

“That the Generation to Come Might Know”

Psalm 78

This is the second longest psalm in the book and is primarily historical. The superscription is important to the purpose of the psalm — “Maschil of Asaph.” As we’ve seen before, the term *Maschil* (found in 13 psalms) comes from a word that means to be wise; to act with understanding; to have insight. This psalm is not just a song but a teaching psalm designed to produce understanding. Asaph isn’t simply rehearsing Israel’s history; he interprets it so that the next generation might not repeat it. This is history with a purpose — truth handed down to the next generation so that hope in a dark world might be preserved. It goes to the familiar statement, made most popular by Winston Churchill: “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

Ronald Reagan made this statement:

If we fail to instruct our children in justice, religion, and liberty, we will be condemning them to a world without virtue, a life in the twilight of a civilization where the great truths have been forgotten.

I. THE CALL TO HEAR (VS. 1-4)

➤ Truth must be received.

A. The command to listen (vs. 1)

The Hebrew parallelism here — “*Give ear*” and “*incline your ears*” — reinforces the urgency. This is intentional attentiveness.

B. The character of the message (vs. 2)

- This verse indicates that what follows requires reflection.
1. *"Parable"* (פָּרָבֹל) — this is not just a story, it is a governing principle illustrated through a narrative (in this case, history).
 2. *"Dark sayings"* (חִידוֹת) — riddles; things that require meditation. In other words, the events of Israel's history are not self-explanatory. The "darkness" points to the depth of meaning.
 3. This verse is directly cited by Matthew where it is applied to the use of parables by Jesus. This isn't to say this is a Messianic psalm, but that God teaches through history and parable.

Matthew 13:35

³⁵ That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.

C. The continuity of the message (vs. 3)

- Truth is to be faithfully handed down.

D. The refusal to conceal (vs. 4)

1. The temptation to hide — *"We will not hide them from their children..."* The reason truth might be hidden would be simple neglect, fear of what it teaches, the pressure of culture and society around us (a primary reason today), or spiritual apathy.
- This shows that the present generation is responsible for whether the next generation knows. Spiritual decline never begins with the

children; it begins when the parents stop teaching.

2. The commitment to declare — “...*shewing to the generation to come...*”
3. The content to be shared — “...*the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.*” The next generation needs theology and doctrine, not just stories.

II. THE CHARGE TO TEACH (VS. 5-7)

- Truth must be reproduced.

A. The foundation given (vs. 5a)

1. “*For*” — this connects the command to teach in verse 4 with God’s prior revelation.
2. “*He established a testimony*” — refers to God’s revealed acts and statutes.
3. “*And appointed a law*” (תּוֹרָה) — speaks of God’s revealed truth that must be given out.

B. The fathers commanded (vs. 5b)

- Notice that it is not the responsibility of the priests alone, nor that of centralized public worship of the day (think: church today). The responsibility of the instruction is placed squarely on the home (Deut. 6:6-7).

Deuteronomy 6:6-7

⁶ And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: ⁷ And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the

way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

C. The future envisioned (vs. 6)

- The truth of God's word is meant to outlive us.

D. The faith intended (vs. 7)

1. Confidence — *"Set their hope in God"*
2. Memory — *"Not forget the works of God"*
 - This is neglect of what one knows.
3. Obedience — *"Keep his commandments"*
 - If truth is not taught, obedience will deteriorate.

III. THE CAUTION FROM THE PAST (VS. 8)

- Truth must not be rejected. Verse 7 gives the goal; verse 8 gives the warning.

A. The pattern of resistance

"A stubborn and rebellious generation"

1. *"Stubborn,"* in this context, is the language of a people who refuse correction.
2. *"Rebellious"* — willfully resisting authority.

B. The problem of the heart

"A generation that set not their heart aright"

1. *"To set the heart"* means to establish, prepare, fix it firmly.
2. They never got their heart right with God so their

outward participation in the mechanics of the Law led to spiritual instability.

C. The instability of the spirit

"Whose spirit was not steadfast with God"

1. *"Stedfast"* carries the idea of being firm, faithful, reliable.
 2. They were spiritually inconsistent.
- Spiritual decline never begins publicly. It begins when a generation stops setting its heart aright.

IV. THE CYCLE OF HARDNESS (VS. 9-64)

- Truth repeatedly resisted.

A. Rebellion in the wilderness (vs. 9-39)

1. A cowardly retreat (vs. 9-11)
 - They failed even though they had great privilege.
2. A compassionate redemption (vs. 12-16)
 - This recounts the mighty acts of God.
3. A continual rebellion (vs. 17-20)
 - a) *"They sinned yet more"* (vs. 17)
 - b) They tempted God in their hearts (vs. 18). The sin began *"in their heart"* before it was voiced to God.
 - c) They spoke against God (vs. 19).
 - d) They questioned His ability (vs. 20). There is a progression in these verses. What started in their heart resulted in questioning the very God that

delivered them so miraculously.

4. A righteous response (vs. 21-31)

- God provided for them, yet their unbelief persisted. The provision from God did not solve their rebellion.

5. A superficial repentance (vs. 32-37)

- a) *"For all this they sinned still"* (vs. 32) — one of the most profound and amazing statements regarding God's children. And don't we still do that today, after all God's done for us?
- b) Days consumed in vanity (vs. 32)
- c) They sought the Lord only after *"he slew them,"* and it was only superficial.
- d) They tried to "flatter" (הַפְּתִי) God — that is, they thought they could deceive Him with their fake repentance.
- e) Their heart was not right with God (vs. 37)

6. A merciful restraint (vs. 38-39)

- The wilderness generation had revelation, provision, discipline, and mercy — yet without a heart set aright, none of it produced steadfastness.

B. Rejection in the land (vs. 40-64)

1. Repeated grief (vs. 40-42)

- They limited God by forgetting Him.

2. Remembered power (vs. 43-51)

- The God they doubted and tried to deceive was the same God who destroyed Egypt.

3. Shepherd deliverance (vs. 52-55)

- These verses show God as their Shepherd and points forward to David as shepherd in the end of the psalm.
 - a) He led them forth like sheep (vs. 52).
 - b) He guided them safely (vs. 53).
 - c) He brought them into the land (vs. 54-55).
- 4. Renewed rebellion in the land (vs. 56-58)
 - Their sin did not stop once they were in the Promised Land.
- 5. National rejection (vs. 59-64)
 - a) God greatly abhorred Israel (vs. 59).
 - b) He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh (vs. 60).
 - c) He delivered the Ark to the enemy (vs. 61).
 - d) He gave His people over to national devastation (vs. 62-64).
 - This shows us that the failure of a generation eventually leads to the loss of desire for worship. Someone has said, "We are just one generation away from atheism."

V. THE CHOICE OF A SHEPHERD (VS. 65-72)

- Truth ultimately redirected.

Failure on man's part does not nullify God's purpose. It simply redirects it to accomplish His sovereign will.

A. The divine intervention (vs. 65-66)

- This is considered as a redemptive turn that is often seen in the Old Testament.

B. The choice of a tribe (vs. 67-68)

- This shows the historical shift of worship from Shiloh to Zion.

C. The Davidic appointment (vs. 69-72)

- The shepherd king.
 1. The sanctuary (the Temple) was established (vs. 69). This is forward-leaning, or near-prophetic language. Verse 60 says God "*forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh...*" Although the Temple had not been built when Asaph penned this psalm, David was the one that established its place and purpose, and Asaph, as a "Seer," is showing that God chose a different place than the Tabernacle to meet with His people.
 2. David was chosen, being taken from the sheepfold (vs. 70-71).
 3. He fed them with "the integrity of his heart" (vs. 72). He was upright and pure in the administration of his government.

Conclusion:

This psalm is a historical account of repeated failure of God's people — yet, it is also an account of the persistent mercy of God. Israel forgot God; God remembered them. They rebelled, but God remained faithful. And when Shiloh fell and Ephraim fell away, God's purpose stayed true — He redirected it through Zion and David.

God's purpose will stand — the question for us today is whether we will stand faithfully within that purpose.