

REMEMBER...TO TRUST AND OBEY

College Park Church 7/3/2011

Ps. 78

INTRO

Are you excited for tomorrow evening, just about dark? What's going to be happening? There will be explosions going off everywhere. And none of us will be scared. We recently returned from a trip to Pakistan, and explosions there mean something else. But as Americans, tomorrow we will be delighting and rejoicing in the celestial exhibition. Why? Well, for some of us, we just think explosions are cool. I mean, what could be more fun than lighting things on fire and watching them go Boom!? But the more thoughtful among us will remember that those fireworks represent something, they speak of some important historical events. Behind the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air, we can see the soldiers of the revolutionary war, fighting bravely for the independence of our country. We might remember others who have fought. . .and died. . . in the years since, so that we could remain a free country. And our hearts swell with pride and gratitude and patriotism as we see through the night that our flag was still there; and as we see that star spangled banner yet waving over the land of the free and the home of the brave, something might even happen inside of us where we want to be a little bit better Americans.

You see, remembering history can have a clear impact on us now; the past holds up a mirror to the present. That's what Ps. 78 is all about. We're in a summer series on the Psalms, a Song for every Season. Memorizing Ps. 34? Last week, Pastor Mark walked us through Ps. 83 and the apparent silences of God while the wicked strut about freely, about what it's like to be in the middle between Redemption and Consummation, between the Cross and the New heavens and new earth, where our hearts cry out for God to judge the wicked, to vindicate His name and our faith. It's hard, in the Middle, isn't it, because, while our salvation has begun, it is not yet complete, and we cry out, in our pain and confusion, "How long?"

It can be helpful to see how others faced situations that have parallels with ours. Our Psalm today is essentially a story, an historical re-telling, of the history of the people of God between Egypt and the Promised Land, between the time they were delivered from the tyranny of Pharaoh until they entered their rest in Israel. While the focus of Ps 83 was more on the wicked and God's eventual judgment of them, Ps. 78 is more about us, the people of God, and how we are to live between our Red Sea and our Jordan River.

It is a maskil, a teaching or instructional Ps, and it's "of Asaph", either written by him or one of his descendants. And it's long! But it's far from boring because it's got some of the greatest stories of the OT in it.

We're probably not going to cover every verse today, so let me give you the outline of the Psalm, because it's pretty neat how it's put together. Remember, this is a poem, a song; it's not a history book. The writer has been selective in his material and it's not always in chronological order. So what we're looking for is his point in presenting the material he has in the way he does. By recounting certain events in song, he is teaching future generations lessons to take to heart.

1. INTRODUCTION, Listen Up! vv. 1-8: Summons to listen. . .and to pass the stories on
2. CONCLUSION, God's good plan, vv. 65-72: God's provision of a shepherd, David

In between are 5 sections, each starting with the rebellion of God's people, note vv. 9, 17, 32, 40, 56. So it's not going to be a pretty picture. But there are powerful lessons for those with ears to hear.

I. INTRO, Listen up! vv. 1-8

v. 1, Pay attention, listen thoughtfully. Because, v. 2, he is going to speak a parable, a dark saying from of old. A parable was the tool of a wisdom teacher, a story that required thoughtful consideration and imagination to unlock, to uncover mysteries of God which are only opened to those who will work hard to discover them, who are willing to believe and act on them. V. 2 is quoted in Mt. 13:35 of Jesus' ministry, that He always used parables in His teaching, to weed out the merely curious from those who truly seek God. Parables are not preachy—but there's gold in them if you will dig for it.

So today is going to be story time! But if you want to get the gold, you're going to have to work your mind, to solve the puzzles, to untangle the threads that the Psalmist has artfully woven together. And I hope I can help you in that process.

But we need to finish the introduction. V. 4, once we have discovered the meaning behind these stories, we have another responsibility: to pass them on to the next generation. Our fathers told us, v. 3, now we are to tell our children, the glorious deeds of the Lord, His might, the wonders He has done, and the Law He has given us. We need to teach them His doings as well as His sayings. Because how do you get to know somebody? It's not just in what they say—you can learn a lot more, sometimes, from what they do. And so if we and our children know the ways of God, how He acts, we will know His character.

In fact, this is a command, v. 5. Deut. 6:7, "You shall teach them diligently to your children. . ." Notice it doesn't say, bring your children to church so that the SS teachers can teach them. Now that's a good thing to do. But the primary responsibility is on the parents, the fathers in particular, to ensure that each generation, and there are 4 mentioned (fathers→us→our children→their children) knows the glorious deeds of the Lord. This is a job that we as a church want to help you parents with.

This is the theme verse, for good reason, of our Next Generation ministries here at CPC:

Nursery –	God Made Me, Jesus Loves Me, God is Good, We Love Jesus, etc.
Preschool –	Learning God through the Stories of the Bible
Kindergarten –	Jesus What a Savior
1 st Grade –	The ABC's of God, Great is the Lord
2 nd Grade –	Faithful to All His Promises
3 rd Grade –	In the Beginning...Jesus!
4 th Grade –	To Be Like Jesus (gospel terms – regeneration, justification, etc.)
5 th Grade –	How Majestic is Your Name
6 th Grade –	Coluccis, prep for Jr. Hi

So why know the deeds and the laws of the Lord? V. 7 gives us the key that unlocks this whole Psalm. 3 things: 1) So that they would set their hope in God, 2) Not forget His works, 3) But keep His commandments. Remember. . .so that you will trust. . .and obey. We will see these twin themes of trusting and obeying in each of the sections of the chapter. If we don't remember, we will become, like our forefathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, v. 8. And that's what the rest of the Psalm is about.

II. TURNING BACK, vv. 9-16

What the people did: v. 9, the Ephraimites, though armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. This is the one reference in the Psalm which is not entirely clear. I follow F.B. Meyer's lead in taking it to refer to the time when the Israelites, referred to as the Ephraimites as the leading tribe, were on the border of the Promised Land and, after they had sent the spies in, refused to go up. Though they were armed for battle, and though God had commanded them to take the Land, they "turned back." They didn't trust God enough to give them victory, because the enemy had been seen and they were scary. As they lost courage, they also lost conviction, and began, v. 10, to walk away from God's laws.

Why? V. 11, "They forgot His works"! They forgot what God had done, that just a few months earlier, He had orchestrated the greatest escape in history, He had divided the Red Sea and let His people pass through on dry ground. He had taken their dreaded enemies, Pharaoh and all his chariots, and drowned them in the Sea. Just like that, He dealt with their problem. Then He sent a pillar of cloud to guide them by day and a pillar of fire to light their way at night. He cracked open rocks and made water gush out. God was basically running rampant doing miracles to get them out of the bondage of Egypt and to provide for them in the dessert—and now when they were faced with the challenge of uprooting the Canaanites from their land, they suddenly forgot all that? They forgot His works, v. 11. Not in the sense that they couldn't have told you the stories; rather, that they did not have the capacity to let the God of then be the God of now, to believe that the God who made the waters of the sea stand up in a heap then could now dispense with a few thousand giants in the Promised Land.

III. REBELLION IN THE DESERT, vv. 17-31

What the people did: Now they're in the desert, and they sin still more against God, v. 17. They tested God in their hearts, v. 18, and demanded the food they craved, saying, "Can God. . .?" To test means to try something out, to see if it works like you think it's supposed to. God is allowed to test us, and He does, Gen 22:1, to see what is in our hearts. But us testing God? Not a good idea. Like the smart aleck first grader testing the teacher. You may know what 2 + 2 is, but do you know what 9 + 8 is?! Only worse. Deut. 6:16 says, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." And the people said, "Can God. . .?" I Cor. 10:9, "We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents." Calvin: "To subject His power to the narrow rule of our own senses, and to prescribe to Him the mode in which to act, according to our own desires; so as to defer to Him no further than our carnal reason dictates."

Why did they do it? According to the Quartermaster General in the Army, it is reported that Moses would have to have had 1500 tons of manna each day. Do you know that to bring that much food each day, two freight trains, each at least a mile long, would be required! They would have to have firewood to use in cooking the food. This would take 4000 tons of wood and a few more freight trains, each a mile long, just for one day. And just think, they were forty years in transit. And Oh yes! They would have to have water. If they only had enough to drink and wash a few dishes, it would take 11,000,000 gallons each day and a freight train with tank cars, 1800 miles long, just to bring water!

God had done all of this for them. . .and they weren't satisfied. They got sick of God's menu and remembered the fish and the garlicks and the leaks of Egypt (see, they were good at remembering some things), and they gave into their lust and demanded the food they craved. If God is so great, can He give us meat out here in the wilderness? You see, because they did not believe God, v. 22, or trust His saving power. You can see their utter impatience with the pilgrim call.

What God does: Now God, in a fit of rage at their lack of trust, v. 21, lets loose the east and the south wind and blows in quail by the ton so that they are 3 feet deep for a 20 mile radius around the camp and the people dig in and are stuffing themselves but before they had satisfied their lust for meat God's anger burned against them for their impertinence and sent a very great plague, Num. 11:33, that killed the strongest and the fittest of them. He gave them what they demanded but sent leanness to their souls, Ps. 106:15.

IV. ONGOING REBELLION. . . AND PERSISTENT MERCY, vv. 32-39

The middle section of the Psalm, takes a bit of break from the history stories to summarize what's going on. . . and on. . . and on.

What the people did: In spite of all that God had done, both in saving and in disciplining them, they did not obey, v. 32, or believe.

What God did: So He punished them some more, v. 33, 34

What the people did: Temporary repentance, v. 34, which is in fact no repentance at all and turned out to be nothing more than hollow words, actually worse, they were deceptive words because while they said the right things their hearts were not right, they were not committed to obedience.

So how does God respond? Vv. 38, 39 are perhaps two of the most surprising verses of the Psalm. You would expect God to wipe them out. But instead of destroying them, He shows His compassion, His tender mercy, and atoned for their iniquity. This means that He accepted the blood sacrifices that they offered according to the Levitical system and forgave their sin! He restrained His anger and didn't stir up His full wrath, because He remembered (you see, He remembers while we forget) that they were but dust. I can relate. . . Stubby and tissues

V. REBELLION IN THE DESERT, vv. 40-55

What the people did: How often, again and again they tested Him, 10 times, Num. 14:22. The grievous Him, v. 40, provoked Him, 41, did not remember His power or all that He had done for them, v. 42.

"Provoked" can mean "to draw a circle around", to limit Him to our time and way. Calvin, "to circumscribe God's infinite power within the narrow boundaries to which unbelief would confine it."

What had God done for them: The Psalmist gives a rundown of 6 of the plagues, the blood, flies, frogs, locusts, hail. God did amazing things to set His people free, He showed His power, He turned His anger loose on the enemies of His people, finally by sending the destroying angel to kill all their firstborn. This finally did the trick, His people were kicked out of the land of Egypt into. . . freedom. Now, out in the wilderness, they needed help, and so God, v. 52, tenderly shepherded them through the desert, protected them from danger, and brought them to the Land He had promised them. And there, on the second time around, when they had faith to enter the Land, He, v. 55, drove out the nations before them and gave them their land and even their houses to live in.

VI. GOING IN, vv. 56-64

What the people did: But, true to their nature, even seeing all of God's deliverance and provision, His miracles and His power, they continued even in the Land, v. 56, to test God and rebel and disobey Him. They continue to try to deceive Him with their mouths, but were in fact like a faulty bow that never can hit its mark. Because, instead of worshipping God alone, they now began to worship idols in their high places, breaking the 1st and 2nd commandments. While discontent was a major struggle in the desert, disloyalty will be in the Land.

How did God respond?: He got jealous, and He was angry. His own people, to whom He had committed Himself by covenant, turned their back on Him, told Him where to get off, said they were

done with Him, they were now going to bow down to statues of wood and stone and offer sacrifices, even their children, to them. God, the jilted lover, is deeply hurt, and now His anger boils over and He leaves His wayward people, v. 60. Then He gave them over to their enemies. The people reading this would remember well the story in 1 Sam. 4 when the Philistines routed the Israelites and captured the ark, and Eli's sons were killed and his daughter-in-law, as she lies dying in childbirth, names her son Ichabod, saying "The glory has departed from Israel."

VII. GOD'S GOOD PLAN, vv. 65-72

In this concluding section, it is God alone who acts, for the people have made a shamble of things. But God, v. 65, who has been silent while His people suffer under His punishment for their rebellion, awakes, as it were, from sleep and rushes into action, like a man stimulated with strong drink. He's ready to kick some tail, and He does that, literally, in v. 66, He struck the enemies in their "hinder parts."

And now God does something amazing for His people. He came back to live among them, but in Judah, not Ephraim, in the magnificent temple that Solomon built. He chose a good leader for them, David, who had learned in the fields what it meant to shepherd the wayward and the weak. David guided the people with an upright heart and a skillful hand. And He was a forebear of that Great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus, who called Himself the good shepherd, who laid down His life for His sheep.

LESSONS

Those are the stories, the true life parables. What are we to learn from them? I am sure as you have given ear to this teaching and inclined your ears to the words of God, as you let these stories simmer in your mind and heart, as you let the water in the coffee maker soak through the grounds some coffee is beginning to come out, some things are begin to filter through.

Let me suggest that two portraits are painted here, one of us, the other of God.

What kind of portrait of us, as God's people, is drawn?

- Forget, 11, 42
- Rebel, 17, 40, 56
- Test God, 18, 41, 56
- Unbelieving, 22, 32 "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?" (Num. 14:11)
- Flatter and lie to Him, 36 even in their "repentance"
- Grieve God, 40
- Provoke God, 41
- Unfaithful, 8, 37, 57

Is it any wonder, then, that Scripture says of us, "They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. . . There is none righteous, no not one." (Ps. 14:3; Rom. 3:12)? By looking at our history, we can see what a desperate and hopeless lot we are. Just look at your own history—does it not parallel the people of Israel? We are incurably sick, and we need a Savior. Are you beginning to see yourself as you really are, in the mirror of history?

But there's good news! Look at the portrait of God in this Psalm.

Righteous:

- He gets angry, 21, 31, 58, 59
- He punishes, 31, 34, 62-64
- He is hurt, 40
- His jealousy is aroused, 58 Mt. Henry, "God is a jealous God and so it is no marvel if a people whom He had betrothed Himself to embraced the bosom of a stranger that he should refuse to cohabit with them any longer."

Compassionate:

- Divided the Red Sea, 13
- Led His people like a flock, 14, 52, 53
- Gave them water, in abundance, 15, 16, 20
- Gave them manna, in abundance, 24,25
- Gave them meat, so that they were well fed, 27
- Atoned for their iniquity, 38
- Restrained His anger, 38
- Remembered their weakness, 39
- Redeemed them from their foe, 42
- Provided land and houses, 55
- Came to their aid, 65
- Chose a good shepherd to care for them, 68, 70

No wonder the Scripture says of God, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty. . ." (Ex. 34:6,7). It is this God who expects us to trust and obey Him.

CONCLUSION

So why are we in the wilderness in the first place? If life is so hard there that we are challenged to trust and tempted to disobey, why doesn't God pick His people up on eagles' wings from shores of the Red Sea and drop them off, unscathed, in the land of milk and honey? That is the puzzle, the mystery of this parable. "These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" I Cor. 10:11).

The reason, I believe, is that He wants us to learn how to trust and obey. There is no expressway from Egypt to Canaan (as to Evansville). If there are no difficulties, there is no need for trust. He delights to show His strength, flex His muscles, as it were, and deliver us! If there is no temptation, then obeying is robotic. It brings deep joy to Him when we choose Him over other attractions. God wants to see what our faith is made of—do we believe Him enough to trust Him to save? And do we love Him enough to do everything He says?

There are some people here who in the last week or two have been called into the boss's office and been told, Hate to do this to you, but we just can't keep the company going with this many people on board. . .or into the doctor's office and told, It doesn't look good. . .or your marriage seems beyond hope, your children are not walking with the Lord, or a relationship that seemed so promising has ended and now your hopes of marriage seem to be slipping away. You're struggling to really trust God with the cards you've been dealt. Why so hard? We are on the pilgrim road, we are not home yet.

Others of you are living in sin right now. For some, it's a pattern of falling, getting up, falling, getting up, falling again, and you just can't seem to conquer that besetting sin. For others, you're in a long

period of rebellion, where you have strayed away from your earlier commitment to God, you've hardened your heart to His voice, you have let desire for independence or your lusts of one sort or another become Lord of your life instead of the One you made a covenant commitment to. Do you see, we're all in this Psalm, this could be the story of each of our lives.

So what do we do about it? Is there a way out? How do we not become, v. 8, a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts are not steadfast? By remembering, v. 7, the works of the Lord. If we remember the glorious deeds of the Lord, v. 4, His might, and the wonders He has done, these will help us, v. 7, set our hope (trust) in God. . . and keep His commandments. How does that work?

When we're struggling with trust, we're essentially testing God, asking, "Can God. . ." Unbelief of every kind is a testing of God. For not to believe on the evidence He has seen fit to give is to demand that He give more than He has already given! We become like the people in Jn. 6, who, after Jesus fed the 5000 said, "Give us a sign."! We test God whenever we are dissatisfied with His dealings with us and ask that He alter those dealings in a way that is more agreeable to us. We cannot distrust God without accusing Him of a lack of either power or goodness, without telling Him that His plans are not the best, nor His dispensations the wisest. Our fear and our anxiety and our despondency is nothing less than a call upon God to change His course. You cannot be dissatisfied without virtually saying that God might order things better. We both impeach His wisdom and betray our pride when we prescribe to God how He ought to act (Mt. Henry).

Well, you might ask, what of prayer? Can we not ask God for things He has not chosen to give us? Certainly. He has promised, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you" (Jn. 15:7), and "You have not because you ask not" Js. 4:2). There is a fine but clear line between humbly asking for His largesse and grumblingly asking God to give you what you feel you deserve. And He knows the difference. An understanding faith will not ask, "Can God?" but "Why didn't He?" and "Would you please?" Trusting God is making oneself secure in Him.

How do we build faith? I believe, help my unbelief, Mk. 9:24. The answer was in the Psalm. It is by remembering, meditating, worshipping on the works of God that we find ourselves drawn up to heaven, learning God's perspective, realizing with all He's done that He can do everything, and that He has assigned us our portion and our lot. Pray, for sure. But humbly, with thanksgiving . . . and ready to accept whatever answer He gives. When the Son of Man comes, Jesus asked, will He find faith on the earth? Lk. 18:8. Let us be content in our circumstances and believe Him to deliver us, in His time. Do we really want to keep testing God?

If we're struggling with obedience, what is the answer? God has given us His law, v. 5, and His expectation is that we would obey it. But we don't. We wander like sheep, each going his own way. What can help to keep us on the straight path? Did you see some clues in the parable? I think there are two things. One is the discipline of God. Time and again He punished His people. It hurt. It helped, at least for a season, to keep them in line. If you deliberately sin against God, He may well discipline you as a child, and that discipline will not be pleasant, it will be painful, but it will produce, in the end, a harvest of righteousness and peace, for those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:11).

The other is the goodness of God. Did you notice how often God did not give full vent to His anger, how He continued to provide for them, how he led and guided them and protected them, how He gave them the lands of other nations and even houses to live in, how He atoned for their iniquity. He does these things because He loves us with an everlasting love. And those who are so loved ought to so love in return. If we have indeed entered into a covenant relationship with God, we are the bride of

Christ. And as His bride, if we continue to pursue other lovers, we not only betray our insincerity, we grieve His heart, v. 40.

The word means pain, used in Gen. 3 for pain in childbirth. Isa. 54:6, as a wife feels when deserted by her husband. We all know at least to some degree what this feels like. When someone we love and have committed ourselves to slaps us in the face, there is a deep wound in the heart, and it hurts so bad. This is how God feels when we rebel against Him. He is not just a force out there or a cop in the sky gleefully zapping people who step out of line. He is a person. He has committed Himself to His people, has given us His covenant love. He expects that we would reciprocate in relationship, that we would keep ourselves pure for Him and Him alone. And when we slap Him in the face by turning our back on His words, He is grieved. Do we not care that we are hurting our Savior? Do we really want to keep grieving Him?

The way to trust and obey is to remember. To learn the ways of God by remembering the works of God, to let them soak into our lives until they renew our minds, and we walk with a fresh sense of confidence in His care for us and a renewed desire to please Him, by obeying His commands. If our record is our shame, the record of God's persistent goodness is our only hope. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

We have a great country; let us be inspired this week-end to be great Americans. But we have an even greater citizenship: we are the people of God. Let us be inspired by the history of His works to be great Christians, those who trust and obey our good God and great Savior.

Nate Irwin