PSALM 78: REMEMBERING WHAT GOD HAS DONE

This morning we begin a study in the Book of Psalms. The Hebrew people called it the Book of Praises. “Psalms” are songs sung to musical accompaniment (normally stringed instruments). Unfortunately long since lost to us are the original tunes and rhythms by which the psalms were sung by the people. Just a brief overview of how the Book of Psalms is arranged. It is not organized by subject, but rather by when the psalms were compiled. There are five different “books” of psalms. Book 1 (Psalms 1-41) contains the original psalms, most of them written by David (37 of the 41) and collected during David’s reign. Book 2 (Psalms 42-72) contains psalms collected during the time of Solomon, again mostly written by David (18 of the 31). Book 3 (Psalms 73-89) is a collection of psalms compiled during Judah’s exile in Babylon, with most written by Asaph and Korah. We will be looking at Psalm 78 today, which was written by Asaph (more on him in a minute). Book 4 (Psalms 90-106) is also dated from Judah’s exile, but most of the contributors are anonymous. Book 5 (Psalms 107-150) contains the latest additions of psalms compiled after the Jew’s returned from captivity. Asaph, whom we are told wrote Psalm 78 was an outstanding musician in the time of King David. He was appointed minister of music in the tabernacle worship in Jerusalem. Korah would have been his choir director. So Asaph and Korah were worship leaders during David’s and Solomon’s reigns.

Psalm 78 begins: “A Maskil of Asaph.” Asaph is the writer of this psalm. A maskil is simply a poem intended to instruct or guide (13 of these are identified specifically in the Psalms). The idea then is to reflect on what truths you have been told.

READ Psalm 78:1-4.

God addresses His covenant people thru Asaph. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Asaph writes these words to God’s people in King David’s time. Asaph calls his readers to pay attention. He’s not going to tell them anything new. These are things they’ve heard before from their fathers, mothers, and grandparents. They may have been told these same things in the forms of parables, stories, riddles or mysteries, but they have heard them before. And it’s so important that they hear them again – “the glorious deeds of the LORD, and His might, and the wonders that He has done.”

READ Psalm 78:5-8

God intended for His people to experience His wonderful works, to learn His law, His testimony, His will, His love for them and to trust Him and obey Him so that, in turn, He could bless them. But not only that, God wanted for them to then pass what they had learned and experienced about Him on to their children. And for their children to then pass what they had learned and experienced on to their children, and so on, and so on. Training children to follow the Lord was the responsibility of the parents in the Old Testament, and it still is today. If we were to take the attitude, “well, I will just let my kids decide for themselves what they want to believe,” then those children will very likely end up going down the broad path of destruction that the world follows, away from God. So it’s our job as Christian parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts to teach our children, those whom God has entrusted to our care, the truth, to lead them to know and to fear God. Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers (parents), do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” I like how the KJV puts it”: “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

Now we know the history of the nation of Israel. They were not a faithful and obedient people. In fact in these verses Asaph characterizes them as “a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was NOT steadfast, whose spirit was NOT faithful to God.” Asaph in this psalm is saying, “Don’t be like them!” Learn from the mistakes of the past. There is saying that goes like this: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” We must learn from the past – the positive, what God has done for us, what we did right as well as the negative, our personal failures and the failure of our fallen humanity in general to be what God intended us to be. [much of the Bible is history]

And right off the bat Asaph provides an example of what happens if we don’t pass the truth about God on to our children… READ Psalm 78:9-11. Who were the Ephraimites? Descendants of Ephraim, who was the son of Joseph. The failure here of the Ephraimites to not trust God and keep His covenant was rooted in their forgetfulness. Here Asaph mentions that the Ephraimites were defeated in battle (“turned back”). I believe the defeat Asaph is referring to here was an incident recorded in 1 Sam 4 when the Ark was captured by the Philistines in the battle of Aphek. Of course the Ark at that time was housed at Shiloh which was in Ephraimite territory so it would have been the Ephraimites who protected it. Their religion had become so shallow that they were trusting in the Ark to save them rather than in God Himself. And because of this they were routed by the Philistines. Joseph 🡪 Ephraim 🡪 Ephraimites. It was a slow steady decline from complete trust in God to empty religion. Why? Because they forgot the works of God. They had begun to trust in their own might and in their religious façade rather than to depend totally on God. So Asaph simply provides a case in point about what can happen over several generations if the children are not reminded about the goodness and greatness and faithfulness of their God.

Comment on verse 12-31…

God delivered Israel out of Egypt. He brought His people safely thru Red Sea and allowed them to escape the Egyptian army. He led them by a cloud during the day and pillar of fire by night. He provided water for His people out of the rocks in the wilderness. He actually did this twice (Exo 17 and Num 20). He provided manna (“bread of the angels”). He provided meat in the form of quail. And it wasn’t just to satisfy their hunger pangs, the people were filled. They had an abundance. And how did the covenant people of Israel respond to God’s goodness to them?

READ Psalm 78:32-40

So as the people of Israel traveled from Egypt to the Promised Land God guided them, protected them, provided for their physical needs and in turn the people grumbled, griped and complained constantly. It says in v 40 that they “grieved Him.” They were not grateful to be free from Egyptian bondage. They were not a thankful people. “They did not believe,” v 32 tells us. So God judged them harshly and some died on the way to the land of promise. Remember when Moses didn’t come down from Mount Sinai the people had Aaron make them an idol, a golden calf. God knew about this and this is what He told Moses: “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” God tells Moses that He is going to destroy the nation for their idolatry and start over with Moses. But we know God didn’t do that, did He? And why not? Because Moses interceded on behalf of the people and God changed His mind. That is a great lesson about prayer. God relented and spared the nation but 3000 men were put to death for their part in the golden calf incident. And in addition to that God sent a plague upon the people. V 34 says “they repented and sought God earnestly.” V 35 says, “They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer. Happy ending, right? Not hardly. V 36, “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.” God’s people had a serious spiritual problem. Their hearts were not right. And there were consequences for their sins. But eventually the vast majority of the people, because of God’s faithfulness and grace (they didn’t deserve any of the good things God gave them) arrived at the entrance to the Promised Land – Kadesh Barnea.

Now God’s plan was that His people, having seen firsthand the mighty acts of God against Israel’s enemies, having been told time and again that this was the land that God had promised to give them – that they would now go in and take possession of the land. That was God’s plan for His people. But you know the story. They sent the spies in and when they brought back their report to Moses and here’s what they said… Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, ‘Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.’ Then the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.’ So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, ‘The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (giants)… and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.’” (Num 13:30-33). Well you know what happened next. God judged them for their unbelief.

READ Psalm 78:41-42

The people tested the patience of God time and time again. It all came to a head with the bad report from the spies. And God had had enough. Well you know what happened… God sent the people back out into the wilderness to roam about until all of that faithless generation, all the men 20 years of age and older, except for Joshua and Caleb, died. That would take 40 years. Along the way over 600,000 corpses fell by the wayside, and that’s just the number of the men not counting women and children. [Comment on the harsh environment of the wilderness wanderings]. God’s intention was to have His people go directly from Egypt to the land of Canaan and take possession of the land that He would give them. But because of their lack of faith in God, they were forced to wander in the harsh wilderness environment for 40 years. What a tragic story!

Asaph for now goes back in history, back to when Israel was still living in Egypt and from verses 43-51 he recounts God’s faithfulness to His people during their sojourn in Egypt. You know the story. Pharaoh (who knew not Joseph) decides that the Hebrew people were a threat to national security and made them slaves of the Egyptian people. He placed cruel taskmasters over them and God’s people suffered terribly. So the people cried out to God and God heard their cry. He raised up a national deliverer in the person of Moses. And Moses along with his brother Aaron went to confront Pharaoh and told him, “Thus says the Lord, let My people go!” Pharaoh, of course, hardened his heart and said “no way” and so God sent a series of plagues on the land of Egypt. And that’s what Asaph talks about in verses 43-51. The last plague, of course, was the death of the firstborn which is what finally prompts Pharaoh to let the people leave Egypt. So not only did God’s people have all those experiences with God on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land that we just talked about. They had the experience of God’s faithfulness to them while they were in Egypt. Read Exodus Chapters 7 thru 12 about all those plagues. Do you realize that for each one, God’s hand was over the land of Goshen where the people of Israel resided? While the Egyptian people were experiencing all those terrible plagues – water to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts and darkness – the land of Goshen was spared. God protected His people. And they knew it! God even provided them a way to escape the death of the firstborn – told them to place the blood of a sacrificial lamb over the doorposts of their homes. Thus the Passover celebration, to remember God’s mercy as He passed over their homes and did not kill their firstborn.

So that group we left wandering around in the wilderness knew all of that – but somehow they had forgotten it! Well, again, we know the story. God eventually is faithful to His covenant people and they go back and the second time they take possession of the land. READ Psalm 78:52-55

Now the people of Israel, the second generation are in the Promised Land. Happy ending, right? No, again there was a problem and it too was a spiritual problem – they did not drive out all the inhabitants of the land like God had told them to do. Instead they allowed some of the Canaanite peoples to remain there. And the result was what God had warned them about – false gods. Idolatry became a major problem in Israel.

READ Psalm 78:56-58

So this next generation didn’t do any better than their fathers, did they? Again we know the story. Listen to the following exchange between Joshua and the people of Israel… Then Joshua said to the people, “You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you.” The people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.” Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” “Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and we will obey His voice.” (Joshua 24:19-24)

Well, did the people of Israel obey God and serve Him only like they promised they would do? You don’t have to wait very long to find out. The answer comes just two chapters later in Judges Chapter 2… “Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger.” (Judges 2:11-12) That’s what Asaph said in v 58 of our text.

And from verses 59-69 Asaph recounts God’s faithfulness to His faithless people during the period of the Judges. The cycle repeated itself over and over again… the people rejected God, God sent foreign oppressors, the people cried to God to save them, God sent a deliverer, a time of peace and prosperity ensued, then the people reject God again. By the time we get to 1 Samuel the priesthood was corrupt, the religion of the people was empty. God judged Eli and and his sons, killed them and raised up Samuel who leads the nation in spiritual revival. Which brings us to Asaph’s time and the rule of the shepherd boy turned king -- David.

Thus, Asaph reminds the Jewish people of the pure goodness of God, the persistent ingratitude and rebellion of God’s people, and the faithful and prevailing grace of God. All recounted in a snapshot of Israel’s history, 450 years of God’s faithfulness to His people, from the time of Egyptian bondage to King David’s reign. How could this people so blessed by God thru the years not love and be faithful to Him?

Well that may be the end of Psalm 78, but it’s certainly not the end of the story, is it? We, living in 2017 know so much more about God than Asaph knew. We have the whole canon of scripture available to us telling of God’s goodness and faithfulness thru the centuries.

David sins, confesses, repents, is punished (son dies and Absalom rebels), but God is faithful and He restores David’s kingdom.

Solomon begins to reign, God gives him great wisdom and riches, despite Solomon’s heart being turned away from the Lord because of his love of women, God remains faithful, Solomon has peace and prosperity.

The kingdom is divided, the northern kingdom of Israel slips deep into idolatry, but God faithfully sends His prophets to warn them, conquered.

The southern kingdom of Judah fails to heed the example of Israel and God’s prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, eventually taken into captivity.

God is faithful and returns a remnant back to the land. God’s prophets announce hope for the nation, a Messiah who will bring salvation.

Then, in the fullness of time, God sends His only begotten Son to live with us, a baby is born, Jesus. Heaven cannot contain its joy…Glory to God

Jesus grows up and lives out the loving character of God for us to see. He makes the lame walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear, raises the dead, He proclaims salvation and we beheld His glory.

In the ultimate act of God’s love Jesus dies on a Roman cross and pays our sin debt. By His wounds we are healed. We are saved, redeemed.

But He doesn’t stay dead. On the 3rd day He rises from the grave and defeats death. He ascends back to heaven but He sends the Holy Spirit – God in us. He promises that He will return again one day.

The epistles tell us how we can live with power and victory

In Revelation we see how it will all end. God to the very end proclaiming salvation in Jesus. Jesus returns with His church, reigns for 1000 years, fulfills His promise to Israel, destroys sin and Satan. God makes a new heaven and a new earth in which we live with Him forever

Yes, we see much more than Asaph saw. If the people of God in Asaph’s day are without excuse, how much more are we today?