

Looking at Psalm 95 Theologically

By Ben Cowgill

Psalm 95

A Call to Worship and Obedience

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

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

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

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 the dry land, which his hands have
formed.

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

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

O that today you would listen to his voice!

8 Do not harden your hearts, as at
Meribah,

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
9 when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had
seen my work.

10 For forty years I loathed that
generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go
astray,
and they do not regard my ways."

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

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version.
(1989). (Ps 95). Nashville: Thomas Nelson
Publishers.

Psalm 95: Traditional *Venite, exultemus*

O come, let us sing unto the Lord; *
let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our
salvation.

Let us come before his presence with
thanksgiving, *
and show ourselves glad in him with
psalms.

For the Lord is a great God, *
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are all the corners of the earth, *
and the strength of the hills is his also.
The sea is his and he made it, *
and his hands prepared the dry land.

O come, let us worship and fall down *
and kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For he is the Lord our God, *
and we are the people of his pasture
and the sheep of his hand.

Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not
your hearts *
as in the provocation,
and as in the day of temptation in the
wilderness;

When your fathers tempted me, *
proved me, and saw my works.

Forty years long was I grieved with this
generation, and said, *
It is a people that do err in their hearts,
for they have not known my ways;
Unto whom I swear in my wrath, *
that they should not enter into my rest.

The Episcopal Church. (2007). *The Book of
Common Prayer and Administration of the
Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the
Church* (p. 146). New York: Church Publishing
Incorporated.

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In a unique way, the psalms school us in the life of faith. Here in the psalms there is laid out before us a sort of spiritual anatomy of the people of God: what gives them joy, what causes them to stumble and sin, what makes them suffer, what makes them praise God in the midst of suffering, and, above all, what kind of God is present with them and sustains them in the life of faith with mercy and correction. (p. 111)

John Webster is the person with whom we study the Psalms together this week. Webster was an Anglican Theologian trained in England who held a professorship at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He wrote extensively on the nature of grace, the moral aspects of Karl Barth's theology, and released a compelling book of sermons a few years before his death. Three of those sermons were on Psalm 95, and it is from those sermons that I draw on for this lecture.

Psalm 95 is a unique Psalm: the NRSV lists it as "a call to Worship and obedience." There is no superscription, but its place in the Psalter is *after* Psalm 89. Where do we encounter this psalm in worship, specifically morning prayer? On P. 82 of the Book of Common Prayer, the first part of Psalm 95, called the "Venite" has been part of morning prayer going back as far as the Rule of Benedict in the 6th century. After we say, "O Lord, open our lips," and the Gloria, we recite this invitational Psalm. Thus, by its liturgical role, and its daily use, this Psalm is teaching us about worship; the Psalmist is addressing us to sing to the Lord. John Webster looks at the Psalm in three parts: An exhortation to enter into worship of God (1-5), God is our God (6-7), and a warning against hardness of heart (8-11).

Let us Worship the Lord

Christian worship, Webster says, is purposeful. We gather for a reason; it is not the same as normal human gatherings. We gather at the invitation of God to encounter God to turn away from sin and towards God. God is inviting us to public worship in this Psalm, not private worship (note the use of "us" throughout). To connect back to our lectures on types, this is a communal hymn. Webster says this about worship:

The accumulated wisdom of the Christian tradition is this: Assembling and meeting together is basic to the rhythm of the life of faith. It is not an option, something which we can drop in and out of as the fancy takes us. It is what God requires, and it is what builds us up. Our culture very easily relegates religion to solitude; it tempts us to replace worship by spirituality, and to think that the life of faith is just self-cultivation, growing a more interesting me. And to that we Christian folk must politely and firmly say, quite simply, no. God is honored by obedience to his command; and his command is that—however unappealing it may be—we must give ourselves to the public praises of his people. (p. 103).

Worship involves two things: first, it involves moving in a specific direction. The Psalm calls us to come twice, no coincidence. We redirect ourselves from our lives in worship towards the presences

of God. Second, it involves intensity. We make a joyful noise. Again, the psalm shows us that worship is full of gratitude towards God. Both of these are evoked by God, not solely on our own ability.

According to the Psalm, we worship for four reasons. First, we worship God because he is “a great God.”

Worship is without measure, because God is without measure; there can be no end to our praises, for there is no end to the divine glory. Worship recognizes the supreme worth of God.... Worship doesn't ascribe anything to God; it is not a statement of the value that we think God has. Nor is it flattery, hoping somehow to win favors. Worship acclaims that from all eternity, in all his ways and works, God is the perfect one. (p. 106)

Second, God is not only the perfect one, but he is “the great king above all Gods. (v. 3). Third, God is the creator of all things (v. 4-5). Finally, God is *our* God. Looking ahead to verses 6 and 7, we will talk about the relationship between God and us.

So, to conclude the first section: this Psalm orients us to God; it calls us to turn from our lives back to him, every morning when the church prays it in morning prayer. It calls us to encounter the One who is above all else, who creates and sustains the world around us.

He is our God, and we are his

So why do we worship God? John Webster says that it is a matter based in covenant. Psalm 95 affirms that the Lord is our maker and our God, and we are his people.

If there is a people of God, if there is a coming together of men and women for the worship of almighty God, then it can only be because of one fact: God himself has gathered these tatters of humankind for himself. The life of the people of God, our life—is therefore rooted in this: God chooses; God summons; God congregates this congregation and makes them into the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. (p. 113).

Yet, the church appears to be like any other human gathering, even to herself. The church is deeply flawed, like any other human gathering (primarily because of our own “hardness of heart” the psalmist later warns about). This is where God’s grace comes in.

What do we mean by that little word “grace?” Grace is God's undeserved, unexpected, unimaginable goodness; grace is God at work to do what no creature can do or ask or imagine. And God's grace in gathering the people of God consists in this: In the midst of human incapacity, in the midst of human enmity or hostility to God, God himself creates a new people to live in fellowship with himself, and above all to gather together to worship him. (p. 114)

We are from God, and we are for God. God created us this way, and our relationship to God is damaged by sin, or hostility to God; yet God rebuilt the covenant through the works of Jesus, through grace. God “matches our hostility by his great work of reconciliation.” God sends his son to become us, to die for us and to save us. This mystery of Grace is what we encounter every Sunday in the Eucharist, and every morning when we begin Morning Prayer: God is among us,

tending to us, his sheep, summoning us to worship him, which is to hear God's word through scripture and sacrament and respond to it with praise. Thanks be to God.

Hardness of Heart

This section of the Psalm is left out of our morning prayer service except on special occasions. It is different from the first two parts of the Psalm. Hardness of heart refers back to Exodus 17. The Israelites had just left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. They accuse God and Moses of bringing them to die, for they had no water. So, God provides water, but "loathes that generation" for forty years. There is an important point that Webster makes here:

We read of God "loathing" this generation, of God's anger against them. But if we are to make sense of that, we must not fall into the idea that God becomes another God—a God without grace, a God without mercy, a God who is not the redeemer and guardian of his people. God's anger against this wicked generation does not mean that God abandons his covenant. It does not mean that God casts off his people forever, and that his promises are at an end. God's purpose stands fast. His ways will be brought to completion. No sin, no rebellion, no refusal of God, can overthrow the determination of God. If our sins could stand between us and God, then no one would ever have been saved. (p. 125).

This idea of God's anger is that God's anger is really just an expression of God's love. His anger eradicates sin and its consequences, bringing us back into the covenantal relationship with God. Hardness of heart is what happens to us when we turn away from God; and faith, along with true worship, is its opposite. True worship exposes us to God, turns us away from our own ways and back to God's word, and allows us to rebuild our faith. So, the warning at the end of the Psalm fits precisely with the Psalmists call to worship: it is a call away from hardness of heart. Finally, God takes hold of us and guides us like a shepherd when we do not know where to go— through Jesus, he brings us new life when we hear and respond to his Word. That is what we pray when we pray Psalm 95.

Webster, John. *Confronted by Grace: Meditations of a Theologian*. Edited by Daniel Bush and Brannon Ellis. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014. Chapters 12-14