

## **PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

*Leader's Guide, Lesson Seven*

# **PSALM 95**

## **Today, If You Hear His Voice**

### **Lesson at a glance**

Psalm 95 begins as a joyful call to worship and turns, without warning, into a sermon about the wilderness generation who sang, saw, and still perished. The lesson walks the class through the psalm in its own setting, back to Massah and Meribah in Exodus 17 and to the refusal at Kadesh in Numbers 14, and then into Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13, where the Hebrew writer takes this psalm and preaches it to Christians. This is the perseverance lesson of the series. Its aim is not to frighten anyone but to make the class take the word "today" seriously, to show that faith in Hebrews is a trust that obeys, and to leave every person more watchful over their own heart and more attentive to a drifting brother or sister.

### **Goals for this session**

First, that each person would understand Psalm 95 in its own setting, as a call to worship that carries a warning drawn from Israel's own history.

Second, that the class would see how the writer of Hebrews argues, and would learn to follow an argument in Scripture rather than collect isolated verses.

Third, that each person would understand from the text itself that a child of God can harden his heart and fail to enter God's rest, and that this is precisely why Scripture warns us.

Fourth, that the class would take up the daily work of Hebrews 3:13, exhorting one another while it is still called today, and that anyone who has not yet obeyed the gospel would feel the urgency of that word.

### **Preparing to lead**

Read Psalm 95 out loud several times early in the week, and stop at the seam in verse 7. Then read Exodus 17:1 to 7 and Numbers 13 and 14 in full. The lesson only quotes fragments of those chapters; you need the whole story in your head, particularly the detail that these were people God had already redeemed.

Read Hebrews 3 and 4 at one sitting, then again with a pen, marking every connecting word. Then read Hebrews 6:4 to 6 and 10:26 to 31 slowly. Someone in your class will raise them, and you want to have thought about them before Sunday rather than during it.

Pray for the people in the room by name. Pray specifically for anyone you know to be drifting, for anyone who has a wandering child, and for anyone who has never obeyed the gospel. Pray that you would teach this lesson with warmth and not with a frown, because a warning delivered coldly will not be heard.

## **Sensitive topics in this lesson**

People who have fallen away. Almost every class contains someone who has a son, a daughter, or a spouse who once walked with the Lord and no longer does. When you talk about the wilderness generation and about Hebrews 6, remember that for some in the room this is not theory. Do not use those passages as a hammer. Point out that Hebrews addresses the drifting person as a brother and calls the church to go after him, and that the whole reason a warning exists is that the outcome is not yet settled.

Fear and a tender conscience. Some faithful Christians hear a lesson like this and go home certain they have committed the unpardonable sin. Watch for the person who gets very quiet. Make the point plainly, more than once, that the anxiety of a soft heart is the opposite of the hardness Hebrews warns about, and end the class in Hebrews 4:16 rather than in Hebrews 4:13.

Assurance and eternal security. There will likely be someone in the room, perhaps a visitor, who has been taught that a saved person cannot be lost. Do not name groups and do not go looking for a fight. Simply keep the class in the text and let the text talk. Ask the questions the passage itself asks: who is "brothers" in 3:12, what does "if" mean in 3:6 and 3:14, and why would God warn people about something that could not happen. That approach persuades; argument by label does not.

People who have never been baptized. Question 15 makes the invitation directly, and Psalm 95 gives it its urgency. Keep the appeal exactly as the lesson words it: talk with the teacher or an elder this week. Do not put anyone on the spot in front of the class, but do make it clear that you would be glad to sit down with anyone afterward.

Grief over a hard season. Massah and Meribah were born out of real thirst, and Kadesh was born out of real fear. Some in your class are in genuine hardship right now. Be careful not to leave the impression that struggling is the same as hardening. The wilderness generation's sin was not that they were thirsty; it was that they concluded God was not among them and turned back.

## **Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule**

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 95 aloud in its entirety, without comment, and let the turn at verse 7 land on its own.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask each person to name something they once did every day and no longer do at all, and how the change happened.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

## Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 4 (the word "today"), 6 (what "my rest" meant first), 8 (who the warning is addressed to), 9 (disobedience and unbelief as one failure), and 11 (what the rest actually is). If time runs short, protect 9. It is the theological center of the lesson.

## Notes on key questions

**Question 2.** The commands in 95:1 to 5 are come, sing, make a joyful noise, and come into His presence with thanksgiving. The reasons are all statements about who God is: He is the rock of our salvation, a great God, a great King above all gods, and the Maker and Owner of the whole created order, from the depths of the earth to the sea and the dry land. The point worth drawing out is that biblical praise is always grounded in fact. The psalm never tells Israel to work up a feeling; it tells them what is true and lets the shouting follow.

**Question 4.** The speaker changes in the middle of verse 7. Up to that point the psalm has been the congregation talking to itself about God. Now God speaks directly. Hebrews 3:7 identifies the voice as the Holy Spirit, and Hebrews 4:7 says God spoke it through David. Both statements are worth naming, because together they teach the class something important about inspiration: Scripture is God's own present voice, not merely a record of what He once said. On "today," press the group to say why urgency matters. The wilderness generation did not intend to be lost. They intended to decide later.

**Question 5.** In Exodus 17 the people quarreled with Moses over water and asked, "Is the LORD among us or not?" That is the question underneath every hardening of the heart. Massah means testing and Meribah means quarreling; the Greek Old Testament translated the two names as "the rebellion" and "the day of testing," which is why Hebrews 3:8 reads the way it does rather than naming the places. In Numbers 14 the offense is far worse. After the spies' report the people wept all night, proposed a new leader, and talked of returning to Egypt. God swore that no one of that generation over twenty, apart from Caleb and Joshua, would enter the land. Stress that these were redeemed people. They had seen the plagues, walked through the sea, and eaten bread from heaven.

**Question 6.** God's complaint in 95:10 is that they "go astray in their heart" and "have not known my ways." The problem was not a shortage of evidence; it was a settled disposition. For the first singers, "my rest" would naturally have meant Canaan, the land where the wandering stopped (Deuteronomy 12:9 to 10). Let the class give that answer and affirm it. Then leave it there. Hebrews will deepen it in question 11, and the lesson works best if the class discovers that expansion rather than being handed it early.

**Question 8.** The first word of Hebrews 3:12 is "Take care," and the address is "brothers." This is written to Christians about Christians. The heart in view is "an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." Note the direction of the fall: away from a living God, not away from a doctrine. Verse 13 gives the remedy, and it is startlingly ordinary and startlingly frequent: exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today." The deceitfulness of sin is the reason for the daily frequency. Sin does not announce itself; it lies. Verse 14 restates the condition: we share in Christ "if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."

**Question 9.** This is the heart of the lesson. Those who fell in the wilderness were the very people who came out of Egypt under Moses. Verse 18 calls them disobedient; verse 19 says they could not enter because of unbelief. The Hebrew writer moves between the two words as though they described one thing, because in Scripture they do. Faith that will not obey is not the faith of Hebrews 11, where every example listed is someone who did something. This is the place to make the positive point about salvation by God's grace through an obedient faith, and to head off both errors at once: the idea that faith is a bare mental assent that cannot be lost, and the idea that we earn our standing by our performance. Neither is what the text says. Steer the discussion by keeping everyone in verses 18 and 19 and asking simply, "Which word does the writer use, and why does he use both?"

**Question 11.** Hebrews 4:3 to 4 anchors the promise in Genesis 2:2, God's own rest on the seventh day. Verse 8 is the hinge: Joshua did lead Israel into Canaan, yet God was still saying "Today" through David centuries later, which proves the promise was never exhausted by a piece of real estate. So the rest is God's own rest, entered by faith. Be careful here in both directions. Do not flatten "rest" into a synonym for heaven, and do not turn it into a merely present feeling of peace. Hebrews holds both: "we who have believed enter that rest" (4:3) and "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (4:9).

**Question 12.** Hebrews 4:11 contains one of the great paradoxes of the letter: strive to enter a rest. What we strive against is named in the verse itself, "so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." Then 4:12 to 13 explains why striving is not self-improvement. The word of God exposes what we would rather keep hidden, dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It is the perfect close to an argument about hardened hearts, because the only cure for a heart we cannot see into is a word that can.

## About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in this lesson. Marking Repeated Words is simple enough for a new Christian and useful enough for a preacher; if you have a few spare minutes, do it together in class by having everyone find the five occurrences of "today" in Hebrews 3:7 to 4:7. Distinguishing What a Text Says, What It Means, and What It Demands is the more important of the two, and it will correct a great many bad habits. Most people leap straight to application. Insist on the first two questions before the third, and point out that the Hebrew writer himself takes them in order.

## **A suggested closing prayer**

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, You are the rock of our salvation, and we are the sheep of Your hand. We thank You that You still speak, and that You speak today. Forgive us for the places where we have grown hard without noticing, and for the times we have looked at what You have already done for us and still asked whether You are among us. Give us soft hearts and honest eyes. Make us the kind of church that watches over one another every day, so that no one among us drifts away quietly. And bring every one of us at last into Your own rest, through Jesus our great High Priest. Amen."

## **Looking ahead to Lesson Eight**

Next week is Psalm 110, the passage the New Testament quotes and echoes more than any other in the Old Testament. Two short oracles, "sit at my right hand" and "you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek," stand behind Jesus' unanswerable question to the Pharisees, Peter's sermon at Pentecost, and the whole central argument of Hebrews. Encourage the class to read Genesis 14:18 to 20 and Hebrews 7 in advance; the more of Hebrews 7 they have read before class, the better the discussion will be. It is a fitting sequel to this lesson, since Hebrews 4:14 to 16, the very passage you closed with, is where the writer turns from the warning to the High Priest at God's right hand.