

Psalm 95: Do Not Harden Your Heart

Expository Lessons from the Psalms

I. Introduction to Psalm 95 (designated as Psalm 94 in the Septuagint)

- a. Importance of this psalm.
 - i. There are five quotes from the second half of this psalm in the New Testament. These are found in **Hebrews 3-4**.
 - ii. The argument made in **Hebrews 3-4** is the foundation for everything that follows in **Hebrews**: why we must persevere and remain faithful to the Lord, to the very end.
 - iii. Therefore, **Psalm 95** is extremely relevant to Christians today, containing key warnings and promises that are intended specifically for us.
 1. It provides a clear answer to the very important question:
“What will I need to do (and not do) in order to be saved in the end?”
 - iv. This psalm also illustrates the importance to Christians of the 40-year period of wandering in the Wilderness, especially from the books of **Exodus** (the first year of their time in the Wilderness) and **Numbers** (the remaining 39 years).
 1. We went through **Exodus** within the past two years (in 2020) and hope to begin an expository series studying **Numbers** soon.
 2. The exodus from Egypt and the subsequent 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness provide a spiritual template or map of the Christian life, as alluded to in three places in the New Testament:
 - a. **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**,
 - b. **Hebrews 3-4**, and
 - c. **Jude v. 5**.
- b. Why I encourage us to use a text based on the Greek Septuagint (LXX) rather than the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) when studying this psalm.
 - i. In Bibles where the Old Testament is based on the MT, this is **Psalm 95**. However, in the LXX it is designated as **Psalm 94**.

- ii. When this psalm is quoted in the New Testament in **Hebrews 3**, while the text of the MT and LXX are similar, if you compare the Greek New Testament with the Greek of the LXX, clearly the author of **Hebrews** is using the LXX text.
- iii. For example, consider the issue of the author of this psalm.
 - 1. Some of the psalms identify the author at the beginning of the psalm.
 - 2. While the MT does not identify an author for this psalm, the LXX identifies David as the author.
 - a. "...again He designates a certain day, *saying in David*, 'Today,' after such a long time, as it has been said: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts.'" (**Hebrews 4:7**, NKJV)
- iv. There are places where the **Hebrews** writer is quoting from other parts of the Old Testament. Where the MT and LXX diverge significantly, the **Hebrews** writer is relying on the LXX and expects that his Jewish Christian readers will be doing likewise.

II. Reading the LXX Version of this Psalm

- a. Read all of **Psalm 95** (corresponding to **Psalm 94** in Bibles based on the LXX, from which I am reading in the audio lesson).
- b. A few comments.
 - i. This is identified in the LXX as *an ode of praise by David*.
 - ii. David emphasizes the time of Israel wandering in the Wilderness, which had happened hundreds of years before the time he was writing this psalm.
 - iii. The first 6-1/2 verses are devoted to praising God.
 - 1. This is a call for all to join in with David in worshiping God.
 - 2. He is praised for being over all the 'gods'.
 - 3. He is identified as the one who made the sea and the dry land.
 - a. This reminds me of how Jonah described the Lord he worshiped to the pagans on the boat in the storm, in **Jonah 1**.
 - 4. This is an animated, passionate call to assemble before the Lord and worship Him. The people are called to "shout aloud to

Him with psalms”, “worship and fall down before Him” and even to “weep before the Lord” (LXX) or “bow down, kneel before” Him (MT).

- a. Passages like these are no doubt inspiration for those churches who strive to present an animated ‘worship experience’ type of service on Sundays!
5. David describes the Lord here as being like a shepherd. We are the sheep of his pasture.
 - a. Bear in mind that David, who wrote this, was a man who had been a shepherd by occupation.
 - b. He is the one who, as he told King Saul before the battle against Goliath, “Your servant used to tend the flock of his father, and when a lion or a bear came and took a sheep out of the flock, I followed it and struck it, and delivered the sheep from its mouth.” (**1 Samuel 17:14-15**; designated **1 Kingdoms 17:14-15** in LXX, OSB)
 - c. David is also identified as the author of **Psalm 23**, the famous psalm that begins “The Lord is my Shepherd”. That psalm goes on to describe how the Lord leads him to green pastures and by the still waters; and protects him even “in the valley of the shadow of death”.
- iv. The final 4-1/2 verses are commented on extensively by the **Hebrews** writer, in **Hebrews 3-4**, as being extremely important and pertaining to us Christians.
 1. In **Hebrews**, we have a detailed commentary on this part of the psalm. Let us go there and learn what the Hebrews writer sees in this passage.
 2. As I mentioned, the **Hebrews** writer is quoting from the LXX.
 - a. This is easy to see if you compare the LXX with the New Testament passage. However, in the OSB translation from which we just read (which is based on the LXX text), one might think that verse 10 does not match.
 - b. However, that is just a peculiarity of the OSB translation. In Greek, the LXX *does match* what it says in **Hebrews**. You can confirm that by comparing an interlinear Greek LXX and NT, or by checking other English translations of the LXX.

- c. The OSB says, “For forty years I was *treated with contempt* by that generation” (**Psalm 94:10a**, LXX, OSB)
- d. However, other LXX translations render it more literally (and easier to see the match with the New Translation quote in **Hebrews**).
 - i. “For forty years I was *irritated with* that generation...” (**Psalm 94:10a**, LES)
 - ii. “Forty years was I *grieved with* this generation...” (**Psalm 94:10a**, Brenton LXX En)
 - iii. “For forty years I *loathed* that generation...” (**Psalm 94:10a**, NETS)

III. The Hebrews Writer Explains the Significance of this Passage, for Christians

- a. Read **Hebrews 2:17-3:6**.
 - i. This is the introduction to the exposition of the passage from **Psalm 95**.
 - ii. It also introduces the main theme of **Hebrews**: perseverance.
 - iii. Christ is described here as:
 - 1. The faithful High Priest.
 - 2. Who is the Son *over* the house of God.
 - a. Christ is also the *builder of* that house.
 - b. In contrast with Moses, who was only a faithful servant in that house.
 - iv. We (the Christians, the church) are the house of God...
 - 1. *IF* we “hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of hope firm to the end.” (**Hebrews 3:6**)
 - v. The significance of this statement is that it is in fulfillment of a prophecy in **1 Samuel 2:34-35** (which is alluded to here, but not quoted directly).
 - 1. There, in the days of Eli, a prophet had foretold that in the future, God would “raise up” a “faithful priest”.
 - a. This is one of several important prophecies in the Old Testament where it speaks of the Lord “raising up”

someone important. These prophecies were fulfilled by Jesus, who was literally “raised up” from the dead on the third day. Other prophecies about someone being “raised up” include:

- i. **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**, where it says the Lord will *raise up a Prophet* like Moses.
 - ii. **2 Samuel 7:12**, where it says the Lord will *raise up a King from the line of David*, who will rule over the eternal kingdom.
 - iii. **Ezekiel 34:23 (LXX)** where it says the Lord will *raise up one Shepherd* over all of God’s flock.
2. The prophecy of **1 Samuel 2** also says that this promised future priest would serve before a “faithful house”, forever.
- vi. The **Hebrews** writer explains that Christ is indeed the “faithful priest”. He goes on to explain that this new priest over God’s house is from the order of Melchizedek (an eternal priest, not descended from the line of Aaron) as prophesied in **Psalm 110**.
 1. **The Remaining Question:** Will *we* be a part of that “faithful house”?
 2. **The Answer:** *A conditional ‘Yes’.*
 - a. *IF* we remain *faithful to the end!*
 - b. ‘Faithful’, as in a marriage, means keeping your commitment over time, to the end.
 - i. In sickness and health, in riches or poverty, for better or worse, in good times or bad, until death!
 - ii. It involves being constant, unwavering, loyal and true to your word.
- b. Read **Hebrews 3:7-19**.
 - i. Although David wrote **Psalm 95** (according to what is says in **Hebrews 4:7**), it was actually from *the Holy Spirit speaking through him*, as the **Hebrews** writer states in **Hebrews 3:2**.
 1. Belief in the inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit is ‘a hill to die on’, something we can never relinquish under any circumstances.

2. We hold to the divine inspiration of Scripture because that is in the deposit of faith that Jesus handed down to the apostles.
- ii. The **Hebrews** writer says that this warning from the Holy Spirit, written by the hand of David, applies to Christians. So, it is the Holy Spirit speaking to us!
 1. "*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;*" (**Hebrews 3:12**, NKJV)
 2. "*For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end,*" (**Hebrews 3:14**, NKJV)
- c. The primary challenge for us: Do not *harden your hearts*, as the Israelites did during their time in the Wilderness.
 - i. This points back to the 40 years of the Israelites wandering in the Wilderness, as recorded in **Exodus**, **Numbers** and **Deuteronomy**.
 1. They are an example for us. May we learn from their mistake and not imitate that!
 - ii. They hardened their hearts *while they were in the Wilderness*.
 1. That implies that they *had soft hearts* at the beginning of their journey, at the time they left Egypt (and crossed through the Red Sea); however, something went wrong after that.
 - a. Recall that of the 600,000+ adult males who departed Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, only two from that original group (Joshua and Caleb) made it all the way to the Promised Land.
 - i. This stands as a sober warning for us, not to harden our hearts as they did.
 - ii. However, while *only two* out of 600,000 men made it, we should not get discouraged. Each of us can make it! God is faithful and will not let us be tempted beyond what we are able to bear. Instead, He will provide a *way of escape* from sin so that we can make it to the end, as Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 10:13**.
 2. This also clearly implies that we have control over whether our hearts become hardened.

- a. Several times in **Exodus**, it stated that the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh. Some people (Calvinists in particular) have the idea from passages like this one that God *arbitrarily hardens* people's hearts. However, here David says we should not harden our own hearts!
- b. **Question:** *Who does this "hardening"?* God or us?
 - i. Early Christian writer Origen (a teacher from Alexandria, Egypt, writing c. 225 AD) noted that many were troubled by these statements in Exodus regarding God hardening Pharaoh's heart, as well as the statement in **Ezekiel 36:26** about the Lord removing their "heart of stone" and giving them a "heart of flesh" instead.
 - ii. He explained that God hardens or softens people's hearts in the same way that the heat of the sun hardens clay or mud, while the same sun softens wax or butter.
 - 1. God does not override our free will. We have a choice of whether to have a wax-like heart that softens under adversity from God, or to have a clay-like heart that will become hardened in the face of God's action.
 - iii. For further information on this, see Origen, *De Principiis*, 3.1.10-3.1.20; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, pp. 311-324.
 - 1. Also see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Free Will and Predestination'.
- c. Similarly, in the Parable of the Sower, the four different soils represent four different types of hearts. Jesus is calling his hearers to have hearts that are receptive to the word of God, like the good (fourth) soil.
 - i. "Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." (**Luke 8:12**, NKJV)
 - ii. "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble

and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.” (**Luke 8:15**, NKJV)

1. Note that NASB says “with *perseverance*” rather than “with patience”.
2. A good (soft) heart is possessed by one who holds onto God’s word, obeys it, and produces good fruit.

3. Questions:

- a. What does it mean to have a *soft heart* (spiritually)? Does it mean to have empathy? To be easily persuaded? Is it primarily a feeling or an emotion?
- b. How does someone’s heart *become hardened*? Do they realize it is happening? Are there identifiable symptoms, or are there some kind of tests one can take to determine if their *spiritual heart* is becoming hardened?
 - i. There are symptoms of physical heart disease (heart attack, myocarditis, pericarditis, etc.), such as chest pains, leg swelling or shortness of breath.
 - ii. For our physical hearts, you can get an electrocardiogram or do various lab tests to determine if you are suffering from various heart diseases.
- c. Is there anything we can do to keep our hearts from getting hard, or to re-soften them if they start to harden up? Is this problem irreversible?

IV. They Had Soft Hearts in the Beginning

- a. The hearts of the people became hardened just a few months after entering the Wilderness. In **Exodus 15**, they departed Egypt, but by **Exodus 32** (at Mt. Sinai, after Moses came down after 40 days away with the Lord), the people were already involved in pagan revelry and worshipping the golden calf.
- b. The good hearts of the Israelites are seen in **Exodus 20** and **Deuteronomy 5**, at the time when the 10 Commandments are given. The people feared God and desired to obey Him.

c. Read **Deuteronomy 5:22-29**.

- i. This is a picture of a good heart!
- ii. The people tell Moses, "*Whatever the Lord says to you, we will do it.*"
- iii. From this scene, we can take a 'screenshot' of what a good (soft) heart toward God looks like.
 1. Many have this attitude early in their Christian life, but *lose it over time.*
 2. (My own, made-up) '**Parable of the Two Sons**'
 - a. A man has two sons. He sits them down at the table and speaks to both about the things he wants them both to do. The father notices that his first son writes down all his father's commands on one list; however, his second son is making two lists (putting some of the commands on the first list and others on the second one). After a while, the father asks his second son, "Why are you making *two* lists?"
 - b. The second son replies, "The first list is things that you will disinherit me for if I don't do them. The second list is things you have asked me to do that I can disregard without being disinherited."
 - c. **Questions:** Which of the two sons really loves his father? Which one has a good heart? And which one is the 'legalist'?
 - i. Jesus calls us to have the faith of a child. That is a heart that does *whatever his father tells him.*
 - ii. We cannot 'make two lists' of God's commands, attempting to make a distinction between so-called 'salvation issues' on the one hand, versus lesser commands that we think we can disobey with impunity without losing our salvation!
- iv. A good (soft) heart has a restoration attitude like King Josiah in **2 Kings 22-23** (designated as **4 Kingdoms 22-23** in the LXX).
 1. When Josiah discovered the lost Book of the Law, he tore his clothes and immediately called the entire nation back to following God's commands.

2. This is the heart we should all have when we discover there are commands and teachings in Scripture that we were somehow unaware of.
- v. A good (soft) heart fears God.
1. In the **Deuteronomy 5** passage, the Israelites *fear God*. They are terrified of the Lord, in fact. This is a good thing!
 2. Later, they *lost* that fear of God they once had.
 3. As we discussed in prior lessons on **Psalm 34** and **1 Peter**, the *fear of the Lord leads to righteousness*.
 - a. “And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, *conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear...*” (**1 Peter 1:17**, NKJV)
 - b. “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. *Fear God*. Honor the king.” (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
 4. Jesus said: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
 - a. Jesus taught His disciples that they should *fear God* and not fear men.
 5. Read **Hebrews 4:1-5**.
 - a. “Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, *let us fear* lest any of you seem to have come short of it.” (**Hebrews 4:1**, NKJV)
 - b. We are still called to fear God, or we are in danger of falling short!
- d. **Our Challenge:** To pass God’s test (and maintain soft hearts)
- i. We who have become Christians are now *in the time of testing*. Which kind of heart do we have? Will we be shown to be the “faithful house”?
 1. *Abraham was tested* when the Lord told him to offer his son, Isaac (**Genesis 22:1**, **Hebrews 11:17**).
 2. Job was tested (**Job 1-2**).
 3. Jesus told Peter, “...Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.” (**Luke 22:31**, NKJV)

- a. Note that since the word translated “you” in this passage is *plural*, the challenge applies to more than Peter alone.
- 4. Hezekiah, after the Lord hears his prayer and his life is extended, receives another test from the Lord. Because of his pride, he failed that test when he showed his treasures to the ambassadors from the king of Babylon.
 - a. “However, regarding the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, whom they sent to him to inquire about the wonder that was done in the land, God withdrew from him, *in order to test him*, that He might know all that was in his heart.” (**2 Chronicles 32:31**, NKJV)
- 5. Peter reminds us that our faith will be tested, to determine if it is genuine.
 - a. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ....” (**1 Peter 1:6–7**, NKJV)
- 6. Our hearts may be tested through hardship, as well as through exposure to wealth and comfort.
 - a. Read **Deuteronomy 8:1-20**.
 - i. The Lord had used manna to test the Israelites in the Wilderness, to see what was in their hearts (whether they would obey the Lord or not).
 - ii. However, in the future, the Lord would bring another type of test: *prosperity* (to see whether the people would forget the Lord).
 - ii. God is *testing us*. However, we must never attempt to *test Him*! We do not put the Lord to the test, for example through:
 - 1. Complaining, or
 - 2. Provoking God through ongoing disobedience.

V. Conclusion

- a. **Challenge to Mature Christians:** Do you *still* have the attitude: “*Whatever the Lord says, I will do*”?

- i. As Christians we must continue to deal with our sin and the temptation to harden our hearts.
- ii. **Question:** Do you have a soft heart regardless of whether the Lord is speaking to you from the Scriptures, through other people, or through your own conscience?
- iii. We must never lose that soft heart that is willing to obey any new command of the Lord that comes to our attention.
 - 1. Many churches are afflicted by a pall of spiritual emptiness that can almost be felt. While things may look good outwardly, there is a spiritual vitality that is missing. Often the problem is the rampant hardness of heart caused by unseen sin.
- iv. Do not harden your heart when you hear the Lord's voice, including when you see something you were not previously aware of. Keep the restoration attitude exemplified by King Josiah in **2 Kings 22-23**. That may include areas such as:
 - 1. Forgiving others,
 - 2. Helping the poor,
 - 3. Practicing prayer and fasting,
 - 4. Living according to righteousness,
 - 5. Pulling the plank (of sin) out of your own eye,
 - 6. Fearing of God, and/or
 - 7. Escaping the dangers of the 'third soil' of being spiritually choked out by life's worries, riches and pleasures (**Luke 8:14**).
- b. The goal is to continue working to the very end, to enter God's rest.
 - i. It is not to retire and enjoy this life!
 - ii. The promised rest, which we look forward to, will come *at the end*.
 - iii. Those who are not diligent to the end, who allow their hearts to become hardened, will not enter the rest we are looking forward to.
 - 1. The older men who inspire me are those who are still pouring themselves out for the kingdom of God, even to an advanced age.
 - 2. They plan to work for God to the end, to the best of their ability.

- c. Let us encourage and exhort one another daily.
 - i. Real discipling relationships in the church.
 - ii. “Iron-sharpening-iron”.
 - iii. Encouraging and challenging others in the face of trials.
 - iv. Sin hardens our hearts and is deceitful.
 - 1. Confess your sin to a trusted brother or sister. Repent.
 - 2. Strive to live for righteousness.
 - 3. Do not harden your heart!