

GOD'S COVENANTS WITH ISRAEL AND WITH DAVID

Psalm 78

Memory Verse: *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord* (Eph. 6:4 ESV).

Background Helps:

This week we take another “detour” from the historical books of the Old Testament and study one of the historical psalms, Psalm 78. This psalm reviews events in Israel’s history from the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. According to the opening stanza (vv. 1-8), the psalm has a didactic or teaching purpose: fathers should pass on what God has done and what God has said to succeeding generations, so that, unlike former generations, future generations will be faithful to the LORD. The unfaithfulness of Israel was unfaithfulness to God’s covenant (vv. 10, 37), in this case the covenant that the LORD made with Israel through Moses at Sinai: “They did not keep God’s covenant, but refused to walk according to his law” (78:10).

At the end of the psalm, we discover another anticipation (as we saw last week in the book of Ruth) of God’s covenant with King David. In verses 9-11 the psalmist mentions the unfaithfulness of the tribe of Ephraim. In verses 59-63 he alludes to the story of God’s rejection of his sanctuary at Shiloh, the city in Ephraim where the tabernacle was set up when the Israelites first settled in the Promised Land under Joshua (Josh. 18:1, 8-10; 19:51; Jud. 18:31). Skim 1 Samuel 1–4 to see how the tabernacle with the ark of the covenant was located in Shiloh under the priesthood and judgeship of Eli and how it was captured by the Philistines. At this point, according to Psalm 78, God “rejected the tent of Joseph; he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim, but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves” (vv. 67-68) as the new location for the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant, and he chose David to be the shepherd of his people Israel (vv. 70-72).

Lesson Helps:

Psalm 78 gives an opportunity for teachers to review important Old Testament stories that relate to God’s covenant with Israel. See particularly verses 12-20, 23-31, and 42-55. Perhaps your students could be divided into three groups, each group listing the Old Testament events rehearsed in these passages. Also, in your review emphasize (as the psalmist does) the unfaithfulness of Israel (vv. 9-11, 17-20, 32-37, 40-42, 56-58), God’s chastisement of his people (vv. 21-22, 30-33, 58-64), and yet his steadfast love for them (vv. 12-16, 23-29, 38-39, 42-55, 65-72).


In your lesson include reference to the unfaithfulness of the tribe of Ephraim as seen in 1 Samuel 1–4, which Psalm 78 emphasizes in verse 9-11, 59-64, 67 (see background helps above), and God’s choice of Judah and King David in Psalm 78:68-72. More about God’s covenant with David next week!


Here are several possible lesson aims:

1. For parents and grandparents: My students will learn about their responsibility to pass along the works and words of God to the next generations, so that their descendants will be faithful to the Lord. In this lesson study the whole psalm in the light of verses 1-8. Emphasize the memory verse: Ephesians 6:4.

2. For all classes (but especially for children): My students will learn about Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant and God's faithfulness to the covenant, so that they will choose to be faithful to God's covenant. In this lesson study the whole psalm as a review of Old Testament history, emphasizing Israel's unfaithfulness and God's contrasting faithfulness to Israel. Urge your students to be faithful to the Lord (a faithfulness made by possible by the new covenant!).
3. For adults and teens: My students will learn about Ephraim's unfaithfulness to the covenant and God's faithfulness to the covenant, so that they will choose to be faithful to God's covenant. This aim is similar to the previous aim but it specifically relates Psalm 78 (especially verses 9-11 and 60-72) to the story in 1 Samuel 1-4, preparing the way for our study of God's covenant with David next week.

Home Assignment:

 Read 1 Chronicles 10:1-11:9; 13; 15-17.

 Memorize Psalm 89:3-4 ESV.

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