

Resounding Praise and Reverent Worship

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Fiona and Van, for leading our worship so helpfully this morning. Two weeks ago, my wife Bridget and I were up on the Isle of Lewis visiting our daughter-in-law Kirstein's parents.

And while we were there, we went along with them to Locke's Free Church. If you went to a free church in Edinburgh, you might well find that the music wasn't very different from what we have here. But up in Lewis, they still sing the Psalms exclusively with a presenter.

And as I was thinking about this psalm we're looking at this morning, I thought it was a good reminder to me that the psalms were intended to be sung as originally written.

Nothing wrong with reading the verses or studying them. We're going to be doing that later on. But originally, they were written to be sung. So for our scripture reading this morning, I thought we'd do something a little bit different.

We're going to listen to someone singing Psalm 95. The words will come up on the screen as well. The words are very faithful to the text. If you want to follow them along, one or two verses repeated, but very faithful to the text.

[1 : 01] So it will tell us what Psalm 95 is about. And be a good reminder to us that we're looking at Israel's songbook at the way in which the people then used to praise God. So let's watch this now.

And whether sung or spoken, that is God's word. And we pray that you'll bless it to us as we think about it this morning. While we were up in Lewis, we also went into Stornoway and spent a day there.

And while we were walking around the streets, we came across a converted shop that had been changed into a church. It was called the New Wine Church. Now, I don't know much about the New Wine Church, but I would guess that their worship, their style of worship, is very different from the free church.

And in the window, they had guitars. But again, a quote from the Psalms, I will sing a new song to the Lord on the ten-stringed lyre. And again, that was a reminder to me of the Psalms, of the variety that we have in them.

There are times in the Psalms when we want to come exuberantly and with lively music as we sing praise to God and rejoice in him. And there are times also when we want, as would be normal in the free church, to be more reverent and reflective in our worship.

[2 : 16] And different people respond to different kinds of worship. But good for all of us to have that variety. And when we're in the Psalms, very often we find that even in one Psalm, there is that variety of worship.

I don't know if you noticed, it went through Psalm 95. It is a classic example of it. It starts off as a really Psalm of praise, of excitement to God, or encouraging people to sing and to shout to him and to worship God.

And then in the middle of verse 7, suddenly it changes completely. And it changes into a warning not to harden our hearts, not to lose the rest that God has promised to us.

And you might wonder, well, why does the Psalm change so dramatically halfway through? Why does it start off with such joy in the Lord and then end with such a strong warning?

Well, let me paint a little picture of what I think might be the background to this Psalm. The Israelites, during the course of the year, they had many festivals.

[3 : 20] Now, their festivals weren't great extravaganzas of music and of drama and dance and so on, like we'll be having in Edinburgh over the next month. Rather, the festivals were celebrations of what God had done for his people and coming to give him thanks and to offer sacrifices to him for them.

And it might have been the festival here was the Feast of Tabernacles. Feast of Tabernacles was kind of a harvest Thanksgiving period, but also a time of remembering that God led the Israelites for 40 years through the wilderness and that he took them safe into the promised land.

Indeed, in the Feast of Tabernacles, the people sometimes lived in little tents or booths as a reminder to themselves of what it had been like in the wilderness. So let's imagine it's the Feast of Tabernacles, and we've got the pilgrims who are coming to the feast.

And they're really excited about it. This is one of the highlights of their year. And as they're walking through the streets, they're saying to people, come on, let's worship God together.

Let's sing and shout for joy to the Lord and remember what a great God he is. And that is, I think, the first half of the psalm. Then they arrive at the temple and the priest is standing there.

[4 : 41] And he says, come in, but remember you're coming to worship the God who's our maker and who is our shepherd. And he's not just someone that we want to sing and shout praise to.

Our God, our great God, is someone we need to bow down before and to recognize his greatness. And let's make sure as we come before God that we don't come with hard hearts, with wrong attitudes, that even though on the surface we appear to be praising God, actually inside, we're wrong.

As your ancestors, speaking to Jews, as your ancestors going through the wilderness, they hardened their hearts for all God's goodness to them. They lost out on the blessing that God had planned for them because they didn't obey him.

I think that might be an explanation of the two halves of the psalm. In the one half, you've got the call to worship and to praise God together. And then in the second half, you have the call to come reverently before God and to examine your hearts and then to worship him.

So I'll just give a brief outline of what I think the two halves are made up of and then we'll go through them in a little bit more detail. So the first half is about acclaiming God's greatness.

[6 : 02] I'll divide that in two. The first two verses are about irrepressible praise. They're the ones that talk about shouting and singing and so on. And then verses three to five talk to us about God's incomparable power, that he is the God who is in control of everything on our earth.

And the second half of the psalm, I've said, is about accepting God's grace. And then in verses six and seven, there's the call to sincere worship. And that's followed then by the solemn warning that I talked about.

So we're going to go through the psalm under these headings and just see what God has to say to us through it. So first, irrepressible praise. So let's read more conventionally this time what the psalm says here.

It says, Psalm 95 is one of a string of psalms through the Psalm 90s, which we're looking at the moment, where there is a great command to come and to praise God.

There are psalms that celebrate God as our king, as the one who is in control of everything, as the one who deserves our praise. And many of them do talk about praising God with singing, with musical instruments, with real joy.

[7 : 30] Not holding back, not coming half-heartedly in worship, but rather as we come to God, really letting go and letting him understand and know how much we appreciate him, and letting everyone else, too, know about the greatness of our God.

If this was, as I was imagining, people walking through the streets of Jerusalem singing, they were letting everyone else know how great God is. And it's good, isn't it, when we can come together, and in that sense, we can let go.

We can come with real joy. Some of the songs we've been singing this morning, which tell us about God's goodness, and rejoice in all that he is, and all that he has done for us.

And we should come with hearts that are full of thankfulness and full of joy, because we have such a great God. He's called, in this verse, the rock of our salvation.

Now, when we think of God as the rock, we probably would immediately think of the rock as being something solid and something you can build on, like the story of the two builders Jesus told in the New Testament.

[8 : 37] The one who built on the rock, their house was secure. The one on the sand, it wasn't. Psalms also talk about being hidden in the rock. So the rock talks about security.

But I think particularly in the context of this psalm, there's a second significance to the rock, because as we'll see a bit later on, one of the events that the psalmist is looking back to is when

Moses struck the rock with his rod, and there was water came from it.

And that water was vitally needed by the Israelites, who were really in danger of dying if they didn't get water. And it speaks of God's salvation, of him being able to save us from the worst things in life.

Looking forward, it looks to the salvation that we have through Jesus. So we're looking to the one who is our rock. We're praising him. We're excited about him.

And we want to give him all the glory. Good if we can come with that attitude. I know people going through difficult times might be difficult to do that. But if we're able to come and to praise God and to sing our worship to him with real joy.

[9 : 48] And why do we do that? Well, says the psalmist, it's because of his incomparable power. So verses 3 to 5. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.

In his hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. So in this part of the psalm, the psalmist is particularly concentrating on God as the all-powerful one.

The one who is the creator, and the one who keeps things moving everywhere on the earth. He is, says the psalmist, the great God.

And he says he's the great King above all gods. Now the psalmist is not thinking that the other gods that people around about the Israelites would worship were in any sense real, in that they existed. But they were real in the sense that people worshipped them and thought that they existed. And the psalmist is saying, our God is incomparable with these false gods that other nations worship.

[10 : 55] And it's possible as he goes through the list in verses 4 and 5, he's thinking particularly about some of the gods, with small g, of the nations round about Israel.

So there was the god Baal or Baal. Now the thing about Baal was he was a god where everything had to be seen and visible. Remember when Elijah was up against the prophets of Baal in the book of 1 Kings, that it was on the mountaintop, on Mount Carmel, that they had this big sacrifice to see which God could answer with fire.

And that was very much taking Baal on on his own territory. He was the god of the mountaintop. So when the psalmist says the mountain peaks belonged to him, may have been thinking about that false god of the nations round about Israel.

The god where things had to be seen. And the idea was that you went up to the top of the mountain, and you acted something out, and Baal would see it, and he would bless you.

Whether it was sacrifices you were making, or there were sexual orges, and all sorts of things, you were supposed to give messages to Baal. The idea was he saw them, and when he saw them, things happened.

[12 : 14] And we don't worship gods like that in that sense in our day. But for many people, it's perhaps not that different. It's wanting to be seen, and to be visible, and to look at the material things round about us.

Because all these sacrifices to Baal and so on, they were really just to win his favor, so that he would bless the people, so they would have good crops, and that the nation would be prosperous. And certainly, we think of it in that kind of sense. A lot of people today, their big aim is that they, that people round about should be prosperous. The markets, getting the markets right, getting more money for myself, getting a better job, and so on.

And that maybe is the modern equivalent of the worship of Baal. And the psalmist says to us, much more important than that is that we worship, that we praise God, that we get our priorities right. Second God was called Molech. Now, Molech was almost the opposite of Baal. Rather than being the god of everything being seen, he was the god of everything that was hidden.

[13 : 29] So it was all the kind of a coat stuff, and things that were hidden away that weren't on the surface. It was kind of almost a secret society type stuff. The Molech dwelt in the underworld, and he could have a very malevolent force on people.

And again, don't have a direct equivalent perhaps today, but there's an awful lot of stuff today that's done in secret that people don't want others to find out about.

I'm sure you've noticed over the last few months the amount of things that have come out that have been secret, the sexual improprieties of lots of celebrities in the past, and some shocking abuse that's been revealed.

Or the kind of secret mining of data and using it in ways that it was never intended to be used, the Facebook thing and so on. Lots of these things that are kind of hidden away in secret, that aren't meant to be revealed, and yet which are very much against the way that people should be behaving.

And perhaps that again is a lesson for us, that we need to be very careful that we are open, that we are transparent, that we've not got lots of things that are hidden away, that our life is open before God, and that our worship for him is true and is sincere.

[14:51] One more example, the god of the sea was called Timat. And he was a god who was characterized by great strength and force.

The force of the sea as their waves crash against the land or against the boat, if you're out in it. And Timat represented the importance of power and of influence.

And again, in our day, many people, the thing that they really want, the thing that's important to them, is to have power and to have influence and to be seen to be important.

And again, we need to say, let's bow down, let's worship our great God. Beside him, we're insignificant. Any power we have, any power that gods of our day, not that we imagine they're gods in the sense they did in the past, but actually in reality, very much similar.

Nothing that they have can compare to our God. And because he is so great, because he is so wonderful, then we should praise him and we should be letting other people know how good our God is.

[16:03] And particularly in the way the psalmist never could, to talk about how God sent his son into the world to be our saviour, how God came as one of us and lived our life and died our death on the cross at Calvary.

And much of our singing this morning has been praising God and the Lord Jesus for that great sacrifice. So we need to be praising God. We need to be coming before him with joyful hearts. As I said, there's then a bit of a change in the psalm. And instead of looking at the importance of praising God with great joy and with singing and with shouting, the psalmist now says, actually, when you come to God, another appropriate way to come is with an attitude of worship and to bow down before him and just be awestruck by how great our God is and then to go away and to obey him.

And that's what the second half of the psalm is about. I've imagined it's the priest saying that to the people. Might have been, might not. But it certainly is trying to get home to us. It's not all about being on the mountaintop and singing and being excited all the time.

We need to come to our God with reverence and with respect and with real awe and to recognize that everything we are comes from him and that we owe him our allegiance.

[17:35] So verse six, he says, come, let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker, for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Now you notice the psalmist has moved here from the general to the specific. So in the early verses, he's talking generally about God, the God of creation, the God of the mountaintops and of the sea and so on.

Now he's talking about our God. The God who is not just the all-powerful one, but the God who cares for you and who cares for me.

And he says, as we come to God and reflect on that, the right way to come is bowing down and symbolically in thought at least, kneeling before the Lord.

He is our maker. He is our God. And he is our shepherd. We're talking earlier to the children, but Psalm 23, there are a way looking at it just now.

[18:39] And there's a bit of an echo of that in verse seven here. We are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Shepherd's job is to look after the sheep.

The sheep's job is to follow the shepherd shepherd and to trust him and to do as he tells them. Now in the olden days in the land of Israel, at the time the psalmist was writing, you wouldn't have a shepherd going out with a sheep dog and using the dog to round them up.

Rather, the shepherd would do it all with his voice. He would call his sheep, his sheep would know his voice, and his sheep would respond. That's the picture the Lord Jesus picks up on in John chapter 10, when he talks about himself as the good shepherd.

And so the psalmist now says, we have this God who's great, who's the master of the universe, who's in charge of everything. He's also our God, and he cares for us, and he loves us.

But our responsibility then is to bow down and to worship and to obey him. The psalmist says, I know that very often people come before God or come into church or temple or whatever in those days, and that's not the way they are.

[20 : 01] And he says, remember what happened in the wilderness. So let's read the remaining verses of the chapter that are called A Solemn Warning. And this is God speaking here.

Today, if you would only hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as you did at Meribah, as you did at that day at Massah in the wilderness. Where your ancestors tested me, they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

For 40 years, I was angry with that generation. I said, there are people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways. So I declared on oath in my anger, they shall never enter my rest. The Sabbath is looking back, particularly at two instances that happened to the Israelites as they went through the wilderness. Remember, the Israelites, under Moses, eventually got free from Pharaoh and the Egyptians after the 10 plagues.

And then there were 40 years wandering around the wilderness before they got to the promised land where they would eventually settle. Didn't need to be 40 years. There were 40 years because they were so disobedient and so mistrusting of God.

[21 : 14] And there were two instances in particular, one near the start of when they set out, and one a bit further on that the psalmist talks about here. First one after the start, the Israelites have come out of Egypt.

They've got stuck in front of the Red Sea with the Egyptians charging up behind them, and God miraculously passed the Red Sea and the Israelites were able to get over and the Egyptians are all drowned in it.

And there were then three incidents where the Israelites felt they had a great need of God. First was they came to some water and discovered the water was undrinkable.

The water was very bitter. And God, through Moses, made that water drinkable, made it sweet.

They then went on a bit and they were grumbling because they were really hungry.

They were saying, why have you brought us, Moses, out of Egypt just to die here in this wilderness? And God graciously provided for them manna that they would get every day or six days a week and the seventh day there'd be enough on the sixth day to do throughout their time in the wilderness.

[22 : 24] He also provided that time quail. So God provided what they needed. They went on a bit and they got thirsty. Now you think at this point, the Israelites would realize, well, God can look after us.

He got us out of Egypt. He got us across the Red Sea. He made that water drinkable. He's given us food to eat. But no, they grumble against Moses. Moses worried they're going to actually kill him that they're so angry with him because they haven't believed in what God is doing for them.

And that's what the reference here to Mereba and Massa is. It's the same place and there are two names for it given in the passage in Exodus chapter 17. And Moses, it was so exasperated with Israel at that point, quite rightly, and God too is exasperated because they've hardened their hearts, they've seen his goodness, and rather than seeing the lack of water as being God testing them and an example for them to show the faith they had in God, rather they made it a test of God.

Well, if he's the real God, can he do something for us? They ignored the good that God had done for them and they tried to get him to do more.

That's incident number one, as I say, near the start of the wanderings. Incident number two in the second part of it is in some ways the culmination of a great period of unbelief by the Israelites.

[23 : 55] Again and again, the Israelites experienced God's grace and they throw it back in his face and they still won't believe. So Moses sent some spies out to spy out the land of Canaan where they were going to settle.

And the spies came back and they said, it's a wonderful land. It's flowing with milk and honey. It's everything we could possibly want. But they said, the people there are really strong.

There are giants among them. They're much bigger than us. There's no way we can go in and conquer that land. And of the 12 spies that went, 10 of them gave that message.

Two of them, Joshua and Caleb, came back and said, yes, with God's help, we can do it. But the 10 who were unbelieving, they won over the people and the people were terrified of going forward.

They didn't believe the God who had led them out of Egypt, who had done so much for them, was able to take them into the promised land. They didn't really understand God because their hearts were hard.

[25 : 04] And the consequence of that was out of the Adai to left Egypt, only two, Joshua and Caleb, made it into the land at the end, which is referenced there to entering my rest.

Only two of those who left Egypt as adults went into Canaan at the end because everyone else refused to believe God. So this is about hard hearts.

Hard hearts and not believing God, not taking up his word and not believing that he can continue to be with us as he has been in the past.

Now these are very important verses. The verses are sometimes missed when this psalm is used as a call to worship as it is in some traditions, but they're verses that are picked up in the book of Hebrews and for two chapters the writer to the Hebrews comments on the significance of these psalms to us today, of these verses to us today.

So it's not just about the Israelites back in the wilderness, back under Moses. It's not just about the immediate audience that the writer is addressing this to and the Israelites as they sing the psalm.

[26 : 14] It is very relevant for us today as Christians. And the message is we must not harden our hearts. It is so easy for us to be led astray by the things of this world and for our hearts to become hard before God.

Now what does a hard heart mean in this context? Well I suppose the first thing it means is that we forget all that God has done for us. That was the great sin of the Israelites wasn't it?

They'd seen everything that God had done and they didn't pay any attention to it. All they could see was the problems and the difficulties they were facing then. They forgot what God had done for them.

And we need to be very careful if we know God if we have put our trust in the Lord Jesus that we don't forget all that he has done for us.

Because if we do forget what he's done for us then as we look forward we won't be able to exercise the faith in him that we need to. We have a God who loved us so much that he sent his son into the world to die for us on the cross and to forgive us for all the wrong that we've done and to bring us into a relationship with him where we can come before him and we can call him our father.

[27 : 40] And we need to look back and say God has been good to me. We also need to look back over our lives and to see times when we have needed God and he has been there and he has helped us.

Now I can't say what these times have been for you but there have been times where I'm sure all of us who know the Lord Jesus when we have struggled and God has been there and he has helped us as he helped the Israelites as they went through the desert.

And we need to remember what God has done for us and that needs to be the thing which gives us faith to know that the God who has been with us in the past will also be with us in the future whatever we may face in this life.

Hard hearts forget all that God has done for them. Second thing I suggest that would be characteristic of hard hearts is not believing what God has promised to us.

So God had promised to the Israelites he'd lead them out of Egypt and he would take them to the land that had been promised many centuries before to Abraham. And the people knew God's word and yet they clearly didn't believe it.

[28 : 53] They spent an awful lot of time going through the wilderness saying I wish we could go back to Egypt. We'd be much better off in Egypt than we are now. It was rubbish. They were slaves in Egypt. They were under oppressors.

They were in a terrible situation and yet they couldn't understand that they needed to follow God's plan and they needed to believe God's word to them.

Important for us too that as we come to look at life and look at his problems that we do it believing that God's word is absolutely true and it can be the thing that gives us the strength to keep going as we trust in him.

If we in any way start to doubt God's word then our faith is failing, our hearts are becoming hard.

Then the third thing I think that characterizes hard hearts is very much a focus on myself rather than looking outward.

So the Israelites were totally focused on them and on their situation and their worries and their anxieties and they weren't really interested in anyone else or in what God was doing for them. [30 : 04] Very easy for us too to have hard hearts and to become very self-centered. Not focusing on God and on his greatness and not focusing either on others and seeing their needs and thinking well how can I help to meet that need.

If we just come along on a Sunday morning looking for something for ourselves and not really concerned about anyone else, if we have no interest in other Christians during the week we just want to get what's best for us, then that is a sign perhaps that our hearts are becoming hard. So hard hearts, you forget what God's done, you don't trust God's word, and you only care about yourself. That's where the Israelites were, and the psalmist and the writer to the Hebrews says there's a real danger that that is where we get to as well.

And yet we shouldn't. We need to remember that the God who didn't spare his own son but gave him up for us all, he will also freely with him give us all things.

In other words, we remember what God has done in giving his son and we recognize that he will give us all things. We need to recognize, as the writer of the Hebrews does, the word of God is living and active and sharp and any two-edged sword.

[31 : 28] And when we hear the word of God, we need to let him speak to us and to change our life, to change our hearts, to bring us closer to Jesus. And we need to remember that if we are going to reflect the love that Jesus had, then we need to be outward thinking, we need to be concerned about others, not to have hard hearts and to be self-centered.

And why is this important? Well, says the psalmist, it's so that you can enter God's rest. His race in this desert never got to enter God's rest, in that case, the promised land.

Writer of the Hebrews says, picking up this psalm, be careful that you don't miss out on God's rest as well. And I think there are two aspects to God's rest. One of it is the kind of present day, that as we experience God's rest, it is a peace, it's an awareness of God's presence, it is not being too taken up with events that we can't see, that God is there and God will help us through it.

So it is being able to rest in God and know he has done for us. And then there's the forward-looking aspect, that those who know and who love the Lord Jesus, there is an ultimate rest for them when work is over, when this life is behind us and we go to be with the Lord Jesus and to be with him forever.

And that in a sense is what is symbolized in Israel, it's going to the promised land, it is us if we know and trust the Lord Jesus entering into his rest at the end of our lives.

[33 : 04] The psalmist says make sure that you get that rest. And one other thing he says, today. And the writer of Hebrews again picks it up, he says today, if you would only hear his voice.

Forty years the Israelites wandered through the wilderness. Forty years they had opportunities to believe God and to obey him and to have the assurance of his rest.

Again and again as they failed him, God was willing to overlook that and to continue to bless them despite the fact that they didn't trust him.

but in the end it was too late for them and they didn't get into the promised land. And this I think is designed to bring a sense of real urgency to us.

Getting myself right with God whether that's trusting the Lord Jesus for the first time or coming back to him and confessing the hardness has come into my heart.

[34 : 02] That is something that can't keep getting put off. It will ultimately be too late. Today is the day of salvation. Today is the time when we need to get ourselves right before God.

So as I said a psalm of two halves. One half which is joyful and celebratory and another half which is really quite solemn and is designed to make us think and examine ourselves before God.

And let's all of us today, let's rejoice in what God has done for us but let's also examine our hearts. Heart disease is one of the biggest killers in our country and in the world today.

And most heart disease is caused largely by lifestyle, by what we eat, by not getting enough exercise and so on.

And perhaps that is one thing that I can leave with you as a practical thing to think about as we take this psalm away. how can I have a healthy heart before God?

[35 : 08] Well it's partly about taking in the right things, it is about reading God's word and meditating on it. And can I challenge everyone this week to spend time before God reading and meditating on his word.

And it's also about what I do. It's about the exercise we like when we're talking about our physical hearts. And this week, let's go out with hearts that are soft and that are willing to serve God and to serve others and to show other people the love of the Lord Jesus for us.

Let's not be those with hard hearts, let's be those who go and who listen and who obey and who then can rejoice in our great God and in all that he has done for us.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you for your word, we thank you for the joy that is in the psalm and yet the solemnity.

And we pray that you will give us that joy as we think about all that you have done for us. But we pray also that you will soften our hearts, that you will remove indifference from us, that you will make us wholly committed to you, that we will listen to your word and that we will believe it and that we will obey it.

[36 : 26] For some, that might be for the first time believing that Jesus came and died for their sins and putting their trust in him. And for some of us it might be a returning to you, a softening of our hearts as we recognise how far we've gone from you and how much we need to change to get back to the rest and the joy that you promised to us.

Help us to examine ourselves today and to respond appropriately, that we may have a joy in the Lord, that we may have a real rest in him. We give you thanks and we commit ourselves to you. In the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.