

Psalm 115: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 115. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. Why should the nations say, Where is their God? Our God is in the heavens, he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but do not speak, eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear, noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel, feet, but do not walk, and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.

O Israel, trust in the Lord, he is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord, he is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord, he is their help and their shield. The Lord has remembered us. He will bless us. 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. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children. May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth. The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord. Psalm 115 contrasts those who trust in and are blessed by the Lord with those who trust in idols and are cursed as a result.

The Lord is utterly unlike the idols of the nations. This psalm may have been designed for a liturgy, given its changes in style and its repetitions and what seem to be antiphonal responses. This is one of the Hallel psalms. From Psalm 113 to Psalm 118, there is a cycle of psalms that would have been sung at festivals such as the Passover. This particular psalm would have been the first of the four that was sung after the final cup in the Passover, for instance. It begins by calling upon the Lord to glorify his name in the sight of the nations by demonstrating his character. The people call God to act on account of his steadfast love and his faithfulness, not on account of anything that they have done. They want the Lord to vindicate his reputation. The nations are asking, where is their God? God is not acting on behalf of his people. His people are being put to shame. Even when God's people have gone astray,

God is still concerned for the glory of his name, and he will hallow his name by restoring his people. Considering the claims of the idolatrous nations round about, that God is not acting, the psalmist declares that God is in heaven. He is unlimited in his sovereignty. Heaven is he has spoken of as a realm of unconstrained might and authority. This is one of the great polemics against idolatry. We find something similar in the book of Isaiah, in places like Isaiah chapter 44 verses 9 to 17. All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit.

[3 : 1 2] Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a God or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified, they shall be put to shame together. The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails. He drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak, and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar, and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself. He kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a God and worships it. He makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat, he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says,

Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire. And the rest of it he makes into a God, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, Deliver me, for you are my God. The idols then are

impotent. Their apparent faculties are powerless. They have eyes but they can't see. They have ears but they can't hear. Looking to such a creation of man's hands for deliverance is futile. They can't save. They have to be carried around from place to place. The psalmist contrasts God's doing and God's making with the doing and the making of idolaters. Idolaters end up becoming like their idols. They close down and ultimately become dead. We become like that which we worship. In worshipping dead, lifeless idols, people close down, their hearts become hard, their necks become stiff. In contrast, those who worship the living God are renewed in their life. The points that the psalmist makes here are similar to those found in Psalm 135 verses 15 to 18. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak. They have eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear. Nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them. There is a three-fold exhortation following this to trust the Lord that's given to Israel, the house of Aaron and to those who fear the Lord. These are likely antiphonal statements assuring the people of the value of trusting in the Lord. The priest perhaps leads the people in the statement of trust and then the people or perhaps the Levitical choir responds with he is their help and their shield. The three different groups refer to Israel as a whole nation, to the priestly house of Aaron and to all who fear God wherever they might be. The Lord is the source of help. He comes to his people's aid. He's the shield. He's the one who protects his people from attack. Following this three-fold exhortation to trust there's a three-fold encouragement that the Lord will bless his people. He has remembered his people. He has seen their distress. He will act on their behalf. He will bless the house of Israel. He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord. The psalmist declares a blessing, an increase for them and their children by the Lord who made heaven and earth. In contrast to the idols, this is one who can truly provide blessing. Once again the psalmist reminds the hearer that the Lord acts from the heavens. The heavens are the Lord's heavens. The realm of authority and power and might. The realm that holds everything else under its sway belongs to the Lord. He is free within that realm. It is his realm. The earth, by contrast, has been given to the children of man. If the Lord is above, the dead are those who go down. The dead do not praise the Lord. They pass down into silence. This cessation that occurs as people pass into silence is contrasted with the forevermore worship of the people of God. They will bless the Lord vocally from that time forth and forevermore. They are not of the dead that pass down into death. They are not of those who worship dead idols who will become like dead idols. They are those who worship God in heaven, the living God, and as a result they look forward to eternal life. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in scripture that God, in contrast to the idols, leads his people into fullness of life?