

Sermon 14, Carcasses in the Wilderness, Psalm 95

Proposition: Psalm 95 reminds us that true worship demands that we listen to the word of God.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we interrupt our regularly scheduled programming this morning to look together at Psalm 95 with its celebration of worship and warning against the behavior of the wilderness generation. We are doing this because Psalm 95 is a big deal in Hebrews 3-4 — such a big deal that, I think, we need to know what's going on in the Psalm in order to rightly understand the Hebrew writer's argument. Thus, we are going to take a week to look at Psalm 95, which is based in large part on Numbers 13-14 — the account of Israel's unfaithfulness that led Yahweh to swear that the wilderness generation would not enter His rest. What we'll see this morning from Psalm 95 is the truth that worship demands that we listen to the word of God. The Psalm breaks down into two invitations, two calls to worship — both with reasons, and the second one with a warning.

I. An Invitation with a Reason, vv. 1-5

We begin by looking at the first part of the psalm, the invitation with reasons taken from the exalted and glorious character of God.

A. The Invitation: Come, Let Us Sing, vv. 1-2

¹ The two Roman numeral main points are Spurgeon's outline, from his *Treasury of David*, in loc.

The invitation is, of course, an invitation to worship God. As the commentators noted, the psalmist does not say “Go worship God.” He includes himself. He offers to come along.

I worked with my grandfather in Georgia in the summer of 2005, and it drove me nuts the way he would use the phrase “We’re going to do such-and-such” to mean “You’re going to do such-and-such.” He would tell me, “We’re going to wash out the trailer.” By that he meant I was going to wash out the trailer.

Well, that is not how the Psalmist operates. He doesn’t say “Let us sing” to mean “You’re going to sing while I listen.” He truly means “Let’s both do this together.”

The same goes for the three hymns that we have in each worship service. They are not invitations to you to perform music while I listen, nor for me to perform music while you listen. We are calling on one another to sing to the LORD. The Psalmist is writing a hymn that we can sing together, that we should sing together.

Notice, too, that singing in v. 1 is paralleled with coming into God’s presence in v. 2. To sing to the LORD is a way of being filled with the Spirit, of getting close to God. Remember, the book of Ephesians tells us to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:18-19). The Holy Spirit of God fills you when you sing. There is no place closer to God’s presence than when you and I are singing to Him together.

Brothers and sisters, our church needs to sing better. Come, let’s do it! God doesn’t command you to wear particular clothing to church. He doesn’t command you to eat particular foods. But He does command you to sing, and to sing loudly. The translation “shout joyfully” reminds us that we are not singing *pianissimo* but *fortissimo*! Do you sing vibrantly, at or near your maximum volume? If someone heard the singing of this church, would he pull out his phone and start filming in a vain attempt to catch the glory of what he was hearing? Would he tell his family “You have got to hear this”? Or would he say “I can’t wait for this song to be over”?

We need to sing, vibrantly, loudly. It’s not optional. I’m not asking you to do it alone; I’m asking you to do with me, just as the psalmist asked Israel to do it with him. If you’re in church today, you are in the presence of God. Don’t sit there like a bump on a log; celebrate God’s presence with loud and glorious singing.

B. The Reasons

Why? Why is God worth singing to?

1. Yahweh Is a Great God

The first reason you should sing to Him is that He is a great God, in every sense of the word. He’s not a lousy or mediocre god. He’s not a god that we would gladly trade in for a superior god. He is a great God, the supreme and greatest God. That means that He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. He has all power in heaven and on earth. He is without body, parts, or passions, infinite, immense, not subject to change, omnipresent. He is pure act, with no potentiality or passivity. And of course, His greatest greatness is that He is not a Monad, but a Trinity — one God, the Father, from whom are all things; and His only begotten Son, for whom are all things;

and their Spirit, who proceeds from the Father through the Son. The greatness of God is seen in the eternal love, the eternal paternity and filiation and spiration that unites the three persons in one God.

2. Yahweh Is a Great King

Not only is our God a great God; He is a great king as well. What does that mean? That He reigns! In the ancient world monarchs typically traced their lineage to some deity, far in the past of course where no one could check their claims. But God Himself was king of Israel, and the human kings He appointed did not claim to be divine. In fact, rather than saying that he was the descendant of a divine king, David claimed to be the father, or ancestor, of a divine king. His claim to divinity was rooted in the future rather than the past — a sign that he followed the God who knows the future.

So God is a king. That is, He reigns. Not only is He a king, but a great king — a highly exalted monarch, one greater and more powerful than any other. There are many gods and many lords, many demons and other powers both good and bad in this cosmos. But they are all servants of Yahweh God. He is king over them all! You can honor these angelic beings by calling them ‘gods,’ and God Himself does so in Psalm 82. But however exalted they are — and some of them are indeed pretty exalted — God is far more exalted. As the saying goes, you may stand on the highest mountain and I may be at the bottom of the deepest mine, but you are no more able to touch the stars than I am. That, indeed, is a good representation of the distance between the highest created being and the uncreated Almighty. That’s the greatness of our King, the rock of our salvation. He doesn’t take hold of gods and angels, but of us.

3. Yahweh Made the Earth, Mountains, Sea, and Caves

He is Lord not only of Powers, but also of our home planet. The heavens, the realm of the gods, are certainly His, as the previous verse just said. Now the psalmist turns to the earth, the sea, the caves under the earth, and announces that they too are all God’s. He did not have to fight the sea; He made the sea. The realm of death, the caves under the earth, is not somehow outside His control; it too is in the palm of His hand.

So listen to the invitation to worship. You are invited; you are welcome. God and His saints want you to come and worship Him. He is a great God, He is a great King, and He is a great Creator.

II. An Invitation with a Warning, vv. 6-11

The psalmist now reiterates his invitation, but this time with a warning attached. The warning, of course, is the part of the psalm that stands out most in the Hebrew writer’s usage of this psalm. He takes for granted the desire of his audience to worship the Lord. But he has to warn them that to fail to worship God by listening means being excluded from God’s rest. There is no rest for those who ignore and deny God’s voice: “No place of grace for those who avoid the face; no time of choice for those who avoid and deny the voice” (T.S. Eliot).

But you don’t have to avoid and deny! The psalmist wants you to know that the door is open, that you can come into the Father’s presence and worship Him.

A. The Invitation: Come, Let Us Worship, v. 6

Once again, the invitation: Come, let us worship! Notice that singing is one part of worship, but the psalmist now broadens his words to include all kinds of worship — not just singing with grace in the heart, but also hearing the reading and preaching of the word. Indeed, as we will see in a moment, the psalmist makes this the core of worship. Singing is good, and singing is something we are commanded to do. But at the end of the psalm, God doesn't damn His people for their poor singing, but for their poor hearing.

So come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our maker! To worship and bow down is to ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name. It is to prostrate yourself in a position of utter vulnerability and submission before Him. When you're on your knees, you can't fight back very well. You can't move quickly. You're like a dog rolling onto its back and exposing its throat. It's a sign of obedience, a signal that you are the inferior in the relationship and that you are submitting to whatever the superior says. Obviously, this is perfectly appropriate with God — far more so than with any other being.

B. The Reason: We Are His Created Covenant People, v. 7a

In fact, the psalmist gives one more reason that we ought to bow before God. That reason is that we are the flock that He shepherds. We are His people — that is, the people in covenant with Him. To be the “sheep of His hand” means that we are under His powerful care and protection. He loves and cares for us perfectly. That is reason enough to bare your throat before Him, to kneel in the dust before Him, to sing loudly to Him with songs of praise. Not only does He guide the earth and rule the sea and the mighty but lesser gods; He also cares for you with His hand.

C. The Warning

But that is merely a prelude to the warning that the psalmist now issues. Worship is not just exuberant singing with drums and trumpets and deep organ pedal notes. Worship requires something of us all week long, not just in our gathering here. Worship requires conformity and obedience. You have to follow through on the gesture of submission, the kneeling that you performed.

1. Worship Means Listening to God's Voice, v. 7b

Notice, first of all, that worship means listening to God's voice. “Today, if you will hear His voice.” Most of us using this psalm for worship stop reading here. I know I have many times when using this psalm as a call to worship. If you look at the setting of this psalm in our hymnal, it stops at v. 7a. These last four verses are chopped off as though they were not relevant to the theme of worship that pervades the psalm's beginning. Nothing could be further from the truth. Like Ps. 19, this psalm is unified. That psalm is about God's revelation in nature and scripture. This psalm is about worship. And thus, by announcing “today, if you will hear His voice,” the psalmist is telling us that the most fundamental aspect of worship is to listen carefully to the voice of God. To worship Him rightly is not just to stand in His presence and say “Oh, Father, you are so exalted and wonderful and great.” That's part of it — but if you really mean that, then above all, you need to *listen to Him!* The great king is not accustomed to having His words disregarded.

We've all had the experience of talking to an empty room. You're yammering on, explaining something you think is very important to someone you firmly imagine to be listening with all their ears. Then you turn around and find that the person is gone, and has been for some time.

Whoops!

That feeling is so embarrassing. It makes you feel stupid that you wasted all that passion and thought and eloquence on empty space.

Well, let's just say that God hates that feeling. He doesn't talk to empty rooms, He talks to full rooms. But He has every week the privilege of seeing the people who looked like they were listening carefully get up and wander off into the most frightful sins as though they never heard a word of it.

One day when I was in seminary my Indian roommate sat down to do his homework. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I said to him, "Why are you doing your homework on Sunday?"

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked.

I explained the concept of Sabbath rest and that our professors didn't want us doing homework on Sundays, and that the Lord didn't want us doing it either.

"I've never heard this before!" he exclaimed to me.

Then it was my turn to go off. "What do you mean? I have sat with you in class on three different occasions when our professors explained the Sabbath day to us. I know for a fact that you have heard this before!"

Santosh continued to insist that no, it was all news to him. Again, brothers and sisters, this is the kind of thing the psalm is talking about. God does not want you to sit there and let the words go in one ear and out the other. The most important aspect of worship is listening. You have to take the words in and let them change your thinking and your actions.

2. Worship Means Softening Your Heart, v. 8a

Of course, that's what the next line of the psalm gets at. Do not harden your hearts! Worship requires a soft heart. Hard-hearted "worship" is not worship at all. Kneeling before God and singing songs to Him while your heart is stuck on having its own way is not worship. You can easily imagine yourself coming in here and singing loudly, reciting the creed enthusiastically, and listening to the sermon with the pleasure of a connoisseur, while still planning to go have sex with your mistress at an afternoon date, or to yell at your children when they drop a plate at Sunday lunch, or to continue to oppress your tenants, rip off your clients, cheat on your homework and taxes, and so on. It happens, brothers and sisters. In fact, it happens all the time. Hard-hearted worship is a contradiction in terms, and hard-hearted worship is something that you and I tend to be specialists in.

How do you soften your heart in worship? Prayer. Ask God to change your stony heart and give you a fleshy heart. Ask Him to write His laws on your heart. The tongue can no man tame — and how much less the heart! But God is a heart-tamer, a heart-softener. His Spirit is the self-feeding Fire who can turn your heart into a semi-liquid pat of butter that can be shaped by the slightest word from Jesus.

Don't harden your hearts. Allow God to work them over by His word and Spirit.

3. Worship Means Turning From Our Fathers' Sins, vv. 8-10

The next thing the psalmist covers is generational sins. True worship means turning from our fathers' sins, and specifically from the sins of Massah and Meribah, aka Test and Quarrel. The place where the Israelites complained for lack of water became known as Test and Quarrel, because they quarreled with God and tested Him, saying, "Is Yahweh among us or not?" The answer was "Yes, He is among you." In fact, to prove it, Yahweh consented to allow Himself to be struck and thereby to provide water for the people.

But the psalmist tells us that true worship means turning from our fathers' sins. The wilderness generation tested God, attempting to force Him to show Himself on their terms. They also rebelled, quarreling and fighting against His providence instead of submitting to it. They are a great example of what not to do. To worship God means allowing Him to test you, rather than attempting to test Him. To worship God means not quarreling with His ways, but submitting to them because they are His.

In other words, you cannot worship rightly if you are having a fight with God. That, of course, is why so many people drop out of church when they get offended with God. They want to be mad at Him and they know that it makes no sense to pretend to come and worship Him when you are in open rebellion against Him. One classic scenario is the elderly couple where one is sick and the other is mad at God for letting his wife get sick. They both drop out of church because Massah and Meribah — test and quarrel. They are testing God to see if He will heal on their terms, and when He doesn't, they rebel.

Don't live that way, brothers and sisters.

4. Worship Means Learning God's Ways, v. 10

Worship means learning God's ways, rather than rebelling against God's ways. Worship requires you to know your Father's ways. That means studying Him, learning what He wants, and doing what pleases Him. One woman told me, "My dad was often grumpy on Sunday morning so I made sure that I had his favorite CD in the car radio. That way, he would turn on the car, his music would start, and he would calm down."

Now, that's a poor example because that's knowing the sinful ways of your father. But apply the necessary changes in your mind to think that you are called to know God like that, not to turn away His grumpiness, but rather to please Him!

How do you learn your Father's ways? Let's just say that Israel saw His ways in Egypt. They had traveled through the first part of the book of the knowledge of God. They had seen the plagues and Red Sea crossing. They had seen the Sinai revelation and the glory of God entering the tabernacle. They had seen the manna on the ground six days a week. And they did not know His ways.

What? How is this possible, brothers and sisters? Again, all I can say is that you and I clearly are at risk of the same damnable ignorance. God showed Himself to the wilderness generation in an incredible way, and their hearts were simply not affected. They did not know His ways. After all those years of walking with Him in the wilderness, seeing His character and

hearing His word proclaimed from Sinai and by Moses, they didn't have a clue about His real character. His ways were a total mystery to them.

Have you noticed this on a lesser scale? I know people who have lived with their spouse for decades and yet seem utterly ignorant of their spouse's real character. I've told you before about the one couple I know. Their thirtieth anniversary is coming right up, and the husband is the most mild-mannered, nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. And his wife got mad at him for not going full mama bear on the medical team that was dithering about how to treat their son's seizures! This woman apparently does not know her husband's ways, despite living with him 24/7 for thirty years.

What this means for you and me, of course, is this: Look out! You may have been in church every Sunday of your life. You may know your Bible inside out. You may be able to describe in great detail and accuracy the history of the church and the teachings of the church fathers, the Scholastic theologians, and the moderns. But you can do all that, live cheek-by-jowl with the Almighty, and not know His ways — not, I mean, know them in such a way that they have truly sunk in and given you understanding of who He is and how you ought to relate to Him.

Evaluate your knowledge of God. What surprises you in Scripture? In the church? In the habits of church people? Why does it surprise you? How well do you know God's ways? What parts of His word are hard and angular for you? Figure out the trouble spots, and give some attention to learning His ways. Worship demands it. You cannot ascribe worth and glory to Him without knowing who He is.

5. Worship Means Not Being Disgusting to God, v. 10a

The other thing to notice here is that worship means not being disgusting to God. "For forty years," says the LORD, "I loathed that generation." Other translations are "I grieved with that generation" (ASV), "I despised that generation" (CEB), "I was disgusted with that generation" (CSB), "I loathed that generation" (ESV), "I was angry with that generation" (NIV), and "that generation sickened me" (NJB). Let's just say that no matter how you render it, it ain't positive. Do you want to be the one about whom God says "You sicken me"? "You disgust me"? Of course you don't! Worship means not being disgusting to God. Worship means being the kind of person who pleases Him rather than the kind who makes Him gag and throw up.

Brothers and sisters, we tend to think pretty well of ourselves. But we can grieve God and make Him disgusted with us by our unwillingness to soften our hearts and listen to His voice. Don't do that. Hear His voice. Soften your hearts. Don't put Him to the test; don't let your heart wander away.

6. Worship Leads Toward God's Rest, v. 11

True worship leads toward God's rest. It is oriented in that direction. To worship rightly is to approach His rest. Indeed, we were made to rest in Him as well as to work in Him. True worship is spiritually restful and refreshing, even if it is work in other ways.

7. False Worship Will Keep You From God's Rest, v. 11

But false worship will keep you from God's rest. When the Israelites refused to go into the promised land, God swore that they would not enter His rest. False worship will exclude you from His rest, brothers and sisters. Failure to listen will exclude you from His rest.

The exuberant mood of the first two verses is gone. Now we are confronted with the sobering reality that not all worship is true worship, that not everyone who claims to walk with God will actually arrive in Heaven. He took an oath when He was angry.

It's a good policy as a human being to not make decisions when you're angry. But God never gets angry unless He needs to, and thus He is free to make decisions when He's angry. The refusal of Israel to enter the land He had promised them angered Him so much that He swore with uplifted hand that they would not enter that rest.

Will you go to Heaven? Or will you back out at the last second? Will you submit to God's ways, or reject them? Amen.