

## 2. Persistent Unbelief

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. Well, let's turn to Psalm 78, and if you'd like to follow this in the big church Bibles, you'll find it on page 488, 488. Last week we were looking just at the first eight verses, the introduction to the psalm, and this week we're going to get into the meat of it, and verses 9 to 31, our passage.

But I will read from the very beginning again, just so that we can get the whole context and remind ourselves of why the writer Asaph put pen to paper and wrote this psalm in something like 970 or 60 BC, as far as we know.

So Psalm 78, verse 1. Give ear, O my people, to my teaching. Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable.

I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonders that he has done.

He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments, and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.

[ 1 : 39 ] In other words, Asaph is saying, I'm writing these things so that we can help our children and our grandchildren and the ongoing generations to learn the lessons of history. So now Asaph goes into the history that he's talking about.

Verse 9. The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law.

They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them. In the sight of their fathers, he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. He divided the sea and let them pass through it and made the water stand like a heap.

In the daytime, he led them with a cloud and all the night with a fiery light. He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved.

[ 2 : 45 ] They spoke against God, saying, Can God spread a table in the wilderness? He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?

Therefore, when the Lord heard, he was full of wrath. A fire was kindled against Jacob. His anger rose against Israel because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power.

Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven. And he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels.

He sent them food in abundance. He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens. And by his power, he led out the south wind. He rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas.

He let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings. And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved. But before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them, and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the young men of Israel.

[ 4 : 01 ] Amen. Well, friends, let's make our starting point this afternoon, the first half of verse 22. Because they did not believe in God.

Now, if you pluck that phrase right out of its context, you might think it was a description of a group of atheists, wouldn't you? They did not believe in God.

That's the kind of description that a 21st century atheist might be rather proud to have hung around his neck. He might say, I'm glad that the world recognizes that I'm an unbeliever in God.

But the shock of this phrase in verse 22 is that it's not describing modern atheists. It's describing the people of Israel in the 15th century BC, who a very short time previously had been spectacularly rescued by God at the Red Sea.

By this stage in their story, and Asaph is looking back nearly 500 years from his own time, by this stage in the story, the people of Israel were en route from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land.

[ 5 : 06 ] God was caring for them in the desert. He has just gloriously delivered them from their slavery in Egypt. He has promised them a great future as a great nation in the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey.

And yet here they are in Psalm 78 being described as unbelievers. So how can this be? Well, let's remind ourselves again of what this psalm is about and why it has been written.

Its author, as you see from the title, is Asaph. And Asaph was one of King David's close associates in the 10th century BC. David reigned from about 1000 BC till about 960 BC.

And Asaph was both a musician and a prophet. In fact, no less than 12 of the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms were written by him. So he was a considerable figure in David's court.

And as we saw last week, he wrote this psalm so that the lessons of history, the often painful and hard-won lessons of history, should be passed on to the coming generations.

[ 6 : 10 ] So just as we today try to teach our own children the lessons of more recent history, perhaps 20th century history, the lessons arising from 20th century tyrannies and totalitarianisms, the Holocaust and Hiroshima and apartheid and so on.

In the same way, Asaph is urging his readers in the first few verses of this psalm to pass on to the coming generation, as he puts it in verse 4, the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might, so that, verse 6, the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise to tell them to their children.

To what purpose? So that they, the future generations, should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments, and that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation whose heart was not steadfast and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

So the big lesson of this psalm is going to be, don't be like your forefathers, Israel. Their behavior is not an example to follow.

It's a horrible example to avoid. Now, when we teach our children the lessons of 20th century history, we're only going back a generation or two or three.

[ 7 : 29 ] But here, Asaph is turning the clock back almost 500 years because the history of the Exodus, which took place in the 15th century BC, that is a key period in Old Testament history.

In fact, the psalmists often take their readers back to the Exodus because it has so much to say about the character and trustworthiness of the God of Israel. So, friends, as we tackle this section from verse 9 to verse 31, let's strap on our emotional armor because this passage makes rather uncomfortable reading.

But if we can see what the author is saying to us, it will greatly strengthen us and indeed revive us and give us a determination not to behave like these Israelites who, in the psalmist's analysis, end up behaving like unbelievers, as he puts it in verse 22.

Well, we take our section onto two headings. First of all, we see a failure of memory. And I'm taking that idea from verse 11.

They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them. And you'll see that Asaph has already used that phrase, forgot the works of God back in verse 7.

[ 8 : 46 ] Now, we'll return to this forgetfulness in just a moment. I want to look first at verse 9, the Ephraimites. And I want to ask why Asaph should speak there about the Ephraimites, the Hebrews of the tribe of Ephraim.

Now, you'll remember that Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of Joseph. Manasseh was the older of those two sons. But towards the end of Jacob's life, if you belong to the Tron, you'll

have heard a sermon on this just a few weeks ago, towards the end of Jacob's life, when the whole family has moved down to Egypt, Joseph, who has been the ruler of Egypt for many years, brings his two sons to his now very old father, Jacob, to ask for the patriarchal blessing.

And when Joseph brings his two sons, who would have been young men by this stage, he presented Manasseh, the older boy, to Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim, the younger, to Jacob's left hand, because the idea was that the right hand is the hand of power, and therefore a more powerful blessing will come from the right hand than from the left.

But Jacob, you may remember, crossed his hands over like this, and he blessed Ephraim, the younger boy, with his right hand, and Manasseh, the older boy, with his left.

So Ephraim was singled out for a greater portion of blessing than Manasseh. And when you think of Joseph and his position in relation to his brothers, he was almost the youngest of the lot, but remember how he'd been raised up by God and sent to Egypt to be their savior, and how he was ruler over the whole of Egypt, you realize that Ephraim, as the older son of Joseph, was really in pole position.

[10 : 24] He was the exalted son of the father who had been exalted over all his brothers. So you might expect great things of the tribe of Ephraim. And yet, verses 9, 10, and 11 in the psalm show how the Ephraimites actually behaved subsequently.

But that's not all. Just look onto the end of the psalm, to verse 67, where Asaph is beginning to wind down. It's an important final section here, and he's showing how God chose King David to be the ruler of Israel.

And what did God do? Verse 67, he rejected the tent, which means really the household of Joseph. He did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, which you might have expected, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves.

And then verse 70, he chose David to be his servant, David his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds, to be not only the archetypal king of Israel, but to be the eternal king of Israel as well, in the sense that Jesus was to come from him.

So when Asaph, going back to verse 9, when Asaph puts the Ephraimites at the head of his section on the unbelief and rebelliousness of Israel, he's really saying that the Ephraimites, although you might have thought that they were destined for great things, they actually confounded everybody's expectations and behaved in a way that no one should imitate.

[11 : 48] So the Ephraimites really stand for the whole of Israel. Their behavior and their attitude typifies the whole of God's people and the way they behaved, alas.

So what do we learn of their behavior? The key verses are verses 10 and 11. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law.

They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them. In other words, they showed the most callous indifference to God that it was possible to show.

Look at the three things in verses 10 and 11 that God had given to them. First of all, his covenant, the promise, given first to Abraham and restated to Isaac and Jacob, then developed enormously at Mount Sinai, where the Lord told Moses the whole of the law, which was to enable Israel to live a happy and holy life.

And what did they do? Verse 10 tells us they did not keep the covenant. They spurned it. They thought, we can get on better without it. In our wisdom, we'll lay God's covenant on one side and we'll live life in our own way.

[12 : 57] To do that really is to repeat the sin of Adam, who laid aside God's command. And then secondly, still in verse 10, we have the law. They refused to walk according to God's law.

So you might say they looked at the Ten Commandments and all the other commandments of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, and they said, we can do without this. Isn't there a better way to live?

And they laid God's law to one side, just as Adam had done in the Garden of Eden. And then third, in verse 11, his works and wonders that he had shown them, that he had demonstrated to them before their very eyes.

And beginning at verse 12, Asaph reminds his readers of the wonderful works that God had shown their forefathers. In the sight of their fathers, verse 12. It wasn't just hearsay.

They'd actually seen it. So what had they seen? Well, verse 12, wonders in Egypt in the region of Zoan, which is part of the Nile Delta. They'd seen the plagues.

[13:59] They'd seen the death of the firstborn throughout Egypt. They'd seen the miracle of Passover night. And then verse 13, he divided the sea and let them pass through it and made the water stand up like a heap.

How could anybody forget that? The walls of water standing up to right and left and 600,000 families of Israelites passing through dry foot.

Would that not have been unforgettable? And yet verse 11 tells us that they forgot it. And then verse 14 speaks of God's gracious guidance to the Israelites after they were safely through the Red Sea.

In the daytime, he led them with a cloud and all the night with a fiery light. So the Lord was not only guiding them to show them, as it were, the map or the route. He was reassuring them of his presence with them.

I'm with you. That's what the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire were saying. And then verses 15 and 16 remind us of the times when they were thirsty in the desert and they felt that their life was coming to an end for lack of water.

[15:04] But as verse 15 puts it, the Lord gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. In other words, there was so much water available, it was as though all the subterranean reservoirs of the earth had burst forth.

You need some water, don't you, to slake the thirst of 600,000 families, not to mention all their cattle, sheep and goats. A cow, I believe, can drink about five gallons a day.

And yet, says verse 11, they forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them. So taking verses 10 and 11 together, the covenant, which assured them of God's steadfast commitment to them, the law, which showed them how to live their life in a way that pleased God, and the wonders which demonstrated God's mighty power to save, these three great demonstrations of God's loving purposes to Israel, they spurned them, and they forgot them.

They forgot his works. I do seem very vaguely to remember, sometime a very long time ago, says a sleepy old man.

I seem to remember walking through the sea. Yes, walls of water, standing up to right and left.

There were cattle there, children. Was I at Millport?

[16:26] Perhaps it was Blackpool. I can hardly remember. I don't suppose it was very important. Mabel, darling, can you remember anything? Not really, dear. No, I can't really. I'm so old and tired. Something fiery in the sky at night, a bit like a pillar.

Can't have been anything very significant. Perhaps it was Halley's Comet. They forgot his works, these great things that God had done. Now, friends, God has caused Asaph to record this for our benefit, as well as for the benefit of Asaph's contemporaries.

So what is the lesson for us? The lesson is not to be like these Israelites who forgot God's wonderful works. But we are in danger of having the same failure of memory that they had.

I know that you are in danger of this failure of memory. I know it because I'm in danger of it myself.

And I assume that you're like me because we all belong to the same category of frail humanity.

I think our problem is something like this, that the horizons of our thinking can very quickly shrink down to the most mundane cares and concerns.

[17:33] It's possible, especially later in life, when energy begins to run low, it's possible to think of nothing but our families, our financial affairs, our gardens, and our health.

Even our active membership of the Lord's people can become rather mechanical and lackluster. But we shan't fall into these traps if our memories of the Lord's wonderful works are being constantly refreshed.

Asaph's contemporaries in the 10th century BC had the Exodus to look back to and to remind them of the power and grace of God. And we have the same memories of the Exodus, but we have so much more besides.

We have the much more wonderful rescue that God has achieved for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. How, then, are people like you and me going to fend off what you might call creeping amnesia?

Well, let me suggest three things. First, let's make sure that we meet with the Lord's people as often as we possibly can. If we're still fit enough, let's get to church morning and evening on a Sunday.

[18:40] And let's get to every midweek meeting that we possibly can to read the Bible, to pray, to encourage each other. Secondly, let's expose ourselves to the Bible, if possible, every day.

Now, if you're retired, and I think quite a number here are retired, I guess the pace of life is a little bit steadier than it was some years ago. So here's my suggestion for those who are retired. Every day, have your breakfast, then take your dog to the newsagents, buy your paper, give the paper naturally to the dog so he can carry it home for you.

Then go home, retrieve your paper from the dog's mouth, go to the kitchen, put the kettle on, make yourself a large cup of tea, sit down, open your Bible, and then, now here's the novel suggestion, read it out loud and read it rather loudly.

The problem is that if you read your Bible in silence, you're in danger of nodding off, aren't you? Isn't that right? I know because it happens to me. But if you read your Bible out loud and read it out loud rather dramatically, you're never going to nod off and your mind is going to get caught up with everything you're reading.

And then when the weather gets a bit warmer, as we hope it will within another week or two, go out into the back garden if you have one or sit out on the balcony in the sunshine and still do your loud reading. That will be tremendous because you'll be not only keeping your own memory fresh, you'll be evangelizing your neighbors at the same time.

[ 20 : 02 ] Your neighbor will look over the wall and ask what to do. And you can tell her which part of the great story you're reading and why it's so fascinating. But however we go about it, it's this continual, day after day, vital engagement with the Bible which will ensure that we never forget the wonderful works that God has done.

And surely there's a very strong link between verse 11 and verse 10. Keeping our memories of God's work fresh will inevitably stimulate our desire to keep God's covenant and to walk according to his law.

Lord, we shall say every day, have you done all this for me and for your people? Then of course I want to live a godly life according to your law and your instruction. So there's the first thing Asaph is teaching us to avoid, a failure of memory.

Now second and more briefly, he's teaching us to avoid a failure of trust. And here we'll look at verses 17 to 31. Now the background story to this part of the psalm is told in Numbers chapter 11, which is a very depressing chapter.

It begins with the Israelites complaining, they're wandering in the wilderness, and they're complaining about their food. And here's what they say. Oh, that we had meat to eat.

[ 21 : 22 ] We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing. The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there's nothing at all to look at but this manna.

Now they were conveniently forgetting the slavery and the brick making and the hard labor and the vile treatment that the Israelites, that the Egyptians had given them. All they remembered was the fresh fish and the vegetables.

And they developed a craving for meat. Give us meat, Moses. And Numbers 11 records how Moses looked up and down the camp and heard them all coming to the door flaps of their tents, weeping, blubbering for meat, and fed up with the good, nourishing manna which God was providing every day, which Asaph describes in verses 24 and 5 as the grain of heaven and the bread of angels.

So the Israelites had got themselves into a very dangerous frame of mind. On the one hand, they were not grateful for the good things that God was giving them.

And on the other hand, they were bitterly clamoring for things which really they didn't need. And it's that kind of mindset that Asaph calls unbelief.

[ 22 : 39 ] Look at verse 19. They spoke against God. Can God spread a table in the wilderness? He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?

Now this is why in verse 21, God was angry with them. This is why Asaph says in verse 22 that they didn't believe in God or trust his saving power. Look at that brazen-faced question of verses 19 and 20.

Can God? Can he? It's another way of saying, I don't believe he can. And that kind of question is always regarded in the Bible as an expression of unbelief.

It's rather like Sarah. Do you remember in the book of Genesis when the Lord comes to Abraham and tells Abraham that about a year from now, your wife Sarah is going to have a baby. And Sarah's listening at the flaps of the tent.

And she's 90. And she laughs out loud. And she says, after I'm worn out, shall I have this pleasure? And the Lord said to Abraham, why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?  
[ 23 : 45 ] Sarah was saying, can God do this? I don't believe he can. So what happened in Numbers chapter 11? Well, Asaph tells the story here in the next few verses. The Lord, verse 27, rained meat on them like dust.

Now the meat was quails. Quail is a plump little game bird like a small partridge. And the Israelites picked these up in their hundreds of thousands. And they began to stuff them into their mouths. But, verse 30, before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the young men of Israel.

And Numbers 11 tells of how God sent a plague amongst them. And many died there in the desert. And they were buried at a place called Kibroth Hata'ava, which means graves of craving. Craving. That was their problem. Do you see how Asaph uses the word three times? Verse 18, demanding the food they craved. Verse 29, he gave them what they craved.

[ 24 : 52 ] And verse 30, but before they had satisfied their craving. And this craving for meat and their unbelief are the two sides of the same coin.

They desperately wanted what they did not need and they refused to be satisfied with everything that God had so generously given them. And verse 22 becomes almost an epitaph for them.

They did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power. So, friends, what is the lesson for us? Well, I don't suppose that anybody in this hall today is likely to become an unbeliever in the sense that Richard Dawkins is an unbeliever or Bertrand Russell was half a century ago with an articulated position that denies the existence of God.

But Asaph has a word for us. He's counseling us to take warning from history. These people never crossed the Jordan. They never entered the promised land.

Their wretched existence came to an end in the graves of craving. And yet, they were Israelites. They believed in the existence of God, but they had lost sight of what it meant to trust him.

[ 26 : 10 ] They'd seen with their own eyes the walls of water rising up to right and left. They'd seen the Egyptian army drowning in the Red Sea. They'd tasted the manna, the bread of angels, and they had been wonderfully sustained by it.

But despite everything they had seen, Asaph has to tell us in verse 11 that they forgot the wonderful works of God. And in verse 22, that they did not trust his saving power.

And the message to us today is surely this, that we stand in the same danger. We too can have a failure of memory and a failure of trust. And we have so much more evidence to go on than they had.

We have everything that they had, but so much more besides. And in particular, we have the crowning glory of the record of Jesus, his life, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension.

The Bible's teaching is that all who put their trust in Jesus Christ can be assured that our sins are forgiven and that we will share in the great resurrection, that we will be given in the end glorified bodies like the body of Jesus and we will be with him.

[ 27 : 18 ] So friends, the encouragement to us is to keep going and to keep trusting. Let's keep our memories fresh, full of the wonderful things that God has done, and let's never forsake our trust in his saving power.

Look at verse 22. They did not believe in God and they did not trust his saving power, even though there was so much about God that they knew. There's the warning.

And Asaph is saying to us, don't go that way. There's a real danger, but let's take the warning. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

Dear God, our Father, this is an uncomfortable passage for us to read because we know that these Israelites who died in the desert had seen so much of your saving power and your glorious, wonderful deeds, and yet they forgot and refused to carry on trusting you.

Please, dear Father, have mercy upon us and help us not to go the same way. Help us to learn these lessons from history, we do pray, and help us with our eyes fixed upon the great future to which you are calling us.

[ 28 : 34 ] Keep going as we trust you and our Lord Jesus and the grace of the Holy Spirit to enable us to persevere to the end with joy. And we ask that you'll bless us and our ministry and the witness

that we bear for the name of the Lord Jesus.

And in his name, we ask all these things. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.