

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 16, 2011**

## **WORSHIP MATTERS**

### **Psalm 95:1-11**

Last Sunday we were in Isaiah 6, where Isaiah tells of this vision of heaven in which he saw the Lord, seated on His throne, in His unimaginable glory, in His sovereign majesty, in the holiness of His holiness – in other words, in the fullness of His worth-ship. When Isaiah saw the Lord, do you remember what happened? He was overcome with a sense of his own radical sinfulness and unworthiness before God. Which is what happens when you see God as He really is, and you see yourself as you really are: You are stabbed in your conscience with an awareness of the awfulness of your sin and your unworthiness to come into God's presence. But the story didn't end there for Isaiah, and it doesn't have to end there for you and me. Isaiah experienced God's grace. He received forgiveness for his sins, symbolized by the hot, burning coal from the altar touching his lips. Then, as a recipient of grace, Isaiah heard the voice of God and responded to that call, saying: "Here am I, Lord. I'm available. Send me. Use me" (Isaiah 6:8).

The grace of God, you see, comes before the call of God. But, as was true in Isaiah's life, the call to serve God always comes. It always follows the grace of God. If you have experienced the grace of God in having your sins forgiven and being justified or declared righteous in God's sight through faith in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ, then God has a plan and a place for you to serve Him. Just like Isaiah. If you will say, "Here I am, Lord. Take me and use me. Show me where and how You want me to serve, and I'll do it," I promise you that God will use you. But it may not be exactly in the way or the place you imagine.

Grace, we said last Sunday, is central to true worship because grace is central to who God really is. His grace, as well as His holiness and power and authority and justice and wisdom and glory, is something we celebrate every time we come together in His name. And something we must never, ever forget. Which is why grace has been the underlying and overarching theme of this series of messages which began way back in January.

Today we turn to Psalm 95, which is a call to worship God, along with a warning against allowing our hearts to become hard toward God. Giving God our full attention, with reverent and trusting hearts, let's hear the Word of God from Psalm 95.

### **THE SAFEST PLACE IN THE WORLD**

Do you know where the safest place in the world is? If you want to be safe, statistics show that it is best to avoid riding in any kind of automobile – car, truck, bus, or motorcycle – because they are responsible for 20 percent of all fatal accidents. (Not a laughing matter.) But don't stay home, because 17 percent of all accidents occur in the home. Don't walk on streets or sidewalks, since 14 percent of all accident victims are pedestrians. Avoid travel by air, rail, or water, because 16 percent of all accidents involve these forms of transportation.

Of the remaining 33 percent, 32 percent of all deaths occur in hospitals. So, above all else, avoid hospitals.

I am happy to report that only .001 percent (1/1,000 of 1 percent) of all deaths occur during worship services in church, and these are usually related to already existing health conditions. If you put all of this together, the logical conclusion is that the safest place to be at any given time is at church, worshipping God. Bible study is safe, too. The percentage of deaths which occur during Bible studies is even less. (Source: Mark Moring, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com))

How is that for a persuasive reason to attend worship regularly and to participate in a Bible study?

### **A CALL TO WORSHIP**

More seriously, Psalm 95 is an invitation or exhortation to worship God. There is a seriousness about this call to worship, but it is not somber. It is not stuffy. In fact, it is infused with passion and exuberance. It is not dull and boring. It is full of enthusiasm and energy. You get the idea from this psalm that worship is a pretty big deal. You get the impression that maybe worship actually matters. A lot. Which it does.

One theologian (Karl Barth) went so far as to say that “Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place” in this life. Have you ever thought of worship in terms like these? Have you ever really thought about how important and how blessed it is – how blessed we are – to participate in both regular and special times of worship as part of a fellowship of believers with whom we share a common faith, hope, love, and devotion to the God of our salvation?

In calling us to worship God, Psalm 95 gives us some specific instructions about some of the forms our worship is to take. It is not an unabridged “how-to” manual on worship. There are other forms or expressions of worship in addition to these. But we had better not miss or dismiss these.

Verse 1 begins with the invitation to “come.” Think of it as more than just an invitation, though. It is really more like a directive, although there is no coercion in it. God wants us to come. He wants us to come freely and willingly. He wants us to want to come to worship Him. Did you hear that? *God wants us to want to.*

The psalmist is saying: “Don’t neglect this. Don’t stay away. Come! Make it priority one in your life to worship God in spirit and in truth.” The part about worshipping “in spirit and in truth” actually comes from Jesus in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42, especially v. 23). But I’m sure that the psalmist, hearing the words of Jesus, would say: “That’s what I’m talking about!”

So, the psalm begins with the exhortation to “come.” The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews picks up the same idea when he urges his 1<sup>st</sup>-century readers (and all of us, by extension) to not give up meeting together for worship and fellowship and teaching and

prayer, as some were apparently in the habit of doing (Hebrews 10:25). Our worship begins with the decision of the will to come. God wants us to want to come.

Verses 1 and 2 tell us what to do when we come:

- Sing for joy and shout aloud in praise to the Lord (v. 1). A lot of us – maybe all of us, I don't know – are a lot more comfortable shouting out loud for our favorite sports team than we are with the idea of shouting our praises to God. Some of us might say; "You may not be able to hear me, but I'm shouting my praises to the Lord in my heart." That's a good thing. Nothing wrong with that. But notice that here the Bible gives us permission, even encouragement and exhortation, to sing and shout out loud "to the Rock of our salvation." As it says in *The Message*, we are to "raise the roof for the Rock who saved us."
- Come into God's presence with thanksgiving, and worship Him with music and song (v. 2). Christians, to the detriment of our witness in the world, have argued with one another for centuries about what musical instruments to use and not to use, and what musical styles are acceptable and not acceptable for worship. The only "instruments" for worship mentioned here, if you will, are the instruments of "music and song." It doesn't say you have to use *these* musical instruments or *this* style of music. It doesn't say you can't use certain instruments or styles. It is not about the instruments or the style of music. It is about giving thanks and praise to God. It is about using every means at our disposal to exalt Him as our God and King.

Notice that there is a second invitation or call to worship in verse 6. There, once again, we are urged to come into God's presence with our worship. As we come, the psalmist exhorts us to "bow down in worship" and to "kneel before the Lord our Maker." Bowing down and kneeling both signify submission to a power or authority greater than ourselves. There is a sense in which this is what worship is really about. In a sense, the essence of worship is to prostrate ourselves in submission and surrender to God. But true worship – the kind of worship God desires, the kind of worship that pleases God – is not forced. It is not coerced. True worship is not done out of duty. True worship is prompted and motivated by love for God and gratitude for all that God has done for us. To bow down and kneel before the Lord in a spirit of true worship is the highest calling in our lives. It is something to be embraced with joy and gratitude. Not something we do because it's what we're supposed to do. If you have a ho-hum attitude about meeting together with your church family to worship God each Sunday, or you feel like church cuts into "your day," or you're here because somebody might get on your case if you didn't come, let me ask you this: How would you like to trade places with Pastor Yousef, the Iranian Christian pastor still imprisoned in Iran (and, at one point, sentenced to death) because of his refusal to renounce his faith in Christ and return to Islam? How would you like to trade places with Christian believers in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and other parts of the Arab world where it is dangerous or even illegal to meet together openly for worship? I bet they would love to trade places with us.

## **THE OBJECT OF OUR WORSHIP**

In verses 3-5, the psalm also draws our attention to the proper object of our worship, which is God Himself. God and God alone is worthy of our worship, because of who He is. We worship Him because He is “the great God, the great King above all gods” (v. 3). Search the whole universe over, and you will not find anyone His equal, for there is no one like Him. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. And He is sovereign over all things. Everything in all of creation belongs to Him. He’s got the whole world in His hands (vv. 4-5).

Then, in verse 7, we have a reminder that the God we worship is not a distant deity who doesn’t know us or care about us personally:

He is our God  
and we are the people of His pasture,  
the flock under His care.

The Lord is *our God*. We worship a God who is in relationship with us, and us with Him. Our Maker, yes. Our Sovereign, yes. But He is our Shepherd, too – and we are His flock. He cares for us. He watches over us. He protects us. He provides for us. He leads us. He corrects us. And all of this, He does because He loves us. The God we worship loves us with an everlasting and unfailing love. He is gracious and compassionate toward us. He cares for us as a shepherd cares for every sheep in his flock – only better, because He is the good Shepherd who, in the coming of Jesus, laid down His life for the flock. I claim the words of Charles Wesley as my own:

Amazing love! How can it be  
That You, My God, would die for me!

All of this points to the fact of God’s absolute worth-ship. Can we agree that Steve Jobs was a technological genius with an enormous impact on the way we live? Can we agree that Martin Luther King, Jr., whose memorial on the National Mall is being dedicated today, lived a life of extraordinary and enduring significance, and remains a symbol of racial justice, equality, and civil rights for all Americans? And what of the courageous faith of Pastor Yousef, or the courageous faith of believers, both men and women, in many parts of the world who have been persecuted or even martyred because of their allegiance to Christ? Truly amazing. Yet, as remarkable as they are, none of these can compare with the worth-ship of God. Like His holiness, His love, His grace, and every other attribute of His character, the worth-ship of God is in a league of its own. A class all by itself. There is no one else even in the same universe of worth-ship!

If this is true, what should we do? Come. Sing for joy. Shout out loud (not just in our hearts). Give thanks. Praise Him with music and song. Bow down in worship. Kneel before Him in humble adoration and glad surrender. There is this, too: Listen attentively for His voice. Pay attention when the Lord speaks. Do not let your heart become hard or unresponsive toward God.

## **WARNING: HARDHEARTEDNESS IS DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH**

Way back at the beginning I said this psalm contains both a call to worship God and a warning. The warning begins at the end of verse 7, where the psalmist says: “Today, if you hear (God’s) voice, do not harden your hearts...” God has not spoken only in the past. He continues to speak to us in the present through His written Word (the Bible), and the work of the Holy Spirit to give us understanding and to apply the truth of His Word to our lives today. God still speaks through His Word, and we are warned not to dismiss the Bible as irrelevant or out-dated. It is timeless in its relevance and authority. And there is no expiration date on either the trustworthiness of God’s Word or the worth-ship of God. Anybody who tells you otherwise may know a lot of things about a lot of things, but they are wrong about this.

To show how serious it is to allow your heart to become hard, the psalmist brings up an event from Israel’s history, after the Exodus, when the Lord brought the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. At a place called Rephidim, on their way to the promised land, the Israelites began to grumble and complain about Moses’ leadership and about what was lacking in God’s provisions for them. The place became known as Meribah, which means “quarreling” or “contending.” It was also called Massah, which means “testing.” Both bear witness to the Israelites’ lack of trust in God (Exodus 17:1-7).

But their grumbling and complaining and unbelief was not a one-time only event. It happened again and again. It became a way of life. Their hearts became hard through their stubborn unbelief. Here is another example: When the twelve spies sent by Moses to check out the land of Canaan returned with their report, only two of them, Caleb and Joshua, urged the people to trust God and to go and take possession of the land. The rest of the spies said the people living in Canaan were too powerful, too strong, too this and too that (Numbers 13-14). The people of Israel refused to listen to Caleb and Joshua, and, as a result, they spent 38 more years in the wilderness, until an entire generation of stiff-necked and hard-hearted people died. Because of their refusal to trust and obey God, they lost the privilege of entering the “rest” God had prepared for His people in the promised land.

This part of Psalm 95 is quoted in Hebrews 3, where, for professing Christian believers who are tempted to turn away from God, the warning against a sinful, unbelieving heart is sounded loud and clear. Watch out, the Scripture says. Hard-heartedness is hazardous to your health.

What can cause our hearts to become hard? A persistent pattern of disobedience can do it. So can apathy. So can chronic busyness and hurry, which seem to be among the peculiar curses of our age. There are also the thorns Jesus spoke of in the parable of the soils (Mark 4:1-20), such as the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desire for more and more things, which can choke the life out of our faith and strangle the passion of our love for God.

This is serious stuff, my friends. Do not allow your heart to become hard. Do not allow yourself to become deaf to the voice of God. Do not relegate worship to the category of “non-essentials” in your life. Or in the life of your family.

Don't be legalistic about worship. Missing worship is not an unforgivable sin. And you don't get a trophy for perfect attendance. God is a God of grace. He is the God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10). And this is a place of grace. But may I ask you, may I urge you, may I even plead with you, in the name of Jesus and for the glory of God, to commit yourself or to renew your commitment personally, as a couple, or as a family, to make worship each week in the company of God's people priority one in your life.

True worship, dear friends, is not a spectator sport. Even when I'm preaching, you are not to be just "spectating." Worship is an action word. It is something God wants us to do. Come, sing, shout, extol, bow down, kneel – these are all "doing" words. Worship is not something you watch as someone else does it. It is something you do. In fact, it is the most momentous, most urgent, most glorious thing you can ever do.

True worship is not about us. It is not about you or me. It is about God and His worth-ship. And it is not for us. OK, it is for us, but only secondarily. It is first and foremost for God. Not that God needs our worship. He does not. Whether we ever worship Him or not changes nothing in God or about God. From everlasting to everlasting He is God (Psalm 90:1). His worth-ship never changes. And though He does not need it, nothing gives God more pleasure than genuine worship that engages every aspect of our being – heart, mind, soul, and body.

Friends, there is never a time when it is not time to worship God. There is never a time when God, in the greatness and glory of who He is and what He has done for us in His power and grace, is not worthy of our worship. Worship matters. Your worship matters. Our worship matters. So, with reverence and joy, with songs of thanksgiving and praise, with shouting in our hearts and shouting out loud, with attentive hearts, minds, and ears, with both our words and our actions, let's worship God with everything we've got.

Lord, let it be so in us, now, and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.