

INTRODUCTION

Turn in your Bible, if you will, to the seventy-eighth chapter of the book of Psalms - Psalms *seventy-eight*.

I invite you to stand in the reading of God's Word. **Read** Psalm 78:9-20.

It was **Dr. Arthur T. Pierson** who said, "*History is His story*"¹ and this psalm bears that out.

Philosopher and Spaniard **George Santayana** put it this way, "*Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it.*"²

That is how we approach this particular psalm, which is known as *an instructive psalm*. We come knowing that history is just that, God's story.

We also come knowing and believing that God intended for us to learn from history which Calvin sometimes called *sacred* history.

As Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 1:9** –

⁹ That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. **So there is nothing new under the sun.**

It is a harsh reality but nothing is new. We just need to turn the things of old to things newly discovered that we might glean from ages past.

Is it not amazing to notice how slow we always are to learn the great lessons of life and of history?

¹ Cited in Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 104.

² *Ibid.*

In highlighting the authority of Scripture, **R.A. Torrey** has said –

“Oh, happy is the man who has sense enough to learn from the unvarying history of the past and believe what God says in spite of the proud unbelief of men, no matter who they may be.”³

So let us be happy men who have sense enough to learn from sacred history and believe that God intends for us to learn lessons from His Word for us this morning – lessons that we are commanded to teach the coming generation that they might know God; *“that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments”* (v. 7).

C O N T E N T

A SUMMONS TO INSTRUCTION (vv. 1-8)

A RECORD OF REBELLION AND REDEMPTION (vv. 9-72)

What you have in verses 9 and onward is a record of *rebellion* on Israel’s part and *redemption* on God’s part.

It is a story spanning 4 decades. It is a story that is retold so that a lesson may be learned and so that past failure will not characterize the present and coming generations.

The psalmist tells this story in historical fashion, looking back at two major flashbacks in Israel’s history. History that takes the reader from the time when the people came out of Egypt to the wilderness (vv. 9-39) and the time when the people continued in their journey from the wilderness to the Promised Land (vv. 40-72).

Perhaps this will help us along this historical journey:

- Out of Egypt to the wilderness (vv. 9-39)
- From the wilderness to the Promised Land (vv. 40-72)

³ Reuben Archer Torrey, *The Gospel for to-day* (New York; Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1922), 130.
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There are lessons to be taught and retold to our generation and to the coming generations that they may “*not be like their fathers*” nevertheless “*put their confidence in God*” and “*not forget the works of God.*”

Fathers we have something to say to the coming generation! They are *lessons for the journey* that we must tell and not conceal to our children and children’s children.

The first lesson for the journey is that of...

FRAILITY AND FORGETFULNESS – vv. 9-16

⁹ The sons of Ephraim were archers equipped with bows, *Yet* they turned back in the day of battle.

¹⁰ They **did not keep** the covenant of God And **refused to walk** in His law;

¹¹ They **forgot His deeds** And His miracles that He had shown them.

The Ephraimites are representative of the nation of Israel as a whole. They were the ruling tribe during the period of the Judges.

According to **Gen 48:8-22**, Ephraim, the younger son of Joseph, received from Jacob a greater blessing than his older brother Manasseh.

Yet the psalmist reveals in **v. 67** –

⁶⁷ [God] also rejected **the tent of Joseph**, And did not choose the tribe of Ephraim,

Despite the fame of Joseph, and the central position and power of his son Ephraim, God choice was Judah, a tribe which had won no glory in the days of the judges.

God chose “*the tribe of Judah, the Mount Zion which he loved*” (v. 68). As it is written in **v. 60** –

⁶⁰ [God] **abandoned the dwelling place at Shiloh** [which was in the hill country of Ephraim], The tent which He had pitched among men,

Q: *What is it about the tribe of Ephraim that God rejected this tribe?*

A: What you have is an *unruly* tribe who is *easily offended* (cf. Judges 8:1-3).

They are also a self-centered bunch with an inflated estimation of their significance within the nation (cf. Judges 12:1-6).

“Who would dare to go into battle without us? Don’t they know who we are, we are Ephraimites.”

Without a doubt, the Ephraimites were characterized by military power but this nothing of their trust in God.

They were *“archers equipped with bows* yet they turned back in the day of battle.” With all their offenses against Gideon and Jephthah, when push came to shove, they were *cowardly* bowmen. Look down at **v. 57** –

⁵⁶ Yet they [i.e. Israel as a whole] tempted and rebelled against the Most High God And did not keep His testimonies,
⁵⁷ But turned back and acted **treacherously** like their fathers; **They turned aside like a treacherous bow.**

A bow which in time of use would not bend properly, and so proved unreliable. It failed to function.

So were the Ephraimites, Israel as a whole. Look back at **v. 10** –

¹⁰ They did not keep the covenant of God And refused to walk in His law;
¹¹ They forgot His deeds And His miracles that He had shown them.

Instead of being men filled with fortitude, they were men characterized by moral frailty and forgetfulness.

As the *Berleburger Bible*, a rare 8 volume edition of the Bible produced in Switzerland in 1742 (perhaps a revision of the Lutheran Bible), [Spurgeon quoted from it] accurately describes –

“This representation is given to us for instruction and reflection, that we may not grow weak in faith, and fall away in the time of battle. This is commonly the case with those who rely too much upon themselves, and have not unreservedly surrendered themselves to God. They fancy themselves strong, so long as there are no enemies before them, and prepare to fight them in imagination. But as soon as real enemies come within sight, they fly before them and become unfaithful.”⁴

When push came to shove, they were deliberate covenant-breakers who had *“perversely and wickedly shut their eyes”⁵* (Calvin) to all that God had done. *How could a nation forget His deeds?* Look down at **vv. 12ff** –

¹² He wrought **wonders** before their fathers In the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.

¹³ He **divided the sea** and caused them to pass through, And He made the waters stand up like a heap.

¹⁴ Then He led them with the cloud by day And all the night with a light of fire.

¹⁵ He **split the rocks** in the wilderness And gave *them* abundant drink like the ocean depths.

¹⁶ He brought forth streams also from the rock And caused waters to run down like rivers.

How do you forget all this?

Men, learn from the past, or you too may be moved aside by God. As the largest and most prominent Ephraim was among the twelve tribes of Israel at the time of the invasion and conquest of Canaan, God has no problem casting them aside for their *obstinacy* and *pride*.

⁴ E. W. Hengstenberg, John Thomson and Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Psalms, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), 459.

⁵ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), Ps 78:11.

Men walk in His ways and keep His Word and do not dare forget what He has done.

That would be the first lesson for the journey. Another lesson is that of...

INGRATITUDE AND UNBELIEF – vv. 17-33

¹⁷ Yet they still **continued to sin** against Him, **To rebel** against the Most High in the desert.

¹⁸ And in their heart they **put God to the test** By asking food according to their desire.

Question: *What is it to “put God to the test”?* I’m glad you asked.

Turn to **Exodus 17:1-2** for a moment –

¹ Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink.

² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water that we may drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? **Why do you test the LORD?**”

Israel is short of water and began to grumble, *arguing* with Moses. In fact, the place is later named Meribah meaning “*argument*,” “*strife*.”

“*Why do you test the Lord?*” The word in Hebrew is נִסָּה and it refers to *doubting God*, doubting his power and his aid.⁶

This verb appears 36x in the OT has the idea of *testing or proving the quality of someone or something*, often through adversity or hardship,⁷ but here it is more of a *defiant attitude* on the part of the people who begin to *doubt* God’s character.

⁶ Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 552.

⁷ Marvin R. Wilson, “1373 נִסָּה” In , in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 581.

Notice how chapter 17 begins, “*then*,” connecting what took place in the previous chapter where the Lord provides Manna. It is there to show us the *inexcusableness* and to emphasize the *enormity* of the conduct of Israel immediately following the events of chapter 16 [God provides food].

At the same time we are once again reminded of the marvelous patience and the infinite mercy of our God who bore so graciously with His people.

There in chapter 16, they asked the question that is found in our psalm in **verse 19** –

¹⁹ ... “Can God prepare **a table in the wilderness?**”

Anyone asking “*can God*” deserves a rebuke and yet the Lord with patient love rains bread from heaven!

God knows the difference between *struggling* faith and *contemptuous* unbelief. It is, therefore, no wonder that God responds the way that He does in **Ps 78:21-23** –

²¹ Therefore the LORD heard and was full of wrath; And a fire was kindled against Jacob And anger also mounted against Israel,
²² **Because they did not believe in God** And did not trust in His salvation.

God takes unbelief seriously. Just listen to the Apostle Paul in **Rom 11:20** –

²⁰ Quite right, **they** [i.e. the nation of Israel] **were broken off for their unbelief**, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;

Because of sin and unbelief Israel forfeited her great privilege of being God’s unique people. This was what God had declared in **Deut 4:25-27** –

²⁵ “When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and **act corruptly, and make an idol** in the form of anything, and **do that which is evil** in the sight of the LORD your God *so as* to provoke Him to anger,

²⁶ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, **that you will surely perish quickly** from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. **You shall not live long** on it, but will be utterly destroyed.

²⁷ **“The LORD will scatter you** among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD drives you.

The same is true for those who persist in sin and unbelief. They will be judged with death. It is no wonder we read this warning in **Heb 3:12** –

¹² Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you **an evil, unbelieving heart** that falls away from the living God.

Every man is born with an unbelieving heart (Jer 17:9 – *“the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick”*).

Even among those wandering through the wilderness, there were unbelieving Jewish brethren who were in the company of *“holy brethren”* (v. 1) and the author of Hebrews admonishes them to believe and be saved before it was too late – *“take care, brethren.”*

Israel’s lack of faith and rejection of God led to her demise.

Instead of being a people who believed in God and embraced His Word, they *“put God to the test by asking food according to their desire.”*

May we be men who believe and are filled with gratitude for what God has done, is doing, and will do in and through His people.

For *“without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him”* (Heb 11:6).

My dearly beloved, *having you been putting God to the test in your life? Is there doubt roaming around in the deep recesses of your heart?*

Do you doubt God’s power and aid in your life? Do you call into question both His goodness and faithfulness?

A.W. Pink has said –

*“God’s design is to wean us from everything down here, to bring us to the place where we have no reliance upon material and human resources, to cast us completely upon Himself. O how slow, how painfully slow we are to learn this lesson! How miserably and how repeatedly we fail! How long-suffering the Lord is with us.”*⁸

Again, God knows the difference between struggling faith and contemptuous unbelief. If it is struggling faith, cry out to God, *“I do believe; help my unbelief”* (Mk 9:24). If it is contemptuous unbelief, repent of your sin and cry out for mercy.

Stop thinking lightly of the *“riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience”* (Rom 2:4) and be led toward repentance.

Now is the time to learn this lesson and be a people who believe, a people who are grateful. Instead of this time and place to be known as a time of Meribah meaning *“argument,” “strife,”* let it be a time and place in your life where there is **Shalom** which is *“peace”* and **Hosannah** which speaks of blessing God! *Amen?*

*Again, fathers we have something to say to the coming generation! They are *lessons for the journey* that we must tell and not conceal to our children and children’s children.

The first lesson for the journey is that of *frailty and forgetfulness*.
The second lesson for the journey is that of *ingratitude and unbelief*.
The third lesson for the journey is that of...

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), 136.
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³⁴ When He killed them, then they sought Him, And returned and searched diligently for God;

³⁵ And they remembered that God was their rock, And the Most High God their Redeemer.

³⁶ **But** they deceived Him with their mouth And lied to Him with their tongue.

³⁷ For their heart was not steadfast toward Him, Nor were they faithful in His covenant.

There appears to be an *apparent earnestness* on the part of God's people, but as you dig much further you find deception and lies in the heart.

Hosea had to *teach* the people, *love* the people, and *call* the people to genuine repentance. So he pleads in **Hosea 6:1-3** –

¹ “Come, **let us return to the LORD**. For He has torn *us*, but He will heal us; He has wounded *us*, but He will bandage us.

² “He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live before Him.

³ **“So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD**. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; And He will come to us like the rain, Like the spring rain watering the earth.”

But the reality was that Israel's commitment to the Lord was *fleeting* and *superficial*. Just listen to what follows in **Hosea 6:4-7** –

⁴ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For **your loyalty is like a morning cloud** And like the dew which goes away early.

[a morning cloud swiftly disappears. Whether morning cloud or dew, both are short-lived.]

⁵ Therefore I have hewn *them* in pieces by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth; And the judgments on you are *like* the light that goes forth.

[His Word went forth by the prophets and had a devastating effect upon the people and His judgments were as light in its clarity.]

⁶ For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Rightly did **Spurgeon** write concerning Asaph's words in **verse 36** –

*“False on their knees, liars in their prayers. Mouth-worship must be very detestable to God when dissociated from the heart: other kings love flattery, but the King of kings abhors it.”*⁹

Flattery speech won't cut it because your prayers are a fraud. All of us must guard against saying one thing with our mouth and thinking a different thing in our hearts. All of us!

My beloved, it is all a matter of the heart – *is it steadfast toward Him?*

We are either covenant-breakers or covenant-keepers and it all begins with the heart. *Is there an “unfeigned purity of heart”*¹⁰ (Calvin) in us?

It is no wonder that God asks Himself, *“what shall I do with you?”*

But thanks be to God who also says in **Hosea 11:8** –

⁸ **How can I give you up**, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within Me, All My compassions are kindled.

Out of *compassion* and *mercy* does our God respond in **vv. 38-39** –

³⁸ But He, being compassionate, forgave *their* iniquity and did not destroy *them*; And often He restrained His anger And did not arouse all His wrath.

³⁹ Thus He remembered that they were but flesh, A wind that passes and does not return.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David, Volume 3: Psalms 56-87* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 338.

¹⁰ John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), Ps 78:36.

Psalm 78:9-72

CONCLUSION

My beloved, this is how God has dealt with us.

If God had not chosen to be merciful to us, we would all have perished long ago. But instead of not being merciful and allowing us to perish, God made atonement for our sins by the death of Jesus Christ.

He forgave our iniquities. Certainly a love like this demands my all –

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Men we have much to teach our children. We have much to tell the next generation. There are pivotal lessons that we must be faithful to impart to our children.

Part of instructing these lessons is our own testimony how we too, as feeble men, men who are but flesh, a wind that passes and does not return, have been as bad if not worse than Ephraim.

“Son, let me tell you frailty and forgetfulness in my own life. Son, let me tell you about ingratitude and unbelief in my own life. Son, let me tell you about deception and lies in my heart.”

But men, there is good news too, and it comes to us in the last stanza of this magnificent psalm, **vv. 65-72** –

⁶⁵ Then the Lord awoke as *if from* sleep, Like a warrior overcome
by wine.
⁶⁶ He drove His adversaries backward; He put on them an
everlasting reproach.
⁶⁷ He also rejected the tent of Joseph, And did not choose the tribe
of Ephraim,
⁶⁸ But chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion which He loved.
⁶⁹ And He built His sanctuary like the heights, Like the earth which
He has founded forever.
⁷⁰ He also chose David His servant And took him from the
sheepfolds;
⁷¹ From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him
To shepherd Jacob His people, And Israel His inheritance.

⁷² So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,
And guided them with his skillful hands.

Talk about the steadfast love of God. The Christian journey is not only wanderings in the desert, but the glories of Kingdom living.

It is at the end of this psalm where God emerges as our one true hope in this unfinished story – a story that is being written right now of a journey that we men are on: to *“tell the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.”*

Let us pray.