

Psalm 115
Psalm 115
Acts 19

“You Become What You Worship”

November 4, 2018

Some ancient manuscripts put Psalms 114-115 together as one song.

It makes *no sense* in terms of theme or poetry.

The only reason why it may have been done is because all the other songs from 111-118 either begin or end with “Hallelujah” – Praise the LORD!

Since Psalm 114 does not have a “Hallelujah” it just got added to Psalm 115!

As far as I can tell, there is only one useful thing that came about from that muddle!

During the Middle Ages, much of the church was using the blended Psalm 114-115, and after the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 (the perfect year for it 14-15!)

King Henry V ordered that Psalm 114 (including Psalm 115) be sung – and that when they came to the line “Not to us, O LORD,” all the army should kneel!

It is a good reminder to us that the Psalms used to be sung on important occasions.

Indeed, the Psalms used to be sung on pretty much *all* occasions!

It’s something we need to keep working at!

So let us...

Sing Psalm 115A

Read Acts 19

I think that it is safe to say that all of you have ancestors who worshiped idols – whether of silver or gold – or of wood and stone.

Acts 19 provides a lens into that world –

and helps us to see how that world connects to our world!

Demetrius and the silversmiths were concerned for three things:

First, their trade – and their wealth –

because they made a living at crafting little statues of Artemis.

(This is the one we instantly understand:

they were just worried about their pockets!)

But second, they feared that the temple of “the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing.”

The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

People came from all over the world to see the temple of Artemis.

The temple was at the center of civic pride in Ephesus.

Artemis was their patron deity –

and her temple guaranteed the welfare of the city.

And so third, they feared that Artemis herself might
“even be deposed from her magnificence,
she whom all Asia and the world worship.”
You can’t divorce Artemis from her temple and her worshipers!

Their civic well-being and their financial well-being depended *on her*.

Think of how Tibetan Buddhism functions in Tibet.

It’s not just that they are Tibetans who “happen” to be Buddhist.

Their economic and civic well-being are bound up with being Buddhist.

The same thing is true for Muslims in Saudi Arabia.

I once met a Saudi Muslim who said that 90% of the people he knew in Saudi Arabia
didn't *actually* believe in Islam –
but they *practiced* Islam – they went through the motions –
because it was at the heart of their economic and social identity.

You *become* what you worship.

The rhythms and patterns of your devotion shape and form you
into the image of the one that you worship.

As we saw last week, Psalm 114 focuses on God’s *presence* with his people
in the Exodus and the Conquest,
reminding us that God will be *present* with us –
even when we are surrounded by people who don’t speak our language.

And Psalm 115 still assumes that we’re living in that sort of world.

Notice verse 2 “Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?”

We’re surrounded by foreigners who don’t understand us –
who don’t understand our God.

And so we cry out:

1. Glory Belongs to the LORD (v1)

*Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!*

It’s not about us!

My name doesn’t matter.

I am not the center of the universe!

The LORD – *he* is God.

He is God.

You are not!

Glory belongs to the LORD.

What is glory?

We often think of glory in terms of brightness and splendor –
but the root idea is actually one of *weight*.

A glorious name is a *weighty* name.

And even in English we do this:

if you say that “his name has weight” –
that means that when he talks, people listen;
when he says something, he can make it happen.

So in verse 1, the people of God cry out,
don't make *us* weighty – but make *your name* weighty!

If you think about it –

why does it matter what people think about us?
We are here for a few short years – and then we are gone.
All the fuss and bluster – and where does it get us?
It's not the glory of *our name* that matters –
but the glory of God's name!

In Isaiah 42:8, God says,

“I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.”

Likewise, in Isaiah 48:11, he says,

“For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,
for how should my name be profaned?
My glory I will not give to another.”

But also notice where the glory of God's name is *going*:

“for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.”

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases.

The Hebrew word is *hesed* –
it has been translated as steadfast love, covenant loyalty,
the King James Version couldn't find one word to use,
so they created a new word for it: “lovingkindness”!
Hesed is often paired with the second word, *emeth* – “faithfulness.”

Hesed and *emeth* – steadfast love and faithfulness –

this is the reason why God should give glory to his own name!

Because the LORD has promised to save his people – to deliver them from their foes.

When God glorifies his own name –
that is *good* for his people.

It's not *about* us – but it is *good* for us!

Think about it this way:

when you're selfish and pursue your own glory – your own power – your own influence –
what is the result?

Invariably you wind up stepping on others – hurting others –

and the result is that “what goes around comes around” –
and you get hurt in the end!

But when you seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness –
when you love the LORD your God with all your heart –
and your neighbor as yourself –
when you humble yourself and are content with all the glory going to God –
then you can love those around you –
knowing that God will take care of everything else!

And then what is the result?

Oh, sure, sometimes people are nasty and they take advantage of your humility!
But more often, your love and kindness prompts others to respond in kind –
and at the very least, you have made it a better world to live in! –

because you have reflected the humility and grace –
the steadfast love and faithfulness –
of the one who said,
“And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence
with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

Jesus said that in John 17.

Jesus is the one man who could say that!
The rest of us say, “Not to us, LORD, not to us, but to *your name* give glory.”
Jesus says, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence.”

Because Jesus is the one man who is also God –
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.”

But God’s timing is not ours.

And in verses 2-8, the Psalmist reflects on “the nations, the gods, and us.”

2. You Become What You Worship: the Nations, the Gods, and Us (v2-8)

² *Why should the nations say,
“Where is their God?”*

This was a very real question for those who had returned from exile.

Yes, they were *home* – but the glory of the LORD had not filled the new temple.
Yes, they were back in the land – but they had no king.
The Persians still ruled them.

Where is your God?
What has he done for you?

And the answer of the Psalmist is given clearly in verse 3:

³ *Our God is in the heavens;
he does all that he pleases.*

Notice that he does not say, “Our God is everywhere.”
Nor does he say, “Our God is in our hearts!”
Both may be true – but neither would make the point that matters!

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”
If you say, “Our God is everywhere” – that could be mistaken for pantheism,
the idea that God is everything – or everything is God.
And pantheism is really a sort of fatalism.
Whatever will be will be – the universe will do what it does.
And that is *not* the Christian doctrine of providence!
Or if you say, “Our God is in our hearts” – that could sound like an imaginary deity,
the idea that I just believe in God to make me feel better.

No, “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”
We do not live in a deterministic universe.
Impersonal forces do not determine all things.
Our God is the one who governs all things –
who does *all that he pleases*.

For the Jews, singing this song after the Exile,
this does not mean that God is remote and distant.
No, because *our God* is the one who *promised* to deliver his people!
Our God is the one who shows *hesed* and *emeth* – steadfast love and faithfulness
to all generations!

Indeed, it might be better to translate the verb in the past tense:
“he has done all that he pleased” –
because it is not an abstract statement about God’s ideal sovereignty,
but a concrete statement about God’s *actual* sovereignty.

This messy situation – this awful catastrophe of a world,
where God’s people are partly restored, but still under wicked rulers –
already saved, but not yet what we are supposed to be –
this is not outside the will of the One “who has done all that he pleased.”

God knows what he is doing.

And that is contrasted in verses 4-8 with the idols of the nations:

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;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.

At Mt. Sinai God had forbidden Israel to make any graven images.

Why are graven images so bad?

After all, *everyone* did it!

It is remarkable how universal the custom had become.

Every nation all over the earth has had graven images of their deities.

Why did God forbid graven images?

The answer is found in the opening chapters of Genesis,

where God plants a Garden in Eden as a sanctuary –

and he establishes an *image* in his temple.

He formed an image for his temple –

when he created man – male and female – after his own image.

The reason why we should have no graven images in our temples

is because human beings *are* the graven images that God himself put there.

We are the image of God.

To reject and displace God's image

is to reject God himself.

Now, in the ancient world, no one believed that the image was *actually* the deity.

Rather, the image represents and mediates the presence of the god.

The Psalmist simply takes that claim seriously and asks what sort of god
is represented and mediated through a graven image?

A god with a mouth that cannot speak;

eyes, but cannot see;

ears, but cannot hear;

nose, but cannot smell;

hands, but cannot feel;

feet, but cannot walk;

a throat, but cannot make a sound.

Notice that the list begins and ends with silence!

You cannot listen to a mute god!

How do we know that *our* God is different?

Just look at his image!

God's image does speak – does see – does hear – does smell – does feel – does walk –

and makes all sorts of noises!!
Because God created man – male and female – in his own image.

And even our bodies were created to reflect certain things about God.

He gave us eyes *because he has eyes* –
and his eyes are the *real thing!*

Our eyes see some things – but his eyes see everything!
(And so, no, God does not have *physical* eyes –
physical eyes – by definition – are limited and can only see *some things*.
But God's eyes see all things.)

Likewise, God has ears – no, not physical ears –
if he had physical ears, then he could only hear some things!
But God's ears hear all things!

Therefore he gave ears so that we could hear in a creaturely way.

I'm not saying that *every* body part has a direct analogy to something about God
(although it is entirely possible that even the pancreas reflects something divine...),
[I know – someone out there is now going to spend the next five minutes
trying to figure out how the pancreas reflects something divine –
okay – fine – just let me know what you come up with!]

But all of this comes back together in verse 8:

⁸ *Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them.*

You become like what you worship.

If you worship the living God,
the one who *speaks* – then you learn how to speak like him –
the one who *sees* – then you learn how to see like him –
and so on.

But if you worship idols,
then you become like your god as well!

You become mute, blind, deaf –
insensible to everything around you.

Let's think about a couple of examples.

A sports fan can get so focused on his team
that he is mute, blind, and deaf to everything else.

A parent can become so obsessed with their children
that nothing and no one else matters.

James K. A. Smith has made a compelling argument that suggests that consumerism
is effectively the established religion in the United States.

What are the rituals and practices that shape our life?

Well, what do we *trust*?
What do we rely on in times of trouble?

When we need help, where do we turn?

3. So Trust God: Israel, Aaron, and Those Who Fear the LORD (v9-13)

⁹ *O Israel,^[a] 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.

Verses 9-11 then exhort us to trust in the LORD!

And there is a threefold pattern to the exhortation in verses 9-11,
which is echoed in the response of verses 12-13.

O Israel, O house of Aaron, O you who fear the LORD!

This in an interesting way of putting it.

“Israel” starts broad (including all the 12 tribes – not just Judah).

“House of Aaron” then focuses on the priestly family.

“You who fear the LORD” – however, then both narrows and broadens the scope.

Not all of Israel fears the LORD!

Not even all of the House of Aaron! (too many priests had strayed).

So in one sense, “you who fear the LORD” might be taken as a subset of Israel.

But in another sense, there may be an expression of the Abrahamic promise here.

By the time of the NT, “God-fearer”

was a term used of Gentiles who “feared the LORD”

It probably didn’t have that meaning in the 6th century B.C. –

but then again, the same Spirit who inspired the NT

was the one who inspired Psalm 115!

We have seen already in Psalms 111 and 112 the importance of fearing the LORD.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (111:10).

“Blessed is the man who fears the LORD” (112:1).

Fearing God means being more concerned with what God thinks of you
than with what others think of you.

In that sense, it is connected with the idea of glory (weightiness).

Whose word carries weight with you?

God? Or man?

And so three times over, the Psalmist urges us:

Trust in the LORD! he is their help and their shield.

He is the help and shield of Israel
 (even in the midst of the mess and trouble of life).
He is the help and shield of the House of Aaron
 (even when the temple was in ruins – so they couldn't offer sacrifices).
He is the help and shield of all those who fear the LORD
 (no matter what you are going through!).

And since we've mentioned Adam already – I should also mention Eve.
After all, Eve was created to be a “help” for Adam.
It's the same word used here.

If you go through all the uses of this word “help” (*ezer*) in the OT,
 you will be struck by the fact that the overwhelming majority of them
 are about *God* being our helper.
And *never* in all of the OT does the idea of the “helper” suggest “inferiority.”
 When Psalm 115 says that God is “their help and their shield”
 no one would imagine that this is saying that God is my peon
 who does my bidding!
 (Well, I suppose some people might imagine that – *but they'd be wrong!!*)

Rather, the *helper* (the *ezer*) in Scripture is one who does for you
 what you could not possibly do for yourself!
When you are trapped in a pit, the *helper* pulls you out!
When you are condemned to death, the *helper* rescues you from the hand of your foes.

(And in Genesis 2, when God says “I will make a helper suitable for him”
 the context makes it clear that Eve does for Adam,
 what Adam could not possibly do for himself!
 Because by himself, Adam is *never* going to be fruitful and multiply!
It's not that *every* woman needs to have babies –
 Paul makes it clear that singleness is a perfectly acceptable calling
 for both men and women –
 and barrenness within marriage can still be fruitful!
But when God made man – male and female – after his own image –
 he gave to *woman* this particular gift:
 the gift of being able to reproduce the image of God.

She cannot do this without a man (except in the case of the Virgin birth) –
 but, let's be honest, guys, in the nine months that this process takes,
 we don't deserve more than a footnote!
She is the helper –
 namely, the one who does for you what you could not possibly do for yourself!

And in that sense, she reflects the glory and power of God
 as she crafts the image of God in her womb.

Verses 12-13 then echo back the themes of verses 9-11:

¹² *The LORD has remembered 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 the small and the great.*

We saw earlier in Psalm 111 the importance of how the LORD remembers his covenant forever.

Now we hear that the LORD *has* remembered us.
He will not forget his promises – nor will he forget his people,
whom he redeemed with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm.

And he will bless us.

This is the regular word for blessing (barach).
This is the word used in Genesis 1 for how God blessed Adam and Eve –
how he blessed the sabbath day (Gen 2:3),
how he blessed Noah (9:1), and Abram (12:2).

The blessing of God is life, hope, joy, peace, prosperity, and rest *in his presence*.

He will bless the house of Israel –
he will bless the house of Aaron –
he will bless those who fear the LORD,
both the small and the great.

In Psalm 113 we heard how God lifts the needy from the ash heap,
and makes them sit with the princes of his people.
He gives the barren woman a home – making her the joyous mother of children.

The LORD delights to honor the weak –
because he has chosen the weak and the foolish things of this age
to shame those who *think* that they are wise and powerful!

4. Bless the LORD Who Blesses His People (v14-18)

Verses 14-16 then pursue the idea of blessing even further.

Notice how the idea of blessing extends from those present to all the earth:

¹⁴ *May the LORD give you increase,
you and your children!*
¹⁵ *May you be blessed by the LORD,
who made heaven and earth!*
¹⁶ *The heavens are the LORD's heavens,
but the earth he has given to the children of man.*

Do you see why I have emphasized childbirth – reproducing the image of God?
Because our God is in the heavens –
and his image is found not in lifeless idols,
but in the living and breathing children of man!

And the way that God’s blessing comes from generation to generation
is through childbirth.
If ever we have a generation that refuses to bear children –
then humanity will become extinct!

The maker of heaven and earth is the one who blesses his people.
He blessed Adam and Eve – saying “be fruitful and multiply,
and fill the earth and subdue it;
and have dominion over the fish of the sea,
and over the birds of the air,
and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen 1:28)

In other words, the LORD rules in the heavens –
but as the great sovereign over all things – as the Creator –
he has given sovereignty over the earth to his vicegerent, Adam.
And the children of Adam continue to rule the earth under God.

But also notice that we have moved out from Israel to all the earth!
Psalm 115 does not begin to explain *how* God will do this.
But in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Adam came –
the one who has joined Jew and Gentile in one new man –
so that in Christ, the children of Adam have begun to be restored!

Psalm 115 closes with a striking statement:

*¹⁷ The dead do not praise the LORD,
nor do any who go down into silence.*

Remember the silence of the idols?
Those who make them become like them.
Death is the ultimate silence.
The dead have mouths, but do not speak –
eyes, but do not see –
ears, but do not hear –
noses, but do not smell...

The dead make no sound.

*¹⁸ But we will bless the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.
Praise the LORD!*

Some have tried to say that verse 18 is merely saying
that those who are alive will continue to bless the LORD.

They think that the OT has no doctrine of the resurrection.

But verse 18 suggests that there is another alternative *besides* going down into silence.
Death is not the only outcome.

We who are blessed by the LORD will ourselves *bless the LORD*
from this time forth and forevermore.

Psalms 115 – like the Psalms around it – present *two ways* – two paths – two options:
you can either put your trust in idols – and wind up like them (dead);
or you can put your trust in the LORD Jesus Christ –
and wind up like him (blessed and alive!).

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we have not trusted you as we ought. We have put our confidence in idols that do not live – that cannot speak or see or hear. And we recognize that those who trust in them will become like them in death – silent and blind and deaf. We thank you that you sent your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who revealed your glory in his cross and in his resurrection, so that he might redeem us from our sin and misery and death! Have mercy upon us for the sake of your Son, and pour out your Holy Spirit upon us – that he might work your grace in us more and more each day. For we pray in Jesus name. Amen.