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Psalm 95

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Psalm 95

(NRSV)

Introduction to Psalm 95

This almost seems to be two Psalms: verses 1-7a are a call to worship the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth; and verses 7b-11 are a stern warning not to be rebellious. Thus, we might look at this Psalm as a prophetic liturgy blending a hymn with a prophetic oracle. Joined as these two themes are into one Psalm, we must then think of the overarching theme to be something like this: **Genuine worship includes obedience and faith.**

It might be well to begin by reading Exodus 17:1-7. Israel had just been rescued from bondage in Egypt. But, although they were journeying toward it, they had not yet arrived at Sinai where God gave them His Law. When they arrived at a place called Rephidim, they did not find the all-important necessity for life, namely, water. They found fault with Moses' leadership, and demanded water. Moses in turn accused them not only of finding fault with him, but even more seriously of putting the LORD to the test. When Moses brought his dilemma to the LORD, the LORD provided water out of a Rock at Horeb. Moses called the name of that place Massah (Proof, Testing) and Meribah (Contention, Quarrel), because there Israel had found fault with Moses and put the LORD to the proof. Their question, "Is the LORD among us or not?" demonstrated their lack of faith, and was an insult to God, suggesting that, though God had shown Himself powerful enough to rescue them from the Pharaoh of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea, He was unwilling or unable to carry through His rescue operation.

Later in their wilderness wandering they arrived at the borders of the Promised Land, sent some spies into the Land, who reported back that, although it was goodly Land, flowing with milk and honey, they were no match for the currently existing inhabitants should they try to conquer it (Numbers 13:27-28). This elicited a cry of despair from the People of Israel, who responded by calling for another leader to take them back to Egypt, over the protest of Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:4-10). The LORD threatened to disinherit the Israelites (Numbers 14:12), but at Moses' intercession, God relented (Numbers 14:20). Though God pardoned Israel for these transgressions, He nevertheless consigned them to wandering a full forty years before they would enter the Promised Land. In Numbers 14:22-23 the LORD charges that Israel had seen His rescuing Glory in Egypt, yet had put Him to the proof ten times. Therefore none of that generation "who have despised Me shall see the Promised Land."

Still later (Numbers 20:2ff.), Israel once again came to a place without water at a place called Kadesh. Once again the Israelites complained against the LORD, and once again Moses was commanded to call forth water from a rock. Because Moses did not *speak* to the Rock as He had been commanded, but instead *struck* the Rock with his rod, God did not allow Moses to lead Israel into the Promised Land, but appointed another to be that leader. And once again these were called the waters of Meribah, the place of contention. Interesting here is that by the time of Jesus, the teaching rabbis, noticing that there was a mention of a rock at the beginning the wilderness wanderings and another toward the end of those wanderings, interpreted those two as the same rock that had followed the Israelites around the wilderness. The rabbinically trained Apostle Paul also so interpreted those two rock passages, only he went further to identify that Rock as Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4), who supplied Israel with supernatural (or spiritual) drink. Now, on to the Psalm.

Vv. 1-2

- ¹ O 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!**

This is a call to worship the LORD. Recall that according to Exodus 3, the LORD is the translation of the name of Yahweh, the compassionate, promising, rescuing God. When He is here called “the Rock of our Salvation,” this may be a conventional image; or it may be a faint echo of Exodus 17, the Rock from which flowed the life-giving waters.

The appropriate response to this salvation is singing, or the kind of singing which may generously be called a joyful noise, and praise and thanksgiving.

Vv. 3-5

- 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 the dry land, which his hands have formed.**

The LORD is great and is King above all other gods because in His immensity He is the Creator of heaven and earth, its depths and its heights, the land and the sea. The Psalmist does not intend to imply the actual existence of pagan deities, but stresses the sovereignty of the one true God over all the earth and the rest of creation.

Vv. 6-7a

- ⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!**
**^{7a} For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.**

The LORD is not merely a far off Creator God, He is our Maker. He is not only God-in-general, but He is our God. That makes us a peculiar People, sheep in the flock of this God. We are His and He is ours (see the Prayer on page 4).

Vv. 7b-9

- ^{7b} O that today (now, this moment) you (the reader) would listen to his voice!**
**⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,**
**⁹ when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.**

But now the warning, lest we in our time, take the goodness of the LORD for granted. Genuine worship includes listening obediently and faithfully. Not to listen to the Voice of God *now*

(today) risks the danger of spiritual deafness developing into a habit, and habitually not listening to the Voice of God runs the risk of this becoming a hardened posture. By the time Numbers 20 came up, Israel had already put the LORD to the proof ten times.

The decisive factor in Israel's rebellion is that they had seen the LORD's work. They had been eye-witnesses to the great Exodus display of God's power on their behalf, of showing compassion to His chosen people, and of being faithful to His promises. That should have been enough to create a strong faith in the God who, having made promises to Abraham, went about the divine business of showing Himself faithful to His promises. Exodus was simultaneously a fulfillment of God's earlier promises, and itself the promise of more yet to come.

There is the problem with what the Psalmist calls "testing the LORD" and "putting Him to the proof." We demand that God give us some proof, beyond what He has already given us. It is not as though God has not revealed His intentions to us clearly; it is rather that we do not trust the God who has so revealed Himself. We demand more and "better" proof. That is contempt for what God has already given. The "more and better" is really another kind of proof, one in which we try to hold God accountable to us, rather than our giving Him an account of ourselves by entrusting ourselves to his already revealed, if still partially hidden, mercy. You will remember that this strong temptation is one which Jesus also faced and overcame with the words, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the LORD your God to the test' " (Matthew 4:7).

For Israel, that basic account which God had already given and in which He truly, if not yet fully, showed us what kind of God He is, is the story of the Exodus, the follow-up of a faithful God to the promises sworn to Abraham. A Christian reading and use of this Psalm would look to the fulfillment of the Promise of the Exodus in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus. As St. Paul said, "That Rock of Salvation is Christ."

Vv. 10-11

- ¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter My Rest."**

It is strong language that God uses of Israel; I am disgusted with them. His indictment is that they have hearts that go astray; that is, they are disloyal to God and give their loyalty to something other. That is so strong a temptation because God's ways are so different from our ways. In His way He shows himself trustworthy, once and for all, by raising Jesus, his Son, from the dead (prefigured in the Exodus from Egypt), as He had promised He would. In our way we do not want to entrust ourselves to such a God unless He proves Himself over and over. We prefer sight to do our bidding, God, and we will determine if we will surrender control to you. We are tempted to vote against faith; God's way is to ask us to surrender ourselves to God by entrusting ourselves radically to Him. That is the only way to our salvation. Recall Isaiah 55:6-9:

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God's disgust is intermixed with generous amounts of anger. The rebellion of His People is so far removed from His plan for them; they are not fit for entry into His Rest, the climax and goal of His intention for them. The generation of His People who rebelled was excluded from the goal. And that was their punishment. God in effect says, "You want to go back to Egypt? You do not want the Future I have prepared for you? Then have it your way! No way will I let you into My Rest!" This is a terrible verdict on them and a solemn warning to us.

There is one place in the New Testament where there is explicit reference to this Psalm. The unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews applies this Psalm to the Christian community. The Psalm makes its appeal, "O that today you would listen!" As long as it is called today, that is, as long as God does not bring the succession of todays to an end with the end of the world, so long is the appeal in force. **"But take care, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. Exhort one another that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"** (Hebrews 3:12-13). It is again a warning not to take the grace of God for granted.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 95:

Almighty God, neither let us go astray as did those who murmured in the desert, nor let us be torn apart by discord. With Jesus as our shepherd, bring us to enjoy the unity for which he prays; and to you be the glory and the praise now and forever. Amen.

A Prayer appropriate at verse 7:

Lord, we are your people, the sheep of your flock.
Heal the sheep who are wounded,
Touch the sheep who are in pain,
Clean the sheep who are soiled,
Warm the lambs who are cold.
Help us to know the Father's love through Jesus the Shepherd and through the Spirit.
Help us to lift up that love and show it all over this land.
Help us to build love on justice and justice on love.
Help us to believe mightily, to hope joyfully, to love divinely.
Renew us that we may help renew the face of the earth.
Amen.

Unrelated, but instructive:

Matt Groening, creator and producer of “The Simpsons,” was interviewed by the *New York Times* (Dec. 27, 1998): “How do you respond to critics who consider Bart Simpson a dreadful role model for children?” Groening: “I now have a 7-year old boy and a 9-year old boy, so all I can say is, I apologize. Now I know what you guys were talking about. My standard comment is, If you don’t want your kids to be like Bart Simpson, don’t act like Homer Simpson.” ... “Technically, I’m an agnostic, but I definitely believe in hell – especially after watching the fall TV schedule.”

Walter E. Keller

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