Singing in the Dark

Psalm 78

Religious Tradition

Session 2 · October 16, 2025

Epiphany Seattle

Psalm 78 — Read Together

"Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us."

Psalm 78:1–3 (NRSV)

Read Psalm 78 in full

Notice the rhythm of grace and failure. Notice what God keeps doing. Notice what Israel keeps doing.

CONTEXT

When, Where, and Who

BOOK

DATE

AUTHOR

TYPE

CONTEXT

When, Where, and Who

BOOK

Book III (Psalms 73–89) — the darkest book, shaped by exile and lament. Psalm 78 is unusual here: it looks forward, not just backward.

DATE

Debated. Most likely composed during or shortly after the reign of David or Solomon, 10th–9th century BCE. Some scholars argue a later, post-schism date after 922 BCE.

AUTHOR

Asaph — chief musician under David, prophet, temple singer (1 Chronicles 25:1–2). Asaph speaks for God as much as to God.

TYPE

Maskil (teaching psalm) + Historical Recitation. The longest historical psalm in the Psalter — 72 verses, from Egypt to David.

POETIC STRUCTURE

How the Psalm Is Built

Form

Movement

Sounds Like

Notice

POETIC STRUCTURE

How the Psalm Is Built

Form

Predominantly synthetic parallelism — line 2 extends and completes line 1. The effect is narrative drive: history accumulates, pressure builds.

Movement

Three-part cycle, repeated twice: God's mighty acts, Israel's rebellion, God's response (judgment, then mercy). Each cycle ends not in punishment but in renewed faithfulness.

Sounds Like

Psalm 78 is in conversation with Deuteronomy 32 (the Song of Moses) and Exodus 12–20. The events are the same; the angle is different: this is catechesis, not law. It teaches by story.

Notice

Moses is barely named. David ends the psalm as a shepherd, not a king. The arc runs from Exodus to David's throne — but the heroes are surprisingly absent. Only God is constant.

WORD STUDY

Four Words Worth Sitting With

Maskil

superscription

Mashal

v.2

Chidoth

v.2

Zakar

vv.35, 42

WORD STUDY

Four Words Worth Sitting With

Maskil

superscription

Teaching / instruction / meditation. From the root sakal — to look at, to scrutinize, to understand by deep consideration. This is not casual storytelling. It is deliberate formation.

Mashal

v.2

Parable / proverb / riddle. "I will open my mouth in a mashal." Broader than the New Testament sense — includes proverbs, riddles, and instructive narratives. Matthew 13:35 quotes this verse as fulfilled in Jesus.

Chidoth

v.2

Dark sayings / hidden things / riddles. The secrets embedded in historical events. The events happened; the meaning is encoded; the psalm is the decoding key.

Zakar

vv.35, 42

To remember / to call to mind. Appears repeatedly. Israel keeps forgetting; God keeps remembering. The psalm is itself an act of zakar — a structured refusal to forget.

INTO THE TEXT

The Shape of the Psalm

vv.1–8	**The Teacher Speaks**
vv.9–39	**Exodus and the Wilderness**
vv.40–55	**Egypt Retold**
vv.56–64	**The Land and Its Losses**
vv.65–72	**The Awakening and David**

INTO THE TEXT

The Shape of the Psalm

vv.1–8	**The Teacher Speaks**	*Asaph opens as a teacher, not a priest. He summons the people to listen. The goal: that coming generations would know, remember, and not repeat the failures of their parents.*
vv.9–39	**Exodus and the Wilderness**	*Egypt, the Red Sea, water from the rock, manna, quail — and throughout, Israel's rebellion. They tested God. They forgot. They cried out, God relented, they forgot again. The cycle is relentless.*
vv.40–55	**Egypt Retold**	*The psalm circles back and tells the Egypt story again — this time the plagues in detail. Ten plagues. God's wrath unleashed. Then the Exodus once more. Two tellings of the same history.*
vv.56–64	**The Land and Its Losses**	*Israel in Canaan, still rebelling. God abandons Shiloh — the first location of the Ark. The Ark is captured. The priests die. Zion falls silent.*
vv.65–72	**The Awakening and David**	*God awakes "like a warrior shouting because of wine" — one of the most startling images in the Psalter. Then: David chosen from the sheepfold to shepherd Jacob his people.*

What in this psalm *provokes you?*

Psalm 78 — Coverdale Translation

*"Hear my teaching, O my people; *
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.*
*I will open my mouth in a parable; *
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.*
That which we have heard and known,
and what our forefathers have told us, *
we will not hide from their children."*

Psalm 78:1–3 (BCP, Coverdale)

Note Coverdale: "mysteries of ancient times" vs. "dark sayings from of old." Which translation opens the text further? Which closes it?

The asterisk (*) marks where cantor and choir exchange verses in choral recitation.

How does this psalm speak to the world in which *we live right now?*

Where do we see Jesus and / or the Holy Spirit *in this psalm?*