

Come Let Us Worship & Bow Down?

Psalms 95

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What comes to mind for you when you hear the word worship? I suspect for many of us it's something like singing together to music on Sunday morning or at some other gathering with Christians. That's basically what I thought about worship as I was growing up. From the age of 4-24 I attended the same church. But worship was not really the most important thing to me, I was more interested in socializing with friends and whether the preacher had a message that kept my attention. Yet I learned a form of worship in our church. I thought the way we worshipped was how everyone worshipped.

Then I moved to Edmonton to attend seminary. There I met people who came from different church traditions than I did. Some worshipped more formally, some worshipped louder, others worshipped longer. I began to see that people worshipped in different ways. We had to read different books on worship through seminary. I had never really thought about worship that much before and it kind of annoyed me at first. Why couldn't I just stay in my little comfort zone of my home church and the way we worshipped there?

But God has been speaking to me over the years about this. He's impressed on me that I have a lot to learn when it comes to worship. That's primarily because I have a lot to learn about Him. Even though I've been a Christian for 43 years, I've just scratched the surface when it comes to knowing God. Through different struggles about worship that I've observed and been part of over those years, one thing has become clearer to me.

We all need to grow in our understanding of God. The more we understand Him, the more we will worship appropriately. This came together for me at the preaching retreat I went to this past May. Our instructor spoke often about worship because he taught from the Minor Prophets. Those prophets had a lot to say to God's people about worship.

This professor made this statement that really stuck with me. **We think that if we get worship right, we'll encounter God. But we need to get God right. Then we can worship rightly.** We think "if we just can get worship to the way we think it should be, then everything will be set for us to encounter God. But that's backwards. We need to keep growing in our knowledge and understanding of God. The more we know Him, the more likely it is that we will worship Him appropriately.

So we are going to spend the year 2017/18 ministry year of September to June on worship. I'll talk more about where we're going in the Bible about this next Sunday. But today, I wanted to whet our appetites by spending some time in a Psalm that some have called a pattern for worship. It gives us a glimpse into how the ancient Israelites worshipped. Yet it can still apply and teach us today.

I pray that God will use this Psalm to encourage all of us to think more about what's necessary when we come together in corporate worship to connect with Him. But this is also something that you can use during your personal worship times during the week. I pray this will send us off on a yearlong journey of discovery about God and who He has revealed Himself to be. Our text today is Psalm 95.

Psalm 95 (ESV)

95 Oh 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 his hands formed the dry land.

⁶ Oh 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.

Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ when your fathers put me to the test

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 who go astray in their heart,

and they have not known my ways."

¹¹ Therefore I swore in my wrath,

"They shall not enter my rest."

What is necessary to worship the Lord? The first piece necessary to worship the Lord is **a responsive heart**. The Psalm begins with a call to community or corporate worship. “O come, let us sing; let us make a joyful noise; let us come into His presence.” It’s like the worshippers are coming together going into the temple courts. As they go, they encourage one another to come and worship the Lord.

But notice the type of worship they encourage one another to engage in singing, making a joyful noise, coming with thanksgiving and songs of praise. This is the worship of celebration. Our English translations kind of tame the text. They make it sound like the Psalmist states an invitation to a proper kind of activity. “O come let us worship the Lord.” But in fact, the words used here talk about loud, full-throated cries. It is an invitation to rise up and celebrate the Lord.

One thing our Pentecostal brothers and sisters do well, along with our African and Latin American friends, it’s celebratory worship. I know there are many factors that contribute to our posture and attitude in worship - personality, ethnicity, comfort level and familiarity. But I wish we were more celebratory at SVBC when it came to our worship of the Lord. Why yell our lungs out at a sporting event or while playing games but we become so reserved when it comes to our worship?

We might respond, “well, we don’t really feel like celebrating” or “we don’t have reason to celebrate.” But look at the word the Psalmist uses to start verse 3 – “For.” He answers the question “why?” Why celebrate the Lord in worship?

“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.” Look at all those reasons to celebrate God.

“The Lord is a great God. He is the great King above all gods.” But wait a minute. Is this Psalmist saying there are other gods besides the God of the Bible? No. But he does address the reality that people believed in other gods. They put their gods up against the Lord as rivals. Today, there certainly are people of other faiths who believe in other gods. Many others give their greatest affection to something other than the one true God. We call those idols.

Yet with his reasons to worship the Lord in verses 3-5, He challenges the idols of that day along with alternative gods today. How is the Lord the great King above all gods? First in his hand are the depth of the earth. In the mythology of the day, there was a god called Molechh, the god of the depths or valleys. This religion involved demon worship. He was a god of fiendish-cruelty and human sacrifice by fire. Some of the Israelite kings even worshipped this detestable god.

But Molech does not rule the depths. In the Lord's hand, not hands, but one hand, are the depths of the earth. So the Lord is king over Molech.

The Lord also owns the mountain tops or heights. Who was worshipped in the high places but none other than the Canaanite god Baal? Yet he does not own the high places. The Lord reigns over the mountains. Then there is the sea – a symbol of chaos in the Old Testament and unfamiliar to the land focused Israelites. The god of the sea was called Tiamat or Rahab. Yet even the chaotic and unfamiliar seas are under our great King because he made them. To the Psalmist, all belonged to the Lord.

Notice the comprehensive picture of creation he draws in these short phrases – the depths and the height; the sea and dry land. So the vertical and horizontal are completely ruled by the Lord. To the great God and the King over all gods, the Psalmist calls the people to rejoice.

So this is where I get the phrase “a responsive heart.” The Psalmist calls God's people to rejoice and celebrate in response to the great God and king over all gods. He calls for a response to the rock of our salvation in verse 1. A response in heart moved **to rejoice because of the power of our creator God**. That's why it's important in our worship to focus on God's greatness.

When we get that in our minds, this means we can rejoice and celebrate and praise God even when life does not go well. We can praise the Lord and not be happy. We can sing his praises even in our mourning because the Lord is still great and faithful.

And yet I must confess there are times when I don't feel like rejoicing in the Lord when I come to worship. Why does my heart resist it? Sometimes it's because I come with a bad attitude. I want worship that pleases me – except then it's all about me. Sometimes, because things have not gone well in my life that week. I feel like worshipping and praising God when things have gone well. But if my worship depends on having a good week, then I'm exalting a good week as my primary focus in worship. Sometimes, I hesitate because I'm more concerned with what others think of me. But I need to be most concerned about what God thinks of me. So we must recapture a vision of God and His greatness to free us to openly worship Him.

We must also learn from Psalm 95. Worshipping is not always quiet and decorous. It can involve shouting, praising, leaping to our feet, singing our hearts out. When the love of the immeasurably great and transcendent God of the universe becomes real to us, the joy should be uncontainable.

But then the Psalmist calls us to a different kind of response. Verse 6 and the first part of verse 7. “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.” The “invitation” come in verse 6 is more specific than the one that begins the Psalm. Verse 1 was about come and join the procession as we go to the Lord’s house. Verse 6 is about entering into the temple courts.

Here, the worship is more reverent and quieter. It calls for worshipping or getting low; kneeling and bowing down. Some argue this is the posture of repentance. Certainly that is part of it. It’s like the Psalmist recognizes the redeeming work of God to bring His people into close fellowship. That’s what Jesus accomplished on the cross for us. Because of His blood, our sins are paid for and we have the privilege of entering into close fellowship with God. But I could not get beyond the image of a provider God in verse 7. There, the Psalmist again gives a reason to come and worship. Why? “For he is our God, we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of his hand.” A pasture provides for the sheep. It’s the place they go and live in to eat. The sheep of a shepherd’s hand could be referring to the activity of the sheep passing under the shepherd’s hand as they enter the sheep pen at night. The shepherd allowed his sheep in and kept other animals out.

So to me, this is the posture of dependence. This also requires a responsive heart. When a worshipper recognizes the provision of God, they are **moved to a posture of dependence because of shepherding care of God. (Kneel Down)**

Now when do we kneel down in our culture today? We kneel to assist others. First responders kneel down to help someone wounded in a car or on the road. Parents of young children kneel down to help their child get their winter jacket done up before they go out to play in the snow.

But there is also the kneeling down of dependence. A young man kneels before his girl in an act of proposal for marriage. He adopts a posture of pleading. “Will you marry me?” Or a beggar goes on their knees to plead for assistance from a passerby or a benefactor. “Will you please help me?” In some tradition, people literally kneel before the Lord in prayer. There’s great value in that. It physically reminds us of the posture of humility and our great need for God.

Let us kneel before Lord our Maker. Without the Lord, we wouldn't have any knees to kneel on. We wouldn't have a life to live. We wouldn't have lungs so we could breathe. We wouldn't have the mercy of His protection and provision to bring us out of the womb and live.

Yet, we hesitate or resist bowing down and kneeling before the Lord. It may be because our pride. "We kneel before no one." We think we are the master. We hang on to that posture until life apart from God beats us down or our eyes are opened to the pride in our hearts. Sometimes, we might still be too concerned with what others think. We think we need to project this image that "we're in control". We've been scorned before for admitting any weakness so we ensure we don't show anything lest we get that label again. Or we think we are self-sufficient and have no need for some God. That's only for weak people. We don't need shepherding, provision and support. That continues maybe until we become parents and our child has some issue that we never thought we'd have to deal with. We don't know what to do. Or something arises at work that we weren't trained for and we flail around trying to solve it. Or some illness takes over our body or our loved one's body and we don't have the resources in ourselves to deal with it. But he is our God. He brings us into His pasture which has everything we need. He knows us like the shepherd who knows the sheep that pass under his hand into the pen at night.

So to worship God, we need a heart that is open and responsive to the revealing of God's great Creator ability and to His shepherding care. But worship doesn't end at this point. There is the matter of God speaking to us. The Psalm takes an almost shocking turn in the middle of verse 7. Where he talks about God's voice. Today if you hear His voice. God spoke to His people. God speaks through His Word preached. God can speak to us as we pray, as we read His word, and through other people He brings into our lives. But it's not just a matter of hearing what God says. It does not say, "Today if you hear His voice, you're good. You've done your duty. You allowed the sound of God's voice or the teaching of His word to penetrate your ear drums." No. "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts".

So we must not only hear but we must listen. A **listening ear** is necessary for worshipping the Lord. Listening involves a lot more than hearing. Listening means to take in what has been heard and think about it. Then it requires action or response.

Sometimes, God's people heard but didn't listen. They heard and then hardened their heart. The Psalmist brings up one of the most infamous episodes in the Old Testament. It is referred to again and again as a moment of unfaithfulness to the Lord. It's found in **Exodus 17:1-7**.

17 All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah^[a] and Meribah,^[b] because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

So the Israelites have just been released from 430 years of slavery in Egypt. The Lord accomplished this by sending 10 very visible and obvious plagues upon the Egyptians. These culminated with the dreadful plague on the firstborn. Then Pharaoh let the Israelites leave. But he changed his mind and sent his army to get the slaves back. God rescued them by opening the Red Sea as an escape path. They went across and He closed the Red Sea on the advancing Egyptians. They saw the bodies of the soldiers on the sea shore. But then they were in the desert. Yet God provided for them with manna in every morning as bread.

But now they move on and have no water. So they begin to complain and grumble. They believe the Lord has delivered them from Egypt only to they the desert. The Lord instructs Moses to go and strike a rock. Out of it pours life giving water. Yet Moses is not pleased with the people and calls the place Massah meaning quarrelling and Meribah meaning testing. The people put God to the test.

They withheld their trust in Him until He provided them with fresh proof. It was the classic "what have you done for me lately" approach. Though they'd seen the 10 plagues and the Red Sea crossing and the destruction of Egypt's army and the manna every morning, they withheld their trust until God could prove himself again in this situation.

Even though the Lord provided water, they were not ultimately satisfied. Back in Psalm 95, we see the Lord's reaction to this. Notice how the speaker changes from the Psalmist to the Lord himself. Psalm 95:7b "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meribah and 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 on my wrath, “they shall not enter my rest.”

Now at first glance, it seems like God just lost his temper at this one incident of complaining and decided to zap them. But this complaining and grumbling continued all the way up to their arrival at the Promised Land. Then they sent out 12 spies to see about this land. 2 gave a good report saying it was a great land and by God’s strength they could take it. But 10 gave a bad report. Yes it was a great land but there was no way they could take it because of the walled cities and the power of the inhabitants. The people sided with the 10 rejecting the Lord and His provision. They hardened their hearts to his promise. So he turned around and sent them back into the desert for around 40 years until that entire faithless generation would die out. Their children would be the ones to enter the Promised Land.

Yet fast forward to Psalm 95 maybe 300 years later. The Psalmist states, “today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts”. So heart hardening could happen in the time of his psalm. Fast forward about 1100 years to the writing of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. To Christians in the first century, the author of the Hebrews 3:7 writes “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as at the rebellion.” Fast forward 2000 years to Sunday, September 3, 2017 in Sturgeon Valley Baptist Church. The Lord says “today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as your forefathers did”.

To harden our hearts means we withhold trust in God until he provides fresh proof of His reality or provision. Though God may have provided much in the past, a hardened heart asks “Can he do it again? If so, we will trust Him.” It is like a steeling or strengthening of the heart’s walls against penetration by God’s word. A hard heart is a proud heart that is resistant to the things of God

It is a long term persevering rebellion that goes against God and His ways.

God’s voice might rebuke us, call us to change, expose a sin that needs repentance or an attitude that needs reworking. God may be speaking about a relationship that needs restoration or a step that needs to be taken. If we don’t listen, we will be like the generation of the Israelites who hardened their hearts against the Lord in the desert at Massah and Meribah.

To guard against this, we must have a listening ear that remains open to the Lord's call for us to change. We must recognize how seriously God takes persistent rejection of His voice. We must fight against our tendency to dismiss God's message and His call to change.

So what is necessary to worship the Lord? A responsive heart that rejoices over our powerful Creator God and bows down before our Shepherding God. And a listening ear that is willing to hear and act on the Lord's voice. Notice – no specific instruments were described – no specific or type of songs were listed – It was all about knowing the Lord and responding in an appropriate way to Him.

I wonder what He will say to us about our worship both corporately and individually. I wonder what He wants us to learn this year about Himself and our need to adjust in our worship. What might He say to you about your personal worship of Him during the week when you're alone?

To conclude, I am going to invite us to enter into a time of congregational prayer. You may want to pray alone quietly about what you heard from God's voice this morning. But I also invite you to join with others to ask the Lord to grow in having responsive hearts listening ears to His voice this year. Let us pray together.