

A Solemn Warning

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, for our Bible reading, please, if you would turn to page 499 and to Psalm 95. This is a psalm of the Word of God.
- As you know, Willie's been preaching a series on the Bible, the Word of God, and would have been continuing that this evening. So we're going to continue in the same area, not exactly the same theme, but we're going to be looking at this psalm.
- One of a collection of psalms to the Lord, the great King, psalm of praise, and yet a psalm of warning. Psalm 95. O come, let us sing to the Lord.
- Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving. Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise.
- For the Lord is a great God, a great King above all gods. In his hands are the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains are his also.
- [1 : 0 2] The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.
- For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.
- As at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work, for forty years I loathed this generation, and said, they are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.
- Therefore I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Amen, and may the Lord bless to us that striking and also solemn reading from his word.
- Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at Psalm 95, that's on page 499, and we'll have a moment of prayer together.
- [2 : 1 8] Our Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we pray indeed, as we have sung, that the gracious Holy Spirit, who inspired these pages, the Spirit who reads them with us, the Spirit who is in them, and the Spirit who alone can open them to us, we ask indeed that he will lead us to Christ Jesus, the living word, in whose name we pray.
- Amen. Many of us who come here regularly, and even if you come here occasionally, must be impressed by the gifted musicians who lead us.
- It's a great and tremendous blessing to be led by such a gifted team, and particularly those of us who preach either seldom or regularly, know just how inspirational that is.
- You go to some places where the singing is appalling, where the music is dreadful, and your heart sinks before you get to the sermon. I want you to imagine this, though.
- Just imagine one day, morning or evening, we're here in St. George's Tron. Music is playing gloriously. People are singing their hearts out.
- [3 : 4 7] And then suddenly, a voice interrupts very abruptly and says, I wish today that you would listen to me. Because that's what this psalm is doing.

Don't you see? Verses 1 to 7b is a glorious psalm of praise. And then, there is a stern warning.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. This is a psalm I became very, very familiar with when I was in Durham, because in college we would sing or say a version of it every morning, called the Vanity, come let us sing to the Lord.

And very often, you get a version, some of them good versions, which would say, the last part of it may be omitted. In other words, the part that begins, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

If you look at some of the hymn books, the versions of this psalm, it's exactly what they do. They say, these verses may be omitted. But surely, 7b must be the key to the psalm.

[5 : 02] Surely, what God says to us must be more important than what we say to God. The voice from heaven must be more important than the voices on earth.

Indeed, we would have nothing at all to say to God unless he first spoke to us. That's why pagan worship, among other reasons, was such a frustrating thing. The pagans had no idea what to say to their gods, because their gods had not revealed themselves.

So, you see, this is not, as some people say, two psalms clumsily cobbled together. A psalm of praise and then a word of rebuke. In any case, I think if I'd been trying to cobble together a poem, which was so different in both parts, I think I could have done it a little better than this.

At least I hope so. The point is, this rebuke, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart, is the center of what this psalm means.

This psalm was probably composed for what was called the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Booths, where the people remember the desert wanderings. And in particular, two things are impressed here.

[6 : 15] Do not, verse 8, harden your hearts, as at Meribah, or at the day of Massah in the wilderness. Now, these are not so much place names. Meribah means dispute, and Massah means testing.

Places where, we can read about in the books of Exodus and Numbers, where the people of God indulged in what can only be described as whinging unbelief, what Hebrews later calls an evil and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

And you see what the author of the psalm, it's an anonymous psalm, the author of the psalm is saying, there is a great danger of worship, and we'll come back to the word worship later on, great danger of worship being divorced from reality.

There's a great danger of singing words because we either like the tune, or think the words sound pleasant. But, the point that's being made here is, the most important thing when we meet together, indeed, the most important thing whenever we open the word of God, is to listen to his voice.

And that's why, if people, you hear people saying things like, I don't much like the preaching of that church, but the worship is great. That's frankly nonsense. If the preaching isn't up to much, the worship isn't great.

[7 : 34] Because, worship is primarily, before we say anything to God, or sing anything to God, listening to what he has to say. To make sure that what we say to him, fits in with what he says to us.

That's what I want to begin with this psalm then. What is this psalm about hearing his word saying to us? I want to do this by asking three questions.

The first question I want to ask is, who needs this warning? Who needs to hear these words today? If you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

Now, the answer might seem obvious. This is obviously addressed to backsliders, isn't it? To people who have gone off the boil. To people who have lost their love for the Lord. That cannot possibly be true.

Look at verses 1 to 5 again. This is speaking to people who are worshipping the Lord with all their hearts. Who are falling down and shouting aloud to the rock of their salvation.

[8 : 36] There can be few psalms who speak so beautifully of the splendor of God. That God is the creator. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving.

Let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise. And this psalm is doing exactly that. For the Lord is a great God. No part of this universe, seen or unseen, is beyond his control.

Now, the pagan nations believed that their gods inhabited the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, and the sea. The very places where the pagan gods were believed to live.

The heights of the mountains. The mountain of the gods. Which the ancient Canaanites believed in. And in other psalms, like Psalm 48, is compared to Mount Zion, the true hill of God that we looked at this morning.

This God is the Lord of creation. Now, in some passages in scripture, the sea is his great enemy. Unto the powers of darkness. Look at verse 5.

[9 : 42] The sea is his, for he made it. No part of the universe is outside his control. And that's why the very heart of Israel's faith are the words, My help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Now, if he made heaven and earth, there is nothing in heaven and earth that is outside his power. Nor is there any place or any time where we are not subject to, and where we have not to worship him.

He is also Lord of history. He is, we are, verse 7, we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand. Now, if we were doing this as a series of psalms, psalms 90 to 100, which I've done in the past sometimes, we would look at these things.

But I'm particularly concerned that we concentrate on this hinge of the psalm, if you like. The danger of worship, which is simply self-indulgence.

collapsing worship into singing and feeling good. Now, you may remember in the sermons on Romans, Romans chapter 12 and following, well, they talked a great deal about worship.

[10 : 48] Worship of our whole lives. Present your bodies a living sacrifice, which is your reasonable worship. So the answer to the question is, where do you worship? It's not St. George's Tron or some other building, but wherever my body happens to be.

Now, of course, we meet together, if you like, to focus that worship, to praise God, to listen to, and to listen to his word. But it's not just singing.

It's not just feeling good. You can be certain, if some church has someone that they call a leader of worship, that person is almost certainly in charge of the music group.

As I said at the beginning, I love singing. I love music. And we'll feel totally deprived without it. But remember, singing is a medium through which we praise God, praise and worship, and worship God.

And notice the for in verse 7. For he is our God. Our minds must be engaged as well as our heart. That's why we mustn't sing, mustn't sing trivial stuff that really says nothing, but simply stirs our emotions.

[11 : 54] For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture. Scripture always, always through the mind to the heart. See, if we stop at the mind, of course, we don't worship.

It's simply an intellectual exercise. We simply try to get at the heart without the mind, simply fooling around in the emotions, and we don't, it has no effect.

That's why listening together to the word is at the heart of what we do. Because without this, we'll simply become self-indulgent.

The Bible, as I've said before, is God's book about God. We mustn't come to the Bible saying, what is this passage saying to me?

We must come to the Bible and say, what is God saying to me in this passage? What is God saying about God? Of course, then, we'll get to what he's saying about me. But if we start there, if we start with, what is this passage saying to me?

[12:57] We'll simply put our own agenda into the text, and we'll never learn anything we don't already know. That's why worship must pay more attention to the voice of God and listening to him rather than what we say to him.

That's the first thing. Who needs this warning? And the answer, surely, is everybody. When we, and not least, when we are singing praises to the Lord.

That's why the preaching of the word and the praising of his name are so inextricably linked. We do not praise his name properly unless we listen to his word with open minds and hearts.

Second question I want to ask is, when is this warning needed? Verse 7 again, today. if you hear his voice. It's awfully easy to distance ourselves from scripture and to think it applies to somebody else.

This applies, perhaps, to young people who've just come to the Lord and they need particularly to hear his voice. But it doesn't say tomorrow if you hear his voice.

[14:07] It says today. Does this apply to older people who perhaps are going off the boil? But it doesn't say yesterday. It says today.

When do we hear his voice? When do we need to hear his voice today? I read from the letter to the Hebrews which picks up this passage. When Hebrews picks up this warning, Hebrews says, as long as it is called today.

Do not harden your hearts. There never is a day that's not called today. So this word needs to be heard all the time. One of the things we need to realize is that we never know the scriptures well enough.

We can never get to a point where you say, oh, I know that now. I've sussed that out. I don't need to hear it anymore. This is a word that needs to be heard every day by all of us.

What does it mean when the scripture says, do not harden your heart? Now, the Meribah episode comes from Exodus 17 when the people said, is the Lord among us or not?

[15:17] This was a time of toughness. God had rescued them with a mighty hand out of Egypt. He had shown signs, wonders, miraculous salvation. But now, as they are journeying through the desert, the miracles seem to have stopped.

The signs and wonders are not happening. And they were wanting to go back to Egypt. Now, it was back to pagan religion and lifestyle.

In Egypt, we had garlic and cucumbers, they say. You see, the whole misery of Egypt was glossed over.

The whole slavery pretended it hadn't happened. We got nice meals in Egypt, so let's go back there. That's effectively what they're saying. But, what was the problem?

The problem was that they had ceased listening to the words of Moses. The voice of Moses is the voice of God. We've often said this before, there is no authority in the Old Testament that supersedes Moses or bypasses him.

[16 : 23] Whether there are miracles and wonders and signs happening or not, there is still the voice of Moses. I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing.

Therefore, choose life. And that word of Moses, indeed the five books of Moses, they are going to be presented to them, they are going to be part of, in fact, they are going to be the very heart of their life together.

And this must be the same with us. Unlike the people of God's ancient people, we have the whole word. The whole word in its fullness. And when the word is not at the center of our lives together, then what happens?

We start to whinge. We start to complain. We start to think we know better. We become complacent. Remember, we are all responsible for the effective preaching of the word.

Not just the responsibility of the ministers and the other preachers, the responsibility of us all. We need to pray for the preaching of the word. We need to pray that it will go out with power and with effectiveness.

[17 : 33] We need to pray for those who bring the word, that they will be faithful. God is gracious, but we need to open our hearts, open our minds.

C.S. Lewis says, those who have hearts and minds open to the Lord will find something, even in a poor sermon, and those who are hard-hearted will find nothing, even in the most eloquent and the most powerful sermon.

I'm certainly not making a plea for bad preaching or boring preaching. Of course not. What I'm saying is that when the word of God is brought faithfully to people, week after week, month after month, year after year, the Spirit is saying, do not harden your hearts.

Do not put God to the test. That means we need to think about the content of our worship and, if you like, our spirituality.

Now, in this psalm are the great foundation truths of the Old Testament, creation and history. These are at the very center of the biblical revelation. The Creator means we have nothing that we have not been given.

[18 : 55] And history means He is in charge, once again, for He is our God. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hands. No part of His, no part of life, no area of the universe is not His realm.

And the letter of James has some penetrating things to say about this. In James chapter 3, James talks about the power of the tongue.

And James says, a very powerful thing there, it's not right, indeed it's scandalous, that we praise God with our tongue, that we curse humans who are made in His image.

When we hear the word of God, we need to allow that to penetrate into our hearts. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to apply it to our hearts and lives.

The great truths of this psalm and of Scripture. So, first of all then, who needs, who needs this warning?

[20 : 01] All of us. When is this warning needed? All the time. I want finally to ask the question, why is this warning so important?

And this particularly brings us to the latter verses of the psalm, verses 8 to 11, verses, as I say, which so often are missed out in public worship and in public praise.

Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the wilderness. And your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

Now, this is a robust call. And who is calling? Verse 7, He is our God. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.

Remember, this is the shepherd who loses none of his sheep, John 10. And also, the other thing that Jesus says in John 10 is, My sheep listen to my voice.

[21 : 04] That's a great test, isn't it? My sheep listen to my voice. When they hear the voice of the shepherd, they listen. The hardening comes when we stop listening.

The hardening comes when we think we know it all. The hardening comes when we say reject a word because we don't like the preacher. When we reject a word because it's uncomfortable.

That is what hardening means. And there is the danger of continued hardening. You see, verse 10, For 40 years I loathe that generation.

What had happened to Israel? Israel had seen Pharaoh judged. They had seen themselves rescued. What happened to Pharaoh? Pharaoh, we are told, hardened his heart.

Ten times in the Exodus story, Pharaoh hardened his heart. Ten times we are told God hardened Pharaoh's heart. These are not two separate things.

[22 : 05] These are part of the same coin. See what happened? Israel in the desert became like Pharaoh. They became hard and unbelieving.

It's awfully easy for God's people to become like the unbelieving world. Forty years. Many people in this church have heard the living word of God preach for a lot longer than that.

And this is what continued hardening sometimes gets to a stage where the voice is no longer heard, where the voice no longer matters.

And God is angry. Verse 10, Forty years I loath that generation, loath, disgusted. See, God does not tolerate continued hardening, continued contempt for his word and the messengers of his word.

That's what this psalm is saying. And it said there are people who go astray in their heart. They have not known my ways. Notice, go astray in their heart. And heart, of course, in the Old Testament is a bigger thing than our English.

[23 : 17] It means our whole personality. When we hear the word of God, we need to listen to that so that we become Christ-like in our thinking, in our attitudes, so that we become Christ-like in our behavior.

Now, remember, this is not talking about people who occasionally disobey, people who get it wrong, because that's all of us. He's talking about people who persistently, deliberately decide, no, thank you, God, I know what you're saying.

I'm not listening. any longer. Therefore, I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Now, that happened, of course, literally to that generation in the desert.

They died out in the desert without reaching the promised land. But rest, of course, taken up in the letter to the Hebrews, as I've already mentioned, means the enjoyment with God of complete redemption in the new creation.

Once again, it's the, what we believe is happening when the word of God is spoken. When the word of God is spoken, we believe that Christ himself comes to those of us who listen.

[24 : 33] And remember, it's not somebody standing up here and pronouncing spiritual instruction to their spiritual inferiors. That's not what preaching is.

Preaching is when everyone, both the person who brings the word and also receive the word, when all of us together are subject to that word.

If we refuse continually to be subject to that word, there comes a time when we can no longer hear it. The voice becomes more and more and more distant. And we go further and further away from home.

So why is this warning so important? This warning is so important, as I said, because it echoes Moses. I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing.

Therefore, choose life. See, this kind of preaching, which is in this psalm, this is prophetic preaching. Remember, the prophets are a shorthand in the New Testament for the whole of the Old Testament.

[25 : 34] Very often, very often when the New Testament quotes the prophets, it's quoting from the Psalms. Because all of it is the living word of the living God. this preaching is addressed to those who have not finally hardened their hearts, but to those which is all of us who are in danger of doing it.

So hearing and obeying the word must be the heart of all we do in our meetings together and in our personal lives. Lives set by the Bible's agenda.

And of course support for the ministries of the word. You see, sadly, there are many churches which have lost the ministry of the word because people hardened their hearts and didn't listen to them.

People wanted something different, something regarded as superior. Now, Amos, the prophet, talks about a famine of hearing of the word of God.

That's what happens when people reject the word of God. God often removes that and over it can be written the words of 1 Samuel, Ichabod, where is the glory? The glory has gone.

[26 : 51] That's why we need to have the Bible not in the passenger seat, not in the book. The Bible needs to be in the driving seat and set the agenda.

Brothers and sisters, today, if we hear his voice, let us not harden our hearts. Amen.

Let's pray. God, our Father, we praise you. You have given to us the scriptures, the scriptures which are able to make us wise to salvation.

The scriptures will guide us in our lives on earth, in the scriptures which so gloriously point to that rest that lies beyond. Help us indeed, all of us, in our daily lives and in our meetings together to hear that voice and like the young Samuel to say, Master, speak, for your servants are listening.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.