

In keeping with the theme of the enthronement psalms (Psalms 90-99), Psalm 95 extols “the great King above all gods,” and leads the people of God in exuberant worship to the Lord, “the Rock of our salvation.” To this vibrant call to worship, the psalm adds an equally poignant challenge to obedience. The psalmist reaches back a millennium to when the Israelites were in the wilderness and rebelled against the Lord God. He draws out this sober experience in order to inspire a very different response among God’s people “today.”

Some scholars have argued that Psalm 95 is composed of two unrelated fragments, but most accept the unity of the psalm with its two definite themes and divergent tones.¹ There is nothing odd about combining in a single psalm an invitation to heart-felt worship and a warning against hardness of heart. The honest believer recognizes the need for both witness and warning, inspiration and exhortation. Psalm 95 unites faith and faithfulness, theology and ethics, in a Spirit-inspired synergy.

Call to Worship

*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.
For the Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
In his hand 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.
Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.*

Psalm 95:1-7b

The call to worship is a simple invitation. There can be little doubt as to its meaning and no cause for confusion. If it is greeted with apathy or bewilderment it is likely that the hearer has not yet come to God and has nothing to sing about. The call to worship, “Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord,” is always preceded by the gospel invitation. “Come, follow me” (Matthew 5:19) are the first words of the gospel. Jesus invited people to himself, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). The call to worship is grounded in the invitation of the

¹ Kidner, Psalms, 343.

gospel. When the Lord is indeed the Rock of our salvation we will have much to sing about and the call to worship will be embraced with enthusiasm.

We cannot respond to the psalmist's "come," just by showing up and being part of the crowd. Simply attending church is not what the psalmist has in mind. His twice repeated, "let us," envisions the real worship of the people of God. The welcoming imperative, "come," challenges us to sing for joy, to shout aloud, to bow down, and to kneel before the Lord our Maker. There is nothing complicated about the verb "come," except for the fact that it involves our whole being, body, mind, and soul. Worship is fully personal and participatory at its core, never passive. The psalmist describes the body language that engages the mind and heart and awakens the soul. Exuberant worship fills the hearts and minds of the people of God.

The psalmist briefly sketches the God-centered reasons for this call to exuberant worship. The Lord is described as the Rock of our salvation, the great God, the great King above all gods, the Lord our Maker, and the shepherd of God's flock. The psalmist's focus is on *who* God is rather than what he has done. But implicit in these descriptive titles is the recognition that God has done it all. The Lord redeems his people, creates the universe, rules over all authorities in heaven and on earth, and shepherds his people. He holds the deepest depths and the highest heavens in his hands, because he made the sea and "his hands formed the dry land" (Ps 95:5).

There is no room in faithful worship for polytheistic or pluralistic competition. Either the Lord is "the great King above all gods" or Israel's God is no god at all. Far from being a liability the exclusivity of this truth claim lies behind the exuberance of this worship. Oprah Winfrey may express the opinion of many, but she contradicts the psalmist's conviction when she says, "One of the biggest mistakes humans make is to believe there is only one way. Actually, there are many diverse paths leading to what you call God."² One of the heroes of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi, offered his conclusion to the matter in an essay entitled *All Religions Are True*: "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter if we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarreling?" For many, the only civil and reasonable conclusion is that The Eternal One is perceived differently in different cultures, because whatever we mean by "God" exceeds the scope of human thought, language and experience. The global village shares different and distinctive religious perceptions of the one transcendent reality.³ But this is not what the psalmist is saying. He is boldly identifying the one and only living God, who is Lord over creation and redemption.

The polemical force of the psalmist's exclusive truth claim against pagan tribal deities and the gods of nature should not be obscured in our twenty-first century setting. This call to worship is not an innocuous religious claim, but a powerful absolute truth that shatters pagan idolatries and secular ideologies. The apostles echo the conviction of the psalmist and make the absolute claim that salvation is found in the Incarnate One, Jesus Christ. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The early church was convinced that Jesus was the revelation of God, the culmination of a long

² Oprah Winfrey, quoted in *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2002, 45.

³ Gandhi, quoted in Burch, *Alternative Goals in Religion*, 1972, 111.

history of revelation, the very self-disclosure of God. The exclusive truth of the gospel fits with the purpose of God's promise from the beginning. God chose one, small, weak, insignificant nation through which to make himself known and bless the world. The exclusiveness of the gospel is consistent with the character of revelation and the nature of God's own self-disclosure.

Challenge to Obey

*Today, if only you would hear his voice,
“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.
For forty 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.’”*

Psalm 95:7c-11

All the joyful singing and loud shouting, all the thanksgiving and praising, all the bowing and kneeling, comes down to this exhortation: listen to the voice of God! The psalmist answers the call to worship with a challenge: “Today, if only you would hear his voice.” “Today,” like the word “Come,” has the force of immediacy and urgency. If indeed we are “the people of his pasture, and the flock under his care” (Ps 95:7), will we not want to hear the voice of the Shepherd? Jesus declared, “I am the good shepherd,” having explained that, “his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:4,11). He even spoke of having other sheep that are not of this sheep pen, adding, “They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Psalm 95 takes us back to Israel’s failure in the wilderness, when the beneficiaries of the Exodus quarreled with Moses over water at Rephidim (Exod 17:7) and then rebelled against the Lord at Kadesh (Num 14). Moses gave nick names to these notorious places, *Meribah*, meant *quarreling*, and *Massah*, meant *testing*. He gave these names because “the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (Exod 17:7). Their refusal to go into the promised land summed up their chronic contempt for God. “Kadesh became the symbol of Israel’s disobedience, the place where God’s past redemption was forgotten and where divine promise no longer impelled the people to obedience.”⁴ Psalm 95 goes beyond isolated instances of sin and exposes a persistent pattern of stubborn rebellion and hard-hearted resistance to the will of God. The psalmist picks up on this thousand year old history and exhorts believers “do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness” (Ps 95:8). Their constant waywardness is captured in the Lord’s verdict: “Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways” (Heb 3:10).

⁴ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:85.

The author of Hebrews “makes these verses [Psalm 95:8-11] an urgent message for Christians today.”⁵ His exposition of Psalm 95 supports his warning against hard-hearted unbelief and inspires his vision for firm-to-the-end faithfulness. He presses home the urgency of his warning and the immediacy of his challenge by repeating *today* five times. The pastor’s confidence is not in his personal powers of persuasion but in the word of God which he describes as living and thus active, sharper than any double-edged surgical knife. “Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb 4:12-13). His exhortation draws on God’s precedent-setting judgment against the Israelites in the wilderness. He is concerned that believers were in danger of drifting away (Heb 2:1) and turning away from the living God” (Heb 3:12).

The author of Hebrews links Psalm 95 and Exodus typology to the Israelites in the wilderness and the Church. F. F. Bruce explains, “The death of Christ is itself called an ‘exodus’ (Luke 9:31); he is the true passover, sacrificed for his people, ‘a lamb without blemish and spot’ (1 Pet 1:19). They, like Israel in early days, are ‘the church in the wilderness’ (Acts 7:38); their baptism into Christ is the antitype of Israel’s passage through the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1f); their sacramental feeding on him by faith is the antitype of Israel’s nourishment with manna and the water from the rock (1 Cor 10:3f). Christ, the living Rock, is their guide through the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4b); the heavenly rest which lies before them is the counterpart to the earthly Canaan which is the goal of the Israelites.”⁶

The pressing importance of the preacher’s exhortation in Hebrews emphasizes the repetition of the word *today* five times. Thirteen references to *rest* accent the eschatological vision of authentic faithfulness. These two words, *today* and *rest*, form a dynamic *already, not yet* tension. Daily faithfulness and everlasting rest are inseparably linked. When the next generation of Israelites finally entered God’s promised land, they experienced rest from their enemies (Deut 12:10; Josh 23:1), but that rest was only a type of the everlasting rest promised in Christ. The psalmist clearly meant a rest that goes beyond the experience of Joshua. “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day” (Heb 4:8). The pastor sees the ground for this everlasting rest at the beginning of time in creation’s seventh day. “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his” (Heb 4:9-10). Taken together these two types, Israel in the land and God resting on the seventh day, point forward to God’s everlasting rest (Rev 14:13). In Hebrews we will see the significance of Christ’s high priestly work in achieving the ultimate rest for the people of God by fulfilling the Day of Atonement (“a day of sabbath rest,” Lev 16:31) and we will see that “the imagery of rest is best understood as complex symbol for the whole soteriological process.”⁷

The author of Hebrews picks up the redemptive trajectory of Psalm 95 and provocatively

⁵ Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, 86.

⁶ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 96-97; see Jude 5.

⁷ G. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 959.

interprets the meaning of “rest” in the light of fulfilment of Christ.⁸ When believers pray this psalm today we do so with the message of Hebrews driving home the psalmist’s challenge of obedience. The preacher and the psalmist agree, “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (Heb 4:11). The English translation, “make every effort,” hardly does justice to the intensity of the Greek phrase. It means, “Take pains,” “Spare no effort,” “Give it all you’ve got.” “This blissful rest in unbroken fellowship with God is the goal to which his people are urged to press forward.”⁹

⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 46. Calvin minimizes the relationship between Hebrews and Psalm 95. Calvin writes, “We might stop a moment here to compare what the Apostle states in the third and fourth chapters of his Epistle to the Hebrews, with the passage now before us. That the Apostle follows the Greek version, need occasion no surprise. Neither is he to be considered as undertaking professedly to treat this passage. He only insists upon the adverb *Today*, and upon the word *Rest*. And first, he states that the expression *today*, is not to be confined to the time when the Law was given, but properly applies to the Gospel, when God began to speak openly. The fuller and more perfect declaration of doctrine demanded the greater share of attention.” The author of Hebrews may take issue with Calvin’s assertion that he is not interpreting or treating Psalm 95, but rather pulling out two words, “today,” and “rest.” On the contrary the apostolic hermeneutic depends on the whole of Psalm 95.

⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 110.