

# History Lessons

**Psalm 74:1** *To the choirmaster: according to Jeduthun. A Psalm of Asaph.*

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me.

<sup>2</sup> In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.

<sup>3</sup> When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

<sup>4</sup> You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.

<sup>5</sup> I consider the days of old, the years long ago.

<sup>6</sup> I said, "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart." Then my spirit made a diligent search:

<sup>7</sup> "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable?"

<sup>8</sup> Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time?

<sup>9</sup> Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" Selah

<sup>10</sup> Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High."

<sup>11</sup> I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

<sup>12</sup> I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.

<sup>13</sup> Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?

<sup>14</sup> You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.

<sup>15</sup> You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

<sup>16</sup> When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled.

<sup>17</sup> The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side.

<sup>18</sup> The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook.

<sup>19</sup> Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.

<sup>20</sup> You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

**Psalm 78:1** *A Maskil of Asaph.*

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth!

<sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,  
<sup>3</sup> things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children,

<sup>6</sup> that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children,

<sup>7</sup> so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle.

<sup>10</sup> They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law.

<sup>11</sup> They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them.

<sup>12</sup> In the sight of their fathers he performed wonders in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

<sup>13</sup> He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap.

<sup>14</sup> In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light.

<sup>15</sup> He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

<sup>16</sup> He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

<sup>17</sup> Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert.

<sup>18</sup> They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved.

<sup>19</sup> They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?"

<sup>20</sup> He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?"

<sup>21</sup> Therefore, when the LORD heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel,

<sup>22</sup> because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power.

<sup>23</sup> Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven,  
<sup>24</sup> and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven.

<sup>25</sup> Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance.

<sup>26</sup> He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens, and by his power he led out the south wind;

<sup>27</sup> he rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas;

<sup>28</sup> he let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings.

<sup>29</sup> And they ate and were well filled, for he gave them what they craved.

<sup>30</sup> But before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths,

<sup>31</sup> the anger of God rose against them, and he killed the strongest of them and laid low the young men of Israel.

<sup>32</sup> In spite of all this, they still sinned; despite his wonders, they did not believe.

<sup>33</sup> So he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror.

<sup>34</sup> When he killed them, they sought him; they repented and sought God earnestly.

<sup>35</sup> They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer.

<sup>36</sup> But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues.

<sup>37</sup> Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not faithful to his covenant.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again.

<sup>40</sup> How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!

<sup>41</sup> They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel.

<sup>42</sup> They did not remember his power or the day when he redeemed them from the foe,

<sup>43</sup> when he performed his signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan.

<sup>44</sup> He turned their rivers to blood, so that they could not drink of their streams.

<sup>45</sup> He sent among them swarms of flies, which devoured them, and frogs, which destroyed them.

<sup>46</sup> He gave their crops to the destroying locust and the fruit of their labor to the locust.

<sup>47</sup> He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamores with frost.

<sup>48</sup> He gave over their cattle to the hail and their flocks to thunderbolts.

<sup>49</sup> He let loose on them his burning anger, wrath, indignation, and distress, a company of destroying angels.

<sup>50</sup> He made a path for his anger; he did not spare them from death, but gave their lives over to the plague.

<sup>51</sup> He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the firstfruits of their strength in the tents of Ham.

<sup>52</sup> Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.

<sup>53</sup> He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid, but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.

<sup>54</sup> And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won.

<sup>55</sup> He drove out nations before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.

<sup>56</sup> Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies,

<sup>57</sup> but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow.

<sup>58</sup> For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols.

<sup>59</sup> When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel.

<sup>60</sup> He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind,

<sup>61</sup> and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe.

<sup>62</sup> He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage.

<sup>63</sup> Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song.

<sup>64</sup> Their priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation.

<sup>65</sup> Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a strong man shouting because of wine.

<sup>66</sup> And he put his adversaries to rout; he put them to everlasting shame.

<sup>67</sup> He rejected the tent of Joseph; he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim,

<sup>68</sup> but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves.

<sup>69</sup> He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever.

<sup>70</sup> He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds;

<sup>71</sup> from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance.

<sup>72</sup> With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand."

## Psalm 77-78

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# Cover Me

WHAT DO ALL THESE SONGS have in common:

Janis Joplin. *Me And Bobby McGee.*

Jeff Buckley. *Hallelujah.*

Jimmy Hendrix. *All Along the Watchtower.*

Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. *I Love Rock N Roll.*

Joe Cocker. *A Little Help From My Friends.*

Johnny Cash. *Hurt.*

Whitney Houston. *I Will Always Love You.*

If I hadn't added the last one, you might have said all the artists start with a "J." Even with the last one, maybe you say, "What are seven songs I've never heard." In fact, none of these songs were originally performed or written by those who made them popular. They are *cover songs*. A cover is a song that someone else wrote and sang that you redo. Often, the new artist changes the *music* a bit. Other times, the *instruments* are different. Sometimes, the *words* are altered. In every instance, the point is to make an old song come to life again for a new generation or group of people.

**Psalm 77** a kind of cover song. The first half is a lament which bears striking resemblance to Psalm 74 (**Ps 77:1-9**). But the second (**12-21**) is a remembrance through a reworking of the first great song of Moses—Exodus 15.

Here is another list of songs. What do they all have in common:

*Yankee Doodle* – Amer. Trad.

*John Brown's Body* (Glory, Glory, Hallelujah) – Amer. Trad.

*Over There* – George M. Cohan

*Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* – The Andrews Sisters

*Goodnight Saigon* – Billy Joel

*One* - Metallica

These are all songs about wars in American history. Some are patriotic. Others are anti-war. Some are upbeat. Others are gut-wrenchingly sad. If I were to add a third group of songs such as *John Sutter's Mill* (Dan Fogelberg), *The Edmund Fitzgerald* (Gordon Lightfoot), *Shenandoah* (Trad. Amer.), *London Bridge Is Falling Down* (Trad. Eng.), or *Tom Dooley* (Trad. Amer.), we would now have songs that were written to tell some kind of other historical event. And

every single one of these has also been covered some someone else.

Songs of wars and interesting events in a nation's history are things that every culture on earth has. Why? They generate feelings of nostalgia or anger or patriotism or hope. They are means of binding people together or tearing them apart. But in all of this, the chief way these things occur is through **remembering**. These kinds of songs **force us to recall who we are and where we come from**. And because they are put to music, with the way God wired us, song is the best way to transmit memories from one generation to the next.

The second half of **Psalm 77**, as a cover of Exodus 15 is also an example of both a war and a history song. More than that, the very long **Psalm 78** (it is the second longest Psalm, behind only Ps 119) to which it relates, stands for the most part as a long recital of Israel's history. This includes wars that God fought for her as well as other important historical lessons.

So, let's talk about this relationship between Ps 77 and 78. **First**, these both stand as **part of the 11 song "set"** of songs of Asaph. The set itself forms a chiasm of sorts. The



first 5 songs are laments directed towards Israel. The last five are prayers directed at the nations. In the middle stands this great Psalm 78 which is not a prayer, nor a lament, but a theological treatise in the form of song and poetry.

### Eleven Psalms of Asaph

A. Psalms 73-77 – Individual prayers that are Israel-centered.

B. Psalm 78 – *Theological teaching in the form of a poem.*

A<sup>1</sup>. Psalm 79-83 – Community prayers directed toward the nations.<sup>1</sup>

It is called a *maskil* (which was also true of Ps 74). The word, again, means “*wisdom*.” And as we will see, its language begins very much like the Proverbs. (Psalm 77 is “*according to Jeduthun*,” a note we have seen twice [Ps 39, 62] which is either one of David’s singers, a tune, or a noun that means “confession” or “praise”)

So why a theological treatise in the middle of these songs? This raises a *second* point. Ps 77 *begins with a great problem*. Psalm 78 *provides the answer*. Like so many other psalms he says, “*I cry aloud to God, aloud to God (1) ... in the day of my trouble ... my soul refuses to be comforted (2) ... I moan ... my spirit faints (3) ... I am so troubled that*

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<sup>1</sup> See Lothar, 300.

I cannot speak (4). Why? In this case he is feeling **the heavy weight of the God's wrath**. “**Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?’ Selah**” (7-9).

We don't know the exact circumstance in mind, though if we read this together with the previous songs, living in Babylon during the exile far away from your land, without a king or a temple, with no formal way to approach God is not a bad guess. However, it seems to me that this kind of heartache is open-ended in the song such that pretty much anything that a person could go through to bring about these kinds of emotions would be applicable. Therefore, if you are crying to God, in trouble, moaning, fainting, sleepless, or mute because of circumstances in your life, what Psalm 77-78 says in answer to this is **the very thing you need to hear**.

This question-answer between the two songs can be seen in the first verse of each. Notice, as he cries aloud and then at the end of **Ps 77:1** it says, “**... and he will hear me.**” This is translated as an imperfect. However, the Hebrew verb

(*veha'azin* from *'azan*) could also be an imperative. “Hear me” (Targum, Dahood).<sup>2</sup> This fits better with what he is saying in the first few verses. As the *Handbook to the Psalms* says, “The whole strophe (verses 1–3) seems to indicate that God had not listened to the psalmist”<sup>3</sup> up to this point. Therefore, he is pleading in Psalm 77 for God to hear him.

I would argue that this kind of translation is how the scribe compiling these songs into the Psalter was reading it, for this also makes much sense of Psalm 78 coming after it. How? If **Psalm 77:1** is a cry for God to hear him, **Psalm 78:1** is the answer! “Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.” Though he doesn’t realize it in Psalm 77, God *has* heard the Psalmist’s cry and Psalm 78 is the proof that “God has indeed lent an ear.”<sup>4</sup> But—and this really gets to the point of Psalm 78—if

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<sup>2</sup> The “and” (*ve-*) attached to the verb can also make the translation something like “that” instead of “and,” so that you get “I hope that God will hear me,” which is quite similar to translating it as an imperative.

<sup>3</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and William David Reyburn, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 672.

<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III: Psalms 73-89*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 307, ed. David J.A. Clines, Philip R. Davies (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 58. Lothar is of the same opinion. “Psalm 78 ‘answers’ the open ending of Psalm 77 with a theological explanation, which makes understandable the judgment of God on Joseph–Ephraim” (Lothar, 280). Also Wallace, “Psalm 78 suggests that it is an answer to the problems raised in Psalm 74 and 77. Recovery of the community through the compassion of God is possible. Even the demise of either or both the Jerusalem temple or the Davidic dynasty will not negate the hope of those who do ‘not forget

He has lent an ear, God now expects the Psalmist and the people to lend their ear to His answer. And what is God's answer? To find out, we want to turn our attention to these cover songs of war and history.

## Psalm 77

### *Despair*<sup>5</sup>

So we've established that the Psalmist is in "trouble" (Ps 77:2). It is to such a degree that his soul refuses to be comforted (2). Comfort is the job of the Gospel. But is this where he is looking? He is trying to "remember God," but the kind of remembering that he is engaging in is causing him to moan. He is trying to meditate, but his spirit is too weak. It faints. Selah (3). A pause occurs here, always for a good reason. This is not something to be taken lightly. When others are moaning from such pain, sometimes the best thing we can say in response is nothing. All we can do is think about what they are going through in silence, to be with them and listen.

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the works of God, but keep his commandments' (v. 7)." Howard N. Wallace, *Psalms* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 138.

<sup>5</sup> *Despair* (vv. 1-9), *Decision* (10-12), and *Deliverance* (13-20) is the outline given Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2004), Psalm 77.

Try to enter into his trials. They are so severe that he actually **accuses God of holding his eyelids open** (4) so that he cannot sleep. Have you ever felt this way?

In remembering God, he tries to recollect history. But it seems to be a very **specific kind of history**. “**I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said, ‘Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart.’ Then my spirit made a diligent search**” (5-6). What does this mean? It isn’t entirely clear, so we are left to interpret. Not all are in agreement with this thought, but from the ancient Targum to Calvin to The Living Bible, they all think he is **recollecting good history**, when God was clearly at peace with the people and they were full of joy.<sup>6</sup>

This *could* be related to the Gospel, but more likely it may just be common grace. He’s simply remembering “**the good ol’ days**.” Why do I think that? Because all this “remembrance” has done is raise the dire questions on his mind all the more. Will God spurn forever? Won’t he be favorable (7-9)? The Gospel doesn’t do this to people. **Calvin**

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<sup>6</sup> The Targum: “**I have counted up the good days which were at the beginning, the good years of long ago**” (Ps 77:6). The Living Bible: “**I think of the good old days, long since ended, when my nights were filled with joyful songs. I search my soul and ponder the difference now**” (Ps 77:5-6). Calvin: “**He endeavoured to assuage his grief by the remembrance of his former joy; but he informs us that relief was not so easily nor so speedily obtained ... By his song he denotes the exercise of thanksgiving in which he had engaged during the time of his prosperity.**”

says, “The prophet’s meaning is, that when he sought for comfort in all directions [especially by “remembering his former joy”], he could find none to assuage the bitterness of his grief” (Calvin, Psalm 77:6).

The end of this opening section (1-9) ends in a second pause (Selah, 9). Why this pause? God has been favorably disposed to the people whom he chose in the past. But now he isn’t. These first nine verses thus tell us of the Psalmist’s despair.

### *Decision*

The next three are the transition to his thinking of deliverance (13-20). It comes through a three part decision (10-12). There has to be a conscious effort to change mental gears if you will. To make yourself think about the *right* thing. Thinking about the good ol’ days is doing nothing to change his perspective in the present crisis. In fact, it is only making it worse. How often do you reminisce about how much better life was way back when than it is today? And what does this kind of thinking do to you? “Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this” (Eccl 7:10).

That are his three decisions. First, “Then I said, ‘I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High’” (10). This is a fascinating statement.<sup>7</sup> It is the first place where something from Exodus 15 is brought up directly, and this fits nicely into his cover of Moses’s song. In Moses’ Song of the Sea, the Right Hand is called “a man of war; Yahweh” (Ex 15:3). The Rabbi’s saw this as a dangerous verse, because it was a clear example of someone called Yahweh who was in fact a distinct person from Yahweh in heaven. For, he is a “man.” The way the ESV translates Ps 77:10, he is not appealing to Yahweh in heaven so much as he is recounting the Alpha and Omega as Revelation calls Christ. For he is “appealing” to “the years of the Right Hand.” This is the Person of the Godhead who from of olden days was active in Israel, fighting the war against Egypt for them on earth.

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<sup>7</sup> A statement fraught with translation difficulties. For example, many modern commentaries go with some version of the Targum’s translation (Kraus, Lothar, Tate have some version of: “And so I say, ‘My sorrow is this: the changing of the right hand of the Most High!’” where the meaning is usually that it is the Psalmist’s fault that the Right Hand has is now doing nothing positive for him/them; esp. TNK version). All the older English versions (KJV, ASV, GNV) do what the ESV does. The difference it seems to me is really a matter of where you break the transition in the Psalm. The ESV tradition seems to put the break of thought here in this verse. The others seem to put the break of thought in the next verse. Neither translation is incorrect. Calvin has a good discussion.

## Psalm 77:10-20 Compared to Exodus 15:1-18

<p><sup>10</sup> Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of <b>the right hand</b> of the Most High."</p>	<p><sup>3</sup> The LORD is <b>a man of war</b>; the LORD is his name.  <sup>6</sup> Your <b>right hand</b>, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.  <sup>12</sup> You stretched out <b>your right hand</b>; the earth swallowed them.  <sup>16</sup> Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of <b>your arm</b>, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased.</p>
<p><sup>11</sup> I will remember the <b>deeds</b> of the LORD; yes, I will remember your <b>wonders</b> of old.  <sup>12</sup> I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty <b>deeds</b>.  <sup>13</sup> Your way, O God, is <b>holy</b>. <b>What god is great like our God?</b></p>	<p><sup>11</sup> <b>"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"</b></p>
<p><sup>14</sup> You are the God who works wonders; <b>you have made known your might among the peoples</b>.</p>	<p><sup>14</sup> <b>The peoples have heard</b>; they tremble; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.  <sup>15</sup> Now are <b>the chiefs of Edom dismayed</b>; trembling seizes <b>the leaders of Moab</b>; all <b>the inhabitants of Canaan</b> have melted away.</p>
<p><sup>15</sup> You with your arm <b>redeemed</b> your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah</p>	<p><sup>13</sup> <b>"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed</b>; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.</p>
<p><sup>16</sup> When <b>the waters</b> saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, <b>the deep</b> trembled.  <sup>17</sup> The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side.  <sup>18</sup> The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook.</p>	<p><sup>5</sup> <b>The floods</b> covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.  <sup>8</sup> At the blast of your nostrils <b>the waters</b> piled up; <b>the floods</b> stood up in a heap; <b>the deeps</b> congealed in the heart of the sea.  <sup>2</sup> The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.  <sup>7</sup> In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.  <sup>9</sup> The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'  <sup>17</sup> You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.  <sup>18</sup> The LORD will reign forever and ever.'"</p>
<p><sup>19</sup> Your way was through the <b>sea</b>, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.</p>	<p>"Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the <b>sea</b>.  <sup>4</sup> "Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the <b>sea</b>, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.  <sup>10</sup> You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.</p>
<p><sup>20</sup> <b>You led your people</b> like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.</p>	<p><sup>13</sup> <b>"You have led</b> in your steadfast love <b>the people</b> whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.</p>



Second, the Psalmist *remembers* the Right Hand's "deeds" and "wonders" (Ps 77:11). This is more language from Exodus 15 (see chart above on all of these). Of this "man of war" Moses sings, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Ex 15:11). ("Who is like you"<sup>8</sup> becomes the first thought of the Deliverance section of Psalm 77 [vs. 13's, "What god is great like our God?"]]).

Third, he will *ponder* all God's work and meditate on his deeds (12). After actively appealing to the Right Hand, to remembering his works, he finally ponders their meaning in his heart. This is most important, because it is not enough to know a fact of history. You must meditate upon the meaning of those facts and how they relate to you personally. Especially as it concerns the works and deeds of Christ, if you will not ponder, then he cannot be for you.

## *Deliverance*

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<sup>8</sup> This is a conceptual root for the proper name "Michael" (mi-ka-el). The Hebrew here is *mi-kamoka ba'elim yhw*.

This leads him to specifics and the third and final section of this song. What are these “wonders” and “deeds” of the Right Hand? It begins that God’s “way” is holy. “I AM the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus said. “No one comes to the Father but through me.” In Moses’ song, the way (*derek*, not used in Ex 15, but found in other places like Ex 13:18; 18:18; etc.) was through the sea. It would have been a terrifying first step, with walls of water teeter on both sides of you. But this was a way of separation from the old world through baptismal death and rebirth. It was a way that led to Mt. Sinai where the Holy God would meet with his people. If they didn’t go through this way, they would be doomed. It was the only way God provided.

A comparison between Elohim and the created elohims occurs here. “What god is great like our God?” a line slightly changed from Moses’ song. The answer is not that other gods don’t exist and therefore none can compare. What would be the point of saying that? The answer is that no other gods *are holy* or *great*.<sup>9</sup> They can’t do what he does. They aren’t the kind of beings that he is. “You are the God

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<sup>9</sup> Dahood translates the first part of this verse as, “Oh God, your dominion (derek) is over the Holy Ones,” i.e. the gods of the second half. While this makes good logical and theological sense, it is an unusual rendering of *derek*.

who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples” (14). This is even more from Moses’s song when all the nations trembled because of how Yahweh defeated the Egyptians and their gods.

“You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah” (15). This verse ends in the final pause (Selah), which occurs here now because the point of God showing his power was **to save his people**. This was not just an exercise in showing how powerful he was. God doesn’t do things for an ego trip. Rather, it was to redeem them from bondage and slavery; to set them free to serve him. It is worth remembering here that these thoughts are what the Psalmist is meditating on in order to cure himself of the plague of the first nine verses. **Salvation**. *This is finally the gospel*.

It does occur in great power. “When the waters saw you, O God ... they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled” (16). This personification actually fits the ancient view of certain the gods, hence, which one of them is like Yahweh? The Red Sea parted. Clouds poured water; skies gave thunder; lightning flashed everywhere (17). Thunder cracked; whirlwinds blew; the whole world trembled when God

came to his people (18). Baal (god of cloud and thunder), Yam (sea god), Tiamat (the deep chaos goddess), all bowed before Yahweh.

God opened the sea and made a path through the waters. Yet ... *and this is all important*—“his footprints were unseen” (19). There is a famous poem called *Footprints*, where basically Jesus carries a man who sees only one set of prints, not his own but the LORD’s. God’s footprints are seen, though he thought they were his own. It tells its story one way. This one is quite different, for what it shows is that the effects of God were seen everywhere, but God himself was invisible, not there to the physical eyes, yet nevertheless truly present with the people.

In some ways, this verse gets at *the desperate need for faith in Christ*. We often chide the Israelites for not believing when they had so much evidence. But in doing so, perhaps we are thinking more like the *Footprints* poem than the Psalm. How could you not see his footprints! Skeptics of their day could and did chalk those things up as natural disasters. God was not there to be seen anymore then than he is today when a hurricane hits us. But he *was* there, just as he continues to be present today through his sovereign

providential rule over the earth. You can't see this with physical eyes.

He was **there in a very special way** with Israel, because he had covenanted with that people to be their God. He led them to himself. He saved them. He did it through the intercessory hands of Moses and Aaron (20), and not by direct visual encounters that would have crushed them all. He demanded faith and the song seems to end on this same thought as the Psalmist has covered Moses' Song of the Sea for his own purposes for his more contemporary situation.

So what has this remembering and meditating on years of the Right Hand done for Asaph? The answer is, we don't know. Because the Psalm ends. Taken by itself, it seems to say that the remedy to such abysmal thoughts as those plaguing him is to think on Christ. For his works and deed are good news that bring comfort to the insoluble. But as we have seen, this is not the end of our story.

## Psalm 78

Someone has said that the last verse of Psalm 77 could serve as a title for Psalm 78. **“You led your people like a**

flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” Others think there may be a chiasm shared between the two songs, which would link them even further.<sup>10</sup> But Psalm 78 is a different kind of a deal from any of these other songs of Asaph. Standing in the tradition of Psalms 105, 106, 114, 135, and 136, it is an historical psalm. But as a *maskil*, it is a theological psalm, meant to teach. It seems clear that it is going to teach things related to what we have just discussed.

Notice how it begins. “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” (78:1-3). While sounding like Proverbs, it is important to know that our Lord actually quotes this as he begins teaching people parables (Matt 33:35ff). While fascinating in its own right, this says two things for us here. First, it hints that the Lord Jesus is the one who originally inspired this song. For he is quoting it like it is his original words. Second, it shows that the content of Psalm 78 is likened unto one of his own parables. Curiously, this content is more of the Exodus and the history of Israel.

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<sup>10</sup> Christine at [alittleperspective.com](http://alittleperspective.com) whose chiastic work on the Psalms has been so helpful has this unpublished thought, but she hasn’t worked it out fully.

So what does this mean? It means that the things that happened back then were given for more than just historical facts to learn in school. They are written down for the instruction of those with ears to hear. And what is that instruction? It is in part, an answer to Psalm 77 and the woeful condition of the Psalmist. Somehow, the history of Israel is an answer to that!

### *History for The Future*

This unfolds in three ways. The future, the past, and the present. First, the future. “We will not hide them from their children, but tell them to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (78:4). Hide what? The past. The future needs the past (and the present needs the past) in order to deal properly with coming (or present) troubles. Ours is an historical faith, rooted in real events with real people like you and I. Without this, you do not have Christianity.

These are things that not only you need to know, but the generations after you. “That the next generation might know them ... that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments”

(6-7). They are for all who fear the Lord, for his Church even to this very day. Parents, are your children learning the history of Israel? Are you raising them up knowing the stories of old?

What do these stories include? First, there is more of the **glorious deeds** and might and wonders from the previous song (4). Second, there is the “**testimony**” and “**law**” that he gave to Jacob and Israel through the events of those days (5). Third, there is a **warning**, and this really begins to get at the point of this song that was not something the Psalmist raised (or seemingly thought about) in Psalm 77. As he was going through his “remembrances” in that song, he did not bring up anything like vs. 8 here, “**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**” (8). This is really where the rubber meets the road today. For in Psalm 78, much of the focus of the remembering is going to be on the sins of our forefathers. The good ol’ days were not actually as great as he wanted to remember.

## *Remember the Past*



The heart of the song is the majority of its verses. **Vv. 9-64** can be understood as **a rejection of Yahweh by Israel**. **Vv. 59-64** are then his response: **Israel's rejection by Yahweh**. As the end of the song makes clear, the focus here is on the apostasy of the northern kingdom—called Ephraim as a short-hand (9). But it does this by using examples from the Exodus story. Four times we see a pattern of a gracious act from God. The people's rebellion. God's anger and punishment.

**Introduction: vv 1–11**

**First Recital:**

Wilderness events vv 12–32

gracious act (vv 12–16)

rebellion (vv 17–20)

divine anger and

punishment (vv 21–32)

**Sequel** vv 33–39

**Second Recital:**

From Egypt to Canaan vv 40–64

gracious act (vv 40–55)

rebellion (vv 56–58)

divine anger and

punishment (vv 59–64)

**Sequel** vv 65–72<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R. J. Clifford (“An Interpretation of Psalm 78”) in Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, vol. 20, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 287. A dissertation on this is William Lacy Lane, “An Exegetical Study of Psalm 78,” Master of Theology Degree, Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI: 1996).

This is summarized at the beginning, “They did not keep God’s covenant, but refused to walk according to his law” (10) and also “forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them” (11).

Put those together. It is their forgetfulness of his works that caused them to not care about walking in his ways. Why should they, if they do not know who this God is or what he has done? This is why it is so important to tell your children about what God has done in history.

Vv. 12-39 and then 40-58 are two long recitations of these marvelous works. He did things in Egypt “in the sight of their fathers” (12). They saw what he did with their own eyes. The Red Sea miracle (13): leading them through it, staying with them in a cloud and pillar of fire (14), making water come out of a rock (15-16) so that they could drink in the desert, he did all these things in front of them. For them.

So how did they respond? “Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert” (17). They wanted miracles. He gave them miracles. They

clearly really wanted something else. They rebelled.<sup>12</sup> It is like Jesus performing the same and the people of his own home town rejecting him. This is part of the meaning that their own history is really a parable. Do you have ears to hear the meaning and purpose of why he acted? It always seems so obvious until you are the one put in the place of having to really hear what the Lord is saying through his works, especially when he is confronting you in your sin. “God, just do this one thing for me and I’ll believe.” *That* is what Israel was saying. And it is *not* of faith.

The song begins to recount how **they tested God**, demanding food (he gave them quail until it came out their nostrils, **18-19**), how Moses struck the rock and gave them water, and how God gave them manna (**20**). They tested God out of sin, tempting him to make him prove himself time and again because what they had already been through was not enough.

His wrath was kindled (**21**). They did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power (**22**). Their disobedience came from faithlessness.

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<sup>12</sup> It is curious in this light that the Targum of Ps 77:5 and 12 both mention how the Psalmist said he would meditate on God’s “miracles.”

Nevertheless, God is gracious. He gave them **manna**—**the very bread of angels** (25), an extraordinary thing, demonstrating that angels eat. It came down like rain (24) it was so abundant. It blew in with the east wind every morning (26). He rained **meat** on them, birds so plentiful in the middle of a desert that it was like the sand of the seas (27). They ate. They were filled. “**He gave them what they craved**” (29). Beware, beloved, for God very often gives you the things you want, and though they are from him a blessing, you can turn his good gifts into a curse:

“**Before they had satisfied their craving, while the food was still in their mouths, the anger of God rose against them**” (30-31). The man of war started to execute the strongest men of Israel for leading rebellions against Him. Still they sinned **and did not believe** (32). See how in the OT, faith and belief is part and parcel of what they were to have had? Faith in who? In Christ, the one he is singing about, for he is the one doing these things for them.

He caused them to die young and in terror (probably in the wilderness, 33). This got their attention. So **they repented** and earnestly sought God (the next generation,

34), calling upon him as their Rock and the Most High God their redeemer (35).

But it didn't last long. They flattered him with their mouths (36), having great outward public worship. But they lied to him with their tongues (36). Their hearts were not steadfast toward him, and they were not faithful to his covenant (37).

But **God is compassionate**. Always full of compassion against even the most stubborn, hard-hearted people. Is that the God you know? (38). He atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them (38). He remembered that they are flesh, a wind that passes and is gone (39). They were always rebelling against him in the wilderness (40). Testing him and provoking him (41). Forgetting his power and redemption (42). His signs and miracles, especially the plagues of Egypt (43-51), and his liberation from captivity (52-54) by a mighty hand of war which he fought for them (55).

Still, they tested and rebelled and did not keep his testimonies (56), but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers, twisted like a deceitful bow (57), provoking him to anger by worshiping the other gods through idols (58).

So God heard (he always hears, always knows). He was full of wrath and utterly rejected the nation (59). They rejected him. Not once, but over and over and over. Finally, he gave them over to their desires. They want the gods so badly, they can have them. He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh in the tent where he dwelt among men (60). He gave them into captivity (61). He gave his own people to the sword in his wrath (62). Fire devoured their young men, and their women died alone (63). Their priests were murdered. Their own widows didn't even sing for them (64). Such is the longest recitation of Israel's history in the Psalms. They had to sing the whole thing. They had to teach this song to their children.

### *Back to the Present*

But we? Have we ever sung this as a song? Do we not need to? In your woe and distress of the things God brings into your life, are you, like Psalm 77 trying to [find your solace in the good ol' days?](#) How has that helped, remembering when life was supposedly so good? Or maybe you have [moved to his mighty deeds but no further?](#) Those are vital, but not sufficient. For you also need to look at how

you have reacted time and again, like Israel, to his deeds performed so many times for your ancestors in the faith and for yourself as well. Do you not know that **every time you sin, you are guilty of doing what Israel did?** What is your sin if not a forgetting of his works and ways, and laws and testimonies, and kindness and compassion, and wrath and anger, and power and greatness?

If you believed perfectly in those things, you would never sin again. Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief! Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people of unclean lips. What a wretched man I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? God, have compassion on me, a sinner!

Only with the full complement of his works *and yours in response to them*, can you fully begin to appreciate the wisdom and teaching of Psalm 78, including its answer to Psalm 77 and how what it teaches is a riddle and a parable, instructing you through the past so that your present might be put into perspective, so that the future might be taught to your children's children.

Only when you see, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 10, that all of these things were types for you, that you might not sin

as they did. Only when you see as Hebrews does that there is a Sabbath rest in Christ's new covenant that urges you to enter by faith. Only when you see that the way of the LORD is a narrow gate, can you hope to begin to have an inkling of the mystery before you. Only when you recognize yourself in them, can you start to hear. You are not above the Israelites.

And if you do, if you really think you do see, then behold. This entire song is building to a crescendo as it teaches **faithful Judah** in the south not to be like faithless Ephraim in the north. (Of course, we know from later history that they needed more than a warning, they needed Christ in the flesh). Nevertheless, the words are for us.

“Then the Lord (Adonai) awoke as from sleep, like a strong man shouting because of wine” (65). God turned against his own people. They became his adversaries (66) whom he put to rout and everlasting shame (66). He rejected Joseph and did not choose Ephraim (67).

Rather, “**he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves**” (68). Judah, the line of Christ. “**He built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever**” (69). And the sanctuary tabernacle among



us. It was destroyed and three days, his temple was rebuilt, raised from the ground. “He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds” (70). The Messiah, Jesus Christ, Lion of Judah, Tribe of Jesse, David’s Greater Son. The Psalm is pointing you to his faithfulness and away from your faithlessness. To his perfection rather than your imperfection. For this is why he came, to save and redeem you.

God brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance (71). “With upright heart the Messiah shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand” (72). The Good Shepherd. Whose covenant is between himself and his God. Whose works were perfect, never faithless, always obedient.

And now that he has come, he reminds us through even more history, that of the NT, to trust in this God, this Good Shepherd who looks after even a single lamb that has gotten itself lost. Behold his power. What other God is like our god? Remind yourself often of these songs. Sing the old songs again. **Make them your cover.** And old song sung anew. Make it the song you sing day and night until the Lamb of God Returns in glory to judge the living and the

dead. And my these words of God bring you comfort in those long sleepless nights when God seems to be against you. In Christ, he isn't.