

Psalm 78:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 November 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Psalm 78 verses 1 to 18, Amaskel of Asaph. And he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments, and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works, and the wonders that he had shown them. In the sight of their fathers he performed wonders, in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light. He split rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They tested God in their heart, by demanding the food they craved. Psalm 78 is an epic historical psalm, running to 72 verses in length. It begins as a wisdom psalm, presenting to Israel the lessons that are to be drawn from God's great deeds, and from its own track record of disobedience and forgetfulness in its history. It moves from the Exodus to the establishment of David as his anointed, and Mount Zion as his sanctuary.

It was written after David's enthronement, but perhaps not that long afterwards. The rebuke of Ephraim, representing the northern tribes, suggests to some that it might have been after the split of the kingdom, but it might be referring to an earlier event.

[2 : 2 6] Conrad Schaeffer suggests that it might be connected with the preceding psalm by shared vocabulary, with references to God's might, his power, his right hand, and to God as the Most High, along with the shared themes of the Exodus and forgetting and remembering.

Psalm 77 verse 5 I consider the days of old, the years long ago. Verses 11 to 15 of that psalm Like Psalm 78, Psalm 77 recounts the Red Sea crossing as an event of a special importance.

The retelling of history in this psalm is designed to instruct the people in how better to move forward. In the book of Deuteronomy, the necessity of remembering the great deeds of the Lord and his judgments in the wilderness is underlined at several points.

To live long in the land, the children of Israel need to draw lessons from experience. They need to remember and to teach their children. Schaeffer remarks upon literary details of Psalm 78 that heighten the hearer's attention to these themes here.

He writes, Continuity is underscored by the repetitions. Ancestors, in verses 3, 5, and 8. Children, in verses 4 and 6. Generations, in verses 4, 6, and 8.

[4 : 0 1] Tell, in verses 3, 4, and 6. Know or teach, in verses 3, 5, and 6. Beth Tanner cites Richard Clipper's division of the psalm. A division that helps us better to understand its greater purpose.

So it begins with a three-part introduction in verses 1 to 11. And then there are two recitals. The first recital is of wilderness events in verses 12 to 39. It begins with God's acts in verses 12 to 16.

Goes on to rebellion in verses 17 to 20. To God's response in verses 21 to 31. And then God's grace in 32 to 39. The second recital is from verses 40 to 72.

And that concerns Egypt and Jerusalem. Again, it begins with God's acts in verses 40 to 55. Moving again to rebellion in verses 56 to 58.

To God's response in verses 59 to 64. And then concluding on the theme of God's grace in verses 65 to 72. The psalm is introduced as a wisdom psalm.

[5 : 05] In what Alan Ross terms a didactic poem. The psalmist presents his psalm as a parable and a dark saying. Within it he will invite his hearers to reflect upon the meaning of their history.

The introduction is similar to that of Psalm 49 verses 1 to 4. Hear this all people. Give ear all inhabitants of the world. Both low and high. Rich and poor together.

My mouth shall speak wisdom. The meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb. I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre.

The parable is, as Ross puts it, a teaching based on analogy. Whereas the riddle is a disclosing of the ways of God. These are things that they have heard before from their parents.

The purpose of the giving of the law was that the people would give them on to the next generation.

[6 : 02] Giving on what they had received from the Lord. So that a faithful tradition would ensure that the memory of God's great deeds of salvation. And his revelation of his will would not be forgotten.

The passing on of this tradition would direct the children towards the Lord. And protect them from repeating the errors of their parents. Such a tradition makes possible learning over the course of generations.

The task of memory and teaching children was always central to the life of Israel. In Genesis chapter 18 verse 19. The Lord declared his purpose in first choosing Abraham.

For I have chosen him, that he may command 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 to Abraham what he has promised him.

Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, there are frequent exhortations not to forget the great deeds of the Lord in the wilderness. To teach the lessons of the Exodus and the wilderness to their children after them.

[7 : 00] And to ensure that, in the prosperity of the land, they do not forget. The charges to teach the next generation and not to forget were especially pronounced concerning the law.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 6 to 12 for instance. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children. And shall talk of them when you sit in your house.

And when you walk by the way. And when you lie down. And when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand. And they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house.

And on your gates. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers. To Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob to give you. With great and good cities that you did not build.

[8 : 00]

[9 : 00]

 $[10:01]$