

Adult Teaching Resources

September 20, 2020



A Prayer List for Today

Psalm 119:33-40—"Teach Me, Lord"

Psalm 103:1-13—"Forgive Me, Lord"

Psalm 78:1-7, 34-38—"Convict Me, Lord"

Psalm 25:1-9—"Deliver Me, Lord"

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“Convict Me, Lord”

Psalm 78:1-7, 34-38

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

**Key Text: We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done. (Psalm 78:4)**

As we go through life and our faith journey, we have past experiences to learn from. While the situations might not be exactly the same, we can look back at many moments in our life to help us make wise decisions in the present.

Today, we explore a psalm that brings up some bad moments in Israel’s history. What wisdom did Israel learn from her earlier experiences? What wisdom can we glean not only from those moments, but also from our own earlier mistakes?

Opening

After everyone arrives, ask each person to find a partner, for conversation. When everyone is settled, ask each person to share their answers and thoughts to these questions:

What learned lesson from your past have you used to inform a later decision, and you were thankful for the previous experience?

What learned lesson from your past did you ignore to inform a later decision, and you wish you would have paid attention to your past?

When are past experiences helpful?

When are past experiences not helpful?

Give each partnership time to share with each other. As time allows, open the floor for volunteers to share with the larger group.

Reading the Bible

How will the people be taught? (in parable) What will be told? (sayings from of old, that we have heard and known, that our ancestors told us)

Who will be told? (the children and the coming generation)

What will they be told? (the glorious deeds of the Lord, his might, and the wonders he has done)

What did God establish? (a decree in Jacob and a law in Israel)

What did God command? (that the children should be taught)

Who is to know the decrees and laws? (the next generation and the children yet unborn)

What happened after God killed them? (they repented and sought God earnestly)

What did they remember? (God was their rock, the Most High, their redeemer)

What did they do? (they flattered him with their mouths, they lied to him with their tongues)

How were their hearts? (not steadfast toward him, not true to his covenant)

What did God do? (forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them, restrained his anger and did not stir up all his wrath)

Making Connections

What do you say to others when you want them to really pay attention to you? What words pique your interest so that you pay closer attention to others?

What is your favorite parable? What lesson have you learned from that parable? Why do you remember that parable so clearly?

What do you think is the importance of studying history? Do you think we use history effectively as a learning tool for our families? For our cities? For our country? For our churches? Why do you say that?

What is the purpose of remembering and retelling the good moments of the past? What is the purpose of remembering and retelling the bad moments of the past?

What do you remember about the first things you learned about God? Who told you? How has that understanding or lesson changed through the years? Who helped you with that?

Who, younger than you, have you told or taught about God? What did you tell him or her?

When have you strayed from the commandments and decrees from God? How did that affect your relationship with God?

Our Lesson Writer says, “The plagues led to periods of repentance, the psalmist said, in which the people ‘sought God earnestly,’ remembering ‘that God was their Rock, the Most High their

Making Connections *continued*

redeemer.” What typically leads you to repentance? What helps you to remember that God is the Rock, the Most High, and your redeemer?

What do you consider to be true repentance? How can you tell the difference when someone is shallow with their repentance and when someone is serious about it?

So What?

Ask everyone to find their partner from the beginning of the lesson. Share with your group these words from our Lesson Writer:

“Israel could not have survived apart from God’s grace, and neither can we. Our relationship with God is based entirely on the grace God has shown through Christ, and the way we have responded to it. Our generation is likewise responsible for teaching our children the ways of God in order that they, too, may find their hope in God.”

Ask each partnership to have conversation around these questions.

Based on this psalm, how are we to live?

What is our responsibility to younger generations?

What good does true repentance do for our relationship with each other and with God?

What do we need to do more of, as faithful followers of God?

The Challenge

This week, find someone of a younger generation and share God’s story with him or her. Do it in a way that is comfortable and inviting, not overbearing and heavy-handed.

Prayer

Loving God, we have so much to learn. We especially have so much to learn from the experiences and moments from our past. Give us the words we need to be able to talk to the next generations about you, your love and your grace. Thank you for those who taught us. May we now take the mantle and teach. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Oops—Those who keep up with the Revised Common Lectionary texts might wonder why we’ve chosen a portion of Psalm 78 rather than one of the official Psalm readings for “Proper 20,” which would have been Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 or Psalm 145:1-8.

I could suggest some thematic reason for this, but here’s the truth: when working through the lectionary to determine this year’s sequence of lessons, I didn’t notice that the liturgical texts for “Holy Cross Day” were listed between those for the 15th and 16th Sundays after Pentecost. As a result, the text I chose was from the “Holy Cross Day” readings rather than from the readings for September 20.

Since our *Nurturing Faith* sequence published well in advance, I thought it best to stick with the published text rather than switching. It fits thematically with other texts of the season.

For some unclear reason, the lectionary text includes vv. 1-7 and 34-38, cutting sections off in the middle. We will consider vv. 1-8 and 32-39.

A historical psalm—Like Psalms 105, 106, and 136, Psalm 78 reflects on events from Israel’s remembered history as a vehicle for speaking to present and future needs. The history is not a carefully researched and objective matter, as we think of in modern Western history writing. Rather, as elsewhere in the Bible, it is confessional, reciting traditions that have proven memorable and instructive for Israel’s benefit.

The psalm’s bones—Psalm 78 moves back and forth through Israel’s history in attempting to teach an important lesson for Israel’s future. The psalm is lengthy, and shifts constantly between themes of God’s provision, judgment, and grace on the one hand, and Israel’s stubborn rebellion and forgetfulness on the other.

The psalm defies a neat or simple outline. The one presented below, suggested by R. J. Clifford, sees the structure as an introduction followed by two “recitals” that follow roughly the same order (from “In Zion and David a New Beginning: An Interpretation of Psalm 78,” in *Traditions in Transformation*, ed. Frank Moore Cross [Winona Lake: Eisenbraun’s, 1981], pp. 121-41; cited by Marvin E. Tate in *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco: Word Books, 1990], p. 287).

Introduction: vv. 1-11

First Recital:

Wilderness events: vv. 12-32
gracious act (vv. 12-16)
rebellion (vv. 17-20)
divine anger and punishment (vv. 21-32)
Sequel: vv. 33-39

Second Recital:

From Egypt to Canaan: vv. 40-64
gracious act (vv. 40-55)
rebellion (vv. 56-58)
divine anger and punishment (vv. 59-64)
Sequel: vv. 65-72

Digging Deeper *continued*

When was it written?—The psalm looks back on Israel’s history, but from what perspective? How far back was the psalmist looking? Some have argued that the psalm may have been written as early as the 10th century BCE, the time of Solomon, though others date it as late as the post-exilic period. The psalm does not specifically mention the division of the kingdoms after Solomon or the destruction of the Northern Kingdom (referred to in the psalm as “Israel” or “Ephraim”) in 722 BCE, but the vocabulary of the psalm seems to presume it. It is likely, then, to have been written in Judah sometime after Israel was conquered by the Assyrians.

Psalming the Blues—Years ago, when I was a pastor, recalling that Israel’s psalms were actually songs, I sought to communicate the message of Psalm 78 by recasting it as a traditional blues song. Just imagine a sort of “Mississippi Blues” beat in the background ...

*Well the Lord looked down on Israel, didn't like what God saw—
There were Hebrews down in Egypt making bricks without any straw—
so the Lord called out to Moses, and sent him to Pharaoh,
With plagues upon the land he said “Now let my people go,”
God brought them out of Egypt, and set the people free,
but soon they turned their hearts away and chose idolatry,
they give me the blues—I got the Israelite blues—
I got the idolizin' compromisin' ugly livin' Israelite blues . . .*

*They were traveling through the desert, and they had no food to eat,
No water they could drink or even cool their blistered feet,
so the Lord sent bread from heaven, and quail upon the wind,
and water from a rock so that they all could drink it in,
but the more the Lord had blessed them, the more they all complained,
you'd think they wanted caviar and rocks filled with champagne,
they give me the blues—I got the Israelite blues—
I got the fussin' cussin' sinnin' grinnin' wicked men and willful women blues . . .*

*God brought them 'cross the Jordan, into the promised land.
He delivered every enemy into the army's hand,
but they soon forgot the One who had given victory,
they acted like the Canaanites and worshiped every tree,
they gave their hearts to Baal and their gifts to Asherah,
they failed to teach their children how to pray and love the law,
they give me the blues—I got the Israelite blues—
I got the idolizin' compromisin' ugly livin' Israelite blues . . .*

*Well the Lord gave up on Ephraim, but in Judah God did trust,
God gave the throne to David and said make it there or bust,
so now we have a kingdom, and our king is David's son,
we hope that he will lead us to be faithful to the One,
who brought us out from Egypt and who blessed us on the way,*

Digging Deeper *continued*

*we hope that we'll remember and we hope we will not stray,
but we get the blues—we get the Israelite blues—
we get the fussin' cussin' sinnin' grinnin' wicked men and willful women blues . . .*

Don't be shy: sing it for the class!

The making of a Maskil—The superscription to Psalm 78 labels it a “Maskil.” The term is derived from a Hebrew verb that means “to be prudent,” or “to ponder.” That is a fitting description of this psalm, which is designed to inspire meditation on how one should act in response to God's goodness, especially in the light of Israel's history. We would also do well to ponder its message.

Hear, and teach—Jews refer to the famous text found in Deut. 6:4-9 as the “*Shema*” (sh-MAH), after its first word, the imperative “Hear!” The faithful continue to recite this text and place tiny scrolls containing it inside ornamental *mezzuzahs*, which they attach to their doorposts. Orthodox Jews also follow v. 9 literally by placing certain scriptures inside small leather boxes (called phylacteries) and binding them to their upper arm and forehead when they pray.

Here's the text, from the NRSV: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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Does God kill without cause?

The hardest question relative to this psalm is unlikely to come from the lectionary's chosen text, but those who read through the entire psalm may be taken aback by vv. 30-31, which claim that God killed the best of the Israelites when they complained. When the people had complained about having only manna to eat, the text says, God sent flocks of quail, more than the people could eat:

*But before they had satisfied their craving,
while the food was still in their mouths,
the anger of God rose against them
and he killed the strongest of them,
and laid low the flower of Israel.*

How are we to understand this troublesome text? First, we note that in vv. 21-31 the psalmist is recounting the tradition found in Num. 11:1-35, with some embellishment. The Numbers account of a "great plague" is expanded with the statement that God intentionally selected the choicest Israelites to kill. Did God kill without cause?

If we return to Numbers 11, we find a similar account in vv. 1-3: when the people complained excessively, God became angry and "the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some of the outlying parts of the camp" (v. 1b). When the people asked Moses to intercede, he prayed for them "and the fire abated" (v. 2b).

The next verse begins with a reference to certain "rabble among them" who "had a strong craving" and instigated a public cry for meat, recalling the finer fare they had enjoyed in Egypt. This raises God's ire, and is paralleled in Ps. 78:21-22, which says God was "full of rage; a fire was kindled against Jacob, his anger mounted against Israel, because they had no faith in God, and did not trust his saving power."

In both Numbers and Psalms, then, God was already angry at the people's faithlessness prior to sending enough manna and quail to stuff their gullets to bursting.

The judgment, in the form of a plague (according to Num. 11:33) that struck the strongest Israelites (according to Ps. 78:31), is thus to be understood as being in response to the earlier complaints, timed to coincide with the fulfillment of the people's demand for meat.

The collusion of deliverance and judgment seems harsh to modern ears, but made perfect sense to the teachers of Israel, who firmly believed that blessing or cursing followed tit for tat upon obedience or rebellion. Arthur Weiser observed that the account demonstrates "how closely God's grace and his judgment are related to each other" (*The Psalms: A*

The Hardest Question *continued*

Commentary, trans. H. Hartwell, Old Testament Library [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962], p. 541).

Modern readers may still quail at the thought of God unleashing divine anger on the weak and complaining Israelites, but the ancients tended to attribute all things to God, plagues included. The teacher behind Psalm 78 was convinced that God had good cause to wreak havoc on a recalcitrant people, but also that judgment was tempered with compassion and grace (vv. 38-39).