

3. When God becomes Hostile

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let's turn to Psalm 78. We have a little series of four talks. This is the third today, and then the last one is due to be next week.

Four talks on this long psalm. And I want to read a fairly large section of it, verses 32 to 64, in just a moment. But let me say a word or two first by way of introduction, so as to help us to make a bit more sense of what is going on here.

Now, the author of this psalm, as you'll see from the title verse, was a man called Asaph. And Asaph was a contemporary of King David. And in this long psalm, which is the second longest in the book of Psalms, he is reviewing a great sweep of Israel's history, right from the time of the Exodus in the 15th century B.C. through to his own day, King David's day, in the 10th century B.C.

Though most of the history that he looks at dates from the earlier part of that period, the Exodus, the 40 years wandering in the wilderness, the entry into the land of Canaan, which is touched on briefly.

And there's also a reference in verses 58 to 64 of the time when Samuel was a little boy, in the 11th century B.C., when the Ark of God was captured by the Philistines, and for a while Israel was in dire straits.

[1 : 22] Now, in this psalm, Asaph is not simply recording bare historical facts. He's interpreting history for the reader.

So he's helping the reader to understand what was really going on from God's point of view, what was going on in terms of the relationship between Israel and God. Now, we've had a very interesting illustration of how to interpret history just over the last few days, since the death of Lady Thatcher.

And you'll have been reading your papers and listening to the radio broadcasts, and the history of her premiership has been variously interpreted. Some people saying it was the most wonderful 10 or 11 years.

Others saying that it was a terrible 10 years or so. History, as we know, can be very variously interpreted. Now, here in Psalm 78, Asaph, inspired by God, taught by God, is giving us a God-given and therefore true interpretation of the history of Israel from Moses through to King David.

And as I read these verses for today, do notice the ups and downs. There are actually far more downs than ups. But just notice how the Israelites relate to God, and also how God responds to them and how he treats them in return.

[2 : 35] Most of it makes pretty unhappy reading. But it's here in the Bible to help people like us not to make the same kind of mistakes in our relationship to God as the Israelites made all those years ago.

So let me read from verse 32 to 64. In spite of all this, they still sinned. Despite his wonders, they did not believe.

So he made their days vanish like a breath and their years in terror. When he killed them, they sought him. They repented and sought God earnestly. They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer.

But they flattered him with their mouths. They lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him. They were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them.

He restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again.

[3 : 44] How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert. 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.

[4 : 50] 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 God 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.

He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage. Now that last verse, verse 64, refers to the death of Eli's worthless sons.

[6 : 03] Do you remember that time? Hophni and Phinehas. And you may remember that Phinehas' wife is just about to give birth to a baby son. And she hears of the capture of the ark and the death of her husband.

And as she dies, she names him Ichabod. The glory has departed. That's really what those last two or three verses are about. Well, let's look at this whole section now by asking two questions about it.

First, and I want to spend most of my time on this first question, how do God's people behave? And then secondly, how does God respond to their behavior?

In looking at this first question, how do God's people behave, we'll see something of the traps that God's people can fall into in any generation. And as we look at the second question about God's response, we'll learn something of his character and the way in which he deals with his people.

So first of all, how do God's people behave? The short answer is badly. But we've got to go a bit further than that and look at the details. Because all these details are given to us so as to educate our understanding of the kind of things that people like us are capable of.

[7 : 14] Now, perhaps the key word used by Asaph of the Israelites is that they tested God. This was the heart of their problem. They tested God. That word comes first in verse 18.

They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. We read it again in verse 41. They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

And it comes again in verse 56. Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies. Now, this testing is not the kind of testing that school examiners do when they sit down to plan an exam paper, which is going to test the knowledge of the school pupils.

No. This is the kind of testing that a naughty child will put its parents through by being disobedient. You know the scenario. The child does something that he knows is wrong and the parent says, you're testing my patience.

Don't push me any further or you'll regret it. Or perhaps it's the testing that a rebellious school pupil throws at a teacher so as to test that teacher's strength and resolve.

[8 : 25] The pupil thinks, I bet this teacher is too weak to punish me. I'll push as hard as I can and I'll see what I can get away with. Now, here in Psalm 78, it is a bare-faced, in-your-face testing.

It's open rebellion. Look again at verse 41. They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel, provoked him to anger, provoked him to the point where he began to apply discipline and punishment.

Now, there's a whole cluster of verbs that Asaph uses and these verbs tell us what this testing of God really looked like. So let's look at some of these to build up our idea of the testing.

Verse 32. They sinned. They did not believe. Which means they did not believe that God was willing or able to provide for them in the wilderness.

And they didn't believe that he was able to bring them safely into the promised land. They didn't believe, in other words, that he would do what he said he would do. Now, unbelief in the Bible is, generally speaking, not atheism.

[9 : 37] Unbelief in the Bible is the unwillingness to believe that God will do what he has promised. Unbelief says, either, I don't believe that God will bless me, or it says, I don't believe that God will judge me.

So what do the people do next in verses 33 to 37? Well, God responds to the unbelief of verse 32 by killing some of them.

And that is such a jolt to them that they begin, in verse 34, to seek him. And in verse 35, to remember that God was their rock of safety, after all, and their redeemer.

But verses 36 and 37 show that their so-called repentance was very shallow and short-lived. The truth was they were lying to him, and their hearts were neither steadfast nor faithful.

So it was a kind of religious pretense. Here we are, Lord, look at us, faithful and true. But it was a sham. The reality was, as verse 40 puts it, that they rebelled against him and grieved him.

[10 : 41] Verse 41, they tested and provoked him. And verse 42, they did not remember his power. Now, what displays of power did they forget?

Well, the next section from verse 43 to verse 55 tells us. What they forgot, the power they forgot, was the signs and marvels that God had performed for them in Egypt, just before he brought them out of their slavery.

So Asaph runs through some of these things. Verse 44, he turned the river Nile to blood. You would think, wouldn't you, that an incident like that would stick in their memory. But apparently it didn't.

Then he sent flies, frogs, locusts, hail, frost, and thunderbolts. If anybody here has been struck by a thunderbolt while wandering along the shores of Loch Lomond, I rather suspect that you would remember that until your dying day.

But the Israelites forgot these acts of power. Verse 51 suggests that they even forgot the events of Passover night, when every Egyptian household was wailing because their firstborn sons had been struck down in the night.

[11 : 50] Then the next few verses record the crossing of the Red Sea, the 40 years wandering in the wilderness, their arrival in the Holy Land, the land of Canaan, and the settling of the Israelite tribes in the Promised Land, as they dispossessed the Amorites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

God had done all these amazing and spectacular things for them, and yet they seem to have forgotten all about it. But that's not all.

I'm afraid the next few verses tell us that there was more. Verse 56, again, testing and rebelling and disobedience. Verse 57, they turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers.

Just notice that phrase, like their forefathers. There was form in the people of Israel. There was an ongoing problem of testing God. And verse 57 speaks of them twisting like a deceitful bow.

Now, I've never pulled a bow in anger. Perhaps some of you are archers. But I believe that the idea is this, that a bow that is made of the right kind of wood, properly made, when the tension is put on it and the string is drawn back, that bow will stay straight.

[13 : 03] But if the bow is badly made of the wrong kind of wood, when the tension is put on, the bow twists and the arrow flies off in the wrong direction. Now, verse 58 explains their further provocative behavior.

Once they had settled in the promised land, they began to worship idols, the gods of the Canaanites. Now, friends, Asaph, the author, has no intention that we should read this history and remain unmoved by it.

He means to shock us. He means to make us respond by saying, how could the Israelites behave like this? Here was God being consistently faithful and kind to them.

And yet they tested him again and again in this bare-faced, rebellious fashion. And Asaph is wanting his readers, including us in our generation, to realize that we too can behave just like this if we don't guard ourselves.

We too, in the words of verse 57, are capable of acting treacherously and twisting like a deceitful bow. It's interesting how the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, picks up exactly the same line that Asaph is following.

[14 : 18] And he writes in a mode of warning to the Corinthian Christians. He refers to exactly this same period of ancient Israelite history, and he mentions some of the more notorious things that the Israelites did as they tested God.

He mentions episodes of idolatry and sexual immorality and grumbling, which led to many of the Israelites being cut down by God in the desert. And then Paul says to the Corinthians, 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.

Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall. So Paul himself is teaching us to read our Old Testament history with great care and to be sure that we learn the lessons that it teaches, lest we too should treat God in a cavalier fashion and not take him seriously.

Now, in a few moments, we'll come to what Asaph says about God's response to this provocative and unbelieving behavior. But let me first suggest what seems to me perhaps the main way in which people in our generation can imitate the unbelief and testing of God that our Israelite forefathers fell into.

It's really all to do with whether we are prepared, whether we're willing to believe that God will really do as he says. That's the issue here.

[15 : 46] I'm not just thinking here of churches or individual Christians. I'm thinking of whole nations as well. When a nation or a society embraces the Bible as the truth and lives by it, that society grows strong.

And its people will become strong in two main ways, in family life and in the workplace. So in family life, where the Bible is embraced and trusted, marriage becomes honored, sexual immorality is frowned on, and children and their parents and the wider family take responsibility for each other, love each other, and care for each other.

So society becomes undergirded by strong, healthy domestic relationships. And also in the workplace, work is taken seriously and is undertaken willingly and with real commitment.

Because those who work can see that their work is contributing something much larger than just to their own personal pay packet. They're working for the whole community. They can see what contribution they're making.

So whether they're working in offices or shipyards or schools or working on the land, they can see that their work is bringing blessing to the whole nation. But the society that has grown strong as it embraces the Bible and loves the Bible grows weak as it ceases to believe the Bible.

[17 : 08] And this is surely what we're witnessing in our own country today. Family life and marriage are being profoundly undermined and hollowed out. And we know that this is the main cause for the rising mental ill health and personal disintegration that we find so widespread in society.

And in the workplace, a wholesome work ethic is being replaced by a view of work that is narrowed down to being simply a means to an end. The end being to get enough money in one's own pocket to fuel my weekend with various pleasures.

And the poor government, our government, having also lost faith in the Bible, thrashes around in the belief that society's ills can be put right, that society's morale and mental strength and health can be restored by endless acts of legislation.

Now, interestingly, I don't know whether you saw Mrs. Thatcher's funeral an hour or two ago. I was looking at it, but it was she who said, I think in 1988, possibly in that speech in Edinburgh, she said this, it is difficult to imagine that anything other than Christianity is likely to resupply most people in the West with the virtues necessary to remoralize society.

Now, it seems to me you don't have to share her party political views to agree with that. But she was saying there that it's only the power of the Bible that can restore society. I do wish our government today would believe that as well.

[18 : 46] But it's precisely the power of the Bible and the nation's commitment to it which has been leeching out of our society since roughly the middle of the 19th century.

When various church leaders and theologians, the fathers of what we would call today liberal theology, began to question the believability, the trustworthiness of the Bible.

So they began to ask questions like this. Is it possible that Jesus really walked on the surface of the sea and it held him up? We can't believe that.

Is it really possible that Jesus fed 5,000 hungry men with the contents of a little boy's picnic satchel? Some of you will remember George Gershwin's musical Porgy and Bess, which was a big hit in America, I think in this country too, about 60 or 70 years ago.

And there's a song in that show which comes really straight out of the handbook of liberal theology. The song is called It Ain't Necessarily So. Bob, you could probably play it for it.

[19 : 48] I'm not asking you to, but I'm sure you know it. And this song, the strap line goes like this. The things you are liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so.

You can't really believe the Bible. One verse says this. Now Jonah, he lived in a whale. Yes, Jonah, he lived in a whale. Now he made his homin that fish's abdomen.

Yes, Jonah, he lived in a whale. And the verse goes on to poke fun at the idea that Jonah could possibly have domiciled himself in the belly of a great fish for three days and survived. Now this failure to believe the truth of God's words, that was precisely the problem that the Israelites in Moses' day were facing.

Liberal theology did not begin in the 19th century AD. There was plenty of it around in the 15th century BC. And it's precisely the thing that Asaph is telling his readers not to embrace.

He's saying to his contemporaries in David's day, don't be like your forefathers who lost their trust in God and in his words. Of course, this wasn't a problem that made its first appearance in Moses' day.

[21 : 04] It was a problem that first appeared in the Garden of Eden, when a most attractive and cultivated voice said in Eve's ear, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

Oh dear, dear, we mustn't take God's words quite at their face value. The fundamental element in the devil's captivating of the human race is his insinuating suggestion that God's words cannot be trusted.

Now to return to Psalm 78, this is the problem that Asaph is putting his finger on right throughout this Psalm. Verse 10, they did not keep God's covenant.

Verse 17, they rebelled against him. Verse 22, they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power. They didn't really believe that he had the power to save them.

Verse 32, despite his wonders, they did not believe. Verse 56, they tested and rebelled against him. Verse 57, they turned away and twisted like a deceitful bow.

[22 : 18] Now in our case, the whole problem resolves itself into two basic questions and they're both questions about the future. First, are we willing to believe what God says about salvation?

He promises, promises Christians eternal life and a wonderful future in the new creation. Are we willing to believe his promise and stake everything upon it?

Or, as our life begins to dwindle and decline towards its end, are we going to believe that there is nothing beyond the grave? Secondly, are we willing to believe what God says about judgment?

He promises in the Bible that everything is going to be brought to a just judgment at the end. And if we believe that, it's going to bring us great comfort. Comfort to know that the world's evils will finally be brought to account.

Vengeance belongs to God and he will judge justly in the end. He will deal justly in the end with everything that human judicial processes have not been able to cope with.

[23 : 28] So the question that Asaph raises is, are we willing to believe that God will do everything that he says he will do in terms of salvation and judgment?

Well, let me just take a final moment to ask how God responds to the unbelieving behavior of the Israelites here in Psalm 78. Look at verses 37 and 38.

37 and 8. Their heart was not steadfast toward him. They were not faithful to his covenant. Now here's the response. Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them.

He restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath. In other words, he was angry with them, but his anger was restrained.

Why? Verse 39 tells us, the next verse, he remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again. In other words, he remembered their frailty. Yes, in his anger, he killed some of them.

[24 : 33] Look back to verse 31, just after the episode of the quails in the desert. The anger of God rose against them and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the young men of Israel, which was no more than they deserved.

And there's a stronger and grimmer anger that comes later in verses 58 and 59, after they'd colonized the land of Canaan and they had turned to worship the idols of the Canaanites.

So verse 58, they provoked him to anger with their high places. They moved him to jealousy with their idols. When God heard of this, he was full of wrath and he utterly rejected Israel.

Now verse 59, when you read that, at first sight, it suggests that God tore up the covenant and had nothing more to do with Israel. But that's not what Asaph means.

Yes, Israel was brought to a terribly low point. The ark of God was captured by the Philistines. The Philistines triumphed. Israel was in utter disgrace, but not forever.

[25 : 32] The Lord's purposes and plans had not come unstuck. And Asaph is careful to end his psalm by telling his readers of God's kindness in choosing a faithful shepherd for them in the person of David.

And we'll look at that closing section next week. God still intended to exercise his kingly rule over his flock as he does to this day through David's son, our Lord Jesus.

So friends, let's be very thoughtful about God's response. Unbelief in those who are called by his name makes God angry.

It angers him, it provokes God, it grieves God to see whether it's individuals or nations refusing to recognize the authority and the truth of the Bible. But God's purposes continue.

In his compassion, he will preserve his people, he will rule them, and will continue to rule them through the shepherdly care of his anointed king. The challenge to us, finally, is the challenge of whether we will believe the words of God or whether we will turn away from God as so many of Moses' contemporaries did.

[26 : 47] Think of the congregations to which you belong. Every congregation, in the end, will be characterized either by its submission to the Bible or by its denial of the Bible.

and every last individual one of us as well, in the end, will either believe the words of God or we will allow them to slip out of our grasp.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. God of Israel, you're also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And how we thank you that in the end, the full weight of your anger against human rebellion was taken by him in our place on the cross.

And how we thank you that you have opened the door of the kingdom of heaven to all who are prepared to throw in their lot with the Lord Jesus. give us grace, dear Father, because of our frailty and our weakness.

[28 : 00] Give us grace not simply to accept your words but to believe them and to stake everything upon them as we look to the great future. Your words about salvation and your words about judgment.

And we pray that each one of us here in the end will prove to be one who belongs to you and who loves you and who is enabled by your grace to serve you. And we ask it in Jesus Christ's name.

Amen.