



Psalm 95 - A Call to Worship and Obedience

Introduction

This psalm summons those singing it to learn the lesson from the rebellion of a previous generation and to commit themselves to faithfully heeding God's voice. This psalm can be called a prophetic hymn like Psalm 81, which also remembers Meribah, and Psalm 82, as it echoes themes found in the OT Prophets; or it can be called a historical psalm like Psalm 78, as it draws a lesson from the history of Israel. There is a fine line between the two categories.

The combination of Meribah and Massah shows that the psalm draws its lesson from the Israelites' grumbling against Moses because they had no water; refer to Exodus 17:1-7. At the same time, this event did not lead to God's decisive oath found in the psalm. That oath comes in Numbers 14:21-35, after the people had listened to the report of the ten faithless spies and refused to enter the land to take it. The Lord swore <<*as I live*>> that not one of those who grumbled in disbelief <<*shall come into the land*>>; the 40 days of spying would yield 40 years of wandering. That is, those who refuse in unbelief to obey God's voice would be removed from the people, and there would be a delay in the people carrying out their calling to occupy the land.

The psalm takes the incident at Meribah and Massah as an early instalment of this persistent unbelief, which culminated in refusal to enter the land. The psalm has two parts: the first a celebration of God's kingship and the privilege that his people enjoy as they worship him (vv.1-7a), and the second a warning not to repeat the rebellion of their ancestors (vv.7b-11). The first section explains why the psalm appears with Psalms 93-99, and also serves to highlight the folly of any kind of rebellion in the face of such an astounding privilege. Hebrews 3:7-11 uses vv.7b-11, placing its audience in an analogous situation to the Israelites in the wilderness: for these Jews to abandon their explicit faith in Jesus in order to return to the safety of 'ordinary' Judaism would be like the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness, a mark of unbelief. As in the psalm, Hebrews makes every day a 'today' that calls for renewed faithfulness.

This wonderful psalm is quoted and analysed in Hebrews 3:7-4:13. There, in Hebrews 4:7, it is said to be ‘through David’. This may indicate that David the son of Jesse was the unattributed author, but it is also possible that the author of Hebrews simply referred to the Book of Psalms as David’s Book.

Psalm 95:1-7a - The Lord Is King.

The members of the congregation singing these verses invite one another to the great privilege of worshipping the Lord, the great God, the great King above all other gods. On the kind of kingship attributed to God here, refer to the comment made on Psalm 93.

God is King over all creation: it is his, he made it, and he rules over it all - it is in his hand, i.e. under his authority. The marvel of being Israel is that such a majestic King has pledged himself to his people, making them the sheep of his hand; refer to the comment made on Psalm 74:1-3. It is no surprise, then, that worship offered to him would be both exuberant reflected in the terms sing, make a joyful noise, thanksgiving, songs of praise, with astonished wonder, and humble before such majesty, i.e. bow down and kneel. The whole person, body and soul, must offer this worship.

- 1 O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- 2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

Psalm 95:1-2

O come. There is a sweet sense of emphasis in these words. There is a gentle plea here; exhorting the readers to do what is right before God and good for them.

O come, let us sing to the Lord. The psalmist first mentioned honouring God with song, and doing so in community. Singing is not the only way to give honour and worship to God, but it is a chief and important way. Also, importantly, the exhortation is let us sing - that it should be done with the community of God’s people: <<*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching*>> (Hebrews 10:24-25). Spurgeon commented, “It is to be feared that very much even of religious singing is not unto the Lord, but unto the ear of the congregation above all things we must in our service of song take care that all we offer is with the heart’s sincerest and most fervent intent directed towards the Lord himself.”

Let us make a joyful noise. God should be honoured with a happy, enthusiastic heart: <<*Sing aloud to God our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob*>>

(Psalm 81:1), <<*Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel*>> (Isaiah 44:23), and: <<*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!*>> (Zephaniah 3:14). There is a place for a sombre, reflective mood in worship, but it should not be the dominant tone. God's people have much to shout joyfully about.

The rock of our salvation! This is a title for God with both experiential and theological meaning, as David acknowledged in his song: <<*The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation*>> (2 Samuel 22:47). It points to a genuine depth of both thought and experience. Worship should not be simply saying things about God, but doing it with thought and a connection to what his people have or need to experience from him.

Let us come into his presence. This means that worship should be done with a conscious sense of God's presence. God's people do not sing into empty space; he is in their presence and they are in his presence. There is - or should be - a true connection between God and his people in worship. His presence does not mean God in the holy of holies, symbolised at the Ark of the Covenant. There could be no invitation to the community to come before his presence there. Even when they had the tabernacle and the temple, the Jewish people rightly understood the spiritual presence of God, just as the Christian does today: <<*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*>> (Matthew 18:20).

With thanksgiving. Worship should express the simple gratitude and heart of thanksgiving that is appropriate for those whom God has done so much. Spurgeon explained, "We are permitted to bring our petitions, and therefore we are in honour bound to bring our thanksgivings."

Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! This is what the psalmist himself intended with this psalm. The reader can also surmise that he turned the attention of God's people to the broader collection of psalms as a source of inspiration for their worship: <<*These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival*>> (Psalm 42:4).

- 3 For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
- 4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
- 5 The sea is his, for he made it,

and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

Psalm 95:3-5

For the Lord is a great God. Understanding the greatness of God helps people to properly worship him: <<*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God*>> (Psalm 48:1a). Almost everyone has some sense of awe or appreciation of greatness when in the presence of someone the culture regards as great. This is natural; it is even more natural and appropriate for Christians to deeply regard Yahweh as the great God and the great King above all gods: <<*For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods*>> (Psalm 96:4), and: <<*For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods*>> (Psalm 97:9). Spurgeon observed, “No doubt the surrounding nations imagined Jehovah to be a merely local deity, the god of a small nation, and therefore one of the inferior deities; the psalmist utterly repudiates such an idea.”

In his hand are the depths of the earth. One way God’s greatness is illustrated is by his mastery over creation. From the lowest valley to the highest hills, they belong to him. From the sea to the dry land: <<*And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so*>> (Genesis 1:9), God’s hands have formed it.

The sea is his, for he made it. The oceans and seas of this world belong to God. Whatever nation may make claim on the seas or the concept of international waters may intend, God made a specific declaration that the sea is his. Spurgeon again observed, “If God owns the sea because he made it, he owns you, because he made you too. You are his creature, and by all the rights of creatorship you belong to him. He claims you; will you dispute the claim?”

⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

^{7a} For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

Psalm 95:6-7a

O come. As at the beginning of the psalm, there is a sweet sense of emphasis in these words. There is a gentle plea here; exhorting the readers to do what is right before God and good for them.

Let us worship and bow down. The ideas of community (let us) and worship are repeated from earlier in the psalm, with an added sense of humility, the call to bow down in the Lord’s presence: <<*Therefore God also highly exalted him and*

gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father>> (Philippians 2:9-11). The idea behind the Hebrew word worship is essentially to bow down, the thought is emphasised and given more intensity through repetition. Again Spurgeon observed, “It is not always easy to unite enthusiasm with reverence, and it is a frequent fault to destroy one of these qualities while straining after the other.”

Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! In the previous verses the psalmist spoke of God’s mastery over all creation. Now he includes humanity itself among God’s creation. Christians owe humble worship to God because he made them. There are obligations that the creature owes to the Creator. The redeemed have at least two great reasons to humbly worship God. He is both their Maker and their Redeemer. They belong to him twice over, in both creation and redemption. This is reflected in the prayer of Jesus: *<<I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours>>* (John 17:6-9).

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture. Yahweh is also worthy of humble worship because he is the only true God. The ancient Hebrew had something of a choice of gods, and it was a deliberate act of allegiance to say, “Yahweh is my God. I belong to him and there is a sense in which he belongs to me - I am like the sheep of his hand.”

Psalm 95:7b-11 - We His People Must Heed His Voice.

Since worship includes the priests reading and expounding the Scriptures, the worshippers will hear his voice (v.7b), and in the rest of the psalm the congregation reminds itself that they must take it to heart, believing and obeying their great King. A previous generation of Israel had instead put God to the test through their unbelief. This section focuses on the inner self, the heart, where one lays hold of or rejects the grace of the covenant.

As explained in the introduction above, the psalm uses Exodus 17:1-7 together with Numbers 14:21-35 to make its point. God will preserve the corporate entity, the people, in order to achieve his purposes in the world; but he wants the members of the people to be joined to him in true faith. If they rebel, they must be removed from the community and even from his presence.

7b O that today you would listen to his voice!
8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
9 when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

Psalm 95:7b-9

O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not. The psalmist once again exhorts the singer into action, to hear the voice of God. In the midst of their worship, God spoke to his people. He gave them and Christians a word of warning. Many translations have v.7b as <<**Today, if you hear his voice**>> and the NRSVA reflects this in Hebrews 4:7. Some scholars prefer to take the word ‘if’ in the sense, ‘if only’: ‘Today, if only you would hear his voice! Do not ...’ This, however, loses the connection between ‘today’ (the day on which and of which the congregation sings) and the day at Massah.

This word of warning is important enough to be referenced three times in the Book of Hebrews: <<*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness’*>> (Hebrews 3:7-8), <<*As it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’*>> (Hebrews 3:15), and: <<*again he sets a certain day – ‘today’ – saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’*>> (Hebrews 4:7). In Hebrews 4:7 the emphasis is on the word today, indicating urgency to listen to God with a soft heart today. Spurgeon suggested that, “This is the uniform time and tense of the Holy Ghost’s exhortations. He says nothing about tomorrow, except to forbid our boasting of it, since we know not what a day shall bring forth. All his instructions are set to the time and tune of ‘Today, today, today.’” When the writer to the Hebrews quoted this passage in Hebrews 3:7, he specifically attributed it to the Holy Spirit: Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says. He was certain that the words of Psalm 95 were inspired by the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit was Yahweh.

Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness. This rebellion, the day the Israelites were tested refers primarily to the trial at Meribah recorded in Numbers 20:1-13. However, more generally it speaks of Israel’s refusal to trust and enter the Promised Land during the Exodus; refer to Numbers 13:30-14:10. God did not accept their unbelief and condemned that generation of unbelief to die in the wilderness; refer to Numbers 14:22-23 and 14:28-32.

Harden your hearts. The biblical writers use ‘heart’ for the central core of the person’s thoughts, feelings, and choices: <<**Keep your heart with all vigilance,**

for from it flow the springs of life>> (Proverbs 4:23). To ‘harden the heart’ is to make it dull and unresponsive to God, and thus to strengthen it in disbelief. The appeal do not harden your hearts means there is some aspect of the will involved when it comes to the hardness or indeed softness of heart. Many regard a hard or soft heart as something that just happens to someone and is beyond their ability to control. Here the Holy Spirit indicates differently.

The strong words in the second half of Psalm 95 are connected to the sweet, stirring words of the first half. Humble worship of Yahweh and the recognition of him as Creator and God should lead to a listening ear and a soft, surrounded heart toward him. There is something wrong when the worshipper does not obey and trust God.

Charles Spurgeon suggested several ways that Christian may harden their hearts:

- Some harden their hearts by resolving not to feel in regard to spiritual things.
- Some harden their hearts by delay.
- Some harden their hearts by pretended doubts and foolish criticisms.
- Some harden their hearts by getting into evil company.
- Some harden their hearts by silly amusements ‘all intended to kill time and prevent thought upon divine things.’
- Some harden their hearts by indulging a favourite sin.

When your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof. Christians test God by their unbelief. Israel saw the work of God, yet would not trust him at Meribah or in the wilderness in general. Israel tested God in the wilderness and Christians are warned not to do the same. To reject God’s invitation today surely means to test him. Again Spurgeon commented, “Is God to wait as a lackey upon you? You deserve his wrath, will you slight his love? He speaks in amazing tenderness, will you exhibit astounding hardness?”

Though they had seen my work means that God gives all people reason to trust in him. To ignore those reasons is to provoke and to test God.

¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.’

¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore,
‘They shall not enter my rest.’

Psalm 95:10-11

For forty years I loathed that generation. God offered the generation that came out of Egypt the opportunity to take the Promised Land by faith. Their unbelieving rejection of God's offer grieved him for forty years and the adults of that generation perished as they wandered in the wilderness - yet God still sustained them during that time of punishment and trial. It was evidence that they went astray in their hearts, away from humble confidence in him as Creator and Redeemer. Spurgeon again noted, "Their heart was obstinately and constantly at fault; it was not their head which erred, but their very heart was perverse love, which appealed to their affections, and could not convert them."

The Scriptures frequently indicate this conditions, for example: <<*The wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth, speaking lies*>> (Psalm 58:3), <<*Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep your word*>> (Psalm 119:67), <<*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*>> (Isaiah 53:6), and: <<*My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains; from mountain to hill they have gone, they have forgotten their fold*>> (Jeremiah 50:6),

They do not regard my ways. To know God is to trust him. Unbelief is evidence of small or faulty knowledge of God.

Therefore in my anger I swore. God did not honour the unbelief of his people. It was an insult to him, and prompted a solemn, angry declaration from him. Spurgeon warned, "Be not wilfully, wantonly, repeatedly, obstinately rebellious. Let the example of that unhappy generation serve as a beacon to you; do not repeat the offences which have already more than enough provoked the Lord."

They shall not enter my rest. God condemned Israel's generation of unbelief to die in the wilderness, so that a generation of faith could inherit the Promised Land, his appointed place of rest for his people. In the wilderness context, the rest is specifically the place of rest, i.e. the land: <<*for you have not yet come into the rest and the possession that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Deuteronomy 12:9); which was finally secured with David's reign but, since the singing congregation is already in the land, it follows that the psalm is using rest as an image of enjoying God's presence forever, much as: <<*Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it*>> (Hebrews 4:1), and: <<*Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs*>> (Hebrews 4:11) does.

Spurgeon's final comment on Psalm 95 was, "There can be no rest to an unbelieving heart. If manna and miracles could not satisfy Israel, neither would they have been content with the land which flowed with milk and honey."