Psalm 78 — The Riddles of God and the Cross in the Old Testament

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A Psalm Written for Adults

The Bible was written for little children. From Adam and Eve in the garden to Noah's ark, from Moses and the Red Sea to David and Goliath, the Scripture comes down to where we are and makes sure no one is left behind. And that is as it should be — God speaking to us with the tenderness of a Father who stoops to his children.

Psalm 78 is different. It declares itself different at the outset. Verses 1–2: Give ear, O my people, to my law. Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable — I will utter riddles from of old. The psalm says it is full of riddles. That is not an interpretation; it is a declaration. And riddles, by their nature, are not for little children. They are God speaking to those who want to be treated as adults.

The question the psalm raises is: how do you solve a Bible riddle? To answer that, we need a worked example — and the Bible provides one in Judges 14.

How to Solve a Riddle — Samson's Method

Samson was betrothed to a Philistine woman, and at the wedding feast he proposed a riddle to the guests: Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. The answer is recorded in verse 18: what is sweeter than honey, and what stronger than a lion? And the explanation behind that answer is that Samson had killed a lion some time earlier, and when he returned

to its carcass a swarm of bees had made honey in it.

The method for solving the riddle is this. First, identify what the riddle contains — count the elements. Here there are four: eater, food, strong, sweetness. Pair them: sweet food on one side, a strong eater on the other. Two things, clearly different from each other. Then take each one and extrapolate — carry it in your mind to its most extreme possible case. What is the most extreme form of sweet food? In Palestine in the twelfth century before Christ, without granulated sugar, the limit of sweetness was honey. What is the most extreme form of a strong eater — a carnivore, powerful and fierce? At the extreme end: a lion. Put those two extremes together under the conditions of the riddle, and the solution emerges. The method is not clever guessing. It is systematic: find the two contrasting things, take each to its extreme, and then ask how they could possibly both be true at once.

The Sixth Riddle — Psalm 78:56–64

Psalm 78:56–64 is the sixth section of the psalm, and it is a riddle. It does not feel like one on first reading — it sounds like another rehearsal of Israel's sin and God's judgment, the same theme that runs through the earlier sections. But the riddle method reveals what it is actually about.

Verses 56–58 describe Israel provoking God, tempting him, keeping not his testimonies. The same ground as before. Then verse 59: God heard and was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel. And he forsook the tabernacle at Shiloh. Three things together: divine wrath at its most intense, divine abhorrence, and divine forsaking. Set them aside for a moment. They are one half of the riddle.

Verses 63–64 describe something different: the execution of divine judgment. Their priests fell by the sword and their widows made no lamentation. That is the other half. The death of a priest, and widows who did not weep for their husbands — implying death so sudden, and grief so overwhelming, that the normal

response was suspended.

Now apply the method. Take the first half — God's wrath, God's abhorrence, God forsaking — and extrapolate to the extreme. When was God's anger the greatest of all? When did God abhor something so completely that there is nothing beyond it? When was there a forsaking beyond which no greater forsaking is conceivable? The answer is the cross. In those hours of darkness, when the Lord Jesus was made sin for us and cried, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? — there the wrath of God was without comparison, there the abhorrence was of sin laid on the holy sinless One, and there the forsaking exceeded every other forsaking in all of history.

> *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? — Psalm 22:1*

Then take the second half — the death of a priest — and extrapolate to its extreme. Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, were slain by the Philistines when the ark was taken. Doeg slew a whole city full of priests. But is there a death of a priest beyond which nothing worse is conceivable? Hebrews 9 and 10 supply the answer: the great high priest, having offered one sacrifice for sins in perpetuity, sat down at the right hand of God. He died. The prophet had written: Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my fellow — smite the shepherd. The extreme case of the death of a priest is the death of the great high priest, who offered himself without spot to God.

Put those two extremes together, and the riddle resolves: the wrath of God, the abhorrence of God, and the forsaking of God in the hours of darkness on the cross — and the death of the priest who offered himself as that sacrifice. Psalm 78:56–64 is, in its inner meaning, about the cross. The Spirit of God embedded the deepest truth of the New Testament in the riddle-form of a psalm about Israel's failure.

The First Riddle — What Must Be Told to Every Generation

Psalm 78:5–8 opens the psalm's sequence of riddles: He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children — that the generation to come might know them, the children that should be born — that they might set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that prepared not their heart and whose spirit was not steadfast with God.

Two things are in this riddle: something that must be made known to children and grandchildren above all else, and something about a spirit that was not steadfast with God. Take each to its extreme. What is the one thing in all the Bible most essential to tell the next generation? Psalm 22:31 suggests the answer: they shall come and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this — and Psalm 22 begins with the forsaking of the Lord on the cross. The most important thing to tell every generation is what God has done in the death of Christ.

And the spirit not steadfast with God — take that to its extreme. On Palm Sunday the people cried Hosanna, blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord. Three days later the same voices cried Crucify him. That is what it looks like when a spirit is not steadfast with God, taken to its uttermost expression. Put those two extremes together, and the first riddle arrives at the same place as the sixth: the cross, the rejection of the Son of God, and the absolute necessity of telling every generation what God has done there.

Psalm 78 is not easy. It was not meant to be easy. It was meant for those who want God to speak to them as adults — and what God says to adults, in the most demanding literary form the Scripture contains, is what he says to little children in the simplest stories: Christ died for you. And the more any soul understands of those hours of darkness and that forsaking, the better off that soul will be.