

Looking in the right direction

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[0 : 00] Our text then is Psalm number 115, found on page 510 in the Church Bible. Psalm 115. Let's pray together as we come to God's Word.

Almighty God, we come to you this evening in the name of your Son, Lord Jesus. We come to you this evening with your Word to open our inner hands. We ask you once more to speak to us through it.

May your Holy Spirit take these ancient words and implant them deep in our hearts. We remember, O Lord, that all men are as grass, and their glory is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. Father, help me this evening to preach this word with clarity, with conviction and with your power.

And may you be glorified tonight as we worship you in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Psalm 115, beginning at verse 1.

[1 : 07] Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory for the sake of your steadfast love and faithfulness.

Why should the nations say, where is their God? Our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but do not speak. Eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear. Noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel.

Feet, but do not walk. And they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them.

O Israel, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord.

[2 : 12] He is their help and their shield. The Lord has remembered us. He will bless us. He will bless the house of Israel. He will bless the house of Aaron.

he will bless those who fear the Lord both the small and the great. May the Lord give you increase you and your children may you be blessed by the Lord who made heaven and earth.

The heavens are the Lord's heavens but the earth he has given to the children of men. The dead do not praise the Lord nor do any who go down into silence.

But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Jeffrey Bull was a missionary in Tibet in the 1950s and in one of his books he describes going to meet an old Buddhist hermit who'd spent his life as a monk in solitary meditation.

[3 : 26] And he was sick and he'd requested a visit from the missionaries hoping that they might be able to treat his illness. Jeffrey Bull and his friend George arrived expecting to see a charismatic religious guru but instead they found a weeping old man.

And Bull writes this. He was most anxious to obtain a medicine that would effect a cure. And why do you want it? George asked. Is it for your head or your stomach?

And he mentioned various other parts of the body. No, he said. It's for my mind. Bull goes on to write. As we turned toward the door we perceived the basic reason for his tears.

Set on the wall opposite the lama was a tiny idol. Before this pathetic fragment of material he had placed his pitiful offerings. Day after day and year after year his gaze had been focused and his faith centered on that wretched thing.

He had looked too long in the wrong direction. What are you focused on tonight? What is your trust in? Where are you looking for security and significance?

[4 : 47] This psalm is all about looking in the right direction. And it contrasts true faith and idolatry. It's the third psalm of the Egyptian Hallel.

The six psalms that were traditionally sung at the Hebrew Passover. And I've got four points this evening. First, verses 1 to 3. Look to the heavens and you'll find a God of grace.

Secondly, verses 4 to 9. Look to idols and you'll become like them. Thirdly, verses 9 to 15. Look to God and you'll be blessed.

And finally, verses 16 to 18. Look around this earth and praise the Lord. Firstly then, verses 1 to 3.

Look to the heavens and you'll find a God of grace. One of the great things about studying the psalms is that you're studying songs that have been sung for centuries by one generation after another.

[5 : 52] And this psalm begins with words that have inspired worship and praise for more than 3,000 years. At the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, the English army under King Henry V defeated a much larger French force.

And historians record that when the battle was over, Henry ordered his soldiers to kneel in the mud of the battlefield and sing the version of this psalm that famously begins with the Latin words Non Nubus Domini.

400 years later, 1807, our parliament at Westminster finally passed a law abolishing slavery. And William Wilberforce, who'd led the fight against slavery, records that he praised God with these very words, Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory.

Later in the 19th century, Roger Kipling wrote the famous poem that begins, Non Nubus Domini. Not unto us, O Lord, the praise and glory be of any deed or word for in thy judgment lies to crown or bring to naught all knowledge and device that man has reached or wrought.

What is it in these words that generation after generation have found so inspiring? Surely it's grace. Surely it's the God of heaven giving men and women what they don't deserve and what they could never, ever earn.

[7 : 26] Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

when did you last hear the words honor and cherish? It was probably at a wedding unless you got a very romantic spouse.

But we associate these words with traditional marriage vows. The Hebrew words translated steadfast love and faithfulness also had a special association for the Israelites who originally sung this psalm.

And they appear again and again in the Old Testament describing God's covenant love for Israel. Israel was God's covenant people.

The people were feeling he had a special relationship and God had promised that he would be their people and they would be God had promised that he would be their God and they would be his people.

- [8 : 31] And see how that word Lord is in capitals. That means it's a translation of the Hebrew word Yahweh sometimes translated Jehovah and it is God's covenant name.
- It's the special name by which his special people come to know him. But look at what the psalm is saying. Not to us, O Lord. Not to us.
- But to your name give glory for the sake of your love and faithfulness. It wasn't Israel's steadfast love. It wasn't Israel's steadfast faithfulness that had sustained that relationship.
- It was Yahweh's steadfast love and faithfulness. For again and again they'd been anything but loving and faithful in their relationship with God. They're like an unfaithful wife going back to her husband and acknowledging that the marriage only survives because of his enduring love and faithfulness.
- No credit to her only to his grace. Perhaps this verse strikes such a chord in the human heart because we know that we've all been unfaithful spouses in our relationship with God.
- [9 : 49] Not one of us has kept that first and greatest commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength. And yet when we return to God in repentance and acknowledge that our relationship with him only survives because of his steadfast love and faithfulness.
- It's no credit to us. It's all to his amazing grace. So the psalm begins with a people in a covenant relationship with God that depends on his grace.
- But what kind of God is Yahweh? Where will you find him? Is he like the other gods of the Near East? Will you find him in a shrine by the hillside? Will you find him under a tree by the roadside?
- Will you find him on a shelf by the fireside? No, he won't. That is what perplexed the pagan nations that surrounded Israel. Verse 2 Why should the nations say where is their God?
- Our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases. He is in the heavens. He stands transcendent above the earth. Yahweh is the God of heaven, the almighty, enthroned, ruling over the world.
- [11 : 13] And he does all that he pleases. Yahweh pleases himself. When we say about someone, oh, he just does whatever he pleases, we usually mean that they're selfish, self-centered, self-promoting.
- But this God, this God in the heavens, he does what he pleases. This is a God who reaches down from the heavens and he commits himself to his people in covenant love.
- This is a God who shows steadfast love and faithfulness even when his people go astray. This is Yahweh, the God of the covenant. Look to the heavens and you'll find a God of grace.
- moving on then to our second point. Verses 4 to 9. Look to idols and you'll become like them.
- When I was younger, my favorite fairy tale was The Emperor's New Clothes. And it's the story of a vain but gullible emperor who lived once upon a time in a land far, far away.
- [12 : 23] And he was duped by two con men who said they were tailors who made clothes out of a special cloth that you could only see if you're wise enough.
- And when the clothes came, the emperor realized that he couldn't see his clothes. But of course he thought it was because he wasn't wise enough and he couldn't bear to admit to that.
- And when they appeared in public wearing nothing at all, nobody would admit that they couldn't see his clothes because they thought it was because they weren't wise enough and they wouldn't admit to that either.

And the pretense lasted until one little boy shouted out the obvious. The emperor isn't wearing any clothes. And the story ends with the crowd laughing the naked emperor all the way back to the palace.

Well the psalmist is just like the little boy shouting to the crowd. The emperor isn't wearing any clothes. Verse 5 They have mouths but do not speak.

[13 : 30] Eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear. Noses but they do not smell. They have hands but do not feel. Feet but do not walk.

And they do not make a sound in their throat. You're bound down to a lump of wood or metal which can't speak, see, hear, feel, walk or make any kind of sound at all.

You have been deceived. Think about it. What induces intelligent and civilised people to worship idols?

It can only be that they've been deceived. Paul says as much in Romans 1. He writes this. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie. If you don't worship the one true God you've fallen for a lie. You've been deceived.

[14 : 42] And again and again the Bible mocks idolatry as the ultimate deception. Isaiah mocks the man who takes a log and saws it in half.

And then Isaiah writes half of the wood he burns in the fire. Over it he prepares his meat. He roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says ah I'm warm I feel the fire.

From the rest he makes a god his idol. He boils down to it and worships. He prays to it and says save me you are my god.

And Isaiah adds elsewhere you've got to take great care when you're making an idol. If you make it top heavy it'll fall over. It's absolutely absurd to worship something we've made and to ascribe to it powers that we don't have.

But here's where we feel smug and sophisticated. We're educated. We are cultured people of the 21st century. You'll never see us bowing down to something as absurd as an idol.

[15 : 55] people. Well have you ever heard some of your friends say perhaps you've even said it yourself I like to think of God as loving everybody tolerant of all religions and just accepting us as we are.

Are you so different from the pagan Isaiah mocked carving his god out of the end of the piece of wood that he hadn't burnt? The pagan says I'd like a god with a big nose and so he carves a big nose.

You say I'd like to think of God as loving everybody and so you imagine a god who loves everyone. The pagan says I'd like a god with big ears and so he carves big ears but you say I'd like to think of God as tolerant of all religions and so you imagine a god who's tolerant of all religions.

The pagan says I'd like a god with big eyes and so he carves a god with big eyes. You say I'd like to think of God as accepting us as we are and so you imagine a god who accepts us as we are.

You are no less an idol worshipper than a pagan. The Bible says there's one god one true god and we can only worship him through Jesus Christ.

[17 : 24] Everything else is false. If you carve a god out of wood you've been deceived. If you carve a god out of your imagination you've been deceived.

You've exchanged the truth of God for a lie. But perhaps then we Christians are feeling smug. After all we believe in one true God and we worship him through Jesus Christ.

This idolatry business is just for pagans or for people who don't go to church. But remember how the apostle John finishes his first letter?

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. And our first reading tonight was from Paul's letter to the Colossians, to the Christian church at Colossae.

And chapter 3 verse 5 says, Put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and covetousness which is idolatry.

[18 : 38] He doesn't mention Baal or Artemis or any of the pagan gods. None of these things involve temple worship. None of these things involve bowing down before an image.

So then how can they be idolatry? God tells us in the first and second commandments, You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything in the heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

For I, your God, am a jealous God. In other words, God demands exclusive rights to our love, trust, and obedience.

things. And when Jesus was asked to name the most important, the greatest of all the commandments, he summarized the first part of the law with these words, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

[19 : 52] And when we don't do that, we love something else. something else has taken God's place. Something else has become a God. We are worshipping an idol.

Take the last in Paul's list, covetousness. When you're covetous, you want something you don't really need. You already have enough, but you want more.

It could be food, it could be an iPhone, it could be a car or a holiday or a house, but you want it so much that you no longer find your satisfaction or your fulfillment in God.

And you want that creative thing more than you want him. You no longer have no other gods but him. That creative thing has become an idol.

And so you're not only covetous, but you're idolatrous. as well as obese or indebted. Examine the sins that haunt you.

[20 : 59] Think of the failures that you mourn. Remember the habits you struggle every day to break. Underneath them all is idolatry, the failure to love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

But more dangerous still people. Tim Keller warns us that when we make good things into ultimate things, again we're idolaters.

Your spouse or your career or your children are all good things, but if you look to these things to give you what only a relationship with Yahweh can provide, then they have become idols.

has your career become an idol? It can be as cruel and demanding as any of the pagan gods. It will demand that you offer it your time, and then it will go on to demand your marriage, it might demand your children, and finally it's not satisfied until it takes your health.

David Pullison writes, has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ, take entitled to your heart's trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear, and delight.

[22 : 22] That something or someone is an idol. It might be your spouse, it might be your boyfriend or your girlfriend, it might be your sport or your music, it might be your body or your health, it might even be your theology or your favourite preacher or the way you like to worship in church.

But it becomes an idol, and it subtly supplants Jesus Christ as the one in whom you find all your delight and satisfaction, and it takes his place in your affection.

Well, the psalmist finishes his polemic with these words in verse 8, those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.

And the tragedy isn't what idols can't do, but what idols can do. Spend your life in the worship of idols, and you'll become progressively blind and deaf to the truth.

You'll have eyes, but you won't see. You'll have ears, but you won't hear. And the even greater tragedy, the saddest thing of all, what you'll be missing.

[23 : 37] Jonah wrote in his prophecy, those who cling to worthless idols, forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

Look to idols, and you'll become like them. And so to our third point, verses 9 to 15, look to God for salvation, and he'll bless you.

It's never enough to simply turn away from the idols that attract us. You've got to look in the right direction. Listen to the last few verses from the prophecy of Hosea.

The prophet writes this, Ephraim shall say, what have I to do anymore with idols? I have hurt him and observed him. Ephraim is another word for Israel, and Hosea is a book full of the story of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh.

But at the end of the book, Hosea returns to God in repentance, and Israel says, what have I to do anymore with idols? I have hurt him and observed him.

[24 : 50] I have looked in the right direction. Truth has displaced the lies. My gaze is focused on Yahweh. And the psalmist here tells us to do exactly the same thing, to look in the right direction.

And for verses 9 to 11, he calls in three sections of Hebrew society to turn from idols to the living gods. He calls on Israel, he calls on the house of Aaron, and he calls on those who fear the Lord to trust in Yahweh.

Those who feared the Lord were those who had come from other nations to worship Yahweh. The house of Aaron were the priests, and Israel was everyone else.

And three times he gives the reason for their trust in Yahweh. He is their help and their shield. Yahweh is a help and a shield.

In other words, Yahweh is a source of salvation. As Jonah said, this is the grace that you forfeit when you cling to worthless idols.

[26 : 02] Grace isn't just a New Testament word. Grace isn't just a New Testament theme. Grace didn't just come with Jesus Christ. It's woven through the Bible right from Genesis to Revelation.

And when the psalmist urges Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord to trust in the Lord, he's inviting them to enter a relationship of grace.

Yahweh gives men and women what they don't deserve and what they could never ever hope to earn. Back in the psalmist time, the house of Aaron, the priests, made sacrifice after sacrifice in the temple, but it wasn't to make them acceptable to God.

It wasn't to make Israel acceptable to God. God. It wasn't to make those who feared the Lord acceptable to God. It was to point to the coming one who would finally make full and complete atonement for their sin.

Their gaze was focused in the future. Our gaze today is focused in the past, but it's focused on the same person. Jesus, the image of the invisible God.

[27 : 27] Paul writes in Colossians chapter 1 about Jesus, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by him all things were created.

And he goes on to say, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

You can't worship the true God with an image you make yourself. You can't worship the true God just in any way you imagine. The true God can only be worshipped by focusing on the one who is the image of the invisible God.

Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life. Back in verse 2, the nation's question was, where?

Where is their God? And Israel's response, our God is in the heavens, he does all that he pleases. And yes, that was true then, and it's true today, but he was once here on this earth.

[28 : 47] John wrote about him in his gospel. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We've seen his glory. The glory is of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Where is their God? He's lying in a manger at Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Where is their God? He's growing up in a carpenter's home in Nazareth.

Where is their God? He's praying in an olive grove in Gethsemane. Where is their God? He's carrying a cross through the streets of Jerusalem.

Where is their God? He's dying on a cross between two thieves. Where is their God? He's rising in triumph from an open tomb. He came and he lived and he died and he rose from the dead to save his people from their sins.

Not one of us has ever loved the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength. But he did. And he came to live the life we should have lived.

[29 : 56] And he came to die the death that we should have died. And so when we trust him for our salvation, when we turn away from every idol that captures us, God graciously forgives us our sin.

He washes away our guilt. And he brings us into a relationship with him. A relationship that doesn't depend on us, that doesn't depend on our morality, that doesn't depend on our goodness, that doesn't depend on our moral record, that depends only on him, only on his steadfast love and faithfulness.

Look to him for salvation. Don't look to idols to save you, for they have mouths but they don't speak. Jesus came to speak.

He taught on their streets, he taught on their hillsides and he taught in their synagogues. Matthew wrote, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.

And that wasn't all he said. Read through the gospels and again and again you hear the marvellous things that he says. Friend, your sins are forgiven.

[31 : 16] Or to another woman, neither do I condemn you, go in peace and sin no more. And he still speaks today. Here in the Bible, see his words to you, page after page after page of the living God speaking to you.

They have eyes but they don't see. Jesus came to see. He was moved with compassion when he saw the lepers. He wept over the sight of an unrepentant city.

He wept at the sight of his grieving friends. And he sees today. He sees you, every day of your life. He knows what you go through.

He understands the burdens you carry. He sees and he cares. They have ears but they cannot hear. Jesus came to hear.

From the anguished request of Jairus to come and heal his dying daughter to the weeping of a repentant woman as she bathed his feet with her tears to the plea of a dying thief.

[32 : 25] Remember me when you come into your kingdom to the shout of Bartimaeus son of David have mercy on me. He came and he heard them all. And he hears you today.

He has promised to hear the cry of every single last person who comes to him in repentance and looks to him alone as their source of salvation.

In verses 12 to 13 the psalmist gives the result of trust in Yahweh. He will bless. Again those three sections of society.

The house of Israel, the house of Aaron and those who fear the Lord. In fact, so great is this blessing that it spills over and it goes on right to verse 15.

May you be blessed by the Lord who made heaven and earth. Blessing is another covenant word. Blessing is what you gain from being in a relationship with Yahweh.

[33 : 27] Those who trust in Yahweh will find in him forgiveness of their sins, fulfillment in life and hope beyond the grave. But it's always because of God's grace.

It's always because of Calvary. It's always because of Jesus Christ. Yahweh will give you what no idol can ever give you. Yahweh will give you what no created thing in this world can ever give you.

Yahweh will give you what you could never earn or ever deserve. Look to God and you'll be blessed. Finally then, our fourth point, verses 16 to 18.

Look around this earth and praise the Lord. When you first read verse 17 it sounds very odd indeed. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence.

It doesn't seem to fit with the rest of scripture. Doesn't the Bible end with the loudest, richest, most glorious praise of all? By the dead in heaven.

[34 : 41] And yet the psalmist says, the dead do not praise the Lord. But look at the context. Who are the dead in this psalm? Who are those who go down into silence?

The idols are dead. The idols are silent. They have mouths but do not speak. And they do not make a sound in their throat. And those who worship them become like them, dead and silent.

The dead and silent in this psalm are those who worship anyone or anything other than the one true God. And if you worship anything tonight other than the one true God through Jesus Christ, the Bible says that you are dead and you are silent.

But those who worship Yahweh, they are so different in verse 18. But we, we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the Lord. We are alive and we are not silent. God has given us this earth to fill with his praises. He tells us in verse 16, the heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of men.

[36 : 03] And our praise isn't just for this earth. Look again at what the psalmist says in verse 18, but we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

The psalmist doesn't suggest that there is no future worship and praise. On the contrary, if you worship and serve Yahweh, you will live on through the grave to eternal life, to worship and serve him forever.

Your praise will simply grow louder and louder until one day you're part of that worship of which John writes in Revelation 5.

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that's in them singing to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power forever and ever and ever.

But for now, look around this earth and praise the Lord. In conclusion then, in which direction are you looking this evening?

[37 : 25] Are you going to end your life like that weary old monk, destroy that lifetime of looking in the wrong direction? Or are you going to worship the true God through Jesus Christ and praise him from this time forth and forever more?

Look to the heavens, you'll find a God of grace. look to idols and you'll become like them. Look to God for salvation and he'll bless you.

Look around this earth and praise the Lord. Amen. Let's pray together. Almighty God, we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ.

We could never have known what you were like had it not been for him. We could have never known all your love and faithfulness and forgiveness and steadfastness had it not been for him and for the cross.

And tonight as we bow in your presence, we come once more to him. Father, may you tear us away from every idol that encaptures us and help us to worship and praise and serve only him as we pray in his name.

[38 : 40] Amen.