

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 78

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 78 is one of the longest psalms in the Psalter and one of the most sustained examples of *maschil* (didactic/instructional poetry) in the Old Testament. The psalmist Asaph opens with a formal call to hear — structuring the whole psalm as a teaching address to the covenant community — and immediately declares his purpose: to speak in parables and dark sayings, to rehearse the praiseworthy acts of the LORD and the stubborn failures of the fathers, so that the next generation will know, trust, and obey. The body of the psalm is a selective, theologically interpreted rehearsal of Israel's history from Egypt through the wilderness to the conquest and the establishment of David's reign, tracing a recurring cycle: God's mighty acts of deliverance and provision → Israel's forgetting, unbelief, and rebellion → God's judgment → God's relenting mercy → the cycle beginning again. The psalm culminates not in despair but in election: God rejects Ephraim and chooses Judah, Zion, and David — grace overriding the pattern of failure.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through this psalm is to break the cycle of covenant amnesia by compelling Israel — and every subsequent generation of God's people — to look squarely at the history of grace spurned and grace renewed, so that they will fear the LORD, trust His works, keep His commandments, and not be like their fathers. The psalm is not primarily a history lesson — it is a warning delivered through history, and simultaneously a testimony to God's astonishing, inexhaustible, undeserved mercy. The intent is simultaneously diagnostic (exposing the anatomy of unbelief and its consequences) and doxological (displaying the God who relents, remembers, and restores despite everything). The closing movement — God choosing David as shepherd-king — declares that the answer to Israel's failure is not Israel's improvement but God's sovereign, gracious provision of leadership and a new beginning.

Subject Sentence: Israel's long history of grace spurned and grace renewed — and the God who does not abandon His people despite their repeated unbelief.

Primary Claim: God is calling every generation of His covenant people to remember His mighty works and the faithfulness He has shown despite human unfaithfulness, so that they will not repeat the pattern of their fathers — forgetting, testing, and rebelling — but

will trust, obey, and find in God's sovereign mercy the only secure foundation for covenant life.

Interpretive Evaluation

The psalm's genre and purpose: There is broad interpretive consensus that Psalm 78 belongs to the *maschil* genre — an instructional, wisdom-inflected psalm — and that it functions as a didactic recital of salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*). This consensus across traditions is well-founded: Asaph explicitly frames the psalm as teaching (vv. 1-4) and explicitly names the pedagogical goal (vv. 5-8). No significant divergence exists here.

The function of the historical rehearsal: A significant interpretive question concerns *why* Asaph selects and arranges Israel's history as he does. Some traditions read this psalm primarily as a call to national repentance and covenant renewal — emphasizing the warning dimension. Reformed interpretation, while affirming that dimension, insists the psalm cannot be reduced to mere moral warning: the closing sections (vv. 65-72) reveal that the ultimate answer to Israel's failure is not Israel's resolution but God's sovereign election — of Judah, Zion, and David. The psalm begins with the problem of human failure and ends with the solution of divine grace. The didactic warning is real, but it is framed within a doxological confession of God's mercy that prevents the psalm from becoming simple moralism. This Reformed reading is preferred because it alone accounts for the structural movement of the psalm: Asaph does not end with a renewed call to obedience but with the story of what God did despite Israel's failure.

The “parable” language (v. 2): Matthew 13:35 cites verse 2 (“I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old”) as fulfilled in Jesus's teaching in parables. Some dispensational and evangelical interpreters treat this as an incidental quotation rather than genuine typological fulfillment. Reformed interpretation holds that Matthew's citation is neither incidental nor strained: Asaph's role as a Spirit-inspired singer of Israel's sacred history participates in the same revelatory pattern that reaches its fullness in Christ's proclamation. The “hidden things” (*hidōth* — dark sayings, riddles) of Israel's history are not merely obscure traditions but carry a veiled eschatological freight that Jesus's teaching and the Spirit's illumination progressively disclose. This does not mean Psalm 78 is primarily a messianic prophecy — it is not — but it does mean the psalm's wisdom-teaching function is part of a larger canonical movement toward Christ as the supreme teacher and shepherd-king (cf. vv. 70-72).

The portrayal of God's anger and relenting: Some Wesleyan/Arminian readers use Psalm 78 to argue that God's responses are genuinely reactive — that He changes His mind in response to human behavior in ways that imply open or conditioned foreknowledge. Reformed interpretation acknowledges that the language is real, not merely anthropomorphic in a dismissive sense — God's anger is genuine, His mercy is genuine — but insists that the pattern of the psalm reveals not a reactive God buffeted by human choices but a sovereign God who works His redemptive purposes *through* and *despite* the

entire history of human failure. The fact that the psalm ends in confident declaration of God’s choice (vv. 67-72) rather than in uncertainty underscores this. The Arminian reading is qualified but not fully adopted: the emotional and relational reality of God’s responses is affirmed; the implication that God’s purposes are contingently determined by human behavior is resisted by the psalm’s own structure.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 6:20-25** — The command to rehearse the LORD’s saving acts to the next generation; Psalm 78 is Asaph’s sustained fulfillment of the Deuteronomy mandate — the pedagogy of covenant memory.
 - **Exodus 16-17; Numbers 11; 14** — The wilderness rebellion episodes Asaph recounts; the canonical grounding for the historical content of the psalm and the specific nature of Israel’s testing and unbelief.
 - **Hosea 11:1-9** — God’s emotional wrestling between judgment and mercy toward unfaithful Israel; the most direct prophetic parallel to the dynamic the psalm displays — “How can I give you up, Ephraim?” — expressing the same tension Psalm 78 narrates historically.
 - **Matthew 13:35** — Matthew’s citation of verse 2 as fulfilled in Jesus’s parabolic teaching; establishes the psalm’s wisdom-teaching function as part of a redemptive-historical trajectory fulfilled in Christ.
 - **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** — Paul’s direct engagement with the same wilderness tradition, using it as a warning to the Corinthian church: “these things happened as examples for us.” The New Testament appropriation of Psalm 78’s didactic logic — the church must not repeat Israel’s pattern.
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Aim

This analysis sets out to equip the teacher or preacher to confront the congregation with the full anatomy of covenant amnesia — its causes, its consequences, and its cure — and to ground the call to faithful trust not in moral resolve but in the astonishing mercy of the God who does not abandon His people despite every provocation.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1-4	Call to hear: Asaph summons the congregation to listen to teaching (<i>maschil</i>); he will speak in	Formal wisdom-teaching opening; <i>parable/dark sayings</i> language connects to Matthew 13:35

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	parables and dark sayings — the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, His power and wonders	
5-8	Purpose declared: The LORD established His statutes in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel — to be taught to the next generation, who will in turn teach their children — so that they will trust God and not forget His works, and not be like their stubborn, rebellious fathers	The pedagogical mandate: transgenerational covenant memory as the antidote to the cycle of failure
9-11	The failure of Ephraim: Armed with bows, they turned back in battle; they did not keep God's covenant, refused to walk in His law, forgot what He had done, the wonders He had shown them	Ephraim introduced immediately as the negative example; the psalm opens its historical recital with failure
12-16	God's wonders in Egypt and the Exodus: He did marvelous things before their fathers — splitting the sea, leading by cloud, bringing water from the rock	The counter-narrative begins: what God did before the rebellion
17-20	Israel's first wilderness rebellion: Despite the wonders, they sinned more and rebelled in the desert, testing God by demanding food — "Can God really furnish a table in the wilderness?"	The grammar of unbelief: grace received → immediate doubt about future grace
21-31	God's anger and provision: The LORD heard and was furious; fire broke out, anger rose against Israel — but He gave them manna, bread of	Judgment and mercy intertwined: God provides what they demanded while judging the unbelief behind the demand

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	angels, meat from the skies — yet even as they ate He struck them down; His anger flared against those who craved	
32-39	The cycle intensifies: Despite the miracles, they kept sinning; they did not believe in His wonders; He ended their days in futility — yet when He slew them, they sought Him; they returned, but only with their mouths, not their hearts — lying to Him, not faithful — but He was compassionate, atoned for iniquity, restrained His anger, remembered they were flesh	The pastoral center of the psalm: the full exposure of Israel's heart — and the full exposure of God's compassion despite it
40-55	Extended recital of wilderness rebellion and Exodus wonders: How often they rebelled! — grieving Him in the desert; they did not remember His power, the day He redeemed them from the foe — the plagues of Egypt rehearsed; He brought them to His holy land, drove out the nations before them, allotted their inheritance	The longest narrative section: Asaph rehearses the Exodus plagues in detail before returning to rebellion
56-64	Rebellion in the land: They tested and rebelled against God Most High; they did not keep His statutes; they worshiped idols and provoked Him; He abandoned His tabernacle at Shiloh (the tent He had set among men); He gave His ark into captivity, His	The catastrophe of Shiloh: the ark's capture (1 Sam. 4) as the nadir of the cycle — the most devastating consequence of the pattern

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
65-66	people to the sword; fire consumed their young men, no songs for their maidens The LORD awakes: Like a warrior waking from sleep, like a man shaking off wine, He drove back His enemies to everlasting disgrace	The dramatic turn: sovereign divine initiative, not human repentance
67-69	God's sovereign election: He rejected the tent of Joseph, did not choose Ephraim, but chose Judah, Mount Zion, which He loved — He built His sanctuary like the heights, like the earth He established forever	The answer to failure: divine election, not human improvement; Zion chosen
70-72	David chosen: He chose David His servant, took him from the sheep pens, from tending ewes with young He brought him to shepherd His people Jacob, Israel His inheritance — and David shepherded them with integrity of heart and skillful hands	The psalm closes on David as shepherd-king: God's grace-answer to Israel's failure; typological pointer to the greater Shepherd-King

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-8	The Pedagogical Mandate: Covenant Memory as the Antidote to Covenant Failure
2	9-11	The Paradigm Case: Ephraim's Failure Introduces the Pattern
3	12-31	The First Wilderness Cycle: Wonders, Rebellion, Provision, Judgment
4	32-39	The Pastoral Center: The Full

Division	Verses	Label
		Anatomy of Unbelief and the Full Depth of Mercy
5	40-55	The Exodus Rehearsed: God's Power Against Egypt and Toward His People
6	56-64	The Catastrophe of Shiloh: Rebellion in the Land and Its Consequences
7	65-72	The Sovereign Turn: God Awakes, Elects Judah and Zion, and Raises David

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel's long history of grace spurned and grace renewed — and the God who does not abandon His people despite their repeated unbelief.

Primary Claim: God is calling every generation of His covenant people to remember His mighty works and the faithfulness He has shown despite human unfaithfulness, so that they will not repeat the pattern of their fathers — forgetting, testing, and rebelling — but will trust, obey, and find in God's sovereign mercy the only secure foundation for covenant life.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Diagnose the anatomy of your own unbelief by learning the pattern the psalm exposes. Psalm 78 does not present Israel's failure as exotic or incomprehensible — it presents it as a precise, repeatable pattern: grace received → forgetting → doubt about future grace → testing God **???** demanding what He has not given → consuming what He provides without worshiping the Giver. The congregation should be equipped to recognize this pattern in themselves, not merely to condemn it in Israel. The question is not “how could they do that after seeing the Red Sea?” — it is “where in my own life am I forgetting what God has done, doubting what He will do, and testing Him by demanding what I think I need?”

2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the staggering mercy of verses 32-39 produce grief, wonder, and love — not merely cognitive admiration. The pastoral center of the psalm (vv. 32-39) is one of Scripture's most concentrated portraits of divine compassion toward undeserving, insincere, flattering sinners: “Yet he was compassionate; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh.” This is not an interesting

theological fact — it is a description of what God did for people who lied to Him with their mouths while their hearts were elsewhere. The application is not “God is patient, so be patient.” The application is: kneel before this God. Let it produce awe that God has extended this same mercy to you, not because your repentance was sincere enough but because He remembered you are dust.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Establish concrete practices of transgenerational covenant memory in your family and community. Verses 5-7 are explicit: God established His statutes so that fathers would teach their children, who would teach their children — so that each generation would put its hope in God and not forget His works. This is not a metaphor. The application is concrete: what are you doing to ensure that the people in your household, your church, and your sphere of influence know the story of what God has done? Family devotion, testimony in the congregation, deliberate rehearsal of answered prayer and gospel grace — these are not optional spiritual enrichments. According to Psalm 78, they are the mechanism by which the cycle of forgetting is interrupted.

4. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe your understanding of God’s ultimate answer to human failure: it is not your improvement but His sovereign, gracious provision. The psalm’s structural movement is decisive: it does not end with a renewed call to Israel to do better. It ends with God acting — waking like a warrior, rejecting Ephraim, choosing Judah, building Zion, raising David. The answer to the entire history of failure recounted in the psalm is not found in Israel getting their act together. It is found in God’s sovereign election and His provision of a shepherd-king. For the Christian, this is explicitly Christological: the David of Psalm 78 points beyond himself to the Son of David who is the true Shepherd of His people (John 10; Hebrews 13:20). The application is this: your hope does not rest on whether you finally break the cycle. It rests on the Shepherd God provided when the cycle had run its full, catastrophic course.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Grieve the casualness with which you treat the means of grace — and return to them with recovered reverence. The Shiloh catastrophe (vv. 56-64) — the ark taken, the tabernacle abandoned, the young men consumed — is the nadir of the psalm’s recited history. It happened because Israel treated the presence of God as a given, worshiped idols, and forgot what the tabernacle represented. For the New Testament congregation, the application is not abstract: the word of God, prayer, the Lord’s Table, the gathered assembly of the saints — these are the places where God has promised to meet His people. They are not magic, but neither are they merely cultural habits. The question is whether you approach them with the seriousness of someone who knows what it means when God withdraws His presence, or with the casualness of someone who has never imagined Shiloh.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 78 is theologically important as one of Scripture’s most comprehensive expositions of the doctrine of God’s covenant faithfulness set against the

backdrop of human covenant failure. The psalm teaches that God's mercy is not contingent on the sincerity or consistency of human repentance — it arises from His own character and His own sovereign purposes (vv. 38-39: "he was compassionate...he remembered they were but flesh"). The psalm also teaches that God's judgments are real and not merely pedagogical threats — the consequences of rebellion are genuinely devastating — but that they never constitute His final word to His people. Perhaps most significantly, the psalm demonstrates that God's ultimate provision for His people's failure is not reformation but election and representation: He raises a shepherd-king to tend the people who have proven incapable of tending themselves. This is the theological logic that runs from David through to Christ — and it is Psalm 78 that most explicitly embeds that provision within the history of covenant failure that makes it necessary.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 78 is a sustained display of Reformed soteriology in narrative form: total depravity is not a philosophical abstraction but a repeated historical pattern — Israel received grace, forgot grace, doubted grace, and rebelled, in cycle after cycle, generation after generation, despite signs and wonders that should have produced permanent transformation. The psalm offers no hope that Israel will eventually get it right through moral development or adequate instruction — the pedagogical mandate of verses 5-8 is real, but it is set within a history that shows instruction alone does not break the pattern. The answer is God's sovereign election and provision: He chooses Judah, He builds Zion, He raises David — not because David's generation was better, but because God acted in sovereign grace. For Reformed exposition, this psalm is a powerful guard against two errors simultaneously: the moralist error (preaching the historical recital as a call to try harder) and the quietist error (treating the pattern as inevitable and therefore pastoral urgency as pointless). The psalm calls for real, concrete, transgenerational effort in covenant memory — and it grounds that effort not in human capability but in the God whose mercy outlasts every cycle of failure and who has already acted decisively in the provision of the Shepherd-King.

Main Takeaway

This is who your God is: the One who watched generation after generation forget His wonders, test His patience, and pursue other gods — and kept relenting, kept providing, kept pursuing — and when the cycle had run its full catastrophic course, did not issue a stronger warning but raised a shepherd. Stop trusting your own ability to break the pattern. Learn the history. Teach it to your children. And worship the God whose mercy is more durable than your unfaithfulness.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the psalm as a straight morality tale — “don’t be like Israel.”** This is the most common mishandling of Psalm 78, and the most dangerous, because it is half-true. The warning dimension is real — “do not be like your fathers” (v. 8) is explicit. But a sermon that ends with that call, without arriving at vv. 65-72, has stopped reading before the psalm does. The psalm’s structure is deliberate: the historical recital of failure leads not to a renewed imperative but to a declaration of sovereign grace. Preach the warning inside the doxology, not the doxology as a footnote to the warning.
- **Flattening the Ephraim/Judah distinction into merely historical detail.** The rejection of Ephraim and the election of Judah (vv. 67-68) is not a tribal footnote — it is the theological resolution of the entire psalm. God does not simply forgive and reset; He makes a sovereign, gracious choice that reconfigures the entire future of His redemptive purposes. Missing this misses the structural logic of the psalm and cuts off the Davidic-Christological trajectory that the psalm’s conclusion establishes.
- **Treating the historical content as ancient history irrelevant to contemporary congregations.** Paul explicitly warns against this error in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13: “these things happened as examples for us.” Asaph himself frames the psalm as a word for every generation (vv. 5-7). The preacher must do the work of translating the historical specificity (manna, quail, Shiloh, the ark) into its functional equivalents in the congregation’s experience — not by allegorizing but by identifying the same pattern of grace-reception-forgetting-testing in contemporary covenant life.
- **Missing the Christological telos of the Davidic conclusion.** Verse 72 describes David shepherding with “integrity of heart and skillful hands” — but the psalm has just spent seventy verses demonstrating that no one in Israel’s history managed to do this faithfully for long. David himself is a grace-provision, not a human achievement. The Reformed preacher should note what the New Testament makes explicit: the shepherd-king of Psalm 78’s conclusion finds His ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who is the Good Shepherd, the Son of David, who shepherds His people with the integrity of heart that Israel’s entire history could not produce (John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20-21).
- **Preaching the psalm without the pedagogical application of vv. 5-8.** The opening mandate is not decorative — it is the psalm’s stated purpose. God established His covenant instruction so that it would be taught from generation to generation. A sermon on Psalm 78 that does not conclude with a concrete call to transgenerational covenant memory has missed what Asaph himself said he was doing. This does not mean reducing the sermon to a children’s ministry recruitment pitch — it means taking seriously that the antidote to the cycle of forgetting is

deliberate, structured, habitual rehearsal of God's mighty works in the covenant community.

- **Underplaying the genuine anger of God in the judgment passages.** The temptation in contemporary preaching is to hurry past vv. 21-31 and 56-64 to arrive at the mercy passages. But the psalm dwells on divine judgment at length and with specificity — the fire that broke out, the striking down even while they ate, the abandonment of Shiloh, the young men consumed. This is not incidental. The mercy of vv. 38-39 only lands with full weight when the congregation has felt the full weight of what God was relenting from. Preach the judgment clearly; the mercy will be correspondingly astonishing.