

An Invitation to Worship

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Turn with me if you have a Bible, or you can follow along on the screen. We'll be reading this morning from Psalm 95. We're doing a series on the Psalms this fall, or I guess it's becoming winter. As we've said, the Psalms are a collection of songs and prayers that were written over the course of several hundred years by several different people, and they were gradually collected together and became a song book or a prayer book for the ancient Israelites. And we've seen there are all kinds of different Psalms that teach us to pray in all kinds of different circumstances. So we've looked at Psalms of lament, people crying out to God in the middle of trouble. We've looked at Psalms of confession, people turning to God in the midst of failure when they've messed up and finding God's mercy. We've seen Psalms of thanksgiving, where people are just remembering the blessings that they've received from God. This is a Psalm of worship, and in fact of coming together to worship as a community in particular.

We might call it a call to corporate worship. So let me read Psalm 95 for us this morning. Oh 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 noise to him with songs of praise, for the Lord 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, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker, for he is our God. And we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Today if you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day at Massa in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty 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 shall not enter my rest. Where is this world headed?

And where is my life going? I wonder if you've asked either of those questions lately. Probably many of us have seen signs over the last few months saying something like, we will get through this together. Right? And I think that expresses a good aspiration towards solidarity and steadfastness in an age where there's a division and disillusionment.

[3 : 0 1] But it leaves also an unanswered question. As a society, after we get through this, where exactly are we headed? Or we might ask that question on a personal level.

You know, many people in the ancient world, in the modern world, secular people, religious people, have spoken of life as a journey. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, the journey of a thousand miles starts beneath one's feet, or with a single step.

Aerosmith sang, life's a journey, not a destination, and I just can't tell just what tomorrow brings. Right? But if my life's a journey, here's the question. Is it just an endless wandering or meandering?

Or is there a final destination where we're headed? Well, the psalm we're looking at today extends an invitation. An invitation to worship.

In other words, an invitation to join God's people on a journey towards God's presence. And according to the Bible, that's what the human race was made to do from the very beginning, to worship God and to draw near to Him and to live in His presence.

[4 : 17] Now, we don't know for sure who first wrote this psalm, or when exactly it was written, but a good possibility is that this psalm was written for Jewish pilgrims journeying to one of the three annual festivals in Jerusalem.

Three times a year, many of the Jewish people would travel to Jerusalem, and they would meet together in the temple. In the fall, there was a feast called the Feast of Tabernacles. So they would gather together, they would come together in the temple and listen to God's word where God had promised to be present with them.

If you notice, verse 1 and verse 6 begin with the words, O come, right? It's an invitation, come along. So just imagine these pilgrims singing the words of this psalm as they journeyed toward Jerusalem and finally entering in.

Ever since the early church, Christians have also looked to this psalm and received this psalm as an invitation to corporate worship. So in many liturgical churches or churches with sort of a set routine for what is read each week, this is often an invitation at the beginning of morning prayer or other prayer gatherings.

So, you know, maybe you're here today exploring faith or spirituality or maybe you're tuning in for the first time and you're sort of wondering what Christianity is all about. I hope this psalm for you could be an introduction to the God who Christians worship, as well as an invitation to consider orienting your life around him.

[5 : 50] For those of us who are Christians, I hope this psalm will be an encouragement for us, an encouragement to worship God and to draw near to him and also a guide for what it actually means, what it looks like to do that.

This psalm actually points us to three aspects of worship. And the first one I'll call rejoicing before God's greatness. The second one I'll call reverence before God's kindness.

And the third we'll call responding to God's word. So rejoicing, reverence, and response. We'll see these as we go through the three sections of the psalm. So first, rejoicing before God's greatness.

We see this in verses 1 through 5. The psalm begins with a summons to rejoice. Look at the verbs in verses 1 and 2. Sing to the Lord.

It's a word that means give a ringing shout. Make a joyful noise. The word was used for a triumphant war cry or for a trumpet blast. So we see a picture of God's people speaking to one another, sort of urging each other on.

[6 : 55] Let us sing. Let us make a joyful noise. Let us come before God with thanksgiving. In one commentator's words, this is an exuberant opening, an expression of unashamed enthusiasm, an acclamation fit for a king.

And then in verses 3 of 5, we see the reason for this rejoicing. For the Lord is a great God. And a great king above all gods.

Now, as we've been going through the psalms, if you've been coming or listening to these sermons, you may have noticed a common pattern in the psalms. And the pattern is this. One line echoes or builds upon, or sometimes contrasts, the prior line.

The technical or literary term for this is called parallelism. Now, parallelism can almost seem redundant at times, right? Here, we have the word great repeated twice.

The Lord is a great God, a great king above all gods. But it's more than just repetition for emphasis. The second line often takes the initial idea one step further, or one step deeper.

[8 : 06] So here, it says, The Lord is a great God. And then it goes on to say, A great king above all gods. You see, the God of the Bible is not just one among many gods out there.

He is the supreme Lord who reigns over every other power and authority in heaven and on earth. That's what the Bible claims. Now, one of the fascinating things about the psalms is that their primary distinguishing feature on a literary level is what I've called this parallelism.

Now, many poems, if you read different kinds of poetry in different languages, some poems are distinguished by steady beats or beautiful rhythms. But if you try to translate a poem with a steady beat or a beautiful rhythm from one language into another language, it's almost impossible to do that.

And you almost always lose a lot in the process because there aren't always the same words that rhyme in another language. But here's the thing. The psalms can be translated into all kinds of languages because their distinguishing feature is not a steady beat or a beautiful rhythm, but these echoing or building ideas, these images that build on each other.

You see, God designed the psalms not just for the ancient Israelites and not just for modern scholars who can study Hebrew and appreciate Hebrew, but for people of every nation, speakers of every language, to take these prayers upon their lips and draw near to the one true God with them.

[9 : 50] You see, these psalms, even in the way they're constructed, literarily are meant for the whole world. The Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods.

It says the depths and the heights, the sea and the dry land, the whole world belongs to this God. Now in the ancient world, that was a revolutionary idea because nearly everyone else in the ancient world believed that the world was under the rule of various territorial deities.

So in Canaanite mythology, Baal was the God of the heights, the mountains, the God of fertility and prosperity. So people gathered at mountaintop shrines to seek the favor of Baal.

On the other hand, there was a God named Molech, who was the God of the depths. And so people gathered in caves and dark places and carried out actually some dark rituals to worship Molech.

In Babylonian mythology, there was a God of the sea named Tiamat, right? The sea was this overpowering, right? The sea could easily overpower you, right?

[11 : 02] And so they worshiped this God of the sea, the God of power and control and domination. But you know, throughout the Hebrew Bible, throughout the Old Testament, we hear a very different idea.

There's a confident and consistent proclamation that there's only one deity truly worth fearing. There's only one living and true God who rules over everything, everywhere, without any exceptions.

And so you don't have to worry. You see, many people in the ancient world lived in fear that there was some God of some place that maybe they didn't quite know how to please that God.

Or maybe that God was having a battle with a nearby God, right? So there was, you could never be totally secure with all these territorial gods inhabiting different places, the heights, the depths, the sea, the desert.

And so this would have been a liberating message for people who had lived in constant fear and constant efforts to please many, many different gods. The Lord is a great king above all gods.

[12 : 13] You see, no matter where you are on your journey of life, whether you're on a highest mountaintop or whether you're in the deepest, darkest valley, the message of the Bible is that the Lord is God.

His hands formed it all and his hands hold it all. He's the only one you really need because he's the only God who's always there. Now, some of you might say, well, okay, I guess I can see how that was a revolutionary idea back then when people thought the mountains and the valleys and the seas were haunted by different spirits.

But, I mean, we live in the modern world. I mean, nobody even recognizes those names of ancient gods anymore. But I think modern people still worship gods like these.

Modern people still worship gods like Baal, gods of fertility and prosperity and pleasure and success. People go to great lengths, spend huge amounts of money, huge amounts of time, huge amounts of energy pursuing fertility, pleasure, success, and material prosperity, all those things that Baal was supposed to provide.

And yet that quest for pleasure and prosperity can be brought to a screeching halt when unwanted sickness or suffering or pain or loss intrudes.

[13 : 37] When suffering strikes as it has in so many ways this year, gods like Baal have nothing meaningful to say, nothing helpful to say. The only thing they can say is, just wait until the next party.

Just wait until the bars and nightclubs open again. Just wait until you can do what you used to be able to do. And so some people turn to gods like Molech, the gods of the depths, the gods of darkness and despair and secrecy and shame.

Just think about how prevalent addictions of all kinds have become in our society. How many times people retreat into dark corners and hide behind anonymous web browsers and continue doing the same things which they would even admit are self-destructive, but they continue doing the same things over and over again.

Every year the number of deaths of despair, suicides and overdoses, keeps increasing. Other people deal with the chaos and unpredictability of the world by turning to gods like Tiamat, the ancient god of the sea, the god of power and control.

And we try to seize that power and control. We try to obtain and maintain power and control, whether it's through physical strength or emotional manipulation. But the worship of power makes us hardened and cynical and selfish, and ultimately it dehumanizes us.

[15 : 03] You see, these ancient gods are still very present in the modern world, just in different forms. But none of those false gods can give lasting joy.

Only the true God, the great king above all gods can do that. He's the god of the heights, the giver of every good gift. He's the god of the depths who can meet us and shine his light into our darkest, deepest valley and who can walk with us through it.

And he's the god of the turbulent waters who can abide with us and bring us peace in the midst of the storm. You know, if you turn to the New Testament, if you read the gospels in the New Testament, they show us that Jesus Christ is the lord of all these places.

One of his first miracles is Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding. He's better than Baal. He's the god of joy and life and beauty. But he's also the god who meets people in their place of shame and despair and darkness, who touches the lepers and befriends the outcasts and heals people who have been sick for years and years and years and who have been shut out and abandoned.

And he welcomes them in. And he walks on the troubled waters. And bids the storm be still. He's the great king above all gods.

[16 : 31] You see, we have a reason to rejoice before the greatness of our God and Savior. That's the first aspect of worship that this psalm invites us into is rejoicing before the greatness of God.

But the second aspect of worship that this psalm invites us into is reverence before the kindness of God. In verses 6 and 7, O come, let us worship and bow down.

Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker. You see, here we're called to take a posture of reverent humility, of quiet submission before the Lord.

All these three verbs in verse 6 emphasize the idea of getting low before God, accepting our own place and acknowledging his. He is God. We are not.

But this is not a distant, formal kind of reverence. You know, you might have noticed that both verse 1 and verse 6 begin with the words, O come.

[17 : 35] But the Hebrew verbs are actually slightly different. The first one in verse 1 means something like, come along. Join us on this journey. But the verb in verse 6 means something like, come on in.

Enter in to the presence of this God. Come before him. Kneel before him with reverence. You see, it's not an idea of shrinking back from God or running away from God in terror.

It's the idea of drawing near to God with reverence. That's what this psalm is inviting us to. And verse 7 gives us the reason for such reverence. Because of the Lord's kindness.

He's our maker. In other words, he's made us who we are. Just like he made the sea in verse 5, he made us to be his very own people, his children, his inheritance, whom he loves.

And he's not just a great God. It says he's our God. We can know him as ours. We can know him as a shepherd. We're the people of his pasture.

[18 : 38] We're the sheep of his hand. You know, in the ancient world, a shepherd during the daytime would lead his flock as a group to a green pasture where they all could feed.

But at nighttime, he went one step further. He would count them one by one. Each one would pass under his hand as they entered the fold.

You know, the Bible says that Jesus Christ is a good shepherd. And that he cares for his flock, right, his church, his people as a group, but he also sees us one by one.

Jesus said, no one can snatch my sheep out of my hand. Now, before we move on to the third point, let's consider two implications of these first two points.

First implication, worship is a matter of both rejoicing and reverence. Right? Well, the first part and the second part. Making a joyful noise without reverence is not really worship.

[19 : 44] It's, it just, that just ends up being superficial and self-indulgent. But a kind of reverence or fear of God without any joy is not the, that's the attitude of a frightened captive, not of a beloved child.

See, neither of those are true worship of God. You see, genuine biblical worship lives at the intersection of rejoicing and reverence.

There's a time for singing songs of praise, for clapping our hands or raising our hands, but there's also a time for kneeling quietly and confessing our sins and reverently approaching the throne of grace.

Now, rejoicing and reverence can be expressed in a variety of styles and forms. Different churches do this in different ways. Some worship services are louder, some are quieter, some are shorter, some are longer, some are, some use choirs, some use bands, some have no musical instruments at all, some use prescribed liturgy, some avoid prescribed liturgies as much as they possibly can.

But whatever styles and forms it may take, the heart of true worship is rejoicing and reverence before the God who is great and who is kind.

[20 : 57] That's what the Bible says at the heart of genuine worship, no matter what the precise styles and forms it might take. So that's the first point. It's about rejoicing and reverence.

Second implication, notice the reasons for rejoicing and reverence. I think most of the time we would assume that the reason we should rejoice is because God's done good stuff for us.

And the reason that we should fear God is because he's great and strong and higher than us. But this psalm actually flips that. It says we should rejoice because God is great.

And it says we should fear God because he's so kind. Now think about that. Why does this psalm say that? You see, we don't rejoice only because God's been good to us, only because God, only because we like the benefits that come along with knowing God.

We also rejoice because God is the sovereign king and there's no one else like him and he's greater than all other gods and that's a reason to rejoice. That is a good thing that there is a God like that.

[22 : 10] And also, we don't fear God just because he's more powerful than we are. You know, the Bible is not talking, you see, God is not a cosmic bully that we have to live in constantly be intimidated by just because he's more powerful than us.

No, this psalm says we should fear God because of how kind he is, because of how merciful he's been to us even though we don't deserve it because he's been our faithful shepherd and we're the sheep of his pasture and the flock under his care.

So corporate worship involves rejoicing before God's greatness, reverence before God's kindness and third, from verses 7 to 11, we see that worship involves responding to God's word.

Today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts. You see, so far, in the first two sections, we've heard God's people speaking to each other, encouraging one another to come before God in worship.

But here, starting at the end of verse 7, we hear God's voice speaking to us. Again, that makes sense if the psalm was written for these Jewish pilgrims, sort of the first half is them on their journey to the temple, verse 6, they enter into the temple and then they hear the word of God, right?

[23 : 31] You see that pattern. And also, if you think about what we do when we meet here on Sundays, guess what? We're doing the same thing. We begin with rejoicing for the greatness of God.

That's almost always the theme of our first song or hymn. And then we draw near with reverence, right? We come before God, we confess our sins and our need for His mercy and then we hear a reading that assures us that God's mercy and forgiveness have been provided and that we can be assured of that.

And then often we respond with a song praising God for His kindness. And then we listen to His voice, we listen to the scriptures, to God's voice speaking to us in His word. You see, when we meet for worship, the pastors are not just making up stuff that we can do together that we think sounds good and feels good.

No, we're following the patterns that have been laid out for us here in this psalm and in other parts of the Bible that help us to draw near to God. You might also notice that the tone changes in section three compared to sections one and two.

Instead of rejoicing, instead of exuberance and enthusiasm, the psalm concludes with a stern warning. One commentator said the ending of this psalm sacrifices literary grace to moral urgency.

[24 : 53] You see, the point is worshiping God is not just a matter of beautiful songs and happy feelings. Real worship involves being confronted by the message of the real God at a heart level.

And you know what? That isn't always pretty and it isn't always pleasant. Here the warning is don't harden your hearts. Now you might say, well what exactly is that warning against?

Well, the psalmist gives an example. He says, don't harden your hearts like they did back in the day at Masa and Meribah. Now we read the account of Masa and Meribah earlier in the service from Exodus 17.

Now just as some context for that story, the people in that story, they were the generation of Israelites who had been rescued dramatically from slavery in Egypt.

For generations, they had been enslaved, they had been oppressed, it got worse and worse, the Pharaoh was trying to basically exterminate them, and God sent them, Moses, as their leader, to deliver them.

[26 : 01] And God intervened on their behalf, and God had led them out of slavery in Egypt and they were on a journey in the wilderness. So verse 9 says, these people had seen my work, they had seen my work, these people had seen miracles that most of us have never even seen.

They had seen more miracles than almost any other generation in history would ever see. So they had seen the ten plagues coming upon Egypt, one after the other, the Red Sea parting, the Egyptian army pursuing them that was intent on devouring them, instead perishing in the sea, God then giving them a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide and lead them through the desert, making bitter water sweet, providing manna from heaven every morning.

God had demonstrated his greatness and his kindness to them in countless ways already. And then they come to Exodus 7, that's what happens in Exodus 1 through 16, and then they come to Exodus 17, they come to a place called Rephidim, and there's not any water to drink there.

And how do they respond? Well, they start quarreling with Moses. It says they grumbled, they said, why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?

They start accusing Moses, and by extension accusing God, because God's the one who had appointed Moses and God had used Moses to deliver them. And Moses cries out to God, he says, these people are ready to stone me.

[27 : 41] And I don't think Moses was exaggerating or overreacting. The people were ready to put Moses on trial, declare him guilty, and get rid of him for good. And the end of the story says Moses called the name of the place Massah, which is a word that means testing, and Meribah, which is a word that means quarreling because of how the people behaved there.

You see, here's the picture. God had proved himself to them time and time again. And then, when his people faced a test, when they faced a struggle, when they faced an uncomfortable situation, they very quickly turned against God.

They hardened their hearts, they start accusing Moses and accusing God, denying God's power, denying God's goodness, denying his presence with them. They said, God, I won't trust you until you prove yourself again.

I won't believe that you love us until you make our lives easier. I won't obey you until you give me what I want. And they didn't just do that once.

They did it over and over for 40 years in the wilderness. If you read through the book of Numbers, it shows seven different times when the people hardened their hearts.

[28 : 58] Same pattern, over and over again in the wilderness. And in the end, it says, God got fed up with them because they never learned. And that generation of Israelites never entered in to the promised land.

They perished in the wilderness. And so, the psalmist here, writing hundreds of years after all that happened, the psalmist says, don't be like them. Today, if you hear God's voice, don't harden your hearts.

In other words, don't forget all the ways that God has shown himself to be great and good. That he's shown himself and proved himself to you and to his people in the past.

Don't forget all that he's already done for you and all that he's already brought you through. If we were to apply it to today, don't stop trusting and obeying God just because it's 2020 and life is hard and disappointing.

He's still the same God yesterday, today, and forever. He's still the great creator. He's still the good shepherd. He's still worthy of our trust and obedience. This is a stern warning.

[30 : 06] It's a bit like being doused with ice cold water. Right? It doesn't feel very pleasant to hear this. But within this stern warning, there's also a standing invitation.

If you notice in verse 11, it says, those people back then never entered God's rest. But that word enter is the same word that's translated O come in verse 6.

It's a word that means enter in. You see, the same psalm that says the wilderness generation never entered in to God's rest also invites us to enter into God's rest.

And hundreds of years after this psalm was written, the writer of the book of Hebrews, which is in the New Testament, picked up on this detail.

And if you read the book of Hebrews chapter 3 and chapter 4, it's basically a mini sermon on this psalm that highlights that point. So Hebrews 4 verse 1 says, the promise of entering God's rest still stands.

[31 : 14] It's a standing invitation. And he gives some very dense reasoning to explain his point. He says, those who formerly received the good news, chapter 4 verse 6, the Israelites who perished in the wilderness in Moses' day failed to enter, right?

They didn't enter because of disobedience. But then, hundreds of years later, when this psalm was written, the psalm says, come along, enter in. And so the writer of Hebrews says, the true rest God was offering wasn't just the promised land that Joshua conquered.

He says, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest. You see, what the author of Hebrews is saying is that this is a standing invitation to enter into God's rest.

God's rest. And the invitation is given not on the basis of our own works or our own efforts.

[32 : 20] It's given on the basis of what Jesus Christ himself has done. You see, Jesus Christ has made a way for us to enter in to God's very own presence and to find rest and peace with God that we couldn't have otherwise.

You know, there's even a picture of what Jesus would do in the story of Masa and Meribah. Right? The Israelites were grumbling, quarreling, making all kinds of false accusations against Moses, against God.

They were ready to get rid of Moses, find Moses guilty, put him on trial, and basically sentence him to death by stoning. That's what they were about to do. And if you notice, God says something very strange to Moses in the middle of that situation.

God said, go on before the people, take your staff, your big stick in your hand, behold, I'll stand before you on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock with your staff, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.

Now, if you paid attention to that verse, you might ask the question, what in the world is going on there? Because that's a very strange command. God says, take this big stick, I'm going to stand right in front of you on this rock, smack the rock.

[33 : 41] Well, guess what? If God's standing on the rock, and God says to Moses, smack the rock with your stick, guess who's going to get smacked? What is God saying there?

You see, God's saying to Moses, look, these people are ready to stone you. In other words, they want to get rid of me. They're convinced that I don't love them.

They're convinced that I can't provide for them. They're convinced that I've just brought them out here to kill them, but the reality is I'm willing to be struck down and killed for them, so that they can live, so that they can be revived and rescued.

I'm willing to take a punishment that I don't deserve, so that my people can receive the life that they so desperately need. You see, that's what Jesus did when he came into the world.

He was the son of God, and he lived a perfectly obedient and faithful life. He didn't deserve any punishment from God, and yet he was willing to be crucified and falsely accused and put to death and to receive the punishment that we deserved for our sin and for our rebellion against God.

[34 : 58] You see, if you think that God doesn't love you, or if you think that God doesn't care, or if you think that God can't bring good out of hard things, look at the cross of Jesus Christ.

Jesus came into a world where people wanted to get rid of him, and he didn't just immediately strike them all down in their foolishness and in their pride and in their rebellion.

And in their sin, he was willing to be, he was willing to die as a sacrifice for them, for us, so that we could drink of the water of life, so that our souls could find eternal rest in the presence of God.

Hebrews 10 says, we now have confidence to enter the holy places, that is, the presence of God, by the blood of Jesus, by his sacrifice, by the new and living way that he opened for us through his flesh, so let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, because he who promised is faithful. And let's consider how to stir up one another toward love and good works. You see, that's what it means to worship.

[36 : 15] is to join God's people on a journey towards God's presence, a journey of faith and hope and love in response to what Jesus Christ has done for us, to open up that way for us.

That's what this psalm calls us into, to rejoice before God's greatness, to have reverence before God's kindness, and to receive and respond to his word. Augustine wrote, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

Isn't that true? the invitation is, come and find your rest in Jesus Christ today. Let's pray. Father God, thank you for this psalm.

Thank you for the gracious invitation that you extend to us. Lord, to people like us who are, naturally, tend to get ourselves lost, and be wandering in the wilderness and not really knowing where we're supposed to go.

Lord, thank you for this gracious invitation to come and enter into your presence. Thank you for Jesus who paid the price for our sins and our failures that we might come before you not on the basis of our achievements but on the basis of what he has done and being received by your mercy and grace.

[37 : 54] Lord, would you fill our hearts with joy and with reverence and awe before you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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