

Experiencing God when Life is Hard

Worship the Lord

Psalm 95

There are lots of good reasons to come to worship on Sundays (or to join online, although the dynamics are obviously different). And I suspect that many of those reasons are reflected here today by those of you who've joined us.

- * Perhaps you've come to worship because you **love God**. You honestly love God so much that come to church to express that to him.
- * Perhaps you've come to worship/church out of **habit**. Maybe you grew up going to church and never stopped. You don't get up on Sunday mornings and decide whether or not you're going to church; you pretty much go to church every Sunday. That's a good habit. Like flossing your teeth whether you feel like it or not, going to church is a good habit.
- * Perhaps you are **curious** and came to see for yourself why so many people come to church. Why would people ruin a perfectly good Sunday morning by driving to a building and sitting in rows singing songs and listening to a lecture??? Several years ago a guy named Michael, a K-State senior, told me why he started coming to Faith a couple years earlier. He was working at Kite's and was very interested in one of his coworkers. She had basically told him that unless he was a committed follower of Christ he didn't have a chance with her. Since she came to church here, he came one Sunday to check it out. [Long story short, he ended up becoming a committed follower of Christ and ended up marrying his coworker. If you've come to church today for the same reason Michael did, we cannot guarantee the same result.]
- * Maybe you've come to church because you're **desperate**. You're brokenhearted or you're overwhelmed with guilt or your life has fallen apart and your desperate for God to comfort you or speak to you or reassure you.

Whatever reason you've come to worship, we're glad you're here. But now the most pressing question is, "***What are you going to do now that you're here?***" Our text is Psalm 95 which was read earlier. Three times (verses 1, 2, and 6) the psalmist urges his readers to "come" (using 3 different verbs) into the presence of God with the rest of the believing community. But for the psalmist, gathering together with others isn't enough. The emphasis in Psalm 95 is upon what we do when we're gathered: sing, give thanks, bow down/kneel, and listen to the voice of God. Since that's the emphasis of Psalm 95, that will be the emphasis of this message today.

Today marks the beginning of week 2 of our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. We are looking at four psalms which teach us how to ***Experience God when Life is Hard***. This is a relevant topic because life is almost always hard in some way. Last week we saw from Psalm 90 that if you want to experience God when life is hard, ***Seek Wisdom***. Since life is short and hard, seek God. This week we're going to see from Psalm 95 that if your life is hard, one of the most transformative things you can do is ***Worship the Lord***. The psalmist urges us to come together and then **worship**; and in the context of worship, he also issues a warning.

Come and worship the Lord. (Psalm 95:1-7) We'll notice that the psalmist urges us to do some very specific things when we gather for worship.

1 Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

The psalms are written using Hebrew parallelism in which the second line often restates or complements the first line. The idea here in verse 1 is that when you sing you are making a "joyful noise." Singing should be joyful - an expression of joy/delight in God and his ways. And our singing should be a joyful **noise** - not that it's cacophonous, but that it's loud.

You might be wondering, "But what if you're not feeling it? Or what if you're not an expressive person?" The issue is not the feelings or the personality of the worshiper. Of course you need to worship in a way that fits you; faking it is never a great idea. But the issue is the worthiness of the One being worshiped. The Lord is the "rock of our salvation." When it comes to the most important issue in our lives, namely, our salvation, the Lord is **our rock** - our strength and our protection. When the storms come, those who take refuge in the Lord are safe because he is the rock of their salvation.

2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

The only reason that sinful human beings are able to come into the presence of a holy God is because God Himself has made it possible. In the old covenant God provided a sacrificial system whereby the sins of a family or individual were symbolically laid upon the animal being sacrificed. In our day, all who believe in Jesus can come directly into the presence of God because our sin has been removed and we are now just as righteous and just as alive to God as Jesus Himself (Romans 6:1-11).

And we can always come into his presence "with thanksgiving" because there are always things for which we can be thankful, even when life is hard. And we can always come with "songs of praise" because God is always praiseworthy.

One of the values of coming to church and actually worshiping (whether you feel like it or not and whether it's convenient or not) is that the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, and the Scriptures we read and discuss all draw us out of our own small, self-centered ways of thinking and remind us who our God really is. That's the emphasis in verses 3 through 7.

We see in verse 3 that the "greatness" of God is why we can and should worship him even when our lives are hard.

3 For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.

The English word “gods” doesn’t really capture the sense of the Hebrew word which is *elohim*. In the Old Testament, an *elohim* is simply a spiritual being, a being without a body. There are several different kinds of *elohim*. The God of Israel is often referred to as *elohim*. YHWH is unique among all *elohim* because he is the only uncreated being. But he created other spiritual beings, other *elohim*. These beings are called various things: sons of God (Genesis 6:2, Job 1:6, etc.), angels (Genesis 35:7), demons (angels who rebelled against YHWH; see Deuteronomy 32:17), and several other terms.

Whereas YHWH is the creator and possessor of the entire world, he chose the descendants of Abraham to be his people - not because they were greater or more virtuous than everybody else, but because he wanted to make them a light to all the other nations. The other nations had their gods (see Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 82); but “the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods”!

If you’ve been reading Exodus as part of our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting, you’ve probably noticed the conflict between the Lord and the gods of Egypt. Exodus 12:12 tells us that when God liberated the nation from slavery in Egypt, he was ***passing judgment on the gods of Egypt***. The Lord was “a great King above [the gods of Egypt].” The same thing was true when the people were in Exile in Babylon. The accounts of Daniel in the lion’s den and the account of the three young men tossed into the fiery furnace were examples of how the God of Israel was “a great King above [the gods of Babylon].”

The Lord deserves our praise because he is still “a great King above all gods.” The enemy of our souls isn’t even in the same league as God the Father and Jesus his Son and the Holy Spirit.

Verses 4 and 5 remind us that we can and should worship the Lord because he is the Creator and Possessor of the entire world.

4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.

5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.

God created and therefore possesses everything from the highest mounted to the deepest ocean. I often hear people say that they feel closer to God when they are out in creation, away from modern noises and distractions. That’s because God’s creation declares the glory of its Creator. This reality should prompt us to worship him.

The tone of Psalm 95 changes in verse 6. In addition to loud, joyful worship, the psalmist urges humble, reverent submission.

6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

If you bow down or kneel, you are humbling yourself before and submitting to another. The psalmist urges us to bow down and kneel before the Lord because he is “our Maker.” It is only appropriate that the created reverently submit the Creator. [Like many churches, we’re not set up to bow down and kneel when we’re gathered. But if you’re physically able, I would urge you do so in your private times of prayer and worship. Generally speaking, it’s good when the posture of our bodies reflects the posture of our hearts.]

In verse 7 the psalmist gives another reason to worship and bow down:

7a For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

Whereas the other nations had their gods, Israel’s God was YHWY. Remember that this block of psalms (Book 4 of the Psalms - chapters 90-106) were meant to give encouragement to the nation in exile in Babylon. Even though they had experienced catastrophic loss and their lives were about as hard as you could imagine, they needed to know that the Lord is still “our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” In other words, they could say along with David in the 23rd psalm, “the Lord is my shepherd.”

When we experience heartbreak and loss, we might find ourselves wondering if God is really good. . . if God is really for us. . . When life is hard, it’s all the more important that we enter into worship and confess that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. As Philip Yancey says, “Just because life isn’t fair doesn’t mean that God isn’t fair. Don’t confuse God and life.” Worship helps us do that very thing.

That is why, I think, this psalm about worship ends with a warning drawn from an incident that happened almost a thousand years earlier. The warning is: Do not harden your hearts.

A Warning for Worshipers: Do not harden your hearts. (*Psalm 95:7b-11*) The author makes reference to a specific incident involving Moses and the children of Israel while they were in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Even though God had delivered them from Egypt and had provided water and food in the desert, they accused God of being anything BUT a good Shepherd. Beginning with the last line of verse 7 we read:

7b Today, if you hear his voice,
8 do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
9 when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

The children of Israel in the wilderness had heard God’s voice telling them that he was bringing them into a land flowing with milk and honey (in other words, the most prosperous land they could imagine). But in Exodus 17 (as you’ll read on Wednesday if

you're reading through Exodus with us for this 21 Days experience), we read that instead of trusting that God would supply their needs. . .

2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"

Moses points out that they weren't merely quarreling with him; **they were testing the Lord**. In verse 3 the people's accusations escalated further:

3 But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

As they had done a couple of times already (Exodus 14:11-12,16:2-3), they accused Moses (and ultimately God - see Exodus 16:6-8) of bringing them out into the wilderness to die. Instead of seeing the exodus as God delivering them by his might right arm, they accused him of being negligent at best and evil at worst. [Significantly, the previous two chapters in the book of Exodus describe how God had met their needs, providing both water and food in the middle of the desert.]

The psalmist's conclusion is that they had "hardened their hearts." If you've been reading the book of Exodus, that statement is like a bolt out of the blue because we are told over and over that the one who had enslaved and oppressed them in Egypt, **Pharaoh**, had "hardened his heart" (7:22, 8:15, 8:19, 8:32, 9:7, 9:34-35) and eventually that "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:4). The psalmist is pointing out that after everything God had done for them, his own people were no more receptive to his word than Pharaoh had been.

Verses 10 and 11 are a statement on God's lips forty years later.

10 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."

11 Therefore I swore in my wrath,
"They shall not enter my rest."

They had **seen God's many works** on their behalf, but they didn't **know his ways**. They never really understood how he had worked on their behalf protecting and providing like a Good Shepherd. As a consequence, they were not allowed to enter into the Promised Land.

Read Hebrews 3 and 4 when you get the chance. There the author quotes these verses in Psalm 95 and warns against being "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" which leads to unbelief (3:12-13). The message that the Hebrews had heard was the gospel. If they didn't believe the gospel, they wouldn't enter into God's ultimate "rest" - salvation that begins now and only gets better throughout eternity.

The warning for us here today is the same: Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart. Don't look at the things you're suffering and conclude that Jesus is a bad shepherd who could care less about you. ***The antidote to a hardened heart is worship.*** The kind of worship that the psalmist has been urging: coming together as the body of Christ and worshiping with joyful exuberance and with reverent submission. When we worship we are declaring that God is great and God is good even when our lives are hard. He is still our dwelling place, the rock of our salvation.

Conclusion. A couple years ago I came to worship one Sunday morning "as a civilian"; Brian was preaching, so I came strictly as a worshiper. During the first worship set I noticed two other families in front of us who were each going through some tragic, painful issues in their lives. And yet they were worshiping God from the heart - hands raised, singing praises God. They were declaring what Job did when he found out that his livestock had been stolen and his servants and his ten children had been killed. In Job 1 we're told that "Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped."

Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart. The Shepherd of your soul laid down his life for you; he loves you; he weeps with those who weep; and he is worthy of your worship.