



Psalm 115 - The Impotence of Idols and the Greatness of God

Introduction

This is a hymn urging God's people to trust and worship the Lord alone, by reminding them that he alone is worthy of their deepest loyalty. In the background lurks the temptation to turn to the gods worshipped in other nations, and the congregation must grasp how hopeless it is to serve such deities. Some scholars suppose that the Gentiles' taunt: <<*Where is their God?*>>, and the description of useless idols is evidence that the psalm arose after the exile, when Israel had close exposure to such taunts and temptations. And some have taken the expression, <<*you who fear the Lord*>> to address Gentiles who worship the Lord like the Roman Centurion Cornelius: <<*He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God*>> (Acts 10:2), and the people in Pisidian Antioch: <<*So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: 'You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen*>> (Acts 13:16), which began to be a notable feature of Jewish life in the Greek period, i.e. after 330 BC. None of these arguments is decisive, however: as the comments show, the taunts and temptations existed at all periods, and the expression 'fearing the Lord' readily applies to any of the faithful in Israel at any time. Nevertheless, if the psalm originated before the exile, it certainly took on a renewed relevance in the postexilic period; and the Gentiles attending the synagogue might see themselves included among those who fear the Lord, the true God. Indeed, Christians can sing this psalm for the same purpose of fortifying their loyalty to, and confidence in, the true God.

Psalm 115 continues in the collection of the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113-118) sung by the Jews during their Passover celebrations. It therefore makes up part of the hymns sung by Jesus and his disciples on the night he was betrayed and arrested and the night before his crucifixion; refer to Matthew 26:30 and Mark

14:26. It is especially meaningful to consider Psalm 115 in the heart and on the lips of Jesus at that great moment.

Regarding the structure of Psalm 115, James Montgomery Boice observed: “The opinion of the majority of scholars is that the psalm is liturgical, intended to be sung by alternating groups of worshippers: the priests, the high priest, the people, and so on. It reads that way, but it is useless to spend time trying to decide who said what part. The scholars themselves differ widely.”

Psalm 115:1-8 - Only One God Deserves Praise.

This section develops the idea that only the Lord deserves glory, i.e. all honour and praise: first, because of his steadfast love and faithfulness in accordance with his own declared character in Exodus 34:6; and second, because he is in the heavens, i.e. in a position of authority over all: <<*The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high*>> (Psalm 113:4-5), and in sovereign power he does all that he pleases: <<*Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps*>> (Psalm 135:6), and: <<*I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfil my intention*>> (Isaiah 46:9b-10), unlike the gods that the Gentiles worship (vv.4-8).

- 1 Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.
- 2 Why should the nations say,
‘Where is their God?’

Psalm 115:1-2

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory. The singer of Psalm 115 understood that when God did wonderful things, the glory should not be given to God’s people, even if they are in some sense active in the work. The glory should go unto God and his holy name. Charles Spurgeon commented, “The repetition of the words, ‘Not unto us,’ would seem to indicate a very serious desire to renounce any glory which they might at any time have proudly appropriated to themselves, and it also sets forth the vehemence of their wish that God would at any cost to them magnify his own name.”

For the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. The mercy of God alone means that he is worthy of praise and glory, and not his people who receive his mercy. His truth may add to that, because truth is grounded in him and not even in his people. Again in the psalms, mercy translates the great Hebrew word *hesed*, which may be understood as Yahweh’s grace, his loyal love, his covenant

love unto his people. When John later wrote, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ in John 1:17, he wrote with the same idea of the psalmist and saw it perfectly fulfilled in Jesus.

Why should the nations say? This is an artfully formed prayer. The request is made subtly but powerfully. The psalmist asked God to deliver his people so that he would be glorified among the nations, and the Gentiles would have no reason to think God had forsaken them. The concern for the Lord's reputation among the nations occurs as early as: *<<Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people>> (Exodus 32:12), <<But Moses said to the Lord, 'Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night>> (Numbers 14:13-14). When Israel remembers that its very calling includes making God's name known among the Gentiles: <<For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever>> (Joshua 4:23-24), and: <<Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built>> (1 Kings 8:41-43), they will see that more than their own self-esteem is at stake here: if the Gentiles think this way, they will not receive God's light.*

Spurgeon concluded, "It was very natural that the heathen should say, 'Where is their God?' because they had no outward emblem, no visible image, no tangible token; whereas the heathen had their gods many, such as they were, made of wood and stone; so that they asked, 'Where is their God?'"

- 3 Our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he pleases.
- 4 Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.

- 5 They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
- 6 They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
- 7 They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throats.
- 8 Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them.

Psalm 115:3-8

Our God is in the heavens. At best, nations worshipped imaginary beings and the projections of their own lusts and longing. At worst, the nations worshipped demonic spirits. Yet Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel is different. He lives and reigns in heaven, and sovereignly does whatever he pleases. Spurgeon observed, “Where he should be; above the reach of mortal sneers, over-hearing all the vain janglings of men, but looking down with silent scorn upon the makers of the babel.” The confession that God does whatever he pleases is pertinent in reply to the Gentiles’ taunt (v.2), because in: <<*All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does what he wills with the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. There is no one who can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What are you doing?’*>> (Daniel 4:35), and: <<*Then they cried out to the Lord, ‘Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you’*>> (Jonah 1:14), Gentiles confess this once they realise that the Lord is the true God even if they did not have the sense to turn their lives fully over to him. However, this is not surprising in light of: <<*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder*>> (James 2:19).

This satirical passage exposes the folly of worshipping idols, much like Isaiah 44:9-20. This builds on: <<*There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell*>> (Deuteronomy 4:28), with the regular denunciation of idols as the work of human hands, and therefore unworthy of human worship, also found in Deuteronomy 27:15 and 31:29, 2 Kings 19:18, Isaiah 2:8, Jeremiah 1:16, and Micah 5:13. Psalm 135:15-18 repeats most of these verses. If these gods are unworthy of Israel’s worship, it is a tragedy that the Gentiles both make them and become like them, i.e. lifeless and useless; let Israel take warning!

The psalmist understood that when men worship things beneath them, it brings them lower. They begin to lose the strength of their own ability to perceive and interact with the world. All who make or he who trusts in idols will have this as their destiny, and false gods draw people down, never up; let Christians take warning!.

Those who make them are like them is virtually a spiritual law: people become like the things they worship. When people worship the true God who reigns in righteousness, the God perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ, they become like him. When they worship false and vain idols, the things of this world, they become like them. There Paul advises: <<*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect*>> (Romans 12:2).

They have mouths, but do not speak. The psalmist exposed the folly of idolatry. Men worship statues of silver and gold that they themselves have made. The idols are fashioned with human body parts, i.e. mouths, eyes, noses, hands, feet, and a throat. Yet they cannot do with those body parts what their makers can – speak, see, hear, smell, feel, walk, or even mutter. Men worship things so obviously below them!

The folly of worshipping idols made by human hands was ironically well described by Demetrius when he tried to defend the practice in Ephesus: <<*These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, ‘Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her’*>> (Acts 19:25-27).

Again Spurgeon commented, “Certain idols have had jewels in their eyes more precious than a king’s ransom, but they were as blind as the rest of the fraternity. A god who has eyes, and cannot see, is a blind deity; and blindness is a calamity, and not an attribute of godhead. He must be very blind who worships a blind god: we pity a blind man, it is strange to worship a blind image;” and on they ‘do not smell’: “In sacred scorn he mocks at those who burn sweet spices, and fill their temples with clouds of smoke, all offered to an image whose nose cannot perceive the perfume.”

Psalm 115:9-11 - Let God’s People Trust Him as Their Help and Shield.

In response to the warning (v.8), this section calls all the members of God’s people to trust in the Lord. The Lord alone is qualified to be their help and their shield:

<<*Blessed are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord? He is your shield and helper and your glorious sword. Your enemies will cower before you, and you will tread on their heights*>> (Deuteronomy 33:29 NIV), <<*The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him*>> (Psalm 28:7), and: <<*Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield*>> (Psalm 33:20).

⁹ O Israel, trust in the Lord!

He is their help and their shield.

¹⁰ O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord!

He is their help and their shield.

¹¹ You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord!

He is their help and their shield.

Psalm 115:9-11

O Israel, trust in the Lord! Knowing the folly of idolatry should renew the believer's trust in the true God and compel them to look to him as their help and shield. In this they have something of Peter's heart when he said: <<*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life*>> (John 6:68). The singer's exhortation was not merely to trust the Lord, but to trust in him. This goes beyond regarding him as trustworthy, and actually placing trust, confidence, and reliance in him and not in self or any idol. Despite a person's many disappointments in looking to other place for a help and shield, they are often quick to repeat the mistake. They need to hear the common sense exhortation to look nowhere else for help and protection. Adam Clarke adds, "He is the succour, support, guardian, and defence of all who put their confidence in him." The reader can imagine an idolater having to help and shield the idol he made or bought. It is much better to have a God who can be their help and shield.

O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord! If God's people as a whole should trust God, then those who are his called servants should trust him even more: <<*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*>> (Ephesians 4:4-6). It was right and good for all the priesthood, all the house of Aaron, to regard the God of Israel as their help and their shield.

The house of Aaron was the specific family within the tribe of Levi that supplied the priests: <<*Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests – Aaron and Aaron's*>>

sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar>> (Exodus 28:1), and: <<Then Moses said to Korah, ‘Hear now, you Levites! Is it too little for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to allow you to approach him in order to perform the duties of the Lord’s tabernacle, and to stand before the congregation and serve them? He has allowed you to approach him, and all your brother Levites with you; yet you seek the priesthood as well! Therefore you and all your company have gathered together against the Lord. What is Aaron that you rail against him?’>> (Numbers 16:8-11).

Spurgeon encouraged his readers, “You who are nearest to him, trust him most; your very calling is connected with his truth and is meant to declare his glory, therefore never entertain a doubt concerning him, but lead the way in holy confidence.”

You who fear the Lord. As indicated in the introduction above, by the time of the NT, Gentiles who adhered to the synagogue were called God-fearers: <<*He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly*>> (Acts 10:2 NIV), and: <<*So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: ‘You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen’*>> (Acts 13:16). Although the OT expected that Gentiles would come to fear the Lord, as indicated in King Solomon’s prayer: <<*for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built*>> (1 Kings 8:42-43), there is no evidence from either the OT or the Apocrypha, the intertestamental books, that this term had taken on its specialised sense early enough for the psalm to use it. The term describes Israel as a community bound to the Lord by covenant, and perhaps especially designates those members with true piety. At the same time, the term is wide enough to include all who worship the Lord – even if they are neither from the house of Aaron nor from ethnic Israel – and once Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world began attending synagogues, they could see themselves addressed here.

The thought of calling those who fear the Lord - God-fearers, Gentiles who honoured the God of Israel - calling them to trust God must have sounded especially sweet to Jesus on the night of the last supper, knowing how great the harvest among the Gentiles would soon be.

Psalm 115:12-15 - The Lord Blesses His Faithful People.

The next section expresses the confidence that God will indeed bless his people, and prays that he will continue to do so.

- 12 The Lord has been mindful of us; he will bless us;
he will bless the house of Israel;
he will bless the house of Aaron;
- 13 he will bless those who fear the Lord,
both small and great.

Psalm 115:12-13

The Lord has been mindful of us; he will bless us. The psalmist drew upon God's past faithfulness and used it as confidence for his future blessing: <<**Remember his covenant for ever, the word that he commanded for a thousand generations**>> (1 Chronicles 16:15). He has not forgotten his people in the past and he will not forget them in the future, and for God to remember his people is to bless them. Spurgeon added, "It is his nature to bless, it is his prerogative to bless, it is his glory to bless, it is his delight to bless; he has promised to bless, and therefore be sure of this, that he will bless and bless and bless without ceasing."

He will bless the house of Israel. Blessings are pronounced upon all those who were called to trust in the Lord in vv.9-11. All who trust him will be blessed: <<**Praise the Lord. Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands**>> (Psalm 112:1 NIV), both small and great.

- 14 May the Lord give you increase,
both you and your children.
- 15 May you be blessed by the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 115:14-15

May the Lord give you increase. In the world of ancient Israel many looked to the idols of the nations for fertility and the increase of the field, the flock, and the family. In giving this blessing to those who fear and trust the Lord, the psalmist recognised Yahweh as the true source of such blessing, extending even to the children of true believers. Verse 14 echoes Deuteronomy 1:11, anticipating that God's people will increase through their children, and v.15 echoes Genesis 1:28 and 1:31; God called Israel in order to give them the privileges that Adam forfeited. Those privileges have now been magnified beyond all expectation: <<**But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement**>>

following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ>> (Romans 5:15-17).

May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Once again in this psalm, Yahweh is exalted above the idols of the nations. He alone has created the cosmos and all that is in it.

Psalm 115:16-18 - We Will Bless the Lord Forever.

The psalm closes by having the congregation sing of their renewed dedication to bless the Lord in response to his blessing (vv.12-15).

- 16 The heavens are the Lord's heavens,
but the earth he has given to human beings.
- 17 The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence.
- 18 But we will bless the Lord
from this time on and for evermore.
Praise the Lord!

Psalm 115:16-18

The heavens are the Lord's heavens. The psalmist recognised God's authority as creator over both heaven and earth (v.15). Here he acknowledged God's continuing dominion over the heavens, probably in all three senses: the blue sky, the starry sky, and the heaven where God dwells.

But the earth he has given to human beings. Although God has authority over earth as its creator, he has given a significant dominion on the earth to humankind. The psalmist no doubt had in mind God's grant to Adam and his descendants of dominion over the earth in Genesis 1:26-30 and 2:19-20. This dominion given by God means that men and women should use the earth and its resources for the good of humanity, and as wise and thoughtful stewards. They can use, but should not waste and destroy.

The dead do not praise the Lord. Their voice is no longer heard among the living. Whatever heavenly choir they may join, they are absent the earthly choir and their praise will no longer testify to those who resist and reject the true God. When Jesus sang this with his disciples according to Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, the

depth of feeling in Jesus may be considered, for he sang this knowing that he would not sing among his disciples on earth anymore.

From this time on and for evermore. Given the perceived uncertainty of praise in the life to come, the greatness of God, and the astounding blessing he has given to humanity, he is worthy to be praised forevermore. This is something to which God's people can say *Hallelujah!* - **Praise the Lord!**

From this time on and for evermore may have the sense, in this life and the life to come. It could be said that this teaches that there are only two times a person should praise the Lord - now and forever. Spurgeon commented, "We who are still living will take care that the praises of God shall not fail among the sons of men. Our afflictions and depressions of spirit shall not cause us to suspend our praises," and again, "Though the dead cannot, and the wicked will not, and the careless do not praise God, yet we will shout 'Hallelujah' for ever and ever. Amen."