

Forgetting the Unforgettable
 Psalm 78
 8/20/23

In 1897 England found herself at the height of her power & the vast British Empire turned its attention to the jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria. Leaders of the various British colonies returned to London for a summer of self-congratulations. Rudyard Kipling was asked to write a piece for this historic occasion. Taking this opportunity to sound a much-needed warning, he wrote a poem entitled *Recessional*. It began:

*God of our Fathers, known of old,
 Lord of our far-flung battle line,
 Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
 Dominion over palm & pine—
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget—lest we forget.¹*

In this poem Kipling was calling for all of England to look to her accomplishments, not with pride, but with humility & dependence upon God. He challenged his countrymen to trust in God, not in themselves, lest they repeat the now-forgotten mistakes of their past. Kipling's reminder that all earthly success comes from God & that He must not be forgotten is believed to be the reason he was passed over as the nation's poet laureate. A proud people didn't want to think like that. But Kipling was right, even though his message wasn't well received. If England was to be prosperous in the future, he believed she must not forget the lessons of the past. Ps 78 is like this as it recounts the history of Israel in order to draw lessons for the present & for the future. It recalls how God's people wrongly responded to Him in the past & is designed to show how God's people in a new generation must not repeat the same mistakes.² The superscription tells us this is **Maskil of Asaph**. *Maskil* probably means teaching, which we've seen before. This is a teaching of Asaph but who is Asaph? His name means a *gatherer of people*, which fits as he was a singer & musician who served in the temple worship during the time of King David. In time he seems to have become the leader of this group & the father of an entire family of temple musicians. He was the author of 12 psalms (50, 73-83; we've looked previously at Ps 73 & 81).

¹ www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46780/recessional

² Steven J. Lawson, *Psalms 76-150*, pp 13-14

1. The Purpose 1–8

Focusing on Israel's past, Asaph begins with a passionate plea to be heard by others. He tells them he'll speak in parables & **dark sayings of old**. **Parable** means *to throw alongside of*. It's the placing of one incident or story alongside something else so we might learn by comparison. Here, Israel's history is set alongside the present so that those living won't repeat the people's past sins. **Dark sayings of old** are simply truths from Israel's past. When Asaph tells of **the praises of the Lord, His wondrous works, & a testimony in Jacob** (4–5), he isn't revealing anything new that the people didn't already know (3). The problem was that God's actions & commands had been rejected & forgotten by a **stubborn & rebellious generation** (8). These lessons from redemptive history must be told to **the generation to come** so that the mistakes of the past won't be repeated. Asaph's generation shouldn't **be like their fathers**, who were **stubborn & rebellious & not faithful to God** (8). Israel's history has been one long, unbroken record of unfaithfulness to God in spite of His abundant grace & undeserved lovingkindness to them. They must choose to respond differently toward God than past faithless generations had.

What is the purpose for this teaching? The answer is given positively in vs 7 & negatively in vs 8. Asaph's teaching is to create **confidence in God** revealing the living God who keeps His word. 2nd, it reminds Israel of God's works & saving deeds, protecting her from forgetting Him (7). This should lead to obedience. Negatively, in vs 8, this instruction is a warning so that God's people won't be **like their fathers**, a generation who was **stubborn, rebellious**, didn't have its heart right, & wasn't faithful to God (8).³ Three sins of the past offer a clear warning to Israel in the present: God's people should live lives that aren't rebellious, but obedient; not forgetful & disloyal, but remembering God's deeds; & not unfaithful, but trusting. Trust, remember, & obey. These 3 virtues are the foundation of the lives of those who belong to God in all ages.⁴ History is to teach us to hope in God, to remember His works, & to obey His commandments. In other words, don't be like the rebellious Israelites. Asaph in this psalm is repeating what God had clearly said to the

³ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73–150*, p 53

⁴ W Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, p 138

generation of the Exodus. In Dt 6, the chapter immediately following the 2nd listing of the Ten Commandments, Moses wrote,

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons & shall talk of them when you sit in your house & when you walk by the way & when you lie down & when you rise up (6–7).

Later in the same chapter:

When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What *do* the testimonies & the statutes & the judgments *mean* which the LORD our God commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, & the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. Moreover, the LORD showed great & distressing signs & wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh & all his household; He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers.’ So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always & for our survival, as *it is* today. It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us (20–25).

Asaph is doing this very thing & encouraging his people, & all God’s people in every generation, to do this as well. When we realize the greatness of God’s grace, when we realize the power of His works, when we realize the trustworthiness of His promises, we respond to that with obedience. We’re to show our gratitude to God for His mercies to us by keeping His commandments. & so the Law, the instruction of God’s word, is designed to promote all these things: trust in Him; a realization of the greatness of His power & grace; & to move us to obedience, to keep His commandments. (Much more can be said from vss 1-8 but we’ll save some for our upcoming child dedication.)

From vss 9-64, a pattern is repeated: God does wonders; God’s people fail to appreciate what He’s done by failing to trust in Him; they ignore His instructions, warnings, & exhortations; &, ultimately, fall into idolatry.

2. The Past, Part 1 9–39

Asaph is telling us to learn from history, not repeat it. He’s relentless in making this point as he recounts failure after failure on Israel’s part. It’s a lesson about the people of God forgetting His promises, His wonders, failing to trust Him, not heading His warnings, forgetting His power, & despising His provision & protection. This isn’t a pretty story. Asaph’s theme is God’s great faithfulness, even when Israel proves faithless. But Asaph is also honest about the sad &

unnecessary consequences for willful disobedience & sinful desires. He addresses **the sons of Ephraim**, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, whose failures represented the entire nation. The tribe of Ephraim was named after the younger of Joseph's 2 sons (Gen 41:50–52). Ephraim received a greater blessing from his grandfather Jacob than his older brother Manasseh did. Ephraim's prominence grew as Joshua was an Ephraimite & the tabernacle was erected in Shiloh in the Ephraim's territory. Asaph gives the reason for Ephraim's defeat saying **they did not keep the covenant of God & refused to walk in His law** (10). They were defeated by their enemies because of their disobedience. They didn't keep God's covenant because they repeatedly **forgot His deeds & His miracles** (11). If they'd remembered God's faithfulness to them, they would've been motivated to be faithful to Him. But they forgot God's past mighty deeds & fell into disobedience again & again. God's chosen people forgot God's miracles in bringing them out of Egypt, taking them through the Red Sea, & leading & providing for them in the desert (11–16). They had experienced the power of God in Egypt (Ex 1:11). They saw the miracles, the great escape, the divided sea, the cloud by day, & the pillar of fire by night. & yet they rebelled against God, doubting His ability to provide for them & not trusting Him. In the face of God's goodness, Israel **continued to sin against Him & put God to the test** (17-18). The more gracious God was, the more they rebelled. When water came gushing from the rock, they were skeptical that God could provide bread & meat (20). They demanded **food according to their desire** (18), all the while doubting God's ability to provide it. The problem wasn't that they needed food & water. God knew their need. The problem was their ingratitude & unbelief.⁴ They ask, **can God prepare a table in the wilderness?** (19). Of course He can & He did exactly that. Remember Ps 23? What does it say? **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies** (5). Here they are in the wilderness asking, *Can God provide a table for us in the wilderness?* & the 23rd Psalm's answer is, *You better believe it!* But they don't believe it. Asaph highlights the nature of their sins by contrasting them with the abundance of God's blessings. When **he struck the rock ... waters gushed out, & streams were overflowing** (20). But they continued to ask, **can He give bread & meat?** (20). In vs 21 we read this

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*, p 647

made God angry & **a fire was kindled against Jacob**. We might think this **fire** was a metaphor for God's **wrath** but Numbers describes how an actual **fire of the LORD burned among them & consumed *some* of the outskirts of the camp** (Num 11:1-3). Why? **22**

But even this didn't stop their selfish cravings. In spite of His displeasure, He still fed them. God **opened the doors of the heavens; & He rained down manna** for His unthankful people to eat (Ex 16:14-31). How graciously & patiently He dealt with them giving them **food from heaven ... in abundance** (24-25). This food wasn't substandard or starvation rations. It was **the bread of angels**. **Will He provide meat for His people?** (20). They wanted meat so badly that God gave them their desires & **rained meat upon them like dust..., like the sand of the seas** (27). The greed of the people knew no bounds & they ate like there was no tomorrow. Moses tells us that **while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, & the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague** (Num 11:33). God responded to their disobedience, unbelief, & ingratitude with anger & wrath. He did this because **they did not believe in Him** (22). God fed them plentifully & gave them their desires (29). But they remained disobedient & God's anger rose against them (31). Why? Because they were dissatisfied with what God had done, wanting more, & they thought the reason God didn't give them everything they wanted was because He couldn't. In other words, their sins were ingratitude & unbelief. In both they **put God to the test** (18) contrary to the law's teaching (Dt 6:16). God's power evident through the Exodus should have motivated Israel to fear & obey Him. Instead, they forgot what God had done. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, their liberation was impossible. When they were trapped at the Red Sea, escape was impossible. Without food & water in the wilderness, survival was impossible. God repeatedly did the impossible, & Israel repeatedly forgot.⁵ God was angered by the ingratitude & judged them. The text says He **killed some of their stoutest ones, & subdued the choice men of Israel** (31). When the people were judged, they repented. Unfortunately, their repentance wasn't true repentance. Asaph says, **34-37**.

⁵ James M Hamilton, Jr, *Psalms 73-150*, p 53

With the pressure off, God's people become deceptive. They flatter Him. They lie. They put up a smokescreen of ritual & worship, thinking God will be impressed as they continue in their rebellion.⁶ A hypocritical repentance like this is nauseating to God. True repentance involves an honest acknowledgment of sin, a turning from it, & an appeal to God's grace (Hosea 14:1–3). None of this is present here. Nevertheless, God didn't deal with the people as they deserved. Instead of destroying them, God **was compassionate & forgave their iniquities** (38). **He remembered that they were but flesh...** (39). This is precisely how God has dealt with us. If God hadn't chosen to be merciful to us, we'd all have perished long ago. But instead of not being merciful & allowing us to perish, God made atonement for our sins by the death of Jesus as our substitute & forgave our iniquities. Beyond God's judgment is His mercy, & His wrath is again & again overcome by His love. It's this that ultimately sends Jesus to the cross, the sinless One dying the sinner's death. A love like this demands a genuine repentance from us & a true following after God in faith & gratitude. As Isaac Watts wrote, *Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.*⁷ We sing this but do we actually respond like this? Are we like the Jews of old? All too often, yes, we are. In spite of their unfaithfulness, God **was compassionate**, forgiving **their iniquities**, & He **restrained** the full expression of **His anger**, remembering that they were weak & lived fleeting lives (38-39). Despite their continued grumbling, God never utterly destroyed them. He kept His promises & continued to show mercy & provide for them & their children. He always stayed true to His covenant. Israel was quite a different matter. Asaph draws out the irony of the situation. The people kept on sinning (32). Whether God judged them for their sin or miraculously did wonders for their benefit, the results were similar. Even when they truly remembered **that God was their Rock & ... Redeemer**, they persisted in sin (35–37). In spite of all of that, God remained merciful (38). God's mercy far exceeded His righteous judgment.

Asaph's not done. Returning again to the time of the Exodus, Asaph repeats the themes of Israel's rebellion & God's redemption.

⁶ Williams & Ogilvie, p 59

⁷ *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, #274 in our hymnal

3. The Past, Part 2 40–64

How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness (40), Asaph lamented. There's a sense in which he goes back to the beginning & retells the story of Israel's ingratitude to God all over again, beginning with the exodus from Egypt & with the people's failure to remember God's mighty works on their behalf. Yet in spite of them, they rebelled in unbelief. How is this possible? The answer is in vs 42.

They'd forgotten God's redemption. They'd forgotten what God did on their behalf. Do we? I'm sure we do. When we forget what it cost God to redeem us from our sins through Jesus' death, we won't trust Him in life's trials or love Him enough to obey Him. The cure is to remember, which is what this psalm is about. We need to remember all that God has done.

After this great display of divine power, the people should have been able to trust the Lord in any situation, knowing that He was in control, but they grieved Him, provoked Him, & tempted Him to display His anger against them. Human nature hasn't changed.⁸ Asaph now reminds us of the plagues God brought on the Egyptians. He only refers to 6 of the 10. I have no idea why he lists these 6 & leaves out the other 4. But the plagues that are mentioned build forcefully toward the last terrible judgment of God against the firstborn, which is then placed in beautiful contrast to the way God led His people out of Egypt. 52-55

In spite of what God did, Israel rebelled & became disobedient, disloyal, & idolatrous (58). Israel was no better in the Promised Land than they'd been in the wilderness. In spite of Israel's 40 years of disobedience in the wilderness, God remained faithful to them. He led them like a flock to **His holy land** & gave each tribe its inheritance. He led them into the promised land & **drove out the nations before them** (53). God did this to bless them. In spite of their rebellion, God still fought for them, defeating their enemies & favoring them. Israel continually turned away from God but He remained faithful. Their unbelief & idolatry infuriated God (59) & led to their defeat at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 4–5). Disaster followed disaster. God abandoned the tabernacle in Shiloh, & so many young men died in battle that young women had no one to marry (63). Even the priests

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, p 256

were massacred & their widows were too weary to weep (64). This isn't a pretty picture. It's rather depressing. Up until the end of this psalm we're not left with a lot of hope. But in vss 65 to 72 there's a new beginning. God wakes up as from sleep. He beats back His enemies. He chooses Mount Zion, which is in enemy hands, & captures it & reigns there. & then He gives them their greatest king. All of this is undeserved, completely by grace. Their record is nothing but shame, but God emerges as their last & best hope.

4. The Promise 65-72

Inexplicably, despite the constant rebellion, forgetfulness, & disobedience, God steps up to defend His people. He's likened to a warrior who is aroused suddenly from his wine-induced sleep ready to go to battle. He **drove His adversaries backward** & puts them to **everlasting reproach** (66). The sovereign Lord rejects the descendants of Joseph & the tribe of Ephraim & chooses instead the tribe of Judah. Mount Zion becomes His sanctuary & David His chosen servant (1 Sam 16). He gives the people a new beginning & new leadership. Like Abraham & Moses before him, David doesn't deserve this selection. God takes him from the fields & puts him on the throne. By God's grace, a man after God's own heart has been appointed to rule His people (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). The psalm ends on a positive note of good news & hope. Ps 78 tracks salvation history from the exodus to David's reign, bearing witness to God's great faithfulness even when His people are faithless. Asaph calls us to remember the unforgettable grace & mercy of God.⁹ In spite of Israel's great & repeated sin, all was not lost. Yahweh would arise & defeat His enemies, He would also transfer leadership to Judah & His dwelling place to Jerusalem. He would take a shepherd, David, out from the sheepfold & into a palace. David was skillful & led the people righteously. Like many aspects of David's life, 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. Once again, this was God's blessing upon His people, though undeserved. As their king, David ruled over them **with integrity of heart & skillful hands**. This clearly contrasts with the fathers, the generation that didn't set it's heart right & whose

⁹ Douglas D. Webster, *The Psalms: Jesus's Prayer Book*, pp 60–63

spirit wasn't faithful to God (8). With the praise of David the psalm concludes. The teaching is done. The lesson is over. But we know it doesn't end there. Even after David, Israel persists in its sin. Eventually a new & better King arrives. The chosen people, Judah (68), refused their rightful King & did so in Jerusalem at Mt Zion. Yet God more than kept His promise. We have a King who is evidence of God's continuing grace, & who is evidence that God hasn't given up on His people. Where we have failed, this King has obeyed. The King who came lived perfectly. He took our sins to the cross. He rose again triumphantly from the grave to give us new life. He reigns at the right hand of God, & offers eternal life to all who trust in Him. For the sake of our generation & those to follow, it's time to repent of our sins & not let history repeat itself. It's time to renew our hope in Him, despite our repeated failures. We must tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord. We've seen that the anger of God builds against human sin but His mercy doesn't end (38–39). Yes, Ephraim's rejected, but Judah is chosen. Shiloh is abandoned, but the ark is brought to Mount Zion. Asaph's point is that it was entirely of grace that God chose Judah & elevated its shepherd boy, David, to be a great king. The people didn't deserve this, any more than they deserved God's other blessings. But the fact that they received such mercies multiplied their obligations to serve God. It's the same for us, only our mercies are even greater than those experienced by Israel since in Jesus Christ who rules **with integrity of heart & skillful hands** we've been given **every spiritual blessing** (Eph 1:3). We deserve nothing, yet we've received everything. Don't forget it! Remember God's blessings. Remember His mercy. & remember to tell the next generation too.¹⁰

Don't forget that this is a psalm, Israel's & Jesus' songbook. I don't think we have any songs like Ps 78 today. Maybe we should. Why would Israel sing a song reminding itself of all of its failures & of God's patience? Because God wants us to examine ourselves & remind ourselves that we're in danger of repeating history. We're supposed to learn from the past & to remind ourselves that we have a track record of blowing it. It's a reminder that our strength isn't in ourselves. There is a Hero in the story & it's not us. It's God, who extends grace to us over & over & over again. Most of

¹⁰ Boice, pp 650–651

all, this psalm is part of worship to call us to something better. Don't let history repeat itself. Let's not make the same mistakes. Repent. Remember. Respond in gratitude to the deliverance God has given you. Do so for the sake of the next generation.

Two dominant themes have reoccurred throughout the centuries of God's people & must never be forgotten: Our failures & God's faithfulness. Over the years, believers have repeatedly disobeyed the Lord & turned to go their own way. In spite of this, God has remained longsuffering & patient, providing undeserved blessings for His wayward people. This amazing patience of God's grace, enduring with His people in spite of their sin, underscores the marvelous mercy of God. He rewards His people, not according to their sins but according to His lovingkindness. This psalm reminds us that the Lord remains graciously faithful to bless His people, even when they're unfaithful to Him. As we look to God's past dealing with His people, we should be encouraged & note that:

1. God's Word never changes. In spite of our disobedience, God's Word remains the same. It's unchanging, immutable, & forever true. Cultures change. Values change. Morality changes. But not God's Word. It's the one constant that endures from generation to generation. What was wrong yesterday remains wrong today. You can always look to the unchanging standard of Scripture & know what God expects.

2. God & His ways never change. In the face of human rebellion, God remains gracious & longsuffering, slow to anger, & quick to forgive. The living God does not change. He's always faithful to bring back a wayward people to Himself when they humble themselves & repent. We must be as quick to repent as God is to forgive.¹¹ Paul, in summarizing some of what's been recounted here, told the Corinthians these things are to be an example for us (1 Cor 10:1-11). We've seen the dangers of ingratitude & forgetfulness. They're destructive things with eternal consequences. They're also entirely avoidable. This is possible if we daily remind ourselves of God's goodness & grace. The Father, in Christ, has granted us salvation. It's a gift. The Father & the Son sent the Spirit who regenerates & conforms us into the image of the Son. God hears our prayers & gives us new mercies (Lam 3:22-23). We have spiritual blessings in Jesus, a relationship

¹¹ Lawson, pp 14-19

with the Father, Son, & Spirit, & the promise of an inheritance. No only this but He who spared not His son shall also freely give us all things (Rom 8:32). No matter what trial we face, God's power & grace is greater. No matter what we're tempted to put our confidence in, God alone deserves our faith & trust. As we remember the works of God & put our confidence in Him & respond to Him in gratitude by obeying His commandments, then we see the mercies of God in His provision, in His choice, in His worship, & in guidance through His Shepherd Savior, King Jesus.

This psalm points to Jesus in more than just this general way. Jesus was the One who faced all the temptations of His people & successfully resisted them as the true Son of God. Indeed, the 3 temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness parallel in a remarkable way the temptations of the people of God in Ps 78. In Matthew's gospel, even the order of the temptations is the same (Mt 4:1-11). The people 1st faced a temptation related to food or to the most basic needs of human survival. Jesus faced the same when in His hunger & weakness the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread. But Jesus resisted the temptation by trusting God & His Word. 2nd, the people faced a temptation related to power or success. They forgot the great power of their God who had punished the Egyptians, opened the Red Sea, & led them into the Promised Land. Jesus faced the same temptation when the devil asked Him to show God's power to rescue Him by throwing Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus identified this as a temptation to test God, but Jesus, who always remembered the power of His Father, rejected testing His God. 3rd, the people faced a temptation about worship, namely, whether they would serve God alone. Jesus faced the same temptation when the devil offered Him the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worshipping him. Where Israel disobeyed & worshiped false gods, Jesus obeyed & worshiped the true God alone. As Ps 78 summarized all the disobedience of Israel in terms of 3 temptations, so the gospels summarize the obedience of Jesus when He faithfully rejected the 3 temptations of the devil. Whether the issue was survival, success, or service, Jesus was steadfast in His commitment to His Father. Once again, we see that Jesus is the true King & the true temple. He perfectly fulfilled all the obedience to which His people were called. Ps 78 teaches us that only God could provide a Shepherd to save His people by His integrity & the NT teaches us that Jesus is the perfect fulfillment

of all that David symbolized. Ps 78 points to God's provision for His people in David's greater Son who would come to shepherd His people & guide them into the land which God had given them. May we tell that story to the next generation. May we remind that generation not only of God's works which He's revealed to us in His word, but may we remind them of God's works for us in our lives, tell our children & their children what the Lord has done for us so that they won't forget & rebel against God but love, worship, & obey Him.