

## DO YOU HUNGER FOR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART?

PSALM 95

There's one affliction every pastor must endure. It's having to listen with a straight face to people's reasons for not going to church. I have a lot of sympathy for a fictitious country preacher by the name of Pastor Jones who had a most revealing Sunday afternoon car drive. He explained it like this: "Attendance at church last Sunday was mighty porely. I don't reckon I oughta grumble because I had a bunch of sick members and when you add to all that my shut-ins we don't have a site of pew fillers. So I went ahead and preached to what I had. Only thing was the echo in the near empty church hurt my ears. My Madam said I needed to get out and ride awhile and let the fresh air clear my head. It done the trick. Our little ride not only cleared my head, it made me feel right good inside. What I saw made me rejoice! I saw miracle after miracle."

"Ole Hezekiah, who had been deathly sick that very morning, had roused up and was riding down the highway with his fishing poles. No, nothing but a miracle could have rescued Old Hez from the jaws of death in such a short time! Now there's Rufe's brother. Rufe told me Sunday morning that his brother's back was in such foul shape that they was afraid a operation was gonna be necessary. Well, we remembered him in our prayers and - lo and behold - at 2 o'clock there he stood at the driving range hitting golf balls. If that wasn't a quick recovery, I don't know what is!

"About 20 of my folks had roused up and was taking nourishment in one form or another. But what really made me happy was to see so many of my shut-ins out riding around and enjoying the world. Hezekiah's paw, who don't attend church cause he can't stand crowds, was headed for the drag races. Sister Nell's mama, who was too weak to get outa the house, was in town shopping. Ellie Nickelsinger's sister, who can't come to church on account of her kidneys, stood in line two hours to get into the show. It was called 'The Miracle Worker.' I thought it was right appropriate, seeing as how a miracle had happened to her! Yes, sir, it thrilled my heart to see what I saw. I ought to have a packed house next Sunday with all my sick folks being healed and shut-ins being set free. I just hope they don't overdo themselves before next Sunday and have a relapse."

Over the years, I've heard my share of excuses as well. My personal favorite for the most bizarre excuse was by a woman in a congregation I served in Pennsylvania. She told me that the church building was just entirely too damp and that her frail body was simply not up to the challenge of it. Then there are what I call the "tried and true" excuses. "My mother forced me to go when I was a kid." I've always thought the late Roman Catholic bishop Fulton Sheen had the best response to that excuse when he said, "She also made you wash your neck. That doesn't mean you stopped taking baths." Then, there are those who say, "There are just too many hypocrites in the church." I've always been tempted to respond, "Well, then, you should feel right at home." Probably the most common excuse is this one, "I don't have time to go to church. My life is too busy. Sunday

is my only day to relax, to sleep in, to recreate.” Whatever. I’ve learned as well that if you expose one excuse for what it is, three more will appear immediately. When it comes right down to it, there’s really one only good reason to ever go to church on a Sunday morning. God. Only a hunger to know God better and to experience God more will ever keep you worshipping and praising Him regularly.

Worship is a verb! It’s not something done to us or for us but by us. It’s active not passive. It’s about participation not observation. The verb that’s synonymous with worship today is “hunger.” Do you hunger for God with all your heart? Far more interesting than trying to figure out why people don’t worship God is to find out why they should. Why have you come to church today? Why should you worship God? What does it mean to hunger for God with all your heart? Let’s consider Psalm 95 because I believe we find answers there to our questions. Here’s the first one:

### **WORSHIP KEEPS YOUR HEART FOCUSED.**

Over and over again in the Bible, you’re encouraged and invited to worship God. Worship is universal in the sense that every follower of Jesus should enter into it. And it’s something that should be continually practiced. You never outgrow worship. It never becomes obsolete. C.S. Lewis, one of the most thoughtful Christians who ever lived, admitted to having a great struggle at first understanding this need to worship God. Why does God want to be worshipped? It almost sounds like a divine ego trip – as if God is saying, “What I want most of all is to be told over and over again how great I am.” You would despise that kind of attitude in a fellow human being as hopelessly self-centered. We can’t stand being around people who always have to be told how great, how wonderful or how unique they are. Why is it OK for God to be like that?

It helps me to think of it this way. Whenever you enjoy something immensely, you spontaneously just begin praising it in some way. And you invite others to praise whatever you enjoy as well. You say things like, “What a beautiful day!” or “That has to be the most delicious meal I’ve ever eaten!” or “I will never forget that football game as long as I live!” You praise whatever you value and, then, you invite others to join you in that praise. You say things like “Isn’t she the most beautiful child you’ve ever seen? Don’t you think that was the best vacation we’ve ever had? Wasn’t that the most incredible music you’ve ever heard?” Whenever you praise something, it allows you to express your enjoyment. And when someone else chimes in and praises what you praise, it just adds further enjoyment. Worshipping God is like that. When God invites you to worship and praise Him, He’s inviting you to enjoy Him. In fact, the word “worship” itself is derived from the old Anglo-Saxon word “worth ship.” It means to attribute value or worth to something or someone. When you worship God, you remind yourself of His worth, His value and His greatness. Every time you do that, you enjoy God all over again. And when you worship Him with others it adds to and completes this enjoyment of God.

There are many significant things about Psalm 95. Did you notice that it's all about joy? You're invited here to enjoy God through singing, enjoy God through shouting and enjoy God by playing instruments. If there's one consistent theme in the Bible on how to worship God, it's this: do it with joy! Worship is about enjoying God and you can't enjoy God without joy. May God save us from joyless worship services! It's an insult to the Holy Spirit who is Himself the Spirit of joy. There is nothing more reverent than approaching the Almighty - at all times and in every way - with joy. Far more important to God than exactly what we do here on a Sunday morning is whether it's done with joy.

God never commands you to do anything that doesn't have a positive effect on you. Worship – done consistently and joyfully - has a way of keeping your heart focused. That word in the Bible –“heart” – always refers to the innermost part of who you are as a person. The world you live in has a way of becoming fuzzy, confusing and out of focus. And sometimes that lack of focus affects your heart so it loses focus, too. I wear contact lenses because I'm seriously nearsighted. When those little plastic lenses aren't attached to my eyeballs, my whole world is fuzzy and out of focus. Life isn't very enjoyable when I can't see well. On a spiritual level, when your life and how you live your life gets fuzzy, confusing and out of focus – and that seeps into your heart - it produces deep unhappiness.

Worship is God's way of getting your heart refocused. How so? For one thing, worshipping God – consistently and joyfully, corporately and personally - gives your life a framework. It restores a healthy kind of structure to your life. Your attention is brought back to what matters most: God, not life, not problems, not even you. Your memories of who God is and what He has done are refreshed. “Oh, yeah, I forgot. That's who God is and that's what He's done for me.” You're reminded that you have a choice to obey God and worship encourages and strengthens you to make that wise choice. Worship is often the place where you bring your sadness to God and He gives you new joy, where you bring your fears to God and He give you new peace, where you bring your dullness to God and He gives you new enthusiasm and life.

A pastor was visiting a member of his church in her home. The woman was sitting at a window embroidering a piece of cloth held taut over one of those wooden, oval hoops. She said, “You know, Pastor, while I was waiting for you to come I realized what's wrong with me. I don't have a frame. My feelings, my thoughts, my activities – everything is kind of loose and sloppy. There's no border to my life. I never know where I am. I need a frame for my life like the one I have for this embroidery.” Worship does that. It gives a framework for your life.

There's simply no substitute for this regular, systematic framework with God. Worship reminds you of who God is and who you are. In Psalm 95, you're reminded that God is like a king. Kings rule over stuff. God rules over all things. He's greater than any power. All things belong to Him and He controls all things. You're reminded that God is the Creator. Everything has been made by Him and

for Him. You're also reminded there that God is like a shepherd and you are like one of His sheep. You're His possession. You were chosen by Him and for Him. You belong to Him. Walking through this life has a way of getting your heart out of focus very quickly. But when you worship God you're given the opportunity to come face to face again with the single most fundamental reality in all of life. And what's that? God loves you and He's proved it for all eternity through the death and resurrection of His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When life doesn't make sense, you still hold on to that one, great and all-encompassing truth.

Over the years, I've heard people say, "Pastor, I just don't feel like worshipping God." Shoot, I've said and felt that way myself! But if you worship only when you feel like it, you end up worshipping less and less. Feelings are a very important part of your life and feelings are important in worship, but you will miss something of great value if you only worship when you feel like it. I love the story of a member of a certain church who just stopped attending worship services regularly. After a few weeks, the pastor stopped by for a visit. It was a chilly evening and the man was enjoying a fire in his home. He guessed why his pastor had dropped by and invited him to sit in a chair close to the fire. The pastor didn't say anything; he just watched the fire for a few minutes. Then, without a word, he took some tongs and carefully picked up a stick which was burning at one end and placed it on the stone hearth all alone. Then he sat back down, still silent. Before long that stick's flame diminished and went out with a puff of smoke. Once again, the pastor got up and put the stick back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it caught on fire again because of the heat of the other logs and sticks. It began to glow again. His little object lesson completed, the pastor got up to leave. His host said, "Thank you for your visit and your fiery sermon. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

What's the old cliché? "You can act yourself into a new way of feeling much quicker than you can feel yourself into a new way of acting." Lot of truth there! And it pertains to this thing we call worship. Worship is an act you do that develops your feelings for God. Keep doing it. Stay at it. Worship keeps your heart focused. Psalm 95 points to yet another great benefit in worship:

### **WORSHIP KEEPS YOUR HEART SOFT.**

This psalm seems a little odd to me. It starts out with this wonderful invitation to worship God. It waxes eloquent on how and why you should worship God. Then – all of a sudden – in the middle of verse 7 comes this lengthy warning against letting your heart become hard. And it's on that note that the psalm ends rather abruptly. Why this warning about having a hard heart? Perhaps it's because the psalmist recognized that when you fail to worship God consistently and regularly the inevitable result is a heart that becomes spiritually hard to the things of God.

What is a hard heart? It's an inner attitude towards God, others and life that solidifies into a kind of spiritual cement. There are at least three characteristics

of a hard heart. One, your mind becomes negative towards spiritual things. You become rigid and inflexible. You become cynical about other people's experience of God. You begin to doubt what you once believed. Two, your will becomes stubborn. You refuse to recognize God's authority over your attitudes and actions. You know what's best for you and you will continue to do what you want when you want and where you want. There's no desire to hear from God or to be led by the Holy Spirit. Three, your emotions become unresponsive. Your feelings for God just dry up. No gratitude. No joy. No love. You're less compassionate and more irritable in dealing with other people.

Is there a more frightening condition spiritually than having a hard heart? Can a follower of Jesus have a hard heart? The answer is "yes." After all, the psalmist is exhorting God's people in Psalm 95 not some pagan group far from God. Over in the New Testament this psalm is quoted and this warning is added, "Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. You must warn each other every day, while it is still 'today,' so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God." (Heb. 3:12-13 NLT) Let's face it. Your heart – that place where you connect and interact with God – can get hardened against God.

How does your heart get hard? It never happens all at once. It's usually the result of a very gradual process of spiritual erosion. When an opportunity to trust God for something or in something is rejected, your heart hardens. When a discouragement or a loss in life is not released to God's sovereignty, your heart hardens. When you start to depend more on your strength than God's strength, more in your limited resources rather than God's unlimited resources, more in your own determination rather than God's ability, your heart hardens. I don't know who said this, but it's true: "Before you are finished, the world will do one of three things with you. It will make your heart very hard. It will make it very soft. Or else it will break your heart. No one escapes." As a pastor, I've seen that many times. Life's struggles have made some people hard and crusty. Life's struggles have broken the hearts of other people and they're just sort of crippled emotionally for life. But there are those who allow life's struggles to create in them soft hearts – just full of tenderness towards God and compassion towards other people. Worship is one very important way God keeps your heart soft.

The most tragic side effect of a hard heart is suggested here in Psalm 95. You miss God's best for you. The psalmist talks about the long journey out of Egypt and into Canaan for God's people – the Israelites. You remember the story. Over and over again, God supplied their needs miraculously and defeated their enemies. But over and over again, they defied God – demanding water at places like Massa and Meribah. Over and over again, they complained, murmured and whined at every opportunity. Then they refused to enter the land God gave them. They rejected God's best for them. Tragically, that entire generation of God's people was rejected by God. It's as if God said, "Fine, I'll just wait for this stubborn, hard-hearted group to die off in the desert. Then, I'll work out my plan

and purpose through their kids.” Don’t miss the important warning in this psalm, child of God. You have a lot to say about whether your heart is hard or soft towards God. And it can absolutely change the direction of your life. So what will keep your heart soft, receptive and responsive to the Lord? The best remedy of all might well be worship – consistently, regularly and joyfully offered up to God. The soft heart is the worshipping heart.

Here’s some great news as I close. It may take a very long time to harden your heart to the things of God, but the Lord can soften your heart in an instant. “...If only you would listen to his voice today!” (Ps. 95:7 NLT) says the psalmist. Your heart can be changed today! That’s good news, isn’t it? Don’t miss another day of God’s best! If you need to confess sin your life, renounce it and receive God’s forgiveness through Jesus, today is the day. If you’ve allowed life’s struggles to make your heart hard and crusty against God, today is the day to get a soft heart again. If you sense today any longing for a Holy Spirit-filled life and a Holy Spirit-guided life, today is the day to ask God for a new, soft heart. God stands ready to give you His best today if you really want it.

Many years ago now a blacksmith whose heart was soft towards God and focused on God was approached by another man who wasn’t a follower of Jesus. This man asked the blacksmith, “Why is it that you have so much trouble in your life? I’ve been watching you since you trusted Jesus as your Savior. It’s true that you seem to love God and everybody else. But, you also seem to have twice as many problems as you had before. I thought that when a person started to follow Jesus, his problems were over.” The blacksmith looked around the shop where he was working and said, “Do you see this piece of steel? I want to make a carriage spring out of it, but it needs to be tempered. So I heat it up and I hammer it. I bend it and shape it so it will be suitable for the carriage. Often the steel is too brittle and can’t be used. When that happens, I throw that piece of metal over there on the scrap heap. Those metal scraps over there are less than a cent a pound, but a carriage spring is really valuable.” The blacksmith continued. “God saves us by His grace for something more than just having a good time in life. That’s the way I see it. Yes, we have the good time all right. But He wants us for His service just like I want to put this piece of steel to good use. And through the testings and trials of life He puts the temper of Jesus into us. Ever since I realized this, I’ve been saying to God, “Lord, test me in any way You choose. Just don’t ever throw me on the scrap heap!”

God stands ready to give you His best today if you really want it. And His best is experienced when your heart is focused and when your heart is soft. And so often that happens when you enter into worship joyfully, regularly, consistently, with others and even by yourself. That’s how you continue to experience the grace, peace and rest of God day by day and everyday.