

Psalm 115

Trust in the LORD – He is Our Help and Shield

1. Outline and message

There is no consensus on the structure of the Psalm. The following is based partly on content and partly on the presence of “hook” words that link sections together, i.e. B-C (“he works”, “the work of men’s hands”), C-D (“trust”), D-C’ (“Israel”, “house of Aaron”, “fearers of Yahweh”), C’-B’ (“heavens”, “earth”). See later for a wooden translation.

A (v. 1) Commitment: not to us, but to the LORD the glory

B (vv. 2-3) Confession answers the nations’ taunt: our God is in heaven

C (vv. 4-8) Contempt for the idols: they are dead and they bring only death

D (vv. 9-11) Central message: trust in the LORD, our help and shield!

C’ (vv. 12-15) Confidence in the LORD: he is the Creator and bestows blessing

B’ (vv. 16-17) Confession answers the nations’ taunt: they are silenced

A’ (v. 18) Commitment to blessing and praising the LORD

The advantage of showing the structure like this is that:

- (a) it allows us to identify the central message, which is the call to trust in the LORD since he alone is able to support and defend his people;
- (b) it also allows us to see how the meaning of the call to trust in the LORD is fleshed out in terms of confidence in God the Creator (C-C’), confession of the God of heaven (B-B’), and commitment to the God of glory (A-A’).

Compare the Psalm with the conversion of the Thessalonian believers: “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

“The reality of a relationship with God imparts strong resistance to rival human ideologies and creates a hope so certain to believing hearts that its prospect can already produce praise, in the spirit of Rom 5:2; 8:38-39; 1 Pet 1:3-9” (L.C. Allen, p. 150).

2. Commitment: not to us, but to the LORD the glory (v. 1)

The opening words have the atmosphere of a great deliverance. However, verse 2 suggests that Israel is in a sorry condition – in which case verse 1 is a prayer for help (cf. “For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great,” Ps. 25:11; “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name’s sake,” Ps. 79:9; “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to

another,” Isa. 48:9-11; “Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O LORD, for your name’s sake,” Jer. 14:7). Then v. 2 “has a fine defiance about it, a prelude to the withering retort to the enemy in 3-8” (Kidner).

Name, glory, steadfast love and faithfulness belong together in Exodus 34:5-6.

Notice that God is the subject of the verb “give”, i.e. “LORD, give yourself the glory in all you do.” John Piper: “God’s ultimate commitment is to Himself and not to us... God loves his glory above all... He is committed with all His infinite and eternal might to display that glory and to preserve the honour of His name... God loves his glory...with infinite energy and passion and commitment.”

3. Confession answers taunts: our God is in heaven (vv. 2-3)

The opening question “Why?” suggests protest. “One can imagine the restoration community in its unflourishing state asking the question, and imagine that the question attributed to the nations is actually the community’s own” (Goldingay, p. 329). But given the empty futility of idolatry (vv. 4-8), the question asked by the nations need not be taken too seriously, i.e. “Why should they say...? After all, it will get them nowhere” (cf. Ps. 2:1).

The important affirmation is not that God is in the temple, or in the hearts of believers, but that he is in the heavens. “This does not make God remote and uninvolved; it is ‘our’ God who is there. It does mean that God is not limited to (for instance) the realm of personal piety. [The LORD] sits in a position of authority over the earth” (Goldingay, p. 329).

Verses 3 and 4 contrast “but our God” with “their idols”.

“A God too great to tie down to any image or even to earth itself, who is not the prisoner of circumstances but their master, is a God to glory in. And He is *our God*, not in the petty sense in which the heathen have *their idols*... but in the personal bond of ‘steadfast love and... faithfulness’” (Kidner, p. 405).

4. Contempt for the idols: they only bring death (v. 4-8)

Verses 5-6 concern the inability of the idols to command human life (they cannot speak a word of instruction; they cannot observe human behaviour; they cannot hear human prayer; they cannot receive human devotion). Verse 7 concerns the inability of the idols to respond to human need (no power to act; no ability to come to help; no ability to feel sympathy). “It is one of the places where Scripture, like the child in the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes, takes a cool stare at what the world does not care to admit” (Kidner, p. 405).

“Each of the seven times that the negation *lo’* lashes out at them, one of the faculties is destroyed” (Fokkelman, cited by Goldingay, p. 331).

“Yahwism was unique in the ancient Near East as an aniconic religion...Such ridiculing tirades as this one...were intended not as serious debate with pagan religion but as Israel’s propaganda for Israelite ears, as a corollary of their own exclusive, monotheistic, and aniconic faith” (Allen, p. 148).

Given vv. 3-7, the nations have no right to ask the question in v. 2.

5. Central message: trust in the LORD! (vv. 9-11)

Polemic (vv. 4-8) is all very well – but what are you to do with it? It could become another form of idolatry unless Someone better replaces all idols. Polemic is only safe in the context of a living relationship with the LORD. And what does such a relationship look like? Trust (confidence, confession and commitment). Hence the Psalm must move on to vv. 9-11.

“In the modern world, our temptation would be to rely on ourselves, to reckon that we need to be responsible for our destiny. In a traditional culture, the temptation is to rely on other deities. This fact lies behind the movement in the psalm. Reliance on images is stupid (v. 8); reliance on [the LORD] makes sense because [the LORD] is both help and shield, proactive in doing what needs to be done, protective in defending people from attack and pressure” (Goldingay, p. 332).

6. Confidence is well placed: God bestows blessing (vv. 12-15)

The thought moves on from God’s power to save (“he is their help and shield”) to his power to enrich (“he will bless”). Every group (vv. 12-13a), every type of person (v. 13b) and every generation (v. 14) needs God’s blessing to be fruitful. The blessing of numerical increase is typical of the OT expectation (cf. Gen. 1:28; 15:5).

Notice how “the Maker of heaven and earth” in this section contrasts with the idols, the “making of the hands of men” of the matching section (vv. 4-8).

Verses 12-13 are in contrast to vv. 5-7, i.e. Yahweh is able to help: he “remembers” and he “blesses” are both covenantal term. Verses 14-15 are in contrast to v. 8, i.e. he gives blessing (increase of life). Notice why this contrast is so: in v. 8 the idols are made and their makers partaker of their death; but in v. 15 the LORD is Maker of heavens and earth and those who trust him come to partake of his blessing (abundance of life).

7. Confession answers taunts: the nations are silenced (vv. 16-17)

There is generosity in the phrase “the earth he gave to the sons of man.” This rings true to the idea of numerical increase (v. 14) and dominion (Gen. 1:28).

“Nowhere [in the Old Testament] is there the possibility of abiding, true life that does not praise God” (Westermann, cited by Allen, p. 149).

8. Commitment to blessing and praising the LORD (v. 18)

The “we” is emphatic – we as opposed to the nations. The affirmation of v. 1 is underlined, i.e. our commitment is not to ourselves but to the LORD.

The worshippers of lifeless images die. But the worshippers of the true and living God live – and they live to worship: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.”

- 1 Not to us, O Yahweh, not to us – for to your Name give glory,
because of your steadfast love, because of your faithfulness
- 2 Why should the nations say,
“Where then is their God?”
- 3 But our God is in the heavens;
all that he pleases he has worked.
- 4 Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of the hands of man;
- 5 they have a mouth but they do not speak;
they have eyes but they do not see;
- 6 they have ears but they do not hear;
they have a nose but they do not smell;
- 7 their hands do not feel; their feet do not walk;
they do not utter in their throat.
- 8 Like them will be their makers –
all who trust in them.
- 9 Israel, trust in Yahweh –
their strength and their shield is he.
- 10 House of Aaron, trust in Yahweh –
their strength and their shield is he.
- 11 Fearers of Yahweh, trust in Yahweh –
their strength and their shield is he.
- 12 Yahweh remembered us – he will bless –
he will bless the house of Israel,
he will bless the house of Aaron,
- 13 he will bless those who fear Yahweh,
the small with the great.
- 14 May Yahweh add to you –
to you and to your sons.
- 15 Blessed are you of Yahweh,
Maker of heavens and earth.
- 16 The heavens are the heavens that belong to Yahweh,
but the earth he gave to the sons of man.
- 17 Not the dead will praise Yah,
nor all those who go down to silence.
- 18 But we, we will bless Yah,
from now and for ever.

Hallelujah!