



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 135

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Introduction

- This Psalm has no title in Hebrew; and the author, and the occasion on which it was written, are also unknown
- This Psalm is mainly made up of selections from other parts of the Holy Scripture
- Almost every verse quotes the words or the idea of another Old Testament passage, including four different Psalms, two passages from Deuteronomy, two from Jeremiah, and two from Exodus
- This Psalm is liturgical intended for use in the worship of the Temple



Introduction

- It is an exhortation addressed to the priests and Levites, and to all Israel, to praise the Lord publicly
- And it begins and ends with *praise the Lord*, and is throughout an exhortation of praise to God, because of His works of creation, providence, and grace
- Psalms 135 and 136 are considered Psalms of praise which the Jews used in the morning services of the Sabbath day, as well as in the Feast of Passover, both called 'The Great Hallel' or (Praise) following the Psalms of Ascents (120-134)
- There are three groups of Hallel Psalms



Introduction

- The Egyptian Hallel: Psalms 113 to 118
- The Great Hallel: Psalms 120 to 136, including the Psalms of Ascents
- The Final Hallel: Psalms 146 to 150
- This Psalm is well connected with the preceding, Psalm 134
- But while Psalm 134 is directed to the Levites alone; Psalm 135 is addressed to the priests, the Levites, the whole congregation, as well as to all those who fear God
- It is an appropriate Psalm to follow the Psalms of Ascents



Introduction

- The pilgrim journey to Jerusalem ended in the call of Psalm 134:2: *"Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, And bless the Lord"*
- Now, in Psalm 135, the psalmist stands in the temple, calling on worshipers as well as the priests and Levites to join the king and people in praise
- The conclusion of this Psalm is nearly the same with Psalm 115
- What is said about idols, and the effects of the power of God, seems to be taken from it and the tenth chapter of Jeremiah
- And from these and other circumstances it appears the Psalm was written after the captivity; and might have been used at the dedication of the second temple



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5
- Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7
- Praise God for His Wonders Done in Egypt 135:8-9
- Praise Him for His Wonders in the Wilderness 135:10-12
- Praise Him for His Goodness to His People 135:13-14
- The Vanity of Idols 135:15-18
- The People of God are Called to Praise the Lord 135:19-21

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- This Psalm begins and ends with *Praise the Lord*
- It is a call for stirring passionate praise to God
- Praising God means standing with angels and archangels and all the host of heaven in crying "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!*" (Isaiah 6:3)
- To praise *the name of the Lord* is to honor Him in all His character and attributes
- The name was understood to represent the nature of the person
- His people must not only praise Him for what He has done for them, but praise Him for what He is in Himself

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- Praise the Lord Himself, the perfections of His nature; His greatness, goodness, grace, and mercy; His holiness, justice, power, truth, and faithfulness
- *servants of the Lord*; this refers to the priests and Levites
- Now His people are called *servants of the Lord* who were once the servants of sin, Satan, and the world, but now by the grace of God become His servants; *“But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”* (Romans 6:17)

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- According to St. Augustine, “Being servants, we are committed to praise our God, for the sake of His love for us, and His uncountable gifts to us. How much more would it be befitting of us to praise Him, when He has granted us to enjoy sonhood to Him, and to enter into His bosoms?”
- Some observe that the word praise is here used three times, which may point to the Three Divine Persons in the Godhead, who are each to be praised; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
- *You who stand in the house of the Lord*, this refers to the priests and Levites who would *stand in the house of the Lord* for priestly and temple duties

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- *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 to the *house of the Lord* (only priests could enter the holy place)
- The common man could stand *in the courts of the house of our God*
- This was a call to *all* God's people to praise Him
- According to St. Augustine, God grants us the blessing of praise wherever we are; How much more would His blessing be when He brings us into His house, to praise Him, together with His angels?

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- The psalmist instructs the Jews not to do anything concerning their worship to God outside the house or the courts, designated by the Lord
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Now, he definitely refers to the house and the courts, confining the congregation to a certain place, forbidding them from wandering anywhere outside...from the very beginning, God, by His command to build the tabernacle of meeting, He intended to keep His people from being influenced by the surrounding uncleanness of idol worship, and from wildly wandering everywhere, turning the gardens, springs, hills, and high places, to places where they would offer sacrifices; He even condemned those who did to death, (Leviticus 17:3-4).”

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- This Psalm gives many reasonable, logical reasons why we should *praise the Lord*
- He began with the simple declaration of God's goodness, *for the Lord is good*
- God is good, and He does good, in a providential way, to all men; and in a way of special grace to His own people
- *for it is pleasant*, This is the second reason given to praise God because it benefits the one who praises Him
- This should never be the primary reason, because then worship has a focus on self-gratification, but worship does do us good

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- St. Augustine says, “Briefly in one word is here explained the praise of the Lord our God. ‘The Lord is good;’ good, not in the same manner as the things which He here made are good. For God made all things very good; not only good, but also very good. He made the sky and earth, and all things which are in them good, and He made them very good. If He made all these things good, of what sort is He who made them?...How far can we speak of His goodness? Who can conceive in his heart, or apprehend how good the Lord is? Let us however return to ourselves, and in us recognize Him, and praise the Maker in His works, because we are not fit to contemplate Him Himself.”

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- The work of *singing praise is pleasant*, it is the work of angels; the subject matter of it delightful
- It must be pleasant work to His people, because it is pleasing to God; and especially when the presence of God is enjoyed in it, and is from the heart as well as with the mouth
- *For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself*, The descendants of Jacob
- The psalmist listed a third reason to praise God
- He has selected them from among all the inhabitants of the earth to be His special people

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- The Holy Scripture often refers to God's choice of the Jews as His own people in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 7; Exodus 33; Amos 3:2)
- It may also point to spiritual Jacob and Israel, the whole church and people of God, whether Jews or Gentiles
- St. Augustine says, "Let not Jacob therefore extol himself, let him not boast himself, or ascribe it to his own merits. He was known before, predestinated before, elected before, not elected for his own merits, but found out, and gifted with life by the grace of God."
- The word treasure, means that which is acquired; property or wealth

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- His choosing of *Israel for His special treasure* fulfills the declaration of God in Deuteronomy 7:6: “*For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.*”
- They were what God possessed, owned, or claimed among all the people of the earth as especially His own
- He had chosen them; He had redeemed them; He had made them His own
- In the Septuagint version, the words *special treasures* came as “*His inheritance*”

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- He cherishes His believers and counts them as His special treasure; His body members
- He did not choose Israel because they were great, but because He is great in love
- God told Israel this in Deuteronomy 7:7-8: *“The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”*

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- Another reason to praise God is His greatness
- The psalmist asserts it with assurance, *I know that the Lord is great*
- He knows that He is so; know it not only by observation of the proofs of it, but by belief of the revelation of it
- *I know*, as if he is saying, *“I am sure of it; I know it by my own experience of the divine greatness working on my soul”*
- God is exalted above all the pretended deities of the pagans
- He is not only above any god, but above all gods, infinitely above them, between Him and them there is no comparison

A Call to Praise God for His Goodness and Greatness 135:1-5



- Some wonder how could the psalmist say that God is great, then compare Him to the gods of the nations, and say that He is above all of them?
- It is clear from Psalm 135:15, that the psalmist does not intend by this comparison to imply that the gods of the heathen have any real existence
- St. John Chrysostom says, “although there is no point of comparison, yet the psalmist says so for the sake of the weakness of the minds of his listeners, who have for so long been connected to idol worship, and even used to revere them. That is why, by such a comparison, he attempts to rescue those lost souls.”



Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7

- The psalmist exalted *the Lord* as having ultimate power, with the ability to do whatever He desires
- His power extends everywhere, *In heaven and in earth, In the seas and in all deep places*
- In the visible seas, and in those invisible depths, both of *earth*, and of *the seas*
- God is an absolute sovereign
- He has formed a plan and has carried it out
- He has made the world as He chose, and He has ordered all its arrangements according to His own pleasure

Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7



- St. Augustine says, “Who can comprehend these things? Who can count the works of the Lord in the heaven and earth, in the sea, and in all deep places? Yet if we cannot comprehend them all, we should believe and hold them without question, because whatever creature is in heaven, whatever is in earth, whatever is in the sea and in all deep places, has been made by the Lord.”
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Do you see all-sufficient power? Do you see source of life? Do you see undeniable might? Do you see incomparable excellence? Do you see authority nowhere obstructed? Do you see everything easy and simple for Him? He did *Whatever He pleases...where? In heaven and in earth.*”

Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7



- Verse 7 is adapted from Jeremiah 10:13 and Jeremiah 51:16:
“And He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, He brings the wind out of His treasures.” (Jeremiah 10:13)
- The psalmist talks about the power of God in creation
- All the powers of nature prove the greatness of the God of nature
- *the vapors*, was interpreted by many commentators of the mist which went up out of the earth, and watered it, Genesis 2:6
- When one considers upon what an immense scale evaporation is continually going on, and how needful it is for the existence of all life, one may well admire the wisdom and the power which are displayed therein

Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7



- All around us from every point of the horizon the vapor rises, condenses into clouds, and ultimately descends as rain
- So, the earth does not lose by the vapors it sends up, for they are returned with advantage in fruitful rain
- St. Jerome interprets these clouds, spiritually of the apostles and prophets, raised from a low and mean estate; and so may be applied to the ministers of the word, who are clouds full of water; of good doctrine
- *He makes lightning for the rain*, He makes thick clouds, which, being broken, produce lightnings, and so are dissolved into showers of rain



Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7

- If He shuts the heaven up, Who can open it? (Job 12:14; 2 Chronicles 7:13)
- And if He opens them up, who can shut them? (Malachi 3:10)
- Who can endure the burden of draught or of the flood, if it is not for the Mighty God who controls the whole universe by His measures? (Job 28:25)
- The lightning refer to the spirit of enlightenment, granted to us by the Holy Spirit of God
- *He brings the wind out of His treasures*, Out of those secret places where He preserves them, and whence He brings them as He sees fit



Praise God for His Wonders in Nature 135:6-7

- As He has His treasures for the snow and hail, Job 38:22: *“Have you entered the treasury of snow, Or have you seen the treasury of hail,”* so for the winds
- They are all in the hands of God, and disposed of at His pleasure
- St. Jerome interprets them of the angels, and it might also be applied to the gifts of the Holy Spirit

Praise God for His Wonders Done in Egypt 135:8-9



- The psalmist mentions the great things God had formerly done for His people Israel, which were proofs of God's greatness as well as of His goodness
- He refers back to the many plagues God inflicted on the Egyptians and mentions the last of the plagues inflicted on them and the most astonishing one
- Why? because of this plague the Egyptian were willing to let the children of Israel go out of their land and the Israelites were delivered

Praise God for His Wonders Done in Egypt 135:8-9



- This was one of the great examples of separation of those who belong to God, and those who are of the world
- The night that death visited Egypt and killed all the firstborn of the Egyptians, the Israelites, who had the blood of the lamb on their door, were all spared
- *He destroyed the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and beast*, The Lord is to be praised; for this deadly defeat was an act of justice against Egypt, and of love to Israel
- The firstborn of beasts must die as well for the plague was meant to shock and overwhelm, and it accomplished its purpose

Praise God for His Wonders Done in Egypt 135:8-9



- *signs and wonders*, were things like the parting of Red Sea and the ten plagues on Egypt
- These plagues are called *signs and wonders* because they came not in the common course of providence, but there was something miraculous in each of them
- They were *sent upon Pharaoh and all his servants*; but the Israelites, whom God claimed His servants, were exempted from them, and no plague came near their dwelling
- Those who stand in the courts of the Lord are delivered, but the servants of Pharaoh were defeated, all of them, for they were all partakers in his evil deeds

Praise Him for His Wonders in the Wilderness 135:10-12



- Once Israel was free from Egypt, God also showed His greatness over all alleged gods by defeating *nations* and *mighty kings* that attacked His people
- *many nations*, The seven nations of the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, (Joshua 3 & 12)
- The kings of which were mighty and many, even 31 in number, (Joshua 12:24)
- Israel conquered because God fought for them, and put them in possession of that good land when the iniquity of its old inhabitants was full

Praise Him for His Wonders in the Wilderness 135:10-12



- The victories over *Sihon* and *Og* are recounted in Numbers 21:21,33; Deuteronomy 3:11
- These are particularly named, because they were the first that were slain, and were the most mighty and powerful; (Deuteronomy 3:11)
- The defeat and overthrow of these nations and kings showed the power of God and laid the foundation for praise
- 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

Praise Him for His Wonders in the Wilderness 135:10-12



- God gave these kingdoms the opportunity to repent of their evil
- When they did not, God brought the Israelites in to overthrow them, and gave their land to the Israelites
- *their land as a heritage*, a type of the heavenly Canaan, the glorious, incorruptible, undefiled, and eternal inheritance
- St. Augustine says, “When you see what has been done to the wicked, take heed lest it be done to you....But when the good man sees what the wicked has suffered, let him cleanse himself from all iniquity, lest he fall into a like punishment, a like chastisement.”

Praise Him for His Goodness to His People 135:13-14



- In light of God's incomparable greatness that the psalmist just declared in the previous verses, he praised His unchanging *name* and His never-ending *fame*
- God is the same now as He was then
- As He impressed the world with a sense of His majesty and power, and as He intervened on behalf of His people by mighty *signs and wonders*, He can do it now, and is now equally worthy
- He is unchangeable; He is always the same in His eternal attributes
- Verse 14 is taken literally from Deuteronomy 32:36

Praise Him for His Goodness to His People 135:13-14



- The good and great God *will* bring justice, righteousness, and *compassion* to His people
- His goodness and greatness are for them, not against them
- *the Lord will judge His people*, He will discipline them
- *He will have compassion on His servants*, When He has chastised them, and they humble themselves before Him, He will have *compassion* on them
- He plagued Pharaoh's servants; but as for His own He has mercy upon them, and returns to them in love after He has in the truest affection chastised them for their iniquities



The Vanity of Idols 135:15-18

- Verses 15-18 are taken with some alterations from Psalm 115:4-8
- To show more fully the appropriateness of praising God, and Him alone as God, the psalmist made a comparison between Him and idols, showing that the gods worshipped by the pagan lacked every ground of claim to divine worship and praise
- It is a striking contrast to the greatness of the all-powerful God who reigns in heaven
- *The idols of the nations are silver and gold*, the matter of which they are made is at best gold and silver, which are the dust and metals of the earth



The Vanity of Idols 135:15-18

- They are the creatures of God, and at His dispose, who says, *"The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine," says the Lord of hosts.*" (Haggai 2:8)
- The goodness and greatness of God make the idols, *the work of men's hands*, seem even emptier and more foolish
- St. Augustine says, "As God made all these things, who made whatever He would in heaven and earth, what can anything that man makes be, but an object of ridicule, not adoration?"
- *They have mouths, but they do not speak*, These idols are carved with mouths, but they make no use of them



The Vanity of Idols 135:15-18

- *they do not see*, If they cannot even see, how can they know people's needs and appreciate their worship and praise?
- The one who makes the statue has a mouth, eyes, and ears superior to the idol itself
- St. Augustine says, "All these things could the carpenter, the silversmith, the goldsmith make, both eyes, and ears, and nostrils, and mouth, and hands, and feet, but he could give neither sight to the eyes, nor hearing to the ears, nor speech to the mouth, nor smell to the nostrils, nor motion to the hands, or going to the feet."



The Vanity of Idols 135:15-18

- They are deprived of ordinary human senses, though represented with organs of sense
- *They have ears*, They cannot hear prayers offered to them
- *Nor is there any breath in their mouths*, They are lifeless statues
- 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.”
- *Those who make them are like them*, Idolatry never exalts man, but rather brings him low



The Vanity of Idols 135:15-18

- Though man is greater than the idol he makes, the creation and honoring of idols make a man or a woman *lower*
- Worshiping things that people produce, will become a person as impotent and empty as those things
- They will be as blind, foolish, and senseless as idols are
- St. Augustine says, “And believe brethren, that there is a likeness to these idols expressed not in their flesh, but in their inner man. For ‘they have ears, and hear not.’ God calls to them indeed, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’ They have eyes, and see not, for they have the eyes of the body, and not the eyes of faith.”

The People of God are Called to Praise the Lord 135:19-21



- In a series of three statements, this Psalm closes with a call to the descendants of *Israel*, *Aaron*, and *Levi* to honor God and give Him the recognition He deserves
- These verses also, is a copy of the verses in Psalm 115:9-13
- *O house of Israel*, may mean the nation of Israel who God delivered from the hand of Pharaoh and may mean the spiritual Israel, the family of Christ
- Those whom God has named *the house of Israel*, ought to show their loyalty by thankfully bowing before their sovereign Lord and praise His Holy Name

The People of God are Called to Praise the Lord 135:19-21



- *O house of Aaron*, Who were separated from their brethren to minister and to offer gifts and sacrifices for the people, and to bless them, Exodus 28:1
- They were under obligation to bless the Lord, who had called them to this service, and put this honor on them; as are the ministers of the Holy Gospel
- *O house of Levi*, the whole of the Levites were set apart for holy service
- They helped the priests, so they ought to help them in this also
- *You who fear the Lord*, It may be intended to bring in those who were not included under Israel, Aaron, and Levi

The People of God are Called to Praise the Lord 135:19-21



- This may be a call to Gentiles who honored God to also join with Israel, the priests, and the Levites in praising and honoring the Lord
- *Blessed be the Lord out of Zion*, This final call for praise corresponds to the prayer with which Psalm 134 concludes
- Jerusalem was a special place to God, but His praise, His goodness, His greatness extend *out of Zion*
- He is not a local deity; His power and greatness are not limited to Zion
- From Zion, God's blessing goes forth upon His people

The People of God are Called to Praise the Lord 135:19-21



- As God gives His people blessings *out of Zion* (Psalm 134:3), so they praise and bless Him most appropriately out of the same place
- *Who dwells in Jerusalem*: he gives a reason of why they should bless God, because He had blessed and honored that place with His glorious presence
- And also, to distinguish the true God from the gods which were worshipped in other places and countries
- *Praise the Lord*, It is fitting for this Psalm to end as it began – to declare God's praise, and to call upon others to do so also



Discussion

- What is the central topic of this Psalm?
- What does the psalmist have to say about God's creation and redemption?
- How does Psalm 135 contrast the great God with the idols of the nations?
- On which of the Lord's characteristics did the Psalmist focus his praise?



Discussion

- What will be the result of trusting in other gods?
- In verses 8-12, the psalmist recalls God's judgment on Egypt and Canaan. How does this historical context influence your perspective of God's justice?
- Who does this Psalm say should praise the Lord?