

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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| <b>Series:</b> | <b>The Psalms</b>              |  | Pastor/Teacher |
| <b>Number:</b> | <b>27</b>                      |  | Mason Depew    |
| <b>Text:</b>   | <b>Psalm 95</b>                |  |                |
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### A HOLLOW KINGDOM

The Introduction: Psalm 95 celebrates God's rule over all of creation, and his special covenant relationship with the people of Israel. In the middle of this psalm, however, it takes a darker turn and raises a difficult question: what good will God's rule be, if his own subjects have contempt for him? If they could not care less about his decrees, how can he truly rule them? If the hearts of the people are not attuned to their king's will, the kingdom is divided against itself and cannot stand.

#### 1. Verses 1-6: A Call to Worship

- a. The first two verses are a summons to the Temple for worship. Some have speculated that because Psalm 90 begins with speaking of the Lord as the "rock of our salvation," that its occasion was some great national victory, but this psalm would make for a great start to any liturgy.
  - i. There is a strong pattern throughout Scripture of the most joyful worship following God's greatest acts of salvation. The Song of Moses in Exodus 15 follows the Red Sea, and the Song of the Well in Numbers 21 follows the Lord's provision of water. Deborah and Barak sing their song in Judges 5 after a glorious victory over the Canaanites. Many of David's psalms are credited to particular moments when the Lord rescued him from his enemies.<sup>1</sup>
  - ii. Note that this is addressing God as Israel's own covenant Lord. This is significant because the psalm is going to move toward contemplating God as ruler of all creation in the next few verses, but then return to his special relationship with Israel in verse 7.
- b. Verses 3-5 portray the uniqueness of the God of Israel over and against all the pagan gods worshipped by the gentiles. While the pagans claimed their various gods each created *parts* of the world, the Lord actually made *all* the depths and heights of creation.
  - i. There are some who take statements like verse 3 as indicating that the God of Israel was originally seen as just one among many gods. This misses, however, that Israel's claims about her God were exhaustive, so that there was no room left for any other gods. If Yahweh created and rules literally everything, what is there left for any other gods to do? Passages like this one in Psalm 95 show that any other gods, if they did exist, would be entirely irrelevant and deserve no worship.
  - ii. These verses express the totality of God's creation through pairs of opposites: the depths and heights in verse 4, and the sea and the dry land in verse 5. This rhetorical device actually echoes Genesis 1:1, when God created "the heavens and the earth."

<sup>1</sup> Compare these Old Testament examples with the songs in Revelation 5 and 15.

## 2. Verses 7-11: The Outward Call

- a. “For” at the start of verse 7 could also be translated “Truly!”<sup>2</sup> In this view, the psalmist is not saying the Israelites should just worship God because he is *their* God. He is giving an additional reason for worship on top of what he has already said, that God is the Creator and ruler over all the world. They are to worship him as *both* their Creator and Savior.
- b. “Meribah” and “Massah” in verse 8 refers to an infamous event on the road out of Egypt in which the Israelites had no water, and quickly jumped to accusing Moses of trying to kill them all with thirst. There was a way to ask for water humbly and with faith in God’s gracious provision, but this was *not* it. Moses interceded on behalf of Israel, as he often did, even though he was afraid they were about to stone him.
  - i. “Massah” and “Meribah” are actually both names for the same place, which the Lord gives in Exodus 17:7. “Massah” means “testing” and “Meribah” means “quarrelling.”
  - ii. According to Psalms 95:9, 106:14, and Exodus 17:7, the one being tested here was *God himself*. According to Psalm 81:7, on the other hand, God put Israel to the test at Meribah. So which is it? The answer is actually *both*, because Israel tried to reverse the relationship, as if they were the masters and God was their servant.
  - iii. In what sense was it a test for God? The Israelites were testing his patience and commitment to the covenant with Abraham. In what sense was it a test for Israel? Because it exposed what was in their hearts all along: unbelief. Psalm 95:10 makes it especially clear that this is *not* because they had faith and lost it; it is because they had not known God *all along*. They exposed their own lack of trust by asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?”
  - iv. This was inexcusable, because the very same people had seen God’s plagues in Egypt and crossed through the Red Sea on dry land. As Psalm 95:9 says, they “put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.”
  - v. Therefore God rejected that generation and let them perish in the wilderness without seeing his promised land. This is what verse 11 means by God swearing in his wrath that they shall not enter into his rest.
- c. Hebrews 4:7 quotes these verses of Psalm 95 and attributes them to David. Earlier in the same chapter, the author of Hebrews makes it quite clear that unbelief was Israel’s main problem: “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.”<sup>3</sup> The Word, by itself, has no effect on anyone. Sincere faith is absolutely required.
  - i. The author of Hebrews then goes on to make a fascinating point about this “rest” which God denied to the faithless at Meribah. Although in the immediate context of Exodus 17, that rest was clearly the promised land, Hebrews 4:7 says that was only a type or a shadow of a greater rest. This is clear, he argues, from the fact that David wrote Psalm 95 and it was sung in the promised land many centuries later. If the physical land of Canaan was all the rest that the Lord had in mind, Psalm 95 would make a different threat because the people writing and hearing it were already there.
  - ii. The “rest” God warns us against missing in Psalm 95 is actually everlasting life itself. It is what Adam was supposed to enter into if he had fully shown forth the image of God and, like God, if his work had been found “very good” he would have

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<sup>2</sup> Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 720.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 4:2

entered into rest with him.<sup>4</sup> Rest from all the toil and misery of this fallen world, rest from all our enemies who constantly threaten us, and rest from everything that makes us feel distant from God and one another.

- d. God outwardly calls everyone who hears his Word to trust in his promises and be saved, but this calling is only effective for the elect. This is why the Reformed term the call of those who are truly saved as “effectual calling,” to distinguish it from the outward call that everyone receives. Despite what some think, Reformed theology is in no way opposed to the free offer of the Gospel. The Canons of Dort (the source of the famous “five points”) actually say preachers should proclaim the Gospel “to all persons *promiscuously* and *without distinction*.”<sup>5</sup> Who is predestined to which place is something for God to know, and us to find out at the end of history. In the here and now God wants us to speak to all people as if they might be chosen and warn them against hardening their hearts.
3. People have often mocked the idea that the Lord rules his kingdom in the hearts of his people. While there is certainly more to the idea of the Kingdom of God, Psalm 95 nevertheless shows that God as King (verse 3) is seriously concerned with the hearts of his people (verse 8). If the hearts of his people are hardened and have no love for his Word, the Kingdom is being built on a rotten foundation that cannot survive testing. The very last thing God wants is for his kingdom to be a nation of hypocrites, like a hollowed out, dead tree or a whitewashed tomb.<sup>6</sup>
    - a. This is exactly what Stephen accuses the Jews who stoned him of in Acts 7:51: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” The Holy Spirit must overcome this resistance in the sinful human heart if that heart is ever to have true faith.
    - b. This is why, under the New Covenant, as the Apostles spread “the good news of the Kingdom,”<sup>7</sup> the Holy Spirit was the one who was really doing all the heavy lifting.<sup>8</sup> Without him, all their preaching and praying would have been totally in vain.
    - c. People in the charismatic movement are prioritizing the wrong gifts of the Holy Spirit. Rather than focus on the outward, miraculous *signs* of the Spirit’s power, such as healing, speaking in tongues, etc., we should desire the transformation of our own hearts above all else. From the Spirit we need faith before anything else, and then all the gifts that follow in Galatians 5:22-23: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”
    - d. This is why the Reformed confessions and catechisms generally deal with sanctification, which is all growth in the Christian life, under the work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is implied by Hebrews 4:4-5 treating the promise of rest to us as the same as God’s rest on the seventh day.

<sup>5</sup> Canons of Dort, II.5

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 23:27-28

<sup>7</sup> For example, in Acts 8:12 and 19:8.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in Acts 6:10, 10:44-48, and 16:6-7.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Belgic Confession, Art. XXIV says, “We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost, doth regenerate and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin.” Also, the Heidelberg Catechism Answer 24 divides the Apostles Creed up into three main sections, “the first is about God the Father and our creation; the second about God the Son and our redemption; the third about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.”

4. The Holy Spirit does not just work faith as a generic virtue in us, but specifically faith *in Christ*. He does this primarily as we hear the Law and the Gospel preached and feast on his grace in the Supper, week after week. Therefore it is fitting to conclude by reflecting on how Christ was a better mediator than Moses, and passed the test which the Israelites failed.
- a. The most obvious parallel is with our Lord's temptations in the wilderness, of course. Their duration, 40 days and 40 nights, is clearly meant to reference several other periods of testing in the Old Testament, including the wilderness wanderings. Psalm 95:10 makes direct reference to the period of 40 years which were their punishment.
  - b. In addition to all the similarities, notice that this is in some ways a direct *reversal* of the Meribah incident. Israel was tested first, then punished for 40 years because they failed, but God still provided food and water for them throughout the whole time. Christ endured 40 days without food even though *he had not sinned*, and explicitly *refused* to put God to the test even though his situation was so much more severe.<sup>10</sup>
  - c. This testing proves that Jesus Christ is the greater Israel. Where Israel was supposed to be God's loyal son,<sup>11</sup> but acted more like the Prodigal, the only-begotten Son never wavered, not even once.
  - d. There is no better text in the New Testament to demonstrate this than Philippians 2:4-16. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death**, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, **in heaven and on earth and under the earth**, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for **it is God who works in you, both to will and to work** for his good pleasure. Do all things without **grumbling or disputing**, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, **holding fast to the word of life**, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain." As we strive to live the Christian life, humbling ourselves and being tested like Christ was, we must remember two key things from this passage.
    - i. Our Savior went first, and without any sin whatsoever, to provide us with both forgiveness of sins and his own righteousness as a covering. There is no part of our salvation which is paid for or caused by our own works.
    - ii. Anything good in us at all, from the faith that holds fast to the word of life to all its fruits in love and good works, is really the work of God. We are not partners with him. We are tools in his hands, trusting that he gives our lives purpose and will not let our hearts fail when tested. It is for this reason that God has "put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."<sup>12</sup> If you truly trust in Christ now, you *do not* have the hardened heart that the Israelites showed at Meribah.

<sup>10</sup> As Matthew 4:7 and Luke 4:12 both record, Jesus directly told Satan, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" This is clearly language drawn from the incident at Meribah.

<sup>11</sup> "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.' If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" - Exodus 4:22-23

<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:22