

Psalm 95 “Entering God’s Rest”
Psalm 95
Hebrews 3:7-4:16

November 26, 2017

Do you find Psalm 95 a little abrupt?

There’s this great call to worship at the beginning,
and then all of a sudden it launches into this terrifying warning!
If you think about it,
that’s kind of the way the liturgy is shaped!
There’s all this great gospel content –
and then, in the sermon, there is often a warning!

And that’s the shape of Psalm 95.

Indeed, that is also very much the shape of Israel’s history!

God created all things – then Adam ignored God’s warning and died.
God brought a New Creation as he created Israel to be his people –
but Israel ignored God’s warning and died.

So – today, if you hear his voice – do not harden your hearts... like your fathers did!

Sing Psalm 95

Read Hebrews 3:7-4:16

Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts –
Do not harden your hearts as your fathers did in the wilderness.
Do not harden your hearts as your fathers did in the days of the Kings.
Do not harden your hearts as your fathers did when facing trial and temptation
in generations past.

It is tempting to say that things are *now* worse than they have ever been!

But why are we tempted to say that?

Because if it’s *worse* now – then we can make excuses for *our* hard hearts!

But Hebrews tells us that we are facing the *same* temptations as our fathers –

the same temptations that overcame them –

the same temptations that Jesus endured – yet without sin!

And therefore Jesus sympathizes with us in our weaknesses –

because he understands them from the inside.

But “sympathize” is too flimsy a word here –

the sympathy of Jesus does not consist in empty words –

“Yeah, sorry to hear about that – tough luck, bro!”

The sympathy of Jesus consists of *powerful words* –

so that, as we draw near to the throne of grace,

we have *confidence* that we will receive mercy and find help
in our time of need.

Do you need *mercy*?
Do you want to find *help*?
Are you in *need*?

Psalm 95 is for you!

The first part of the Psalm talks about the outward practice and posture of worship.
The second part talks about the inward disposition.

Some people want to emphasize the outward –
their critics rightly point out that outward action without the inward disposition
is a farce.

But you can too far in the other direction as well!

If all you focus on is the inward,
but you never get around to doing the outward,
then it is fair to ask (with James) can such faith save him?

The outward and the inward have a reciprocal relationship!

The outward practices of worship nourish and sustain the inward disposition of faith –
while the inward disposition of faith continues to pursue its outward expression
in acts of worship, love, and service.

Just as faith must always result in action,
so also a soft heart towards God will always result in the *act* of worship.

But it can go either way!

After all, consider Psalm 73 –
where the Psalmist's faith is flagging –
he *almost* betrayed God's people by forsaking God!
But when he comes into the sanctuary, then he sees clearly!

I think all of us have had this experience.

There are times when my faith is flagging –
where I am tempted to deny my God.
And what we do *here* in worship revives my fainting spirit.

1. The Outward Practice and Posture of Worship (v1-7a)

Verses 1-7 focus on the outward expression of worship.

a. Sing Joyfully as You Come into God's Presence (v1-2)

Oh 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!

Verses 1-2 opens with an imperative –
a single command to *you* (plural):

Come.

The word is used a thousand times in the OT –
in English translations, you can find the word “come” 1700 times in the whole Bible!

So I will pardon you if you have never thought about the importance of this command!
You say it to your little child – “Come to daddy!”
You say it to your friends – “why don’t you come over for lunch?!”
It takes on a whole different meaning when your wife says, “Are you coming to bed?”

Come.

It is a very physical word.

It is sometimes translated “go” or “walk” –
but invariably it means to move from one place to another.
You cannot “come” merely as a mental exercise.
It means that you must stand up and *walk*.

But Psalm 95 opens with this very simple – yet very important – command!

Jesus talks like this:

“Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Mt 11:28)
“Come, you who are blessed by my Father,
inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundation of the world” (Mt 25:34)

And in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, Paul uses the term “come together” seven times
to refer to the church’s gathering for corporate worship.

Come!

This is a major reason why we started having the congregation *come* forward
to partake of the Lord’s Supper.
Our worship is not merely inward –
it involves *walking* – *coming* together as the people of God.

The Spirit and the Bride say “Come”!

And there are four things that follow for those who come!

Notice how the Psalmist draws *you* in –
after using the second person imperative – “Come” –
he now includes himself – making an “us.”

Because worship is primarily a corporate thing –
we come *together* as the people of God to meet *together* with our Triune God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So come,

“Let us *sing* to the LORD,
Let us make a *joyful noise* to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving,
Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise.”

I have often emphasized the importance of songs of lament,
but it is also important to sing songs of praise!

Here the Psalmist offers us four different ways of saying it:

Let us sing to the LORD –
that's the most basic way of putting it!
Sing to God!

Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

This is the key to the whole Psalm!
The word translated “joyful noise” means “to shout” –
so you could just translate it:

“Let us *shout* to the rock of our salvation.”

The “shout” in the OT

can refer to the war-cry – when people are going into battle.
or it can refer to the victory-cry – when we have won the battle.

It was used in Joshua 6, for the “shout” that brought down the wall of Jericho.
Or, in Ezra 3, it is used of the great shout at the rebuilding of the temple.

But in every case, the “shout” is either a shout of confidence in God as we go into battle,
or it is a shout of victory *after* God has defeated our enemies.

“Make a joyful noise” is probably too generic here.

Raise the “victory shout” – or “Shout in triumph to the rock of our salvation.”

Because the point is that *God has won* the victory!

Therefore we should come into his presence with thanksgiving –

Let us shout in triumph to him with songs of praise!

We do pretty well at singing here at MCPC,
but I haven't heard much shouting.

Can I get an amen?

So we may need to practice this...

just like we've been working on the "holy kiss" for a while!

But we need to get our bodies (including our voices)
more involved in worship.

You may have noticed that a lot of people say "Thanks be to God"
after the scripture readings.

That didn't start with me – or with any of the elders.
It started with a couple of people in the congregation
who just started saying it out loud –
and then others joined in!

Of course, sometimes, "Thanks be to God" might not be the right thing to say!
Sometimes (especially after a reading that highlights sin and judgment)
it would be better to say, "Lord, have mercy!"
(And, by the way, it's okay if different people say different things!)

But when Joel gives the declaration of pardon –
when he tells you that your sins are forgiven and that you are *free*
from the powers of sin and death –
that would be a good time to *shout!*

I mean, I suppose you *could* murmur – 'thanks be to God' –
if you are only *kind of* grateful for being saved from *hell!*

Or you could shout, "Hallelujah" (which means, "Praise the LORD!")

But the victory shout *is* a shout of joy – a shout of triumph!

Can I get a "Hallelujah!"

And verse 3 gives us the *reason* for our victory shout:

Because the LORD is the Great King above All Gods (v3)

³ *For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.*

Even though the son of David was not yet restored,
Book 4 of the Psalms has confidence that the LORD will still accomplish his purposes.
Because the LORD is a great God –
he is not just an ordinary god – he is not just one god among many.
He is a Great God.
And a Great KING above all gods.

In those days, the King of Persia was the “great king.”
And the Persian empire was the greatest empire *ever*.
What Cyrus the Great and his heirs accomplished has never been duplicated!
Sure, other empires have held more *land*.
But *no other empire* has ever had more than 40% of the world’s population
under one king!
So if you are the king of *Moab* – you are *nothing* compared to the great King of Persia!

And when the Psalmist identifies Yahweh as “a great king above all gods”
he is saying that Yahweh is to all gods what the king of Persia is all kings.
There is *no comparison*.

As Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6,
“For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth –
as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ –
yet for us there is one God, the Father,
from whom are all things and for whom we exist,
and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

The scriptures are quite consistent in saying that there are all sorts of spiritual beings –
some of whom have been called “gods” by the nations.
But there is only *one* God.
No other being is worthy of being compared with God.

And Paul’s emphasis on creation and new creation is rooted in Psalm 95:4-5

b. He Rules Earth and Seas (v4)
⁴ *In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.*
Because He Is the Creator (v5)
⁵ *The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.*

Verse 4 highlights God’s rule over the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains.
While verse 5 focuses on *why* – he made the sea and the dry land –
therefore it all belongs to *him*.

Honest atheists will admit that at to the most basic question,
“why is there *something* rather than *nothing*?” –
they have no answer.

Some *dishonest* atheists try to push the question back a step:
they posit the “multi-verse” and suggest that there are an infinite number of universes.

But that still doesn't explain why there is *something* rather than *nothing*.
Where did all this multi-verse come from?

Psalms 95 tells us that God made the earth and the seas with his own hands.
The word *hand* is important here – because it connects with verse 7 –
where we are the sheep of his hand.

And so the Psalmist comes back to the opening idea of verse 1
but he uses a different word in verse 6:

c. So Let us Kneel Before the LORD, Our Maker (v6)

⁶ *Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!*

In verse 1, the basic idea of the word is “to walk.”
In verse 6, the basic idea of the word is “to enter.”

Come!

Or

Come in!

What is the difference?

Well, the first is a summons:

Leave where you are, and come over here.

The second is a welcome:

You are here! Come in!

You see the same distinction in the Call to Worship – Come to the LORD!
And the Declaration of Pardon – You are welcome here!

We sing the victory song – we shout to the LORD for his great triumph!
And then we bow – we kneel – we humble ourselves before him.

Because this time the focus is not on singing or shouting.

This time the focus is on our *posture* –

let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

If the LORD is a great King –

well, how do you approach a great King?

On your knees.

The posture of kneeling is all about humility – submission –

it is a visible acknowledgment that I am helpless before you.

Imagine, if you will, a throne room –
with the Great King sitting on his throne!

The people all come to the palace shouting his great victories and wondrous deeds –
and then, as they enter – as they draw near to the Great King –
they kneel – they bow down – as they acknowledge *him* as their Lord.

This is what *we do* as we come into the heavenly Holy of Holies –
as we enter God’s heavenly throne room through our Lord Jesus!

Because He is Our God and We Are His People (v7a)

⁷ *For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.*

The same hand by which he formed the dry land –
the same hand which holds the depths of the earth –
that hand is the one by which God guides and protects us as our good shepherd.

He is not only the great King over all gods.
He is also *our God*.
This is why Jesus teaches us to pray,
“Our Father, who art in heaven...”

This is the amazing heart and soul of the Christian faith:
that the creator God – the one who made the universe
(and any multiverse that may be out there!),
this God sent his only Son to come in the flesh –
to join himself to our humanity –
so that through *his* death and resurrection,
he might join *us* to God.
He became all that we are by nature,
so that we might become all that he is by grace.

So we *come* to God, singing his praise and shouting because of his great victory.
We enter his presence, kneeling before him, acknowledging that he alone is our God.

And then we shut up.
And we listen to his voice.

2. The Inward Disposition Necessary to Enter God’s Rest (v7b-11)

a. Today: Hear His Voice (7b)

Today, if you hear his voice,

Sometimes the transition from part 1 to part 2 of Psalm 95 strikes people as abrupt.
But it is no more abrupt than the liturgy itself –
which moves from singing and shouting the praises of God,

to the quiet and humble listening to his voice in the sermon.

But the movement in Psalm 95 is also a movement inward.

The actions of verses 1-7 are all outward:

walk, sing, shout, worship, bow down, kneel.

But in verses 8-11, there is only one command:

“do not harden your hearts.”

Now, it is true that a hardened heart will express itself in action.

But no one can see outwardly a heart being hardened.

After all, if you go back to Exodus 17 –

Israel has just been saved from Egypt,

they are on their way to Mt. Sinai

to enter the presence of God!

They had seen God’s mighty deeds!

b. Yesterday: Meribah and Massah – the Rebellion in the Wilderness (v8-9)

⁸ *do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,*

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ *when your fathers put me to the test*

and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

Psalm 95 speaks to *today* by reminding us of “yesterday” –
your fathers in the wilderness.

There are two places that are called “the waters of Meribah.”

Exodus 17 – where Israel first grumbled for water,
and Moses struck the rock.

And Numbers 20 – where Israel again grumbled for water,
and Moses was *commanded* to *speak* to the rock,
but instead, Moses struck the rock.

I think that Psalm 95 is talking about *both* of those episodes –

or, better yet, he is talking the whole of the wilderness rebellions –

under the names “Meribah” and “Massah” –

which, in Hebrew, mean “provocation” and “temptation.”

So you could translate it:

“In the provocation in the wilderness,

on the day of testing

when your fathers put me to the test.”

The “day of testing” was not just a singular occurrence.

If it had only happened *once*, it could easily have been forgiven.

But – as is the case with hardened hearts –

it kept getting worse.

Yes, they grumbled at Meribah – in the provocation in Exodus 17.

But then, even after seeing the glory of the LORD revealed at Sinai –
they rebelled at Sinai by making a cast metal ox!

And then, when the LORD had given them the tabernacle –
and the Most Holy Place, where God could dwell with his people –
they grumbled again and again in the wilderness.

Why did they keep grumbling?

And here is where God zeros in on the *heart* of the problem:

c. The Heart of Yesterday: They Go Astray in Their Heart (v10)

¹⁰ *For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways.”*

They go astray in their heart.

This is not an intellectual problem.
Our problem is *not* a lack of education!

Modern society thinks that education can fix all our problems.

We’re having trouble on the West Side.
We need better schools...
Maybe if we had better teachers...

Giving people information doesn’t change them.

Consider Israel!

At Mt. Sinai they got the best education from the best teacher!
God himself *spoke* from the mountain.

And Moses – until the coming of our Lord Jesus,
there was no greater prophet than Moses!

Yet “they have not known my ways.”

But the LORD does not blame the teacher.

He zeros in on the *real problem* with all of us.

“They go astray in their heart.”

Our problem is not lack of information.

Our problem is with what we *love*.

Because we will *listen* to the voice of the one we love.

We will *do* what our beloved asks.

I was reading this week about a scandal in our sister church, the Free Church of Scotland.
The Rev. Iain D. Campbell – a well-known preacher and writer –
committed suicide last winter,
after it became known that he had been having a series of affairs for many years.

The Free Church has done well at investigating the case,
vindicating his widow,
and is now trying to figure out how they can get in each other's lives better –
so as to help prevent something like this from festering for so long!

But as I read from the record of the case,
I was struck that Mr. Campbell was simply following what he *loved*.
He was a doctor of divinity – he had all the *knowledge* in the world!

But he was a *lover* of pleasure – he *loved* how his affairs made him feel.

But when you love something other than God,
when you put your own pleasure ahead of hearing and doing what God says,
well, then, as we saw last week,
there is a sort of poetic justice in the end.
And verse 11 declares that same justice:

d. Yesterday's Tomorrow: Exile as Judgment (v11)

¹¹ *Therefore I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter my rest."*

Think about Israel:

Israel had refused to enter the promised land – through unbelief.
They did not believe that God was able to defeat the Canaanites
(even though just a little more than a year before
they had seen God's power against the mighty Egyptians!).
Again, the problem was *not* that they lacked information!

When God said, "Go, enter the promised land –
take possession of the land that I promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob –
Israel refused.

And so the LORD declared, "They shall not enter my rest."
You don't want to go in – okay, fine – you *can't* go in!

He gave them what they wanted –
and then they found out that what they wanted
was a land of dust and death.

Iain D. Campbell had hardened his heart –
he pursued his desires – and refused to hear the very promises he preached so clearly!

And so God gave him what he wanted –
but in the end, he learned the same lesson as our fathers in the wilderness:
“Therefore I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

Why do I say that he learned the same lesson?
Because that’s what Hebrews 3-4 *says* is the point of Psalm 95.

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart,
leading you to fall away from the living God.
But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today,
that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Sin is deceitful.
And we don’t see it.
If we did, we might not be deceived by it!
Because *again*, the problem is not lack of information.

If the problem was lack of information,
then all you would need is a church that has good teaching.
Get all the right information in your head on Sunday,
then go home and live it out all week!
But that doesn’t work!

That’s why Hebrews 3:13 says to exhort one another “every day” –
as long as it is called ‘today.’
This is why we need to be in each other’s lives!
This is why we need *both* the inward disposition *and* the outward practice.

Listen again to how Hebrews says it:

¹⁶For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Notice how Hebrews blends together the idea of “disobedience” and “unbelief.”
Faith always produces obedience.
Unbelief always produces disobedience.

And so, Hebrews 4:11-13 goes on to say:

¹¹ Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

If you hear his voice – do not harden your hearts.

For God's word is living and active –

God's word is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

No one can escape the coming judgment –

when you will have to give an account to God.

But there is a way in which we have an advantage over our fathers in the wilderness.

We have Jesus – as Hebrews 4:14-16 says:

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

It should be clear by now that this promise is for *us*.

If you wander off by yourself and say, oh goody, this promise is for me – all by myself!!

No.

It's not.

“Let *us* then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,
that *we* may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Those bodily, physical practices from the first half of the Psalm
are absolutely essential for us.

Singing together – shouting together – worshiping together – kneeling together – hearing together
these are the things that train our hearts!

Liturgy, catechism, Sabbath, psalmody, family worship, discipleship, shepherding –
these outward practices always need to be oriented by a heart that *loves* the Lord Jesus.