

Glorify God, not idols

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 July 2019

Preacher: David Ely

[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon, and very good to see you all. We're going to read today from Psalm 115. So if you could turn to that.

We're leaving Daniel behind this week, and you can find that on page 510. Psalm 115, on page 510.

And I will read the whole thing out for us. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Why should the nation 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.

[1 : 0 6] 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. 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 man.

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.

[2 : 1 1] Praise the Lord. Well, I wonder if this is something that you've ever come across. But many people in our world think that our God is a dead God.

To many in the world, it looks like our God isn't really there because he's conspicuously invisible. And often we're trained to believe that only what we see is worthwhile or real.

I mean, how many people have you known who have abandoned Jesus because the life of faith was a struggle, but the life of what they saw was easy?

How many friends along the way have lost their way because what the world offers can be seen and can be touched and is tangible in its impressiveness?

And yet we as Christians, despite that, do something that seems incredibly odd to most people in the world. This invisible, this perhaps conspicuously invisible God is the one we Christians choose to honor with our whole lives.

[3 : 1 8] We choose to go throughout the world to live our whole lives in order to make much of this invisible God. And so we Christians read the first verse of this psalm and know that we simply have to join in.

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory. And to most people in the world, this is so odd, giving glory to this God.

Not because we seek to give glory to someone. After all, everyone in the world seeks to glorify someone or something. Perhaps it's Allah or Vishnu in just the way that the ancient world wanted to honor Baal or Zeus or Odin.

But even if that's not the case, all people just simply aim to glorify themselves, usually with as much fervor as any ancient worshiper. Now, this is odd because we want to glorify someone so invisible.

Why would we do that? Why would we struggle against flesh and bone for the glory of an invisible God? Well, just as the psalmist says here in verse 1, we know that we are happy to do this, that we long to give our lives to do this, because that invisible God, the one that we can't see, has proven himself steadfast in his love to us, and he has been faithful through much.

[4 : 44] We're willing to give glory to God and not to ourselves or to someone else, because we know that he has blessed us, and because he has fulfilled his promises to us time and time again.

And so that's why we say with the psalmist, not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory. We know that our God has been steadfast and faithful in his love toward us.

But if you're anything like me, that doesn't always silence the words of the world, who still say, as in verse 2, where is their God?

We still live in a world and still have to listen to people who say that, who say, look at our glory, look at how our glory has benefited us, look at our gods who have monuments to their name, and statues and powerful people, powerful manifestations of their own glory, look at what we have, you can see it and touch it.

Where is your God? He's nowhere to be seen. We know that we have a steadfast and faithful God, but sometimes we still do feel that conspicuous absence, especially when the world taunts and taunts and seems to get away with it, chipping away at our confidence.

[6 : 09] Well, this is a psalm written to the people of God in just that situation. The first readers faced the same thing as we do. They had an invisible God, whereas the world around them specialized in the creation of very visible gods.

In their world, just as in our world, God looked pretty absent in comparison to the power and might and splendor of those who glorified something or someone else.

Imagine with me, an ancient army marching into battle. And at the head of that army, the troops are carrying an impressive statue. It's covered in gold, so it glows brightly every time the sun catches it.

With seeming divine power, it's designed to be intimidating. Its face is a terrifying contortion of animal and human, and its feet are wet with the blood of sacrifices.

It certainly looks like this army has brought their God with them, that their God will be with them and will be powerfully with them.

[7 : 22] But in contrast, facing them on the battlefield is the army of the people of God, and they don't have a terrifying statue of their own. Where is their God?

Are they coming into battle, into conflict, godless? And what hope of victory do they have without one? You can imagine the taunts.

What hope do you have with no glorious being on your side? Where is your God? Israel's God is so invisible, and so it might be tempting for Israel to think, is bringing glory to him worthwhile?

Can we trust him? Is he powerful enough to be trustworthy? The Israelites have just one life on earth. Is it worth spending it, glorifying a God who is invisible?

Is it worth throwing their lot in with this one? Can he be trusted? Perhaps you can sympathize with that feeling. It can be tempting to wonder whether our invisible God can stand against so many things that blight us in this modern world.

[8 : 29] Can our God stand against the march of secularism and the modern liberal agenda? Can our invisible God stand against the strident Darwinist and his tireless devotion to his own gods of naturalism and the scientific process?

Is it worth spending a life, the only life we have, serving the glory of an invisible God? That is often the all-too-real fear of the people of God, when surrounded by the taunts of an enemy who carry horrific statues before them into battle.

Well, surely, surely it's because the psalmist knows the fears of his people, this very real fear, that he goes on to write the blistering attack he does on the gods of the nations in verses 3 to 8.

The world does have tangible gods, statues, idols, things they bow down before that assert themselves visibly. That's their speciality.

But look at verses 3 to 8 with me. What use are they really? The psalmist here recollects something that's very easy to forget in the midst of battle.

[9 : 44] These gods are just man-made. Quite literally, in the case of these ancient statues, they've been made by people. And that's just as much the case with the philosophies of this age.

And what use, in the end, is a man-made God? These few verses here draw almost comical attention to that fact. It is it is oddly and darkly hilarious.

These pagans just worship stuff they've made. They look like they have mouths. There's the slit there and the carving. But you'll never hear any words come out of it.

In fact, you won't even hear a gurgle in their throats. Nothing. No sound at all. And they might look like they have heads and eyes and ears.

Someone has spent a lot of time carving those in. But they're just lumps of rock and wood. They can't see anything or hear anything.

[10 : 45] Shout as loud as you want before these statues and nothing will go in. Bow as much as you want. Dance before them as much as you want. Do any number of unspeakable things.

Sacrifice whatever you like. It will still just be a big shiny lump of wood. They look like they have hands but they'll never move them for even the simplest action.

They will never even give the slightest wave let alone help them in battle in difficulty let alone protect them. The nations bow down in deference to these things.

They give glory to a God who can do nothing for them. They cry out for wood to speak to them and they ask for stone to protect them. These nations honestly think that because they can see their gods it proves their power.

But the psalmist says it's completely the opposite. That only proves their frailty. It proves that they are made by men out of lesser stuff.

[11 : 58] What use is a God who is bound to a statue. He can't do anything. He even needs human slaves to bring him to the battlefield.

In their end despite the pomp and the visible impressiveness their gods are just papamache. And the same is true of the modern gods that surround us as well.

They are just man made philosophies. But Israel's God God our God is not like that. He is invisible which turns out to be a good thing.

It means he is not bound to a statue. He is free to do everything that he wants and plans. He's not bound on the earth but look at verse three.

Our God is in the heavens. That's why we can't see him. He's in the heavens and does all that he pleases. What would you expect of the creator of everything that he could be so easily captured in mud and clay.

[13 : 03] So not only can you trust him, our God, despite his invisibility, but you can trust him because he is invisible. It's yet another fact pointing to the fact that they're dealing with the real thing here.

The God of Israel can't be seen. That's true. But far from meaning he's dead or absent, it points in the opposite direction. It means that their God is the real thing.

The pagan gods are frail enough to be bound in stone and clay, but Israel's God cannot be contained. These dead gods carry a peculiar disease with them.

The pagans rely on them for life and strength and prosperity, but really they're just killing them. Look at verse 8. If they make idols instead of getting life, they inherit death, the dead idol kills them.

If they trust the statue to bring them blessing to be their help and shield, then they will end up silent and cold. Notice what a wonderful contrast the God of Israel is in the next few verses.

[14 : 19] Three times in just the next couple of verses, Israel are reminded to trust in the Lord. This is both a reminder that they can and a command.

It's both of those things together. Notice, trust in the Lord, there's the command. He is their help and shield. There's the reminder that he is trustworthy and powerful to act.

It's the reminder that they aren't trusting a dead God like the pagans. They might not be able to see him, but he is their help and shield in a way that a statue never could be for anyone. So you see it three times.

Trust in the Lord because he is your help and shield. It's pretty clear what the psalmist wants Israel to do, to trust in the Lord. As a nation, in their political life, their big decisions, their laws and structures, they can and must trust the Lord because he is the one who will protect them, who will give them life.

We need to notice that. The polemic that we've just read against the nation's gods, it cuts two ways. You can trust him. There's an invitation there. It will be good for you to trust him.

[15 : 30] But also, they must trust him. There's a warning there. They must trust him and no other. It's an invitation to trust, but also an imperative to trust.

You can, and he will be your help and shield, but also you must because he is the only help and shield and bowing to other gods leads to death. This is invitation mixed with warning, a warning to be careful, to guard very, very carefully.

I think that warning is why the psalm particularly mentions in the midst of this trio the house of Aaron. The house of Aaron guarded the temple, God's holy place.

The whole of Israel was a holy place and idols should never enter any of the land, of course, but the temple was even more special. And so if idols ended up in there, then the end would surely, surely come.

it would symbolize the poison of these idols, these dead gods reaching the very heart of God's people. And so the house of Aaron needs to take its particular responsibility to trust the Lord as it guards.

[16 : 41] They need to remember that the Lord is the one who is their help and shield and that the gods of the world will offer them nothing despite what they claim. The nation must trust and guard.

The house of Aaron must trust the Lord and guard. And every single individual who loves the Lord needs to trust and guard as well. This is a command to the whole country, to everyone in the people of God.

Their families must not turn from trusting God alone. This is a command from the top to the bottom. Trust the Lord. And notice the result of trust in the right place.

In verse 12 and 13, God will remember them. He's not like a dead God who can't remember anything. Their God will remember them.

He'll bless them. And once again, this blessing comes at every level of life, from the greatest to the least. Everyone who stands guard against idols, who trusts that God is greater and who lives to glorify him will be blessed abundantly.

[17 : 46] As the God who made heaven and earth gives good things to generation after generation. The God who is faithful and steadfast will be their help and shield. But the idols will just make you dead.

So trust the Lord and trust the Lord alone. Ancient Israel had seen time and time again that their God was living and that they could and must trust him.

He had saved them many times. Have we seen more or less evidence now? Well, we have seen the victory of our invisible God time and time again just as Israel had.

We can look back at the same things as they could at the Exodus and the victories of old. We can see exactly the same thing. Our invisible God is greater than any idol. But even more than that, we can look now at the greater victory of Christ Jesus.

The whole New Testament is filled with the declaration that our God is still greater than the gods of the nations, is far greater than the idols of the world. Listen to these words from the book of Acts, from the lips of an enemy of God's people, someone who loves these idols.

[19 : 03] And this is what happens as the message of Christ spreads throughout the world. This is what the book of Acts says. It says, you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

The gospel of Christ goes into the world and people start to see this. Gods made with hands are not gods, but the God of Israel, revealed supremely in Christ Jesus, is a true God.

Christ defeats the idols by turning people away from them. The ancient Israelites had good reason to trust their God. God, we have even more reason to trust him.

The world will try and tell us to bow to its statues and will try to do that by telling us that our God is old and weak and dead and invisible.

They'll say, where is your God? But we have plenty of evidence that we can and must trust our God. God. As we come towards the end of the psalm, we turn once more back to the theme of the very first verse, with verse 16.

[20 : 22] Perhaps verse 16 seems a little out of place when you first read through the psalm, but when the opening of the psalm is something like to your name give glory, verse 16 is actually quite fitting.

It says, the earth was given to the children of man and humanity was given that dominion for a purpose, with the purpose of bringing glory to God, just as the psalm starts.

Israel, in the day that this psalm was first written, had been called back to that purpose, after Adam failed it at the start, being called back to the purpose of glorifying God with their whole life.

And we've been saved for the same reason, to give glory to God. That's not a cold thing. Remember, it's a tremendous privilege accompanied by blessing upon blessing, as I'm sure many of us know.

But even now, we are not just saved, we are saved for something, to glorify God, as this psalm calls us to do. And of course, this is exactly why we must guard against idols, because this is our purpose, to glorify the God who has saved us.

[21 : 36] And look at the fate of the one who trusts in idols. Those who make and worship, idols become like them. That is, they die. And as verse 17 says, those who are dead don't praise the Lord.

The silent ones don't bring glory to his name. Someone dead who follows idols can't fulfill this great purpose of bringing glory to God. God. The sad history of Israel bears that out.

They failed to guard. Idols made their home in the temple and in the hearts of the Israelites. It led to death and exile. The glory of the Lord left Israel and they were no longer fit for purpose.

They no longer brought glory to the God they could trust, who was their help and who was their shield. It's a tragic story. Now God has promised that his church will never fall.

There will always be a church. But the testimony of the New Testament and the testimony of history is similarly clear. Once faithful congregations can fall and families that were once filled with the gospel can lead to idolatrous generations.

[22 : 45] We must still listen to this warning. We cannot fulfill our purpose in glorifying God if we do not trust him instead of the idols the world offers.

And the idols of our time are tempting because they're impressive, because they're tangible and powerful. Perhaps we could be tempted to follow the God of public opinion in our own lives, in our churches.

Sacrificing to her leads to acclaim, to favor in the world, ease and popularity. It leads to temporary peace and it leads to comfort. But her followers are dead and silent and bring no glory to God.

Her followers gather dust in empty halls waiting to be swept away. They're not fit for purpose and will not bring glory to the God who we can trust.

Perhaps we'd be tempted to follow the God of anything goes as long as it makes you happy. Sacrificing to him brings ease and again brings a lot of pleasure. He will impress you with powerful experiences and memories to take to the grave.

[23 : 54] But those memories will stay in the grave because his followers have rejected the true blessing, the unending blessing of trusting the only true God.

Perhaps the gods of scientific reductionism will bend our ear of neo-Darwinism and the denial of supernatural things. Well, sacrificing to them often leads to proud careers, important careers in lofty institutions.

But their followers are powerless, eventually. They look impressive, but their gods are bound. And it would, of course, be a mistake to think that all modern idols are abstract.

Beware Allah, beware Buddha, beware Vishnu, beware Brahma and Shiva. There are a surprising number of Christians and churches who are willing to bring these very real ancient idols into their midst and worship them.

we're not immune. And so we need psalms like this to remind us of how ridiculously impotent idols are, of how dead they are and how dead those who follow them become.

[25 : 06] And we need psalms like this to remind us of our purpose, to set our eyes joyfully on the Lord and the Lord only, to bring glory to him with all the days of our life. love. We need to constantly remember that the Lord, though invisible, is the only one who can and will be our help and shield.

And that this path, however hard, is the only path of true blessing. And when we remember that, when we reflect on that every day, then we'll end up doing as the psalmist does in verse 18.

We'll end up fulfilling our purpose and we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and for psalms like this that remind us of what the world around us is like, that remind us of what the idols the world tempts us with are like.

Father, we pray that you'd help us to always see past the impressive bluster and instead remember that though you are invisible to us, that only proves you are the real thing and that we can trust.

[26 : 27] We can trust you to be our help and our shield. Father, help us to guard against idols in our lives, in our church's lives. And so help us always to live out our purpose of glorifying you with every single breath that we have.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.