

“A Prayer of Remembrance for a Forgetful People” | Psalm 95 (Scripture Set to Worship)

The Rev. Dr. John Frederick | The Falls Church Anglican

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Introduction

Psalm 95 has been used as a Call to Worship in Christian churches since the 4th century, probably earlier. But the idea of praying or singing pre-written prayers, even biblical prayers comes across as stodgy and limiting to some. I’ve heard people say things like ‘Real prayer is spontaneous, and Spirit-led, not scripted.’

An internet post got at the heart of this complaint:

“Saying the same prayers in the morning and evening gets boring. I know I’m not supposed to be entertained. But are there any tips on how to get into a better mindset before I enter prayer?”

One commentator responded like a typical liturgical internet grouch:

“[Prayer] was never intended to be fun.”

Other traditions only ever pray or sing Scripture in worship. No spontaneous praying or singing is allowed at all. When I was in Scotland studying and teaching at the university, I belonged to a church that was only permitted to sing biblical psalms, like Psalm 95, but with no instruments!

Imagine if we applied such restrictiveness to other parts of life. What if you were restricted to using the Old Testament language of Song of Solomon for things you could write in an anniversary card to your beloved:

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Mount Gilead.

²Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing.

Each has its twin;
not one of them is alone.

Are we being too restrictive, or quenching the Holy Spirit by teaching this series? No, instead we are inviting each other into a series of biblical passages that have saturated and shaped worship and prayer of the people of God for millennia. Passages that continue to enrich our worship as we conform our will and words to the Spirit of God working through Scripture’s that he himself inspired.

We'll approach the psalm in three parts:

- as a prayer of remembrance for a forgetful people (vv. 1-7),
- as a prayer of reverence for a rebellious people (vv. 6-9), and finally,
- as a prayer of rest for a restless people (vv. 10-11)

I. A prayer of remembrance for a forgetful people (vv. 1-7a)

Verses 1 and 2 focus on inviting us to worship God by

- "singing songs of praise to the Lord"
- "making a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation"
- and "giving thanks"

This instruction continues in verse 6, ensuring that the exuberance of our praise is reverent not rambunctious. The psalmist invites us to:

- "worship and **bow down**"
- and to "**kneel** before the Lord, our Maker"

The psalmist provides reasons for why we should worship God, reminding us of the majesty and uniqueness of the God of Israel.

We should worship, he says, because:

God is our Savior (vv. 1-2)

The word "savior" means "liberator or "deliverer." God didn't just save his people's souls and leave them in Egypt; he liberated them from slavery in Egypt, and he delivered them from destruction through the Red Sea *en route* to the promised land.

God is Great King and a Great God above all 'gods' (v. 3), who has created all things (vv. 4-5), including us (v. 6)

Notice, here that in the span of two verses the psalmist is able to encapsulate the entirety of the earth by using vertical and horizontal imagery. God's "hands" control the **depths** of the earth and the **heights** of the mountains. The **sea** is his, for he made it, and his hands have "formed **the dry land**."

He is our God and our Good Shepherd (v. 6-7a)

- He is not just a **god** he is **our God**
- We are **his** people (e.g., "the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.") This is highly relational imagery.
- For the Christian, the shepherding imagery calls to mind John 11, where Jesus is portrayed as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Illustration [Remembering our Deep Need for God]

This week was something of a crazy week for me. My car suddenly died in the McDonalds drive through, of all places. There might be some health-conscious food Pharisees out there, thinking McDonalds? I know you're out there. If the fast-food part is too much for you, you can pretend that instead of buying Happy

Meals at McDonalds my car broke at Whole Foods, and that I was buying those healthy seaweed snacks. Ahh yes, WholeFoods, a much more sophisticated and respectable place for an automobile catastrophe.

The car got sorted by mid-week. But the week continued to be stressful for various reasons.

Often when I'm stressed I'll take a long bike ride. Playing drums or guitar really balances me. Writing music and listening to music is central to my daily well-being. These are not bad things to do at all, and they definitely help me to gain perspective.

Whatever it is for you—exercise, hobbies, study, work, time away on vacation—these should be incorporated into a content, well-balanced life. I cannot imagine a holistically healthy life without them. But we also have to be careful. Too often our patterns of earthly comfort are ways to escape, ways to forget; but Psalm 95 calls not to forget, but to *remember*. Psalm 95 evokes a good, godly nostalgia in God's people. The psalm of the forgetful helps us, not to forget our problems, but to fall down before the majesty and infinite holy and good power of God in reverent remembrance. Only there can our underlying problem be addressed: that we are made to hunger and thirst for the living God.

We like Israel forget (or have never known) who the living God really is. We forget that underneath our real, physical and psychological fears, and our sometimes-severe struggles and stresses, we are sons and daughters of the living God, created by God for fellowship with him forever.

A life lived fleeing from problems is a life always on alert for the next catastrophe, devising an exit plan, and a detour around our stresses. There is no rest there. Psalm 95 reminds us to instead flee to God for an abiding spiritual baseline, and to build out from there, approaching our tasks and joys from a posture of worship, rather than approaching worship from a posture of busyness. Prioritizing worship actually make these other aspects of life even more fruitful.

[Transition] Praying this psalm rightly calibrates our hearts to remember and desire God—our creator, our savior, our God, King, and shepherd. That he is “our God” and “we are his people.” And yet, as we see in verses 6-9, the prayer of remembrance for a forgetful people must also be a prayer of reverence for a rebellious people.

II. A Prayer of Reverence for a rebellious people (vv. 6-9)

When I first memorized Psalm 95, it was by using the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. It was the version most American Anglicans and Episcopalians would have used until the newest 2019 edition. In the 1979 edition, verses 7-11 of the psalm were left out entirely. The Psalm ended by saying with optimism and hope, "Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!"

Of course, the actual way that the psalm ends is far more spiritually sobering. The Psalm ends not with verse 7 but with verse 11, which reads "Therefore I swore in my wrath they shall not enter my rest."

Even the latest prayer book says of verses 7-11, "The following verses may be omitted, except in Lent." But I say, if that's the case we should extend lent . . . to cover the whole year. Lent forever. Because you really cannot understand the psalm rightly without praying the whole thing.

You see, in these verses, the Psalmist is reminding us that the generation that God lead out of Egypt never entered the Promised Land. The very thing that they feared, dying in the wilderness, is precisely what happened to them. Not because God was unjust; but because they refused to trust in God's faithfulness and provision. Like the Israelites, we need a prayer of remembrance because in the struggles of day to day life we are more likely to rebel against God than to worship him.

The mention of Meribah and Masseh is significant. It recalls several episodes in the book of Exodus.

- First, in Exodus 16 the people grumble because they are hungry in the wilderness, and the Lord provides bread from heaven (manna) and quail for the people.
- Then in Exodus 17, at a place name Massah and Meribah, the similarly people complain to Moses about their thirst, and the Lord provides water for them in the wilderness. This is what Psalm 95 is referring in verses 7-11.

The Hebrew word Meribah means "quarreling." The early Christians translated it as "rebellion."

The Hebrew word Massah means "testing." This was a form of testing that tried to trick and entrap the respondent. It was asking 'gotcha' questions of God. It put God on trial. "Tell me why I should trust you again, God?"

The Psalm invites us to consider when we are faced with a Meribah moment:

- Will we be inclined to remember God or will we rebel against him?
- Will we revere him or to replace him with our own attempts at traversing the wilderness?

- We will marvel at God's infinite majesty or to test God, thereby shrinking his infinite majesty so that it fits within the limits of our finite imagination and intelligence?

In other words, at our own Meribahs and Massahs, when the struggles and stresses of life encroach upon our comfort and peace, will we fall before a God who formed us, or will we fall in the wilderness in front of the gods we have formed for ourselves?

It is interesting to think in terms of those two words, **forming** and **falling**. Both words appear in the passage, and they help us to see how human rebellion typically plays out in a Meribah moment.

Ila. **Forming** our own Gods [Idolatry] (v. 5)

You will notice in Psalm 95:5 we read "his hands have **formed** the dry land." That word "formed" is used in other key parts of the Bible to refer to rebellious people forming idols to take the place of God. When we forget that we are formed by God, we form other gods.

- **The Golden Calves of Exodus 32:4 – A**

And [Aaron] received the gold from their hand and **formed it** with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"

- **King Jereboam's Idolatry in 1 Kings 12**

²⁸ So **the king took counsel and made two calves of gold**. And he said to the people . . . **Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.**" ³² And **he . . . offered sacrifices on the altar . . . sacrificing to the calves that he made**. And he placed in Bethel **the priests of the high places that he had made**. ³³ He went up to **the altar that he had made** in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month **that he had devised from his own heart**. And **he instituted a feast** for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.

In our disillusionment we reckon that rebellion is a means of expedient progress, a way of moving forward through the wilderness to the rest and the peace of the Promised Land that we so desperately crave. In reality, rebellion causes us to step slowly and steadily backwards, walking further into the wilderness that we are so desperately trying to escape. The Bible says the doing so results in a sobering reality: "our dead bodies fall in the wilderness."

Ilb. **Falling down** in Worship or Falling in the Wilderness (v.6)

This striking and sobering phrase, "your dead bodies will fall in the wilderness" occurs in Hebrews 3:17. There the New Testament author interprets Psalm 95, saying that because of Israel's unbelief "their dead bodies fell in the wilderness."

Hebrews draws this chilling phrase from Numbers 14, the place in the Old Testament where God bans the wilderness generation from entering the promised land. This is the passage Psalm 95 has in mind in verses 7-11.

Within the span of five verses the phase appears five times.

- Verses 29 – **“your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness”** (ESV)
- Verses 32-33
³² But as for you, **your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness.** ³³ And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of **your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.**

Later in the Book of Numbers, in chapter 20, we discover that even Moses is disqualified from entering the land!

[Transition] As one commentator said, “The old trek through the wilderness toward the promised land always passes by Meribah, where hearts harden and the pilgrimage is lost.”¹ We have to ask, then, if even Moses lost. If Moses *himself* died in the wilderness and did not enter the Promised Land, what hope is there for us?

III. A Prayer of Rest for a Restless People (vv. 8-10)

A glimmer of hope begins to emerge in Hebrews 4. Commenting on Psalm 95:10-11, the author tells us

- **“the promise of entering his rest still stands,**
- And that although those who failed to enter the Promised Land, did so because of a lack of faith but **“we who have believed enter that rest.”**
- Finally, verse 10 “whoever has entered **God’s rest** has also rested from his works as God did from his.”

Notice how the Bible speaks here in Hebrews and in Psalm 95. Whose rest is it that is mentioned? It is not our rest, achieved by us, earned by us. No, the rest that we enter by faith is the already-achieved sabbath rest of God the Father and the perfectly-finished salvation rest of Christ the Son who is seated at the right hand of God. **The rest we enter into by faith is God’s rest.**

It’s a rest that stands despite our circumstances. A rest that outlasts our illnesses. Not the rest in peace of a gravestone; but the rest that comes from the ‘He is not here. Here is risen’ of the empty tomb. It is a resurrection rest. An eternal rest for the restless soul. A rest that is yours now and forever by faith in Christ.

Conclusion

I will leave you with a rare gem from Numbers 13-14 that I discovered this week that will give you great hope as you seek your rest in Christ. You see, in Numbers 13 most commentators pass over the fact that when Moses sent spies into the Promised Land to survey the land and its

¹ Marvin E. Tate. *Psalms 51–100*. WBC 20 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 504.

inhabitants he commanded them to carry out a peculiar, seemingly incidental task in Numbers 13:20.

There Moses said “Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land.” Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes. A few verses later, in verse 23, we learn that “they came to the Valley of Eshcol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them; they also brought some pomegranates and figs.”

Finally, in verse 28 we receive the spies return and they say to Moses “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.”

Why bother mentioning this as we conclude? It is because figs, pomegranates and fruit of the vine are not random contraband that the spies brought back from Canaan. No, to the Hebrew readers these fruits—figs, pomegranates, and fruit of the vine—were highly symbolic. In the Old Testament the presence of these fruits always serve as symbols of **God’s blessings, God’s peace, prosperity, provision, and security.**

Just after this, in Numbers 14:19-20, God pardons the people who eventually die in the wilderness. This means that though the people fell in the wilderness, it was a failure of faithful obedience but not a fall from grace.

God’s people struggled, they failed, and they fell in the wilderness, God extended Gospel grace to them in advance in the form of figs and grapes. An outward visible sign of an inward, spiritual grace. A sacramental reminder that, as 2 Timothy 2:13 says, “if we are faithless, **he** remains faithful— **for he cannot deny himself.**”

So, let us remember God and the Gospel rest he has won for us through the cross and the resurrection. Let us rehearse our spiritual heritage through praying Psalm 95. Let us not be those who forget, but those who remember. Let us not fall down in the wilderness but fall down in worship so that we might rise as resurrected bodies in the Promised Land.

Discussion Questions

(1) In Numbers 13-14, God pardons the people who were faithless in the wilderness, but they (including Moses) are still condemned to die in the wilderness. Yet, the Bible reveals that the spies bring back figs, pomegranates, and grapes, symbolizing a sign and seal of God's covenantal love, peace, and future prosperity. How do the New Testament means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) help us to remember God's pardon, peace and forgiveness even to us, imperfect sinners?

(2) It is tempting to form idols in response to the Meribah moments of life, the times of great affliction, suffering, and fear. How can a life that remembers God and reveres God, assist us to avoid and identify idolatrous practices that aim to replace God and achieve our own rest?

(3) In the sermon, it is argued that "exercise, hobbies, study, work should be incorporated into a content, well-balanced life. But too often they are ways to escape, ways to forget; this Psalm calls not to forget, but to *remember*." How can good, healthy habits that contribute to holistic emotional, physical and spiritual health work together with a God-centered, worship-centered approach to life? How can prioritizing worship actually make these other aspects of life even more fruitful?

(4) The concept of testing God is a tricky concept. On the one hand, it could breed a form of anti-intellectualism that is akin to indoctrination: "Never ask questions, just believe what you're told." On the other hand, it could become an idolatrous form of inquiry, forcing God to fit within the confines of our cognitive limits, and the limits of our human intellect and imagination. How can we strike a healthy, prayerful balance that encourages us to have inquisitive minds that don't become idolatrous?

(5) In your experience, how are reverence and exuberance, both of which are demonstrated in Psalm 95, balanced in the life of corporate and personal worship? How can praying and singing the Psalms assist us to ensure that we are pursuing neither pure emotionalism nor rote religious activity?

Another prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, *The General Thanksgiving*. It's one worth memorizing and one that really captures the heart of all we've been thinking about in Psalm 95 today.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you humble thanks and praise, for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made.

We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace and the hope of glory.

And we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly grateful hearts we may show forth your praise not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory throughout all ages. **Amen.** (BCP, 2019 p. 25)