

Psalms: Book Three (Part Four)

Lessons of History

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This past Independence Day, July 4th, marked the 239th anniversary of the nation's founding in 1776. Now, that may seem like a long time ago, 239 years, but really by international standards, we are a young nation. Our mother country, Britain, is going on 950 years since the Norman invasion in 1066. So our history is relatively short. We could say maybe it goes back to Jamestown, which was established in 1607. So 408 years ago.

We really cannot go back to 1492 with Columbus because he landed way down south in the Caribbean. What was that, Hispaniola, that he landed on down there? So that was not the continental United States. Our history did not start until maybe 1565 with the founding of St. Augustine in Florida, the oldest city in America, But even so, 1565, that is only 450 years. So America is a recent phenomenon all things considered.

People who colonized this land came from all walks of life, all educational strata, but a considerable number of them were quite literate. And you could even say that some of them were actually literary types, people who could write very well, and these people recorded what happened during those early centuries.

This is especially true of the time around the founding, probably any time from around 1750 to about 1800 or even a little further than that, into the writings of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and Madison and Monroe and their work on the Constitution and such matters like that. They told us what went on. We do not have to guess at what happened during those times. We do not have to guess at what they believed. We do not have to guess at what they thought. We do not have to guess at their reactions to things. Those things are written down, their lives are pretty well documented, and the founders themselves, they wrote a lot.

They left a lot behind and they were not only good writers writing in English, but most of them, if they were classically educated, they learned Latin and Greek and Hebrew and many of them learned a language or two out of Europe, whether it was French or Dutch or Russian or what have you. So they were learned men and they left behind them. Not only the legacy that they left behind them, but a lot of writing.

We have substantial documentation, not just their political writings and speeches and such. But diaries, first-person accounts, and scads of letters that they wrote to each other, to newspapers, to just to other normal Americans who were asking them questions. The libraries and museums and personal collections here on the eastern shore of the United States contain a considerable trove of historical documents that tell us what life was like back then and what people thought. So we do not need to guess, as I have said before, their thoughts, their beliefs, their goals, and their actions.

Yet, there is always a yet or a but or a however, there always seems to be a dispute in modern America over what to teach our children about American history. And instead of sending them back to the original documents, which we can, we have got a whole series of books here in our own library that gives you copies of what the people actually wrote. So they are, they are very well available. They are available over the Internet. You do not even have to buy anything. You can get them off the Internet for free.

But what they do instead is they make textbooks that allow themselves to put the information in that they want the children to know. This year's dustup over the curriculum occurred in Oklahoma, where some state lawmakers objected to the revised 125 page advanced placement U.S. history guidelines developed by the college board and implemented this past year. The reason why there is this dustup in Oklahoma was because when they went over it, that is, lawmakers in Oklahoma and Board of Education, they found that it was very pessimistic about America, about the founders, about their intentions. It made America look like everything was bad from the very beginning and their only intentions were to make money and various other things.

One representative said that the A.P. guidelines have a pretty strong leaning toward everything that is wrong with America. And he also objected to the fact that it completely cut out any idea of American exceptionalism, that we are a different country and that we have a freedom that allows us to go beyond what other nations have done. Even the Republican National Committee condemned this new A.P. history course, saying basically the same thing; also saying that it presents a skewed view of the motivations of early settlers, why they wanted to come over here, probably leaving out their religious intentions or religious ideas, as well as why America got involved in something as recent as World War Two.

It is so bad that several states have condemned this A.P. history. Among them, Texas, as you would expect, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. They have all threatened to cut off funding for the A.P. program.

This follows a trend. Lately curricula have tended to reduce the amount of space devoted to the founders, as if they really were not very important. And they have even cut luminaries such as Abraham Lincoln down to just mere paragraphs in favor of social issues. So they will highlight things like slavery, which makes America look bad and it gives the teacher or whoever is pushing this, the opportunity to talk about racism. They also highlight women's suffrage in the early 20th century so that they can talk about feminism and the role of women in this country. And they also tend, in later history, to highlight the debacles of modern American foreign policy so that they can accuse the United States of imperialism, going in and taking the resources of other countries for ourselves.

Some textbooks here and there have even covered presidents Clinton and Obama far more thoroughly than Washington and Lincoln!

If nothing else, there is a decided imbalance, a bias toward modern history and social issues, then the era of the founders and the critical documents like the Declaration and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. It has gotten so bad and it has actually been this way for quite a long time, because I remember this from my own schooling that it was no longer called History. You did not go to History class, you went to Social Studies. So the tendency has been toward liberal and progressive views so that they can get across

their mindset to these. As Rush Limbaugh says, "Skulls full of mush before their opinions are formed."

So why have Conservatives and Christians resisted this trend? Now, that should be fairly obvious. But I want to give you two reasons. The first is that the founders and their writings, and to some extent, their personal characters, form the basis of the American Republic and American liberty. It is what they thought and what they did that established those two things: our government, which is a republic based on the Constitution and also based on the rights of states and individuals within it, giving only certain powers to the federal government. They do not want that. They want the federal government to have all the power and reduce us to some mere democracy and really, a socialist democracy.

A summary statement for that point is that the founders and the documents and that history set the principles and tone for what America is all about.

The second point is what George Santayana famously said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Or maybe even a better way to put that is, those who fail to learn the lessons of *history* are doomed to repeat it. And if those kids in school in their history classes do not learn about what happened at the founding, they are going to be doomed to have to, in this case, maybe rebel again and repeat the process. Because history, our freedom needs a great deal of sacrifice to keep it alive. And we have lost that understanding.

Now, the great spiritual principle, then, that comes out of all that I have said so far is that the beginnings of things set the stage for what comes after. This is true in such things as the law of first mention that I talk about quite a bit in giving these sermons because it is very important. When something is said for the first time, a word is used for the first time, it sets the stage for how the rest of the Bible uses that term and thinks about that term and applies that term. Not only that, God gave us a book that is called, "In The Beginning." It is the book of beginnings—Genesis. He did it for just this reason: to provide knowledge of the foundation of everything. It gives us the foundation of the world, not just the creation but how the world itself, this cosmos, began. The

foundation of mankind and mankind's thinking, his governments, and especially from the very beginning, from chapters 3, his stubborn refusal to follow and obey God, even in the simplest things.

So we get a very easily understood example in that of Adam and Eve given one very simple command, do not eat anything of the tree in the midst of the Garden. That is really simple. They knew the tree, they knew which one they should not eat of, and they perversely took of it with just a little bit of persuasion. And we think that maybe Satan was putting *all* his powers into turning Eve and it does not read that way. "Oh, this looks pretty. I wonder if it tastes good." I mean, I get the impression that she did not fight it very much. Looked good, tasted good. Seemed like it was good for food as it says, and wow, maybe this will make me wise. Maybe that is why God told me not to eat of it, and she was caught and then she just flipped one over to Adam and said, "Here, try this, this is good." And he ate and it has been that way ever since.

I mean, think of this. How much do people resist sin in the world? And you can use yourself as an example, if you like. I am not going to condemn you because we are all in the same boat. We all come across something that is forbidden and we tend to fall for it very easily. It is just the way it is. We are weak and we have this spirit out there that is whispering in our ears saying, "It'll be ok just this once" and we follow it.

Also in Genesis, on the flip side of all this, are His first steps in working His plan, calling out individuals from the world to form a nation, and not just a nation but a family, a people who will follow Him. And not just Israel. I am talking about the church. And He called Abraham, of course, among the first, and in him He would create that nation. And so he is called then the father of the faithful.

So, we come to learn, not just in terms of physical things like a building, but through the lessons of history, that a foundation, whether it is square or skewed sets the stage for what is built upon it. So if you start your foundation off and it is good and perfect and square, you have the best chance that all your joints will be square and you can build straight up and

put a great edifice on it. But if it is skewed, then you have got to start making corrections all over the place and you are likely going to get a building that is going to fall down.

And so what we see, then, from this principle is that beginnings are very important because what comes after the beginnings are going to reflect that beginning. The Bible consistently counsels us to look back to the beginning because it helps us to set ourselves again, to reset ourselves so that we can, let us say, it is not really start over, but at least get our minds set the way that they should. God wants us to remember events and personalities and principles *before* they were sullied by what came after them.

So He points us back to places like the Garden of Eden and how the relationship with Adam was at that time. What marriage was supposed to be. Jesus Himself said in Matthew the 19th chapter, when the Jews asked Him about marriage, He said, "My teaching, My beliefs on marriage go all the way back to the beginning—as it was at the beginning. It was not like this where divorce was easy. He says said it was a man and a woman and they became one flesh. That is how it was. God created the male and female and He told them to multiply and replenish the earth. That is the way it was. So His teaching reflected the beginning.

And we find in several places throughout the Bible that it says that God did this "before the foundation of the world," He did "that. . ." It all points us back to the foundation of the world, that these things got their start right then. And that God has been working out salvation from that time.

If you would, please turn to Isaiah 51. We will see a direct command to do just this.

Isaiah 51:1 [God says here] "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness. . .

Who is He talking to? He is really talking to us. The heading says here, The Lord Comforts Zion. That is who He is talking to, this Zion. And it seems to be a type of the church here, but He talks specifically to those who are pursuing righteousness. That is us, right? We are the ones pursuing righteousness.

Isaiah 51:1-2 . . . you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you are hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him."

He is telling the church, those who have been called, to go back to Abraham and to Sarah and look at how God worked with them and how they responded to Him and how He then had to correct them and help them and test them. He is saying, "If you go back there and watch how I looked at him and how I developed him over the years, because God called him at 75 and he lived about 100 years after that. So God spent a long time with Abraham and with Sarah bringing them up in the way that they should go, as a father would bring up his children. And so He is telling these people, those who pursue God and pursue righteousness, to go back there and see the example of Abraham and Sarah.

And of course, He wants us also to see Himself, for us to see Him in His working so we can understand just how He works with us. He works with us the same way he worked with Abraham. It's the same kind of relationship. Abraham was a great man, sure. And God knew that he had a pearl there that was of great price, as it were. But you know, you are the same way in His eyes. He loves you like He loved Abraham. As a matter of fact, it says that He loves us like He like He loves Christ!

We need to understand that when we go back and look at the example of Abraham and Sarah, that God is going to complete us, work with us, mature us along those same lines. And as He was faithful to Abraham, He will be faithful to us. And as Abraham was faithful to Him, well, we can be faithful to Him in the same way. We have what it takes. He would not have called us if we did not have what it takes. And we know from the promises that He will not let anyone snatch us out of His hand. (That is in John 10.) So here is this command to go back to the beginning, to go back to the originals, and see how it was then.

Now, if you are thinking of these people who pursue righteousness in terms of the Israelites, actually, it works with us as well. But what these two verses suggest is that the people He is talking to had a righteousness that left a bit to

be desired. Otherwise there would not be the command or the advice to go back and look. Because He is trying to correct them, to improve them and so He says, "Look, wherever you are now in the realm of righteousness, you know, or you just getting started or you're halfway along till the time when you'll finally die, whatever it is, go back and look because you have areas in which you can improve." So look at Abraham and look at Sarah and see what was produced from that raw material. The same could be done for you.

So what He wanted them to do, these people—us—was to return to bedrock. Look at the foundation, go back to the place where this Family of God started. Look at how level it is. Look at how square it is. Look how careful God was in His beginnings and learn the lessons.

That is kind of the theme (that is why I started this way), of Psalm 78, which is the psalm we are going to go into today. The theme is essentially recall God's past acts and learn the lessons. Go back to the beginning, go back to what God has done before, learn the lessons and repent, strengthen the relationship with God.

If you will, let us go to Psalm 78. By the way, this theme is a theme of the whole Book Three. There are a few psalms in here that have similar themes where you are told to go back and look at what the Israelites have done before or what God has done before. There is a term, a phrase that is used a few times, telling you to mark God's wondrous works, the things that God has done, the miracles that He has performed for Israel, and learn the lessons from them because He did not do those things just for nothing. He did them and left a record of them so that we could go back and look at them and figure out what we needed to learn.

Psalm 78 is one of those psalms of Asaph. There have been quite a few of those in this book. And it is often categorized by people who study the Psalms as a historical psalm. And you can see why. If you read through it, you will see that a lot of Israel's history, certainly in Egypt, in the wilderness are recounted. A lot of the things that God did to help them come out of Egypt and cross the wilderness. But while it does this, while it does look at historical events, it is actually concerned with getting one specific point across. And that is that God has been delivering Israel all along, but she has constantly turned away from Him. That God has been beseeching Israel to do

what is right and He has given them blessings and He has given them miracles and He has given them good leaders and He has done everything—great, tremendous promises. Well, we should also mention that His law is perfect and good.

He has given them everything that they needed, blessing upon blessing, grace upon grace, as it were, but they have always rejected Him. They have always rebelled. They have never stopped sinning. They have never really given their hearts to the Lord, as it were, but they have stubbornly perversely, consistently gone the other direction.

And that is what this psalm puzzles over. What comes out of it is that the problem of Israel's rebellion is entirely one-sided. God has been good and righteous and perfect in His dealings with them in everything. And it is almost exactly the opposite on the other side. That Israel has never dealt with Him in the way that they should have. So Israel has forsaken the covenant, used God for her own purposes, but He always remains faithful.

Now, the superscription of the psalm in the *New King James* here says "A Contemplation of Asaph." The word under contemplation there in Hebrew is maskil. And to tell you the truth, scholars are uncertain about what it means. It is a little bit sketchy, but they look at the root and what the root means and how the root has been translated, and they have a kind of an idea of what it might mean. Because the root means something along the lines of understanding or comprehension or even instruction. And so what maskil seems to imply is that this psalm is a kind of reflective psalm or a teaching psalm.

Its purposes are to get you to think and that is why they called it a contemplation of Asaph, which is probably a pretty good translation. Perhaps we can say that the purpose of a maskil is to get across a lesson that we can think about. If we think through what the psalmist has presented, then what it does is it teaches us a lesson that we can use in our lives. But *we have to think about it*. That is the important thing in a maskil, that you need to meditate on it. You need to think it through, you need to sit down in a quiet corner and contemplate what is going on here and not just brush it off lightly or fly through it without much thought. It is something you need to really say "Hmm" over and think it through.

In terms of organization, if you notice Psalm 78 has 72 verses. And I will tell you right now, I am not going to try to go through them line by line, verse by verse. That would take a long time and I am sure some of you want dinner. So I am just going to go through various things, especially at the beginning of it because I think that is the most important part of the psalm. But I want you to at least have an idea of the organization of this psalm.

It has three main sections. The first is an introduction that runs through verse 11. And then there are two final sections, two final parts, and both are what are called recitals, meaning the psalmist is reciting a series of events. And the first, which is verses 12 through 39, is a recital of wilderness events as they are coming out of Egypt and crossing the Sinai toward the Promised Land. And then from verse 40 to the end of the chapter, verse 72, we have a recital of events in Egypt and in Jerusalem. The events in Egypt are the plagues that happened and the ones in Jerusalem are just things that went on in Jerusalem that we also know about. So what he is doing there in that final one is trying to bring it up to the present, or his present.

We have got to break down these two recital sections a little bit so we understand how they are formatted. So under two and under three, there would be an A section, and the A section are God's acts. In the first one (I do not know if I need to tell you this), it runs from verse 12 all the way down through verse 16. Those are God's acts. Each section starts out with a recitation of what God did. So 12 through 16 in the first section and then verse 40 through 55 in the second section.

Then there is another section, B, under these two recitals. These are Israel's rebellion and that rebellion goes from verse 17 to verse 20 in the first section and then it goes from verse 56 through 58 in the second section. And then there is a C section which is God's response. You could find that in verse 21 through verse 31 in the first section and you find it in verse 59 through verse 64 in the second section. And then finally, there is a D section under these two recitals and this is God's grace. In the first recital it runs from verse 32 to 39 and then the second verse 65 through 72.

So you have these four things: God acts and what happens after that? Israel rebels. And so then God has to respond, that is the third part, and then God

looks down on them and sees that they are but flesh and so He gives grace. So you have this four step process. Israel rebels. God responds to their rebellion and then He gives them mercy or grace and shows compassion because He knows that they are human beings (and we will go into that a little bit later).

But I want you to see from this organization that we are beginning to see what the psalm is all about that. We are beginning to see that the psalmist, looking from God's perspective, is seeing that there is a consistent pattern here of how things are working between Him and His people. He goes out of His way to do something wonderful for them, to give them a blessing, to do some great wondrous miracle, and what do they do? They do not say, "Oh, thanks God! We will follow You forever. God is with us, we are going to worship Him."

No, they do not say that at all. They say, "What have you done for us lately? And they go haring off in another direction, and then God says, "What!?" He does not quite say, "I can't believe it!" because He knows man's heart. But He is essentially saying, "How could this happen?" And so He has to come back and respond to their rebellion with chastisement, with punishment, with trying to bring them back. And it usually has to be very violent and destructive to get their attention because Israelites are quite hardheaded. They do not see God in anything. They just think, "oh, it's just a drought" or, "It's just bad leadership. You know, maybe we elect the next guy. He'll be better." Or, "It's just the Assyrians. They came through and wiped us out. But hey, no problem, God was not behind that at all."

They do not see God in anything. And so God has to respond and He responds with some sort of destruction. He is beating them down and then He says, "You know what? They're not getting it. If I keep this up, they are going to be dust. I'm going to wipe them all out. So I should have mercy." and that is what He does. He gives grace and He lets them up and lets the six or seven of them that are left start over again.

So that is what the psalmist sees and this is what he wants us to contemplate. Why is this? What is happening? What can we learn about God in all this? And especially, let us not repeat this. Let us make sure that when God does one of His wonderful events, we thank him for it and turn our hearts toward

Him and follow Him so He does not have to respond, at least not in destruction. He can respond in blessing and in helping us to mature and to grow. Do not be like those Israelites who always had a bad pattern. Be like God who always has a good pattern, one that leads to life rather than the bad pattern of the Israelites, which leads to death and destruction.

Let us go to Judges the second chapter and here we will see that Asaph was not working something new. This idea of a pattern of Israel's rebellions and just bad actions toward God had already been set out in the book of Judges. (You might want to keep a bookmark or something in Psalm 78 because we will obviously be back.)

Here in Judges 2 (we are going to start in verse 10) we will see that God remarked this way back, whenever this was written, maybe Samuel wrote it. We do not know. We think that probably Samuel was the one that compiled the book of Judges, but maybe not, but he is the best guess. But notice what he wrote down here, whoever that was.

Judges 2:10-23 When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers [he is talking about the generation that crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land] another generation arose after them who did not know the Lord nor the work which He had done for Israel. [Now, just remember that this first generation in Israel in the Promised Land did not teach their children about God. Just file it away.] Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and serve the Baals; and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. [we will be seeing that in Psalms 78]

They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity, as the Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.

Nevertheless, the Lord raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked in obeying the commandments of the Lord; they did not do so.

And when the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and delivered them out of the hands of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way. Then the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel; and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not heeded My voice, I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the Lord, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not." Therefore the Lord left those nations without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hands of Joshua.

What we see here in the history of the judges is a similar cycle, a similar pattern. And their cycle, as it is shown here, was first, rebellion against God, and then punishment, and then deliverance, and then short-lived compliance, and then rebellion again, and then it went on again—punishment, deliverance, compliance, rebellion; punishment, deliverance, compliance, rebellion; punishment, deliverance. . . I could go on all day, but that is how it worked. In example after example, this is the pattern that was set. It continued generation after generation and it did not end with the establishment of the Davidic monarchy but persisted with slightly less regularity because every once in a while, there would be a pretty good king and he would haul them back to the way that is right. and they would do okay for a while, and then they would get a bad king and on it would go.

So by the time we get to the late 700s BC, Israel's rebellions had become intolerable to God so that He decisively punished them through the Assyrians, and the Assyrians were so hard and cruel that the Israelites still do not know who they are. We walked through the section of the British Museum that was part of the Assyrian section there and it is right there on the walls. Not necessarily what they did to Israel, but what they did to other nations, other kingdoms. And it was horrific, total war. Deport the people, put your own people in their place, or not, but just totally destroy them and remove them and who cares how many died.

And then about 135 years later, Judah rebelled and God did the same with them. But by this time, the Chaldeans were on the rise and He used them instead of the Assyrians. And so both the nations of Israel—the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah—went into exile and God had had enough. That is how the cycle ended. And of course they are still doing it today. They just do not know who they are and God is not working with them in the same way.

Let us go back to Psalm 78. I want to read the first 11 verses here because this is the introduction and this, to me, is the heart and core of this psalm. So please pay attention. Listen to the wording, listen to what the psalmist wants to get across to us because, remember, this is a contemplation. He is thinking, he is meditating, he wants our thoughts to go along the same line. He wants us to learn the lessons that he is getting out of it. And of course, God overall is wanting us to learn the lesson. But it is setting it out here in the first 11 verses.

Psalm 78:1-11 Give ear [listen], O my people [Listen to the pathos in that statement. It is pleading. "Give ear, O my people! It is an endearment there. I do not want you to fail], to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and his wonderful works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob,

and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded to our fathers, that they should make them known to their children, that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments; and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The children of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle. They did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them.

This sets up the entire rest of the psalm.

Now, I do not know if you noticed, but this psalm begins like several passages in Proverbs. Let us go there.

Proverbs 1:8 My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother.

Lets compare that. "Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth."

Proverbs 2:1 My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding. . .

Proverbs 3:1 My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; for length of days and long life and peace will they add to you.

Proverbs 4:1 Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know understanding; for I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law.

Proverbs 5:1 My son, pay attention to my wisdom; lend your ear to my understanding, that you may preserve discretion, that your lips may keep knowledge.

Proverbs 6:1 My son, if you become surety for your friend, if you have shaken hands in pledge to a stranger, . . .

Proverbs 6:20 My son, keep your father's command, and do not forsake the law of your mother.

Proverbs 7:1 My son, keep my words, and treasure my commands within you. Keep my commands and live, and my law as the apple of your eye.

We do not need to go any farther. I think you get the point.

This is not your normal psalm. This is a psalm of pleading instruction so that you will not go astray, in the same way that a father would take his son aside and say, "Look, I want to give you some advice so that you do not go into the same ditches that I've fallen into." And so it is a plea from God, you could say, to wise up, listen, follow this way. If you follow this way, you will be successful, you will live, good things will happen.

Now verse 2 even uses the word "proverb." It is not there in English, but it is there in Hebrew. It is the word "parable." I do not know why they translated it as parable here because it really should be proverb. It would be better. The word is *masal* and you can see that its sense, even though it can easily be translated proverb, is tweaked a little bit by the parallel phrase here in the next line, "I will utter dark sayings of old." See, the word parable or proverb is parallel with dark sayings.

We have a tendency to think of something dark as something negative or bad. That is not what it means. Do not think that he is trying to tell you something evil. What he is really meaning here is something obscure, something that is a little difficult to understand, something that is going to take some contemplation, something that is going to take some meditation, some deep thought to really grasp the kernel, the principle of what he is

trying to get across. So the word mystery might be a good word to put here. I will open my mouth in a parable, and remember, parable has this sense of one thing beside another. Is it a comparison. But it takes some thought. And as we know from the way Jesus did it, He did it to obscure things a little bit. This is why verse 2 is a Messianic verse, you might say, because it was used of Christ and we will get that out in a second in Matthew 13.

But what he is trying to get across here is that he is going to tell us something that is a bit of a mystery. It is not something that you could come up with if you were just a normal person without being given a bit of prodding, a bit of help to understand what it is all about. So we could think of this term here either as the term parable, and especially the term dark saying, as something akin to a deep truth. Or a much longer way of looking at it, instruction learned only through careful thought and meditation. So if we put the other one in there, "I will open my mouth in a parable, I will utter deep truths of old," something that came from the beginning you could say.

As I mentioned, verse 2 is a Messianic prophecy. So let us go to Matthew 13 where we see this verse quoted. Matthew 13 is the chapter of parables of Jesus and in the middle of it,

Matthew 13:34-35 All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet [the prophet being Asaph in the psalms], saying: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world."

Ah ha. Is it not interesting that the New Testament changes that dark sayings of old to something that is more understandable to a New Testament Christian? That he will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world. These are things that God did not reveal right away.

Let's go back to verse 10. This is after He gave the Parable of the Sower.

Matthew 13:10-17 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of

the kingdom of heaven, but to them, it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance. But whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people [people of Israel] has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

What is He telling us here, if we use this to understand Psalm 78 a little bit better, He is essentially telling us that the people of Israel could not get what Asaph wrote. It was not written to them. It was in a sense, but not really. That was not the main audience. The main audience were those whose eyes have been opened and whose ears have been unstopped.

So who are we speaking to here? Who is Asaph speaking to? The called of God. That Zion that we read earlier. The lessons that he is trying to get across are for you and me, because Israel never could understand. These were deep mysteries from the foundation of the world that they could not grasp, as much as they tried. But only through the Spirit of God opening up our minds, our hearts, are we able to have an inkling of what they really mean. And so we are blessed because many people in history have tried to understand these things and were not able to because they were not called, were not given His Spirit. But we are able to, and we better learn the lessons.

What we have here, these dark sayings of old, have to do with God's plan and how He is going to work out salvation and entry into His Kingdom for those whose eyes He has opened. So we can understand that, right from the beginning of this psalm, that the majority of the people of Israel did not

understand, *could not* understand, could not react properly, and their repeated failings are proof of that. They could not get out of the rut, they could not get out of the pattern.

Now, it also tells us then that we can understand and we better get the point. If we do not get out of that rut, if we get in it, then our eternal life is on the line. Remember what it says there in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 about tasting the heavenly gift, and if we sin after that to the point where we are not repenting, there is no sacrifice for sin after that. We get one big chance so we need to learn the lesson.

Let us go back to verses 5 through 8 In Psalm 78. This is where he is telling the people who are reading this psalm that they should make God's law, God's instruction known to their children. Now, this refers back very clearly to Deuteronomy 6. In fact, we could say that Asaph modeled Psalm 78 on Deuteronomy 6; that we could say it is kind of a contemplation of Deuteronomy 6 played out in history. How God told Israel in Deuteronomy 6 what to do. I am your God. There is one God, that is Me, He says, so teach these things to your children when you are walking by the way, when you are sitting down, when you do this, when you do that. It should be on the front of your eyes and on your hand, when you go in by your gate and when you go out, you know, all of that.

And then what happens? He goes on and talks about, well, if you rebel, this is what is going to happen. And of course they did. And so Asaph looking back through history, writes Psalm 78 that has a very similar theme. And what the psalmist is doing here is admitting that Israel failed to keep the instruction of Deuteronomy 6. (I wanted to go and read all of Deuteronomy 6, but that is not possible. I will let you do that.) But I do want to read verses 6 through 9, which I just said, but I want you to see it here.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Now, what this shows is that it is less teaching your children by rote or formal education. That is kind of assumed that that would be done, that the Bible would be read to them and that they would be given some instruction. But what is really pointed out here is that the parents should be making an example of themselves through their daily life so that their children could look at the parents and see God's instruction in action.

And so when when the father or mother is sitting down and talking about it, they are talking good things, they are saying right things. And when they are walking by the way, children can see them interacting with people in a proper way. When you lie down, even when you are asleep, it sounds like you are doing what is right. And when you rise up, that all day long you are teaching your children the right way through your own actions and your own words.

Then it gets this here, "bind them on your hand." Your hand is what you do work with. And as frontlets, that is between your eyes, that is your thoughts. They can see what you are thinking and by what you say, they know that you are following God's way and speaking God's words. And it says when "you write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates," it is talking about going and interacting with the world—when you go in and out. How do you act when you are in the house versus how you act when you are out in the world? Is it the same? Do you do what is right out in the world or do you do what is wrong and then come home and do what is right for your family? Or is it the other way around? That you show a good pleasant demeanor to people outside. But when you come home, you beat your kids and your wife.

What is being shown here is that the best teacher is an example which God gave us in Jesus Christ. But the people of Israel were supposed to be this kind of an example to their children. And you know, children, they can spot hypocrisy from a mile away. They know when one is doing something, a parent is doing something that they do not really believe. Or, when they act two-faced, like I mentioned, out toward the world and what they do at home, they know a phony when they see it.

So what is being shown here is that the people of Israel may have given God lip service, but they never acted properly in their homes, they never taught their children. And so we see, in the metaphor that is given in Psalms 78:9, how this all turned out. It uses a metaphor about the children of Ephraim. They were armed and carrying bows and they turned back in the day of battle. This is not supposed to be a historical remembrance. What this is is a, well, I use the word metaphor. It is showing how they live their lives.

Ephraim was known as a fiercely militant people. They were among the foremost in battle when Israel went out and fought their wars. But when it came to the battle to keep God's laws and keep His covenants, what did it say they did? They allowed themselves to be routed. They ran. Remember, Paul said he has fought the good fight. Well, the Israelites here, they did not, they *ran* from the fight. They surrendered to the world in their own sinful desires. Then verses 10 and 11 tell us what they did, how they failed. They did not keep the covenant of God, they refused to walk in His way, in His law. They forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them.

This was their failing. This was the fight that they lost. It was not some historical battle. It was the battle to do what was right and to live God's way, and they lost it badly.

This term here "being armed and carrying bows," especially the carrying bows part, is badly translated, difficult to translate. It actually has a counterpart in Ephraim being a deceitful bow, which is said in Hosea 7:16. It is also mentioned in verse 57 of Psalm 78, that they "turned aside like a deceitful bow." Here is how one commentator, a man named W. R. Harper explained this:

The comparison is not to a bow which has lost its elasticity, nor one that cannot be used because it is relaxed, nor one whose string breaks while shooting the arrow, nor one which strikes and wounds the bowman, but rather to a bow which is expected to shoot in one direction, but actually shoots in another, thus failing to accomplish its end.

So the bow is what God gave them—all of His blessings, all of His wonders, all of His promises, everything that He gave them, that is the bow—but they turned around and used it for something entirely different. They shot it in another direction. And what we find is that Ephraim, or Israel, used its blessing to turn from God. If you go to Ezekiel the 16th chapter, verses 10 through 19, it is talking about all the blessings that God gave to Israel and she used them for idolatry, it says. If you want to put it into another metaphor, Israel was like an athlete that a coach trains, giving him every bit of training and sound advice that he had learned over the many years, and at the first drop of the hat, the athlete takes the opportunity to go play for another team. God had just given and given and given and given and Israel said, "Thanks, God, I'll go play with my friends over here." And that's what they did.

Very quickly I just want to mention a few things about the rest of the organization here of these psalms. We see in verses 12 through 16 that God acts in the Exodus and in the wilderness and these are wonderful miraculous events that anybody would surely say, "God is with us. He's on our side, let's worship Him! He's the one that we need to follow."

But then you get to verses 17 through 20 and Israel rebels. The Hebrew suggests here, "But they sin even more against Him," as it says there. The Hebrew suggests that these wonders hardly phased them and they certainly did not change them at all and they continued to sin. And then it says here that "they tested God in their heart (verse 18), by asking for the food of their fancy." They spoke against God and said, "Can you prepare a table in the wilderness?"

What they did after they saw these great miracles of God, they continued to sin and then they ramped up their demands, whatever they wanted. And they were testing Him to see if He would respond and it even shows them *taunting* Him. What have you done for me lately, God? Can you give me this? Can you give me that? And it says (verse 21) that tempting God or testing Him provokes Him to fury. If you want to make God mad, keep demanding things of Him to see if He will jump. That is what tempting God

is, or testing God. It is requesting things of Him to see if God will respond to your demands, to your way of looking at things. He is not going to be pushed around.

Who is the senior in this relationship? Actually, if we do that, we are being very presumptuous and out of our place. It is getting the relationship entirely backwards. It shows here that He saw (verse 22) their tempting Him as faithlessness because they always wanted proof that He would act for them rather than trust that He would indeed act for them. So they were always pushing at Him to give them what they wanted rather than wait for God to save them, deliver them at the right time. And what did God do? This is wonderful here. God responded by giving them something, manna, and then He gave them quail and they were stuffing their mouths with it. And then He struck them with a plague. While the food was still in their mouth He slew them in their lust, it says back in the Pentateuch.

But then God learned something about Israel that is incredible to think about. In verse 32, "In spite of this, they still sinned, and did not believe in His wondrous works. Therefore their days He consumed in futility, and their years in fear." He found out something about Israel, I am sure He knew it, but it really came to the fore when He did this. He found out that Israel—humankind, human nature—is perverse. They were perverse. His chastisements of them, His punishments of them for their sin, for their faithlessness, did not stop their sin, did not even in any way cause them to believe or trust Him. They just kept sinning. The punishment did not work.

And it says here that if He had kept on punishing them, that He would consume them in futility. They did not have what it took. They could not change. They were just a stubborn, intractable people. They would give Him lip service, it says here, but they would not give Him true fear. They would not give Him true worship.

Why? Verse 37, "For their heart was not steadfast with him, nor were they faithful in His covenant." Now, there is a lot more behind the words of this here, what it means. Here, this Hebrew word for steadfast means "fit." Their heart was not *fit* with Him. Their heart was not *prepared* with Him. In other words, as it says elsewhere, they had a heart of stone. It could not be worked with. God knew that He would have to change their hearts in order for them

to react properly to Him. And they would not change in their flesh, in their carnality, they would not change, they *could not* change. They did not have what it took.

So what did He do? He gave them grace, He had mercy on them. He had compassion. He forbore with them time and time again knowing that they were but flesh, carnal flesh. They were not going to change. And so He just kept things going for several generations. And what did He do? The next section actually answers it when we get down to the grace section in the second major recitation of Israel's history.

You know what he did? Do you know what His grace was ultimately? David. It says He chose Judah and then He chose David to shepherd His people. There is a lot more behind this as well because David is a type of Christ. His grace was to set His plan in motion once again by calling David, by setting up the monarchy, by working things out so that ultimately Jesus Christ would be born. That was the only answer because they needed a Savior. They needed someone who could pay for their sins and then a Spirit could be given to them to change their hearts. So He wanted to give them a shepherd, a true shepherd, which is mentioned here verse 70, in David, but it is really a type of Christ.

I was going to go to Hebrews 3:7-15, which kind of summarizes all of this, that "Do not harden your heart as in the rebellion," like those Israelites did. I do want to just read just a little part of it.

Hebrews 3:12-15 Beware, brethren, lest there be any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast [there is that word again] to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Now, because our hearts have been transformed by God's Spirit we do not have to follow that sinful destructive pattern of Israel. And as Peter writes,

I Peter 5:10-11 May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.