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## Psalm 115

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# Psalm 115

(RSV)

## Introduction to Psalm 115

Psalm 115 is a hymn of praise in which the Psalmist contrasts the power of Yahweh, the God of Israel, with the weakness of idols, the gods of other nations. Yahweh's power is manifest especially in his care for his people, and for this reason they are called upon to praise Him. We might perhaps think of this liturgical piece according to the following scheme: in verses 1-2 the choir praises God; in verses 3-8 a soloist proclaims God's power, to which the choir responds (verses 9-11) by exhorting the worshippers to trust in the LORD; in verses 12-13 the worshippers respond, and then a priest pronounces a blessing on the people in verses 14-15; this Psalm then comes to its conclusion with a hymn of praise (verses 16-18).

### V. 1-2

**<sup>1</sup> Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to thy name give glory,  
for the sake of thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness!**

This is liturgical language. Hence, although it sounds as if we are asking Yahweh to give Himself glory, honor, and praise, it is actually a plea for Yahweh to act in such a way as to enable His people to glorify Him. More specifically we are asking Yahweh to act in steadfast love and faithfulness to His promises. The practical effect of this petition is that, when something good happens to Israel, Israel is to be prepared to give thanks to God for that goodness and not imagine or act as though she herself may take credit for her success.

**<sup>2</sup> Why should the nations say,  
"Where is their God?"**

But Israel is also asking that, when God does his acts of steadfast love and faithfulness, such acts be public, so that the surrounding nations, perhaps against their will, must acknowledge that the God of Israel is indeed good and kind and faithful to His own. We do not want to be placed in the embarrassing position of having the God of whom we in our language of praise boast let us down so that others ask tauntingly, "What happened to their God?"

### Vv. 3-8

**<sup>3</sup> Our God is in the heavens;  
he does whatever he pleases.**

The taunt is deflected by taking seriously the question: "Where is their God?" And the answer to that question takes the form of a taunt of its own when it contrasts Yahweh, our God, with the idols of the nations. Our God is in the heavens; our God is not earth-bound, nor can our imaginative representations even begin to identify Him correctly. He is in the heavens, and He acts in complete sovereignty. He is identified, by way of contrast to the inert and lifeless idols, not by the way He looks, but by the way in which He acts "as He pleases." You might note here that it is only because we confess God acting in completely sovereign freedom that we can rejoice so much in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. He can always do just what He pleases, and (Wonder of wonders!) He pleases to act in goodness toward us. God does not have to love us; but, praise the Lord, He continually chooses to love us.

- 4 Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of men's 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.**

The clause in verse 7c interrupts the rhythm and the meter of the Psalm. It seems like little more than a reinforcement of the thought in verse 5a. One is tempted to imagine that some poetic Philistine added the clause at a later time, not even realizing that he was destroying the pattern of the verses in this part of the Psalm. But it does raise the interesting question, "What was our putative Philistine trying to say with his addition?" Was it perhaps in his judgment necessary to emphasize that idols could not match the distinctive attribute of Yahweh, namely, that He speaks His Word and breathes into our nostrils the Breath of Life? If so, he gets passing marks for good theology but flunks for his lack of poetic feel.

- 8 Those who make them are like them;  
so are all who trust in them.**

We are not created by God for independence; we are created to be dependent upon God and interdependent among one another. That condition of our existence does not change when we fall into sin. Indeed, the original sin is that we imagine we can do without our Creator and that we can go it alone, determining for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. But the Bible testifies again and again that, even though we may be GOD-less, we can never be godless. There is in our very being a God-shaped hole, and we can never be satisfied until it is filled. The big question therefore is: Who or What is filling that hole? This Psalm teaches that the choice is between God and an idol, or as the Germans can so nicely say, *zwischen Gott und Abgott*. "Abgott" might be thought of as a grotesque caricature of the original. You can decide not to entrust your life to the true God, but you cannot decide to do without any god whatsoever. You will, because our human constitution requires it, find or create a substitute god. Such a substitute god will necessarily be false, because it is not the God in whose image we are created, but a god whom we have created in our fallen image. But this Psalm goes on to say that we do not entrust our lives to an idol without grave consequences: to worship a grotesque caricature of God instead of God leads, under the influence of the idol, to becoming a grotesque caricature of the human being we were designed by the Creator to become. You always become more and more like the God/god you worship, for good or ill.

**Vv. 9-11**

- 9 O Israel, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and their shield.**

"Israel," both here and in verse 12b, designates the whole community of the People of God.

- 10 O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and their shield.**

"The house of Aaron," here and in verse 12c, designates the priests within the People of God.

**11 You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and their shield.**

"You who fear the LORD," both here and in verse 13, designates the Gentile proselytes, those who were not born Israelites, but who nevertheless joined Israel in the worship of the true God. Also in the New Testament "those who fear God" refers to Gentiles who, though not submitting to circumcision, nonetheless were allowed to join in the worship of the synagogue. Note that verse 13 adds "both great and small" as a term of inclusiveness. This would then designate both the important and the less important people among the Gentiles, the rich and the poor, the adults and the children, who feared God. This Psalm makes it clear, however, that such inclusiveness does not include those who despise Yahweh and worship other gods. The language and cadences are a series of liturgical versicles and responses, appealing to the entire assembly to entrust themselves to the LORD because He is their help and their shield (protection).

**Vv. 12-13**

- 12 The LORD has been mindful of 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 small and great.**

The same grouping is employed here as in verses 9-11. Here the promise is added: Yahweh, to whom we entrust ourselves, has been mindful of us. To be mindful is to remember in a special, solicitous way (recall, for example, Psalm 25:6).

**Vv. 14-15**

- 14 May the LORD give you increase,  
you and your children!**

Some translations take this to be a general benediction (e.g., NAB: May the LORD bless you more and more). There is good reason, however, to take this verse as a benediction specifically for children. The JPS translates, "May the LORD increase your numbers, yours and your children's also. It thus means "May the LORD give *you* children, and may He give children also to your *children* in a growing succession of generations. In the Bible children are a precious gift from God, however burdensome they at times may seem.

- 15 May you be blessed by the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth!**

To invoke the blessing of the LORD is not to invoke a powerless God, but rather to invoke the God who created heaven and earth in the first place, and all that is in them.

**Vv. 16-18**

- 16 The heavens belong to the LORD,  
but the earth he has given to the sons of men.**

Because God created both the heavens and earth, there is a heaven in the created order. Heaven is that "place" *within* His creation which the Creator makes and reserves for Himself. Otherwise in His sheer Otherness he would remain *outside* the created order. But from that

“place,” so far as the Psalmist knows, human beings are excluded. The realm within the created order for us human beings is the earth, God's precious gift to us.

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

This creates a dilemma for the Psalmist. The praise of God must go on, but we human beings perish and go to our graves, the place of silence, where there is no praise of God. (At this stage in the history of God's revelation the Psalmist could not yet reckon with any hope for the resurrection from the dead.)

**18 But we will bless the LORD  
from this time forth and for evermore.**

Yet under the blessing of Yahweh, who grants us children and offspring, we, the on-going community of Israel, in the succession of generations, will forever praise the Lord.

We Christians might learn from this Psalm not to be so otherworldly, that we are eager to escape this life in favor of the next. God the good Creator has assigned us to earth for now. But it is true, that for Christians there is the added dimension introduced by the resurrection of Jesus. For us, already now, the "we" has been augmented into the great community of those on both sides of the grave. As we say and sing in the words of The Lutheran Hymnal Communion Liturgy: "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Thy glorious name, evermore praising Thee and saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; Heaven and earth are full of thy glory; Hosanna in the highest!"

**Praise the LORD!**

So we in our turn in the succession of generations offer praise to the LORD, here *and* hereafter.

**The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 115:**

Lord God, creator and ruler of the universe, you have entrusted the care of the earth to its peoples. Grant that your children, surrounded by signs of your presence, may live continually in Christ, praising you through him and with him, now and forever. Amen.

**Guide for Reflection:**

1. When you reflect on verse 1, think of those times when you succeeded in a project in which you had invested yourself heavily, and for which you naturally desire and deserve some credit. You may be helped by recalling 1 Corinthians 3:6-7; we may legitimately take credit for planting and watering, but credit for the really significant, and perhaps even hidden dimension of the project – the growth – belongs to God. So also you may wish in this connection to recall Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:14-30;

the master commends the first two servants, but withholds it from the indolent third servant. But even where he gives praise and credit, he alone can add the final dimension, namely, entry into the joy of the Lord. Praise for the steadfast love and faithfulness of Yahweh belongs to Yahweh alone.

2. When you reflect on verse 2, think of your language of praise to God. Remember too that your language of praise is public; others have heard you say in one way or another, "God is great, God is good, God is faithful." Then recall those times when your public acclamations of God seemed not to be borne out in the actual course of your life. How do you handle the taunt, "Where now is your God?" And if the taunt does not come from another person, does it perhaps not steal into your thinking from your own soul? How often are you tempted to think that your trust in God is not paying off? Perhaps under the pressure of those cultural forces which make faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and its corresponding life-style, very difficult? Perhaps under the bombardment of adversity that afflicts you, or perhaps your family, or your friends?

3. It is common to lament a worship service because we did not think we got anything out of it. But verses 14-18 teach us that worship also consists of offering our praise and thanksgiving to God. In more waggish moments I sometimes wonder whether God gets anything out of our worship!

4. Psalms 113-118 were customarily sung at the Jews' annual observance of the Passover. According to Mark 14:26 and Matthew 26:30, Jesus concluded the Last Passover and the First Lord's Supper by singing a hymn, most likely a reference to this series of Alleluia Psalms. Imagine Jesus singing this Psalm on the eve of his crucifixion, for example, when he was being taunted, "Where is now your God?" as he was being affixed to the cross. Other examples will occur to you.

Perhaps as you reflect on this Psalm, you will be able to come up with a richer, or more personalized, prayer than the one that is offered by the LBW for this Psalm.

*Walter E. Keller*

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