

“WORSHIP—OR ELSE!!!”

Psalm 95 March 15, 2020

Most of us do not like ultimatums because they force us to make difficult decisions, usually under pressure. I don't know about you but they tend to make me dig in my heels and either say no or choose to do the opposite! The late Jack Benny had a running joke about his stinginess. He used to do a gag where a robber stuck a gun in his face and said, “Your money or your life!” There was a long pause. The gunman snarled, “Well?” Jack said, “Don't rush me! I'm thinking about it.”

It's seems to me that very few of us would think about worshipping God as an ultimatum. We're pretty casual about it. If it happens, that's nice. If it doesn't happen, no big deal. Maybe we'll catch it next time around. We don't see it as eternally significant. In academic circles, professors know the term, “publish or perish.” If you don't publish articles in academic journals, you may lose your job. But God says to us, “Worship or perish!” And He isn't talking about losing our jobs, but our souls! The abrupt ultimatum of Psalm 95 is,

**We can either worship God with great joy  
or harden our hearts and perish.**

Worship-or-else!! The psalm falls into two halves. The first half (1-7a) is an invitation to worship the Lord, who is a great God, King, and Creator. Then, rather abruptly (7b-11), the psalmist warns us to hear God's voice and not harden our hearts, as Israel did in the wilderness. It ends suddenly with God's frightening warning (95:11). “Therefore I swore in my anger, truly they shall not enter into My rest.” Period!! End of song! The ultimatum: Worship God or else you will perish!”

Maybe you are thinking, “Yes, but this was in the Old Testament. We live in New Testament era. We're not under law, but under grace.” But before you shrug off the warning of Psalm 95, you might want to recall the author of Hebrews in the New Testament cites the entirety of the warning section in Hebrews 3:7-11. He again quotes verse 11 in Hebrews 4:3, and verse 7b in Hebrews 4:7. Derek Kidner observes that the Hebrews quote “forbids us to confine its thrust to Israel.” He adds, “The “Today” of which it speaks is this very moment; the ‘you’ is none other than ourselves, and the promised ‘rest’ is not

Canaan but salvation.” So we dare not shrug off the serious ultimatum of this psalm! Worship—or perish!!

Also, note that the first half of the psalm emphasizes God’s absolute sovereignty. He is the great God and a great King above all supposed Gods. He created the entire earth, and so He owns it. Further, He is our maker. He owns us and is over us just as a shepherd governs his flock. But, before we mistakenly conclude that since God is our sovereign, there isn’t much that we can do, the second half of the psalm emphasizes our responsibility. The psalmist pointedly appeals to us not to harden our hearts against the sovereign Lord. We can’t blame anyone but ourselves if we disregard God’s warning here. God’s sovereignty does not excuse us of responsibility to worship Him with tender hearts.

So, Psalm 95 presents us with two ways to live. We can become people of joyful praise to God (1-7a), or people who grumble and harden our hearts toward God, in spite of His many blessings (7b-11). In the words of Hebrews 3:12, after citing Psalm 95:7b-11, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.”

**The invitation: Worship God with rejoicing, reality, reverence, and relationship.**

Soft hearts are worshipping hearts. Soft hearts submit to God’s rightful lordship over all. Soft hearts submit to God’s discipline. They trust Him for His care as the Good Shepherd.

How does the psalm entreat us to worship God? With rejoicing!!! Note the exuberance of verses 1-2: “O come, let us sing for you to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalm.” Does that describe your heart as you come daily into God’s presence and as you gather with the saints on the Lord’s Day? There is no room in those verses for apathetically mumbling through a few songs while your mind is elsewhere! As Kidner says, “The full-throated cries urged in the verbs of verses 1 and 2 suggest an acclamation fit for a king who is the savior of his people.”

This so goes with our Wesleyan tradition where our founder urged us: “Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of

Satan.” But in his DIRECTIONS FOR SINGING at the beginning of our hymnal Wesley also wrote: “Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.”

Notice that in the context of shouting joyfully to God, the psalmist calls Him, “the rock of our salvation.” In this psalm, which refers to Israel in the wilderness, the rock that literally saved the nation was the rock that Moses struck, which then flowed with water (Exod. 17:1-7). Paul tells us that that rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). If Christ is the rock of your salvation, who has given you living water for your soul, shouldn’t you come before Him with joy and thanksgiving?

**Worship God in the reality of His presence and His person (95:2-5).**

“Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving” (95:2a) God is present everywhere, of course, but He is especially present when His people gather to worship Him. After the incident with the golden calf, Moses told the Lord, “If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here.” (Exod. 33:15) He knew how vital it was to have God’s real presence with him because the task of leading two million people through a barren wilderness was humanly impossible. Although we are fewer in number, we would still be attempting the impossible and wasting our time if we meet each week and God is not with us.

Verse 3 begins with the word “for,” giving the reason why we should worship God so exuberantly. He mentions three things: The Lord is a great God; He is a great King above all gods; and, He is the great Creator.

As Psalm 113:3-5 exclaims, “From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised. The Lord is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned on high?” Or, Psalm 145:3: “Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised, and his greatness no one can fathom.”

He is the great Creator. “In whose hands are the depths of the earth, the peak of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land” (95:4-5). You can dig down to the earth’s molten core, and it’s all in God’s hand. The oil is His. Mount Everest belongs to Him. He made the sea and every creature in it. He formed the dry land. The point is, unlike the idols of the pagans, who were localized gods, the god of

the mountains, the god of the sea—The Lord made it all and owns it all. And even more, He also made us: He is our Maker (95:6). Thus we should worship Him in the reality of His presence and His person.

We worship God with reverence and in relationship. “Come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker” (95:6). The verb translated “worship” means to prostrate yourself. So all three verbs in verse six are “concerned with getting low before God” (Kidner) So while our worship should be exuberant and joyful, it must also be reverent. We are worshipping our maker!

“For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand” (95:7). Kidner again puts it aptly, “The familiar metaphors of verse 7 express His commitment, which is constant (*our God*), and His care, which is all-sufficing (*his pasture*) and personal (*his hand*).” Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep and His sheep know Him (John 10:14). We worship Him in close relationship to Him, as His people.

So the appealing invitation is, “Come, worship our God with rejoicing, in the reality of His presence and person, with reverence, and in relationship to Him as our Good Shepherd. But, what if we don’t worship Him? Do we shrug our shoulders and go, “Whatever! No big deal!”? No, the Lord gives us an ultimatum:

**The ultimatum: Harden your heart against the Lord and perish (95:7b-11).**

The command is given in 7b-8a: “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” The rest of the psalm is an illustration of Israel in the wilderness as a people who hardened their hearts against God. When they sided with the ten spies, who thought that the giants in the land of Canaan were too hard to conquer and they wanted to return to Egypt, they said (Num. 14:2), “would that we had died in this wilderness!” Because they disbelieved God’s promise to give them the land, He determined that according to their word, they all would perish in the wilderness. Of those who were twenty years old and upward, who had seen God’s miraculous deliverance from Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb would enter the land (Num. 14:28-32).

Both in Psalm 95 and in Hebrews 3, where it is cited, the warning is directed to those who were *associated with God’s people*, but their hearts were not right before Him. Those in Israel had seen God do stupendous miracles in the plagues against Egypt, while protecting them they watched God part the Red Sea

and take them across on dry land. They watched Him bring the sea back on the Egyptian army. Then they went three days into the wilderness and found no water. After witnessing all of those miracles, you would think that they would have said, “God, You didn’t bring us this far to have us die of thirst. You can provide water for us and our children. Please bring us to some water.” But instead, they grumbled. God directed Moses to throw a tree into some bitter water and it became sweet. (Exodus 15:22-26)

The point is, it is possible to associated with the people of God and yet to harden your heart against God when trials come. He’s meeting your needs, but He’s not doing it in the way that you want Him to do it. You want a trail free life. You don’t like His discipline, which is for your ultimate good. So you complain against Him or, even worse, turn back to the world. Be careful!! Great privileges do not guarantee responsive hearts.

So the ultimatum or warning against hardening your heart is written to professing believers who are prone to grumble when trials hit. The danger is that if you keep grumbling against God and don’t worship Him with a thankful heart, it may reveal that you’re not a genuine believer. You may be in danger of incurring His anger and not entering into the eternal rest of His salvation.

All of that being said I am going to stop there for this Sunday and perhaps conclude with a bit more next Sunday. However, in closing I would like to share a portion of Pastor Pat’s message to his congregation at Frontier UMC. I have requested his permission and been granted it. He begins with words of Scripture that I think are very apt to our situation this morning:

*“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was not dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” -- Matthew 6:27-34*

“Worrying about something doesn’t help solve the problem. True, we need to spend time thinking and working hard to devise and implement solutions. However, the worry that causes the sleepless night and upset stomach doesn’t help.

The two tools most effective for me in reducing worry in my life are perspective and prayer... Looking back, I can see that even the things that didn’t end the way I wanted them to, ended completely unlike any of the doomsday scenarios that had run through my head. The perspective I have gained from this allows me to face any new obstacles that come along with a more realistic outlook, rather than panic or dread. It also allows me to resist the panic and dread that we are so often told we are supposed to feel by segments of society.

Secondly, when I do sense a growing worry, I find that in prayer it can be calmed. Remember, God is bigger than any problem we may face and we can go to Him for help. Through prayer we can grow to better accept that, although things may not turn out the way we want them to, God will use all things, all circumstances, good and bad, for the good of those who love him.

All we can do is our best. All we can do is pray for God’s guidance and then work our tails off and know that (to borrow a sports analogy) we left everything on the field. From there we just have to have faith that God loves us, is guiding us, and is strengthening us through all of our lives. From there, we go on, trusting in His plan and believing in his love.” We can all do that, right? Right?!?! With God’s help.... Amen and amen.