

4. The True Shepherd at Last

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 April 2013

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Amen. Well, we're continuing our studies in Psalm 78, in fact concluding our studies in Psalm 78 today. And my passage for this afternoon is really going to be the final few verses.

But I want us to keep up, as it were, with the context of these last few verses. And so I'd like to read from verse 40 through to the end of the psalm, even though we shall concentrate on the final paragraph or so.

So Psalm 78, you'll find it on page 489 of our big Bibles, and I will pick it up at verse 40. The context here is that the children of Israel are wandering in the wilderness.

They've come through the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses. God has brought them safely through, but there has been rebellion and grumbling and difficulty and unbelief again and again.

And that's really what the psalm is about, the unbelief of the Israelites, but the faithfulness of God. So verse 40. How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert.

[1 : 06] They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe, when he performed his signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan.

He turned their rivers to blood so that they could not drink of their streams. He sent among them swarms of flies which devoured them and frogs which destroyed them.

He gave their crops to the destroying locust and the fruit of their labor to the locust. He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamores with frost. He gave over their cattle to the hail and their flocks to thunderbolts.

He let loose on them his burning anger, wrath, indignation and distress, a company of destroying angels. He made a path for his anger.

He did not spare them from death but gave their lives over to the plague. He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the first fruits of their strength in the tents of Ham.

[2 : 07] Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. He led them in safety so that they were not afraid, but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.

And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won. He drove out nations before them. He apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.

Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High and did not keep his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers.

They twisted like a deceitful bow, for they provoked him to anger with their high places. They moved him to jealousy with their idols. When God heard, he was full of wrath and he utterly rejected Israel. He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe.

[3 : 09] He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage. Fire devoured their young men and their young women had no marriage song. Their priests fell by the sword and their widows made no lamentation.

Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a strong man shouting because of wine, and he put his adversaries to rout. He put them to everlasting shame.

He rejected the tent of Joseph. He did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth which he has founded forever.

He chose David, his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds, from following the nursing ewes he brought him, to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance.

With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand. Amen. Well, now the genius of Psalm 78 is that it shows us how God deals with his own people.

[4 : 27] Although this Psalm 78 covers the period of ancient history that runs from the 15th century BC, the century of the Exodus, through to the 10th century BC, so from Moses to David, and although the coming of Christ has altered things wonderfully for the better, as far as we're concerned, the essential way in which God deals with his people has not changed in the 3,000 years that separate us from the time of King David.

So as we come to the end of our studies here in Psalm 78, I hope I can persuade you, particularly from the final few verses of the Psalm, that the position occupied by God's people today, that is the Christian church, is a position of great strength, security, and comfort, because that is the ultimate message of this very striking Psalm.

Now, as I say, our passage for today is just the final few verses from verse 65 onwards to 72, but I want to spend two or three minutes, first of all, reviewing the whole Psalm from the beginning, so that we can see the choppy waters that the writer takes us through before we reach the calm haven of these final six verses.

If you look back to verse 1, you'll see that the writer is a man called Asaph, and Asaph, the books of Chronicles tell us, was one of David's chief musicians, a kind of leader of the music at David's court. So this psalm must have been written either during David's reign, or perhaps just after his reign had ended with his death in about 960 BC. And the purpose of the psalm, as the first eight verses explain clearly, is to teach the reader to learn the lessons of Old Testament history, so as to be able to pass on those lessons to the next generation, and the generations beyond that.

[6 : 19] Why? So that, look at verse 7, the next generation should set their hope in God, unlike their forefathers, who had an ingrained habit of turning away from God to idols, and, still in verse 7, not to forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

Again, the forefathers had so often forgotten his works and had not kept his commandments. And verse 8, that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

So that's the purpose of the 72 verses of this psalm, so that the readers, and that includes us today, should teach our children how to trust God and how to be loyal to him, unlike the forefathers, who were a pack of stubborn rebels.

We then have the central section of the psalm, which runs from verse 9 to verse 64, and those verses take us through the choppy waters, as I've described them.

Though that's really an understatement. It's more like going around Cape Horn in a leaky old steamer. In fact, any sensitive Jew reading these verses would be hanging his head in shame to think that his forefathers had been so deeply unfaithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[7 : 39] But there's a big rebuke that runs through this psalm to the Jews of that time. Now, this central section of the psalm details how faithful the Lord has been to his people.

So, for example, look at verses 12 to 16, how God had rescued them from Egypt. He'd divided the sea. He'd made the water stand up as a wall on either side.

He'd then led them through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. How he'd provided them with abundant water during their wanderings in the thirsty desert.

And yet, how did they respond to all this kindness that God had given them? Verse 17, they sinned. They sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert.

They tested God. Verse 18, they spoke against God. That's always a sign of unbelief, isn't it? To speak against God. How can God provide food for us? Can he give bread and meat to his people?

[8 : 38] Unbelief. God then punished them. And you'll see in verse 31, he killed some of them, which I think you have to say was no more than they deserved. But, verse 32, in spite of all this, they still sinned.

They went on sinning. And so it goes on. God's faithfulness was met again and again by Israel's unfaithfulness. Then later on, when we get to verse 54, we read of how the Lord, after their 40 years of wandering, finally brought them to, notice that phrase there, the holy land in verse 54, the promised land, the land of Canaan.

And in verse 55, he drove out the Canaanite nations, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites, and so on. And he then settled the tribes of Israel in the parcels of the lovely land of Canaan that he had apportioned for the various tribes.

Now, you would think, wouldn't you, after all that, that the Israelites would be trusting him and loving him and wanting to obey him. Now, here they were settled in their beautiful land of Canaan.

They were able to build their houses and their cities and raise their children and farm their land and raise their crops in this land flowing with milk and honey. But, not a bit of it.

[9 : 58] Verse 56, they tested and rebelled against the Most High and did not keep his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers.

They twisted like a deceitful bow. They provoked him to anger with their high places. That's the shrines to Baal and so on up on the hills. They went up there for their worship and they moved him to jealousy with their idols.

They thought that the idols of the Canaanites were preferable to the God who had so spectacularly rescued them and cared for them. We have no compunction, Lord, in thumbing our noses at you.

Just leave us with our lovely idols. We prefer them because, unlike you, they make no moral demands upon us. That surely is where the rub is. To serve the true God is morally demanding and involves submitting to his lordship.

But with idols, the whole thing is turned the other way around. You control them and they serve you. And they wouldn't dream of telling you not to indulge in immorality and licentiousness.

[11 : 04] In fact, they rather encourage it. But, verse 59, Israel is in dire straits here. When God heard about this idolatry, he was full of wrath.

We're now perhaps in about the year 1050 BC when Samuel was a little boy. God was angry, says the psalmist, so much so that, verse 60, he forsook the house of the Lord, the shrine at Shiloh.

He delivered the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines. Remember the story from early 1 Samuel? And the Philistines defeated Israel overwhelmingly. And verses 63 and 64 record the devastation and disgrace that Israel felt.

Their young men, their young soldiers, were devoured by the Philistine's sword. Their young women, as a consequence, were left with no young men to marry. Their priests, Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, and old Eli himself, were killed.

And their widows, end of verse 64, were not even able to weep and wail and lament. In fact, in the story, Phinehas's widow gives birth to a baby boy when she hears that her husband has died and the Ark of God has been captured.

[12 : 14] And she dies in childbirth. And with her dying breath, she says, this baby is going to be called Ichabod. The glory has departed. So in the words of verse 59, it looked as though God had indeed utterly rejected Israel.

So verse 64 brings us to a very low point in Israel's fortunes. Now, would it not have been only reasonable for God to tear up the covenant at this stage, to wash his hands totally of Project Israel? Wouldn't it have been sensible, perhaps, for God to start again with a new nation? He could have gone to New Zealand, couldn't he? And picked those tall, athletic Maoris who play rugby so well. He could have come to Scotland. He might have selected the McDonald's and the McGregors and the McLeans. Possibly even the McLeods. But the final verses of the psalm tell us that although he did reject Israel briefly, and he did briefly give them over to the consequences of their folly, he very quickly showed them that he had not finished with them.

Look at verses 65 and 66. They show God coming quickly, almost violently, to the rescue of his people. Verse 65, the Lord awoke from sleep like a strong man shouting because of wine.

[13 : 39] That's not an endorsement of drunkenness. It's making the point that when the Lord came to Israel's rescue, he did so in a terrifying manner. Now, the Philistines, again, you remember this from early 1 Samuel, they very quickly discovered that it was a curse, not a blessing, to have the captured Ark of God in their midst.

They were quickly routed. Their fish god, Dagon, do you remember, fell over prostrate and dismembered before the Ark of the Covenant when the Philistines were rash enough to put the Ark in Dagon's temple.

That's really what verse 66 is referring to. He put his adversaries to rout and to everlasting shame. And then what happened? Well, this brings us to the final delightful section of the psalm.

God quickly showed the undeserving Israelites that he had not torn up his covenant with them. On the contrary, he had wonderful ongoing plans to look after them and provide for their care and their security.

And in these final six verses of the psalm, he shows them two wonderful provisions. First, a lasting city in verses 67, 8, and 9.

[14:50] And secondly, a lasting monarchy in verses 70, 71, and 72. So we'll look at these two in turn. First of all, the lasting city verses 67 to 69.

Now the hill country of Ephraim lies about 20 miles to the north of Jerusalem. And that's where the half tribe of Ephraim had settled. And you may remember that Ephraim was the younger of Joseph's two sons.

But he'd been promoted in seniority over his older brother, Manasseh, when the two boys were blessed by their dying grandfather, Jacob. You may remember the story where Joseph brings the two young men or boys to old Jacob.

and instead of blessing them like this, he crosses his hands over so that his right hand, conferring the greater blessing, rests on the head of the younger boy and his left hand on the head of the older.

So Ephraim became the favored son of Joseph who was himself a favored son. But so often in Scripture, God shows himself to be not bound by human expectations.

[15:57] We might have expected God to choose a city in Ephraim's territory to be the holy city. But verse 67 tells us that God rejected the tent or the household of Joseph, which he had favored in the past.

And he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, which in the past had been selected for blessing. Instead, he chose the tribe of Judah, which had not distinguished itself in recent centuries with any special acts of courage or nobility.

But then God is like that. If he chooses the likes of you and me, it's perhaps no surprise that he should choose the undistinguished tribe of Judah so as to find a site for his city and his temple. And that's what verse 68 is telling us. But he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves. And what did he do with this beloved mountain?

Well, he built, verse 69, his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth which he has founded forever. Now, the language of that verse, verse 69, suggests wonderful strength and permanence.

[17:07] God's sanctuary, the site of his temple and his royal city, is in verse 69 likened to both the heavens and the earth. The heavens are the high heavens, awesome in their majesty, almost without a ceiling.

And the earth is founded forever. So the first half of verse 69 takes us up and up and the second half of the verse takes us down and down.

This is one strong city. It stretches upwards and downwards and nothing is going to disturb it or uproot it. Now, do the Israelites, after these centuries of rebellion and unbelief and idolatry, do they deserve a capital city like this?

Of course not. But God gives it to them. And you and I, if we're Christians, we are grafted into the stock of Israel. Do you and I deserve to belong to an eternal city like the New Jerusalem, of which this city in Psalm 78 is just a foretaste?

Of course we don't. But if you are a Christian, you belong to God's city. And one day, to your amazement and your joy, you will be walking its streets and dancing in its squares.

[18:26] Forget Glasgow. Definitely forget Edinburgh. This one is the only city worth belonging to. Do you remember, again, John Newton's words?

Savior, since of Zion's city I through grace a member am. Let the world deride or pity I will glory in thy name. Fading is the worldling's pleasure.

All his boasted pomp and show. Solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know. And these three verses in Psalm 78 help to build our confidence in the city to which we really belong if we belong to Christ.

And remember, at the center of the city of Jerusalem there was a temple in which stood an altar, the place where animals were sacrificed and blood and blood was shed to speak of forgiveness and atonement.

And then later on, many centuries later, outside the city walls was a greater altar and a greater sacrifice which assures everyone who trusts in Christ of a full atonement and the complete full forgiveness of every sin.

[19:36] Every last sin. So this is the lasting city given by grace as the eternal home of those who do not deserve it.

Now secondly, there's a lasting monarchy in verses 70 to 72. And again, the choice here is so surprising. Remember how David was chosen?

Think back again to 1 Samuel. Have you no more sons? Said the prophet Samuel to Jesse. Jesse, having just inspected seven of his sons.

Have you no more sons? You would think that seven sons would be quite enough for any man and his wife to have brought into the world. But the question was asked. And Jesse replied, well, yes, there is one more.

He's the youngest, but he's out feeding the sheep. In other words, he's a pretty insignificant person. Bring him, said the prophet. No one will sit down to dinner until he comes. So David was sent for, probably still a teenage boy, and there he comes.

[20 : 36] And as verses 70 and 71 put it, God chose David, his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds. From following the nursing ewes, he brought him to shepherd Jacob, his people, Israel, his inheritance.

So the elementary lessons that he had learned in shepherding out on the hills with the sheep, he was then able to build on as he learned to shepherd the people of God.

He soon learned, I guess, that it was harder to shepherd men and women than to shepherd ewes and lambs. But by the grace of God, he did it. And as verse 72 puts it, with upright heart, he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.

Now, friends, just as the old city of Zion prefigures the new Jerusalem, so this figure of David, the rather flawed shepherd, prefigures the figure of Jesus, the flawless shepherd of his people.

Because he too, in the words of verse 72, shepherds his people today with upright hand, upright heart, and guides them with his skillful hand. But let me ask this question, which may be of real importance to some here.

[21 : 52] Do you find attractive the idea of being in the flock of Jesus, the great and good shepherd? Or do you prefer to see yourself as a lone and self-confident sheep who grazes by itself and sorts out its own problems?

Are you an integrated sheep or are you a sheep on the loose? Now, while you're thinking about that question, let me ask another. Why do we need a shepherd?

A shepherd is to the sheep as a king is to his people. Sheep need a shepherd to rule them and people need a king to rule us because we are, by nature, all of us, anarchists.

Just look at that last phrase of the psalm. We need to be guided by a skillful hand, a strong as well as a skillful hand, because if we're not guided like that, we get into deep trouble and we know it.

In fact, in the shocking but true words of Jesus, we will then be at the mercy of our hearts. For out of our hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.

[23 : 07] Would you rather be ruled by the good shepherd or ruled by evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.

The lone sheep who sits loose to the flock and its shepherd will in the end be ruled by those things that come out of the heart of man.

And looking back over this psalm, isn't God extraordinarily good and kind to persevere with Israel? Psalm 78 is saying, Israel did little but grumble and complain and rebel and turn to unbelief and idolatry.

But although God was angry with them and punished them, he did not cast them off and he did not tear up his covenant with them. On the contrary, he provided them with a lasting city and a lasting monarchy.

And his ways of dealing with Old Testament Israel are his ways with us. Like the Israelites of old, we deserve nothing from God, but he has had extraordinary mercy on every person who is here today.

[24 : 25] To have a shepherd like Jesus to guide us and rule us is the only thing that we need in the end. If he is your shepherd, then you are blessed.

if he is not yet your shepherd, you need to come to him. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

with upright heart, he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.

How much more skillful, Lord Jesus, is your hand even than the hand of King David, your servant? And we thank you so much that so many of us here have gladly put ourselves under your care and

your guidance and your ruling.

And we pray that you will bless us in the future as you have blessed us in the past and help us to walk in your ways and not to be like the Israelites of old who so often rebelled and tested you and provoked you.

[25 : 32] and we pray for any here this afternoon who have not yet gladly submitted to your loving rule and we pray that you will have mercy upon them and draw them to yourself so that they too with us might enjoy not only your rule in this life but your presence and the glory and joy of heaven in the world to come.

And we ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.