

WORSHIP AS A PEOPLE GATHERED

SERIES: THE NOW OF WORSHIP

By Doug Goins

We are now in the season commemorating the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths. God introduced this eight-day festival to the nation Israel through the prophet Moses toward the end of the wilderness wanderings (Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16). It was to be celebrated annually to help Israel remember God's faithfulness to them during the forty years in the wilderness. It is called the Feast of Booths because they lived and worshiped in temporary dwellings as they traveled. They were a people in transit, totally dependent on God's faithfulness to provide and protect them as they traveled toward the promised rest in the land of Canaan.

In John 7, we are told that it was the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles that the Lord Jesus revealed his Messianic identity and mission. During this week-long temple festival of worship, praise and celebration in Jerusalem he identified himself as living water, a place where people can come to be refreshed. Speaking of eternal reality, he preached the truth about himself in the annual context of public worship.

The passage we are considering, Psalm 95, was written for temple worship in Jerusalem. In all probability, it was written to be read as a call to worship during the Festival of Tabernacles each year. The psalm includes two hymns of community worship, and then concludes with a sermon recalling the wilderness experience. Two specific historical events in the desert are used to confront the people Israel and to act as a strong warning against disobedience. Likewise, it confronts us today as we listen to its message.

This is the second of two messages exploring the two-fold meaning of Biblical worship that was introduced last week in our study of Romans 12:1-2 (Discovery Papers #4622). Psalm 95 focuses on worship of submission, of bowing down before the Lord. It is about God's people coming together in a specific time and place to sing, and pray, and sit under the Word. The purpose of coming together to worship is to focus on the Lord. In our study of Revelation 4 and 5 (Discovery Papers #4621) we saw, "the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever;" (4:10). In Romans 12:1-2 we looked at the parallel definition, a definition that is held in creative tension in the Bible. It defines worship as lifestyle: every choice we make and every activity in which we engage is an act of worship to the Lord. Thus, it is worship that has moral and ethical expression in our life. Worshiping God will be evidenced in our faithful obedience to him.

Psalm 95 considers the first definition of worship. What do we do when we come together in worship as a family? Two primary answers come out of this psalm. One, we sing together. Not only do we sing loudly and joyfully, but we also sing reflectively, quietly and prayerfully. The second thing we do is sit under the Word of God. We listen to God speak through the Scriptures.

Psalm 95 by itself does not tell us everything about community worship, but it is one of eight psalms that combine to give us demonstrations of worship and teaching on how to worship. Psalms 93 through 100 connected in the Psalter. They are obviously great poetic expressions of worship, but they are also important instructions as to how we are to worship our God.

Psalm 95 was written by King David of Israel, the prolific song-writer and worship leader of the nation, although he is not credited here in the text. When the rabbis translated the Hebrew Bible into the Greek language just before the time of Jesus, they put David's name in the superscription as the author of Psalm 95. In addition, the writer of Hebrews quotes this psalm in chapters 3 and 4 as being, "said through David" (4:7). So the New Testament

testifies that David is the author of this great worship song.

An invitation to exuberant worship

In the first half of the psalm, we sing songs that celebrate God's sovereign authority, and also the fact that he is our shepherd. Verses 1 and 2 are the first call to worship in the psalm, an invitation for us to gather and worship. David writes,

**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 noise to him
with songs of praise!**

Several things come out of those two verses that I have stressed in the first two messages of this series. First, worship is God-centered, not self-centered. Four different times David makes the point that worship is directed to God, to his presence. We sing to him, we offer ourselves to him, our gratitude is expressed to him. It is about him and not us. Secondly, this is an invitation to people who know God, who already have a relationship with him. Verse 1 says we know him as "the rock of our salvation." None of *this* makes sense to people outside the family of faith. They do not know a God of salvation because they have not entered into relationship with him. Third, it is an invitation to community worship. Four different times the word "us" is used: let us sing, let us come into his presence, let us make a joyful noise (twice). This is for the congregation, and the focus is on the good of the whole.

It is important to remember that we are a family, a community gathered together in worship, and the good of the whole is more important than individual sensitivities. In these first two verses the call to worship is for exuberance, for hilarity, for incredible volume level. Twice it says to make a noise or to shout loudly out of joy, out of gratitude. It is joyful gratitude that is motivated by the absolute certainty about the source of our strength in life. It is not excitement for the sake of excitement, or volume for the sake of volume. It is a joyful response to knowing the God who is the rock of our salvation.

Again, these are the songs of the redeemed. Our savior God is the strength from whom we draw help in life. He is the strong foundation on which we build our lives. Because we are certain of that, we can sing joyfully and thankfully out of our experience. That is New Testament, as well as Old Testament, reality. Similarly, Paul writes to the Ephesian church, "be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Eph 5:19-20).

The second verse in the psalm makes clear that we bring an attitude of praise and thanksgiving with us into worship. It tells us to come prepared, with thankful anticipation. God is already waiting for us. As we come, we are coming into his presence. We never have to invoke his presence in worship: "Oh, Lord, come now, we're all here waiting on you." No, he is the one whose presence we are privileged to enter. Joyful songs of praise do not create worship in us. They are the response of hearts already grateful for God's power and presence and activity.

Our community worship experience is an overflow of our lifestyle of worship. These two understandings are held together. There is a synergy between seven days of worship as a lifestyle, and then gathering together on Sunday morning. If we come to church with the expectation that an hour-and-a-half fix will fill all our worship needs, we will be disappointed and frustrated. There is a living, vital relationship between all of life as worship and what we

experience as the people of God gathered together.

A hymn celebrating God's greatness

Verses 3 through 5 are a hymn of response focusing on the transcendence of God. The opening phrase says we worship because the Lord is a great God. Later in verse 7 a second hymn says not only is he the great, creator God, but also a personal, relational God. The first hymn proclaims,

**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;
for his hands formed the dry land.**

Thus our noisy thanksgiving and praise is based on our relationship to the God of creation. Not until we grasp who the Lord is in his grandeur will we be moved inwardly to worship him. We must see him as a God of absolute, supernatural power, supreme over all the forces that affect our life. When it says he is the great God, there is no hint of a pantheon of gods with our God being the best. Rather, he is the creator of everything, sovereign over every physical and spiritual force in our existence. Even Satan and his demonic forces of evil cannot prevail over him. It is this great God who is the king of the world.

Verses 4 and 5 tell us that God created all things out of nothing. He formed the land mass, and he formed the waters of the ocean. In effect, it is saying he created the entire planet. Since it is his work, he has the right to sustain it and be involved in all aspects of life as we experience it on earth. This indicates that we are dependent on him completely. As we saw previously in Romans 11:36 it says, "For from him and through him and to him are all things..." Our great God holds in his hands all of life's mystery and adventure and excitement, all the things that challenge us as human beings. He created the world out of nothing, and Genesis tells us it was a good gift. Even in its fallen, sinful state, it is still a good gift.

An invitation to reverent worship

Verse 6 begins the second invitation to community worship. Whereas the first invitation was to be loud, exuberant, and hilarious, this verse is an invitation to reverence and humility before God in community worship:

**O come, let us worship and bowdown,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!**

This quiet response of worship is still God-centered, not self-centered. We are before the Lord our maker. This verse emphasizes that posture is an important aspect of worship. We have already seen that kneeling is a sign of complete submission before someone who is superior to us. In Psalm 100:3 we read, "It is he that made us, and we are his;" We are called in verse 6 to prayerfully acknowledge our limitation. God alone is the creator. The Old Testament says that he is like a potter who takes us as clay and has the right to shape us and mold us however he wishes (Isaiah 64:8). So in this verse quiet, reflective prayer is given as much importance in worship as joyful noise.

A hymn reflecting God's closeness

This brings us to the second hymn of response in verse 7. The first hymn focuses on God's transcendence, his greatness as creator, but this is different. Now it says he is our God:

**For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.**

There is a shift here from God as a distant, supreme creator to God as our personal savior and redeemer. God's closeness to us is described in terms of his being a loving shepherd. He is our God who pastures us, who pays close attention to us personally. A shepherd knows each sheep individually, and therefore knows each one's needs. Our response here is to be one of grateful humility. God has lovingly pursued us although we are like stubborn, stupid, lost sheep. The Bible tells us God went looking for us, he found us, and he saved us. Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we like sheep have gone astray." We know our shepherd God through intimate, personal relationship as a savior.

In the book *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis tells of his conversion from agnosticism to living Christian faith. Lewis says he finally came to the point that he could accept verse 6 of the psalm, that God was creator. But he struggled to move to verse 7, to believe that God is an intimate God who cared about him personally.

Our response in verse 7 is prayerful gratitude. It is still in the context of being together as God's people, like a flock of sheep. From the tiniest baby lamb to the oldest ram or ewe, we have group identity. We worship together as a redeemed people, and our gratitude unites us in worship. What connects us is not our personal taste in music, aesthetic sensitivity, cultural distinctives, or the comfort zone of common age. We all celebrate God as our king, our savior, and our shepherd. The overriding awareness we are to have of the people with whom we gather for worship is that we are all his joyful, submissive people. Each of us is a sheep desperately in need of shepherding. That is our identity as worshipers. We are all sheep together.

The mood changes again in verse 8, from songs of worship to a sermon. We listen to the word of God together, and here the sermon is a warning against disobedience. Before God begins speaking in verse 8, however, David challenges us to pay attention. The last phrase in verse 7 says:

O that today you would hearken to his voice!

In *The Message* Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, "Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks: "Don't turn a deaf ear...." This exemplifies the immediacy of worship, the "now" of worship. The psalmist exhorts Israel at the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as us today, to listen carefully to what God says next. What follows in the text is essentially Biblical exposition of Exodus 17 and Numbers 20.

In one sense, worship is paying attention to what God wants to say to us. We are to listen to his voice, especially through the Scriptures. That old-fashioned word hearken means to listen to somebody with the intention of doing something about it. It means that worship ought to change us. Our call is to let the Scriptures correct us however it desires: our belief systems, our attitudes, our reactions to circumstances.

Remember Meribah and Massah

God preaches a three-point sermon in verses 8 through 11. Verses 8 and 9 challenge us to pay attention to history, what happened at Meribah and Massah.

**Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,**

**when your fathers tested me,
and put me to the proof, though
they had seen my work.**

We are commanded not to come hardened. Hardening is the exact opposite of hearkening. It is not hearing or paying attention to God. These historical examples of Israel hardening their hearts against God's word would

speaking powerfully into the annual festival of the Feast of Tabernacles. It would counter the temptation to romanticize the wilderness experience.

Exodus 17 tells of an early crisis the people encountered right after deliverance through the Red Sea, before arriving at Mount Sinai. When they came to a place called Rephidim, they complained to Moses because there was no water they could see. They said to Moses, "Give us water to drink! Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?" (17:2, 3). When Moses prayed, God told him to strike a rock, and miraculously, water gushed out of it. But because the people were so demanding, Moses gave the place two names at Rephidim. First is the name Meribah, which means blaming, disputing or quarreling. He also named it Massah, which means testing or tempting.

Later, at Mount Sinai, during the giving of the Law, Moses preached to the people, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test as you tested him at Massah at Rephidim" (Deuteronomy 6:16). Sadly, forty years later, the Numbers 20 account tells us that a similar crisis occurs at Kadesh. Despite all of God's provision--the waters at Rephidim, quail and manna for food, guidance of the cloud by day and the fire at night, protection from enemies--the people complained to Moses about the lack of water again. God responded graciously and mercifully, because salvation is by grace; but the people are judged by him. He judged them for having hard hearts, for being forgetful, stubborn, angry, and unbelieving. So Moses named the place Meribah Kadesh to distinguish it from Meribah at Rephidim. It served as a witness that both times, forty years apart, the people were demanding and tried to coerce God into satisfying their wants.

It is not presumptuous to ask God for help, and he does not admonish us for that. What he judges is disbelief--when we murmur, when we complain about our circumstances. Like Israel in the wilderness, our grumbling proves our forgetfulness and stubbornness towards God's faithfulness. In the gospels, Jesus expressed similar concerns about his disciples. After Jesus fed the five thousand, he walked on the Sea of Galilee, and then calmed the storm. The gospel of Mark says the disciples did not understand the miracles. In language similar to Psalm 95, it says the disciples did not understand what Jesus did because their "hearts were hardened" (6:52). Matthew's gospel says that Jesus responded to one of his disciples, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:31).

Understand how we can provoke God

Thus, the first challenge in the sermon is to remember the lessons of salvation history, specifically the lessons in the wilderness. The second challenge in verse 10 is to understand how we can frustrate and provoke our loving shepherd. God says,

**For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people who err in heart,
and they do not regard my ways."**

What happened at Meribah was indicative of forty years of hardened hearts. Israel represents two sinful patterns that provoke God's grief and angry disgust. What is striking in these stories is how lovingly patient God is with willful, forgetful people. After forty years of patience he continued to call, "O that today you would just hearken to my voice." Over and over God made that call in the face of their erring hearts. NIV translates the phrase, "They are a people whose hearts go astray," Eugene Peterson puts it in a question form: "Can't they keep their minds on God for five minutes?"¹ In New Testament language, using the apostle Paul's word in Colossians 3, their minds--or their affections--were set upon the things on earth.

How did this express itself in the behavior of the Israelites? First, they wanted to return to what they remembered as the good life in Egypt. God called the nation Israel to follow his leading and to walk by faith to the promised land, but when the wilderness experience was difficult they romanticized the quality of life they enjoyed in the Nile Valley. They wanted to go back to where the diet was better, the climate was better, and life was predictable. The second problem is in verse 10, "they do not regard my ways." NIV translates it, "...they have not known my

ways." Peterson paraphrases it with another question: "Do they simple refuse to walk down my road?"² God had met all their needs in the wilderness and protected them from the attack of enemies. He had clearly communicated his loving expectations for them at Sinai. But they chose not to trust him, and wanted to live on their own terms.

There is a logical progression in these sinful patterns. Setting our hearts on earthly things, which is demanding to walk by sight and not faith, will result in acts of rebellion. We will make conscious choices to go our own way and to make up our own rules. In the New Testament the apostle Paul talks about a man named Demas who had been an important part of the ministry. They had traveled and done the work of the gospel together. However, at the end of his life, Paul writes to Timothy, and says, " For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:10). Demas did not learn from the history of Israel in the wilderness, and his legacy in Scripture is infamous along with an unbelieving generation of Israelites who died before reaching the promised land.


Understand that we can enter into "Sabbath rest"

The last verse of Psalm 95 seems like a blunt way to end a worship and praise psalm. It is as if David wants to sacrifice literary grace for moral urgency. God says,

**Therefore I swore in my anger
that they should not enter my rest.**

Does the idea of an angry God bother you? In Numbers 14:21-23, Moses argues with God and begs him to show mercy towards his rebellious, hard-hearted people. God says, "...but truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the proof these ten times and have not hearkened to my voice, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers; and none of those who despised me shall see it."

Clearly, murmuring, complaining, and disbelieving is despising God. When I do those things, however, I do not view myself that way. I don't despise God, I just don't like the way things are going in my life. But from God's perspective, it is despising who he is because of the things he is allowing in my life. From that perspective, God's anger is understandable.

Even Moses suffers because of his hardened heart towards God. At Kadesh, he struck the rock out of anger, not faith. As a result, he did not enter the promised land, along with an entire generation, except for Joshua and Caleb. The people received the water they demanded from God, but they lost the greater blessing of entering "my rest," the land of Canaan. Parenthetically, it is important to be clear that not everybody is eternally lost who dies in the wilderness. They do not all die as non-believers. There were believers in that generation--like Moses, Aaron and Miriam  who died in the wilderness. They were unbelieving in relation to the picture of rest, of trusting God for provision, but they were not lost eternally.

I said earlier that Hebrews 3 and 4 applies this psalm and its historical context to us as Christians, people who place our faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. I would suggest that if you want to understand this psalm fully, ponder Hebrews 3 and 4, because it is an thorough examination of Psalm 95. After a long commentary on the wilderness experience, the author of Hebrews says to those of us who know Jesus Christ, "So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience" (4:9-11).

We are the people of God. Resting from our work means, by implication, that we are trusting God to work in his own ways to meet our needs. He is the only one who can satisfy our restlessness, our drivenness. The phrase there, "strive to enter that rest," requires honest confession of our unbelief, of how demanding and mistrustful we are of God. The call is to acknowledge and resist our self-dependence, by the grace of God, and to repent of our murmuring and complaining. The invitation to respond in honest repentance still stands today, as well as every day. In Matthew 11:28, the Lord Jesus' offers a wonderful invitation, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy

laden" And his promise is, "I will give you rest." It is the rest that depends completely on God's goodness in provision and saving activity on our behalf, but it cannot coexist with our own need to control circumstances.

Psalms 95 and Hebrews 3 and 4 present us with a clear choice. We can live out of restlessness and insecurity. We can be demanding and live like the wilderness wanderers. The result is our hardened hearts will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13). Or we can choose to live out of Sabbath rest, increasingly secure in God's commitment to us as our creator king and our loving shepherd. We can enjoy a life of joyful, worshipful gratitude with our hearts being softened by daily submission to the word of God.

In the last two messages I have asked what defines good worship. This psalm suggests that an important thing in worship is to learn how to rest in the Lord. True worship stabilizes us and strengthens us. It steadies us, and focuses us on our God of rest. But we cannot have rest until we hearken to his word. This psalm addresses the danger of regular worship participation without allowing God to change us. We can sing the songs, pray the prayers, sit through the sermons, and never personally respond to truth. The peril, then, is becoming hardened. Some of us could have forty years of incredible worship experience without being changed one iota. As long as we resist God's word, we are going to hear him say "You will never enter my rest." But the gospel, the good news, the gracious invitation still stands today and every day:

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock
of our salvation!

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

O that today you would hearken to his voice!

Today is the day of salvation!

NOTES

1. Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message: Psalms*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994. P. 134.

2. Ibid. P. 134.

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