

One of the things that we all know to be true yet we rarely admit or acknowledge, is that God has initiated our relationship. God is the one who came seeking us before we even knew to go looking for God. God has taken the initiative and he calls out to us when we are lost or wandering. The way in which Psalm 95 is written testifies to the fact that all this is true.

Still, in Psalm 95 the first response to God’s invitation is kind of noisy. There is singing and shouting. “*Come!*” is the invitation extended to us. Deep down people everywhere want to be invited to come along, because God’s people come together in worship with wonderful things to celebrate.

But then, as we move closer to engaging in worship, our posture shifts from lifted faces to bowed heads. The writer of Psalm 95 directs our attention to the object of our worship: “*The great God, the great King above all gods*” (v. 3). The Holy God, creator of all things, invites us into his presence. Bowing is a posture that expresses our humility before God’s greatness and our acceptance of his personal rule in our lives.

God would like us to stay this way—worshiping, hearts softened and pliable, open and near to the Lord. The psalmist warns us of a time when people were impatient, whiny, and complaining. But God wants to give so much more—God’s rest and God’s presence. The key to verse 8 is at the end of verse 7: “*Today, if only you would hear his voice.*” Let’s listen to God’s words to us.

Psalm 95 is a call to rejoice in the assurance of belonging to God. But Psalm 95 adds a sober warning. Indeed, the second half of Psalm 95 is so stern that it seems to call into question all the joyful certainty of the first seven verses. In fact, the jarring shift in mood between the first and second halves of Psalm 95 led some earlier critical scholars to speculate that Psalm 95 must have originally been two separate Psalms artificially glued together somewhere in history. It’s easy to see why someone might come to that conclusion. Verses 1-7a are a joyful call to worship and bow down before our Creator and Covenant Maker, while verses 7b-11 are a somber warning not to harden our hearts lest we lose the rest God has promised his people.

But separating those seemingly contrary messages in this beloved Psalm keeps us from hearing its powerful message. This psalm reminds us that the most joyful worship is of no value if we don’t listen to God’s voice. Psalm 95 moves us beyond verbal praise and physical submission to the heart of discipleship, namely, listening to God with open hearts, and then trusting and obeying God. If we harden our hearts when we hear God’s voice and

refuse to trust and obey what God says, our singing and our bowing are empty gestures. If we continue to worship in just such a way, God will be angry, and we may well miss out on the “rest” that God has promised to his people. I don’t know about you, but the promise of “rest” in this psalm sounds more and more appealing the older I get.

That is a central message of Psalm 95, but that message raises some knotty questions about God’s anger with his beloved covenant people and about the possibility of God’s chosen people losing the blessings he has promised them. How can we square the warning of Psalm 95 with the Bible’s good news about God’s unconditional love? Let’s approach those issues not with some high flown theology, but with some hands-on wrestling with the Scripture.

If we read carefully we will notice that the first half of the Psalm calls for two distinct but related actions in worship, both highlighted with the word “*Come*.” “*Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord*” (v. 1) and “*Come, let us bow down in worship*” (v. 6). Worship just isn’t complete without both of those actions. It’s not enough to sing joyfully, if you aren’t submissive to God. It’s not enough to be submissive, if your heart doesn’t sing. We journey to God with both an open mouth and a humble heart.

God deserves both song and submission, because, says the Psalm, he is both good and great. God is “*the Rock of our salvation*” (v. 1) and “*the great King above all gods*” (v. 3). He is the mighty creator of all that is, from the “*depths of the earth to the mountain peaks...the sea...and the dry land*.” And he is “*our Maker, our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care*” (v. 7). Psalm 95 roots our worship in creation and covenant; in invitation and redemption.

That theme of redemption is highlighted in the second command of verse 1. “*Let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation*.” Though verses 8 and 9 refer to those episodes in which God gave his thirsty people water from a rock as they wandered in the wilderness, verse 1 is rooted in Deuteronomy 32 where Moses reminds Israel that throughout their history Yahweh himself is The Rock. “*He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, who does no wrong, upright and just is he*” (Deuteronomy 32:4). No wonder Psalm 95 is so exuberant in its call to sing and so earnest in its command to bow down.

And no wonder Psalm 95 is so stern in its warning not to reject such a God. Later in his farewell speech in Deuteronomy 32, Moses reminds Israel that, in spite of all the ways God has been their Rock, they have rejected him. “*You deserted the Rock who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth*” (32:18). Psalm 95 verses 8 and 9 refer to a

specific example of that rejection, an example that is particularly relevant to Israel and to us. Actually, it is two examples, both involving a rock, one in the Desert of Sin at the beginning of Israel's wilderness wandering (Exodus 17), the other 40 years later in the Desert of Zin at the end of that wandering (Numbers 20).

In both stories, Israel is thirsty, so thirsty that they complain to Moses, accusing him of leading them into the wilderness to die. It would have been better to have stayed in bondage back in Egypt, where at least there was water. In speaking that way against Moses, they were in reality speaking against God, quarreling with Yahweh, testing his word, rejecting all that he had done for them. *"Is the Lord among us or not?"* they cried.

In spite of the fact that Yahweh had delivered them from Egypt by his mighty arm and his outstretched hand, and then provided guidance and sustenance and protection for them during those 40 years in the desert, they did not trust him now, in this moment, "today." Your *"ancestors tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did"* (Psalm 95:9). It was a monumental case of "what have you done for me lately?" He was the Rock of their salvation and now they rejected him, not once, not twice, but continually. Verse 10 says, *"They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways."* Because they had rejected Yahweh not just once or twice or even 10 times (Numbers 14:22), but *continually, habitually, terminally*, their hearts were hardened against the word of the Lord.

Every parent has felt the sting of a child's rejection. It hurts when they go their own way, disobeying our explicit rules for life, confident that their way is best, not trusting the parent's wisdom and knowledge and love. But we parents get over our hurt, unless it goes on and on. Then the momentary anger that follows single acts of rebellion and disobedience becomes a broken heart and loving anger. That is how we should understand the anger of God against Israel in Psalm 95. It was not the rage of an enemy, but the deep disappointment of a broken heart. God's heart is broken by the hardness of human hearts and he is understandably angry about the way we humans ruin our lives by rebellion and disobedience.

As a result of long term, deeply ingrained, profoundly ungrateful, distrustful disobedience, God was justifiably angry with *"that generation."* From the beginning to the end of their pilgrimage through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, they did not trust and obey *"the Rock of their salvation."* Not one of that original generation of Israelites entered the Promised Land. Because of their terminal hardening of the heart, that first generation did not receive the *"rest"* toward which they had journeyed all those years.

That is a historical fact. We may not like it, but it happened. The Bible tells us so. But what are to make of it? Are these words only for Israel and only about entering Canaan? Or can they be applied to Christians and our salvation? Is it possible to be one of God's chosen children, but to miss out on the blessings we've been promised in Christ, because of our faithlessness? We Reformed Christians may struggle to square Psalm 95 with the Calvinism of unconditional election and the perseverance of the saints.

We know this much. Psalm 95 is obviously a cautionary tale. That's how Psalm 95 uses the stories of Meribah and Massah. "*Do not harden your hearts...as you did in the wilderness*" (v. 8). As you journey toward God through Jesus Christ, don't lose your trust because of hard circumstances and become disobedient because obedience looks too hard. Look what happened to Israel all those years ago. Don't let that happen to you.

This is not an invitation with an RSVP attached. By the way, RSVP translates to "respond if you please." But this is an invitation with implications. The implications for ignoring God's invitation may result in forfeiting God's rest. Is this a word for Israel, but not the church, a word about the Promised Land, but not about heaven? Given the strong words elsewhere in the Bible about God's unbreakable love, it is tempting to downplay this possibility.

My ultimate answer to the challenge presented by verse 7 of Psalm 95—"*Today, if only you would hear my voice*"—is the prayerful assurance offered by Paul to the Thessalonians in his first letter: "*We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1:3). So, today, we are warned not to harden our hearts against God's voice, but instead to respond to God's invitation to worship here at Ken Mawr, and throughout our lives, with "*work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope!*"

In the end, let us trust that the God whose grace pierced Paul's Christian-hating hard heart can still rescue the most hardened heart of any sinner and bring them into the *eternal rest* promised to all God's children.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.