

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

WORSHIP—OR ELSE!

Psalm 95

By

Steven J. Cole

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Worship—or Else!
Psalm 95

Most of us do not like ultimatums because they force us to make difficult decisions, usually under pressure. The late Jack Benny had a running joke about his stinginess. He used to do a gag where a robber stuck a gun in his face and said, “Your money or your life!” There was a long pause. The gunman snarled, “Well?” Jack said, “Don’t rush me! I’m thinking about it.”

I would guess that few of us think about worshipping God as an ultimatum. We’re pretty casual about it. If it happens, that’s nice. If it doesn’t happen, no big deal. Maybe we’ll catch it next time around. We don’t see it as eternally significant. In academic circles, professors know the term, “publish or perish.” If you don’t publish articles in academic journals, you may lose your job. But God says to us, “Worship or perish!” And He isn’t talking about losing our jobs, but our souls! The abrupt ultimatum of Psalm 95 is,

We can either worship God with great joy or harden our hearts and perish.

Worship—or else! The psalm falls into two halves. The first half (1-7a) is an invitation to worship the Lord, who is a great God, King, and Creator. Then, rather abruptly (7b-11), the psalmist warns us to hear God’s voice and not harden our hearts, as Israel did in the wilderness. It ends suddenly with God’s frightening warning (95:11), “Therefore I swore in My anger, truly they shall not enter into My rest.” Period! End of song! The ultimatum is: Worship God or else you will perish!

But maybe you’re thinking, “Yes, but this was in the Old Testament. We live in the New Testament era. We’re not under law, but under grace.” But before you shrug off the warning of Psalm 95, you might want to recall that the author of Hebrews cites the entirety of the warning section (7b-11) in Hebrews 3:7-11. He again quotes verse 11 in Hebrews 4:3, and verse 7b in Hebrews 4:7. Derek Kidner (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 343) observes that the Hebrews quote “forbids us to confine its thrust to Israel.” He adds,

“The ‘Today’ of which it speaks is this very moment; the ‘you’ is none other than ourselves, and the promised ‘rest’ is not Canaan but salvation.” Thus we dare not shrug off the serious ultimatum of this psalm! Worship—or perish!

Also, note that the first half of the psalm emphasizes God’s absolute sovereignty. He is the great God and a great King above all supposed gods. He created the entire earth, and so He owns it. Further, He is our maker. He owns us and is over us just as a shepherd governs his flock.

But, before we erroneously conclude that since God is sovereign, there isn’t much that we can do, the second half of the psalm emphasizes our responsibility. The psalmist pointedly appeals to us not to harden our hearts against the sovereign Lord. John Calvin expresses the balance this way (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 95, p. 41), “The will of man, through natural corruption, is wholly bent to evil; or, to speak more properly, is carried headlong into the commission of it. And yet every man, who disobeys God therein, hardens himself; for the blame of his wrong rests with none but himself.” In other words, we can’t blame anyone but ourselves if we disregard God’s warning here. God’s sovereignty does not absolve us of responsibility to worship Him with tender hearts.

And so Psalm 95 presents us with two ways to live. We can become people of joyful praise to God (1-7a), or people who grumble and harden our hearts toward God, in spite of His many blessings (7b-11). In the words of Hebrews 3:12, after citing Psalm 95:7b-11, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.”

1. The invitation: Worship God with rejoicing, reality, reverence, and relationship (95:1-7a).

Soft hearts are worshiping hearts. Soft hearts submit to God’s rightful lordship over all. Soft hearts submit to God’s discipline. They trust Him for His care as the Good Shepherd.

A. Worship God with rejoicing (95:1-2).

Note the exuberance of verses 1 & 2: “O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.” Does that describe your heart as you

come daily into God's presence and as you gather with the saints on the Lord's Day? There is no room in those verses for apathetically mumbling through a few songs while your mind is elsewhere! As Kidner says (p. 344), "The full-throated cries urged in the verbs of verses 1 and 2 suggest an acclamation fit for a king who is the savior of his people."

Note that in the context of shouting joyfully to God, the psalmist calls Him, "the rock of our salvation." In this psalm, which refers to Israel in the wilderness, the rock that literally saved the nation was the rock that Moses struck, which then flowed with water (Exod. 17:1-7). Paul tells us that that rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). If Christ is the rock of your salvation, who has given you living water for your soul, shouldn't you come before Him with great joy and thanksgiving?

B. Worship God in the reality of His presence and His person (95:2-5).

(1) Worship God in the reality of His presence (95:2).

"Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving" (95:2a). God is present everywhere, of course, but He is especially present when His people gather to worship Him. After the incident with the golden calf, Moses told the Lord (Exod. 33:15), "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here." He knew how vital it was to have God's real presence with him because the task of leading two million people through a barren wilderness was humanly impossible. Although we are fewer in number, we would still be attempting the impossible and wasting our time if we meet each week and God were not present with us.

(2) Worship God in the reality of His person (95:3-5).

Verse 3 begins with the word "for," giving the reason why we should worship God so exuberantly. He mentions three things: The Lord is a great God; He is a great King above all gods; and, He is the great Creator.

- He is a great God.

As Psalm 113:3-5 exclaims, "From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised. The Lord is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. Who is like the

Lord our God, who is enthroned on high?" Or, Psalm 145:3, "Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable."

- He is a great King above all gods.

The psalmist is not suggesting that any of the gods of the nations are real. They are only manmade idols, who have no life in them. Or, if it refers to the demons behind the idols, the Lord is still a great King above all the host of heaven. He rules the entire universe (Ps. 103:19).

- He is the great Creator.

"In whose hand are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land" (95:4-5). You can dig down to the earth's molten core, and it's all in God's hand. The oil is His. Mount Everest belongs to Him. He made the sea and every creature in it. He formed the dry land. The point is, unlike the idols of the pagans, who were localized gods—the god of the mountains, the god of the sea—the Lord made it all and owns it all. And even more, He also made us: He is our Maker (95:6). Thus we should worship Him in the reality of His presence and His person.

C. Worship God with reverence.

"Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker" (95:6). The verb translated "worship" means to prostrate yourself. Thus all three verbs in verse six are "concerned with getting low before God" (Kidner, p. 345). So while our worship should be exuberant and joyful, it must also be reverent. We are worshipping our Maker!

D. Worship God in relationship.

"For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand" (95:7). Kidner again puts it aptly (p. 345), "The familiar metaphors of verse 7 express His commitment, which is constant (*our God*), and His care, which is all-sufficing (*his pasture*) and personal (*his hand*). He is no hireling." Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep and His sheep know Him (John 10:14). We worship Him in close relationship to Him, as His people.

So the appealing invitation is, "Come, worship our God with rejoicing, in the reality of His presence and person, with reverence, and in relationship to Him as our Good Shepherd." But, what if we don't worship Him? Do we shrug our shoulders and go, "Whatever! No big deal"? No, the Lord gives us an ultimatum:

2. The ultimatum: Harden your heart against the Lord and perish (95:7b-11).

The command is given in 7b-8a: "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." The rest of the psalm is an illustration of Israel in the wilderness as a people who hardened their hearts against God. When they sided with the ten spies who thought that the giants in the land of Canaan were too hard to conquer and they wanted to return to Egypt, they said (Num. 14:2), "would that we had died in this wilderness!" Because they disbelieved God's promise to give them the land, He determined that according to their word, they all would perish in the wilderness. Of those who were twenty years old and upward, who had seen God's miraculous deliverance from Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb would enter the land (Num. 14:28-32).

Both in Psalm 95 and in Hebrews 3, where it is cited, the warning is directed to those who were *associated with God's people*, but their hearts were not right before Him. Those in Israel had seen God do stupendous miracles in the plagues against Egypt, while protecting them. They watched God part the Red Sea and take them across on dry land. They watched Him bring the sea back on the Egyptian army. Then they went three days into the wilderness and found no water. After witnessing all of those miracles, you would think that they would have said, "God, You didn't bring us this far to have us die of thirst. You can provide water for us and our children. Please bring us to some water." But instead, they grumbled. God directed Moses to throw a tree into some bitter water and it became sweet (Exod. 15:22-26).

But then they went further into the wilderness and grumbled because they didn't have the meat and bread that they had enjoyed in Egypt. In response, God sent them manna each day (Exod. 16:1-21). But in spite of all these evidences of God's power and His care for them, the next time they ran out of water, they grumbled again. It was there that God told Moses to strike the rock and water

gushed forth. But it became known as Massah (“test”) and Meribah (“quarrel”), because they tested the Lord and quarreled with Him there (Exod. 17:1-7).

Later, God supplied them with quail (Num. 11:31-32). But they were perpetual grumblers. The text describes them (Num. 11:1), “Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord.” Although they had been miraculously delivered from Egypt and miraculously sustained in the wilderness, they still grumbled against God because of the hardships that they had to endure. And so God was not pleased with them and laid them low in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5).

The Hebrews in the New Testament were in danger of doing the same thing. They had come out of Judaism, professing faith in Christ. But now they were suffering persecution and other hardships. Some had defected from the faith back to Judaism. They were like the seed on the stony ground. At first, it sprung up and seemed to be doing well. But when the sun of adversity beat down on it, it withered, because it had no root (Mark 4:16-17).

The point is, it is possible to be associated with the people of God and yet to harden your heart against God when trials come. He’s meeting your needs, but He’s not doing it in the way that you want Him to do it. You want a trial-free life. You don’t like His discipline, which is for your ultimate good. So you complain against Him or, even worse, turn back to the world. Be careful! Great privileges do not guarantee responsive hearts.

So the ultimatum or warning against hardening your heart is written to professing believers who are prone to grumble when trials hit. The danger is that if you keep grumbling against God and don’t worship Him with a thankful heart, it may reveal that you’re not a genuine believer. You may be in danger of incurring His anger and not entering into the eternal rest of His salvation.

Note five things about this ultimatum:

A. The ultimatum is time-sensitive: “Today” (95:7b)!

Today emphasizes the urgency of the appeal. You may not have tomorrow. As Thomas Fuller put it, “You cannot repent too soon, because you do not know how soon it may be too late.” Or, Francis Quarles said, “He that hath promised pardon on our re-

penitance hath not promised to preserve our lives till we repent" (both cited by C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* [Eerdmans], 4:328). Don't think that you've got years to wait. *Today* is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2)!

B. The ultimatum requires sensitive ears: "If you would hear His voice" (95:7b).

God has spoken to us through His Son (Heb. 1:2) and that message is recorded in His written Word. The author of Hebrews introduces the quote from Psalm 95 by saying, "just as the Holy Spirit says" (Heb. 3:7). In other words, God inspired the psalmist. The Holy Spirit used human authors (David may have written Psalm 95, or "in David" [Heb. 4:7] may mean, "in the Psalms"). But God used those authors to record His message in such a way "that what they said God said" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* [Eerdmans], 1:154).

But, as Jesus often said to the crowds who heard Him, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:23). He warned of those who "while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt. 13:13). Thus He said (Luke 8:18), "Take care how you listen." When we read God's Word, we must ask Him for understanding. We must think about how to apply it to our lives. Otherwise, we will not be doers of the word, but hearers who delude themselves (James 1:22).

C. The ultimatum is heart-related: "Do not harden your hearts" (95:8a).

Also (95:10), "they are a people who err in their heart." Israel's wilderness wanderings were due to their heart wanderings. In the Bible, the *heart* refers to our total inner being—the mind, the emotions, and the will. Proverbs 4:23 warns, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

Do you guard your heart? Jesus taught (Mark 7:21-22), "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness." He leveled against the Pharisees God's complaint through Isaiah (Mark 7:6-7), "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they wor-

ship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." Outwardly, they spoke nicely about God, but He saw their hearts, which were far from Him. Outwardly, they worshiped God, but in vain, because they were following manmade rules rather than submitting to His Word. So, again, in the words of Hebrews 3:12, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God."

D. The ultimatum is historically illustrated: Do not be like Israel in the wilderness (95:8-10).

Do you read the Old Testament? I'm amazed at how many Christians do not read the Old Testament! Paul tells us that these things happened as examples for our instruction, so that we would not fall into the same sins (1 Cor. 10:5, 11).

The Lord says that Israel in the wilderness *tested* Him (95:9) and that they did *not know His ways* (95:10). God's ways are His method of accomplishing His purpose in our lives. His ways include His loving discipline, so that we might share His holiness (Heb. 12:5-11). God could have sent a plague to wipe out the Canaanites. Israel then could have moved into the land with no battles (and, no need to trust in God!). Instead, He led them through the wilderness (I call it, "the scenic route to the Promised Land") because He knew that they were not ready to go into the land (Exod. 13:17). But in spite of the hardships of the wilderness, He always cared for them. He protected them with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He gave them food and water in the barren desert. But they grumbled and tested Him.

We test God when we do not submit to His ways with us, but rather complain and accuse Him of not caring. Rather than rejoicing in His salvation, we wish that we were back in the world, where we didn't have all the trials that we now face. Submitting to God's ways does not mean that it is wrong to pray for deliverance or to seek legitimate means to relieve the trial, such as medical help. But it does mean that if God prolongs the trial, we don't grumble and shake our fist at Him or turn back to the world. Rather, we see how much He has cared for us in the past and in the present and we worship Him for His ways, even if they are difficult.

- E. The ultimatum is dreadfully enforced and eternally final: "I swore in My anger, 'Truly they shall not enter into My rest'" (95:11).

God's anger by itself sounds pretty frightening! I don't want Him to be angry with me. But to have Him *swear* in His anger sounds utterly dreadful! It means that the curse He is about to pronounce is irrevocable. Israel crossed the line of no return when they grumbled at the report of the spies. At that point, God swore in His anger, "Truly, they shall not enter into My rest." It meant that they would never enter the Promised Land.

But as the author of Hebrews applies it to us, not entering God's rest means that we will not be saved. We remain under His wrath (see Heb. 3:10, 11, 17, 18; 4:3). Because of unbelief, expressed through grumbling about our trials, we do not experience the "rest" that comes through trusting Christ for eternal life. Although we may be associated with God's people (as the grumblers were a part of Israel), we remain under God's judgment because of evil, unbelieving, hardened hearts that come short of God's true rest, which is eternal life. (See my sermon, "Cultural Religion Versus Saving Faith," on Heb. 4:1-11, 2/29/2004, on FCF web site.)

Conclusion

Whenever I read this psalm, I'm always caught up short by the ending. I want to add a happy ending verse 11. But there's no happy ending. God leaves us with the urgent ultimatum: Worship—or else!" It's not, "Your money or your life!" It's, "Worship or perish!" Sing for joy to the Rock of your salvation or grumble about your trials with an evil, unbelieving heart and incur God's wrath. Those are the only options. If you go with the first option, you will enjoy God's rest, both now and for eternity. If you harden your heart, God swears in His anger, "You shall not enter into My rest!" And don't be like Jack Benny and wait to think about it. *Today* is the day of salvation!

Application Questions

1. What should we do if we don't *feel* like worshiping God? Is it hypocritical to do it without feeling it?
2. It is possible to work up feelings apart from God. How can we have *genuine* feelings of adoration from the heart?
3. Why is a proper view of the doctrine of creation essential to worship? Can a theistic evolutionist *really* worship God?
4. The psalmists sometimes complain to the Lord. Is all complaining wrong? When would it be okay?

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