

## The Sheep of His Hand

### Psalm 95

Among Solomon's famed reflections on times and seasons, he was led to express the gamut of human expressions of life under the sun. In one section he expressed, "*there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.*"<sup>1</sup> And, there's little doubt that Solomon learned and heard (at least in music-form) such reflections from his father. Psalm 51—weeping under the weight of sin. Psalm 103—rejoicing under the shadow of grace. We can track a similar contrast through David's lament, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*"<sup>2</sup> and into his celebratory declaration, "*My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless His holy name forever and ever.*"<sup>3</sup> Disturbance and delight are places we find ourselves as we walk the narrow pathway of faith. It's a place where David, the composer of this psalm, found himself at various points of his life.<sup>4</sup>

But a problem can arise when one of these responses becomes the singular note ringing out from us. For example, we wear sadness to such the degree that we begin to believe that it defines *who* we are. Emotions can become demanding taskmasters when we believe that they lie at the core of our identity. If we have secured our tents in the land of melancholy, determined that this is just how it is and should be, then aren't we are falling short of the full experience of life in Christ? Has He not told us that true joy is ours in Him, a joy that can't be taken away?<sup>5</sup> Further, emotions have the propensity of causing us to act untimely, especially with impulsiveness, when wisdom may call for prayer and patience.<sup>6</sup> Or, believers can be guilty of being emotionally illiterate, meaning we don't take efforts to read why we are feeling a particular way.<sup>7</sup> We rush through, pressing quickly through a deep feeling with repentant wording and quoted verses. Yet, we take small efforts at understanding something of what these emotions are conveying about ourselves, or how God might be found sufficient for us inside these feelings.

The Psalms can help us navigate the disturbances and the delights of life. I trust that our Father has used the Psalter this way on some level through this series or through the years of your own Bible intake. They truly offer us the whole package—feelings expressed that resound with our own experiences, reasons why we feel as we do, and they all help to lead our emotions in ways that God uses, in His timing, to minister to and grow us. The Psalms point back to a people who, on a fundamental level, were little different from you or me. And these songs reveal to us in real time a God who is a wonderful counselor through life's highs and lows.

### I. The privilege of God's invitation

Maybe we could sum this psalm up structurally by saying it a few different ways. It's a seven-verse praise of fervency with a four-verse sobering plea. Or, it's a song of rejoicing with a rejoinder.<sup>8</sup> It certainly presents the exhortation/admonishment framework. Yet, one way we can

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:4

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 22:1

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 145:21

<sup>4</sup> Though your Bible headings may not express this, Hebrews 4:7 attributes this song to David.

<sup>5</sup> John 15:11, "*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*"

<sup>6</sup> There is a kind of joy that runs ahead of wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> Groves & Smith, *Untangling Emotions*, 140-141.

<sup>8</sup> Longman and Garland, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms*, 717.

make our way into this psalm is to consider these first few verses as a blessed invitation, an invitation to make our way into the privilege of worship to the Living God.

We see this beginning in verse 1, ***O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.*** First consider, is there a sweeter summons? Is there a privilege higher than this in all the world? To use our mental energies, our time, our mouths to offer and sing praises to this covenant LORD, and to do so together? And I say *together* because of this word ***us***. The psalmist is summoning the community of those who belong to the LORD by faith to rise up in songs of acclaim. ***Let us sing, let us shout.*** On down in the song, ***let us bow down, let us kneel.*** We aren't given the occasion for which this psalm was written, but whatever the occasion for this call for the community to join up, it was at least a call to proper, corporate worship. It was the great privilege which required forethought by the leaders and mindful, affectionate participation by all in attendance. We might come into this corporate gathering on any given Sunday preoccupied with other things, or with apathy or sluggishness. It happens to all of us, leaders included. It happened in David's day. But this psalm was a call for all present, and a call to all present now under the blessings of the new covenant, to snap out of it. Corporate worship is God's gracious provision for us to weekly take advantage of the moment we've been given, with the rich resources we've been gifted to do just that.

No less is this a call to see Who is before God's people when they gather to worship. Verse 1, we respond to the God who has revealed Himself as ***the rock of our salvation.*** The song writer pulls the image of a rock of rescue from Exodus 17. Recall, Moses was commanded to strike the rock so that Israel wouldn't die of thirst. We know this too because in that Exodus text Moses names that place ***Massah*** and ***Meribah***, which the psalmist draws into this song here in verse 8. As Israel was saved from the threat of physical death in thirst, so the LORD continues to be the spiritual ***rock of salvation*** for His people.<sup>9</sup> This truth alone is worth ages of reflection and joy!

Then in verse 2, we find the continued invite to come before the LORD in particular ways—with praise and ***with thanksgiving***, yes. But these responses are somewhat qualified with the repeating of the word ***shout***. Full-throated,<sup>10</sup> zeal-appropriate worshipping cries to God. If there was ever a time to make noises that exceed what we typically express in life, it is when we are together basking in the grace that has brought us from the grave and set our feet upon a rock that cannot be moved. This is the grateful privilege of the church—to worship the LORD our God.

## II. Why we possess such a privilege...

### A. *We are made witnesses to the hand of a great Creator-King*

Verse 3, ***For the LORD is a great God and a great King above all gods.*** Psalm 95 is situated among several psalms that share this theme of God's kingly rule. Over the created order and over His created people He sits enthroned, to the uttermost. And here, David reminds us that other earthly powers, often deified by the "unlicensed imagination"<sup>11</sup> of sinful mankind, are positioned below Him. Notice that Yahweh's rule is the stimulant for His people's praise. And this song bears out

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:3–4, "...and all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ."

<sup>10</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 376.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Psalm 93-150*, Vol. 6, 33.

that God's rule is exercised over the whole observable world. Verse 4-5, ***In whose hand are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land.***

While in central Wisconsin last month, I didn't see the depths of the earth or the peaks of mountains, but I did see some rather raw and modestly touched terrain. Some parts of the woods I traversed looked like something out of a prehistoric bog—large, leafy plants and prickly trees with thorns as long as a finger. At one point, I happened upon a fawn cuddled up in tall grass. It didn't like my presence as much as I liked its presence, but catching each other's gaze for a few seconds struck wonder in my heart. Why? Because in moments like those God's people often see Someone else. Psalm 29:9, "...the LORD makes the deer to calve and strips the forests bare; and in His temple everything says, 'Glory!'"

The psalmist is eyeing an excellency in the world, but he's also peering through it to something else more magnificent. He asserts the extremes of the created order to make his poetic point. In God's hand are all things. Mentioning the *sea* and the *dry land* just about covers it all, right? But David also reflects on the earth's deepest and highest places. A seven thousand feet deep cave in the country of Georgia<sup>12</sup> and the colossus that is Mount Everest in Nepal—both and all alike persist under God's governance. It seems as if a song like this serves as something of a spur. I don't think you have to join the Wolf River Conservancy to open your eyes and appreciate the beauty and complexity and wisdom you'll find outside your back door. But when your eyes are opened to all of it, taking time to praise is right, and fitting, and biblical. There is wonder in the fluttering of wings and in the power of pachyderms and among lazy clouds wrapping motionless between the peaks of the Smoky Mountains at sunrise. This theater of God's glory called creation is meant to arouse us from being mere silent observers to hearty praisers of our Creator. When was the last time you gazed and then gaped with worship at God's glory displayed in the world? There are too many psalms that share the same theme for us to be utterly indifferent to the flower, the frog, the falcon, or fjords.<sup>13</sup>

#### *B. We are brought to experience the hand of a kind Shepherd*

Notice that verse 6 repeats verse 1, ***come***. But there is a shift, not in reverence, but in posture. And this posture has moved from high, decibel praise to a calmed, humble attentiveness. We see the progression of humility in the postures expressed. ***Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD...*** Why are such acts appropriate? Because of how verse 6 ends. He is ***our Maker***. This is not a reference to creation, but refers to the LORD making a people. Paul says a similar thing in Ephesians 2:10, "*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...*" The end of verse 7 echoes this, ***For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.*** You, saints, are the ***sheep of His hand***. Not your own hands, or the hands of another. He is the Potter. He is the power behind our change into Christ's image. We who are formed come to Him who forms.

Further, we dwell in ***His pasture***. We didn't created the context or come up with the content for our spiritual nourishment. He has given us the Word. He has saved us by delivering His Son over

<sup>12</sup> Veryovkina Cave

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 8, 19, 24, 33, 65, 96, 98, 100, 104, 136, 145-148.

to death in our place. And as a result, He has placed us into the family of the redeemed. We are made new creatures through the gospel and given green pastures of spiritual nourishment in the gospel. We possess what sustains us through life's slower and quicker currents because He is the exalted **King** overseeing the trials and supplying Spirit-endowed strength for each one. And all of these provisions are kindnesses hard to summarize and impossible to earn. Songs from David capture such grace. One in our own day one that's ministered to me time and again is called "Sooner Count the Stars."<sup>14</sup>

I could sooner count the stars  
Than number all Your ways  
Though I only know in part  
That part exceeds all praise  
As sunlight fills the skies  
Your goodness fills my life  
For all Your precious gifts  
Receive my gratefulness

No praise is high enough  
No thanks is deep enough  
No life is long enough  
To tell of all You've done  
No shout is loud enough  
No words are strong enough  
No song is sweet enough  
To sing Your love

And singing of God's noble love is precisely the direction David is pointing us. We're told who we are in relationship to who God is. The way modern man fumbles is that he attempts anthropology apart from theology. But filled with the Spirit, David knows better. "**For He is our God...**" And lest we fall down before Him with an unhealthy fear, we see the necessary addition, "...and we are the people of His pasture..." He is our great Shepherd, indeed our faithful Pastor. His relationship to His people is set apart from His love and dealings with those who aren't. He is leading us, providing for us, loving us, sheering us, de-laming us in our pains, rescuing us from the deadly ledges, protecting us from the wolves of falsehood.<sup>15</sup> And most centrally, all of these kindnesses are realized in the One who voiced, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep...they listen to my voice.*" The reasons we possess this privilege of worship are laid down by this sweet shepherd of Israel in Psalm 95, but they are fully grasped and fully appropriated in the good shepherd of John 10. Without the Christ of John 10, Psalm 95 would tragically be a dead-end street with a few nice homes. But with it, this psalm is one of many beautiful thoroughfares that all make their way to one specific household<sup>16</sup> and doorway.<sup>17</sup>

This song has brought the singer from loud praise to quiet lowliness. Why? Because God is **our God**. Because **His pasture** always yields a sufficiency. Because we know **His hand**, that personal touch magnified times over in Christ. But finally, the psalmist desires good for those who fail to approach the LORD with such reverence and trust.

### III. What will keep us from such a privilege...

#### A. Rejecting His Word and work

<sup>14</sup> Sovereign Grace Music, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, 600.

<sup>16</sup> Hebrews 3:6, "Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope."

<sup>17</sup> John 10:9, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture."

In somewhat of a surprising shift in the psalm's mood, we've moved from the major chords of a riotous joy to the minor chords of sober reflection. <sup>7b</sup>, *Today, if you would hear His voice*, <sup>8</sup> *Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness*, <sup>9</sup> *"When your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work.* Now the psalmist turns to plead with the wandering or worship-less soul. To clearly *hear [God's] voice* in His Word and then to ignore what 's been heard or act contrary to that Word—that marks the *hardened heart*. The warning is clear and instructive. He reminds Israel of that time when she was directly under the Mosaic administration, recipients of direct deliverance from slavery, and witnesses to the superiority of Yahweh over the gods of Egypt, and yet in receiving God's instructions and eyeing God's wonders, they rejected both. The author of Hebrews would join David to draw from the story of how Israel misstepped in the wilderness wanderings, issuing the same warning to his readers.

The book that follows Hebrews illustrates such unbelief with a mirror.<sup>18</sup> James 1:23–24 states, *"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. [24] For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."* That's the idea here. To look into the mirror of the Word and walk away without ever adjusting what is out of alignment with the will of God—that is an act of *hardening* one's *heart*. Most parents understand the distinction. "You may have heard me say clean your room, but one look at it tells me that you didn't really hear me!" Hearing but not heading. It's possible to live in the sunshine of faithful preaching and God's gracious works and respond to such riches with impoverished indifference, discontentment and faithlessness. To run some diagnostics: Are you thoughtless or lethargic concerning God's honor? Are you dissatisfied with life and how things are panning out? At root, do you default to trusting your own ideas and decisions before others? Before the LORD's? The psalm tells us how a life marked by these things ends.

#### B. *Receiving His deserved justice (rooted in that rejection)*

Verse 10-11, *"For forty years I loathed that generation, and said they are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways. Therefore I swore in My anger, truly they shall not enter into My rest."* The psalmist reminds Israel of a time long past when their forebears willfully stepped out of Pharaoh's frying pan and into the fire of God's judgment. How did they *err in their heart*? They missed the mercy shown and the hope promised. They neglected to prize His grace in delivering, His power over evil, His sovereignty over creation... and the list of God's sweet attributes that they turned away from in trust just keeps going. Again, Hebrews will use this same text to address Jewish professors who were in danger of a similar fate. And the result of an erring heart calloused to God's Word and works? No final *rest*. This psalm and the Object of all the psalms hold out the restful enjoyment of God's finished work in creation and redemption.<sup>19</sup> This is the invitation to all who are far from fellowship with God. And the word *Today* shows us that it's an urgent one! This day, come, find peace and join the feast.

## Conclusion

<sup>18</sup> James 1:23

<sup>19</sup> Kidner, 178.

The point of holding up Israel as an example of unbelief must move beyond admonishing us all to be the true people of God that Israel failed to be.<sup>20</sup> Because the truth is we don't have the capability within ourselves to be those people. What is the lone way we can near possessing a soft heart, one eager to hear what God has to say, one that sees His works and truly rejoices, one which is thankful and sensitive to His kindnesses in providing, protecting, and leading in paths of righteousness? How can we worship, in spirit and in truth, this holy God who requires nothing less than perfection? The short of it is that we need new life.<sup>21</sup> We need a new heart.<sup>22</sup> We need a righteousness apart from the law.<sup>23</sup> And in the kindness of our LORD, when we locate the man on the middle cross<sup>24</sup> and cast ourselves at His feet as helpless and undone, only then we can lift our eyes to genuine worship.

Christ Jesus leads sinners beside still waters and into an eternal feast of green pastures. The bounty of God's goodness is such that we don't just nibble at and sip on the realities of the gospel, but we can guzzle and gorge at this good news spread. Peace is one course on the menu. Mercy is a fine meat ever before us. Joy wafts at this table of grace. Forgiveness and justification and adoption are crowding the plate of those who have tasted the new birth. Even sanctification, with its bitter notes, are served up in the sauce of precious promises. All is seasoned with patience and prepared with infinite wisdom. And do we not hope in an inheritance near-ready to be fully unveiled? The Day is drawing near. Brothers and sisters, we're not just sheep in position only. We are His sheep in present possession of this Shepherd's very best gifts and care, secured through Him laying down His life for the weakling flock.

We are the *sheep of His hand*. Let's not squander this invite today. Renew your trust, or give it to Him for the first time. Lay aside the entanglements that seek a foothold. Feel the warmth, hear the welcome, and unleash praise at this gracious invitation, ***O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation!***

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us*, 226.

<sup>21</sup> John 5:21, "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will."

<sup>22</sup> Ezekiel 36:26, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

<sup>23</sup> Romans 3:21–22a, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

<sup>24</sup> From Alistair Begg's viral sermon clip. I could listen to it 'til the Second Coming.