



## Psalm 135 - Praise for God's Goodness and Might

### Introduction

This hymn calls God's people to praise him for his majestic power that he has displayed in his deeds on behalf of Israel. Each generation that sings this would strengthen their faith in and loyalty to the Lord, and deepen their gratitude toward him for their privileges. A side effect should also be an increasing compassion for the Gentiles, who suffer from worshipping lifeless idols. Many phrases in this psalm closely resemble phrases found elsewhere in the OT; there are reference to four different psalms, two passages from Deuteronomy, two from Jeremiah, and two from Exodus. Derek Kidner wrote of Psalm 135, "Every verse of this psalm either echoes, quotes or is quoted by some other part of Scripture." This could mean that the author of the psalm used those other texts as his sources; it could also mean that this psalm and some of those other texts used phrases and ideas from a common stock. The psalm names no author, nor does it state whether <<*the house of the Lord*>> is the first or second temple. The psalm serves the needs of God's people at all times, in order to renew their faith and gratitude.

### Psalm 135:1-4 - Praise the Lord Who Has Chosen Israel.

The psalm begins by calling the worshipping community to praise the Lord, Hebrew *hallelujah*. The term 'servants of the Lord' most likely refers to the Levitical attendants who serve in the house of the Lord, i.e. in the temple. The reason for the praise is given at the end: for the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself. This is a call to humility, gratitude, and faithfulness on the part of the worshippers.

- Praise the Lord!**  
Praise the name of the Lord;  
give praise, O servants of the Lord,

<sup>2</sup> you that stand in the house of the Lord,  
in the courts of the house of our God.

### Psalm 135:1-2

Praise the Lord! Psalm 135 begins and ends with this phrase. It is a call for stirring, passionate praise to God, but not one that runs only on the fuel of emotion. Psalm 135 gives many reasonable, logical reasons why believers should praise the Lord.

Praise the name of the Lord. To praise the name of the Lord is to honour him in all his character and attributes. The name was understood to represent the very nature of the person.

In the psalms, the name of the Lord is often the object of religious affections, such as praise, love, trust, and hope. The way that Deuteronomy speaks of God's 'name' dwelling in the sanctuary helps here, for example: <<***But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there***>> (Deuteronomy 12:5a), and: <<***They set your sanctuary on fire; they desecrated the dwelling-place of your name, bringing it to the ground***>> (Psalm 74:7). The Lord's name there is a way of talking about his personal presence, i.e. the name Yahweh as such, is not the issue, and particularly as he makes himself known through his covenant: <<***The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you!***>> (Psalm 20:1).

Give praise, O servants of the Lord. As in the previous psalm: <<***Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord!***>> (Psalm 134:1), this is most likely a reference to the priests and Levites who would stand in the house of the Lord for priestly and temple duties.

In the courts of the house of our God. This may speak of the people of Israel in general, who as worshippers had no access into the inner parts of the temple, but could stand in the courts of the house of our God. This was a call to all God's people to praise him. Derek Kidner commented, "While the previous psalm greeted chiefly the Levites on night watch, this one has a great and varied throng in view, priestly and lay." Spurgeon added, "'Our God' signifies possession, communion in possession, assurance of possession, delight in possession. Oh the unutterable joy of calling God our own!"

<sup>3</sup> Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good;  
sing to his name, for he is gracious.

<sup>4</sup> For the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself,  
Israel as his own possession.

### Psalm 135:3-4

For the Lord is good. In listing reasons why Yahweh should be praised, the psalmist began with the simple declaration of God's goodness. This idea is presented many times in the Bible, for example: <<*Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart*>> (Psalm 73:1), <<*Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path*>> (Psalm 143:10), and: <<*Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone'*>> (Mark 10:18). Spurgeon noted, "Do not only magnify the Lord because he is God; but study his character and his doings, and thus render intelligent, appreciative praise." Alexander Maclaren observed, "It is impossible to keep the reasons for praise out of the summons to praise."

Human beings have ideas of good and evil because they are made in the image of God. Anyone who questions the goodness of God or his existence has to answer the question, "Where do we get our concept of good?"

Sing to his name. One of the ways praise is expected is in song. God's people should be a singing people.

For the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself. The psalmist listed a third reason to praise God – his choosing of Israel as his own possession. He did not choose them because they were great, but because he is great in love. God told Israel this: <<*It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors*>> (Deuteronomy 7:7-8a). Spurgeon commented, "God's choice exalts; for here the name is changed from Jacob, the supplanter, to Israel, the prince. The love of God gives a new name and imparts a new value; for the comparison to a royal treasure is a most honourable one."

On for himself Spurgeon also commented, "It does not say, 'unto heaven,' – 'unto certain privileges,' – 'unto certain favours.' All that is quite true, but it does not say so here: 'The Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself.' Oh, what a blessed choice is this, – to be chosen unto God!"

Israel as his own possession. This fulfils the declaration of God in Deuteronomy 7:6-11.

### Psalm 135:5-7 - Praise Him Because He Is Great.

The psalm moves to another reason to praise the Lord, namely, that: <<*the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods*>> (Psalm 95:3). This means that whatever the Lord pleases, he does: <<*Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases*>> (Psalm 115:3); refer also to the associated comment there. There is no power that can stop him. He controls the weather systems (v.7);

the implication is that the gods worshipped by the nations do not, and therefore God's people should neither fear nor honour them, which they were often tempted to do.

- 5 For I know that the Lord is great;  
our Lord is above all gods.
- 6 Whatever the Lord pleases he does,  
in heaven and on earth,  
in the seas and all deeps.
- 7 He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth;  
he makes lightnings for the rain  
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

#### Psalm 135:5-7

For I know that the Lord is great; our Lord is above all gods. In declaring the greatness of God, the singer used two great titles or names for God. Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, i.e. the Lord, is great; and Adonai, the Master or Lord of all is above all gods: <<*For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods*>> (1 Chronicles 16:25), and: <<*Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those that are on high?*>> (Job 21:22). God is exalted above all the pretended deities of the pagans.

Whatever the Lord pleases he does. The psalmist exalted Yahweh as having ultimate power, with the ability to do whatever he desires: <<*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). His power extends everywhere, in heaven and on earth, also in the seas and from the ends of the earth.

He makes lightnings for the rain. This exalts Yahweh over the Canaanite idol Baal, who was thought of as the god of weather. Baal was sometimes depicted as holding a bolt of lightning and was believed to be the one who sent the rain. The singer rebuked this and sang of Yahweh as the Lord over lightning, rain, and the wind. Spurgeon observed, "The heathen divided the great domain; but Jupiter does not rule in heaven, nor Neptune on the sea, nor Pluto in the lower regions; Jehovah rules over all."

## Psalm 135:8-12 -

### The Lord Delivered His People from Egypt and Brought Them to Canaan.

The Lord has displayed his great power and his enduring love in the history of Israel; these verses mention the exodus from Egypt (vv.8-9) and the conquest of the Promised Land (vv.10-12). The defeat of the nations ruled by Sihon and Og was the first taste of victory for the new generation of Israel and it strengthened their faith: <<*The Lord will do to them as he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when he destroyed them*>> (Deuteronomy 31:4), <<*For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed*>> (Joshua 2:10), <<*And you gave them kingdoms and peoples, and allotted to them every corner, so they took possession of the land of King Sihon of Heshbon and the land of King Og of Bashan*>> (Nehemiah 9:22). Israel is under the special care of the Creator-Redeemer who exercises his power for their sake – what a privilege!

- <sup>8</sup> He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
both human beings and animals;
- <sup>9</sup> he sent signs and wonders  
into your midst, O Egypt,  
against Pharaoh and all his servants.

## Psalm 135:8-9

He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt. Yahweh also exalted himself over the supposed gods of the Egyptians. Psalm 135 remembers the many plagues God inflicted on Egypt, i.e. he sent signs and wonders into your midst, with the greatest of them being the judgement of death on the firstborn of Egypt: <<*who struck Egypt through their firstborn, for his steadfast love endures for ever*>> (Psalm 136:10).

Against Pharaoh and all his servants. It was not necessarily the people who opposed God but their leadership certainly did, yet it was the people who suffered as well. Spurgeon commented, “God’s servants are far better off than Pharaoh’s servants: those who stand in the courts of Jehovah are delivered, but the courtiers of Pharaoh are smitten all of them, for they were all partakers in his evil deeds.”

- <sup>10</sup> He struck down many nations  
and killed mighty kings –
- <sup>11</sup> Sihon, king of the Amorites,

and Og, king of Bashan,  
and all the kingdoms of Canaan –  
<sup>12</sup> and gave their land as a heritage,  
a heritage to his people Israel.

### Psalm 135:10-12

He struck down many nations. Once Israel was free from Egypt, Yahweh also showed his greatness over all supposed gods by defeating nations and mighty kings that attacked his people.

Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. Sihon tried to prevent the Israelites from reaching the Promised Land by denying them passage through his land so they fought and God defeated the Amorites; refer to Numbers 21:21-32. Og was a neighbour and he too came out against the Israelites, suffering a similar fate, refer to Numbers 21:33-35.

And gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to his people Israel. Their lands were seized and became part of the Transjordan that was eventually allocated to the Gadites, to the Reubenites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh. Maclaren commented, “Psalmists are never weary of drawing confidence and courage for today from the deeds of the Exodus and the Conquest.” Spurgeon added, “These two kings were the first to oppose, and they were among the most notable of the adversaries: their being smitten is therefore a special object of song for loyal Israelites.” God demonstrated his greatness over all the gods of the Canaanites by defeating the kingdoms of Canaan and giving their land to Israel, as a heritage to them – something passed on from generation to generation. Spurgeon also observed, “Canaan was their heritage because they were the Lord’s heritage, and he gave it to them actually because he had long before given it to them by promise.”

### Psalm 135:13-14 - The Lord’s Name Will Endure Forever.

Verse 13 evokes Exodus 3:15, which is part of God’s explanation for his ‘name’: it signifies his continuing faithfulness to his people; refer to the comment made on Exodus 3:14. Therefore it ensures that he will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, i.e. rescue them from trouble and oppression, even when it is their own fault: <<**Indeed the Lord will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining**>> (Deuteronomy 32:36), as his deeds have already shown him doing (vv.8-12).

13 Your name, O Lord, endures for ever,  
your renown, O Lord, throughout all ages.

14 For the Lord will vindicate his people,  
and have compassion on his servants.

#### Psalm 135:13-14

Your name, O Lord, endures for ever. In light of Yahweh's incomparable greatness as declared in the previous verses, the singer praised his never changing name and his never ending fame.

The word renown could also be rendered remembrance; as stated above, the psalm is alluding to: <<*This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations*>> (Exodus 3:15b).

For the Lord will vindicate his people. The good and great God will bring justice, righteousness, and compassion to his people: <<*For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.'* And again, *'The Lord will judge his people'*>> (Hebrews 10:30). His goodness and greatness are for them, not against them: <<*What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?*>> (Romans 8:31). Adam Clarke noted, "He will do them justice against their enemies."

#### Psalm 135:15-18 - The Idols of the Nations Are Worthless.

The next section adapts the words of Psalm 115:4-8 (refer to the comments made there) to contrast the God who has chosen and cared for Israel, doing what he pleases with the lifeless and useless gods that the Gentiles worship.

15 The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.

16 They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
they have eyes, but they do not see;

17 they have ears, but they do not hear,  
and there is no breath in their mouths.

18 Those who make them  
and all who trust them  
shall become like them.

## Psalm 135:15-18

The idols of the nations are silver and gold. This is a sad contrast to the greatness of the all-powerful God who reigns in heaven: <<***For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens***>> (Psalm 96:5). The goodness and greatness of Yahweh makes the puny idols, the work of men's hands, seem all the more empty and foolish: <<***The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk***>> (Revelation 9:20).

They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths. As in several other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Bible mocks those who make or worship idols. The one who makes the statue has a mouth, eyes, and ears superior to the idol itself. Spurgeon commented, "The eyes of idols have frequently been very costly; diamonds have been used for that purpose; but of what avail is the expense, since they see nothing?" And again, "If they cannot even see us, how can they know our wants, appreciate our sacrifices, or spy out for us the means of help? What a wretched thing, that a man who can see should bow down before an image which is blind!"

Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them. Although humans are greater than the idol he makes, the creation and honouring of idols makes a person lower. Idolatry never exalts man and always brings him low. Spurgeon added, "Like the materials things the idolater serves, Idolaters are spiritually dead, they are the mere images of men, their best being is gone, they are not what they seem. Their mouths do not really pray, their eyes see not the truth, their ears hear not the voice of the Lord, and the life of God is not in them."

## Psalm 135:19-21 - Let Everyone in Israel Bless the Lord!

The only fitting response to such a great and lively God is for the various members of the worshipping community, the house of Israel, the house of Aaron, the house of Levi, and those who fear the Lord, to bless the Lord. The psalm closes as it began, Praise the Lord!

- 19 O house of Israel, bless the Lord!  
O house of Aaron, bless the Lord!
- 20 O house of Levi, bless the Lord!  
You that fear the Lord, bless the Lord!
- 21 Blessed be the Lord from Zion,  
he who resides in Jerusalem.  
Praise the Lord!

## Psalm 135:19-21

**O house of Israel, bless the Lord!** In a series of three statements, Psalm 135 closes with a call to the descendants of Israel, Aaron, and Levi to honour God and give him the recognition he deserves. The **house of Aaron** refers to the priesthood, whereas the **house of Levi** is a reference to the rest of the servants who served the Lord in the temple complex.

**You that fear the Lord, bless the Lord!** This may be a call to Gentiles who honoured God to also join with Israel, the priests, and the Levites in praising and honouring Yahweh. Spurgeon noted, “It may be that this verse is intended to bring in God-fearing men who were not included under Israel, Aaron, and Levi. They were Gentile proselytes, and this verse opens the door and bids them enter.”

**Bless the Lord!** The psalmist did not mean this in the sense that a greater bestows a blessing on a lesser. God is infinitely greater than man and in this sense man could never give a blessing to God. He meant this in the sense that it blessed and honoured God when his creatures praised him and thanked him appropriately.

**Blessed be the Lord from Zion.** Jerusalem was and is a special place to God, but his praise, his goodness, his greatness extend out of Zion: <<***The Lord bless you from Zion. May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life***>> (Psalm 128:5). He is not a local deity; his power and greatness are not limited to Zion. The passive form of bless is used in v.19. The mention of Zion and Jerusalem is a reminder that this is where the whole people gathered to worship in the OT era; it is where God made his ‘name’ dwell; refer to the comment made on v.1.

**Praise the Lord!** It is fitting for such a soaring psalm to end as it began – to declare God’s praise, and to call upon others to also do so.