



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

The Worship God Deserves

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Psalm 95

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. 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." Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."

Some Christians prefer to stay away from the Old Testament. They reason "Why do we need the Old Testament anyway? We find Jesus in the New Testament. There's just too much violence in that Old Testament. I'll stick with the New Testament." The answer to that question that they have is quite simple. First of all, you can't fully understand the New Testament without the old. It's like walking into the middle of a movie and trying to understand it. Things talked of in the second half of the movie point back to the first half, and so things don't make sense. And we need to remember also that the Old Testament was Jesus' Bible. He quoted it a lot, and he said he fulfilled everything in that Old Testament that had pointed to him. And we know that his disciples had it at the core of their preaching and teaching after Christ's resurrection. And another reason why the Old Testament is so valuable for us is that it contains valuable information about God, his character, power, and his will for us. And that never changes. We also learn much about ourselves as we read the people's stories and their life experiences with

God. We learn that they were far from perfect, not heroic at all. And as we look at their shortcomings and sinfulness, we can learn something to apply in our own walk with God.

Well, today's text from the Old Testament does just that for us today. It's Psalm 95. Remember, the Psalms were the hymn book of God's chosen people, Israel. And this psalm teaches us about the kind of worship God desires from those who are his own. The first seven verses are beautiful, eloquent words. We use them frequently as we open our own worship services, even today as a call to worship. These words call us to worship God with all our being, and they also give us the reasons why to do that. Notice the invitational phrases. There's quite a few of them. "Come, let us. Come, let us," in these first seven verses. "O come let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the Lord of the rock of our salvation. Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving. Let us come and worship and bow down and kneel before him in reverent, humbling of ourselves, showing allegiance and adoration and awe before God."

Now, why would we as God's people, do this? And the psalmist points out to us because God deserves it, for the Lord is a great God, a great King who holds this world in his hands. He's the only God. There is no one like him in power and might and creativity. All things are his, for he made it. He's the creator and under control. He holds it in the palm of his hands.

We read as I read this, I can't help but be reminded of a favorite Christian hymn.

Oh Lord, my God, when I and awesome wonder,
Consider all the world's thy hands hath made.
I see the stars. I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.
And when through the woods, in forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees.
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze
Then sings my soul, my savior, God to thee
How great thou art, How great thou art.

For you are our maker. And we worship him because he's the rock of our salvation.

Look at that opening line. Make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Look what God has done for us. Salvation. He made us his own. Once we were no people. Now we are God's people. He is our God. He's made himself our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of his hand. We are his and he is ours. We don't deserve the privilege. Without him, we'd be lost, helpless sheep in this world. There was nothing special about us. But he chose us anyway and rescued us to be his own. And he cares for us. So of course he is worthy of our bowing down and kneeling before him with reverence and awe. And again, I'm reminded of the Christian hymn.

And when I think that God is son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.
Then sings my soul, my Savior, God to thee.
How great thou art!

As believers in Christ, we have been saved by God's grace through the suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, who offered himself as an atonement for our sin so that we could become forgiven children of God with an eternal promise. Without Him, we would be lost. In Him, though, we have a very bright future. When he comes, "When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home," the song says, "What joy shall fill my heart. Then I shall bow and humble adoration, and there proclaim, 'My God, how great thou art.'" That's worship. Someone once described God-honoring worship like this. Worship is beholding what God is worth, seeing what God is worth, and giving him what he's worth. And that's what Psalm 95 is calling us as God's people to do. Who we are coming to worship is a response to his goodness and grace, his almighty ness in power. It's an expression of our love, our devotion, our allegiance to him, thus making the main question after worship services not "what did we get out of this today," but "what did God get in our worship today?" Was he exalted and lifted upon our praises? Did God enjoy it? Was the truth about him proclaimed and rejoiced in once again? Because worship is for God. He's the audience, the one we desire to honor in response for what he has done for us through Christ.

Of course, in the midst of this experience, I know we receive as well. The Holy Spirit uses the word and sacraments to restore and build us up again, to serve God in the next week. In worship we're blessed as we bless His name. We're told that we're forgiven, that we're not alone, and we have a forever with God. We're encouraged once again and

built back up in faith as we behold His Majesty and faithfulness and power and grace through the retelling of the Gospel. It's a time we get properly focused as we pull our affections off of our idols in life and put them where they belong: on God. It's our lifeblood, coming to worship. We are saved to be worshippers of God. We serve God with worship. That's what we call them worship services. And God loves it when we stop and behold Him in all this grace and majesty and power and open our mouths, singing and making joyful noise to him, bowing humbly, recognizing him as our great God and rock of salvation.

But hold on a minute. The psalm doesn't end at verse seven. There's something else in our worship as well that needs to happen. While it's good that we open our mouths in praise, we now learn it's important that we open our ears to what God has to say to us, and faithfully trust and do what he says. It says, "Today, if you hear his voice," in verse 8, and they will in the reading and teaching from the Torah during worship time, "do not harden your hearts as it Meribah. The heart is the core of a person's thoughts, feelings and choices. And to harden one's heart is to make it dull and unresponsive; to steel itself against God and thus only strengthen its disbelief in God. Don't ignore God's authoritative words and refuse to trust and obey them, we are told. Be obedient, not obstinate people.

He talks about Meribah, it's a story from the book of Exodus. Israel's ancestors rebelled against God. They complained against him, refusing to listen to him and faithfully follow his orders. They cast doubt upon his character, his love and his ability to take care of them. They actually put him to the test over their thirst, even though they'd already seen his great works when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt, with the mighty plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, how he had fed them manna in the wilderness and he'd shown his presence to them as he led them in the fire in the cloud. But now they refused to believe, and they tested God and said, "Is the Lord among us or not? Is he with us or not?" God, being slow to anger, abounding and steadfast love was patient and He provided water for them from the rock. The place was given the name Meribah. But eventually those people rebelled against God again and refused to enter the promised land after hearing a bad report from the spies that Moses had sent ahead to scout out the promised land. They came back reporting, "It's a great land flowing with milk and honey, but the people who have it are stronger thus than us, and we'll never be able to win." So the people complained, had no faith. They rebelled against Moses and God and they wanted to just go back to Egypt at that point. And it's

then that God had enough. He told those unfaithful ones they would never enter the land themselves. They would travel for 40 years around that land wilderness learning to depend on him until every last one of the unfaithful was dead. And then their children would enter the promised land.

So our psalm has the voice of God saying at the end of the Psalm, “For 40 years I loathed that generation and said they are a people who go astray in their heart and they have not knowing my ways. Therefore, I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest,” and we know they didn't. Here we have a negative example from Israel's history, which teaches God's people later on to be faithful to God in the present, saying, “Don't be like them, listen to the Lord and do what He says.” If he is truly the God of your life, then treat him like he's the God of your life. Not only opening your mouth in praise to him, giving him lip service, but also your ears ready to listen and trust and obey him.

So, the first part of the Psalm actually serves to highlight the foolishness of any kind of rebellion or unfaithfulness on the part of God's people in the face of such privilege in power and grace that they've received. We worship this almighty, powerful God who's been nothing but good and gracious to us, we're told, and made us his own. He's worthy of our opening our mouths, and also opening our ears.

Interesting: the last section from this Psalm pops up again in the New Testament book of Hebrews 3. The writer of Hebrews uses the psalmist's words by placing his audience, his Christian audience, in a parallel situation to the Israelites in the wilderness, for they too, as Christians, had been rescued by God and made His people through the work of Jesus. But at that time, some were considering forsaking their faith in Jesus in order to stay safe in the midst of their Jewish communities in which they were living. They were afraid of suffering persecution and being ostracized. So, some reasoned, maybe it would be just wiser to let go of our faith in Jesus and go back to practicing the Judaism that we grew up with. And the author of Hebrews points out to these Jewish Christians that to abandon their faith in Jesus in order to return to the safety of ordinary Judaism would be like the rebellion of Israel and the wilderness mark of unbelief and deserving of God's holy judgment. He quotes Psalm 95 and then comments at the end “Take care of brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God” – like those folks.

So, Hebrews makes every day a today, that calls for renewed faithfulness on the part of believers in Jesus Christ to not have hearts hardened to hearing God's Word, but have them being soft, open, always trusting in Him who is the rock of our salvation, making his word our authority in life. Because the temptation is still there to fall away from him, to not trust his word and his ways. For instance, in the matter of salvation, scripture teaches us that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. That's the message we receive in worship each week. And yet I continue to encounter church people, lifelong members who seem to be refusing to take him at his word and are still convinced by worldly wisdom that there's something that they must do in order to get God to love them and let them into his Heaven.

Listen to this story from an edition of *Newsweek* back in the last year.

Beatrice Feria decided to write a resume for herself as her obituary when she finally passed at age 94. The *Winnipeg Press* printed the resume in its entirety. And it starts, "Dear Lord. Please accept my application for eternal life. My resume is as follows:" And then she divided it into sections about her background and the good things she had done. She shared, "Lord, you know that as a teacher, I never had any teacher's pets. Rather, I put my heart in it each of those with learning challenges or difficult family situations. It was there. I did good work. I also continued volunteer work, knitting scarves for underprivileged children and so many there and all up." She said, "Lord, I hope you will find that I have met my objectives and deserve a place in your heavenly home. You know where to find me to further discuss my qualifications.

Poor Beatrice. In the matter of salvation, she's placed her trust in herself with her good works and good intentions to enter Heaven. She obviously missed or ignored the good news of Jesus. And she's not alone in this. How it must break the heart of God when we refuse to take Him at his word in such matters.

And sometimes it's all too tempting to turn a blind eye to God's desires for me as one of His people, maybe out of fear or self-centeredness and pride. For instance, God's Word says to us, "Forgive others as I forgive in you." And we balk at that. "What? Forgive that person who's hurt me? No way. You can't be serious. God, you don't understand how much pain he's caused me. I can't," which means I won't. And if we hang on to the grudge, it's to our own judgment, as it eats away at us and poisons us with the bitter spirit. And we find no rest like the Psalm says.

Or how about this one? Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and money." And we reason, Well, Jesus didn't mean that literally, did He? He wants me to be happy. Money and possessions are a good thing. It's security and status and it's fun to save and have nice things. And if I don't give it 100% effort now at work, I'll fall behind. I'll get around to giving myself over to serving God later when I'm retired. And by the way, let me remind you, Jesus told a parable about a guy like that. And in the end, he died unexpectedly, and God labeled him a fool.

Psalm 95 serves as a wake-up call. Awaking us, not only to the greatness of God who deserves worship, but the great value He places upon people's trust and obedience of what they hear in worship. When you consider yourself an obedient worshipper, one who sings praise to God and gives thanks for who He is and what he's done, and listens to his word, intending to trust and obey what he says, for that is the worship God desires and deserves from those of us who have tasted His saving grace through Jesus Christ and what He did for us at the cross and grave. He's made us his own. Once we were no people. Now we are God's people through Christ. So therefore, let us commit ourselves to regularly come into His presence and worship him with our whole being, giving him his worth. And let us also come with open ears and softened hearts, saying, "Speak, Oh Lord, for your servant is listening." Amen.