

PSALM 78

This psalm is historical; it is a narrative of the great mercies God had bestowed upon Israel, the great sins wherewith they had provoked him, and the many tokens of his displeasure they had been under for their sins. The psalmist began, in the foregoing psalm, to relate God's wonders of old, for his own encouragement in a difficult time; there he broke off abruptly, but here resumes the subject, for the edification of the church, and enlarges much upon it, showing not only how good God had been to them, which was an earnest of further finishing mercy, but how basely they had conducted themselves towards God, which justified him in correcting them as he did at this time, and forbade all complaints. Here is,

I. The preface to this church history, commanding the attention of the present age to it and recommending it to the study of the generations to come (v. 1-8).

II. The history itself from Moses to David; it is put into a psalm or song that it might be the better remembered and transmitted to posterity, and that the singing of it might affect them with the things here related, more than they would be with a bare narrative of them. The general scope of this psalm we have (v. 9-11) where notice is taken of the present rebukes they were under (v. 9), the sin which brought them under those rebukes (v. 10), and the mercies of God to them formerly, which aggravated that sin (v. 11). As to the particulars, we are here told,

1. What wonderful works God had wrought for them in bringing them out of Egypt (v. 12-16), providing for them in the wilderness (v. 23-29), plaguing and ruining their enemies (v. 43-53), and at length putting them in possession of the land of promise (v. 54, 55).

2. How ungrateful they were to God for his favours to them and how many and great provocations they were guilty of. How they murmured against God and distrusted him (v. 17-20), and did but counterfeit repentance and submission when he punished them (v. 34-37), thus grieving and tempting him (v. 40-42). How they affronted God with their idolatries after they came to Canaan (v. 56-58).

3. How God had justly punished them for their sins (v. 21, 22) in the wilderness, making their sin their punishment (v. 29-33), and now, of late, when the ark was taken by the Philistines (v. 59-64).

4. How graciously God had spared them and returned in mercy to them, notwithstanding their provocations. He had forgiven them formerly (v. 38, 39), and now, of late, had removed the judgments they had brought upon themselves, and brought them under a happy establishment both in church and state (v. 65-72). As the general scope of this psalm may be of use to us in the singing of it, to put us upon recollecting what God has done for us and for his church formerly, and what we have done against him, so the particulars also may be of use to us, for warning against those sins of unbelief and ingratitude which Israel of old was notoriously guilty of, and the record of which was preserved for our learning. “These things happened unto them for ensamples,” ~~601~~ 1 Corinthians 10:11; ~~601~~ Hebrews 4:11.

~~601~~ PSALM 78:1-8

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

Maschil of Asaph.

These verses, which contain the preface to this history, show that the psalm answers the title; it is indeed *Maschil* — a psalm to give instruction; if we receive not the instruction it gives, it is our own fault. Here,

I. The psalmist demands attention to what he wrote (v. 1): *Give ear, O my people! to my law.* Some make these the psalmist's words. David, as a king, or Asaph, in his name, as his secretary of state, or scribe to the sweet singer of Israel, here calls upon the people, as his people committed to his charge, to give ear to his law. He calls his instructions his *law* or *edict*; such was their commanding force in themselves. Every good truth, received in the light and love of it, will have the power of a law upon the conscience; yet that was not all: David was a king, and he would interpose his royal power for the edification of his people. If God, by his grace, make great men good men, they will be capable of doing more good than others, because their word will be a law to all about them, who must therefore give ear and hearken; for to what purpose is divine revelation

brought our ears if we will not incline our ears to it, both humble ourselves and engage ourselves to hear it and heed it? Or the psalmist, being a prophet, speaks as God's mouth, and so calls them *his people*, and demands subjection to what was said as to a law. Let him that has an ear thus *hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches*, ⁽⁴⁰¹⁷⁾Revelation 2:7.

II. Several reasons are given why we should diligently attend to that which is here related.

1. The things here discoursed of are weighty, and deserve consideration, strange, and need it (v. 2): *I will open my mouth in a parable*, in that which is sublime and uncommon, but very excellent and well worthy your attention; *I will utter dark sayings*, which challenge your most serious regards as much as the enigmas with which the eastern princes and learned men used to try one another. These are called *dark sayings*, not because they are hard to be understood, but because they are greatly to be admired and carefully to be looked into. This is said to be fulfilled in the parables which our Saviour put forth (⁽⁴⁰³⁵⁾Matthew 13:35), which were (as this) representations of the state of the kingdom of God among men.

2. They are the monuments of antiquity — *dark sayings of old which our fathers have told us*, v. 3. They are things of undoubted certainty; we have heard them and known them, and there is no room left to question the truth of them. The gospel of Luke is called a *declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us* (⁽⁴⁰⁰¹⁾Luke 1:1), so were the things here related. The honour we owe to our parents and ancestors obliges us to attend to that which our fathers have told us, and, as far as it appears to be true and good, to receive it with so much the more reverence and regard.

3. They are to be transmitted to posterity, and it lies as a charge upon us carefully to hand them down (v. 4); because our fathers told them to us *we will not hide them from their children*. Our children are called *theirs*, for they were in care for their seed's seed, and looked upon them as theirs; and, in teaching our children the knowledge of God, we repay to our parents some of that debt we owe to them for teaching us. Nay, if we have no children of our own, we must declare the things of God to *their* children, the children of others. Our care must be for posterity in general, and not only for our own posterity; and for the generation to come hereafter, the children that shall be born, as well as for the generation that is next rising up and the children that are born. That which we are to

transmit to our children is not only the knowledge of languages, arts and sciences, liberty and property, but especially the praises of the Lord, and his strength appearing in the wonderful works he has done. Our great care must be to lodge our religion, that great deposit, pure and entire in the hands of those that succeed us. There are two things the full and clear knowledge of which we must preserve the entail of to our heirs: —

(1.) The law of God; for this was given with a particular charge to teach it diligently to their children (v. 5): *He established a testimony* or covenant, and enacted a law, in Jacob and Israel, gave them precepts and promises, which he *commanded them to make known to their children,*

~~Deut.~~ Deuteronomy 6:7, 20. The church of God, as the historian says of the Roman commonwealth, was not to be *res unius aetatis* — *a thing of one age* but was to be kept up from one generation to another; and therefore, as God provided for a succession of ministers in the tribe of Levi and the house of Aaron, so he appointed that parents should train up their children in the knowledge of his law: and, when they had grown up, they must arise *and declare them to their children* (v. 6), that, as one generation of God's servants and worshippers passes away, another generation may come, and the church, as the earth, may abide for ever; and thus God's name among men may be as the days of heaven.

(2.) The providences of God concerning them, both in mercy and in judgment. The former seem to be mentioned for the sake of this; since God gave order that his laws should be made known to posterity, it is requisite that with them his works also should be made known, the fulfilling of the promises made to the obedient and the threatenings denounced against the disobedient. Let these be told to our children and our children's children,

[1.] That they may take encouragement to conform to the will of God (v. 7): *that, not forgetting the works of God wrought in former days, they might set their hope in God and keep his commandments,* might make his command their rule and his covenant their stay. Those only may with confidence hope for God's salvation that make conscience of doing his commandments. The works of God, duly considered, will very much strengthen our resolution both to set our hope in him and to keep his commandments, for he is able to bear us out in both.

[2.] That they may take warning not to conform to the example of their fathers (v. 8): *That they might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and*

rebellious generation. See here, *First*, What was the character of their fathers. Though they were the seed of Abraham, taken into covenant with God, and, for aught we know, the only professing people he had then in the world, yet they were stubborn and rebellious, and walked contrary to God, in direct opposition to his will. They did indeed profess relation to him, but they did not set their hearts aright; they were not cordial in their engagements to God, nor inward with him in their worship of him, and therefore their *spirit was not stedfast with him*, but upon every occasion they flew off from him. Note, Hypocrisy is the high road to apostasy. Those that do not set their hearts aright will not be stedfast with God, but play fat and loose. *Secondly*, What was a charge to the children: *That they be not as their fathers.* Note, Those that have descended from wicked and ungodly ancestors, if they will but consider the word and works of God, will see reason enough not to tread in their steps. It will be no excuse for a vain conversation that it was received by tradition from our fathers (~~6018~~ 1 Peter 1:18); for what we know of them that was evil must be an admonition to us, that we dread that which was so pernicious to them as we would shun those courses which they took that were ruinous to their health or estates.

~~1389~~ PSALM 78:9-39

WONDERS WROUGHT IN BEHALF OF ISRAEL

In these verses,

I. The psalmist observes the late rebukes of Providence that the people of Israel had been under, which they had brought upon themselves by their dealing treacherously with God, v. 9-11. *The children of Ephraim*, in which tribe Shiloh was, though they were well armed and shot with bows, yet *turned back in the day of battle.* This seems to refer to that shameful defeat which the Philistines gave them in Eli's time, when they took the ark prisoner, ~~6011~~ 1 Samuel 4:10, 11. Of this the psalmist here begins to speak, and, after a long digression, returns to it again, v. 61. Well might that event be thus fresh in mind in David's time, above forty years after, for the ark, which in that memorable battle was seized by the Philistines, though it was quickly brought out of captivity, was never brought out of

obscurity till David fetched it from Kirjath-jearim to his own city.
Observe,

1. The shameful cowardice of the children of Ephraim, that warlike tribe, so famed for valiant men, Joshua's tribe; the children of that tribe, though as well armed as ever, turned back when they came to face the enemy. Note, Weapons of war stand men in little stead without a martial spirit, and that is gone if God be gone. Sin dispirits men and takes away the heart.

2. The causes of their cowardice, which were no less shameful; and these were,

(1.) A shameful violation of God's law and their covenant with him (v. 10); they were basely treacherous and perfidious, for *they kept not the covenant of God*, and basely stubborn and rebellious (as they were described, v. 8), for they peremptorily refused to walk in his law, and, in effect, told him to his face they would not be ruled by him.

(2.) A shameful ingratitude to God for the favours he had bestowed upon them: They *forgot his works and his wonders*, his works of wonder which they ought to have admired, v. 11. Note, Our forgetfulness of God's works is at the bottom of our disobedience to his laws.

II. He takes occasion hence to consult precedents and to compare this with the case of their fathers, who were in like manner unmindful of God's mercies to them and ungrateful to their founder and great benefactor, and were therefore often brought under his displeasure. The narrative in these verses is very remarkable, for it relates a kind of struggle between God's goodness and man's badness, and mercy, at length, rejoices against judgment.

1. God did great things for his people Israel when he first incorporated them and formed them into a people: *Marvellous things did he in the sight of their fathers*, and not only in their sight, but in their cause, and for their benefit, so strange, so kind, that one would think they should never be forgotten. What he did for them in the land of Egypt is only just mentioned here (v. 12), but afterwards resumed, v. 43. He proceeds here to show,

(1.) How he made a lane for them through the Red Sea, and caused them, gave them courage, to pass through, though the waters stood over their heads as a heap, v. 13. See ²⁵¹² Isaiah 63:12, 13, where God is said to *lead*

them by the hand, as it were, through the deep that they should not stumble.

(2.) How he provided a guide for them through the untrodden paths of the wilderness (v. 14); he led them step by step, *in the day time by a cloud*, which also sheltered them from the heat, and *all the night with a light of fire*, which perhaps warmed the air; at least it made the darkness of night less frightful, and perhaps kept off wild beasts, ^{<301F>}Zechariah 2:5.

(3.) How he furnished their camp with fresh water in a dry and thirsty land where no water was, not by opening the bottles of heaven (that would have been a common way), but by broaching a rock (v. 15, 16): *He clave the rocks in the wilderness*, which yielded water, though they were not capable of receiving it either from the clouds above or the springs beneath. Out of the dry and hard rock he gave them drink, not distilled as out of an alembic, drop by drop, but in streams *running down like rivers*, and as out of the great depths. God gives abundantly, and is rich in mercy; he gives seasonably, and sometimes makes us to feel the want of mercies that we may the better know the worth of them. This water which God gave Israel out of the rock was the more valuable because it was spiritual drink. *And that rock was Christ.*

2. When God began thus to bless them they began to affront him (v. 17): *They sinned yet more against him*, more than they had done in Egypt, though there they were bad enough, ^{<301B>}Ezekiel 20:8. They bore the miseries of their servitude better than the difficulties of their deliverance, and never murmured at their taskmasters so much as they did at Moses and Aaron; as if they were *delivered to do all these abominations*, ^{<301D>}Jeremiah 7:10. As sin sometimes takes occasion by the commandment, so at other times it takes occasion by the deliverance, to become more exceedingly sinful. *They provoked the Most High*. Though he is most high, and they knew themselves an unequal match for him, yet they provoked him and even bade defiance to his justice; and this in the wilderness, where he had them at his mercy and therefore they were bound in interest to please him, and where he showed them so much mercy and therefore they were bound in gratitude to please him; yet there they said and did that which they knew would provoke him: *They tempted God in their heart*, v. 18. Their sin began in their heart, and thence it took its malignity. *They do always err in their heart*, ^{<301D>}Hebrews 3:10. Thus they tempted God, tried

his patience to the utmost, whether he would bear with them or no, and, in effect, bade him do his worst. Two ways they provoked him: —

(1.) By desiring, or rather demanding, that which he had not thought fit to give them: *They asked meat for their lust*. God had given them meat for their hunger, in the manna, wholesome pleasant food and in abundance; he had given them meat for their faith out of the heads of leviathan which *he broke in pieces*, ^{<B744>}Psalm 74:14. But all this would not serve; they must have meat for their lust, dainties and varieties to gratify a luxurious appetite. Nothing is more provoking to God than our quarrelling with our allotment and indulging the desires of the flesh.

(2.) By distrusting his power to give them what they desired. This was tempting God indeed. They challenged him to give them flesh; and, if he did not, they would say it was because he could not, not because he did not see it fit for them (v. 19): *They spoke against God*. Those that set bounds to God's power speak against him. It was as injurious a reflection as could be cast upon God to say, *Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?* They had manna, but they did not think they had a table furnished unless they had boiled and roast, a first, a second, and a third course, as they had in Egypt, where they had both flesh and fish, and sauce too (^{<D163>}Exodus 16:3, ^{<G115>}Numbers 11:5), dishes of meat and salvers of fruit. What an unreasonable insatiable thin is luxury! Such a mighty thing did these epicures think a table well furnished to be that they thought it was more than God himself could give them in that wilderness; whereas the *beasts of the forest*, and all the *fowls of the mountains*, are his, ^{<B100>}Psalm 50:10, 11. Their disbelief of God's power was so much the worse in that they did at the same time own that he had done as much as that came to (v. 20): *Behold, he smote the rock, that the waters gushed out*, which they and their cattle drank of. And which is easier, to furnish a table in the wilderness, which a rich man can do, or to fetch water out of a rock, which the greatest potentate on the earth cannot do? Never did unbelief, though always unreasonable, ask so absurd a question: "Can he that melted down a rock into streams of water give bread also? Or can he that has given bread provide flesh also?" Is any thing too hard for Omnipotence? When once the ordinary powers of nature are exceeded God has made bare his arm, and we must conclude that nothing is impossible with him. Be it ever so great a thing that we ask, it becomes us to own, *Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst*.

3. God justly resented the provocation and was much displeased with them (v. 21): *The Lord heard this, and was wroth.* Note, God is a witness to all our murmurings and distrusts; he hears them and is much displeased with them. *A fire was kindled for this against Jacob; the fire of the Lord burnt among them,* ^{CHIEF} Numbers 11:1. Or it may be understood of the fire of God's anger which came up against Israel. To unbelievers our God is himself a consuming fire. Those that will not believe the power of God's mercy shall feel the power of his indignation, and be made to confess that *it is a fearful thing to fall into his hands.* Now here we are told,

(1.) Why God thus resented the provocation (v. 22): *Because* by this it appeared that *they believed not in God;* they did not give credit to the revelation he had made of himself to them, for they durst not commit themselves to him, nor venture themselves with him: *They trusted not in the salvation* he had begun to work for them; for then they would not thus have questioned its progress. Those cannot be said to trust in God's salvation as their felicity at last who cannot find in their hearts to trust in his providence for food convenient in the way to it. That which aggravated their unbelief was the experience they had had of the power and goodness of God, v. 23-25. He had given them undeniable proofs of his power, not only on earth beneath, but in heaven above; for *he commanded the clouds from above,* as one that had created them and commanded them into being; he made what use he pleased of them. Usually by their showers they contribute to the earth's producing corn; but now, when God so commanded them, they showered down corn themselves, which is therefore called here *the corn of heaven;* for heaven can do the work without the earth, but not the earth without heaven. God, who has the key of the clouds, *opened the doors of heaven,* and that is more than *opening the windows,* which yet is spoken of as a great blessing, ^{CHIEF} Malachi 3:10. To all that by faith and prayer ask, seek, and knock, these doors shall at any time be opened; for the God of heaven is rich in mercy to all that call upon him. He not only keeps a good house, but keeps open house. Justly might God take it ill that they should distrust him when he had been so very kind to them that he *had rained down manna upon them to eat,* substantial food, daily, duly, enough for all, enough for each. *Man did eat angels' food,* such as angels, if they had occasion for food, would eat and be thankful for; or rather such as was given by the ministry of angels, and (as the *Chaldee* reads it) such as descended from the dwelling of angels. Every one, even the least child in Israel, did *eat the bread of the mighty* (so

the margin reads it); the weakest stomach could digest it, and yet it was so nourishing that it was strong meat for strong men. And, though the provision was so good, yet they were not stinted, nor ever reduced to short allowance; for *he sent them meat to the full*. If they gathered little, it was their own fault; and yet even then they had no lack, ^{<17>}Exodus 16:18. The daily provision God makes for us, and has made ever since we came into the world, though it has not so much of miracle as this, has no less of mercy, and is therefore a great aggravation of our distrust of God.

(2.) How he expressed his resentment of the provocation, not in denying them what they so inordinately lusted after, but in granting it to them.

[1.] Did they question his power? He soon gave them a sensible conviction that he could *furnish a table in the wilderness*. Though the winds seem to blow where they list, yet, when he pleased, he could make them his caterers to fetch in provisions, v. 26. *He caused an east wind to blow and a south wind*, either a south-east wind, or an east wind first to bring in the quails from that quarter and then a south wind to bring in more from that quarter; so that *he rained flesh upon them*, and that of the most delicate sort, not butchers' meat, but wild-fowl, and abundance of it, *as dust, as the sand of the sea* (v. 27), so that the meanest Israelite might have sufficient; and it cost them nothing, no, not the pains of fetching it from the mountains, for *he let it fall in the midst of their camp, round about their habitation*, v. 28. We have the account ^{<18>}Numbers 11:31, 32. See how good God is even to the evil and unthankful, and wonder that his goodness does not overcome their badness. See what little reason we have to judge of God's love by such gifts of his bounty as these; dainty bits are no tokens of his peculiar favour. Christ gave dry bread to the disciples that he loved, but a sop dipped in the sauce to Judas that betrayed him.

[2.] Did they defy his justice and boast that they had gained their point? He made them pay dearly for their quails; for, though he *gave them their own desire, they were not estranged from their lust* (v. 29, 30); their appetite was insatiable; they were well filled and yet they were not satisfied; for they knew not what they would have. Such is the nature of lust; it is content with nothing, and the more it is humoured the more humoursome it grows. Those that indulge their lust will never be estranged from it. Or it intimates that God's liberality did not make them ashamed of their ungrateful lustings, as it would have done if they had had any sense of honour. But what came of it? *While the meat was yet in their mouth,*

rolled under the tongue as a sweet morsel, *the wrath of God came upon them and slew the fattest of them* (v. 31), those that were most luxurious and most daring. See ^{<0413>}Numbers 11:33, 34. They were fed *as sheep for the slaughter*: the butcher takes the fattest first. We may suppose there were some pious and contented Israelites, that did eat moderately of the quails and were never the worse; for it was not the meat that poisoned them, but their own lust. Let epicures and sensualists here read their doom. The end of those who make a *god of their belly is destruction*, ^{<0189>}Philippians 3:19. *The prosperity of fools shall destroy them, and their ruin will be the greater.*

4. The judgments of God upon them did not reform them, nor attain the end, any more than his mercies (v. 32): *For all this, they sinned still*; they murmured and quarrelled with God and Moses as much as ever. Though *God was wroth and smote them, yet they went on frowardly in the way of their heart* (^{<2517>}Isaiah 57:17); *they believed not for his wondrous works*. Though his works of justice were as wondrous and as great proofs of his power as his works of mercy, yet they were not wrought upon by them to fear God, nor convinced how much it was their interest to make him their friend. Those hearts are hard indeed that will neither be melted by the mercies of God nor broken by his judgments.

5. They persisting in their sins, God proceeded in his judgments, but they were judgments of another nature, which wrought not suddenly, but slowly. He punished them not now with such acute diseases as that was which *slew the fattest of them*, but a lingering chronical distemper (v. 33): *Therefore their days did he consume in vanity in the wilderness and their years in trouble*. By an irreversible doom they were condemned to wear out thirty-eight tedious years in the wilderness, which indeed were consumed in vanity; for in all those years there was not a step taken nearer Canaan, but they were turned back again, and wandered to and fro as in a labyrinth, not one stroke struck towards the conquest of it: and not only in vanity, but in trouble, for their carcasses were condemned to fall in the wilderness and there they all perished but Caleb and Joshua. Note, Those that sin still must expect to be in trouble still. And the reason why we spend our days in so much vanity and trouble, why we live with so little comfort and to so little purpose, is because we do not live by faith.

6. Under these rebukes they professed repentance, but they were not cordial and sincere in this profession.

(1.) Their profession was plausible enough (v. 34, 35): *When he slew them, or condemned them to be slain, then they sought him; they confessed their fault, and begged his pardon. When some were slain others in a fright cried to God for mercy, and promised they would reform and be very good; then they returned to God, and enquired early after him.* So one would have taken them to be such as desired to find him. And they pretended to do this because, however they had forgotten it formerly, now *they remembered that God was their rock* and therefore now that they needed him they would fly to him and take shelter in him, *and that the high God was their Redeemer, who brought them out of Egypt and to whom therefore they might come with boldness.* Afflictions are sent to put us in mind of God as our rock and our redeemer; for, in prosperity, we are apt to forget him.

(2.) They were not sincere in this profession (v. 36, 37): *They did but flatter him with their mouth, as if they thought by fair speeches to prevail with him to revoke the sentence and remove the judgment, with a secret intention to break their word when the danger was over; they did not return to God with their whole heart, but feignedly,* ^{<4180>}Jeremiah 3:10. All their professions, prayers, and promises, were extorted by the rack. It was plain that they did not mean as they said, for they did not adhere to it. They thawed in the sun, but froze in the shade. They did but *lie to God with their tongues, for their heart was not with him, was not right with him, as appeared by the issue, for they were not stedfast in his covenant.* They were not sincere in their reformation, for they were not constant; and, by thinking thus to impose upon a heart-searching God, they really put as great an affront upon him as by any of their reflections.

7. God hereupon, in pity to them, put a stop to the judgments which were threatened and in part executed (v. 38, 39): *But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity.* One would think this counterfeit repentance should have filled up the measure of their iniquity. What could be more provoking than to *lie thus to the holy God, than thus to keep back part of the price, the chief part?* ^{<4183>}Acts 5:3. And yet he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity thus far, that he did not destroy them and cut them off from being a people, as he justly might have done, but spared their lives till they had reared another generation which should enter into the promised land. *Destroy it not, for a blessing is in it,* ^{<2888>}Isaiah 65:8. *Many a time he turned his anger away* (for he is Lord of his anger) *and did not stir up all his wrath, to deal with them as they*

deserved: and why did he not? Not because their ruin would have been any loss to him, but,

(1.) Because he was *full of compassion* and, when he was going to destroy them, *his repentings were kindled together*, and he said, *How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel?* ^{<318>}Hosea 11:8.

(2.) Because, though they did not rightly remember that he was their rock, he *remembered that they were but flesh*. He considered the corruption of their nature, which inclined them to evil, and was pleased to make that an excuse for his sparing them, though it was really no excuse for their sin. See ^{<018>}Genesis 6:3. He considered the weakness and frailty of their nature, and what an easy thing it would be to crush them: *They are as a wind that passeth away and cometh not again*. They may soon be taken off, but, when they are gone, they are gone irrecoverably, and then what will become of the covenant with Abraham? They are flesh, they are wind; whence it were easy to argue they may justly, they may immediately, be cut off, and there would be no loss of them: but God argues, on the contrary, therefore he will not destroy them; for the true reason is, *He is full of compassion*.

^{<080>}PSALM 78:40-72

JUDGMENTS AND MERCIES

The matter and scope of this paragraph are the same with the former, showing what great mercies God had bestowed upon Israel, how provoking they had been, what judgments he had brought upon them for their sins, and yet how, in judgment, he remembered mercy at last. Let not those that receive mercy from God be thereby emboldened to sin, for the mercies they receive will aggravate their sin and hasten the punishment of it; yet let not those that are under divine rebukes for sin be discouraged from repentance, for their punishments are means of repentance, and shall not prevent the mercy God has yet in store for them. Observe,

I. The sins of Israel in the wilderness again reflected on, because written for our admonition (v. 40, 41): *How often did they provoke him in the wilderness!* Note once, nor twice, but many a time; and the repetition of the provocation was a great aggravation of it, as well as the place, v. 17.

God kept an account how often they provoked him, though they did not. ⁴⁴²Numbers 14:22, *They have tempted me these ten times*. By provoking him they did not so much anger him as grieve him, for he looked upon them as his children (*Israel is my son, my first-born*), and the undutiful disrespectful behaviour of children does more grieve than anger the tender parents; they lay it to heart, and take it unkindly, ⁴⁰⁰Isaiah 1:2. They grieved him because they put him under a necessity of afflicting them, which he did not willingly. After they had humbled themselves before him they *turned back and tempted God*, as before, and *limited the Holy One of Israel*, prescribing to him what proofs he should give of his power and presence with them and what methods he should take in leading them and providing for them. They limited him to their way and their time, as if he did not observe that they quarrelled with him. It is presumption for us to limit *the Holy One of Israel*; for, being *the Holy One*, he will do what is most for his own glory; and, being *the Holy One of Israel*, he will do what is most for their good; and we both impeach his wisdom and betray our own pride and folly if we go about to prescribe to him. That which occasioned their limiting God for the future was their forgetting his former favours (v. 42): *They remembered not his hand*, how strong it is and how it had been stretched out for them, nor *the day when he delivered them from the enemy*, Pharaoh, that great enemy who sought their ruin. There are some days made remarkable by signal deliverances, which ought never to be forgotten; for the remembrance of them would encourage us in our greatest straits.

II. The mercies of God to Israel, which they were unmindful of when they tempted God and limited him; and this catalogue of the works of wonder which God wrought for them begins higher, and is carried down further, than that before, v. 12, etc.

1. This begins with their deliverance out of Egypt, and the plagues with which God compelled the Egyptians to let them go: these were the *signs* God wrought in Egypt (v. 43), the *wonders* he wrought in the field of Zoan, that is, in the country of Zoan, as we say, *in Agro N.*, meaning in such a country.

(1.) Several of the plagues of Egypt are here specified, which speak aloud the power of God and his favour to Israel, as well as terror to his and their enemies. As,

[1.] The turning of the waters into blood; they had made themselves drunk with the bloods of God's people, even the infants, and now God gave them blood to drink, *for they were worthy*, v. 44.

[2.] The flies and frogs which infested them, mixtures of insects in swarms, in shoals, *which devoured them, which destroyed them*, v. 45. For God can make the weakest and most despicable animals instruments of his wrath when he pleases; what they want in strength may be made up in number.

[3.] The plague of locusts, which devoured their increase, and that which they had laboured for, v. 46. They are called *God's great army*, ^{<1025>}Joel 2:25.

[4.] The *hail*, which *destroyed* their trees, especially *their vines*, the weakest of trees (v. 47), and *their cattle*, especially *their flocks* of sheep, the weakest of their cattle, which were killed with *hot thunder-bolts* (v. 48), and the *frost*, or congealed rain (as the word signifies), was so violent that it destroyed even the *sycamore-trees*.

[5.] The death of the first-born was the last and sorest of the plagues of Egypt, and that which perfected the deliverance of Israel; it was first in intention (^{<1023>}Exodus 4:23), but last in execution; for, if gentler methods would have done the work, this would have been prevented: but it is here largely described, v. 49-51. *First*, The anger of God was the cause of it. Wrath had now come upon the Egyptians to the uttermost; Pharaoh's heart having been often hardened after less judgments had softened it, God now *stirred up all his wrath*; for he *cast upon them the fierceness of his anger*, anger in the highest degree, *wrath and indignation* the cause, and *trouble (tribulation and anguish)*, ^{<1018>}Romans 2:8, 9) the effect. This from on high he cast upon them and did not spare, and they could not *flee out of his hands*, ^{<1022>}Job 27:22. *He made a way*, or (as the word is) *he weighed a path, to his anger*. He did not cast it upon them uncertainly, but by weight. His anger was weighed with the greatest exactness in the balances of justice; for, in his greatest displeasure, he never did, nor ever will do, any wrong to any of his creatures: the path of his anger is always weighed. *Secondly*, The angels of God were the instruments employed in this execution: *He sent evil angels among them*, not evil in their own nature, but in respect to the errand upon which they were sent; they were destroying angels, or angels of punishment, which passed through all the land of Egypt, with orders, according to the weighed paths of God's anger,

not to kill all, but the first-born only. Good angels become evil angels to sinners. Those that make the holy God their enemy must never expect the holy angels to be their friends. *Thirdly*, The execution itself was very severe: *He spared not their soul from death*, but suffered death to ride in triumph among them and *gave their life over to the pestilence*, which cut the thread of life off immediately; for *he smote all the first-born in Egypt* (v. 51), *the chief of their strength*, the hopes of their respective families; children are the parents' strength, and the first-born the *chief of their strength*. Thus, because Israel was precious in God's sight, he *gave men for them and people for their life*, ^{<294>}Isaiah 43:4.

(2.) By these plagues on the Egyptians God made a way for *his own people to go forth like sheep*, distinguishing between them and the Egyptians, *as the shepherd divides between the sheep and the goats*, having set his own mark on these sheep by the blood of the lamb sprinkled on their door-posts. *He made them go forth like sheep*, not knowing whither they went, and *guided them in the wilderness*, as a shepherd guides his flock, with all possible care and tenderness, v. 52. *He led them on safely*, though in dangerous paths, so that *they feared not*, that is, they needed not to fear; they were indeed frightened at the Red Sea (^{<240>}Exodus 14:10), but that was said to them, and done for them, which effectually silenced their fears. *But the sea overwhelmed their enemies* that ventured to pursue them into it, v. 63. It was a lane to them, but a grave to their persecutors.

2. It is carried down as far as their settlement in Canaan (v. 54): *He brought them to the border of his sanctuary*, to that land in the midst of which he set up his sanctuary, which was, as it were, the centre and metropolis, the crown and glory, of it. That is a happy land which is the border of God's sanctuary. It was the happiness of that land that there God was known, and there were his sanctuary and dwelling-place, ^{<391>}Psalms 76:1, 2. The whole land in general, and Zion in particular, was *the mountain which his right hand had purchased*, which by his own power he had set apart for himself. See ^{<348>}Psalms 44:3. *He made them to ride on the high places of the earth*, ^{<284>}Isaiah 58:14; ^{<523>}Deuteronomy 32:13. They found the Canaanites in the full and quiet possession of that land, but God *cast out the heathen before them*, not only took away their title to it, as the Lord of the whole earth, but himself executed the judgment given against them, and, as Lord of hosts, turned them out of it, and made his people *Israel tread upon their high places, dividing each tribe an inheritance by line*, and making them *to dwell* in the houses of those whom they had

destroyed. God could have turned the uninhabited uncultivated wilderness (which perhaps was nearly of the same extent as Canaan) into fruitful soil, and have planted them there; but the land he designed for them was to be a type of heaven, and therefore must be *the glory of all lands*; it must likewise be fought for, for *the kingdom of heaven suffers violence*.

III. The sins of Israel after they were settled in Canaan, v. 56-58. The children were *like their fathers*, and brought their old corruptions into their new habitations. Though God had done so much for them, yet *they tempted and provoked the most high God* still. He gave them his testimonies, but they did not keep them; they began very promisingly, but they turned back, gave God good words, but dealt unfaithfully, and were *like a deceitful bow*, which seemed likely to send the arrow to the mark, but, when it is drawn, breaks, and drops the arrow at the archer's foot, or perhaps makes it recoil in his face. There was no hold of them, nor any confidence to be put in their promises or professions. They seemed sometimes devoted to God, but they presently *turned aside*, and *provoked him to anger with their high places and their graven images*. Idolatry was the sin that did most easily beset them, and which, though they often professed their repentance for, they as often relapsed into. It was spiritual adultery either to worship idols or to worship God by images, as if he had been an idol, and therefore by it they are said to *move him to jealousy*, ^{<59>}Deuteronomy 32:16, 21.

IV. The judgments God brought upon them for these sins. Their place in Canaan would no more secure them in a sinful way than their descent from Israel. *You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you*, ^{<60>}Amos 3:2. Idolatry is winked at among the Gentiles, but not in Israel,

1. God was displeased with them (v. 59): *When God heard this*, when he heard the cry of their iniquity, which came up before him, *he was wroth*, he took it very heinously, as well he might, and he greatly abhorred Israel, whom he had greatly loved and delighted in. Those that had been the people of his choice became the generation of his wrath. Presumptuous sins, idolatries especially, render even Israelites odious to God's holiness and obnoxious to his justice.

2. He deserted his tabernacle among them, and removed the defence which was upon that glory, v. 60. God never leaves us till we leave him, never

withdraws till we have driven him from us. His name is *Jealous*, and he is a jealous God; and therefore no marvel if a people whom he had betrothed to himself be loathed and rejected, and he refuse to cohabit with them any longer, when they have embraced the bosom of a stranger. The *tabernacle at Shiloh was the tent God had placed among men*, in which God would in *very deed dwell with men upon the earth*; but, when his people treacherously forsook it, he justly forsook it, and then all its glory departed. Israel has small joy of the tabernacle without the presence of God in it.

3. He gave up all into the hands of the enemy. Those whom God forsakes become an easy prey to the destroyer. The Philistines are sworn enemies to the Israel of God, and no less so to the God of Israel, and yet God will make use of them to be a scourge to his people.

(1.) God permits them to take the ark prisoner, and carry it off as a trophy of their victory, to show that he had not only forsaken the tabernacle, but even the ark itself, which shall now be no longer a token of his presence (v. 61): *He delivered his strength into captivity*, as if it had been weakened and overcome, *and his glory fell under the disgrace of being abandoned into the enemy's hand*. We have the story ^{<0001>}1 Samuel 4:11. When the ark has become as a stranger among Israelites, no marvel if it soon be made a prisoner among Philistines.

(2.) He suffers the armies of Israel to be routed by the Philistines (v. 62, 63): *He gave his people over unto the sword*, to the sword of his own justice and of the enemy's rage, for he *was wroth with his inheritance*; and that wrath of his was the *fire which consumed their young men*, in the prime of their time, by the sword or sickness, and made such a devastation of them that *their maidens were not praised*, that is, *were not given in marriage* (which is honourable in all), because there were no young men for them to be given to, and because the distresses and calamities of Israel were so many and great that the joys of marriage-solemnities were judged unseasonable, and it was said, *Blessed is the womb that beareth not*. General destructions produce a scarcity of men. ^{<2000>}Isaiah 13:12, *I will make a man more precious than fine gold*, so that *seven women shall take hold of one man*, ^{<2001>}Isaiah 4:1; 3:25. Yet this was not the worst:

(3.) Even *their priests*, who attended the ark, *fell by the sword*, Hophni and Phinehas. Justly they fell, for they made themselves vile, and were sinners before the Lord exceedingly; and their priesthood was so far from being

their protection that it aggravated their sin and hastened their fall. Justly did they fall by the sword, because they exposed themselves in the field of battle, without call or warrant. We throw ourselves out of God's protection when we go out of our place and out of the way of our duty. When the priests fell *their widows made no lamentation*, v. 64. All the ceremonies of mourning were lost and buried in substantial grief; the widow of Phinehas, instead of lamenting her husband's death, died herself, when she had called her son *Ichabod*, ^{<0049>}1 Samuel 4:19, etc.

V. God's return, in mercy, to them, and his gracious appearances for them after this. We read not of their repentance and return to God, but God was *grieved for the miseries of Israel* (^{<0716>}Judges 10:16) and concerned for his own honour, *fearing the wrath of the enemy, lest they should behave themselves strangely*, ^{<6527>}Deuteronomy 32:27. And therefore *then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep* (v. 65), *and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine*, not only like one that is raised out of sleep and recovers himself from the slumber which by drinking he was overcome with, who then regards that which before he seemed wholly to neglect, but like one that is refreshed with sleep, and whose heart is made glad by the sober and moderate use of wine, and is therefore the more lively and vigorous, and fit for business. When God had delivered the ark of his strength into captivity, as one jealous of his honour, he soon put forth the arm of his strength to rescue it, stirred up his strength to do great things for his people.

1. He plagued the Philistines who held the ark in captivity, v. 66. He smote them with emerods *in the hinder parts*, wounded them behind, as if they were fleeing from him, even when they thought themselves more than conquerors. He put them to reproach, and they themselves helped to make it a perpetual reproach by the golden images of their emerods, which they returned with the ark for a trespass-offering (^{<0065>}1 Samuel 6:5), to remain *in perpetuam rei memoriam — as a perpetual memorial*. Note, Sooner or later God will glorify himself by putting disgrace upon his enemies, even when they are most elevated with their successes.

2. He provided a new settlement for his ark after it had been some months in captivity and some years in obscurity. He did indeed *refuse the tabernacle of Joseph*; he never sent it back to Shiloh, in the tribe of Ephraim, v. 67. The ruins of that place were standing monuments of divine justice. *God, see what I did to Shiloh*, ^{<2072>}Jeremiah 7:12. But he did

not wholly take away the glory from Israel; the moving of the ark is not the removing of it. Shiloh has lost it, but Israel has not. God will have a church in the world, and a kingdom among men, though this or that place may have its candlestick removed; nay, the rejection of Shiloh is the election of Zion, as, long after, the fall of the Jews was the riches of the Gentiles, ^{<B112>}Romans 11:12. When God *chose not the tribe of Ephraim*, of which tribe Joshua was, he *chose the tribe of Judah* (v. 68), because of that tribe Jesus was to be, who is greater than Joshua. Kirjath-jearim, the place to which the ark was brought after its rescue out of the hands of the Philistines, was in the tribe of Judah. There it took possession of that tribe; but thence it was removed to Zion, *the Mount Zion which he loved* (v. 68), which was *beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth*; there it was that he *built his sanctuary like high palaces and like the earth*, v. 69. David indeed erected only a tent for the ark, but a temple was then designed and prepared for, and finished by his son; and that was,

(1.) A very stately place. It was built like the palaces of princes, and the great men of the earth, nay, it excelled them all in splendour and magnificence. Solomon built it, and yet here it is said *God built it*, for his father had taught him, perhaps with reference to this undertaking, that *except the Lord build the house those labour in vain* that build it, ^{<B10>}Psalms 127:1, which is a psalm for Solomon.

(2.) A very stable place, like the earth, though not to continue as long as the earth, yet while it was to continue it was as firm as the earth, which God *upholds by the word of his power*, and it was not finally destroyed till the gospel temple was erected, which is to continue *as long as the sun and moon endure* (^{<B36>}Psalms 89:36, 37) and against which the *gates of hell shall not prevail*.

3. He set a good government over them, a monarchy, and a monarch after his own heart: *He chose David his servant* out of all the thousands of Israel, and put the sceptre into his hand, out of whose loins Christ was to come, and who was to be a type of him, v. 70. Concerning David observe here,

(1.) The meanness of his beginning. His extraction indeed was great, for he descended from the prince of the tribe of Judah, but his education was poor. He was bred not a scholar, not a soldier, but a shepherd. He was *taken from the sheep-folds*, as Moses was; for God delights to put honour upon the humble and diligent, to raise the poor out of the dust and to set

them among princes; and sometimes he finds those most fit for public action that have spent the beginning of their time in solitude and contemplation. The Son of David was upbraided with the obscurity of his original: *Is not this the carpenter?* David was taken, he does not say from leading the rams, but *from following the ewes*, especially those *great with young*, which intimated that of all the good properties of a shepherd he was most remarkable for his tenderness and compassion to those of his flock that most needed his care. This temper of mind fitted him for government, and made him a type of Christ, who, when he feeds his flock like a shepherd, does with a particular care *gently lead those that are with young*, ²³⁰¹⁵ Isaiah 40:11.

(2.) The greatness of his advancement. God preferred him to *feed Jacob his people*, v. 71. It was a great honour that God put upon him, in advancing him to be a king, especially to be king over Jacob and Israel, God's peculiar people, near and dear to him; but withal it was a great trust reposed in him when he was charged with the government of those that were God's own inheritance. God advanced him to the throne that he might feed them, not that he might feed himself, that he might do good, not that he might make his family great. It is the charge given to all the under-shepherds, both magistrates and ministers, that they *feed the flock of God*.

(3.) The happiness of his management. David, having so great a trust put into his hands, obtained mercy of the Lord to be found both skilful and faithful in the discharge of it (v. 72): *So he fed them*; he ruled them and taught them, guided and protected them,

[1.] Very honestly; he did it *according to the integrity of his heart*, aiming at nothing but the glory of God and the good of the people committed to his charge; the principles of his religion were the maxims of his government, which he administered, not with carnal policy, but with *godly sincerity, by the grace of God*. In every thing he did he meant well and had no by-end in view.

[2.] Very discreetly; he did it *by the skilfulness of his hands*. He was not only very sincere in what he designed, but very prudent in what he did, and chose out the most proper means in pursuit of his end, for his God did instruct him to discretion. Happy the people that are under such a government! With good reason does the psalmist make this the finishing crowning instance of God's favour to Israel, for David was a type of Christ

the great and good Shepherd, who was humbled first and then exalted, and of whom it was foretold that he should be filled with the *spirit of wisdom and understanding* and should *judge and reprove with equity*, ^{<2118>}Isaiah 11:3, 4. On the integrity of his heart and the skilfulness of his hands all his subjects may entirely rely, and *of the increase of his government and people there shall be no end.*