

Learning to Worship

Psalm 95:1-11

Series: Exalt the LORD our God – Fall 2021

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Worship: Sing, Worship, Bow Down

Key Sentence:

Worship is the posture of the voice, the body, the mind and the heart.

Outline:

I. The Voice Sings with Joy (Psalm 95:1-5)

II. The Body Bows Down in Humility (Psalm 95:6-7)

III. The Mind and Heart Listen to His Voice (Psalm 95:8-11)

Psalm 95:1–11 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! ²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! ³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. ⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. ⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

⁶Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. ¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.” ¹¹Therefore I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.”

Learning to Worship Psalm 95:1-11

I've had a fascination with church bells for a while now. In medieval Europe the church bell has long been used to call people to worship, to sound the hours of the day and night, to signal celebration, mourning and even war. In Britain this further developed into change ringing, in which groups of bells, as many as twelve, are played together in mathematical sequences called changes.

But what makes a bell ring? It's all physics, of course, but this morning I'd like to identify four things, the body, the mouth, the metal and the clapper. When you strike the metal body of a bell you set up vibrations that change the shape of the bell from circular to elliptical and back again many times a second. The frequency of the vibration determines what note you hear. The frequency of the note we call "A" is 440 vibrations per second. So the body of a bell whose primary note is "A" is also vibrating at 440 vibrations a second. Sort of. Because a bell is "bell shaped" the smaller parts vibrate faster, producing the overtones and harmonics that make bells sound so beautiful. So, the exact shape and thickness of a bell determines how beautiful it sounds. The voice of the bell is determined by this shape. Air is set to vibrating by the vibrating metal. This air is amplified by the shape of the bell and the sound waves travel mostly out of the mouth of the bell and are transmitted to our ear drums. Some of the large bells of England can be heard as much as 14 miles away.

The metal of the bell is also important. The harder the metal, the faster the vibration. Big bells are made of bronze. Soft materials like copper vibrate too slowly. Harder materials like steel vibrate too fast. Bronze is just right. The thickness of the metal is also important. Church bells are tuned to a particular note and its overtones by shaving different amounts of metal off the casting at different points. Finally, there is the clapper. The clapper can be made of many different materials. Its importance is that it strikes the bell. Without it the bell would never ring. So is all this an allegory? Yes. We'll unpack it as we go along.

We're looking today at Psalm 95, a classic psalm of worship, and we're going to learn that worship is the posture of the voice – or we might say the soul there, but also of the body, the mind and the heart. Next week we're also going to look at worship, in Psalm 96. The difference is that this week we're going to focus more on how we worship, and next week we'll focus more on who we worship. We'll look this week at the voice of our worship, our bodies at worship, and the attitude of our minds and our hearts in worship.

We begin with the voice of worship. Psalm 95:1-5. *Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! ²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! ³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. ⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. ⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.*

The voice of worship is, and has been for the whole history of God's people, a voice of song, a voice of thanksgiving, a joyful noise made before and to the LORD. Like a bell ringing across the English countryside, this psalm compels us to raise our voices in joyful worship. Notice that it says "let us sing; let us make a joyful noise; let us come into his presence." The Hebrew that gets translated this way is not really a command, but neither is it just a suggestion. It's called a jussive, and it's a way of commanding ourselves, compelling ourselves as a body, but also as individuals, to the joyful worship of the LORD.

So, three verb phrases. The first is "let us sing." This word can also be translated "shout aloud." The Theological Wordbook calls it a ringing cry or a shout of jubilation and says "this usage of the term to describe the joy of Israel at God's saving acts is carried on throughout the Old Testament. In Isaiah, it is holy joy. Isaiah 12:6 "Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." In the Psalms "the frequent employment of the term indicates decisively that the highest mood of Old Testament religion was joy." This is not to deny that the Psalms are full of lament or that silence can be worship. As Derek Kidner says "To come singing into God's presence is not the only way . . . but it is the way that best expresses love. So before making ourselves small before him (as we must), we greet him here with unashamed enthusiasm as our refuge and rescuer."

The second phrase is "let us make a joyful noise." Those of us who can't sing console ourselves that we can at least make a joyful noise. This word is often translated "shout," and often used in military contexts. It's what the people of Israel did after they had circled Jericho. They sounded the trumpets, they shouted and they went up against the city. It's what they did when the ark of the covenant came back from captivity among the Philistines, and later when David brought it up to Jerusalem. It is a cry of joyful victory. So, it starts to push back on us. Do we believe God is the rock of our salvation enough to shout that victory with joy? Like the resounding voice of a church bell, can our voices be heard? Or have we made a habit of silence, a habit of reserve, somehow afraid we'll offend people if we declare too openly the truth of God?

The psalmist compels us to sing it, to shout it with a joyful noise and to come into his presence with thanksgiving. The word thanksgiving is never used in Scripture of giving thanks to another person. It should probably be translated “thankful praise.” Come into his presence here this morning, or tomorrow as you’re having your quiet time, or as you’re listening to a playlist or to your radio on the way to work, with thankful praise. Make that joyful noise to him, second half of verse 2, with songs of praise. Praise is the language of worship, it is the voice of worship, and singing is the time-honored expression of that voice. This is why your voice, or at least your joyful noise, should be part of worship. There is a difference between just listening to praise and actually participating. So here, on Sunday morning, add your voice to the worship. We need each other’s voices. And in your car or in your prayer closet or right in front of your family, sing along. And if it’s really not a good time to sing out loud, at least have words and songs of praise running through your head. Be intentional about getting a song stuck in your head. When that one stops being meaningful, get a different song stuck in your head. The first point of this Psalm is that worship compels you and I to offer our voices.

But not for no reason. We don’t shout just because everyone else is shouting. We don’t sing because a song is popular. We have a reason, we have a “what for,” and verses 3-5 remind us of it. “For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.” Many of the psalms we’re studying in this series focus on the fact that God is the king, the sovereign ruler of everything in heaven and on earth. Here the LORD is seemingly compared to other gods. While other nations have their deities who rule over some mountain or some sea or some locality, the psalmist exults in Yahweh, who alone rules over the whole world. By affirming faith in the Lord, God’s people deny the existence of any other deity. Willem VanGemeren says “This is the language of hymnic praise, in which the ‘gods’ are contemptible fictions of the imaginations of man.” God, on the other hand is great in the absolute sense. Nothing is greater. In fact some translations, instead of saying, “a great God,” “a great King,” say “the great God,” “the great King.” He is absolutely God and King.

This is what is emphasized in verses 4 and 5. “In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. ⁵The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.” One of the commentators says that creation is “hand-held,” verse 4 and “hand-made,” verse 5. We value things that are hand made because they reflect the time, the devotion and even the personality and character of the creator. The world is hand made, and, as the children’s song says, “he’s got the whole world in his hands.” He is Lord from the deepest parts of the earth to the highest mountains, and everything in-between.

He is Lord of the seas, which cover 70 percent of the earth's surface, and of the dry land, which covers the other 30 percent, leaving no place on earth outside his dominion. And, of course, He is Lord of the sky and the moon and the stars and all of the universe is his too, not to mention the heavens where he dwells. He is Lord of heaven and earth, as Jesus himself addressed him.

We worship God with our mouths, with our voices, with words of acknowledgement and praise, with songs that resonate with the truth about Him. Like the cavity, the hollow part of the bell, we amplify and magnify the truths revealed in his Word. But like the metal, the body of the bell, our bodies are also important for shaping our worship. Verses 6 and 7: *Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! ⁷For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.*

Our bodies play a role in our worship. Verse 6 has two obvious body images: bowing down and kneeling. But it's actually three, for the word worship itself comes from a Hebrew word whose root meaning is something like "get low" or "prostrate yourself." Derek Kidner says "Each of the three main verbs of verse 6 is concerned with getting low before God, since the standard word for worship in Scripture means to prostrate oneself." The other two words reinforce this. Bowing down is going to one's knees and bending forward. Kneeling is probably kneeling with the upper body erect. This is the posture in which one might receive a blessing, since "to bless" uses the same root consonants as the word translated "kneel." In all these cases the idea is to get low or humble oneself before God, to make yourself increasingly vulnerable: going to your knees and then falling forward and then spreading yourself flat.

Does this 'worship-by-posture' mean anything for us, here and now, today? C. S. Lewis and many others would say it does. Lewis famously argues in *The Screwtape Letters* that "Humans are amphibians: half spirit and half animal." In other words, we are composite beings, consisting of bodies, like animals and souls or spirits. When Screwtape, the senior demon is instructing the junior tempter Wormwood he says "At the very least, they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls."

What this means is that, to the extent we can, we ought to honor God with our bodies. The Bible talks about many postures of prayer and praise. The three here are primarily concerned with bodily humility, making ourselves vulnerable to God by kneeling, bowing down on our knees, and getting down on our faces.

But Scripture points to many others as well. Standing, for example. The tax collector in Jesus' parable stood to pray, though he was deeply humbling himself before God. Furthermore, many in the Bible pray with their eyes raised toward heaven: Psalm 123:1 "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!" We can worship with raised hands: Psalm 63 "So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands." We can worship with clapping: Psalm 47 "Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!" We can worship sitting: 2nd Samuel 7:18 "Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, 'Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?'" We can worship with dancing: Psalm 150:4 "Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!" The same verse encourages us to worship with instruments.

But do we do these things? Do we worship and pray without aligning our bodies to our hearts and minds? I think we do. So, fair warning, for our prayer time later, which will be prayers of worship, I'm going to encourage you to take one of these postures of worship you don't normally take. Probably the most common in Scripture is kneeling, but it doesn't have to be that. In *Letters to Malcolm* Lewis says "When one prays in strange places and at strange times one can't kneel, to be sure. I won't say this doesn't matter. The body ought to pray as well as the soul. Body and soul are both the better for it." But he goes on to say "Since the arthritis, I can hardly kneel at all in most places, myself." That may be true for you today. I have trouble kneeling, whether to work near the floor or to pray. My knees hurt. It distracts me. So, I don't pray kneeling very much. But I do use some of these other postures, and in my private prayers I often use one that is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture: walking. It works well to walk and pray. But not, of course, in corporate worship.

So be aware of your body in worship. But again, not for no reason. Verse 7 is related to verse 6 with the same word, "for," that connects verse 4 to verse 3. "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand." We humble ourselves in our postures and in souls because He is God and we are not. He is our God, the one who has committed himself to us. He is our shepherd. We are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. The Sovereign God of the whole universe, the God in whose hands are the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains, who made the sea and formed the dry land, cares for us. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me," and "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." We are humbled by his greatness, but even more by his hesed, his steadfast love for us. It is right and fitting for us to worship and bow down and kneel.

At this point Psalm 95 turns a corner and gives us a warning, which is not entirely a change of subject. If we are to worship God with our voices and our bodies, we are also to worship God with our minds and hearts, that is, with obedience. The last of verse 7 and verses 8-11 *Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, ⁹when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. ¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." ¹¹Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."*

Kidner says "By ending on this note the psalm sacrifices literary grace to moral urgency. If this psalm is about worship, it could give no blunter indication that the heart of the matter is severely practical: nothing less than a bending of wills." The end of verse 7 is key. "Today, if you hear his voice." Kidner paraphrases, saying "To hear his most holy word is presented here as one of the prime acts of worship. 'Hear', or hearken to, has often the added dimension in Hebrew of 'obey', for which the Old Testament has virtually no other word. So the worshipper singing this psalm is reminded to ask himself how he hears: will it be obediently?" Do you get that? I think he's right.

Hearing his voice, hearing the word of the Lord is an act of worship, just like bowing down or singing. This is why the Word has always been central to Christian worship. And hearing means hearing to obey, not just having the words pass by your head. One of my favorite examples of this is from Psalm 81. In verse 8 God says "Hear, O my people, while I admonish you! O Israel, if you would but listen to me!" Then in verse 11 he says "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me." In verse 13 he renews the plea "Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!" To hear his voice and to listen is to walk in his ways, it is to obey."

To hear his voice and to obey it is to worship God with the mind, because that's what does the listening, and with the heart, because that's what does the obeying. So, verse 8 "do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness." It is an act of worship to hear his voice with a heart that is not hardened against his voice and his demand. If we think of the illustration of the bell, the vibration of the air is our voice lifted in worship, the vibration of the bell is our body submitted in worship, but the metal itself is our heart. If our heart is hard our bell does not vibrate at the right frequency to produce worship. Like a bell made out of steel, we clank rather than ring. And just to complete the illustration, the clapper is his voice, his word, his revelation of himself which is supposed to set us vibrating, set us worshipping.

In this psalm the clapper was verses 4 and 5, his greatness, and verse 7, his shepherd care. If these truths don't set us to worship, we either aren't listening to his voice or our hearts are hard. We've missed two key steps of worship.

The illustration the psalmist uses is the behavior of the people of Israel at Massah and Meribah. This episode is cited pretty commonly in Scripture. The story is that when the people of Israel were leaving Egypt, before they reached Mount Sinai, they ran out of water and began to thirst. They complained to Moses and he said "Why are you putting God to the test." The implication is that God knew their need and would provide. But Moses talked to God and struck the rock at Horeb and the water they had grumbled for was given to them. Moses changed the name of that place to Massah, testing, and Meribah, grumbling. If that wasn't evidence enough of their hard hearts, nearly the same thing happened nearly 40 years later at the end of their desert wandering, at another place that Moses also labeled Maribah, grumbling. The focus in the Psalm is on the fact that the people of Israel, God says, "put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work." In other words, instead of worshipping the God who had provided for them they chose to grumble against him and test him. Because of this lack of trust, and their lack of trust shown when they refused to enter the promised land, God made the people wander in the wilderness for a whole generation, for forty years.

And again, it was in a sense because of improper worship. Verse 10 "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." Worship must be founded on hearing God's voice, knowing his ways, and then responding to it with soft hearts that are willing to obey. Romans 12 teaches us this kind of worship. Paul writes "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Renewed minds, renewed hearts and obedience to God's perfect will is what enables us to present ourselves, our bodies, our voices to God as living sacrifices, living no longer for ourselves but for him. And this Paul says, is at the heart of true spiritual worship.

There's so much more that could be said. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness he quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test." But that verse ends "as you tested him at Massah." When we put God to the test we draw a line in the sand: "God, you must do this." That's what they did at Massah. Jesus refused to do that, though he fully relied on God.

Worship is the opposite of putting God to the test. When we worship we humble ourselves and trust God, we lift him up for who he has revealed himself to be rather than demanding that he do something to prove himself.

Finally, in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, the author quotes these four verses, 8 to 11 and applies them to us as believers and to the rest we find in God. When God says “You shall never enter my rest,” the term is, Kidner says “pregnant with more than one meaning, as Hebrews 3 and 4 make clear. In relation to the Exodus it meant God’s land to settle in, and peace to enjoy it. But Hebrews argues that the psalm still offers us, by its emphatic *Today*, a rest beyond anything Joshua won, namely a share in God’s own sabbath rest: the enjoyment of his finished work not merely of creation but of redemption. The quitters who turned back to the wilderness (so the psalm and epistle warn us) may be but pale shadows of ourselves, if we draw back from our great inheritance.” Once again this shows that an essential underlying element of worship is trust, or faith, which is in fact one of the main elements of those chapters. Hebrews 3:19 “So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.” As we hear the word with our minds, we trust it in our hearts and that leads us first to obedience and then to worship.

So what have we seen? The focus of Psalm 95 is on worship. With our voices we sing to the LORD. We make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. We come with thankful praise, with songs of praise. Like a bell we make the air vibrate, and even more let our souls vibrate with this joyful sound. And with our bodies, this human flesh, we act out our worship. We bow down and kneel in humility before the great king above all gods. We lift our eyes and our hands to the one who is our shepherd, the one who had made us the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. But in order for this worship to take place we must hear his voice, which means hearing to obey. We must let the clapper of his word strike us and call forth the resonant vibration of worship. And we must not harden ourselves against it. Hard metals make harsh bells. Hard hearts make harsh worship. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart, but rather humble your body and raise your voice to worship.