



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 115

Metropolitan Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm has no title
- No evidence of who the author was, nor on what occasion it was written
- It is ascribed to various individuals
- Some attributed to Moses and the Israelites, when pursued by Pharaoh
- Others to the three young men in the furnace of fire in Babylon; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, the companions of Daniel
- Still others to Mordecai and Esther, when Haman distressed the Jews



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- And some attributed it to the heroes at the times of Antiochus and the Maccabees
- Some to Jehoshaphat, when a numerous army came against him
- Some think it was composed for use in the Temple services after the Return from Babylon
- Perhaps when their enthusiasm had died away, and the little community in Jerusalem realized how shamefully weak they were in the eyes of their neighbors (Ezra 3:3,4:1)
- Or, perhaps at a later time (Nehemiah 4:1-5)

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- But the mocking description of idols in verse 4 points rather to the earlier time, when the memories of Babylonian idolatry were still fresh
- And others to David, which is more probable; though on what occasion is not easy to say
- But some think, the occasion was when David was insulted by the Jebusites, 2 Samuel 5:6
- This Psalm is liturgical and is a continuation of the collection of the Egyptian Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118) sung by the Jews during their Passover celebrations



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- It therefore makes up part of the hymns which would have been sung by Jesus and His disciples on the night He was betrayed and arrested, the night before His crucifixion (Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26)
- In some translation versions like the Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, this Psalm is united with Psalm 114
- But in tone, structure, and style the two Psalms are quite distinct and cannot originally have been one
- In addition, in the Hebrew it is a separate Psalm
- It is a triumphal Psalm, in which the victory gained is entirely ascribed to God the Almighty



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- God Alone is to Be Glorified, 115:1-3
- The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8
- All Who Fear God Are Exhorted to Trust Him, 115:9-11
- The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16
- The Dead Cannot Praise Him, the Living Should, 115:17-18

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- Having recorded the wonderful things that God did for His people on their departure from Egypt in the previous Psalm, he now, in the name of the people, prays to Him not to regard their shortcomings, but His own glory and to continue to protect His servants
- He asks not for praise or glory on his own merits, which are none; *But to Your name give glory*
- The psalmist understood that when God did wonderful things, the glory should be given to Him – not to His people, *not unto us*
- The *glory* should go unto God and His Holy *Name*

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- God is prayed to help Israel, but not for their sakes, not to cover them with glory - rather for His own sake, that glory may rest on His Name, and Himself, among the nations
- The words *Not unto us* are repeated, in order to express the deep sense of personal unworthiness considered by the suppliant
- They may also signify the blended prayers of the two great elements of the Church, Jew and Gentile
- *Your mercy ... Your truth*, The psalmist anticipated this manifestation of faithfulness with confidence
- God's honor is concerned in delivering His people, in order to show that *mercy* has been the motive of His dealings with them

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- And His *truth* is no less concerned in fulfilling His promises made to them, and in executing His threatened judgments upon the heathen who have not called upon His Name
- According to St. Augustine, mercy, and truth, are often united together in the Holy Scripture: “In His mercy, God calls the sinners ; and in His truth He condemns those whom He calls, and refuse to come to Him.”
- He gives glory to that Name, because He moves His people through gratitude, and His enemies through fear, to worship Him; and that for the dear sake of His mercy and truth, which are Jesus Christ

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- When St. John later wrote *grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17), he wrote with the same idea of the psalmist and saw it perfectly fulfilled in Jesus
- St. John Chrysostom says, “God has one thing in view, the correction of sinners. Hence, he added *Because of Your mercy, Because of Your truth*, that is, help us for the sake of Your mercy, even if Your glory among human beings is of no concern to You but for the sake of Your mercy and Your faithfulness.”
- Another reason why God ought to seek the glory of His name in preserving His people is the gentiles, seeing God’s people in a state of need

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- Lest they get an opportunity to diminish God's power, and, perhaps, to deny His very existence
- *the Gentiles*, Those who worshipped idols, and who claimed that those idols were true gods
- He is asking God: why do You allow them, or give them any opportunity to say or think so, by giving Your people into their hands?
- Why should we, Your people, be so left, so forsaken, so afflicted, as to lead these idolaters to suppose the God whom we worship is needy of power or faithfulness; either that He does not exist, or that He cannot be relied on

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- So, 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 devil continually attempts to stir doubt in the hearts of believers concerning God's care for them
- He did his best portraying God as residing in seclusion in His heavens, not caring for the affairs of men
- Man feels bitterness when non-believers reproach God as though He does not exist, or as though He is helpless
- The nations worshipped imaginary beings and the projections of their own lusts and longing

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- Yet God, the covenant *God* of Israel is different
- *In heaven*, signifying His invisibility, His majesty, His holiness, and His power
- Although He has no visible shape nor bodily presence here upon earth, as their idols have, which is a certain proof of their weakness, yet He has a certain and a glorious place where He resides, even the highest heavens, where He is clothed with infinite power and majesty
- He is the Maker of heaven and earth; the one is His throne, and the other is His footstool, (Isaiah 66:1)

God Alone is to Be Glorified

115:1-3



- He dwells in the highest heaven, and overlooks all persons and things on earth, and overrules all
- Though its outward circumstances may seem to give ground for the insults of the Gentiles, Israel knows that God is supremely exalted and omnipotent
- If His people suffer, it is because He wills it, not because He lacks power to help them
- *He does whatever He pleases*, And, therefore, what has been done is right, and we should be submissive to it



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- The psalmist is asking How can the Gentiles insult them saying *where is their God?*”
- What are their own gods?
- *silver and gold*, Nothing but the work of human hands
- The gods they serve and worship are not in the heavens; but are made of substance that is dug out of the earth
- *Silver and gold*, This might be the greatest value that there is in them
- By singling out these metals, the psalmist intensifies the scorn which he implies for such as were of inferior price, and which had not the one element of value in their favor



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- And when we bear in mind the Apostle's saying that covetousness is idolatry, (Colossians 3:5) we shall be warned that we too may need this lesson against worshipping silver and gold
- Or the worldly wisdom and hollow deceptive confidence which may be compared to these metals
- They are deprived of ordinary human senses, though represented with organs of sense
- They have the shape and figure of man, and appear to have all his members and senses



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- They cannot teach their worshippers, *“Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Awake!’ To silent stone, ‘Arise! It shall teach!’ Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, Yet in it there is no breath at all.”* (Habakkuk 2:19)
- *they do not see*, They do not see their needs and neglect the real work of souls
- *they do not hear*, They cannot hear prayers offered to them
- *They have ears*, Not for hearing the reading of the Holy Scripture, nor for hearing the cry of the poor and oppressed
- *they do not smell*, the sweet aroma of sacrifices or the incense that is set before them



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- God, though He has no bodily form, can truly be said to speak (Isaiah 1:20) and see (Psalm 113:6) and hear (Psalm 6:8) and smell (Genesis 8:21)
- The idols were shaped with human body parts, *mouths, eyes, ears, noses*, yet they couldn't do with those body parts what their makers could
- Men worship things so obviously *below* them
- And St. Augustine wonders, "The animals, even the harmful among them, have a breath of life, which the idols lack; and even a dead corpse of man, used to be once alive; while the idols never have been."



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- They cannot make use of their hands to stretch them out and receive anything from their worshippers
- Nor can they give anything to them: but our God receives and accepts the sacrifices of His people, their prayers and their praises; and opens His hand, and liberally supplies their needs, both in providence and grace
- They do not use their *hands* to heal the wounds of the sick, nor to lift off the burdens of the oppressed
- *Feet they have*, They cannot go from the place where they are to help those that call unto them, “*They bear it on the shoulder, ... from its place it shall not move.*” (Isaiah 46:7)



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- But our God, *“walks on the wings of the wind,”* (Psalm 104:3) and is *“our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble.”* (Psalm 46:1)
- As we read, *“To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? The workman molds an image, The goldsmith overspreads it with gold, And the silversmith casts silver chains. Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution Chooses a tree that will not rot; He seeks for himself a skillful workman To prepare a carved image that will not totter.”* (Isaiah 40:18-20)



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- They do not make anything in the shape of the voice of man, nor even of beasts
- They are blind, deaf, and silent senseless, motionless, powerless and incapable
- St. Augustine says, “Even a beast does excel them; for unto this it is added, *Nor do they mutter through their throat.*”
- And St. John Chrysostom comments and says, “the psalmist, mocking them for utter folly and revealing them to be ridiculous. I mean, how could it be anything but ridiculous to be attached to a wooden image representing utter shamelessness?”



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- The psalmist understood that when men worship things beneath them, it brings them lower
- Such gods drag down their worshippers to the same level of senseless foolishness
- They are equally vain and powerless and must perish, for their protectors are powerless, 2 Kings 17:15; Isaiah 44:9-10; Jeremiah 2:5; Romans 1:21-23
- There is a close relation between the object of worship and the worshippers
- When men worship the true God who reigns in righteousness, they become like Him



The Vanity of Idols, 115:4-8

- When they worship false and vain idols, they become like them
- *Those who make them* are like idols, because, though they hear and see, it is more in appearance than reality
- For having eyes and not seeing God's truth; the things that only are worth seeing
- Having ears, and are deaf to His Word, do not hear the things that pertain to salvation
- As Isaiah said, cited by Christ, "*And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive ... Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears.'*"
(Matthew 13:14-38)

All Who Fear God Are Exhorted to Trust Him, 115:9-11



- Knowing the folly of idolatry should renew our trust in the true God and compel us to look to Him as our *help* and *shield*
- *O Israel*, The house of Israel includes the whole Jewish nation
- This exhortation is founded in a great measure on what had been just said in regard to idols
- They had no power; there was no reason why they should be confided in
- The psalmist's exhortation was not merely to *trust the Lord*, but to *trust in Him*

All Who Fear God Are Exhorted to Trust Him, 115:9-11



- This goes beyond regarding Him as trustworthy, and actually placing our trust, our confidence, our reliance in Him and not in self or any idol
- As St. Peter has in his heart when he said, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*” (John 6:68)
- *O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord.* If God’s people as a whole should trust God, then those who are His appointed servants should trust Him even more
- 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*

All Who Fear God Are Exhorted to Trust Him, 115:9-11



- The priests were the leaders, teachers, and ought to be examples to others of a victorious confidence in God, and a faithful obedience to Him
- The psalmist addressed first ordinary Israelites; next, those officially holy, the priests; and finally, those actually holy, the truly faithful Israelites
- There are different interpretations of what he means by *who fear the Lord*
- One view is that it expresses Israel and Aaron, the laity and priesthood of the Jewish nation which make up the sum of all the true worshippers of God

All Who Fear God Are Exhorted to Trust Him, 115:9-11



- A second opinion extends the meaning to all devout persons of Gentile origin who served the Lord faithfully, even though not under the Law
- In the New Testament such people are known as *God fearers* (Acts 10:1-2,13:16,13:26), and the title may have come from such Old Testament passages
- The Old Testament writers recognized Gentiles who honored the God of Israel, “*Moreover, concerning a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name’s sake.*” (1 Kings 8:41) also, (Isaiah 56:6)

All Who Fear God Are Exhorted to Trust Him, 115:9-11



- And thus it looks forward to the wider Church of later days, embracing Jew and Gentile alike
- And thirdly, some believe that the converts Gentiles who followed the Jewish belief and were enrolled in Israel, are alone intended
- The second of these interpretations agrees best with the words of St. Peter, *“In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.”* (Acts 10:34-35)
- It is noticeable how God is three times named as our *help and shield*

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- The psalmist drew upon God's past faithfulness and used it as confidence in God's future blessing
- He has not forgotten us in the past and He will not forget to *bless* us in the future
- And is another reason why His people should trust in Him
- The psalmist confirms that God would be the helper and the protector of those that trust in Him
- He places himself among those who received special help and protection from God

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- He then, in the same order, confirms his assertions of God having blessed the house of Israel and the house of Aaron
- According to St. Augustine, “But in blessing both of these, *He will bless those who fear the Lord.*”
- All who fear Him, *great and small*, without any reference to greatness or littleness, whether of age, power, wisdom, or riches
- He blessed *both small and great* in the wide embrace of His love, “*where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*” (Colossians 3:11)

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- *May the Lord give you increase more and more*, This was the original blessing bestowed on Abraham (Genesis 13:16,17:4-6), and continually repeated (Genesis 18:18,22:17,28:14)
- It is much emphasized by Isaiah (Isaiah 49:8-12,18-23,54:1-3,60:1-22)
- In giving this blessing to those who fear and trust the Lord, the psalmist recognized God as the true source of such blessing, extending even to *children*
- He that *made heaven and earth* can doubtless make those who trust in Him blessed

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- God is exalted above the idols of the nations
- He alone has *made heaven and earth*
- The reference to heaven and earth may be found in the blessing of Isaac to Jacob: *“Therefore may God give you Of the dew of heaven, Of the fatness of the earth, And plenty of grain and wine.”* (Genesis 27:28)
- Perhaps after the denunciation of idols in the first part of the Psalm, it is probable that the title of Maker of *heaven and earth* is here given to the Lord to differentiate Him from the false gods of the Gentiles

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- As Jeremiah said in teaching Israel, *“Thus you shall say to them: ‘The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under these heavens.’”* (Jeremiah 10:11)
- The blessing has come in a fuller sense upon the true Israel, in that God has increased it more and more, raising up children to Abraham from the dead stones of Gentile heathenism, *“and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”* (Matthew 3:9)
- Children in true spiritual descent

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- The psalmist after recognizing God's authority as Creator over both heaven and earth; he now acknowledged God's continuing dominion over *the heavens*
- The heaven is God's heaven; He has made it for His own dwelling-place (Psalm 115:3,2:4); He is "*the God of heaven*" (Psalm 136:26)
- So the supreme heaven belongs extremely to God and to the Angels who minister unto Him
- *but the earth*, with the elements that surround it, *He has given to the children of men*, for their habitation

The Lord's Goodness and His Gracious Promises, 115:12-16



- And for such a splendid portion of the universe man should constantly return thanks to God as long as they live and enjoy the fruits of that earth
- Though the earth is given by God to the children of men, yet He has a better country, even heaven, to give to such as will seek it, who are sons of God, not mere children of men, and who can win heaven by exchanging earth for it
- St. Augustine comments on verse 16 and says, “who has elevated the minds of some saints to such a height, that they became teachable by no man, but by God Himself; in comparison of which heaven, whatever is discerned with carnal eyes is to be called earth.”

The Dead Cannot Praise Him, the Living Should, 115:17-18



- Those who are dead cannot praise God, or cannot worship Him, this should be done while we are in the land of the living
- Death puts an end to our glorifying God in this world of trial and conflict
- This opportunity, like all other opportunities, will be cut off in the grave, and hence, we should be faithful in this duty, and should benefit ourselves of this privilege, while life lasts
- Their voice is no longer heard among the living
- Whatever heavenly praise they may join, they are absent from an earthly one, and their praise will no longer testify to those who resist and reject the true God

The Dead Cannot Praise Him, the Living Should, 115:17-18



- The grave is a land of darkness and silence, where there is no work
- St. John Chrysostom says, “He calls the dead not those who come to the end of their time but those who have died in godlessness or who have become rotten in sin.”
- Applying the passage to the Christians under the New Testament, “the heaven of heaven” means that supreme part of heaven where the children of God reside; of which the Apostle says, *“For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”* (2 Corinthians 5:1)

The Dead Cannot Praise Him, the Living Should, 115:17-18



- That house God chose for Himself, *but the earth*, this visible world, *He has given to the children of men*, as distinguished from the children of God
- And therefore, *The dead do not praise the Lord*, those who, though living bodily, are spiritually dead, they will not praise God
- For God is not the God of the dead, but of the living
- *Nor any who go down into silence*, Who have died in their sins, and have gone to eternal punishment
- If the praise is to last *forevermore*, then it does extend into the world to come

The Dead Cannot Praise Him, the Living Should, 115:17-18



- In the spirit of faith God's people see no limit to the continuance of their existence or to their tribute of praise
- Those who live the life of grace, shall praise Him, *from this time forth*, beginning at once in faith, good works, and holiness, and persevering to the very end, to that other life of glory, where for *evermore* the unceasing praise of the conquerors ascend to their King
- The grave is, indeed, before us all; but so is also heaven, if we belong to those who truly fear the Lord, and who sincerely worship Him through Christ Jesus



Discussion

- What did the psalmist recognize about Israel's achievements?
- On which attributes of the Lord does this Psalm focus?
- How did the Israelites answer their enemies?
- What did Israel recognize about the gods of the surrounding nations?



Discussion

- How are idols described in the Psalm?
- Contrast idols and the Lord. What does each do? On What basis does Israel ask for God's help? What is their confidence?
- How does God bless the man that fears Him?
- What words of affirmation conclude the Psalm?