

An Elusive Rest

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of March 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled An Elusive Rest and is based on Psalm 95. You may like to turn in the Bibles to page 479, roughly in the middle, to Psalm number 95.

As you know we're taking a break, a one week break from our sermon series on the letter to the Hebrews because of the parish weekend. And this Psalm is part of the background of what we've seen in Hebrews already, so that's why this is sort of a filling week in one sense.

Let's pray. O God, we thank you that you speak to us through the words of Scripture which testify to your Son Jesus Christ. And we pray today as we come to your word here in Psalm 95 that you will indeed not only speak but that we will attend to, hear and heed your voice.

And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. If you ever stay in a Muslim city or town, one of the first things you notice, and often at an ungodly hour of mourning, is the blaring minaret megaphone calling you to prayer and calling you to worship.

[1 : 3 0] Often waking you up at terrible hours of the day, but then going on through the morning and through the afternoon at set times, wanting worshippers to come to the mosque to pray.

It's usually incomprehensible loud Arabic. I'm not even sure whether Arabic speakers can understand it coming through the megaphones. But it's the call to prayer and the call to worship. Well, it's much more pleasant if you go to somewhere like Germany, in my experience.

When I was studying in Germany ten years ago for my PhD for a while, there on a Sunday morning, beautiful bells echoing up and down the valley, inviting people to come to church and to worship God.

Much more attractive and appealing, let me say, than the blaring minaret megaphone. Of course, we don't have anything like either, really much in Australia. Very rarely do you hear church bells, in the suburbs at least, and no blaring megaphones at 4am in the morning, calling us to worship at a local mosque either, which I guess we can be thankful for.

In Psalm 95, what we get is the call to worship. It's a psalm that was used in the synagogues of Jesus' day to be said to invite people to come to worship and, in a sense, having got to the synagogue to begin to worship together, to worship God.

[2 : 5 1] And when the Anglican Church was established, breaking away from the Pope and Rome in the time of the Reformation in the 16th century in Britain, in the service of morning prayer, this psalm, Psalm 95, sometimes known by the first Latin word of its translation, the venite, was used as a call to prayer and a call to worship for Christians, for the people of God.

As an invitation to worship, it asks us to do three things in this psalm. As you read the psalm, there's a sense in which you can break it into three sections, each one of them inviting us to do three things.

The first section, beginning in verse 1, is, O come, let us sing. That's the first thing that we're not only asked and invited to do, but really urged to do is to come and sing.

Sing to the Lord to make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation, to come into His presence with thanksgiving and make a joyful noise to Him with songs of praise.

Well, that's the first thing that we're exhorted and invited to do is come to sing, to sing as an expression of joy, of praise and of thanksgiving because fundamental to the worship of God is joy and thanksgiving.

[4 : 15] And notice that there are no limits placed on it here. That is, it doesn't say, O come, let us sing to the Lord with joy and thanksgiving and praise on the good days, on the days when things are going well in your life and in the world.

Without limits, it says, come, let us sing. Let us express our thanks. Let us express our joy and our praise to God whenever the circumstances are, whatever they are and whenever the occasion is.

And so, as we come together on the first Sunday after Australian troops are in war, it is highly appropriate that we do so singing joyfully and with thanksgiving and praise to God.

And whatever our personal situations are, personal grief or illness or distress and whatever, it is highly appropriate when we come together that we do so with songs of thanksgiving and joy and praise to God.

As St. Paul said in the New Testament part of the Bible, give thanks at all occasions, rejoice in the Lord always, without limit, whatever the circumstance, whatever the situation.

[5 : 30] Now, we might think that might be a denial of problems in life, not at all. But the reason why, without limit, we are to come together with joy and song and thanksgiving and praise is because, as this psalm makes it clear, we are praising God, the rock of our salvation.

The end of verse 1. The image of a rock is not that God is hard and cold or silent or something like that.

The image of the rock is that God is reliable, solid, trustworthy, dependable. In particular, He's the rock of our salvation.

So that our salvation by God is certain and reliable and solid and dependable. We can build our lives on it with surety and confidence and real trust and faith.

And the point is that whatever the circumstances we face in our personal life or in world affairs, the salvation that God extends to us is solid.

[6 : 40] It is a rock. We can depend upon it and rely upon it. And no matter what bombs fall in Baghdad, no matter what personal griefs we confront, no matter what sadness or distress we are facing, God is the rock of our salvation.

And those circumstances, personal or international, cannot or will not thwart God as our rock of salvation.

They will not undermine it. They cannot shatter the rock or move it. So therefore, whatever the circumstances of life that are thrown up before us, God remains the rock of our salvation.

Nothing can separate us from the salvation He offers us in Christ. And therefore, it is highly appropriate, whatever the day, whatever the circumstance, to come before God with joyful thanksgiving.

it is not a denial of grief or stress or fear. There is opportunity to cast them on God.

[7 : 56] But the bedrock of our life is the salvation God gives us in Jesus Christ. And in the end, that's the bottom line. That's the key thing, the most important thing of all, more important than the griefs and concerns that confront us, more important even than world affairs.

God has saved us in Christ. He is the rock of our salvation. Nothing can move that rock. And so, whatever is going on in the world, we can praise God with joyful song and thanksgiving.

Because that is the most important thing, the most enduring thing in the whole of the world. But also, whatever the circumstance, we can praise God with joy and thanksgiving and praise because as verse 3 goes on to say, we can do this for or because the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods.

Now, one level that might imply that there are other gods around. But in the end, in practice, what this is saying is that God is the only God worthy of praise because He is superior, supreme.

He is incomparable. There is no God or any other thing that surpasses Him in greatness or power. He is a great God and a great King above all gods and therefore it is He and He alone whom we are to praise and give thanks to and express with songs of joy our gratitude.

[9 : 40] Notice then how here the joy that is being encouraged and exhorted of us, the followers and people of God, is grounded in God.

It's because of who God is and what He's done that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to Him with joyful song and praise.

You see, joyful response to God is not a case of mindless emotionalism. It's not about whipping up some sort of emotional atmosphere and frenzy.

It is the truths and the greatness of God that undergirds and creates and stimulates a joyful response that is enduring through any circumstance that life throws up at us.

Now more is said about God in these verses as well. Verse 4 goes on to elaborate on the greatness of God. In His hand are the depths of the earth and not only the depths but the heights of the mountains are His also.

[10 : 47] Moreover, the sea is His for He made it and the dry land which His hands have formed. So, the heights and the depths the seas the dry land.

In effect, it's saying everything God has made and is under His control and jurisdiction. It's a bit like when we say I've lost something and I've searched high and low for it.

We don't then say well why don't you search in the middle as though we've searched up there and down there. Well, it's obvious you should search there. When we say we search high and low it means that we've searched everywhere. So, when it says here that God in God's hands are the heights and the depths it means everything in between as well.

When it says the dry land and the sea that He's made it means everything else as well. Everything God has made everything is under His control. And notice too that it's not just that God made it but that He still exercises sovereignty and control over it.

The end of verse 5 says which His hands have formed but the beginning of verse 4 says that still in His hand are these things. Sometimes what it's saying then is that this universe is both hand shaped and hand held by God.

[12 : 19] His hands have made it and His hands still hold it. And in a world that so often seems to be out of control this is an encouraging and important truth to fall back upon.

The whole world indeed is in God's hands as the children's song says so rightly. It's not that God made it and lost control.

It's not that God made it and let go. It's not that God made it and then sat back to watch what it would do. It's that God made it and still holds it.

He created and He sustains it. And that is good reason to express with joyful thanksgiving and song our praise to God.

So that's the first invitation of this song. Come to God to sing with joy praise and thanksgiving. That's probably a bit of a challenge to us at times.

[13 : 26] The caricature often of the Christian church is of glumness a bit sombre. we ought to be people of joy but not happy clappy just sort of bright and breezy and dismissing the realities of life but rather people who have an abiding joy whatever life's vicissitudes are.

we ought to be joyful people at our heart more than anyone else in the whole of the world we're to be joyful people and yet so often we're glum and down in the dumps a bit gloomy a bit reluctant there is a real sincerity and a heartfelt joy and thanks to God that's being expressed here because we know God is supreme and sovereign we know him to be the rock of our salvation and therefore all the problems of our life real though they are are at least put into perspective so often in our glumness we carry burdens we don't need to carry and so the problems of our life loom larger than they are in reality because the reality is God is the rock of our salvation and therefore there is a real and abiding joy that nothing in life can take away from us so that's the first thing the second invitation comes in verse 6 come let us worship and bow down let us kneel before the

Lord our maker literally the word worship here is to bow down to prostrate oneself to lie down in an act of homage or humility before God and notice then three words in effect meaning the same sort of thing come let us worship to be prostrate let us bow down let us kneel three different words but one on top of the other showing us how important it is that we come before God with humility something that we might easily say yes that's obvious and yet something that is so hard to do I think because humility is not a human characteristic or trait that our world extols or encourages you see people like to tell God where God's got it wrong people like to say that God is like this that we create God in our image not us in his people like to tell God that somehow we're right God we know better in this case we know what's right with this war and we know what's right with this situation come on God you do what we think is right here people like to be proud and self-sufficient people like to stand before God and say that I've accomplished this or I've done this or I'm a good person a moral person therefore God I can stand before you on my own terms when the prophet

Isaiah in the Old Testament came before the presence of God in dazzling splendour and glory in the temple in Jerusalem in the Old Testament times he didn't stand on his feet for very long dazzled by the display of God's grandeur and holiness he quickly found himself flat on his stomach saying before God woe is me a man of unclean lips what are the grounds for humility the psalm goes on in the second half of verse 6 to say let us kneel before the Lord our maker he made us that's why we're to be humble before him we're the pot he's the potter we're the clay in his hands there's a sense in which we've got no right to stand up to God we must be humble before him but also verse 7 goes on to add he is our God it is a personal relationship before God it is not that we're coming lying prostrate or bowing down or kneeling in an act of humility before some grand

God whom we don't know we are in a relationship personally with God he is our God we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand the words here suggest God is our shepherd the one who protects provides and cares for us the sheep and again notice here that this act of worship is not some mindless act but our humility is prompted by knowing who God is our maker but also the one who is our shepherd who cares and protects for us I sometimes notice when it's a communion service and I'm administering the bread at communion the variety of hands that reach out to receive the bread you might never have thought about this but it's something I observe occasionally there are big strong hands from years of physical labour there are small petite and soft hands gentle hands God's hands are mentioned three times here in an extraordinary variety of ways these are the hands that formed the universe at the end of verse 5 the sea is his for he made it in the dry land which his hands have formed so the hands of God are big enough and strong enough to form this universe not only that the beginning of verse 4 says that

[18:58] God's hands are big enough and strong enough to hold the universe and yet the end of verse 7 says that we are the sheep of his hand strong enough still to protect us but gentle enough to hold us so that the hands that form this vast universe are the hands that hold the believer close to the heart of God we're invited here to come and sing we're invited here to come and bow down and thirdly we are invited to come and listen to the voice of God at the end of verse 7 oh that today you would listen to his voice what that seems to imply is that at one level you can expect the people of God to come and sing their songs of praise with thanksgiving and you can expect them to come and bow down but now there is an urgency in this third invitation to listen to

God's voice and it suggests that it might be possible to come and do the first two at least in an outward form and yet ignore this final exhortation to listen to God's voice it's easy to fall into the perfunctory ritual of coming to say the prayers and receive communion and sing some hymns Sunday by Sunday and yet be deaf to the voice of God as he speaks to us as we hear the Bible read and hear God's word preached the example that's given was the one that the writer to the Hebrews used to which we saw last week referring back to the events of Israel in the wilderness and their deafness to God's voice do not harden your hearts as at Meribah as on the day at Massah in the wilderness those events Meribah was where Israel got to in Exodus 17 soon after crossing the Red Sea they grumbled against the

Lord's provision and then later on in the wilderness time at Massah as referred to in the book of Numbers chapter 20 the same sort of thing Israel death to God's voice not trusting his promises not heeding his commands and so that's the time when your ancestors tested me this is a psalm from David's day 400 years after the time of the wilderness when your ancestors tested me and put me to the proof though they'd seen my work for 40 years I loathed that generation and said they are a people whose hearts go astray and they do not regard my ways therefore in my anger I swore they shall not enter my rest you see worshipping God is not just a feel-good factor of singing some nice hymns of our hearts extolling with praise and thanksgiving God's goodness and then indeed bowing down with humility there is a confrontation when we worship God because God's voice confronts us and challenges us it comforts us true but it challenges us it rebukes us it seeks to reform us and transform us and until the day when we arrive at heaven's gates at the end of our lives

God's word seeks to confront us and change us to be more and more like God and like Jesus Christ it's easy to be deaf to such a word but this psalmist urges us as we saw last week the writer to the Hebrews urges us not to be deaf but to listen to God's voice and the word for listen that is used here in the Hebrew standard word for listen has a strong connotation of hear and heed that is we can listen where it goes in one ear out the other we do that all the time but what this urges us to do is to listen so that our lives are changed in response and we heed we trust the promises we obey the commands someone this morning at the eight o'clock service has a French Bible and was following this in the French Bible and made the comment to me afterwards that the words used to translate into French is not the normal word to listen but actually the word to obey to obey God's voice so when we come to worship God there is an essential element of singing God's praise and expressing with joyful thanksgiving our gratitude to God but there is an essential element of acknowledging bowing down with humility before God our maker and our saviour and there is an essential element of hearing and heeding God's voice for God speaks to us in the scriptures and so as we hear the scriptures read and preached we are to hear God's voice speaking to us to change us to be more like Jesus

Christ notice then in all of this that we are to be people of integrity because this is not just about external actions it's not about coming and picking up with with some reluctance or half-heartedness a hymn book and opening it up and just singing the words without actually expressing joy and thanks it's not about coming and doing ritual actions without the accompanying heartfelt humility before God and it's not about coming and just letting words of the Bible and sermons just sort of breeze in one ear and out the other it's about heeding and taking them to heart so that we trust and obey the promises and commands of God Christians are often accused of hypocrisy not always fairly but here we are clearly being exhorted not to be hypocrites so that our external actions match and parallel our internal heart so that the words we sing with our mouth actually reflect the joy in our heart so that our actions of humility reflect a humble heart before God so our actions of hearing God's word read and preached are actually matched by hearts that are responsive to what God says to us it's easy to be complacent in our worship of

[25 : 29] God to sing half-heartedly but not mean the words we sing but to bring our pride before God even though we might mouth words of humility to turn off our ears to God's word and to think about what else is happening in our life notice to the two-way communication that's going on here there is an element in which we are expressing to God our joyful thanksgiving and humility but at the same time God communicating to us through his words in scripture and we cannot expect him to hear us if we are deaf to what he says to us notice too the essential corporate or public act of worship here it is right that privately we express our devotion our humility our praise and thanks and read God's word but there is a right place where the people of God actually gather together corporately to do those same sort of things together and to encourage each other in those tasks as well that's something we saw last week in Hebrews the exhortation to come together and to make sure that we don't leave off and forget and leave behind people who are Christians and let them drift away well this psalm has the same sort of exhortation notice how it begins oh come let us sing that is it's one of the people of God exhorting the others of the people of God to come together to sing God's praise to come together to bow down here with humility to come together and listen and heed to God's voice it is our responsibility to encourage each other to do that and to join together to do those very things it is right and proper that the people of

God gather together as the people of God to worship and bow down to him to sing his praise and heed his words without in any way taking away the importance of doing that privately as well so there's an element of mutual encouragement here we ought to be people who take responsibility for each other's lives as Christians to make sure that we arrive at heaven together and that we don't let people drift away from Christian faith as we saw so sharply last week and finally these words of exhortation are in the end just provisional temporary preliminary if you like they are to stir us up as Christian people so that we continue and persevere in faith to the end of our lives and arrive at God's promise rest for the rest that was promised in verse 11 to the people of Israel coming out of coming out of Egypt in slavery was not just the rest in the land of Canaan that was part of it but the land the promised land to which they were headed was itself the foretaste of the eternal promised land of heaven the generation that came out of

Egypt failed to arrive in the earthly land the exhortation here is that we persevere to the end and so gathering together regularly as Christian people to sing God's praise to express our humility and worship Him and also to hear God's Word is if you like a provisional action we do it to encourage each other to persevere to heaven and our gathering together in the presence of God to sing His praise to express our humility to hear His Word is if you like a temporary thing a foreshadowing of the eternal rest of heaven for heaven is not sort of an idyllic Pacific paradise heaven is where the people of God are gathered for eternity around the throne of God singing His praise heaven in the book of Revelation is full of singing expressing our humility by casting down our crowns before God's presence in heaven but also hearing God's Word as we gather around His throne and obeying God's voice there so let us be people who heed these exhortations let us be people who sing thankfully and joyfully because God is the rock of our salvation not glumly or half-heartedly not miserably but with real and abiding joy that comes from knowing God our maker and Savior let us be people who with sincerity bow down with humility before God our maker before whom He holds all things in His hands and let us with sincerity be people who not only hear but heed God's voice as we hear it read and preached together so that at the end we may finally obtain that eternal rest that is promised to us by God. Amen.

Amen.