

Psalm 95: A Warning About Worship

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(Read entire Psalm)

Not all that many years ago, men believed that the earth was the center of the universe.

All of the planets were thought to be in orbit about the earth.

Modern astronomy has shown this to be in error.

This historical view of the universe tells us a great deal about the mentality of mankind.

Man wants to believe that everything revolves around himself.

We want to be at the center of what is happening.

While we have come to grips with the fact that the sun is the center of our solar system, some Believers still seem to think that in the spiritual realm man is central.

We persist in emphasizing what Yahweh can do for men, rather than dwelling on man's duty toward Yahweh.

We become angry with Yahweh or confused when adversity disrupts our lives.

It is little wonder that Believers have so much difficulty worshipping Yahweh.

Worship is Yahweh-centered, to reorient his thinking and practice concerning the vital matter of worship.

It turns our attention and affection toward Yahweh.

When our role in worship is addressed, the focus is on **obedience** and **reverence** .

Some scholars have noted the dramatic change in mood from the first half of the psalm to the second and have concluded that this must originally have been two psalms.

This view has been ably refuted, for obvious reasons.

The sudden change in mood is required not only by the nature of worship, but also by the nature of man as we shall shortly attempt to demonstrate.

Let us now look to the message of this psalm in order to become better worshippers, as well as to avoid the unpleasant consequences against which the latter part of this psalm warns.

A Call to Rejoice (95:1-5)

1 O come, let us sing for joy to Yahweh; Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. 3 For Yahweh is a great Elohim, And a great King above all gods, 4 In whose hand are the depths of the earth; The peaks of the mountains are His also. 5 The sea is His, for it was He who made it; And His hands formed the dry land. (NASB)

In verses 1-5 we have the psalmist's first call to worship.

Verses 1 and 2 are an exhortation to rejoice, and verses 3-5 provide us with **a good reason for rejoicing**.

We will attempt to capture the essence of these verses by pointing out several characteristics of worship they encourage.

First, the worship that is encouraged is collective in that **it is congregational**.

Four times in verses 1 and 2 we read, "Let us ..."

While worship may be done privately, it is not viewed as such here.

Those who claim to be able to worship Yahweh just as easily from a secluded spot on the lake (with a fishing pole in hand) are hard pressed to explain how they can worship in the corporate manner described in Psalm 92.

Here and elsewhere in the Scriptures, worship is described as congregational, not merely individual.

Second, the worship promoted here is vocal.

Too often we think of worship not only as private, but as silent.

We are told to sing a song “worshipfully” and we know that this means we are to sing slowly and quietly.

No doubt this stems from such scriptural statements as, “Be still and know that I am Yahweh” (Psalm 46:10, AV).

Other versions, such as the NASB (“Cease striving”; margin, “Let go, relax”), indicate that “being still” is not commanded in the context of public worship, but refers to the ceasing from strife, addressed more to an unbelieving world than to believers.

The words employed in verses 1 and 2 all refer to a vocal, public praise of Yahweh.

Third, the terms used in the first two verses speak of vocal praise that is vibrant and vigorous.

It is a joyful, grateful praise.

It is not a subdued, somber praise, but an exuberant expression of worship.

The terms employed here describe activity which seems more appropriate in the football stadium than in the church “sanctuary.”

The expression “sing for joy” in verse 1 is more properly “shout for joy.”

It conveys intense feeling, most often joyful, but occasionally that of sorrow (Lam. 2:19).

The expression “shout joyfully” (NASB) in the second line of verse 1 comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to raise a shout.”

This was done in anticipation of a battle or a triumph (Josh. 6:10,16,20; 1 Sam. 4:5; 17:20,52).

It was done at the coronation of Saul (1 Sam. 10:24).

This term is repeated in the second verse of our psalm and again rendered “shout joyfully” (NASB).

Some Believers seem to think that worship cannot and should not be exuberant or noisy.

They are often critical of others whose worship is too animated and enthusiastic.

While there are extremes, few in our circles come close to being too enthusiastic.

Our tendency is to react against such worship, even as Michal disdained David's enthusiasm before the ark of Yahweh, an attitude for which she was divinely disciplined (2 Sam. 6:12-23).

Finally, the joyful, exuberant praise of verses 1 and 2 is Yahweh-centered.

There is a preoccupation with Yahweh, not with excitement, enthusiasm or expression.

The congregation is not encouraged to "get high" (or, in the words of one contemporary song, "get all excited") with some kind of self-energized enthusiasm.
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The source of their joy and the recipient of their praise is to be their Elohim.

Worship that is biblical is that praise and adoration which has Yahweh as its source and its subject.

As the sun is the center of our solar system, so Yahweh is to be at the center of our adoration and praise.

While our worship should be fervent, it must also be founded on truth.

In verses 3-4 the sovereignty of Yahweh is given as a basis for our worship.

Verse 3 expresses Yahweh's sovereignty in general terms: Yahweh is great, indeed He is above all gods.

This statement does not in any way imply that the psalmist believed there were other gods.

He means that Israel 's Elohim is greater than the false "gods" which the heathen worship.

Thus, after Yahweh's defeat of the "no-gods" of Egypt at the exodus, we find Israel singing: "Who is like Thee among the gods, O Yah? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?" (Exod . 15:11)

Verses 4 and 5 depict Yahweh's sovereignty more specifically.

Yahweh is sovereign over His creation.

He is the Creator of all the earth.

He is the owner of all His creation.

He is the controller of all that He has created and possesses.

What Yahweh made is His and what is His, He controls.

The expressions "depths" and "peaks" (v. 4), and "sea" and "dry land" (v. 5), emphasize the totality of His creation and control of the earth. He made it all.

He is sovereign over all.

The world is not only the work of His hands; it is in His hands now.

In the words of one song: "He's got the whole world in His hands."

A Call to Reverence (95:6-7b)

6 Come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before Yahweh our Maker. 7 For He is our Elohim , And we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. ... (NASB)

The second call to worship is contained in verse 6, and its basis is given in verse 7.

Notice especially the change of tone, from exuberant, enthusiastic praise to awe-inspired prostration.

The worshipper is seen standing in Yahweh's presence, shouting forth praise in verses 1 and 2.

Now, in verse 6 the worshipper falls on his face before Yahweh in humbled silence.

The key word that characterizes the first five verses is **praise**, while the theme of verses 6 and 7 is summarized by **prostration**.

These words, incidentally, are the basic nuance of the original terms for worship, both in Hebrew and Greek.

Worship, then, involves both animated praise and speechless prostration.

The basis for this prostration is introduced in verse 6 and explained in verse 7.

Yahweh is "our Maker."

Not only is Yahweh the Creator of the heavens and the earth (vv. 4-5), He is also man's Creator.

I believe by this the psalmist reminds Israel that Yahweh is her Maker.

This is clearly stated elsewhere: "Thus says Yahweh who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, 'Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Yeshurun whom I have chosen'" (Isa. 44:2; cf. Deut. 32:6,15,18; Isa. 51:13; 54:5; Pss. 100:3; 149:2).

Just as Yahweh controls the earth which He created (vv. 4-5), so He also Shepherds His people, which He brought into existence as her Maker.

Yahweh is not just the Elohim of creation, but our Elohim (v. 7a).

He stands in intimate relationship with His people, just as a shepherd does to his flock (Ps. 74:1; cf. John 10).

The greater the intimacy with Yahweh, the greater man's reverence.

Knowing Yahweh is the means to fearing Him.

Experiencing Yahweh's caring hand in our lives should induce us to greater submission and reverence.

Those who have little reverence for Yahweh may also have little intimacy with Him.

As the creation is handmade and hand-held, so are Yahweh's people the "sheep of His hand" (v. 7b).

A Warning From Massah and Meribah (95:7c-11)

7c Today, if you would hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,

As in the day of Massah in the wilderness; 9 "When your fathers tested Me, They tried Me, though they had seen My work. 10 For forty years I loathed that generation,

And said they are a people who err in their heart, And they do not know My ways. 11
Therefore I swore in My anger, Truly they shall not enter into My rest." (NASB)

I understand the last line of verse 7 as a transition.

On the one hand, it serves to conclude verses 1-7. In effect, we could punctuate it this way:

"For He is our Elohim, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand, today, if you would hear his voice."

Punctuated in this way, we would find an Old Testament parallel to Yahshua's words in John's gospel: **"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me"** (John 10:27).

Yahweh is our Shepherd when we obey His command to worship and to praise Him.

We prove ourselves to be one of the sheep of His pasture as we follow Him as our Shepherd.

On the other hand this final line of verse 7 also serves as an introduction to the following verses.

It can be rendered either as a wish, "Oh that you would obey ..." (margin, NASB), or as a condition, "Today; if you would hear His voice,..." (NASB, text).

When the writer to the Hebrews cites this passage (Heb. 3:7-11) he uses this latter translation.
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Viewed as a transitional statement, this line can be understood both as a conclusion and as an introduction.

Two general observations should be made before we begin to study verses 8-11 in greater detail.

First, note that there is a dramatic change of mood.

From the jubilant praise of verses 1 and 2 we have come to a solemn warning in verses 8-11.

This passage cannot be taken lightly.

Notice next that in verse 8 there is a change of speaker.

In the first seven verses the psalmist has spoken.

Now, Yahweh Himself speaks to the psalmist's generation.

This makes the message of warning even more awesome.

In Psalm 90:14-16 the security of the individual who takes refuge in Yahweh is guaranteed by Yahweh Himself.

Now in Psalm 95:8-11 Yahweh personally warns men of the danger of hardening their hearts, as did those in the day of Moses.

The danger about which Yahweh warns Israel is that of hardening their hearts (v. 8).

To more fully define just what this means Yahweh illustrates this evil from the history of Israel.

He refers to the conduct of our forefathers who escaped from Egypt but who failed to possess the land of Canaan.

Massah and Meribah are not just geographical names, but names which designate two evils, both of which characterized the conduct of Yahweh's people who had hardened hearts.

Massah, as the marginal note in some of your Bibles indicates, is a name derived from the Hebrew word for test.

Meribah is derived from the Hebrew word for strife or contention.

Let us refresh our memories by turning back in our Bibles to two passages which describe two events designated by these terms Massah and Meribah.

The first instance of Massah and Meribah is described in Exodus 17:1-7.

Yahweh had recently accomplished the release of His people from Egyptian bondage by means of ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea (Exod. 5-14).

In Exodus 15 the people sang a song of praise to Yahweh for His redemption (15:1-21).

When the Israelites thirsted and began to grumble at Marah, Yahweh provided a means of sweetening the water (Exod. 15:22-25).

Shortly afterwards when they grumbled for lack of food, Yahweh gave them both manna and meat (Exod. 16).

In chapter 17 the nation camped at Rephidim, where there was no water (17:1).

The people began to quarrel with Moses (vv. 2,7).

Moses then tried to point out to the people that their grumbling was really against Yahweh, whom they were testing, "Is Yahweh among us or not?" (v.7).

The people were so angry they were about to stone Moses (v. 4).

In response to Moses' plea for help, Yahweh instructed him to strike the rock at Horeb with his rod.

It should be noted that the Hebrew word for "rock" in Exodus 17:6 is not the same as that employed in Numbers 20:8-11.
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When Moses did so, water gushed from the rock and the people were able to drink (vv. 5-6).

The place was then named Massah and Meribah (v. 7).

These names which we have said mean "testing" and "contention" are particularly appropriate since we find the verbs "to test" and "to quarrel" twice in this passage (vv. 2,7).

The second account is found in Numbers 20:1-13.

Here the term Massah is not used, only the word Meribah (20:13).

The event is quite similar to that described in Exodus 17, so much so that some liberal scholars have thought the two passages to be differing accounts of the same incident.

There was no water (v. 2).

The people grumbled and complained against Moses and Aaron (vv. 2-5).

They accused Moses of leading Israel from Egypt only to let them perish (v. 4).

They complained that the place of their encampment was wretched (literally, "evil," v. 5).

Clearly implied is the people's belief that Egypt was a far better place than the wilderness.

As Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before Yahweh, His glory appeared to them (v. 6).

He instructed Moses to take his rod and to speak to (not strike) the rock before the congregation.

In anger, Moses scolded the people and twice struck the rock.

While water came forth for the people to drink, Moses and Aaron were indicted by Yahweh for their unbelief and their lack of reverence before the people.

As a result, they were not permitted to lead the Israelites into Canaan (v. 12).
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Although there are many similarities between these two accounts, there are also some significant differences.

The first incident occurred at Rephidim, in the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 17:1); the second happened at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin (not Sin, Num. 20:1).

The first event involved the generation which had just passed through the Red Sea (Exod. 14).

The second event involved the next generation, nearly 40 years later, who were about to enter the promised land (note the death of Miriam in Num. 20:1, also Num. 21ff.).

Furthermore, in the first account it was the people who sinned, while in the second it was their leaders, Moses and Aaron (Num. 20:9-12).

These two accounts, when viewed in the light of their similarities and differences, lead us to several important conclusions.

First, the two events, removed in time, and involving, by and large, different people, reveal a problem common to men of every generation.

Both before and after the first incident at Rephidim , the same basic problems are exposed.

This leads to the conclusion that in any age Yahweh's people suffer from the same problems.

We should also realize that both leaders and followers are plagued with the same problems and suffer the same consequences.

Massah and Meribah are not just historical incidents; they are manifestations of a persistent problem.

They reveal attitudes and actions (testing and contending) which result in the loss of certain blessings.

Massah and Meribah are both typical and the “tip of the iceberg.”

In Numbers Moses speaks of the sins of the Israelites as beginning in Egypt (“from Egypt even until now,” 14:19) and frequently recurring (“these ten times,” 14:22).

Again in the ninth chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses stresses the persistence of Israel’s sin:

“Again at Taberah and at Massah and at Kibroth-hatta-avah you provoked Yahweh to wrath. And when Yahweh sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you,’ then you rebelled against the command of Yahweh your Elohim; you neither believed Him nor listened to His voice. You have been rebellious against Yahweh from the day I knew you” (Deut 9:22 -24).

Asaph also wrote:

“How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Again and again they tempted Yahweh, and pained the Holy One of Israel” (Ps. 78: 40-41).

Massah and Meribah are historical events which expose a deep-seated and recurring tendency to become hardened in heart.

That is why the psalmist wrote, “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah , as in the day of Massah in the wilderness” (Ps. 95:8).

The word “as” indicates that it is a Massah-like attitude of heart which Yahweh despises.

Massah and Meribah reveal an attitude and its resulting actions which Yahweh loathes and which result in a failure to experience the promised blessings of Yahweh (Ps. 95:11).

Kadesh , the incident which was, so to speak, the straw that broke the camel’s back, is not specifically referred to in Psalm 95, although the penalty described in verse 17 was the result of Israel’s failure to take possession of the land (Num. 13–14).

The psalmist seems to see Kadesh-Barnea as a piece of the same cloth, another example of the Massah and Meribah mentality.

Just what are the problems which Massah and Meribah reveal?

Perhaps these can best be seen in contrast to the purposes of Yahweh as outlined in Deuteronomy 8.

Here, Moses explained what Yahweh was doing in the lives of His people in the wilderness.

An understanding of Yahweh's purposes exposes Israel's problems as typified at Massah and Meribah.

Let us briefly review Yahweh's purposes for the wilderness experience of His people.

(1) Yahweh led Israel into the wilderness and into adversity.

Moses explained that Yahweh not only led Israel into the wilderness, but that He purposely created adverse circumstances.

"And you shall remember all the way which Yahweh your Elohim has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of Yahweh" (Deut. 8: 2-3).

Israel saw their sufferings as sufficient grounds for questioning both Yahweh's presence and His power.

<p>They challenged, "Is Yahweh among us or not?" (Exod. 17:7).</p>
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Adversity suggested Yahweh's absence, but Moses taught otherwise.

(2) Yahweh led Israel into adversity in order to humble them.

The purpose of the hardship Yahweh brought upon His people was to humble them, teaching them to depend on Him (Deut. 8: 3).

Israel , rather than becoming humble, became hard in heart (Ps. 95: 8).

Rather than depending on Yahweh they became independent, even rebellious.

(3) Yahweh led Israel into adversity to teach them obedience.

Even more important than satisfying their physical needs, Yahweh's people needed to learn the importance of obedience to His word (Deut. 8:3).

Instead of believing Yahweh's promises and obeying His commands, they refused to believe and they disobeyed His word.

Rather than follow Moses, they were about to stone him (Exod. 17:4), and even proposed that another leader be appointed who would lead them back to Egypt (Num. 14:4).

(4) Yahweh let Israel hunger and thirst in order to provide for their needs .

Not only did Yahweh say that He let Israel hunger and thirst, He also reminded them that in every hour of need He provided for them, in spite of their grumbling and disobedience (Deut 8:3).

Never did Yahweh fail to provide for His people.

He purposed times of need so that He could prove Himself to be faithful to His promises.

Israel interpreted every crisis as the occasion for their death, not their deliverance.

"But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt , to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'" (Exod. 17:3).

(5) Yahweh brought unpleasant circumstances into the lives of His people in order to do them good.

Yahweh's purposes for His people were always for their best interest.

"In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end" (Deut. 8:16).

Israel saw every instance of adversity as evil.

They referred to Kadesh as this "wretched" (lit. evil) place (Num. 20:5).

Yahweh said every calamity was an occasion for good.

(6) Yahweh led Israel into adversity to test them (cf. Exod. 15:25; 16:4; Deut. 8:2).

The best way to test either people or things is by putting them through the most adverse conditions.

This is true of cars, electronic equipment, and people.

The real question was not, "Can Yahweh provide for His own?",

but " Will Yahweh's people trust Him and obey His word?"

Instead of seeing their circumstances as a test of their character, Israel viewed adversity a test of Yahweh's presence and power.

They tested Him, thereby sinning (Deut. 6:16; cf. Psalm 95:9).

As a result of Israel's refusal to trust and obey, they failed to experience the blessings which Yahweh had promised, "His rest."

Conclusion

We dare not take the message of this psalm lightly, because the New Testament makes it clear that the warning of this text applies as much to men and women of our time as it did in ages past.

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul speaks of the sins of Israel in the wilderness (vv. 1-10) and tells us that these have instructional value for us (vv. 6, 11-12).

No trial is unique, but is common to mankind (v. 13).

We are therefore warned against committing the very same sins as Israel practiced in the wilderness ("do not ... as some of them did," vv. 7,8,9,10).

Second, the writer to the Hebrews takes up the warning of Psalm 95:7-11 in chapters 3 and 4 of his epistle, showing that the "rest" of Psalm 95:11 is still future and the warning of verses 7c-11 is still in effect ("today," Heb. 4:7-11).

What, then, is the message of this psalm, both to its original audience and to us?

Positively, it is that we should worship Yahweh as a congregation, both by our rejoicing (vv. 1-2) and by our reverence (v. 6).

Our worship is to be based both on Yahweh's sovereignty as our Creator (vv. 3-5) and His sufficiency as our Shepherd (vv. 6-7).

Verses 7c-11 remind us that we must also worship Yahweh by our obedience.

It is not just the repetition of rituals, not just the shouting of praises or the acts of reverence, but our persistent trust and obedience which is evidence of our true worship.

If we would worship Yahweh as our Shepherd then surely we must follow Him as the sheep of His pasture.

At Massah and Meribah the Israelites renounced not only Moses, but Yahweh as their Leader.

They refused to follow. Worship without obedience is worthless to Yahweh.

Indeed, it is loathsome (Ps. 95:10; cf. also Rev. 3:15-16).

Let us take very careful note of the relationship between the exhortation to worship Yahweh in verses 1-7 and the warning of verses 8-11.

The warning is basically that we dare not fail to worship.

In other words, failure to worship is one of the principal causes of a hardened heart.

When we fail to worship, the hardening of our hearts begins, which is repulsive to Yahweh and is destructive to us.

In his stinging words to those who rejected Messiah, Stephen showed those who stoned him that defective worship was at the heart of Israel's disobedience and the grounds for divine discipline:

"This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. And our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, ... But Yahweh turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship them. I also will remove you beyond Babylon'" (Acts 7:38-39, 42-43).

Those forty loathsome years of Israel's testing and disobedience were years typified by the events at Massah and Meribah.

During that time Israel did not worship Yahweh who made and shepherded them with His hands (Ps. 95:4,5,7).

Rather, they worshipped the gods of Egypt, which they made with their hands (Acts 7:41-43; cf. Jer. 1:16).

Psalm 95 teaches us that worship is not incidental; it is fundamental.

It is not peripheral, but primary.

We should worship Yahweh because He is worthy of it.

We should worship Yahweh because He desires it (John 4:23 -24).

We should worship because Yahweh commands it (Ps. 95:1-7).

We should worship Yahweh because to fail to worship hardens our hearts, leads to dissatisfaction and disobedience and ultimately to discipline.

Notice also that worship is not only to be primary, it is to be persistent.

Every day is "today" (Ps. 95:7; cf. Heb. 3:13 ; 4:7).

It is not enough to initially choose to trust in Yahweh and to follow Him.

It is not enough to see Yahweh's power or to hear His promises.

We must persist in worshipping, in trusting and in obeying Him.

Every day is "today."

We cannot rest on the past, but we must continue in that which Yahweh has begun.

It is not enough to hear.

Those who benefit from Yahweh's promises persist and persevere in His word:

Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard (Heb. 4:1-2).

It is my prayer that you have already come to trust in Messiah as Yahweh's provision for your salvation.

If not, I urge you to acknowledge your sin and to accept Messiah's sacrificial death as Yahweh's provision for your salvation.

If you have already done this, I urge you to persevere in your faith.

In keeping with the words of this psalm **I urge you to worship Yahweh as though your well-being depended upon it, because it does.**

Sources consulted:

Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M . "Psalm 95"

NASB

CJB