

Psalm 95 "Today, If You Hear His Voice"

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[0 : 0 0] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless. Let's pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

You may be seated. So, the musicians mentioned that summer here at Messiah, we're doing the Psalms. So it's a different Psalm every week. And today's Psalm 95. And I love Psalm 95. Psalm 95 is unique. It's for a few reasons. One reason it's unique is that it's been used in worship by Christians and by Jews for a long, long time. So for Christians in the Anglican tradition, this has been part of morning prayer. So if you look through a Book of Common Prayer, you'll find this, the Psalm 95, called the Vanity, which in Latin just means come. Those Latin titles are just the first word in Latin. So 95 is come, the Vanity.

And for Jews, many Jews anyway, this is used to bring in the Sabbath. So they would read this Friday night. This is a way of kind of ushering in that day of rest. So it's unique in that way. But it's also unique in that it's one of three Psalms in the Psalter. There's 150 of them in the Bible. It's one of three that has God speaking in the first person. So normally it's a, it's a Psalmist, often David, but some other people too. And they're speaking either to God or they're speaking to the community. But three of them, and 95 is included in that, has God speaking in the first person. But see, God doesn't speak in the first person through the whole thing. God does speak through the whole thing. But there is in the first half of the Psalm, the Psalmist speaking. And there is in the second half of the Psalm, the Holy Spirit speaking. So there's this clear division that divides the Psalm into two. And you'll notice, I'm just going to read through it again. And you will notice a major shift in tone. So that first bit that the Psalmist is speaking is all about, come, it's an invitation to worship. The second part is a pretty stern warning.

[3 : 4 4] Now, the Psalms are the prayer book or the hymn book of the Bible. And nowadays, we don't do that so much. We don't have such starkly different tones in our worship songs. Like, generally, you don't have exuberant joyful praise combined with a stern warning. But the Bible does that. And the Bible holds things together that we often pry apart. The Bible has a way of holding all these different things together. But that's what this, that's what this Psalm does. And the big question it asks us, the big question Psalm 95 asks us is, what kind of heart do you have when you come to God?

Another way to say that is, what is your spiritual posture before God? So that's the question. So I'm going to read the first half. That's the joyful, exuberant part. And we'll talk a bit about that. And then we'll shift to the warning part. So here's the first bit. It goes from verse 1, to halfway, half of verse 7. So here it is. Psalm 95, beginning at verse 1.

O 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, joyful noise to him with songs of praise. For the Lord is a great God. Just pause here. If you read the Bible, the Old Testament, and you see the word Lord, and it's capital L with lowercase o-r-d, that just means like God or master or something like that. It's a general term. If you see Lord with all caps, capital L-O-R-D, all capital, that is God's name, which is something like Yahweh. It's the name that God gave Moses at the burning bush. So if you ever see, as here, like in verse 3, you see all capitals. That's God's name.

For Yahweh, or Jehovah is sometimes how that's put in English, is a great God, and a great king above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth. The heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it. His hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before Yahweh, Jehovah, our maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. That's the first half. Now, just a couple things on worship generally. You'll notice in here that there's a lot of action words. There's come, sing, make, a joyful noise, give thanks, bow down, kneel. See, biblical worship involves every part of us. It's not just our hearts or minds, it's our bodies, okay? It envisions the whole person being engaged in this act of praise and thanks to God. Now, we do that regularly. Why do Christians worship regularly? Well, the idea here is as we pour all that we are out to God regularly, week after week, it forms a habit, and habits have a way of shaping our hearts, forming our hearts. And so the goal in all of this, as we worship and come open-hearted to God, week after week, the idea is we form habits of being open and receptive to God. We form inner dispositions, okay? Open-hearted to God. That's the goal here. And that's all done, of course, with gratitude. So, okay, so that's a little bit about worship. Now, who are we worshipping? Well, we're worshipping God and the Lord of, the maker of heaven and earth, the God of Israel, and the Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And God, this God, is described really in three ways in this text.

So I want to show you that. God is described first as the creator. Look at verse 4. So in, so this is, this is God. In God's hands are the depths of the earth. So think like the deepest caves in the world, where there's strange little creatures down there, there's darkness, and you can watch interesting YouTube videos about people, cavers. I mean, it's terrifying. I would never do it. But cavers who go like, like miles into the ground. Anyway, all that, down to the earth's core, is, it belongs to God, the creator. So all, all that's kind of beneath our feet right now. And then go high, and all the mountains, these great hills, these are all gods too. He formed these. He made them. And the sea, including, you know, you want to talk about depth, go beneath the sea, that's all gods.

[9 : 06] And of course, the dry land, which is where we're standing now, thankfully. All his. And so this is meant, like any encounter with creation in this way, it's meant to evoke awe. And it's meant to evoke awe, but evoking awe in such a way that we think, well, if the created world is this impressive, imagine the maker of it all. Right? I mean, if creation is this impressive, imagine how great the creator is. And so this is all a way of telling us of the greatness of God. He made it with his word, everything. Right? But it does something else. Well, before I tell you what else it does, I want to share a story that I shared this morning at eight o'clock, just about the awe of creation.

When we were in Iqaluit, my family and I, we lived there for seven years in Nunavut, the northern lights were unbelievable. Often they were like the aurora borealis. Often they were mostly green, but occasionally you would get purples and reds as part of the northern lights.

And I remember one time, I don't, couldn't tell you what year or whatever, but it was one time in those years, we, my wife, Jen and I, we were up late and we looked outside and it was a dome, a dome of northern lights, reds and purples and greens. And it was astounding. And Ben, our son, was probably like six at the time or something, we were like, we gotta wake him up for this.

So we woke him up and Ben stumbled out of his bed, half asleep, and looked outside at this giant dome of light. And his, I remember his comment, he said, is this real? And we said, I think so, yeah, it's real.

And there was just a sense of awe. And that's what this psalm is trying to evoke in us. Awe at the created world. Because if the created world is this wonderful, imagine what God is like.

[11 : 12] That's the idea. Now, so it does that. The greatness of God. It also actually kind of implicitly is warning us about the foolishness of idolatry. Because if everything in the created world was made by God, it means, even though it's impressive and wonderful, it's less than God. So implicitly, this psalm is saying, you can look high and low through all of creation and you will never find anything worth worshipping. You will find a lot of things. You will find a lot of impressive things, but you will never, never find anything worth worshipping. That belongs to God alone.

So, God's the creator. God's also the king. The king. Look at this. Verse 3, 95 verse 3. For the Lord is a great God and a great king above all gods.

The Old Testament talks a lot about God. Our God. The true God. It also talks a little bit about gods with a lowercase g. Gods. A little like... And Christians have disagreed whether these lowercase g gods have reality. Are they fallen angels that are presenting themselves as gods and misleading people?

Maybe. Maybe. Yeah. Are they figments of human imagination? Maybe. But either way, we can say that lowercase g gods represents anything that human beings are tempted to worship. So that includes, like, in the Old Testament, Baal. It includes Greek gods like Zeus.

It includes, like, modern political ideologies. It includes all kinds of things. Anything that human beings are tempted to worship, you can call a small g god. And the point is, God is above all of that.

[13 : 19] Not even in the same realm, ballpark. Not, like, no comparison. And so, again, the greatness of God, yes, he's higher than any spiritual power. He's higher than any ideology. He's higher than anything that anybody has worshipped. He's greater. But again, it tells us the foolishness of idolatry, which is, like, you can explore every religion, every spirituality. You can mine books for the world's wisdom. You'll learn a lot of things. But if the true God is not in there, you will not find anything worth worshipping. You will find nothing that's worthy of your worship.

Third way God is described is a bit more surprising here. This is God the shepherd. So, verse 7. Well, let me, verse 6 kind of starts it. So let's do that. Verse 6 and 7.

Oh, come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker, for he's our God. And then listen to this. Listen to who we are. We are the people of his pasture. We are the sheep of his hand.

So, when I talked about the greatness of God over creation and over all our gods, that's kind of, it's about how huge and vast and immeasurable God is. This image, God as shepherd, actually is about God, God's greatness being in how close he gets to us.

See, because a large part of God's greatness is not just in how vast and far away he is from us. It's that he stoops down and comes near and presents himself as our shepherd. In the ancient world, even now, if people think about gods, they think about God distant, far away, remote from human concerns, that is not our God. That is not the biblical God at all. Vast? Yes. Powerful? Yes. Huge? Yes. But close.

[15 : 36] Closer than your very breath. And so, that is a sign of God's greatness. That he is so great, he is willing to lower himself.

And we just went through Philippians, right, where it talks about the ultimate act of lowering, where Jesus becomes a human being, goes to death on the cross for us. That's the God we worship. Great? Yes. Humble? Yes.

So, there's a greatness, a true greatness in humility. But, also the warning about idolatry.

So, this is an indirect rebuke to any kind of self-worship. So, we're sheep. We're not little sovereigns. We're sheep.

And so, this is saying, you can search inside yourself, you can search your own heart, and you will find nothing in there worthy of worship. You'll find a lot of things.

[16 : 41] But you won't find anything worthy of worship. So, God is the creator, the king, the shepherd. All of those speak of his greatness. And all of those speak of the foolishness of idolatry.

Okay? That's the first part. It's an invitation. Worship. Come. With your whole self engaged, and worship this God. He wants you here, worshipping.

And he takes delight in that. So, now we're going to shift. Now we're going to shift. And I'm going to read this, okay? So, we're halfway through verse 7, or towards the end of verse 7.

I'm going to read it to the end. And remember what I said at the beginning. This is a shift in tone now. It's going to be a stern warning. It's a shift in voice.

So, now you're hearing God speak in the first person, the Holy Spirit in the first person. And it'll feel a bit abrupt to you, but that's okay.

[17 : 39] So, let's read that. So, halfway towards the end of verse 7. And today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. As at Meribah, I'll tell you what that is in a minute.

As on the day at Massa in the wilderness. And again, I'll tell you about that. When your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work, for 40 years I loathed that generation and said, they are a people who go astray in their heart.

And they have not known my ways. Therefore, I swore in my wrath they should not enter into my rest. Now, how we know this is God speaking, it's not only that you can detect a shift.

It's that Hebrews, the New Testament book of Hebrews, which we don't have a lot of time to get into this morning, but if you want to, when you go home, if you're looking for something interesting to read, Hebrews 3 and 4, chapter 3 and 4, reference this psalm a lot.

And Hebrews says, it's the Holy Spirit, starting at the word today, the Holy Spirit's saying this now in the first person. And this warning about don't harden your heart, the example that is used for what not to do, is a particular incident in the book of Exodus.

[19 : 03] I'll tell you a little bit about that. What they refer to as Meribah and Massah. Those words are place names. I don't know if it's the same place or two different places, but it means like quarreling and testing.

That's what the words mean. So what happens in, it's in Exodus 17, which we won't go too deep into now, but I'll just tell you what it is, because the warning is tied to this particular event.

So in Exodus 17, Israel's just been released from generations of slavery. Wonderful. And it was a series of miracles God did to get them out of Egypt.

You know, the crossing of the Red Sea and the plagues and all that, and feeding them with manna. I mean, it was just God's provision, miraculous provision again and again and again and again.

But then they face a crisis, their first big one, but not their last. There's no water. Turns out there's not a lot of water in a desert. Well, so they're thirsty and they're cranky, and they start to argue with Moses.

[20 : 08] Moses is the leader who's led them out, God's chosen leader. And they test God, and they even say, is the Lord among us or not? Like, is God even here? The God who, like, rescued them miraculously, and suddenly there's no water, and it's like, ah, maybe he's gone, maybe he's...

And what happened here is there was a hardening of the heart, a closing off.

So God does still, in this incident, God still does provide water, but this moment here becomes, like, exhibit A in what not to do.

The Bible talks a lot about what to believe and what to do. It also talks a lot about what not to believe, what not to do. This is what not to do. And this becomes kind of exhibit A as what not to do.

And it says they missed God's rest, which in that context meant they didn't get to the promised land. Let's think a moment about hardening your heart.

[21 : 15] It's kind of an odd phrase, hardening your heart. It's not just that you have doubts, because we all have doubts. How could you not?

It's willful resistance to God and His will. It's willful closing yourself off from God. It's a willful decision to not listen.

See, it's also not just complaining either, because if you read through the Psalms, there are complaints all over. Like, the Psalms are full of complaining. They're called lament Psalms.

Full of those. So it's not just that they complained or had doubts. That's not the problem. It's that they began accusing God in such a way that they maligned God's character.

See, a lament in the Psalms is that you come to God, and you ask for deliverance, and you cry out to God, but you do that based on His character.

[22 : 19] You do that with a sense of confidence in His character. The kind of Meribah and, what's it called? Meribah and Massah. That kind of complaining is a closing off.

It's a maligning of God's character. It's a rejection of God. Okay? So what you read in the Psalms about laments, that's not rejecting God. That's faithfulness. There's a faithful way to complain to God.

And it's consistent with God's character. God, deliver me. Because you are my God. I trust in you. Deliver me from my enemies.

Okay? That's a faithful kind of complaining. God, are you even here? You've rescued us, but you've abandoned us now. Like, we're on our own. That's not faithful complaining.

Okay? There's a big difference. And so, in the Bible, the heart is sort of, it's not just emotions. We think about the heart as mostly emotions. But in the Bible, the heart involves feeling and thinking.

[23 : 17] And it's the place from which your decisions come. It's how you choose. You choose out of your heart. And actually, your decisions reveal the state of your heart. And a hard heart, in this sense, as we saw with the Israelites, is a heart, or is a person, that is resisting God's influence.

An open heart, you may have doubts, and you may have all kinds of things, but you're open to God's influence. Okay? See the difference? A good, I mean, one way to think about this is like, concrete.

When you pour concrete, it's soft and pliable, and you can shape it and all that. That's how you want your heart to be. Shapeable. If it hardens over time, concrete or a heart, it becomes a lot harder to soften that, and to shape it.

And so, if we get into habits, where we close ourselves off to God, where we shut God out, where we resist God's influence, like concrete, our hearts get harder, it becomes a lot harder to open ourselves to God.

And the extreme form of hard-heartedness is apostasy. Apostasy is a word that means you came into contact with the truth, and you willfully walked away.

[24 : 33] That's apostasy. Different than heresy. If you say, if you hear the word heresy, that means you're trying to teach the truth, but you don't. You fail, you teach falsehood, but you're trying to teach the truth.

Apostasy is when you willfully, deliberately make a choice to walk away from God and to close yourself off to God. And so, this hardening of the heart isn't an overnight thing, it happens gradually, it comes through habits, spiritual habits, that are warped and turned from God, but it happens.

And the warning's real. See, the warning is more a plea. It's like, it's the call to worship, and then the Holy Spirit coming in and saying, I beg of you to not shut the Lord out.

I beg of you. Okay. Key word here. The most important word in this, probably, in this, and when I, in Hebrews, in the New Testament, when, when Hebrews uses this psalm, Hebrews really zeros in on this word, today.

Today, if you hear his voice. Now, why today? Well, today, today is actually the only, the only time you're guaranteed. Today is all you have.

[26 : 05] The past is gone, and you can look back, and you can learn from mistakes, and you can, you can rejoice in God's faithfulness to you. The future is, has not come yet, and it's no guarantee, and we have hope in the future, because Christ has risen from the dead, but we don't know what the future holds for us personally, but we do have today.

In other words, we do have now, which is the only place we can possibly live, which is the only, only time we can choose, the only context in which we can respond to God.

So every day is today. Every day, every moment, is a chance to open your heart to God, and to respond to his influence.

Every moment is a chance to do that. There's an urgency here. Do you hear the urgency? Which I think is why Jews and Christians have chosen to, to use this in worship, and to repeat it often.

It's, it's this urgency, and it always applies, because it's always today. So when you, when you're a Christian, and morning prayer, and today, oh, okay, today's another day I have to choose deliberately to not harden my heart.

[27 : 17] If you're Jewish, and you're getting into the Sabbath, the day of rest, aha, today's another chance to not harden my heart, to, to remain open, to remain, uh, uh, supple, open to God's influence.

It, uh, it means, uh, that all too human excuse, I'll do it later. The Bible's got no room for that.

Today. Today. So, I'll wrap it up here. Uh, the, Psalm 95 talks about rest. Initially, they would have thought that's the promised land.

We know rest is beyond this world. Why? Because Christ has gone through death, out the other side, and risen to glory at the right hand of God. And so, rest for us is eternal life with God, with Jesus, through Jesus.

It's salvation. And Jesus is, the one who leads us into that rest. Jesus embodies God, the creator.

[28 : 24] Jesus embodies God, the king. Jesus embodies God, the shepherd. He is God in the flesh. And Jesus is worthy of worship.

And so, the choice is quite stark. Psalm 95 gives us is, is you have the option of a coming to God in worship and gratitude with an open heart. And you, you do that through habitually coming to God in that way.

And it solidifies, that's a habit. heart. Or, you can harden your heart and you can drift away gradually. The choice, though, is real.

and it's, the Bible often puts these choices starkly. There's two paths you can choose here. Do you want the soft-hearted path with Jesus? Or the hard-hearted path alone?

Those are the options. And, the choice, the time to make that choice is not tomorrow. It's not next week.

[29 : 29] It's not even yesterday. It's now. Today. So, friends, today is the day of salvation. Today is the time to respond to God with an open heart.

Amen. Amen. Amen.