

Psalm 78 • The Legacy of Signs

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of a mature Believer is that they have come to realize that every sign and miracle documented in the Bible has a deeper, more significant spiritual meaning than just the wondrous act itself. In the Gospels, for instance, a miracle performed by Jesus is almost always an extension of His teaching provided just before or after it. The adrenaline of inspiration in the wake of a miracle is short-lived, but someone learning and applying the right lesson from it is changed forever. One of the best examples of this is to look at the generation of Israelites who God freed from Egypt and guided across the wilderness into Canaan. They experienced signs and miracles unparalleled until the time of Christ's First Coming. How they handled them provides valuable teaching concerning their greater meaning and application.

¹Listen, O my people, to my instruction;
Incline your ears to the words of my
mouth.

²I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings of old,

³Which we have heard and known,
And our fathers have told us.

⁴We will not conceal them from their
children,
But tell to the generation to come the
praises of the LORD,
And His strength and His wondrous
works that He has done.

[Read v.1-4]

Observation: This psalm was penned by Asaph. An interesting thing is stated about Asaph in 1 Chronicles 25:2, that "Asaph...prophesied under the direction of the king". In other words, although he used music, he wasn't actually viewed primarily as a musician, but as a prophet, one who ministered according to the direction of King David. (This is evident in that Asaph's "songs" are now in our Bible as Scripture.) The chief role of a prophet is being like an evangelist to Believers, calling them back from their backslidden ways to a restored relationship with God.

Q: What can you infer from v.1-2 as to the main purpose of this Psalm?

A: There are several references to God's Word ("instruction", "words", "parable", "dark sayings of old") which together are a call to heed God's Word.

Q: What other major person in the Bible spoke in parables and dark sayings? What might this indicate about this Psalm?

A: Jesus. (See Matthew 13:34) There's a very strong allusion here that Asaph is prophesying at the direction of Christ the King, the Son of David, providing some of the same teaching Jesus will come to repeat in His earthly ministry to come. In fact, Jesus confirms His fulfillment of v.2 when He quotes it in Matthew 13:35.

Q: So what exactly are "dark sayings of old"?

A: It's the Old Testament way of describing secrets ordained before the world began which are eventually explained at various appointed times by God. What is going to be spoken of here has meanings that go deeper than just the Law given through Moses. Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 2:7 as...

*but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom
which God predestined before the ages to our glory;
1 Corinthians 2:7*

Q: How do v.3-4 describe the expectation of how God's Word will be communicated?

A: From generation to generation. The admonishment to "not conceal them from...children" is a command to pass along ALL of God's Word complete and in tact.

⁵For He established a testimony in Jacob
And appointed a law in Israel,
Which He commanded our fathers
That they should teach them to their
children,
⁶That the generation to come might know,
even the children yet to be born,
That they may arise and tell them to their
children,
⁷That they should put their confidence in
God
And not forget the works of God,
But keep His commandments,
⁸And not be like their fathers,
A stubborn and rebellious generation,
A generation that did not prepare its heart
And whose spirit was not faithful to God.

[Read v.5-8]

Q: Is this just a suggestion? Just good advice for child-rearing?

A: The Old Testament Law specifically commanded parents to teach their children.

“Only give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, so that you do not forget the things which your eyes have seen and they do not depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons.

Deuteronomy 4:9

Q: What is the goal of this instruction in God’s Word?

1. “That they should put their confidence in God” (v.7)
2. “And not forget the works of God” (v.7)
3. “...keep His commandments” (v.7)
4. “And not be like their fathers” (v.8)

Q: Considering all the things the Old Testament Law teaches about, what is obviously missing from this list? What is never mentioned and how does it reinforce the TRUE goal of a relationship with God?

A: There’s no mention of the temple, priesthood, sacrifices, offerings, celebrations, or any of the rituals and observances. It reinforces the number one thing needed as obedience to God’s Word from the heart.

Application: Why is taking a child to church not enough? What is a parent’s responsibility when it comes to God’s Word and Christian education?

Q: What are the lessons each new generation is supposed to learn so as not to repeat the mistakes of previous generations?

A: They’re supposed to embrace faithfulness from the heart so as to avoid the alternative: stubbornness, rebelliousness, and unfaithfulness.

Point: So much of Christ’s teaching to the Jews of His day was how to properly apply the Law from the heart. This is the major, recurring theme in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, summarized in His command to not be a “hearer” of the Law, but a “doer”.

[Read v.9-16]

⁹The sons of Ephraim were archers
equipped with bows,
Yet they turned back in the day of battle.
¹⁰They did not keep the covenant of God
And refused to walk in His law;
¹¹They forgot His deeds
And His miracles that He had shown
them.
¹²He wrought wonders before their fathers
In the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.
¹³He divided the sea and caused them to
pass through,
And He made the waters stand up like a
heap.
¹⁴Then He led them with the cloud by day
And all the night with a light of fire.
¹⁵He split the rocks in the wilderness
And gave them abundant drink like the
ocean depths.

Q: Why single out the “sons of Ephraim”?

A: Although Reuben was Jacob’s firstborn, and therefore should have been the leader and received special privileges as the firstborn, we know from Scripture that he lost that position.

Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright. Though Judah prevailed over his brothers, and from him came the leader, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph),

1 Chronicles 5:1-2

Joseph’s son Ephraim took the role as Israel’s firstborn. Their ranking position was intimated in their position next to the Ark whenever Israel marched, by its city of Shiloh being the first residence in the Promised Land of the Ark and tabernacle, and by the prominence of the particular

¹⁶He brought forth streams also from the rock
And caused waters to run down like rivers.

part of Canaan given to them. However, as we begin to see in v.9-10, their unfaithfulness led to being replaced by Judah as the head of Israel, a theme developed further in this Psalm. When Israel fragments into a northern and southern kingdom, the southern will be called “Judah” while the whole of the northern will often be called “Ephraim”. There’s much teaching here about the consequences of sin and a parallel of the struggles between Judah and Ephraim just as there was between Jacob and Esau.

Q: What is being highlighted in v.11-16?

A: The greatest signs of the Exodus in what God did to effect their release and then sustain them between Egypt and Canaan.

Q: What is Ephraim’s sin regarding these things?

1. “They did not keep the covenant of God” (v.10)
2. “The forgot His deeds and His miracles” (v.11)

Point: They were unresponsive to the great signs provided by God in the crossing of the Red Sea, God’s leading them day and night, and His providing for them in the wilderness. This was visible by their disregard for His Word.

Q: What was the final result of Ephraim’s unfaithfulness?

A: It’s the opening remark in v.9 that they “turned back in the day of battle”. This is most likely speaking more of their combined spiritual failures which resulted in being replaced by Judah, than by a single, specific earthly battle.

Application: What happens when someone called by God fails to respond properly? What does God do when someone doesn’t do the job He’s given them? Do you see the only real value of an earthly ranking is if used in conjunction with obedience to God’s will and ways?

¹⁷Yet they still continued to sin against Him,
To rebel against the Most High in the desert.
¹⁸And in their heart they put God to the test
By asking food according to their desire.
¹⁹Then they spoke against God;
They said, “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?”
²⁰Behold, He struck the rock so that waters gushed out,
And streams were overflowing;
Can He give bread also?
Will He provide meat for His people?”

[Read v.17-20]

Q: What is the problem with the people’s attitude?

A: They weren’t even grateful for, much less transformed by, the miracle of being provided water in the wilderness. They used that to demand more, in this case to be supplied bread and meat to eat in the wilderness.

Point: The problem when it comes to signs and miracles is that people often want **MORE** signs and miracles. They fail to understand and apply the greater meaning of them to their life. Seeing them as something for their own consumption, they demand more for themselves.

Q: What is the basic sin that they’re committing?

A: By asking if God is limited to just water and whether or not He can also provide bread and meat, they are putting Him to the test. Notice in v.18 that they’re asking “according to **THEIR** desire”.

²¹Therefore the LORD heard and was full of wrath;

And a fire was kindled against Jacob
And anger also mounted against Israel,

²²Because they did not believe in God
And did not trust in His salvation.

²³Yet He commanded the clouds above
And opened the doors of heaven;

²⁴He rained down manna upon them to eat
And gave them food from heaven.

²⁵Man did eat the bread of angels;
He sent them food in abundance.

²⁶He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens

And by His power He directed the south wind.

²⁷When He rained meat upon them like the dust,

Even winged fowl like the sand of the seas,

²⁸Then He let them fall in the midst of their camp,

Round about their dwellings.

²⁹So they ate and were well filled,
And their desire He gave to them.

³⁰Before they had satisfied their desire,
While their food was in their mouths,

³¹The anger of God rose against them
And killed some of their stoutest ones,
And subdued the choice men of Israel.

³²In spite of all this they still sinned
And did not believe in His wonderful works.

³³So He brought their days to an end in futility

And their years in sudden terror.

³⁴When He killed them, then they sought Him,

And returned and searched diligently for God;

³⁵And they remembered that God was their rock,

And the Most High God their Redeemer.

³⁶But they deceived Him with their mouth
And lied to Him with their tongue.

³⁷For their heart was not steadfast toward Him,

Nor were they faithful in His covenant.

³⁸But He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them;

And often He restrained His anger
And did not arouse all His wrath.

³⁹Thus He remembered that they were but flesh,

A wind that passes and does not return.

[Read v.21-33]

Q: So what happened when God gave them their desire?

A: They also experienced judgment.

Q: How did God actually provide a kind of sign within a sign when He accompanied the manna and meat with His judgment?

A: He was trying to teach them the meaning behind signs and miracles, showing the consequences for not applying the greater lessons behind them to change their behavior. They should have seen from the signs of judgment which accompanied the miracle of the food that they needed to be responsive to God's Word and ways. Yet they did not learn and apply that lesson either.

Q: What was their basic problem as described in both v.22 and v.32?

A: "They did not believe".

Point: They personally witnessed two types of signs and miracles, the supernatural provision of food and water, and being struck dead for disobedience. Yet **NEITHER** a sign of God's blessing nor a sign of God's judgment had any impact on them. Signs in and of themselves are worthless against a heart that refuses to yield.

Q: What happens to those who continue in their unbelief?

A: Their life ends "in futility" and "sudden terror" when they experience final judgment for their unbelief.

[Read v.34-39]

Q: Although they would return to God at times, what was consistently wrong?

A: It was only a temporary return. Even though for a time their attention towards God seemed sincere, they would fall away from Him again.

Q: Why was this? What was the root cause of this condition of backsliding?

1. "They deceived Him...and lied to Him"
2. "Their heart was not steadfast toward Him"
3. They were not "faithful in His covenant".

These were all issues of faithfulness from the heart.

Q: But in spite of their repeated behavior, what characteristics did God most often respond with?

1. He was "compassionate" and "forgave their iniquity"
2. He "often restrained His anger and...His wrath"
3. "He remembered that they were but flesh"

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He refrained as long as possible from giving them what they deserved, providing the greatest opportunity possible to be reconciled through His grace.

⁴⁰How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness

And grieved Him in the desert!

⁴¹Again and again they tempted God, And pained the Holy One of Israel.

⁴²They did not remember His power, The day when He redeemed them from the adversary,

⁴³When He performed His signs in Egypt And His marvels in the field of Zoan,

⁴⁴And turned their rivers to blood, And their streams, they could not drink.

⁴⁵He sent among them swarms of flies which devoured them,

And frogs which destroyed them.

⁴⁶He gave also their crops to the grasshopper

And the product of their labor to the locust.

⁴⁷He destroyed their vines with hailstones

And their sycamore trees with frost.

⁴⁸He gave over their cattle also to the hailstones

And their herds to bolts of lightning.

⁴⁹He sent upon them His burning anger, Fury and indignation and trouble,

A band of destroying angels.

⁵⁰He leveled a path for His anger;

He did not spare their soul from death,

But gave over their life to the plague,

⁵¹And smote all the firstborn in Egypt, The first issue of their virility in the tents of Ham.

⁵²But He led forth His own people like sheep

And guided them in the wilderness like a flock;

⁵³He led them safely, so that they did not fear;

But the sea engulfed their enemies.

[Read v.40-53]

Q: So what does the psalmist say was the greater spiritual lesson they should have learned from the signs and miracles of the Exodus which they never applied to their life?

- Instead of submitting to Him, “they rebelled against Him in the wilderness” (v.40)
- Instead of trusting Him, “again and again they tempted God” (v.41)
- Instead of becoming loving, obedient children, they “pained the Holy One of Israel” (v.41)
- Instead of believing in Him, “they did not remember His power” (v.42)

Point: Even though God effected the most miraculous rescue and escape in the history of the world on their behalf, they never engaged God any deeper than someone who did signs. They didn't come to see all of God's attributes as to **WHY** He performed those wonders on their behalf, such as His love, grace, righteousness, etc. They saw Him only as someone who was serving **THEM** through doing things for **THEM** rather than seeing that **THEY** should be serving **HIM**.

Q: What is the description provided that best describes how God viewed the relationship?

A: “He led forth His own people like sheep and guided them”. The right interpretation and application of the signs and wonders was becoming a trusting member of the Good Shepherd's flock.

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

John 10:11-15

Point: When Jesus came the first time, most of His own people treated Him exactly as the generations out of Egypt did, refusing to listen to the meaning of the signs and miracles He performed and instead asking for **MORE** signs and wonders.

⁵⁴So He brought them to His holy land,
 To this hill country which His right hand
 had gained.
⁵⁵He also drove out the nations before
 them
 And apportioned them for an inheritance
 by measurement,
 And made the tribes of Israel dwell in
 their tents.
⁵⁶Yet they tempted and rebelled against
 the Most High God
 And did not keep His testimonies,
⁵⁷But turned back and acted treacherously
 like their fathers;
 They turned aside like a treacherous bow.
⁵⁸For they provoked Him with their high
 places
 And aroused His jealousy with their
 graven images.
⁵⁹When God heard, He was filled with
 wrath
 And greatly abhorred Israel;
⁶⁰So that He abandoned the dwelling
 place at Shiloh,
 The tent which He had pitched among
 men,
⁶¹And gave up His strength to captivity
 And His glory into the hand of the
 adversary.
⁶²He also delivered His people to the
 sword,
 And was filled with wrath at His
 inheritance.
⁶³Fire devoured His young men,
 And His virgins had no wedding songs.
⁶⁴His priests fell by the sword,
 And His widows could not weep.

⁶⁵Then the LORD awoke as if from sleep,
 Like a warrior overcome by wine.
⁶⁶He drove His adversaries backward;
 He put on them an everlasting reproach.
⁶⁷He also rejected the tent of Joseph,
 And did not choose the tribe of Ephraim,
⁶⁸But chose the tribe of Judah,
 Mount Zion which He loved.
⁶⁹And He built His sanctuary like the
 heights,
 Like the earth which He has founded
 forever.
⁷⁰He also chose David His servant
 And took him from the sheepfolds;
⁷¹From the care of the ewes with suckling
 lambs He brought him
 To shepherd Jacob His people,
 And Israel His inheritance.
⁷²So he shepherded them according to the
 integrity of his heart,

[Read v.54-64]

Q: What are the signs and wonders described in v.54-55? How do they differ from those described previously?

A: Those described previously were the things He did to free them from Egypt and guide them across the wilderness to the Promised Land. These are those He continued to do to give the Promised Land to them.

Q: So even though God fulfilled all His promises to safely bring them up out of Egypt and give them Canaan, what was their response? How did it wind up being even worse than that of the generation coming out of Egypt?

A: Like the generation in the wilderness, they were rebellious, tempted God, and did not keep His Word (v.56), but they went even further by forsaking God to worship false gods instead (v.58).

Q: What is the deeper meaning of v.60 that “He abandoned the dwelling place at Shiloh”?

A: It’s a way of stating that God was faithful in every detail to His original plan, which elevated Ephraim in Reuben’s place by placing the tabernacle in Shiloh, which belonged to Ephraim. Having exhausted every opportunity He provided to make things right, God now embarks on a different plan.

Q: How did God’s signs and miracles change from this point on?

A: They were the signs and miracles of His judgment upon them for their unfaithfulness. Verses 61-64 describe the time of the Judges when Israel was repeatedly given over to an enemy and would repent for a short time only during the lifetime of a judge God raised to deliver them. As soon as that judge died, they returned to their unfaithfulness and again experienced the signs and wonders of judgment.

Point: *The same sign or miracle works oppositely depending on the condition of one’s heart. For those faithful to God, it works to strengthen and reinforce their faith and trust in God producing life; for the unfaithful it works judgment for their destruction to produce death.*

[Read v.65-72]

Q: What was God’s new plan?

A: Having “rejected the tent of Ephraim”, God “chose the tribe of Judah”. Part of that was reflected in removing the tabernacle from Shiloh and providing a permanent temple in Jerusalem. The other part was in elevating David to lead Israel.

Q: How is David similar to God’s original, intended relationship with Israel as provided previously in v.52?

A: God raised David to “shepherd Jacob His people” just as God had “led forth His own people like sheep and guided them”.

Q: Why was David a successful shepherd?

A: Because “he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them with his skillful hands.” He not only possessed obedience and faithfulness from the heart, but he proved it in his actions, which were in concert with the quality of His heart.

And guided them with his skillful hands.

Q: The psalmist opened this parable promising he would speak “in a parable” and “utter dark sayings of old”, that is to reveal a deeper mystery concerning God’s plan. How is this, indeed, true concerning these closing verses? What is the far greater fulfillment of this to come?

A: From Judah, and specifically from David’s lineage, would come the ultimate Good Shepherd Jesus who would not just perform the greatest signs and miracles ever, but wholly complete God’s plan of salvation for all of mankind, not just for a single nation.

Point: If we’re to learn the right lesson about Christ from all the mistakes of Israel provided here, it’s that Christ’s signs and wonders are directing us to a personal relationship with Him based on trust and faith, motivating us in our desire to serve Him. He is not here to live according to **OUR terms and conditions, but **WE** to **HIS**.**

Overall Application

- *What is the true role of signs and wonders? What are the right things that we should allow them to produce in us?*
- *How does what we seek from God speak to the true condition of our heart? How well do you consider that always placing yourself first and foremost in your list of requests reveals an attitude of being served rather than service?*
- *How does this show what’s wrong with becoming obsessed with the gifts of the Spirit? Can you see the similarities to the things discussed above when all one keeps seeking is yet another experience?*
- *Why is it probable that those who receive the greatest recognition in heaven for their faith on earth will probably have never witnessed a single sign, wonder, or miracle?*