

Psalm 95

Joy, Awe and Obedience

“Psalm 95 suggests that worship has three aspects. It begins with noise. The raucous and boisterous din associated with a World Cup soccer game or a presidential inauguration is as integral to the worship of the LORD. Yet it also invites people into the actual presence of the President, and then we find ourselves strangely subdued and bowing down before the person who controls the mightiest power in the world. But the President is strangely unimpressed by either the shouting or the bowing and wants to ask questions about how we live our lives after the celebration is over... Thus in the psalm ‘we began with exulting joy: but this Psalm hath ended with great fear’” (John Goldingay).

1. Come and sing! (vv. 1-5)

“Come!” – the word means “to walk”, but in this poetic context signifies not movement from A to B, but movement with alacrity – “Come quickly, come readily, come obediently, come with desire!” So it’s appropriate that the psalm opens with a crash of words: characteristic of the enthusiasm of Israel for the LORD.

Notice the repeated “let us...” – we are speaking to one another, encouraging one another to “full-throated cries...an acclamation fit for a king who is the saviour of his people” (Kidner).

“The Rock of our salvation” – the first mention of “the Rock” is Ex. 17:6-7 where God provides water for the people at Massah-Meribah (see v. 8).

“Let us come before his presence” (v. 2) – the word translated “let us come” really signifies an encounter. God’s “presence” is “his face”. This is a real meeting (remember that Moses met God “face to face”).!

The LORD is to be exalted (a) above all gods as King (v. 3), (b) above all things as Creator (vv. 4-5), and (c) above his people as their Shepherd-Leader (v. 7a-c).

The whole created order is God’s: the unexplored depths of earth and the unclimbed mountain peaks; the sea and the dry land. “To the heathen...*the sea* might represent a power even older than the gods, not conquered without bitter struggle. It is a far cry from the simplicity of *The sea is his, for he made it*” (Kidner). How great God is – how worthy of all our praise!

2. Enter and bow down! (vv. 6-7c)

This section opens with the command “Enter!” We are entering the sanctuary, and so the emphasis of the worship changes from the cries of acclamation to the action of obeisance: the three verbs used in verse 6 speak of (a) stretching oneself out full length on the ground, (b) curtseying, i.e. bending of the legs, and (c) kneeling down. The worshipper is lowering himself before the LORD. We are reminded that we are not just spirits – we are the union of soul and body, and what we do with our bodies in worship is important because it is part of how we express our adoration of God.

“This is the deep and basic note of worship, without which the ‘joyful noise’ of the opening will be shrill and self-indulgent” (Kidner).

Self-lowering in God’s presence can have its basis in the absolute sovereignty of God; it can express cringing fear. But here it has its basis in the LORD’s relationship with his people: he made us (v. 6b); he entered into covenant with us (v. 7a); and he cares for us as a Shepherd for his flock (v. 7b-c).

The “flock of his hand” is the flock under his protection, led and defended by his skilful, powerful hand. Compare Jacob’s confession: “The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (Gen. 48:15-16). In the wilderness Israel forgot this great truth.

3. Obey and believe! (vv. 7d-11)

The psalm began by urging people to make a noise, but v. 7d tells them to listen. Verses 1-7c were an exhortation in which the speaker identified with the people to whom he spoke (“Let us...”), but in v. 7d the speaker stands over against the people he addresses. Verses 1-7c are full of confidence, but v. 7d begins “if”. Verses 1-7c give voice to enthusiastic and awed praise of God, but in vv. 8-11 God responds with admonition and a recollection of wrath.

The urgency of the psalm is indicated by the way in which “Today” breaks in upon the worship. “The word ‘today’ placed first gives prominence to the present, in which this call to obedience goes forth, as a decisive turning-point” (Delitzsch). “If this is a psalm about worship, it could give no blunter indication that the heart of the matter is severely practical: nothing less than a bending of wills and a renewal of pilgrimage” (Kidner).

To hear is to obey (in Hebrew idiom). The worshipper is reminded to ask himself how he is listening – is it obediently?

“Provocation/rebellion” is literally Meribah; and “temptation/trial” is literally Massah. These names were given to the place where God provided water out of the rock (see v. 1) for the people. “And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:7). Hence the admonition is not only “do not be rebellious as your fathers were”, but also “do not question the presence of God here today, as your fathers did.”

Meribah and Massah link the early rising at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1-7) with the climactic one at Kadesh (Num. 20:1-13). It was at Kadesh, when Israel refused to enter the Promised Land, that God swore on oath in his anger that they would never enter his rest. They refused to take God at his word – the basic danger, the “evil, unbelieving heart” of which Hebrews 3-4 warns us.

There was no need to test – God’s great signs in Egypt had given Israel ample evidence of God’s commitment and power (v. 9).

My rest means the Promised Land, and all the good that was to come to the people there. But it also means the solemn Sabbath rest of God, having finished creation and redemption (remember “he sat down” Heb. 1:3; 10:12).