore, when the Lord heard, he was full of rage;
a fire was kindled against Jacob,
his anger mounted against Israel,
22 because they had no faith in God,
and did not trust his saving power.

23 Yet he commanded the skies above,
and opened the doors of heaven;
24 he rained down on them manna to eat,
and gave them the grain of heaven.
25 Mortals ate of the bread of angels;
he sent them food in abundance.

Psalm 78:21-25

Therefore, when the Lord heard, he was full of rage. God blessed and provided for Israel in the Exodus out of Egypt and in the wilderness; Israel responded with complaining and unbelief. God did not ignore this; he heard it and he was furious with their sin against him. The reader should keep in mind that the sins Asaph had mainly considered were the sins of ingratitude, testing God, and doubting his power and his care. These were sins God was furious with. Today people, including many Christians, often think God takes little account of such sins. Spurgeon comments, “He was not indifferent to what they said. He dwelt among them in the holy place, and, therefore, they insulted him to his face. He did not hear a report of it, but the language itself came into his ears.”

A fire was kindled against Jacob. Asaph may have had in mind what happened at Taberah, where in judgement the fire of the Lord burned among Israel: <<***Now when the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, the Lord heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the Lord burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire abated. So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned against them***>> (Numbers 11:1-3).

Because they had no faith in God, and did not trust his saving power. In case the reader has missed the point Asaph stated it clearly for emphasis. These were the sins that made God furious and made his judgement burn like fire to Israel. Unbelief and mistrust toward God are counted as small sins by many today. Again Spurgeon comments, “In the text it appears as if all Israel’s other sins were as nothing compared with this; this is the peculiar spot which the Lord points at, the special provocation which angered him. From this let every unbeliever learn to tremble more at his unbelief than at anything else. If he be no fornicator, or thief, or liar, let him reflect that it is quite enough to condemn him that he trusts not in God’s salvation.”

Yet he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven. Their dark sin is set against the white background of God’s goodness and constant care

for them. He gave them and kept giving them bread or the grain of heaven and the bread of angels, and they ate to the full. There have been many attempts to understand the giving of manna by known natural phenomena. It is possible that there is a link to something along these lines, such as the sugary substance modern Arabs call *mann*; yet the sense of vv.24-25 is that there was something supernatural and even other-worldly about manna.

John records in his Gospel that in trying to persuade Jesus to keep providing miraculous bread, those who had been fed quoted this line from v.24 <<*Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat"*>> (John 6:31). In quoting this psalm to Jesus they fulfilled it in a negative way showing the same ingratitude and willingness to test God that Israel showed in the wilderness.

26 He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens,
and by his power he led out the south wind;
27 he rained flesh upon them like dust,
winged birds like the sand of the seas;
28 he let them fall within their camp,
all around their dwellings.
29 And they ate and were well filled,
for he gave them what they craved.
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 flower of Israel.

Psalm 78:26-31

He rained flesh upon them like dust. Numbers 11:31-33 describes how God sent quail to Israel when they complained of manna. He literally let them fall within their camp, bringing the meat they craved to them.

And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. Asaph wrote this with a strong sense of irony. Israel was well filled but not with good quail meat in their stomachs. God gave them their own desire but because their craving was rooted in their self-will the result would not be good.

But before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them. God gave a disobedient and rebellious Israel all they desired and craved and it turned to a plague of judgement among them: <<*But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague*>> (Numbers 11:33).

Psalm 78:32-39 - In Spite of All They Saw, They Still Sinned.

The mighty works of God described in vv.9-31 should have been enough but they were not. In spite of all this, they still sinned, they did not believe. This section focuses on the judgements with which the Lord disciplined his people, again and again seeking to lead them to repentance. When he killed them, they sought him; they repented and sought God earnestly, yet their repentance was not deep and sincere - they only flattered and lied in their professions of faith (v.36), so it did not last: their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant (v.37). However, God did not do what one might expect, namely, wipe them out and start over. Even though he could have purged them of unbelieving members, he did not destroy them, he did not stir up all his wrath. All this was because he is compassionate and therefore he atoned for their iniquity (v.38), which means that he accepted the sacrifices that they offered and conveyed his blessing of forgiveness.

- 32 In spite of all this they still sinned;
they did not believe in his wonders.
- 33 So he made their days vanish like a breath,
and their years in terror.
- 34 When he killed them, they sought for him;
they repented and sought God earnestly.
- 35 They remembered that God was their rock,
the Most High God their redeemer.
- 36 But they flattered him with their mouths;
they lied to him with their tongues.
- 37 Their heart was not steadfast towards him;
they were not true to his covenant.
- 38 Yet he, being compassionate,
forgave their iniquity,

and did not destroy them;
often he restrained his anger,
and did not stir up all his wrath.

³⁹ He remembered that they were but flesh,
a wind that passes and does not come again.

Psalm 78:32-39

In spite of all this they still sinned. In some ways this is the most tragic line of Psalm 78. Despite all the blessings and the strongest of corrections, they still sinned. Israel would not learn either from God's goodness or from his wrath.

So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror. God said that the generation of unbelief could not enter the Promised Land and that generation would be consumed in the wilderness; refer to Numbers 14:22-24. The futility was expressed in the idea that they came out of Egypt but never into Canaan. The fear was expressed in their unwillingness to take the land by faith: *<<Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?' So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt'>>* (Numbers 14:1-4).

When he killed them, they sought for him. It took the most extreme correction from God but eventually a generation of faith grew and sought God earnestly. Charles Spurgeon comments, "Who would not be pious when the plague is abroad? Doors, which were never so sanctified before, put on the white cross then. Even reprobates send for the minister when they lie a dying. Thus sinners pay involuntary homage to the power of right and the supremacy of God, but their hypocritical homage is of small value in the sight of the Great Judge."

But they flattered him with their mouths. Their seeking of God was sincere but short lived. Soon they came to God only with flattering, insincere words. Strange to think a man could think he could lie to God, yet they (and often people today) lied to him with their tongues.

Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity. God's response to their stubborn rebellion, to their insincere seeking, to their failure to be true to his covenant, was surprising. God showed his compassion, he forgave and many a time he restrained his anger.

He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again. In part, God's understanding of the weakness of humanity prompted his compassion and forgiveness. One reason he was merciful to them was because of their frail nature.

Psalm 78:40-55 - How Often They Rebelled, Forgetting the Exodus and Conquest.

The next section goes back to the exodus, describing all the plagues God brought against the Egyptian oppressors (vv.42-53), with a brief summary of the conquest of the Promised Land (vv.54-55). And yet, how often they rebelled, grieved, tested, and provoked! The reason: they did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe: <<***With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph***>> (Psalm 77:15). The story is one of constant disbelief in the face of unimaginable grace and even more grace being granted in the face of disbelief!

- 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 keep in mind his power,
or the day when he redeemed them from the foe;
- 43 when he displayed his signs in Egypt,
and his miracles 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.
- 46 He gave their crops to the caterpillar,
and the fruit of their labour 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 fierce 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 all the firstborn in Egypt,
the first issue of their strength in the tents of Ham.

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 hill,
to the mountain that 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.

Psalm 78:40-55

How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness. Asaph just explained God's compassionate response to Israel's sin. Yet he did not want to ignore Israel's sin, their great debt of ingratitude and rebellion against God.

And grieved him in the desert. This is confirmed in Isaiah 63:10, where God's people 'rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit'; Paul commanded: <<***And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption***>> (Ephesians 4:30).

They tested God again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel. Not only did Israel's stubborn disobedience provoke and tempt God, there was a real sense in which it limited the Holy One of Israel. In one sense it is impossible for the creature to limit the creator. Yet, when God ties his work to man's faith and/or obedience, there is a sense in which man can and does limit God.

Matthew 13:58 says of the ministry of Jesus in Nazareth: <<And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief>>. As long as God chooses to work in concert with human agency, developing their ability to partner with him, their unbelief can and may hinder the work of God.

They did not keep in mind his power, or the day when he redeemed them from the foe. Asaph had in mind the great power God showed in setting Israel free from their 400 years of slavery in Egypt. The Exodus redemption is often presented in the Hebrew Scriptures as the demonstration of the power of God.

In the NT there is a record of a new and ultimate demonstration of the power of God: the resurrection of Jesus Christ: <<Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ>> (Romans 1:1-6), <<I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come>> (Ephesians 1:17-21), and: <<I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death>> (Philippians 3:10). Paul might rephrase v.42, 'They did not remember his power, the day when he raised Jesus from the dead.'

When he displayed his signs in Egypt. Asaph recounted how God demonstrated his power for Israel and against Pharaoh by sending the plagues upon Egypt. The plagues were special demonstrations of God's power because they were focused against supposed Egyptian deities:

- When God turned their rivers to blood he showed he was greater than the supposed Egyptian gods Khnum (said to be the guardian of the Nile), Hapi (supposedly the spirit of the Nile), and Osiris, said to have the Nile as his bloodstream; refer to Exodus 7:17-20.
- When God sent swarms of flies he showed that he was greater than the supposed Egyptian god Imhotep (the god of medicine) and that he was able

to stop the whole worship of the Egyptian gods with loathsome lice and swarms of insects; refer to Exodus 8:20-32.

- When God sent **frogs** he showed that he was greater than the supposed Egyptian goddess Heqt, the frog-goddess of fertility; refer to Exodus 7:25-8:15.
- When God gave **their labour to the locust** he showed that he was greater than the Egyptian god Set, thought to be the protector of crops; refer to Exodus 10:1-20.
- When God destroyed their agriculture with **hail** and **frost** and **their flocks to thunderbolts** he showed that he was greater than the supposed Egyptian goddess Nut, the sky goddess; refer to Exodus 9:13-35.
- When God gave **over their cattle to the hail** he showed that he was greater than the supposed Egyptian goddess Hathor, a cow-like mother goddess; refer to Exodus 9:1-7.

A company of destroying angels. The worst of all the plagues was the last, the death of the firstborn. Egypt and Pharaoh would not give God his firstborn - Israel (Exodus 4:22-23); so God took the firstborn of Egypt; refer to Exodus 11:1-12:36. Spurgeon commented, “His last arrow was the sharpest. He reserved the strong wine of his indignation to the last. Note how the psalmist piles up the words, and well he might; for blow followed blow, each one more staggering than its predecessor, and then the crushing stroke was reserved for the end.”

Then he led out his people like sheep. After the death of the firstborn the Egyptians begged the Israelites to leave and sent them away with gifts, happy to be rid of them. Asaph then summarised the next many years:

- **He led them in safety;** God protected them all the way.
- **The sea overwhelmed their enemies;** God destroyed the pursuing Egyptian army when the waters of the sea came crashing down upon them.
- **He brought them to his holy hill;** that is, the border of his holy land of promise.
- **He drove out the nations before them,** clearing many of the Canaanite peoples before Israel ever came to the land.
- **He apportioned them for a possession,** dividing the land among those who whom he had made an eternal promise of the land.

Psalm 78:56-64 - They Tested and Rebelled against God in the Promised Land.

Now that Israel has come to the Promised Land (vv.54-55), this section describes the time of the Judges, leading up to the captivity of the ark and the death of Eli and his sons (vv.60-64); refer to 1 Samuel Chapter 4. Just as before, they tested and rebelled against the Most High and provoked him to anger. The cycles of apostasy followed by repentance, followed by more apostasy, so familiar from the Book of Judges, are in view (vv.56-58). The sons of the high priest Eli, who

ministered in God's tent at Shiloh, brought the ark (in which the glory dwelt) to battle as a good-luck charm against the Philistines; but the Philistines won and took the ark into captivity. It would appear that the victorious Philistines went on to devastate the site of Shiloh as well; refer to Jeremiah 7:12-15.

56 Yet they tested the Most High God,
and rebelled against him.
They did not observe his decrees,
57 but turned away and were faithless like their ancestors;
they twisted like a treacherous bow.
58 For they provoked him to anger with their high places;
they moved him to jealousy with their idols.
59 When God heard, he was full of wrath,
and he utterly rejected Israel.
60 He abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh,
the tent where he dwelt among mortals,
61 and delivered his power to captivity,
his glory to the hand of the foe.
62 He gave his people to the sword,
and vented his wrath on his heritage.
63 Fire devoured their young men,
and their girls had no marriage song.
64 Their priests fell by the sword,
and their widows made no lamentation.

Psalm 78:56-64

Yet they tested the Most High God. The previous long section of Psalm 78:42-55 recounted God's great faithfulness from Egypt to Canaan. Yet once Israel came into the Promised Land they did not observe his decrees, but turned away and were faithless. The situation is summed up well in the repeated statement at the time: <<*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes*>> (Judges 17:6 and 21:25).

For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols. When Israel came into the Promised Land they often worshipped the gods of the Canaanites, setting up altars on the high places and worshipping gods of carved images.

He utterly rejected Israel. In context, God's 'rejection' means that he cut off many of the Israelites for their unbelief; he nevertheless retains his interest in the people, as vv.65-72 will make plain.

He abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh. Asaph remembered the tragedy at Shiloh, where the Philistines overran the tabernacle, killed the priests and captured the Ark of the Covenant; refer to 1 Samuel Chapter 4.

And delivered his power to captivity his glory to the hand of the foe. When the Ark of the Covenant was captured at Shiloh, the daughter-in-law of Eli the high priest also learned that her husband, her brother-in-law, her father-in-law, and 30,000 Israeli soldiers had been killed. She was pregnant and the news was so overwhelming that she went into labour and died giving birth. With her last words she said to name the child born on such a tragic day, Ichabod - meaning, the glory has departed; refer to 1 Samuel 4:20-22. There certainly was a sense in which the glory had departed from Israel but it was not the glory of the Ark of the Covenant. The glory that departed was the glory of God's blessing and presence upon an obedient Israel.

Fire devoured their young men, their priests fell by the sword. Asaph reminded Israel that the losses at Shiloh were more than just the Ark of the Covenant. There was also a great loss of life, including the priests; refer to 1 Samuel 4:10-22.

Psalm 78:65-72 - Finally God Answered by Choosing the Line of David.

The final section celebrates how God graciously answered this recurring pattern by raising up David to be king of Israel. The psalmist writes that the Lord awoke as from sleep. This is a bold image, conveying what the believer can feel like when he has not so far seen how God is active. God stirs himself from apparent inactivity to take action on behalf of his suffering people, even when, as here, they are suffering for their own unbelief; refer also to Psalm 35:23, 44:23 and 59:5.

The action that God took was to install a king, selecting a man from the tribe of Judah rather than from the tribe of Ephraim, which, as a descendant of Joseph, might have seemed a more likely candidate; Jacob's dying prophecy in Genesis 49:10 foretold exactly this. God also chose Mount Zion, i.e. Jerusalem, to be not only the capital but the location of his sanctuary.

David was just a young boy looking after his father's sheep when God instructed Samuel to anoint him as the next king. Like Moses in Exodus 3:1, David learned how to shepherd with actual sheep before being given the task of shepherding

God's people. For the image of God's people as sheep, refer to the comments made on Psalm 23:1 and 74:1-3. The king is ideally a shepherd of his people: <<*For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel*>> (2 Samuel 5:2), caring for them, protecting them, and leading them in faithfulness to the covenant. David at his best did his work with upright heart and skilful hand, although he had his own moral failures; many kings in his line were much less upright and skilful.

The term 'shepherd' came to be used of leaders in Israel, i.e. priests, nobles, and judges, and the prophet Ezekiel spoke out about the greedy shepherds in his day, refer to Ezekiel Chapter 34. He looked forward to the time after the exile when God would raise up 'his servant David' (i.e. the Messiah) who would be the 'shepherd' of his people; refer to Ezekiel 34:23-24. When Jesus called himself 'the good shepherd' in John 10:11-14, he claimed to be the long-awaited heir of David, who would guide his people perfectly.

65 Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
like a warrior shouting because of wine.

66 He put his adversaries to rout;
he put them to everlasting disgrace.

Psalm 78:65-66

Then the Lord awoke as from sleep. When the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant they placed it as a trophy in the temple of their pagan god Dagon. Even while the symbol of his presence was captive in a pagan temple, God demonstrated his glory; refer to 1 Samuel Chapter 5.

He put his adversaries to rout. The story of how God exalted himself over the Philistines and put them to everlasting disgrace is also found in 1 Samuel Chapter 5. In it all God demonstrated that he was able to guard his glory when his people neglected it.

67 He rejected the tent of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;

68 but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loves.

69 He built his sanctuary like the high heavens,
like the earth, which he has founded for ever.

70 He chose his servant David,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
71 from tending the nursing ewes he brought him
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel, his inheritance.
72 With upright heart he tended them,
and guided them with skilful hand.

Psalm 78:67-72

But he chose the tribe of Judah. Asaph explained how God did not choose the other tribes to be the home of his sanctuary. He rejected the tent of Joseph, and instead chose Jerusalem, i.e. Mount Zion, to be the spiritual centre of Israel.

He chose his servant David. The Lord's 'servant' is someone he appoints for a special purpose on behalf of his people; refer to Psalm 89:20, 132:10 and 144:10. In the Book of Isaiah, the servant of the Lord is never called an heir of David; but the fact that David can be called this helps support the messianic interpretation of that figure in Isaiah.

Isaiah 42:1-9 is the first of four Servant Songs, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the others being Isaiah 49:1-13, 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. Isaiah sprinkles references to "the servant of the Lord" throughout Chapters 40-55. Often it is a title for the people as a whole, but at times the servant is a specific person within Israel who is distinct from the whole, with a calling to serve Israel and. The second Servant Song (Isaiah 49:1-13), which clarifies that the servant is distinct from Israel, also calls him Israel; this is best explained as identifying the servant as the representative and embodiment of the whole people. This last point shows why the traditional Christian reading, that the servant is a messianic figure, accurately captures Isaiah's intent. First, in the Davidic covenant, David's heirs represent and embody the people as a whole: Israel is God's 'son' (Exodus 4:22-23), and the king becomes God's 'son' on his coronation; refer to 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 89:26-27. Therefore the servant follows the pattern of David's heirs. Second, the servant achieves the expansion of his rule throughout the Gentile world, which is the work of the Davidic Messiah in Isaiah Chapters 7-12. Third, later prophets describe an heir of David, and especially the Messiah, as the servant, i.e. Jeremiah 33:21-26, Ezekiel 34:23-24 and 37:25, Haggai 2:23 and Zechariah 3:8, which supports reading the servant in Isaiah as a messianic figure. In addition to his royal function, the servant also has a prophetic role and a priestly one, which folds a priestly role into Messiah's royal office.

In some ways Jerusalem was an unlikely choice to be the centre of Israel. In the same pattern, David - the humble shepherd boy tending the nursing ewes - was God's choice to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance.

With upright heart he tended them, and guided them with skilful hand. Psalm 78 ends on a hopeful note. It concludes with recognition of and gratitude for the goodness of God in the integrity and skilfulness of David's rule. Like many aspects of David's rule, this was fulfilled in a much greater way in David's Greater Son, Jesus the Messiah. David's heart mostly had integrity; the heart of Jesus was perfect in integrity. David guided Israel with great skill; Jesus leads his people with perfect skill.