

¹ Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. ² Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. ³ For the LORD *is* the great God, And the great King above all gods. ⁴ In His hand *are* the deep places of the earth; The heights of the hills *are* His also. ⁵ The sea *is* His, for He made it; And His hands formed the dry *land*.

⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. ⁷ For He *is* our God, And we *are* the people of His pasture, And the sheep of His hand.

Today, if you will hear His voice: ⁸ “Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, As *in* the day of trial in the wilderness, ⁹ When your fathers tested Me; They tried Me, though they saw My work. ¹⁰ For forty years I was grieved with *that* generation, And said, ‘It *is* a people who go astray in their hearts, And they do not know My ways.’ ¹¹ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ “ (NKJ)

Introduction: Psalm 95 is a call to worship. It explains how and why we should worship. It warns of what can happen if we do not worship, but instead harden our hearts. This call to worship is not given to the nations, like Psalm 96, but to God’s people. It is addressed to the covenant community, to those who bare the sign of God’s special claim on their life, whether it is by circumcision in the old covenant or by baptism in the new covenant.

Psalm 95 is not an arrogant assertion of an insignificant nation, trying to bolster their favorite deity by out-shouting the competition. Psalm 95 expresses the wondering realization of an enlightened people who are responding to the self-revelation of the unique and only God. He has satisfied His holiness and justice so that He may gather a people. His people respond with adoration, confession, and thanksgiving for who He is and what He has accomplished. This psalm directs us to a holy reverence of God’s majesty and a sincere dread of His justice. This psalm produces a desire to please the LORD, and a fear to offend Him.

The message of Psalm 95 is a challenge to great sections of the church in which the art of spiritual worship has been lost entirely. In place of worship is the strange and foreign production called the program. The program is designed to manipulate your feelings toward self-gratification or self-satisfaction.

Psalm 95 presents a contrast to the manipulation of programs. The psalm begins with a bunch of “Let us.” The voice of the psalmist urges us six times (twice in verses 1, 2, and 6) to join him in worship. Then, near the end of verse 7, there is a dramatic different voice who speaks. It is the direct speech of God Himself.

From Psalm 95 we may illustrate major theological dynamics revealed in Scripture. We will conclude with two pairs of doctrines: first, the relationship between election and covenant; second, the relationship between justification and sanctification.

Verse 7a is the center of Psalm 95 -- “For He *is* our God, and we *are* the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.” The statement exalts the uniqueness of God and His people.

Our outline of this call to worship is in three movements: a call to rejoice (vs. 1-5), a call to reverence (vs. 6-7a), and a call to respond (vs. 7b-11). Each movement begins with an exhortation followed by an explanation.

A. CALL TO REJOICE (95:1-5) [From Creation]**1. Exhortation to confession [universal / private] (95:1-2)**

a. Jubilant expression (sing, shout joyfully). Worship is energetic.

The opening exhortation is “Oh come.” We are invited to approach God. “Come” is an overture of the grace of God in the gospel to us. You are invited to approach God’s presence. It is remarkable that this God, who banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because of their sin, should speak to us in grace and say, “Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! ... Oh come, let us worship and bow down.” The invitation to come to God is on the lips of our Savior who said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mat. 11:28).

Singing opens our mouths to extol the greatness and faithfulness of our God. SHOUTING shows the exuberance of our praise.

b. Thoughtful confession (LORD, Rock). Worship is rational.

Verse 1 identifies our object of worship by two of His names: LORD and Rock. The upper case LORD is the divine name explained to Moses at the burning bush (Exo. 3:14). It is His covenant name “I Am” or “I Am Who I Am.” This name reveals God as He who is, or He who has being, or He who exists. The self-existing God has covenanted to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exo. 3:16), and their descendents. He both reveals Himself to His people, and redeems His people from their bondage.

As “Rock of our salvation” He is not only the stable foundation of all things, but also the source of life. This anticipates the major scene of the third movement (Call to Respond) with water flowing from the rock (Exo. 17:6), and Paul’s application that the Rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

The best offering or sacrifice that God’s people can bring to Him is thanksgiving by jubilant expressions and thoughtful confessions. Thanksgiving follows praise, for when one declares God’s attributes and works, he cannot help but be thankful for these. Praise leads regularly to thanksgiving. The exhortation is followed by an explanation.

2. Explanation of confession (95:3-5)

a. Unique God [monotheism / idolatry (pluralism)] (v. 3)

The surrounding nations imagined the LORD 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. Idolaters tolerated many gods and many lords, giving to each a certain measure of respect. This is pluralism. The monotheism of the Hebrews was not content with this concession, it rightly claimed for the LORD the chief place, and the supreme power.

The Lord is “the great God.” The ancient Hebrews used “great” as associated with royalty, and especially with deity. “The great King” is an expression of the one who is over all. The great king is King of kings and Lord of lords. This attribute of absolute sovereignty is given to Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). He is the ultimate authority over all creatures. The background of “the great King above all gods” (vs. 3) is polytheism. “All the gods of the peoples are idols” (Psa. 96:5). This affirms the supremacy of the God of Israel over the whole earth.

b. Creator King [power to fulfill all promises] (v. 4-5)

The vertical and horizontal dimensions of creation (depths and heights, vs. 4; sea and land, vs. 5) emphasize the LORD's absolute sovereignty.

The greatness of God is expressed by a poetic device called a mirrorism, that is, two opposites that assume everything in between, or two poles that are all inclusive. The expression is like something that is from A to Z, meaning not merely the first and last letters but all the letters of the alphabet, or like two bookends that hold all of the books. The greatness of God is expressed by the one extreme of the depths of earth and reaches up to the other extreme of the heights of the hills (vs. 4). From the bottom to the top, our thoughts are directed vertically. A second inclusion is the extremes of sea and land, or wet and dry (vs. 5). From the left to the right, our thoughts are directed horizontally. These expressions indicate that God's greatness is comprehensive, absolute, and even infinite.

A call to rejoice leads to a call to reverence.

B. CALL TO REVERENCE (95:6-7a) [From Redemption]

1. Exhortation to reverence -- Change posture (95:6)

The first and principle concern of worship is not what I may get out of the occasion or experience of worship, but rather the obligation I have to lower myself (prostrate, bow, kneel) before this God -- Creator of the universe and LORD of the covenant. We must not fall down and worship our Lady but our Lord; not any martyr, but our Maker; not any saint, but our Savior.

There is a change of mood from joyful exuberance to sober reverence. True worship includes a variety of moods. There should be light and shade. This is the deep and basic note of worship, without which the joyful noise of the opening will be shrill and self-indulgent. Each main verb in verse 6 describes us as getting low, lower, and lowest in the presence of God. We are to fall down. We are to kneel. We are to prostrate ourselves (which is the meaning of worship). It is a public act of homage. Worship is a political act of making our faith public, our allegiances known, and making God known to our fellow citizens.

Drawing near probably refers to entering the temple. Bowing is an act of humiliation before the Lord. In other psalms, we find physical expressions of worship such as clapping hands (Psa. 47:1) or lifting hands (Psa. 63:4). Clapping is another form of exuberance. The lifting up of hands is an act of prayer and praise. The symbol seems to be that Israel lifted open hands for God to fill. Somewhat parallel is Psalm 81:10, where the Lord says to His people: "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."

All of these external acts of worship are meant to express the reality of faith and devotion in the heart. Where the heart is cold and indifferent, the external acts are just hypocrisy and are utterly rejected by God (Isa. 29:1-3; Mat. 15:8-9; Mar. 7:6-7).

Do these external expression of worship continue to have a role in New Testament worship? Paul may give warrant to them. In Ephesians 3:14 he writes, "I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." In 1 Timothy 2:8 he writes, "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting." In some traditions they literally kneel on benches. The problem is that tends to an outward action without inward sincerity. Many Christians have understood Paul to be speaking metaphorically in

these verses, concentrating on the internal, and not the external. Generally, Christians have believed that such external actions are indifferent, not absolutely required or absolutely forbidden. Different cultures and different personalities vary in physical expressions of emotions. Whatever the actions, the Bible is clear that they must flow from a sincere heart and not be mere formalism or theatrical self-expression. All acts of worship must support the essence of worship: confessing the greatness of our God with sincere hearts.

2. Explanation of reverence (95:7a) -- Identity of God: Creator-King & Covenant-Lord

At the center of this psalm stands a firm confession of faith: “For he is our God.” The call to worship in the beginning of the psalm and the warning of the last part of the psalm are united by this great truth. If He is our God, we must worship Him with great devotion. If He is our God, then we must be faithful in living before Him. The warning is precisely necessary against the temptation to allow worship to become an empty form.

3. Foundation of election (95:7a)

The metaphors express God’s commitment, which is constant (*our God*), and His care, which is all-sufficing (*His pasture*) and personal (*His hand*). The expression, “people of His pasture,” emphasizes the provisions of God. The expression, “sheep of His hand,” emphasizes the protections of God.

John Calvin comments: “His people are here spoken of accordingly as the *people of his pastures*, whom he watches over with peculiar care, and loads with blessings of every kind. The passage might have run more clearly had the Psalmist called them *the flock of his pastures*, and *the people of his hand*; or, had he added merely — *and his flock* — the figure might have been brought out more consistently and plainly. But his object was less elegance of expression than pressing upon the people a sense of the inestimable favor conferred upon them in their adoption, by virtue of which they were called to live under the faithful guardianship of God, and to the enjoyment of every species of blessings.”

Augustine notes how elegantly the psalmist inverts the order of the words. We expect to read, “we are the sheep of His pasture, and the people of His hand.” By inverting the order the people and the sheep are the same thing. The underlying fact is the determined election of God, or that He chose His people or sheep before the foundation of the world (Deut. 7:6; Eph. 1:4).

A call to rejoice and reverence leads to a call to respond.

C. CALL TO RESPOND (95:7b-11)

A dramatic, different voice speaks near the end of verse 7: “Today, if you will hear His voice ...” This illustrates that verse numbers are not part of the inspired text but were devised much later to help locate passages. One way to identify a change of speakers is to notice the pronouns that are used.

For example, Psalm 91 begins in the first person singular, “I,” in verses 1-2. The psalm changes to the second person singular, “you,” in verses 3-13. Then it returns to the first person singular, “I,” in verses 14-16. If you think about the exalted statements, promises, and purposes expressed in Psalm 91, they are truths only fully appropriate for a divine person. In Psalm 91 we may distinguish the three voices of the Trinity -- the voice of the Son as the Commentator (vs. 1-2), the voice of the Spirit as the Counselor (vs. 3-13), and the voice of

the Father as the Commander (vs. 14-16). We hear an inter-Trinitarian communication that focuses on the incarnate Son of God in His ministry to redeem His people.

In Psalm 95, the original speaker is a leader within the congregation who exhorts, “Let us sing ... shout ... come ... shout ... worship ... kneel ...” Suddenly, and without warning, in a dramatic manner, a different person speaks directly to the congregation. This is not reported speech but direct speech. In verses 1-7a, the psalmist speaks in his own person. But from verse 7b onwards, the speaker changes. It is now God who speaks directly to His people. The pattern of exhortation and explanation continues.

1. Exhortation to respond (95:7b)

When God says, “Today,” it is different from our use of today, by which we mean the present 24 hour period. But God does not live in time. For God there is no yesterday or tomorrow. All of time, all of the centuries, is present before God. To Him there is no passage of time. Everything is complete. All of His plans and purposes are fulfilled. We are the ones locked in time. The Holy Spirit who spoke to the Hebrews in the Old Testament is speaking to the church in the New Testament. The great danger of the church in every generation is grieving the Holy Spirit by not hearing and heeding Him.

There is a huge danger that when God’s people come to worship Him that they will not listen to Him. We get so caught up in what we have to say, singing what we have to sing, doing what we have to do, that we forget to pause and hear what God has to say. The language is taken from an incident in the history of Israel. It was about a month or two after the Exodus and just before they reach Mount Sinai. Israel camped at Rephidim and there was no water (Exo. 17:1-7). Forty years later they do the same thing at Kadesh (Num. 20:1-13). They complain again about the leadership of Moses and the lack of water. God’s people tested God. They demanded proof of God’s presence.

The high point of worship is when God addresses us, not when we are addressing Him. The high point is when we are silent and God, through His Word, is speaking to us.

2. Explanation of response (95:8-10)

The explanation to the exhortation to hear God’s voice begins in verse 8. “In the rebellion” and “in the day of trial” are two place-names which sum up the sour, skeptical spirit of Israel on their desert journey, and link the early crisis at Rephidim with the climatic one at Kadesh which cost Moses the Promised Land.

The warning takes Israel back to one of the critical moments in Israel’s history as it is traveling in the wilderness. This moment is critical because it is referred to repeatedly in the Old and New Testament. The primary incident is described in Exodus 17. Israel camps at Rephidim where there is a shortage of water. The people complain that they will die of thirst. The complaint is staggering. The God who defeated the Egyptians in 10 plagues, who opened the Red Sea for Israel to pass through, who drowned the pursuing Egyptian army, who lead Israel by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, who has provided food and water in the wilderness, now hears the complaint of His people. The place will be known as Meribah and Massah, which mean grumbling and complaining. There is something special about the complaint. This is the place they tested the LORD.

What exactly was the sin of the people in putting God to the test? The answer is clear in Exodus 17:7, “They tempted the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” At the

heart of their grumbling and testing was a lack of faith. Their sin was not praying for water, or even wondering where water would come from. Their sin was allowing their need of water to lead them to doubt the presence and love of God.

The test is whether the LORD is among the people or not! That is a question about faith. This is a question that exposes unbelief. The hardening of the heart is not for the moment. This is a fundamental rejection of God.

It is possible to be a member of the covenant community, it is possible to have the sign of the covenant (either circumcision or baptism), it is possible to appear to be a sincere confessor of the faith, but later it is revealed that confession was never true.

3. Expectation of rest (95:11)

“My rest” has more than one meaning, as Hebrews 3-4 make clear. In relation to the Exodus it meant God’s land to settle in, and peace to enjoy it (Gen. 49:15; Psa. 132:14; 1 Kgs. 8:56). Hebrews 4:1-13 argues that the psalm still offers us, by its emphatic “Today,” a rest beyond anything that Joshua won, namely a share in God’s own Sabbath rest: the enjoyment of His finished work not merely of creation but of redemption. The quitters who turn back to the wilderness may be but pale shadows of ourselves, if we draw back from our great inheritance.

“Rest” in Psalm 95 refers to the Promised Land which was a sign, a pointer, a type, of the eternal rest for the people of God in the new heaven and new earth (Isa. 66:2, 22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). The Promised Land symbolized the ultimate rest the people would enjoy. God’s purpose was not that His people would live in a narrow band of land, but that they would inherit the whole earth (Psa. 37:11; Mat. 5:5).

The theme of “rest” is central in the Old Testament as both a place and a time. As a place, it is where the Ark of the Covenant rests (Psa. 132:8) in the Promised Land. As a time, it is a Sabbath rest, a day of rest. Both of these rests of the Old Testament are types. They point beyond themselves. The place of rest, the Promised Land, points to the new heaven and the new earth. The time of rest, as one day out of seven, points to eternal rest where there will not be a holy day distinct from common days, but all days will be holy for the people of God in His presence.

God finished His work and entered into His rest. One day God’s people will finish their work and enter into the rest that God possesses.

Conclusion: What is the single, most serious need at this present moment? It is that we should learn to worship God who is our King, our Maker, and our Shepherd. Worship is the highest, noblest, and greatest activity in which a human or angelic creature can engage. We must come before the great King who is above all “gods,” the great Creator who made all things. We must come internally, intentionally, and intelligently. Christian worship is not a counseling session, or a school classroom, or a form of entertainment. It is a call to be occupied with God by rejoicing, reverencing, and responding.

Applications: There are several applications of Psalm 95 that we should think about.

* Psalm 95 illustrates that what is important is *the message, not the messenger*. Some years ago, a visiting pastor was substituting for the famed pastor Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887). A large audience assembled to hear the popular preacher. At the appointed time the

visiting preacher entered the pulpit. Learning that Beecher was not to preach, several people moved toward the exit. The visiting preacher stood up and called out, “All who have come to this auditorium today to worship Henry Ward Beecher may now leave. All who have come to worship God, keep your seats.” No one left.

* Psalm 95 is a *warning to the present generation*, to you, to hear the Word of God, to heed its exhortations, to understanding its explanations, to believe and obey its directions. Be mindful that it is easier to speak than to listen. Are you listening to the prayers and preaching or are you talking to yourself? It is easier to daydream than to concentrate. How often during a sermon do you hear something that reminds you of something else that reminds you of something else? It requires discipline to concentrate on what someone is saying. To hear God’s most holy word is one of the prime acts of worship.

* Hebrews 3:7 quotes Psalm 95:7, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice.’” This citation illustrates that *Scripture, because the Holy Spirit speaks it, does not become God’s Word when we apprehend it, but is God’s Word*. Beware of those who say, “Listen for the word of God,” instead of “Listen to the Word of God.”

* Verse 7 is the central verse that contains the *doctrines of election and covenant*.

God’s electing purpose is expressed, “For He is our God and we are the people ...” Election is the foundation for faith. It is the heavenly perspective of God’s initiative. This is declared in Deuteronomy 7:6, “... the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.” The same perspective is found in Ephesians 1:4, “... He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ...” Election is the foundation of faith.

God’s covenanting purpose is expressed, “Today, if you hear His voice ...” Covenant is the expression of faith. It is the earthly perspective of man’s response. This is declared in Isaiah 55:3, “Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you -- The sure mercies of David.” The same perspective is found in Hebrews 3:13, “but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” Covenant is the expression of faith.

* Verse 7 is the division between the *doctrines of justification and sanctification*.

Justification is the foundation for the call to come before God and worship Him (vs. 1-7). This is declared in Romans 5:1, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Also Philippians 3:9 records, “and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.” Justification is our change of status by what God has done for us. Justification is the basis for the call to rejoice and to reverence (vs. 1-7).

Sanctification is the response to the call to come before God and worship Him (vs. 7-11). The application is expressed in Hebrews 4:2-3, “For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest ...” Sanctification is our change of nature by what God has done in us. Sanctification is the basis for the call to respond (vs. 7-11).

* Psalm 95 illustrates the *dialogical principle of worship*. We speak to God with our praise

and thanksgiving (vs. 1-7). God speaks to us in His Word and sacraments (vs. 7-11).

* From Hebrews 3-4 we learn that *Psalm 95* is more than merely adequate for New Testament response, it is *THE New Testament response*. The new realities of New Testament revelation are explicated from Old Testament Psalms. The service of the Psalter is not to be consigned to the former dispensation but to be fully used in the new dispensation.

* There is the *danger of disappointments* in life can lead you to become disappointed in God. You cast off God's promises and commands. You demand fresh evidence of God's faithfulness today. You demand that God pass your test.

In crises of faith, we may express our confusion and pain fully and plainly to the Lord, but we must not test the Lord. We must not grumble behind His back and doubt in a fundamental way whether the Lord can be trusted. Such doubt is an expression of profound unbelief and stunning ingratitude. Such doubt evoked the anger and punishment of God.

How do you know that your faith is genuine? One of the biblical tests is that under trial you do not turn away, you do not doubt God's presence and goodness, you do not complain about God's providence.

Worship the LORD by rejoicing, reverencing, and responding.

Prayer: Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we are your unworthy servants, but we give you most humble, hearty thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all people. We bless you for our creation and preservation, for all the blessings of this life. But above all we praise you for your inestimable love in the redemption of your people by our Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. We beseech you that you would give to us that due sense of all your many mercies, that our hearts may be unfaintedly thankful, that we would show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives by giving up ourselves to your service, by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen. [In a prayer book]

Psalter selections: 96A, 96B, 95A, 95B

Resources:

W. Robert Godfrey, **Learning to Love the Psalms**, Psalm 95, p. 175-178

W. Robert Godfrey, **Hebrews 3:7-4:13** (Part I), <https://www.wscal.edu/resource-center/hebrews-3-wrgodfrey-part-i>

W. Robert Godfrey, **Hebrews 3:7-4:13** (Part II), <https://www.wscal.edu/resource-center/hebrews-3-wrgodfrey-part-ii>

Liam Goligher, **A Song of Thanksgiving**, Psalm 95, 11/27/2014, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, www.sermonaudio.com

Liam Goligher, **Venite**, Psalm 95, 05/17/2017, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, www.sermonaudio.com

Liam Goligher, **Venite, Exultemus Domino**, Psalm 95, 09/27/2020, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, www.sermonaudio.com

Liam Goligher, **Let Us Kneel Before Our Maker**, Psalm 95, 10/04/2020, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, www.sermonaudio.com

Richard D. Phillips, **O Worship the King**, Psalm 95, 10/16/2016, Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, www.sermonaudio.com

Neil C. Stewart, **The How & Why of Worship**, Psalm 95, 10/24/2015, Christ Covenant Church, Greensboro, NC, www.sermonaudio.com

Neil C. Stewart, **Heart of Reformed Worship**, Psalm 95, 11/27/2016, Christ Covenant Church, Greensboro, NC, www.sermonaudio.com