

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message The Call to Proclamation and Submission

Scripture Psalm 95

Last week I guided your attention to the future orientation of this series of Psalms. Psalm 90 focused on the question “How long will it be” before God revealed His splendor to His people and “established the work of their hands” (*Psalm 90:13, 16, 17*). Psalm 92 continued the emphasis on the future with statements such as: “Your enemies, O LORD, will perish” while the “righteous will flourish and bear fruit in old age” (*Psalm 92:9, 12-14*).

The future orientation of these Psalms became really obvious with Psalm 94. It was declared that there would be a day in which the LORD, “the Judge of the earth,” would “rise up” and “shine forth” to “repay evildoers for their sins and destroy them.” It was also declared that “Judgment based on true righteousness will again be established, as will all those who are upright in heart.”

Today we are going to take a detailed look at Psalm 95. This is an important Psalm in the series we are studying, but, surprisingly, there are no verses in it which even mention the future. Instead there is the call for the people of Yahweh to worship Him. Psalm 95 is a response to information in the previous Psalms. In view of all the remarkable events which are promised for the future, and in view of all the assurances about the outcome of the future, the people of God are expected to both celebrate in advance of the future and to appeal to earthly pagans to get into relationship with God. Even though in this life on earth the followers of God may be “crushed and oppressed” by evildoers (*Psalm 94:5*), they are encouraged to look ahead by faith to the time when they will be vindicated and glorified. Their hope and confidence in the future causes them to be joyful and grateful.

The Psalm is composed of two parts. The first five verses are a call to praise the LORD of all the earth. Verses 6 through 11 are a call to acknowledge, by submissive attitude and obedient heart, the LORD’s kingship over His people.

Read Psalm 95:1-11

Some commentators assume that this Psalm was originally used as part of an Israelite procession into the temple on a special festival day. In verses 1 and 2 the people are summoned to come together to celebrate “the Rock of their salvation.” The verses are an invitation to individuals who have acknowledged the LORD as the great God who is over all. The phrase “Let us ...” is used four times.

The terms used in the first two verses speak of a kind of vocal praise that goes beyond ordinary joyful, grateful praise. We must picture in our minds an unrestrained exuberant expression of praise and worship. According to one commentator, the terms employed here imply sounds which are more appropriate in the football stadium than in the church sanctuary! In the first two lines are the expressions “sing for joy” and “shout aloud.” In the Hebrew language these phrases refer to the kind of sound made after a victory on a field of battle. Noisy excitement. Pent-up tension is released amid unrestrained joy.

Just who are the people who will join in this collective worship? The next several verses give us the answer. Such joy would only come from people who had a secure relationship with God, who had experienced and acknowledged His greatness, who dwelled in the shelter of the LORD, who were safe in the “refuge” and “fortress” of Yahweh. In the Old Testament, these worshippers would be called the people of God. In the New Testament, they would be identified with the Church, the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. They were the people who looked to the LORD as the “Rock of their salvation.”

The kind of exuberant, collective shout uttered by God’s people hints at an eschatological context — it is the kind of joyous hurrah that might be associated with the return of Jesus at the end of this age. Are the people of God always this enthusiastic? The kind of praise exclamations in Psalm 95 might have been typical of the temple worshippers in the Old Testament, but I have observed that the joy expressed by most New Testament believers tends to be much less demonstrative. Most of us are rather stoic in our demeanor even when we are filled with inner joy. Too often we “Praise the Lord” with a dour expression.

What do you think will be our reaction when Jesus appears? Just imagine the surprise and happiness and excitement which will bubble up spontaneously in those believers who are alive when Jesus appears. It will mean that their days of oppression and injustice and persecution are ended, and that they will henceforth forevermore be free from the curse of sin, and that their physical bodies will be changed and that they will see Jesus face to face. I'm sure that the kind of spontaneous joyous exuberance which will arise from the throats of believers at that time will be unrestrained.

Since Psalm 95 is positioned in the midst of other writings which have an eschatological context, it seems reasonable to me to assume that it is also describing an end time scenario, and that is the perspective that will be followed in this message.

The praises of verses 1 and 2 are pointed specifically toward Yahweh. In the Old Testament the people would be approaching the temple where Yahweh had a symbolic presence in the Holy of Holies. At the end of the age Jesus will be standing on the earth. The "singing for joy" will be to the LORD. The people will "shout aloud" to him, acclaiming Him as their "Rock of salvation." They will "come before him," (literally, will "come before his face,") with an attitude of thanksgiving. The attention of the people is exclusively on the LORD because He would be appearing to them as their long anticipated Deliverer and Redeemer, and, hence, both the source and cause of their joy.

In verses 3 through 5 the sovereignty of God is given as the basis for human worship. The sovereignty of God will be displayed at the end of the age as never before in history. In these verses, His sovereignty is explained in two ways. First of all, in the area of religion, Yahweh is "the great King over all gods." This statement would have helped the Old Testament readers of this Psalm to recall previous displays of God's power which were written in their historical records. For example, there was the time when Elijah stood before the 500 prophets of the false god Baal. God sent down fire on the altar that Elijah had built, an action which thoroughly discredited the false prophets in the eyes of the people and enhanced the reputation of the one true God.

There was another time when God destroyed the entire army of the Assyrian king Sennacherib in response to the prayer of Judah's king (*see Isaiah chapters 36-37*)

The greatest example of God's sovereignty over pagan gods accompanied the rescue of the Hebrew people from Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth at the time. The Egyptians were afflicted with a series of 10 plagues, and through these plagues, God systematically destroyed the nation's entire religious system. Each plague was directed at a specific group of Egyptian gods. Through the displays of God's power, the Hebrew people learned that their God was greater than any of the deities of the nations around them. Shortly after the defeat of the Egyptian gods, the rescued Hebrews acclaimed the greatness of Yahweh by singing, "Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?" (*Exodus 15:11*).

The believers at the end of the age will have even more significant reasons to proclaim the greatness of God. The return of Jesus will signal to all the world that Yahweh has no equal, that He reigns over everyone and everything. His sovereignty will be revealed against evil Satanic forces and the false religious deities invented by humans as well as all the earthly political powers on earth.

Verses 4 and 5 depict God's sovereignty in another way. God is portrayed as sovereign over all creation. The expressions "depths" and "peaks," and "sea" and "dry land," are poetic ways to describe the totality of His creation. He is the Creator of all. He is now the controller and sustainer of all that is. The world is in His hands. The point here is that when this sovereign God appears, He has the authority to accomplish what He wants to accomplish, whether the context is spiritual or physical.

There is a significant change of tone in verse 6. The previous verses were an encouragement for God's people to engage in exuberant, enthusiastic praise to "the Rock of their salvation." The second call to worship is an encouragement to adoration: "Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker."

In the Hebrew language the verb translated "worship" has two basic and related meanings. "Worship" can involve both animated praise and speechless prostration. In the context of verse 6 the meaning is "to fall prostrate," "to be face down in adoration and reverence." All three verbs in verse 6 ("worship," "bow down," and "kneel") are used to emphasize the posture we must take "before the LORD." Yes, "Let us come into his presence" with rejoicing (verse 2), but when we get there, it will be appropriate for us to bow in "worship before Him."

What will be your action when you find yourself standing in front of Jesus? I dare say you will become speechless. For individuals who have been faithful followers of Jesus, I don't think it will be a frightening moment. However, it will be an overwhelming, awe-inspiring moment. All the hopes and expectations you have had since you became a believer will be at the point of fulfillment. The only appropriate action will be falling prostrate at His feet in a demonstration of wholehearted adoration and submission.

The basis for our adoration and worship is explained in verses 6 and 7. We read that "the LORD is our Maker." Not only is He the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all living creatures, but He has personalized His relationship to some people. He calls and chooses some of His human creatures to be His own. He claims them as the "sheep" of His pasture.

In the Old Testament era, the true "sheep" were those Israelites who submitted themselves to the ways of the LORD. The entire nation of Israel claimed to be the flock of God, and in one way they were, but there were a select few who submitted themselves to God by faith and obedience. They were the true flock.

In the New Testament, the "sheep" are authentic born-again followers of Jesus Christ. He referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd who "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" to pasture (*John 10:3*). That is a wonderfully appropriate description of believers: they are individually called out of the world to be members of Jesus' flock and from that point on they will receive guidance and protection and care from Him. Of course, they are expected to be obedient followers of their Shepherd. They are to go where Jesus wants them to go and do what Jesus wants them to do.

So, not only does God control the earth and direct the ways of people in a universal general sense, He also is the Shepherd of His specially chosen few. He maintains an intimate relationship with the people of His flock. In the previous Psalms we had numerous statements about the protection and care and blessings promised to us by God.

There is even a special Psalm which describes God as a faithful Shepherd of His sheep: "Because the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (*Psalms 23:1-3*). Jesus even announced in advance to His disciples that He, as "the good shepherd," would "lay down His life for His sheep" (*John 10:11*).

Now I want us to back up and take another look at the verses starting in verse six and consider this last half of the Psalm as an invitation. The sad history of Israel in the Old Testament was that their relationship with the LORD was tarnished by outright disobedience and rebellion. Throughout the Old Testament the Israelites were guilty of “hardening their hearts,” which was the result of their lack of submission, trust, and obedience to their “Maker,” “Shepherd,” and “LORD.”

At the time this Psalm was written, not every Israelite was an enthusiastic worshiper at the temple. The Psalmist was unhappy about this state of affairs. He did not want the readers in his and following generations to have inappropriate attitudes toward the LORD. He wanted every Israelite to acknowledge the “LORD their Maker.” After all, He was their God, and He had called them out of their bondage in Egypt to be His people. He had promised to be their God, to protect and provide for them as a shepherd cares for and nurtures the flock under his care. The people should have “bowed down in worship.” They should have declared their appreciation to the LORD by submitting themselves to Him. Verses six and seven were an invitation extended to those Israelites who were disobedient and unsubmitive.

The remainder of the Psalm is a warning based on the Israelites’ experiences following their rescue from their time of slavery in Egypt. The rescue involved an impressive demonstration of both Yahweh’s power and loving care, but their response was, almost immediately, grumbling and complaining. Verse eight explains that “they hardened their hearts.”

There were a number of crisis points in the relationship between the LORD and the people who were led by Moses. One of the early crisis episodes involved the provision of water for the people and their livestock. The LORD instructed Moses to strike the rock at Horeb. The LORD provided water, but He was so greatly disturbed by the attitude of the Israelites that He vowed to exclude the members of that generation from His promised “rest.” Moses named the place where this occurred Massah and Meribah, Hebrew words for “quarreling” and “testing” (*see Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-13*).

The first seven verses of Psalm 95 are a description of individuals who have “entered into God’s rest.” God’s “rest” is the place of security from all external threats and internal turmoil. It’s the place where every sincere believer can live, both now and for eternity. The plea of this Psalm is for every reader to enter that rest. If individuals today have any expectation of welcoming the LORD at His return, they must become obedient followers of the Shepherd now. They must be willing to bow before Him in submission and adoration. They must extol Him with their praises and live without any complaints and grumblings. They must be thankful people. They must be filled with praises acclaiming the “Rock of their salvation.”

Jesus told His disciples that His “sheep will listen to his voice.” He said that “He would call his own sheep by name and lead them out,” and “when he had brought out all his own, he would go on ahead of them, and his sheep would follow him because they know his voice” (*John 10:3-4*). He said that those who are “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they will follow me” (*John 10:27*). In these statements, the sheep voluntarily pay attention to their shepherd and willingly follow. That is the nature of obedience: to listen to what the LORD says and to obey without objection.

The writer of this Psalm also understood the importance of listening. He began his warning by writing, “Today, if you hear his voice.” There are two possible human responses to the voice of God: Individuals can hear but not accept the words of God. This will lead to a pattern of grumbling, complaining, and eventually to disobedience and rebellion against God. The result of this kind of attitude and behavior is exclusion from God’s rest.

The proper response to the voice of God is submission to and obedience to the ways and will of God. The result in this case is confidence in, and rest in, the security of the LORD and the promise of future complete rest and the indescribable experience of being with the LORD Jesus.

The warning against the “hardening of hearts” is for both professing believers today who are prone to grumble against God when trials occur and for individuals who have never submitted themselves to the authority of God. The problem with both groups is the lack of faith. The problem is that grumbling against God takes the place of a worshipful thankful heart.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament quoted verses 8 through 11 in his letter and then ended with these words: “Therefore, let us (people today) fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard” (*Hebrews 4:1-2*).

Whenever I read this psalm, I’m always caught up short by the ending. I would prefer that the Psalm end with a happy ending. However God has chosen to leave us with an urgent ultimatum: “Worship Me or perish!” Either be enthusiastic about the Rock of your salvation and be cared for by the LORD or grumble about your trials with an evil, unbelieving heart and incur God’s wrath. Those are the only options in this Psalm.

If we go with the first option, we will enjoy God’s rest, both now and for eternity. If we harden our hearts, we will face the wrath of God, because He has declared, “You shall not enter into My rest!” Today is the day of salvation! If we keep the faith, then the God of our faith will keep us.