

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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## Psalm 78 — A Record of Rebellion and Redemption

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 78

- Psalm 77 serves to introduce Psalm 78:
  - ✓ Vocabulary: “might/power” (77:14; 78:26), “Most High” (77:10; 78:17, 35, 56), “right hand” (77:10; 78:54).
  - ✓ Theme: the exodus from Egypt (77:11-20; 78:11-72).
  - ✓ Remembering God’s wondrous deeds (77:11-12, 16-20; 78:4, 7, 11, 12, 32, 43).
  - ✓ Shepherding (77:20; 78:52, 70-72).
- In the Psalter, only Psalm 119 is longer. Of those psalms that recite Israel’s history (Pss 78, 105–107, 114, and 135–136), this is the longest.
- The concluding verses of Psalm 78 reveal the Davidic focus of the psalm, presenting David as the second Moses.

### 2.0 Reading Psalm 78 (NAU)

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

Listen, O my people, to my instruction;  
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

**78:2** I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings of old,

**78:3** Which we have heard and known,  
And our fathers have told us.

**78:4** We will not conceal them from their children,  
But tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,  
And His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.

**78:5** For He established a testimony in Jacob  
And appointed a law in Israel,  
Which He commanded our fathers  
That they should teach them to their children,

- 78:6** That the generation to come might know, *even* the children *yet* to be born,  
*That* they may arise and tell *them* to their children,
- 78:7** That they should put their confidence in God  
And not forget the works of God,  
But keep His commandments,
- 78:8** And not be like their fathers,  
A stubborn and rebellious generation,  
A generation that did not prepare its heart  
And whose spirit was not faithful to God.
- 78:9** The sons of Ephraim were archers equipped with bows,  
*Yet* they turned back in the day of battle.
- 78:10** They did not keep the covenant of God  
And refused to walk in His law;
- 78:11** They forgot His deeds  
And His miracles that He had shown them.
- 78:12** He wrought wonders before their fathers  
In the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan.
- 78:13** He divided the sea and caused them to pass through,  
And He made the waters stand up like a heap.
- 78:14** Then He led them with the cloud by day  
And all the night with a light of fire.
- 78:15** He split the rocks in the wilderness  
And gave *them* abundant drink like the ocean depths.
- 78:16** He brought forth streams also from the rock  
And caused waters to run down like rivers.
- 78:17** **Yet they still continued to sin against Him,  
To rebel against the Most High in the desert.**
- 78:18** And in their heart they put God to the test  
By asking food according to their desire.
- 78:19** Then they spoke against God;  
They said, "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?"
- 78:20** "Behold, He struck the rock so that waters gushed out,  
And streams were overflowing;  
Can He give bread also?  
Will He provide meat for His people?"
- 78:21** Therefore the LORD heard and was full of wrath;  
And a fire was kindled against Jacob  
And anger also mounted against Israel,
- 78:22** Because they did not believe in God  
And did not trust in His salvation.
- 78:23** Yet He commanded the clouds above  
And opened the doors of heaven;



- 78:24** He rained down manna upon them to eat  
And gave them food from heaven.
- 78:25** Man did eat the bread of angels;  
He sent them food in abundance.
- 78:26** He caused the east wind to blow in the heavens  
And by His power He directed the south wind.
- 78:27** When He rained meat upon them like the dust,  
Even winged fowl like the sand of the seas,
- 78:28** Then He let *them* fall in the midst of their camp,  
Round about their dwellings.
- 78:29** So they ate and were well filled,  
And their desire He gave to them.
- 78:30** Before they had satisfied their desire,  
While their food was in their mouths,
- 78:31** The anger of God rose against them  
And killed some of their stoutest ones,  
And subdued the choice men of Israel.
- 78:32** **In spite of all this they still sinned**  
**And did not believe in His wonderful works.**
- 78:33** So He brought their days to an end in futility  
And their years in sudden terror.
- 78:34** When He killed them, then they sought Him,  
And returned and searched diligently for God;
- 78:35** And they remembered that God was their rock,  
And the Most High God their Redeemer.
- 78:36** But they deceived Him with their mouth  
And lied to Him with their tongue.
- 78:37** For their heart was not steadfast toward Him,  
Nor were they faithful in His covenant.
- 78:38** But He, being compassionate, forgave *their* iniquity and did not destroy *them*;  
And often He restrained His anger  
And did not arouse all His wrath.
- 78:39** Thus He remembered that they were but flesh,  
A wind that passes and does not return.
- 78:40** **How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness**  
**And grieved Him in the desert!**
- 78:41** Again and again they tempted God,  
And pained the Holy One of Israel.
- 78:42** They did not remember His power,  
The day when He redeemed them from the adversary,
- 78:43** When He performed His signs in Egypt  
And His marvels in the field of Zoan,
- 78:44** And turned their rivers to blood,  
And their streams, they could not drink.



- 78:45 He sent among them swarms of flies which devoured them,  
And frogs which destroyed them.
- 78:46 He gave also their crops to the grasshopper  
And the product of their labor to the locust.
- 78:47 He destroyed their vines with hailstones  
And their sycamore trees with frost.
- 78:48 He gave over their cattle also to the hailstones  
And their herds to bolts of lightning.
- 78:49 He sent upon them His burning anger,  
Fury and indignation and trouble,  
A band of destroying angels.
- 78:50 He leveled a path for His anger;  
He did not spare their soul from death,  
But gave over their life to the plague,
- 78:51 And smote all the firstborn in Egypt,  
The first *issue* of their virility in the tents of Ham.
- 78:52 But He led forth His own people like sheep  
And guided them in the wilderness like a flock;
- 78:53 He led them safely, so that they did not fear;  
But the sea engulfed their enemies.
- 78:54 So He brought them to His holy land,  
To this hill country which His right hand had gained.
- 78:55 He also drove out the nations before them  
And apportioned them for an inheritance by measurement,  
And made the tribes of Israel dwell in their tents.
- 78:56 Yet they tempted and rebelled against the Most High God  
And did not keep His testimonies,**
- 78:57 But turned back and acted treacherously like their fathers;  
They turned aside like a treacherous bow.
- 78:58 For they provoked Him with their high places  
And aroused His jealousy with their graven images.
- 78:59 When God heard, He was filled with wrath  
And greatly abhorred Israel;
- 78:60 So that He abandoned the dwelling place at Shiloh,  
The tent which He had pitched among men,
- 78:61 And gave up His strength to captivity  
And His glory into the hand of the adversary.
- 78:62 He also delivered His people to the sword,  
And was filled with wrath at His inheritance.
- 78:63 Fire devoured His young men,  
And His virgins had no wedding songs.
- 78:64 His priests fell by the sword,  
And His widows could not weep.



- 78:65** Then the Lord awoke as *if from* sleep,  
Like a warrior overcome by wine.
- 78:66** He drove His adversaries backward;  
He put on them an everlasting reproach.
- 78:67** He also rejected the tent of Joseph,  
And did not choose the tribe of Ephraim,
- 78:68** But chose the tribe of Judah,  
Mount Zion which He loved.
- 78:69** And He built His sanctuary like the heights,  
Like the earth which He has founded forever.
- 78:70** He also chose David His servant  
And took him from the sheepfolds;
- 78:71** From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him  
To shepherd Jacob His people,  
And Israel His inheritance.
- 78:72** So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,  
And guided them with his skillful hands.

### 3.0 Understanding Psalm 78

#### 3.1 Outline

- I. A Summons to Instruction (vv. 1-11)
- II. From Egypt to the Wilderness (vv. 12-39)
  - A. God's Wonders and Wrath (vv. 12-32)
  - B. God's Covenant and Compassion (vv. 33-39)
- III. From Egypt to the Promised Land (vv. 40-72)
  - A. God's Wonders and Wrath (vv. 40-64)
  - B. God's Care and Choosing (vv. 65-72)



#### 3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** "Maskil"
  - A skillful and artistic psalm teaching wisdom. See Psalms 32; 43–45; 52–55; and 74.
  - As "A Maskil of Asaph," Psalm 74 also focuses on the wondrous deeds of the Lord in the exodus from Egypt.
- **vv. 1-11 A Summons to Instruction**
  - This psalm provides a necessary reminder to those who had forgotten (verse 11) what God had done on their behalf.
- **v. 1** "my instruction . . . the words of my mouth"
  - "Instruction" (*t Torah*) = giving direction to someone.
  - "The words of my mouth" ties this psalm to wisdom literature (cf. Prov 4:5; 5:7; and 7:24) and to the "Song of Moses" (Deut 32:1).

- **v. 2** “a parable . . . dark sayings of old”
  - “Parable” occurs also in Ezekiel 24:3 with reference to teaching rebellious Israel.
  - “Dark sayings” are literally “riddles” (cp. Ps 49:4).
  - Note the use of both of these words in Ezekiel 17:2 and Proverbs 1:6 (“figure” = “parable”).
  
- **v. 4** “tell to the generation to come”
  - See Psalms 44:1-3 and 102:18.
  
- **v. 9** “The sons of Ephraim”
  - Ephraim failed to drive the Canaanites out of their inherited territory (Judg 1:29).
  - Verse 67 concludes Psalm 78 with a reference to the Ephraimites, just like the introduction to the psalm, concludes with the same reference.
  - Ephraim is representative of the northern kingdom of Israel as a whole (cp. Hos 5:3).
  
- **v. 10** “the covenant of God”
  - This is the first time in the Psalms that a psalmist employs the word “covenant” (see, also, v. 37).
  - The covenant in view appears to be the Mosaic Covenant.
    - ✓ Theme of law (vv. 5, 7, 10, 56).
    - ✓ Emphasis on human responsibility (vv. 10-11, 17, 22, 32, 36-37, 40-42, 56-58).
    - ✓ References to sabbath, sanctuary (vv. 60, 69), and divine sovereignty (vv. 4-5, 23-24, 26-28, 42-55, 66-71).
  
- **vv. 12-39 From Egypt to the Wilderness**
  - Throughout this section of the psalm, the psalmist contrasts God’s actions with those of His people.
  - Israel’s first generation in the wilderness rebelled, repented falsely, and received divine grace.
  
- **v. 12** “Zoan”
  - Scripture mentions Zoan seven times (Num 13:22; Ps 78:12, 43; Isa 19:11, 13; 30:4; and Ezek 30:14).
  - Its location was in the Nile delta and was also known as Tanis.
  - It represents the cities of Egypt.
  
- **vv. 17, 32, 40, 56 Refrain**
  - This refrain takes varied forms, but the same theme and shared vocabulary.
  - One cannot help but think of the “Song of Moses” (Deut 32), which exhibits the same theme of characteristic rebellion.
  - The repetition of rebellion followed by divine grace is reminiscent of the cycle represented in the Book of Judges.

- **v. 25** “the bread of angels”
  - This is a description of the manna that God supplied for Israel’s nourishment in the wilderness.
  - “Angels” is literally “mighty ones” (*’abbirim*)—the only such application of the term to angels (a different word is used in v. 49).
  - The word is related to the divine title, “Mighty One” (*’abbir* — Gen 49:24; Isa 1:24; 49:26; 60:16).
- **v. 35** “God was their rock”
  - Compare Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31; Psalms 18:2, 31, 46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2-3; 42:9; 61:2; 62:2, 6-7; 71:3; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1.
  - Is it no wonder that Paul writes, “they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4)?
- **vv. 40-72 From Egypt to the Promised Land**
  - Like wayward sheep, Israel persisted in their rebellion even after their arrival in the Promised Land (God’s “holy land,” v. 54).
  - Israel’s second generation in the wilderness ended up like their parents (v. 57). They failed to learn from their parents’ rebellion and destruction.
- **vv. 67-68 Double Chiasm**
  - **a** He also rejected
    - b** the tent of Joseph,
    - b'** the tribe of Ephraim,
  - a'** And did not choose
  - a** But chose
    - b** the tribe of Judah,
    - b'** Mount Zion
  - a'** which He loved.
  - Message of the psalm: God remains faithful and has not abandoned His original declaration about Judah’s prominence (see Gen 49:10).
  - Background for verses 67-68: God’s rejection of Saul (from the northern tribe of Benjamin, an ally of Ephraim) and His selection of David to be king (1 Sam 15:10–16:13).

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 78

##### My People, Give Ear (Tune: “O Worship the King”)



**1** My people, give ear, attend to My Word,  
In parables new deep truths shall be heard;  
The wonderful story our fathers made known  
To children succeeding by us must be shown.

**2** Instructing our sons we gladly record  
The praises, the works, the might of the Lord,  
For He hath commanded that what He hath done  
Be passed in tradition from father to son.

**3** Let children thus learn from history’s light  
To hope in our God and walk in His sight,  
The God of their fathers to fear and obey,  
And ne’er like their fathers to turn from His way.

**4** The story be told, to warn and restrain,  
Of hearts that were hard, rebellious, and vain,  
Of soldiers who faltered when battle was near,  
Who kept not God’s cov’nant nor walked in His fear.

**5** God's wonderful works to them He had shown,  
His marvelous deeds their fathers had known;  
He made for their pathway the waters divide,  
His glorious pillar of cloud was their guide.

**9** Though well they were filled, their folly they chose;  
Till God in His wrath o'erwhelmed them with woes;  
He slew of their strongest and smote their young men,  
But still unbelieving they sinned even then.

**11** Not right with their God in heart and in will,  
They faithlessly broke His covenant still;  
But He, in compassion, reluctant to slay,  
Forgave them and oft turned His anger away.

**13** They limited God, the Most Holy One,  
And hindered the work His grace had begun;  
The hand that was mighty to save they forgot,  
The day of redemption remembering not.

**15** They thought not of how, their freedom to gain,  
In Egypt's abodes the first born were slain,  
And how all God's people were led forth like sheep,  
The flock He delighted in safety to keep.

**19** He gave them to death in battle, although  
His glory and strength were scorned by the foe;  
Their young men were fallen, their maidens unwed,  
Their priest slain in battle, none wept for the dead.

**21** His servant He called, a shepherd of sheep,  
From tending his flock, the people to keep;  
So David their shepherd with wisdom and might  
Protected and fed them and led them aright.

**6** He gave them to drink, relieving their thirst,  
And forth from the rock caused water to burst;  
Yet faithless they tempted their God, and they said,  
Can He Who gave water supply us with bread?

**10** Because of their sin He smote with His rod,  
And then they returned and sought for their God;  
Their Rock and Redeemer was God the Most high,  
Yet false were their praises, their promise a lie.

**12** His pity was great, though often they sinned,  
For they were but flesh, a swift passing wind;  
Yet though His compassion and grace they beheld,  
They tempted and grieved Him and often rebelled.

**14** Ungrateful and blind, no longer they thought  
Of wonders and signs and mighty deeds wrought,  
Of how all the rivers of Egypt ran red,  
And plagues in God's anger were heaped on their head.

**16** Unharm'd through the sea, where perished their foe,  
He caused them with ease and safety to go;  
His holy land gaining, in peace they were brought  
To dwell in the mountain the Lord's hand had bought.

**20** Then mercy awoke, the Lord in His might  
Returned, and the foes were scattered in flight;  
Again to His people His favor He showed  
And chose in Mount Zion to fix His abode.

— *The Psalter (1912)*

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/m/y/mypeople.htm>

## 5.0 Praying Psalm 78

- Lord, cause me to listen to and obey Your instruction. [v. 1]
- Teach me how to pass on Your instruction to my children and my grandchildren. [vv. 4-7]
- Father, forgive me for my stubbornness, rebellion, and unfaithfulness. [v. 8]
- Oh God, keep me from failure to trust Your saving work in my life. [v. 22]
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## 6.0 Applying Psalm 78

- We must pass on spiritual lessons to our children to celebrate God's faithfulness and to avoid past mistakes.
- Though repeatedly provoked by His people, God continues to care for and provide for them.