

Hearing the Word of God

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Preacher: Doug Norman

[0 : 00] Good morning. Before we come or dive into Psalm 95, I want to tell you about two very different church meetings which may or may not be taking place somewhere in the world today.

The first is one that you'll find all over Melbourne, certainly today. The music is vibrant, to say the least. It is loud. There is lots of frenetic movement up front on the stage and in the audience.

The people sing and sway to the music. Their hands are raised, eyes often closed in rapturous visage. I'm sure some of you have even perhaps come from such a church previously.

There is a sense of celebration and rejoicing in God for his goodness and blessing. And one can only conclude that a worship service is underway here.

The second church service, I must admit, is less likely to be found in Melbourne. But certainly you can find it in many places in the third world, especially on days like Good Friday.

[1 : 34] But where I came from in Africa, you would have seen it most Sundays. There is no music for sure. If the service is loud, it is because of the wailing and crying that you can hear.

Some of the parishioners might have whips or clubs flailing at their bodies. There may even be blood.

Most will be on their knees. Imploring God to hear their pleas. No celebration here.

This is sorrow and lament. The faces are contorted in grief and self-deprecation. But can there be any doubt that these petitioners are giving worship to their God?

Two church services. Both so different. Yet, which of them is doing it right?

[2 : 46] Keep your Bibles open as we dissect Psalm 95 to see if we can find an answer. Verses 1 and 2.

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

Sounds like our first church, doesn't it? This is a call to be noisy and excited in your exclamations before God.

Sing for joy, it says. Shout aloud. Come with thanksgiving. Extol with music and song. The Psalms are full of an expectation of exuberance in Israel's call to worship.

And why should this be the response of God's people? Because, as we see in verses 3 to 5, their worship should reflect their wonder and their awe.

[3 : 59] For the Lord is the great God. The great king above all gods. In his hands are the depths of the earth.

And the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it. And his hands formed the dry land. It was therefore completely natural for Israel to display proper enthusiasm in the face of Jehovah or Yahweh, the great God of Israel.

C.S. Lewis, in his commentary on the Psalms, describes Israel as having an appetite for God. And that must surely be a good thing. For them as for us.

And as we dive into verses 1 and 2, we see there were four elements that were integral to Hebrew worship. Singing.

Well, singing has always been the way to express the full range of human emotion. And I've got a note for you.

[5 : 09] If you don't like singing, heaven's going to be a bit of a problem. Because if I read Revelation, it seems that might be the major eternal prospect. That's what you're going to be doing for eternity.

But songs, especially those that express joy at our salvation, should and will always be a feature of Christian worship.

The next one is shouting. You're all good conservative Anglicans in this service. I won't be saying that at 1030, but I can do it here.

And you're probably shuddering at that thought, aren't you? But shouting aloud, acknowledging the greatness of God, is definitely an emphasis of many of the Psalms.

You can't get away from it. And that makes it a legitimate component of acceptable worship. Do I hear an amen, brother? I have two services done.

[6:07] Maybe I'll get one. Music. Well, it goes almost without saying. Psalm 150 lists a bunch of instruments that could and should be used in the worship services of Israel.

Trumpets and harps, lyres and strings, cymbals and resounding cymbals, electric guitars, keyboards and drum kits.

Okay, I got you. I added those last three. But I do suspect that if Psalm 150 was being written in 2019 instead, then that list would certainly include these instruments as well.

The fourth element is thanksgiving. Without thanks as our default attitude, it is questionable, I won't try and repeat that, whether our worship is anchored correctly.

Given everything that God is and that he has done for us, if we can come into his presence lacking a sense of thankfulness, then we are ill-prepared to worship rightly.

[7:20] So, any conclusions yet? It definitely seems that worship of the Creator God is noisy and exciting. But the next couple of verses change tack as we will see.

Verse 6, Come, let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker. Here, as in verse 1, the people of Israel are urged, Come, let us.

there is a plurality in this command. It is not about you, the individual believer. Rather, it is an invitation to a whole community of God's people.

but in these verses in 6 and in 7, the tone is not exuberant. There are actually three Hebrew verbs in verse 6 and each of them is about humbling oneself.

The sentence could have been rendered just as easily, Come, let us prostrate ourselves, let us bow down, let us worship. So, considering this, was that second church, in spite of its excesses maybe, onto something?

[8:42] If the first verses were inspired by awe, then these next were all about reverence. Verse 7 says, For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

These words are all highly personal. Our God, our maker, people of his pasture, under his care.

If the first awe-inspired, enthusiastic worship is directed at the creator God, then the second self-abasing reverence is intended for the shepherd Lord, the guardian of a beloved people.

There's clearly a special relationship at play here, a special affiliation which underlines their devotion. In fact, there are overtones of covenant language driving the call to worship.

The divine king is their maker and protector, and in return, the subject people prostrate themselves in allegiance and adoration.

[10:04] Many of you will have been attending Peter Adams' talks and it's just as easy to think about Xerxes and the devotion required to, you know, an ancient Middle East king.

Respect, reverence, worship. these are all requirements under any covenant, but they're not the only one. In fact, covenants usually covered every aspect of life, but with all covenants, the greatest obligation which came with a covenant is obedience.

obedience. And because covenant always has this obedience in its contract, it leads us to the pivotal word of our text.

Today. That is the word to remember. Look at the last line of verse 7. Today, if you would only hear his voice.

There is a sudden shift in the whole passage, a warning seemingly out of nowhere. What has prompted this prophetic rebuke?

[11:23] Usually in the Psalms, when we come to such a switch, it's there to emphasize that what comes next is of vital importance. It's almost as to force you to stop, take note, listen, comprehend.

But note, this is not something brand new, something completely unrelated to what has come before. The Hebrew word for worship includes more than speaking, by the way.

It also anticipates listening. Thus, verse 6 could fairly have been translated, come, let us bow down, let us hear.

Furthermore, the word shama in verse 7, where it says hear his voice, means more than simply hearing, it is an active word. It demands obedience.

Therefore, and this is the central point of my sermon today, if you take anything away, it's this, worship, which is only exaltation, joyous as it may be, or prostration, as humble as it may be, is not acceptable, unless it is draped in obedience.

[12:47] The if used in verse 7 is not some plaintive appeal, like you and I might use with our younger children.

It is the warning that there are conditions and consequences involved in worshipping our God. Worship belongs to God alone, not Roger Federer or Donald Trump or the latest Hollywood starlet or Instagram sensation.

God alone is to be worshipped. And to fully understand the ramifications of this rebuke, we have to answer several questions.

And the first question then is this, who is this God that is to be worshipped? John Stott said, and I'm paraphrasing a little, we are not inwardly moved to worship until we grasp who the Lord is, until we are truly in awe of him.

And this psalm has already given us many indicators. The Lord is the great God, the great king above all gods. In his hand, belong to him.

[14:14] He made it, his hands have formed it, everything. He is the fearsome Lord of the universe, the creator of all things, the one to whom all things belong.

the psalmist, when mentioning the depths of the earth, is actually asserting, and people would have understood this, that Israel's God controls the underworld.

And when he says the mountain peaks belong to him, he is actually declaring that Yahweh owns the very place where the foreign gods reside, the gods of the nations round about them.

so he is the God above all gods. Who is this God that is to be worshipped?

He's a God worthy of our all. But he's not an impersonal clockmaker type of creator. The God who sets the world in motion and then removes himself to stay somewhere out there, not at all.

[15:23] Rather, as verses 6 and 7 say, he is our own dear shepherd. The Lord, our maker, our God, has a flock under his care.

And this reference to flock must surely send your thoughts to John's gospel in chapter 10, where Jesus says to himself, I am the good shepherd.

And later in the same passage when he says further, I know my sheep. So who is this God that is to be worshipped? He is a God worthy of our reverence.

On top of all that, our God is the one that intervenes. Verse 1 called him the rock of our salvation.

The covenantal relationship we talked about previously also means that guardianship has a cost for the guardian.

Xerxes didn't do much about it for those who have heard. But this good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. At the end of verse 9, as we shall see soon, Israel are criticized because they had seen what I did.

[16:38] This was in the wilderness. But wow, if that generation had ample evidence of God's saving power and mercy, how much more do we who know what God's son did for us at Calvary?

Who is this God that is to be worshipped? He's a God worthy of our complete obedience.

obedience. The second question we have to answer is what does this worthy God then require of his worshippers?

Well, verses 8 and 9 tell us what we ought not to do. Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness where your ancestors tested me.

they tried me though they had seen what I did. Meribah and Massah, these are places synonymous with hardened hearts and a wrong attitude towards God.

No matter that Yahweh had brought them safely out of Egypt, at the first signs of hardship, no water in this particular case, they grumbled against God.

[18:01] They tested him by questioning his motives. They threatened his appointed leader, Moses. Theirs was a total lack of faith, in spite of everything, because at the center of their hearts, at the core of their hearts was unbelief.

God said, we've already seen what is required of worshippers is to hear his voice. Hearing without believing the one who is speaking, however, is pointless.

And how can we hear unless his word is being pronounced? I would go so far as to say that worship services without preaching are incomplete at best and an abomination at worst.

when the songs have no biblical content, the music is all about the performer, and every person does just what they like.

It is clear, from what we have already seen, that true worship starts with listening, not speaking, not singing, not shouting, listening.

[19 : 28] True worship requires that we know his ways, just as Israel were condemned for not knowing his ways, that we have taken note of what he has done for us.

This is worship. We hear God's word, we believe, we obey, and thus we praise.

Last but not least, we have to ask or answer the question, what are the consequences of failing to heed his requirements?

Verses 10 and 11, for 40 years I was angry with that generation. I said they are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways, so I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.

worship without obedience is for show. It is a sham. Not just a sham, there are real implications for those not heeding this reproach.

[20 : 43] In the case of Israel, what started as quarreling, that's actually what Meribah means, and testing, that's what Masah means, because of their unbelief and their failure to recall Yahweh's past mercies to them, it led them ultimately to reject Caleb and Joshua's report that the promised land was the land of milk and honey, and eventually it resulted in that whole generation being barred from entering the promised land.

for God, Israel's unbelief, not knowing his ways, and their disobedience, their hearts going astray, are the most repugnant aspects of their rebellion.

And as a result, it incurred God's terrible anger against them. Jesus, later in Matthew 15, called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, quoting Isaiah at them, he said, these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain. Hearts far from God results in meaningless worship. Meaningless worship is not just a waste of our time, however.

It has far-reaching consequences for us as it had for Israel. Normally, when we deal with an Old Testament passage, we have to be quite circumspect that we don't draw conclusions from God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament, and then simply try to apply these directly to our own circumstances.

[22 : 35] Sometimes you can, but you need to be careful. But not in this case, however. Our New Testament text, Hebrews 3, Hebrews 3, gives us complete warrant to do so, because it takes Psalm 95 and applies it directly to the Christian.

Andrew hasn't called me up on this yet, so I'm going to say it again, that I think Hebrews 3 has possibly the most extensive use of an Old Testament passage anywhere in the New Testament. the consequences therefore of failing to heed the warnings of this Psalm are as critical for us as they were for Israel. Because this issue of obedience as worship, I'm saying that obedience is part of our worship, is linked inextricably to our salvation through faith in Christ.

The Psalm is open ended. It leaves you hanging a little, not unlike Jonah did, if you remember. As a result, though, it forces each of us to conclude where we stand in relation to God.

Which brings us back to our two churches. Which one is truly worshiping? As we have seen, it could be both, but it could just as easily be neither.

[24 : 03] true worship certainly needs celebration and awe. It definitely needs reverence and humility. But whatever the style or format of your service, worship should come from hearing ears, believing hearts, and obedient lives.

the problem which usually arises in both churches I described is when our sinful hearts make it all about the performance.

Whether it's the performance singing and music wise or the performance of how much self-torture you can apply. In Hebrews 3 verses 12 to 14, the writer warns, See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

We have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. I said that the pivotal word of the whole text was today and it is still today, today, this very day, you and I are also being addressed and possibly rebuked.

[25 : 40] Do you have a heart that is being hardened by sin's deceitfulness? Are you simply going through the motions of worship? mouthing the words, following the forms, but lacking the substance of that original conviction you once had?

Five times in the extended Hebrew passage, in three and into parts of chapter four, we read, while it is still today, while it is still today, this is a warning that should make you stop and consider.

Today does not last forever. It will certainly end with your death or the return of our Lord. But there is also clear warning elsewhere in scripture that the Holy Spirit will not contend with the unbelieving heart forever.

tomorrow. And that could be your today, or maybe more correctly, your tomorrow. If you and I fail to apprehend that obedience is also the obligation that we bear, if we call ourselves a member of Christ's flock, then our final salvation is actually at risk.

only those who hear, believe, and obey will enter God's final rest. Amen.