

# Psalm 78: God and Israel's History



Psalm 78 (77) (Mode 3. 3....12 / 4.....271)

The psalmist recalls the wonderful things God did at the time of the Exodus. He recalls also the recurring infidelity of God's people. In spite of God's compassion (38-39), they persisted in 'having no faith in God. They did not trust God's saving power'(22). Finally God lost patience and rejected the northern kingdom (67). The people of Judah must learn from this to 'set their hopes in God, and not to forget what God has done, but keep God's commandments'(7). The psalmist speaks of this psalm as a teaching (torah, 1), a parable (mashal, 2), a paradox or enigma (hidah, 2).

God is compared to a shepherd guiding his people through the desert to pasture: ‘The Lord led out his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock’(verse 52). God led and tended them (verses 14, 53 and 72). God guided them (verse 52). God brought them to his pasture (verse 54). The psalm concludes with God choosing David as his shepherd: ‘He chose his servant David, and took him from the sheepfolds’(verse 70).

The psalmist is struggling with is how could the people fail to trust God after what God had done, and after the many ways in which God continued to demonstrate divine compassion (38-39).

In the end, tragically, God lost patience and rejected the northern kingdom, choosing Judah, Jerusalem (Mount Zion) and David: **‘He rejected the tent of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever. He chose his servant David’**(verses 67-70).

‘Though Judah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph’(1Chronicles 5:2).

The people of Judah must not repeat the mistakes of their northern neighbours.

# TRIBES OF ISRAEL BEFORE THE MONARCHY



*Psalm is  
rich in  
words  
for sin*

- stubborn, verse 8
- rebellious, verses 8, 17, 40 and 56
- sinning, verses 17 and 32
- failing to obey, verse 10
- unbelieving, verses 8, 22, 32 and 37
- failing to trust, verse 22
- wavering heart, verses 8 and 37
- unfaithful, verse 57
- putting God to the test, verses 18, 41 and 56
- untruthful, verse 36
- provoking God, verses 41 and 58
- speaking out against God, verse 19
- grieving God, verse 40

The key sin is failing to trust God after all that God has done.

Note that the focus throughout is on their personal relationship with God not on their obedience to particular precepts.

The importance of tradition (verses 1-8).

The psalmist exhorts his audience to remember the past and not do what their ancestors did. We are to remember what God has done, hope in God, and obey God.

Listen, O my people, to my teaching;  
attend to the words I speak.

I speak of what we have heard from of old,  
What we have known from our ancestors.

We must not keep it from our children;  
we must tell the coming generation  
of the glorious deeds of the Lord,  
who established a law in Israel.

compare Deuteronomy 4:9

God commanded our ancestors  
to make known to their children the works of the L  
So that future generations would know,  
and grow up to teach their young.

We are to place our hope in God,  
and never forget what God has done.

We must keep God's commandments,  
and not follow the example of our ancestors.

They were stubborn and rebellious,  
fickle and unfaithful to God.

‘I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, turning aside from the way that I have commanded you. In time to come trouble will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands’(Deuteronomy 31:29).

The failure of their ancestors (verses 9-11)

The psalmist focuses on the failures of Ephraim, the largest tribe in the northern kingdom.

We should not follow the example of the people of Ephraim.

Their archers abandoned the field on the day of battle.

They broke the covenant, refusing to obey God's law.

They forgot God's wonderful deeds.

# God's wonderful deeds in Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the desert (verses 12-16)

Exodus 7-11      Our ancestors witnessed God's wonderful deed  
in the land of Egypt.

Exodus 14:22      How God divided the sea for their escape,  
raising the waters like a wall.

Exodus 13:21      By day God led them with a cloud,  
by night with a glowing fire.

Exodus 17      God split rocks open in the wilderness,  
to quench their thirst.

Streams gushed forth, flowing like a river.

In spite of this the ancestors rebelled (verses 17-20)

Yet they continued to rebel.

Wilfully they put God to the test,  
by demanding the food they craved.

‘The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at”’(Numbers 11:4-6).

They complained, 'Is it possible for God  
to spread a table in the wilderness?'

It was God who struck the rock  
and caused water to flow.

Yet they dared to ask,

'What about bread and meat?'

## Deuteronomy 8:14-16

‘Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.’

God's abundant blessings turned to destruction  
because of sin (verses 21-31)

Hearing this, the Lord was filled with rage;  
God's anger flared against Israel,  
because they had no faith in God.  
They did not trust God's power to save.

In spite of this God commanded the skies,  
and opened the doors of heaven,  
raining down manna for them to eat,  
giving them bread from heaven.

John 6:31; Exodus 16:4

Exodus  
16:13

Mortal human beings ate the bread of angels.  
God sent them food in abundance.

A wind blew from heaven,  
scattering meat like driven dust.  
God gave them winged birds,  
as many as the sands of the sea.

They fell in the middle of the camp,  
all around the tents.

The people ate and were satisfied,  
for God gave them what they craved.

But before they had satisfied their craving,  
while the food was still in their mouths,  
God slew the strongest among them,  
struck down the flower of Israel.

Human infidelity and divine compassion (verses 32-39)

Despite this they kept on sinning,  
blind to God's wonderful deeds.  
So God cut their lives short.  
Their days ended like a breath.

Surely now they would begin to pray;  
they would repent and seek God in earnest.  
They would remember that God is their rock,  
the Most High God is their redeemer.

They spoke fine words to God,  
but their lives belied their words.

Their hearts were not steadfast toward God.  
They were not true to the covenant.

Yet God, who is full of compassion,  
forgave their sin, and they were spared.  
Again and again God did not give way to wrath.

‘He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
The Lord is gracious and merciful’(Psalm 111:4).

‘In your great mercies you did not make an end  
of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious  
and merciful God’(Nehemiah 9:31)

‘They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them ... The Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones’(Isaiah 49:10,13).

‘Can a woman forget her child at the breast, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you’(Isaiah 49:15).

‘As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him’(Psalm 103:13).

God remembered that they were but flesh,  
no more than a breath of air  
that passes, never to return.

‘My span of years is short, my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow’(Psalm 39:5).

‘The fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again’(Eccles. 3:19-20).

## Rebellion (verses 40-42)

How often they rebelled in the wilderness  
and caused God pain in the desert!

They tested God again and again,  
and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

They did not remember God's deeds:  
when God redeemed them from the foe,

See, for example, Numbers 16:41 and 20:24.

## The plagues in Egypt (verses 43-51)

when God displayed signs in Egypt,  
and worked miracles in the fields of Zoan;

when God turned rivers to blood, **The first plague (Exodus 7:17)**  
so that the Egyptians could not drink of their streams;

when God sent among them swarms of flies,  
and frogs to molest them; **The fourth plague (Exodus 8:17)**  
**The second plague (Exodus 8:6)**

when God gave their crops to the caterpillar, **The eighth plague**  
and the fruit of their labour to the locust; **(Exodus 10:12)**

when their vines were destroyed by hail, **The seventh plague**  
and their sycamores by frost **(Exodus 9:22)**

God hurled down hail on their cattle,  
and lightning bolts on their flocks.

**The fifth plague  
(Exodus 9:1-7)**

Seething, raging with fury,  
God let loose strife and destruction.  
These were messengers of doom,  
for they were not spared even from death.  
God abandoned them to the plague.  
and slew all the firstborn in Egypt.

**The tenth plague  
(Exodus 12:29)**

The Egyptians thought of themselves as the first born of the gods. It is Israel, not Egypt, that God favours. 'Israel, whom you have named your first born'(Sirach 36:17).

## God brings his flock to the Promised Land (verses 52-55)

Then through the wilderness God safely led his people,  
guiding them like a flock.

They were not afraid,

Exodus 15:5, 10

for the sea had overwhelmed their enemies.

God led them to the holy land,

Exodus 19

to the mountain won by the Lord.

God dislodged the nations, giving Israel their land,  
settling the tribes in their tents.

There can be no rival to Israel's God (verses 56-58)

Still they rebelled against the Most High,  
testing their God, refusing to obey.

They turned away and were faithless like their ancestor  
like a bow on which the archer cannot rely.

They built shrines in high places,  
and worshipped images they had carved.

‘The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, worshipping the Baals and the Astartes, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. Thus they abandoned the Lord, and did not worship him. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites’(Judges 10:6-7).

They made the Lord jealous with strange gods.’

(Deuteronomy 32:16)

## Shiloh (verses 59-64)

God saw and was enraged,  
and utterly rejected Israel.

God deserted the shrine in Shiloh,  
And no longer dwelt with the people.

God abandoned the ark,  
letting it fall into the hands of our enemies.

The ark was kept at Shiloh (Judges 18:31; 1Samuel 1:3).

The Philistines captured the ark when they laid waste the sanctuary there (1Samuel 4; Jeremiah 7:14)

Stirred with anger,  
God condemned Israel to the sword.  
Fire devoured their young men.  
There were no marriage songs for the maidens.  
Their priests fell by the sword,  
and their widows made no lamentation.

‘These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come’(1Cor 10:11).

Israel rejected in favour of Judah (verses 65-72)

It was as though the Lord awoke from sleep,  
shouting like a warrior affected by wine.

God attacked them like foes,  
heaping shame upon them.

God rejected Joseph,  
and turned his gaze from Ephraim,  
choosing the tribe of Judah,  
looking with love on Mount Zion.

There God built his sanctuary, exalted as the heavens,  
securely established as the earth.

God chose David as servant,  
and called him from tending the flocks.  
David was chosen to shepherd Jacob,  
God's treasured possession.  
David acted with an upright heart.  
With a discerning mind he led them.

On God's choice of David see 2Samuel 7; Psalm 89;  
1Samuel 16; 1Kings 11. Christ is the new David, the  
Good Shepherd.