

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Seven

PSALM 95

Today, If You Hear His Voice

The song begins the way a good song should. Come and sing. Come and shout. Come and kneel down, because the God who holds the depths of the earth in His hand is also the Shepherd who holds us. Then, in the middle of verse 7, the music stops. A different voice takes over, and it is not inviting anymore. It is warning. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

Psalm 95 is a call to worship with a warning stitched into the middle of it. The warning reaches back centuries to a thirsty crowd at a rock in the desert, and to a night at Kadesh when a whole generation decided God could not be trusted. Those people sang, too. They had seen the sea open. And they died in the wilderness anyway. The psalm exists so that the generations after them would not repeat it.

Read Psalm 95 several times this week, then read Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13 slowly, with a pencil in your hand. The Hebrew writer quotes this psalm at length and then preaches it for a chapter and a half, and he does not preach it to Israel. He preaches it to Christians. Watch for the word "today." Watch for the word "rest." And watch how often he says "us" and "we."

First impressions

The Hebrew text of Psalm 95 carries no superscription, but the Greek Old Testament used by the early church heads it as a song of praise of David, and Hebrews 4:7 says that God spoke these words through David. The psalm belongs to a group of psalms, roughly 93 to 100, that celebrate the LORD as King over all the earth. It was almost certainly sung as Israel gathered for worship, perhaps as the people came up toward the temple. That makes the second half of it more startling, not less. This is what God wanted His people to hear on their way in the door.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 95 through twice, once out loud if you can. Where exactly does the tone change? Mark that verse in your Bible.
 - b. What surprises you most about this psalm?

Come, let us sing to the LORD (95:1–5)

The opening is loud. The Hebrew verb behind "make a joyful noise" is the word for a shout, the kind raised at a coronation or a victory (Numbers 23:21; Zechariah 9:9). The reasons given for the shouting are not vague good feelings; they are facts about God. He is "the rock of our salvation," a title for God that runs all through Israel's songs (Deuteronomy 32:4, 15), and one with a particular sting in a psalm that is about to mention Meribah, where God gave water out of a rock. He is "a great King above all gods." The depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, the sea and the dry land, all of it is His because He made it. Israel is being told to worship the Creator of everything, not a local deity with a small territory.

2.
 - a. In 95:1 to 5, list every command the psalm gives. What is the worshiper actually told to do?
 - b. Now list the reasons the psalm gives for doing it. What does each reason say about God?

Study Skill, Marking Repeated Words: Get into the habit of marking the words a passage repeats. Repetition is how a biblical writer raises his voice. Read Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13 with a colored pencil and mark every occurrence of "today," of "hear" and "voice," of "harden" and "hearts," and of "rest." You will find "today" five times in Hebrews 3:7 to 4:7 and the word "rest" about a dozen times in the same span. Then look at what surrounds each one. Repeated words are not decoration. They are the skeleton of an argument, and once you can see them you will never again read a passage as a string of unrelated verses.

The sheep of his hand (95:6–7a)

The second call to worship changes posture. The first was standing and shouting; this one is kneeling and bowing down. The reason changes too. Verses 3 to 5 said worship Him because He made everything. Verse 7 says worship Him because He made us His own: "he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." That is covenant language. Sheep do not select a shepherd; a shepherd takes them and keeps them. Israel sang this about themselves, and every word of it is true of the church that Christ purchased with His own blood (John 10:14 to 16; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 2:25).

3. What does it mean to be "the sheep of his hand"? What does that image say about our security, and what does it say about our responsibility?

Do not harden your hearts (95:7b–11)

Two place names carry the whole warning. Massah means "testing." Meribah means "quarreling." Both names were given at the same spot in Exodus 17:1 to 7, where Israel had no water and demanded to know whether the LORD was among them or not. A little over a year later, at Kadesh, the same generation heard the report of the spies, refused to go up into the land, and began talking about choosing a leader to take them back to Egypt (Numbers 13 and 14). God swore an oath: that generation would not enter His rest. Psalm 95 puts that oath in God's own mouth and hangs it over the heads of people who are standing in the sanctuary singing.

4.
 - a. Read 95:7b to 8. Who is speaking now? Whose voice is it that we might hear?
 - b. The psalm does not say "do not harden your hearts someday." It says "today." Why does that one word matter so much?
5.
 - a. Read Exodus 17:1 to 7. What did the people say and do? What question did they ask in verse 7?
 - b. Read Numbers 14:1 to 12 and 14:20 to 35. What did that generation refuse to do, and what did God swear in response?

For Further Study: Read 1 Corinthians 10:1 to 12. Paul walks through the same wilderness history and draws the same conclusion for Christians. Notice how much those people had received: the cloud, the sea, the food, the drink. Then notice verse 12: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

6. In 95:10 to 11, what does God say was wrong with that generation, and what did He swear? What do you think "my rest" meant to the people who first sang this psalm?

The Hebrew writer preaches Psalm 95 (Hebrews 3:7–19)

Hebrews 3 opens by comparing Moses and Christ. Moses was faithful in God's house as a servant; Christ is faithful over God's house as a Son. Then comes verse 6: "And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope." That small word "if" is the door into everything that follows. The writer quotes Psalm 95:7 to 11 in full, and he introduces the quotation with a remarkable

phrase: "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says." He does not say the Holy Spirit once said it. The psalm is the living voice of God, addressed to the people holding the letter in their hands.

7.
 - a. Read Hebrews 3:1 to 11. Who does the writer say is speaking the words of Psalm 95?
 - b. Read 3:6 carefully. What condition does the writer attach to the words "we are his house"?

Study Skill, Distinguishing What a Text Says, What It Means, and What It Demands:

Three questions, always in that order. First, what does the text say? Write out the plain content: God swore that a particular generation would not enter His rest. Second, what does it mean? Explain it in its own setting: the people who came out of Egypt refused to trust God, and the land was closed to them. Third, what does it demand? Ask what God requires of the reader in light of it. Nearly every mistake in Bible study comes from jumping straight to the third question. Notice that the writer of Hebrews works through all three, and in order. He quotes the psalm (3:7 to 11), explains what happened and why (3:16 to 19), and only then makes his demand (4:1 and 4:11).

8.
 - a. Read Hebrews 3:12 to 14. Who is this warning addressed to? Look closely at the first word of verse 12.
 - b. In 3:12, what is the heart described as, and what does it lead a person to do?
 - c. What does 3:13 tell Christians to do for one another, and how often?
9.
 - a. Read Hebrews 3:16 to 19. Who were the people who did not enter? What had they already seen and heard?
 - b. Verse 18 says they were "disobedient." Verse 19 says they were unable to enter "because of unbelief." What does it tell you that the writer uses those two words for the same failure?

For Thought and Discussion: Hebrews 3:12 warns brothers about "an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." Read Hebrews 6:4 to 6, Hebrews 10:26 to 31, Galatians 5:4, and 2 Peter 2:20 to 22. Taken together, what do these passages say about whether a person who has genuinely come to Christ can afterward be lost? And why would a warning have any force at all if failure were impossible?

The rest that remains (Hebrews 4:1–13)

The word "rest" in these two chapters has layers, and the Hebrew writer works through them one at a time. In Numbers and Deuteronomy the rest meant Canaan, the land where Israel would finally stop wandering (Deuteronomy 12:9 to 10). But Hebrews 4:8 points out that Joshua did bring Israel into Canaan, and centuries afterward God was still saying "Today" through David. So Canaan was not the whole of it. Hebrews 4:3 to 4 reaches all the way back to Genesis 2:2, where God rested from His works on the seventh day. The rest God offers is His own rest. It is not simply another word for heaven, though it surely ends there. It is the settled, finished, unanxious life of God Himself, which we begin to enter now by faith and will enjoy fully at the last.

10. Read Hebrews 4:1 to 2. What does the writer say we should fear? According to verse 2, why did the good news they heard do them no good?

11.
 - a. Read Hebrews 4:3 to 10. What rest does the writer connect the promise to in verses 3 to 4?

 - b. What is the writer's point about Joshua in verse 8? What does that prove about the promise?

For Further Study: Trace the idea of rest through Genesis 2:2 to 3, Deuteronomy 12:9 to 10, Joshua 21:43 to 45, Psalm 95:11, and Hebrews 4:1 to 11. Then read Matthew 11:28 to 30 and Revelation 14:13. How do the pieces fit together? What is already ours, and what still waits for us?

12.
 - a. Read Hebrews 4:11. The writer says "let us strive to enter that rest." According to the rest of the verse, what are we striving against?

 - b. Read Hebrews 4:12 to 13. Why do you think the writer describes the word of God this way right at the end of this argument?

Holding fast to the end

Nothing in Hebrews 3 and 4 suggests that God is stingy with His grace or that a Christian should live in dread. The same writer who says "let us fear" in 4:1 says two paragraphs later, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (4:16). But he will not let us hold grace and presumption in the same hand. The wilderness generation had been redeemed. They had walked out of Egypt on dry ground, eaten the manna, and drunk the water from the rock. And they hardened their hearts and did not enter. Faith, in Hebrews, is never a bare opinion held in the mind; it is trust that obeys. That is why 3:18 and 3:19 can call the same failure disobedience and unbelief without blinking.

So here is the encouraging half of the warning: it is still called today. The door has not closed on you. Whatever hardness has been forming in you, this is the day to bring it to God. And this is the day to speak up for the brother or sister who is drifting, because the text does not say "let the elders exhort him occasionally." It says exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today.

Optional Application: Hebrews 3:13 makes daily encouragement the ordinary work of ordinary Christians, not a special assignment for leaders. Think of one person in your congregation who has been slipping away from the assembly or from the Lord. Call, visit, or write to that person this week. Do not scold. Encourage.

13. Read Hebrews 3:13 again. What does the phrase "the deceitfulness of sin" suggest about the way hearts become hard? Is the hardening usually sudden or slow? What does that mean for how we watch over ourselves and each other?

Your response

14. Where is your own heart harder than it was a year ago? Be specific. Is there one place where you have quietly decided that God cannot be trusted with something?
15. "Today, if you hear his voice." What is God saying to you today, out of this psalm, that you have been putting off until later? If you have never been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, talk with the teacher or an elder this week. There is no promise attached to tomorrow.
16. Write one specific step you will take this week, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask each person to name something they once did every single day and no longer do at all, and to describe how the change happened. Almost no one will say it happened overnight. That is exactly the point, and it sets up Hebrews 3:13 better than any introduction you could write.

Discussion. Move through the psalm itself fairly quickly and give the bulk of the time to Hebrews. Questions 8, 9, and 11 carry the weight of the lesson. Question 9b, where disobedience and unbelief stand side by side, is the theological center; do not skip it. Handle the callout on Hebrews 6 and 10 with open Bibles, letting the class read the passages aloud rather than debating from memory.

Wrap-up. Read Hebrews 4:14 to 16 aloud, which is where the writer goes next, and pray that no one in the class would be found on the far side of the wilderness. Then tell the class that next week they will meet the great High Priest of Hebrews 4:14 in the psalm the New Testament quotes more than any other.