

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 115
ABC 8/22/21

The 1st question & answer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism is this: *What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God & enjoy Him forever.* That should govern our thoughts, attitudes, & actions: *Does this glorify God?* To glorify God is to make Him look good, as He truly is. It's to display, as much as we can, His perfect attributes, His moral excellence, & His infinite greatness & worth. Think how much happier our relationships would be if we only stopped to think, *Will my words, attitudes, & actions toward this person glorify God?* If we're not demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit, we're not glorifying God. This is a principle to govern all of life: Live so as to glorify God (1 Cor 10:31). Ps 115 isn't comprehensive, but it tells us about our glorious God & that we're to live to bring Him glory. We don't know who wrote this psalm or when it was written, but possibly it was after Israel returned from exile in Babylon. They were trying to rebuild the temple & were facing opposition & heckling from the heathen who'd moved into the land during their absence. During their time in Babylon, Israel had observed the futility of idol worship. Now back in the land, they saw those around them worshiping idols, which dismayed the author of this psalm. He cries out to God to bring glory to His name & to answer the pagan's taunt, **Where, now, is your God?** (1-3). He ridicules the absurdity of idolatry (4-8) & calls God's people to trust in the Lord to bless them (9-15). They, in turn, will bless & praise God as long as they live (16-18). This psalm is part of the Hallel (Psalms 113-118) sung by the Jews during Passover. It's part of what was sung by Jesus & His disciples on the night He was betrayed & arrested, the night before His crucifixion (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). It's meaningful to consider this psalm in the heart & on the lips of Jesus that night.

1. Our Glorious God The 1st vs is the destination which the psalm is going. Why do I say that? Because of vs 2 which has an insult from the unbelieving nations against Israel. That's the context.

1-3

Times are hard for Israel & the opening statement of giving glory to God is where the psalmist wants the people of God to get to, but they're not there yet. Currently, they're being mocked by pagans & being asked, *where their God is?* & so the statement in vs 1 isn't the context in which

the song is sung. It's the goal to which it aspires.¹ *Where is the God of Israel?* He's in heaven on His glorious throne, reigning as the sovereign God of the universe. His throne is founded on **lovingkindness & truth**. All of God's people can shout, **Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns** (Rev 19:6). What does this mean for us?

A. We mustn't take God's glory for ourselves. The repetition, **Not to us ... not to us** shows the tendency we all have for taking some of God's glory for ourselves. The repetition is for emphasis & signals just how hard it is for us to diminish our own accomplishments & give the praise to the One to whom it belongs.² We are warned of this throughout Scripture. In Is 42:8, the Lord says, **I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images.** In Is 48:11, He repeats, **For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; For how can My name be profaned? & My glory I will not give to another.** But in spite of these clear declarations, we're all prone to take God's glory for ourselves. For example, the most common error with regard to salvation is we believe it's somehow on the basis of our good works. Go to anyone on the street & ask, *If you were to die & stand before God & He asked, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?* You'll most likely hear, *I'm a good person*, or something along those lines. Even among those that profess to know Jesus as Savior, there's a proclivity to take some of the credit for their salvation. Many say God's election of those He saves means He foresaw who'd believe in Him by their own free will, so He chose them. Contrary to Scripture (Jn 1:13; Rom 9:16), they make salvation depend on the will of man, not on the will of God. They make God's choice depend on something good He foresaw in us, making His grace no longer undeserved favor. In this way of thinking, election isn't God choosing us but our choosing God. This robs God of His glory as the sovereign who chose & predestined us to salvation before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-6). Even after God saves us, we're still predisposed to take credit for things that are due completely to His grace. When the Corinthians were boasting in their spiritual gifts Paul rhetorically asks them, **What do you have that you did not receive? & if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had**

¹ Ligon Duncan, *Non Nobis Domine*, preached 10/11/2011, www.fpcjackson.org

² Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction & Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p 393

not received it? (1 Cor 4:7). All we have spiritually is because God was gracious to us. The Bible clearly teaches we were dead in our sins, children of wrath, when He graciously raised us up to new life (Eph 2:1-5). All the glory should go to Him. Spurgeon said,

If you meet with a system of theology which magnifies man, flee from it as far as you can.... Here is a test for you to apply, & by it you may tell whether a thing is true or not. Does it glorify God? Then, accept it. If it does not, if it glorifies man—puts human will, human ability, human merit, into the place of the mercy & the grace of God—away with it, for it is not food fit for your souls to feed upon.³

Don't take God's glory for yourself. 2^{ndly},

B. Don't do anything that would blemish God's glory. When God threatened to destroy the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness, Moses prayerfully intervened, arguing if God did that, the pagan nations would conclude He wasn't powerful enough to bring them into the land (Num 14:15-16). His prayer prevailed & God pardoned the sinning people for the sake of His name. But after centuries of Israel's sins, God raised up the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem & take them captive. By their sin, Israel profaned God's name among the nations (Ezek 36:20). But God graciously promised He'd re-gather them & restore them to the land, not for their sake, but for the sake of His great name (Ezek 36:23). Our application is we should never do anything that would give unbelievers a basis for taunting, **where, now, is your God?** If we claim the name of Christ, we mustn't do anything that tarnishes His glory (2 Sam 12:14). Don't take or tarnish God's glory. 3rd...

C. God is glorious because of His lovingkindness & truth. The psalmist prays that they'll give glory to God **because of His lovingkindness & truth** or **faithfulness**. **Lovingkindness** is another word for God's grace. It's the great Hebrew word, *hesed*, meaning God's grace & loyal love for His people. God's **truth** or **faithfulness** means that what He says & does are always consistent with Himself. If He promises something, He will do it. Everything He does magnifies His **lovingkindness** & His **truth**. When John wrote, **grace & truth were realized through Jesus Christ** (Jn 1:17), he wrote with the same idea of the psalmist & saw it perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. How often do you think of these 2 attributes of God? The shortest psalm in the Bible calls us to do this very thing: Ps 117 says in its entirety, **Praise the Lord, all nations; laud Him, all peoples! For His lovingkindness is great toward us, & the**

³ Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 48:294, 295

truth of the Lord is everlasting. Praise the Lord! If it weren't for His **lovingkindness**, none of us would endure. If it weren't for His **truth**, we'd all be lost with absolutely no hope. Meditating on & understanding these 2 qualities of God will cause you to glorify Him more. Jesus singing these words on the night before His crucifixion must have moved Him in a way beyond our comprehension. This stanza concludes in vs 3 telling us...

D. God is glorious because of His sovereignty. This doesn't mean He's only in the heavens, removed from what's happening on earth. It's an assertion of the total sovereignty of God over all the forces in the universe & a celebration of the kingship of God. This is the God who **does whatever He pleases**. God does whatever is consistent with His own character & whatever furthers His own purposes.⁴ The nations ask, **Where, now, is their God?** The answer is, **our God is in the heavens**, meaning He is sovereign over everything in the universe. Ps 103:19 proclaims, **The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, & His sovereignty rules over all**. Nebuchadnezzar declared, **God does according to His will in the host of heaven & among the inhabitants of earth; & no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'** (Dan 4:35). Job confirmed, **I know that You can do all things, & that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted** (42:2). In Is 46, God declares,

For I am God, & there is no other; I am God, & there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, & from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, & I will accomplish all My good pleasure.' ...Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it (9-11).

Paul says in Eph 1:11 that God **works all things after the counsel of His will** (cf Ps 33:10-11; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). God isn't capricious or unpredictable but is able to accomplish whatever He purposes to do & He does it because it pleases Him to do so. While He isn't the author of evil & evil displeases Him, in another sense He isn't frustrated by it & uses it to accomplish His sovereign purposes. We can take great comfort that God is in charge of all of history, including our own. He uses even evil to accomplish His purposes.

2. Our Living God (4-8) The heathens are mocking Israel because Israel doesn't have an image to worship like the nations do. When they say, *Where is your God?* not only are they saying, *It doesn't*

⁴ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, International Theological Commentary, p 377

look like your God is protecting or blessing you. They're also saying, We can't even see your God. Where is He? We have a visible god. We can see & touch him. We can give him offerings. What about yours? Where is your God? The psalmist now launches into a highly sarcastic & mocking attack against idolatry. He mentions the expensive ones made of silver & gold, but even the best idols are just manmade objects (4). Precious metals don't give them life. How ridiculous to bow down & worship them. As Hosea 8:6 sums up, **A craftsman made it, so it is not God**. Idols are only objects made by human hands; therefore, they're less significant than those who made them. They are certainly not gods⁵ & the psalmist lists some of their deficiencies. **4-7**

They have mouths, but they cannot speak (5). They can't reveal truth nor tell us how to live. They can't explain right & wrong. They can't tell us about themselves. They can't give us comfort when we suffer. But the living God of the Bible speaks to us (Gen 1:3; Ps 33:9; Is 1:20).

They have eyes, but they cannot see (5). They can't see you or your circumstances. They can't see those that bow before them. What good is a blind god? Aren't you thankful God's eyes are always upon us? (Gen 6:8; Ps 6:8; 32:8; 1 Pt 3:12).

They have ears, but they cannot hear (6). They can't hear the prayers of those who cry out to them. The prophets of Baal cut themselves & shrieked for hours, but Baal couldn't hear them (1 Kgs 18:20-29; Ps 6:8-9; 27:7). Our God's ears are open to our cries & He hears us (Ps 34:17).

They have noses, but they cannot smell (6). In contrast to the living God, idols can't smell the incense that worshipers offer to them (Gen 8:21; Eph 5:2; Phil 4:18).

They have hands, but they cannot feel (7). The workers whose hands made the idols have more power than the idols they worship as gods. They can't reach out & take the gifts that are set before them. When I was in Vietnam, all kinds of food offerings had been set before the idols in their shrines. Yet I never saw one idol eat any of it. Dead idols, unlike the living God, can't extend their hands to save or to heal. Our God is at work for us & our good. His fingers made the universe (Ps 8:3) & His arm brought salvation (Ps 102:25; Is 41:10; 46:1-7; 53:1).

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expository Commentary*, p 936

They have feet, but they cannot walk (7). They're completely dependent on their worshipers to carry them & secure them so they don't fall over. They can't move on their own. What kind of god is that? The story is told of an ancient city, under siege, that put a chain on their statue of Hercules, so he wouldn't abandon them in their time of need. Hercules didn't go anywhere, but they were still conquered.⁶ Our God carries us & walks with us (Gen 3:8; Ex 15:6; Is 41:10, 13).

They cannot make a sound with their throat (7). They can't even let out an inarticulate grunt or groan. In short, they're completely lifeless & therefore, worthless. But even worse, **8**.

This is a great principle of worship: You become like what you worship. If you worship an idol, which is nothing, you'll become empty & vain & be brought to nothing. But if you worship the God who is in the heavens & does all that He pleases, you'll be growing into what it is to be the image of God because you're the only image that He allows for. He has chosen us to be His image bearers. We're to reflect the glory of His character. The greatest tragedy isn't what idols can't do but what they *can do* to the people who worship them. We become like the one we worship. As we worship the true & living God, He transforms our ears to hear His truth. He gives us eyes to see His Word & the path He wants us to walk. Our spiritual senses grow & we become more mature in Jesus (Heb 5:10–14). But those who worship false gods become blind to God's light & deaf to His voice.⁷ Augustine witnessed the futility of idol worship 1st-hand, & his comments about vss 5–7 are wise & witty.

Even the idols' artist surpasses them, since he had the faculty of molding them by the motion & functions of his limbs.... Even you surpass them, though you have not made these things, since you do what they cannot do. Even beasts excel them.... For they see & hear & smell & walk, & some apes, for instance, handle with hands.

He observes that mice, snakes, & birds have sometimes made their home in the larger idols or settled on them.

A man then moves himself that he may frighten away a living beast from his own god; & yet worships that god who cannot move himself, as if he were powerful, from whom he drove away one better than the object of his worship.

⁶ Attributed to John Trapp by David Guzik, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-115/>

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Exultant*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, p 90

At the end, Augustine adds the greatest indignity of all: *Even the dead surpass a deity who neither lives nor has lived.*⁵ We become like what we worship. When we worship the true God who reigns in righteousness, the God perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ, we become more like Him. When we worship false & vain idols, we become like them. Most Americans don't bow down to literal idols, although it's more common than we might think. We've all seen the Buddhist prayer flags flying around town. Some have statues of their favorite god or saint in their yards or homes. While we abhor the practice of bowing before idols, there's still a principle of idolatry we must constantly fight against because idolatry is the sin of putting anything or anyone in the place of God alone. Idolatry isn't just about carving a statue & worshiping a piece of wood or stone that can't see or hear or speak. It's about worshiping anything other than the one true God. Anything we value more than or as much as Him or anything we trust in for protection & blessing instead of Him is an idol. & so idolatry is just as relevant today as it was when this psalm was written. We become like what we worship. Empty idols make empty people. As Paul tells the Romans,

Professing to be wise, they became fools, & exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man... Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them (1:22–24).

Worship money & become greedy. Worship pride & become prideful. Worship pleasure & become hedonistic. Worship God & become godly.⁸ Knowing the futility of idolatry should renew our trust in the true & living God & make us to look to Him as our **help & shield**. In this we see something of Peter's heart when he said, **Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life** (Jn 6:68). He's glorious, living, & ...

3. Our Giving God (9-15) What should the people of God do? They should worship God, of course, but vss 9–11 say something equally significant. It tells us that the people of God should **trust** God. Why? Because He is our **help & shield**. The idols offer nothing; they're utterly powerless. By contrast, God lifts the downtrodden, helps us in our weakness, & shields us from our foes. The psalmist calls out, **9-11**

⁵ Saint Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol 8, ed. Philip Schaff, 552, modified to contemporary English

⁸ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73–150*, vol. 14, The Preacher's Commentary Series, p 318

One commentary says, *How different is the religion of revelation! The people of God ... do not come to Him with images. He comes to them with the promise of blessing & protection...*⁹ The 3 groups are all exhorted to trust in the Lord with the same assurance: **He is their help & their shield.** The 1st group, **Israel**, is the chosen people of God. **The house of Aaron** represents the worship leaders, the priests & Levites. Even those who labor in spiritual things must be exhorted to trust God to help & defend them. **You who fear the Lord** probably focuses on those in Israel who truly followed the Lord. Their religion wasn't just cultural, it was real. & yet they needed the encouragement to put their trust in the Lord when trials hit. We glorify Him when we trust Him & He helps & defends us (Ps 50:15). We are all called to **trust**, feel secure, be unconcerned, as we rest in the Lord. This call is given 3x for emphasis. At the same time, the 3-fold promise is also given: **He is their help & their shield.** What's the idea that's repeated? God is the one who protects you. He is your **help & shield**, not the idols, not things made by your own hands. God is the source of our protection. Further, we read in **12-13**.

As Spurgeon said, *It is God's nature to bless, it is His prerogative to bless, it is His glory to bless, it is His delight to bless; He has promised to bless, & therefore be sure of this, that He will bless & bless & bless without ceasing.* The psalmist drew upon God's past faithfulness & used it as confidence in God's future blessing. He hasn't forgotten us in the past & He won't forget to bless us in the future either. **The Lord has been mindful of us; He will bless us** (12). Then the psalmist goes through each of the 3 groups again, assuring them, **He will bless the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord** (12-13). Then he adds, **the small together with the great.** You don't have to be a spiritual superstar to receive God's blessings. His blessing is for you, whoever you may be, if you'll stop trusting in yourself & your own devices & trust God instead. God blesses small & great alike with salvation. Aren't you glad? Yet not all are being saved. No one who expects God to recognize their own good works or merit will enter heaven. Salvation is by the grace of God through the work of Christ alone. If you'll come that way, trusting Him rather than yourself, you will be saved, no matter how rich or poor, young or old,

⁹ Willem VanGemern, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin, 5:721

famous or unknown. God doesn't favor the powerful & successful over the oppressed & poor, or vice versa. All may put their trust in Him. You may be unknown or insignificant to those around you, but God takes note of you & He will bless you as you trust Him. Do you trust Him? We say we do, but do we really trust Him alone?

There was a famous acrobat named Jean Francois Gravalet, known as Blondin because of his blond hair. His most acclaimed feat was crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope 160 feet above the water. On one occasion he went halfway across, stopped to cook an omelette, ate it, then went on to the other side. On another occasion he carried his manager across the falls on his back. Afterward he turned to a man in the crowd & asked him, *Do you think I could do that with you?*

Of course, the man said. *I just saw you do it.*

Well, then, said Blondin, *hop on & I'll carry you across.*

Not on your life, said the bystander.¹⁰

So it is with us. We say we trust God, but when it comes to an actual test we often fail to believe Him. God blesses small & great alike in the hour of death. If you're trusting Him, how could it be that the One who's been faithful to bless you throughout your life should abandon you in death's hour? Just the opposite is the case: God will be even closer to you then. The very next psalm says, **Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones** (116:15).¹¹ Read with me vss **14-15**. By referring to him as the **Maker of heaven & earth**, the author reminds us that God has unlimited resources to bless us. His blessing extends beyond the present to future generations as well. Unlike the dead idols, our God made everything that exists. He can certainly supply our needs & be our **help & shield**.

Notice that the word **bless** occurs 5x in vss 12-15 which shows us the importance of seeking & receiving God's blessing. Do you desire His blessing in your life? Do you pray for His grace to be poured out on your family? How about on His church? Do you grieve when His kingdom suffers? Do you pray He'd be glorified by blessing & prospering His people spiritually? Yes, God alone is to be glorified. If we fall into idolatry, we don't glorify Him. We glorify Him by trusting Him as our helper, defender, & source of all blessing. Finally, what should our response to God be? Since God

¹⁰ Quoted in Boice, p 937-938

¹¹ Ibid, p 939

is all-powerful, unlike the idols who can do nothing, we must trust Him. But further, what should our response be to His goodness & faithfulness to bless us?

4. Our Praiseworthy God 16

To **ble**ss the Lord means to ascribe all glory & praise to Him, to delight His heart with our joyful & willing thanksgiving & obedience. The end of vs 15 affirms God as the **Maker of heaven & earth**, showing His sovereignty over all of creation. Vs 16, then, doesn't mean God has retreated to heaven, with no further involvement on earth. He hasn't abandoned the earth & decided to keep heaven for Himself but He's given the earth to man's dominion. The God who's the **Maker of heaven & earth** (15), & therefore possesses both, has made us stewards of this world so we're responsible to Him for what we do with it. In a way, these vss form a balanced contrast with the powerlessness of idolatry (3-8) & emphasize the unlimited power & freedom of our God.¹² The last ½ of vs 16 affirms what Gen 1:26 & 28 state, that God has entrusted us with dominion over the earth. **17**

This isn't focused on the activity of the dead in heaven, but rather on earth (16b). Along with vs 18, the idea is we need to use our present opportunities to praise the Lord & bring Him glory. Why? Because when we're dead our voices are silenced upon the earth. No praises are given to God on earth by dead people. The dead are silent. Therefore, if we're going to praise God, as we should & must do, it's going to have to be now while we're living. One way in which we exercise our dominion on earth is to praise God constantly. We must praise Him as the wonderful, reliable, good, & saving God He is, & let others know about it, for as long as we live. We must praise the Lord now before our mouths are closed by the grave. **18**

This leads us back to vs 1, **Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory. We will bless the Lord from this time forth & forevermore.** Why? Because **not unto us ... not unto us, but to Your name** be the **glory**. Though we're now under burdens that often seem unbearable, He will put the stanza of vs 1 on our lips. So in our trials & troubles, let us sing His praises. This privilege & responsibility of worship is contrasted with the **dead** who don't praise the Lord. They simply **go down into silence** (Ps 6:5). Since revelation is progressive, the full understanding of eternity hadn't

¹² VanGemeren, p 722

yet been given. Thus the psalmist views the grave as silence. This is only partially true. What we know in Christ is that the dead who are under God's judgment do not praise Him. However, at the point of death the redeemed are ushered into the presence of the Lord, where they join the angels in worship before God's throne forever & ever (Rev 5:8–14). Since it's God's promise to bless us (12–13), we must respond by blessing Him (18). Our praise will be perpetual & continual. The God who has acted will act again. When the scoffers scoff, we're to remember that we worship the invisible, eternal God who is sovereign over all (3). At the same time, He's filled with mercy & truth (1). He has established His covenant & He will keep it. The God who blessed us in creation will bless us in redemption, & our increase will have no end (14). In light of this, let the worship begin & never end (18).¹³ When Jesus sang this with His disciples (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26), He sang knowing He wouldn't sing among His disciples on earth again until His return. Consider, ponder, meditate on the depth of feeling in Jesus that would bring.

John the Baptist was an impressive man. He was miraculously conceived & filled with the Spirit while still in his mother's womb. Jesus said, **Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone great than John the Baptist** (Mt 11:11). Yet when some of John's disciples were jealous for him because Jesus was attracting larger crowds, John made the classic statement, **He must increase, but I must decrease** (Jn 3:30). May that be true of all of us as we grow in Christ. What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God & enjoy Him forever. **Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth** (1). This psalm reminds us to put our confidence in God in the midst of our troubles. To trust in anything else is to trust in an idol, whether it's a false god, money, power, politics, wisdom, or relationships. As Spurgeon put it, *Though the dead cannot, the wicked will not & the careless do not praise God, yet we will shout 'Hallelujah' for ever & ever.*¹⁴ Amen?

¹³ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, pp 320–321

¹⁴ *The Treasury of David*, 5:270