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NOT TO US, BUT TO YOUR NAME GIVE GLORY

Psalm 115

By

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Not to Us, but to Your Name Give Glory
Psalm 115

The Westminster divines had profound insight into God's Word when they wrote the first question and answer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is the chief end of man?" Answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." If we could just get that fixed in our minds and live each day in line with it, God would use us to accomplish His purpose and we would be greatly blessed. It is a statement that should govern my thought life and all my behavior: Does this glorify God? In simple terms, to glorify God is to make Him look good, as He truly is. It is to display, as much as we are able, His perfect attributes, His moral excellence, and His infinite greatness and worth.

Think how much happier our marriages would be if we only stopped to think, "Will my words, attitudes, and actions toward my mate, glorify God?" If not, I shouldn't do it, even though I might feel like doing it. The same applies to our relationships with our children and with all people. If I'm not demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit, then I'm not glorifying God and I shouldn't act that way. If I'm disobeying God's Word, then I'm sinning and not glorifying Him. It's an overarching principle to govern all of life: Live so as to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). Psalm 115 is not comprehensive, but as far as it goes, it tells us how to live that way:

Because God alone is to be glorified, avoid all idolatry, seek God for all your needs, and praise Him all your days.

We don't know who wrote this psalm or when it was written, but many scholars think that it was after Israel returned from the exile. They were trying to rebuild the temple but were encountering opposition and taunts from the pagans who had moved into the land during their absence. The Jews were weak and few in number. During the time in Babylon, Israel had observed the futility of idol worship. Now back in the land, they saw the pagans around them worshipping idols, which appalled the psalmist.

So he cries out to God (vv. 1-3) to bring glory to His name and to answer the pagan taunt (115:2), "Where, now, is your God?" He

ridicules the absurdity of idolatry (vv. 4-8) and calls God's people to trust in the Lord to bless them (vv. 9-15). They, in turn, will bless and praise Him as long as they live (vv. 16-18).

1. God alone is to be glorified (115:1-3).

"Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth [or, faithfulness]. Why should the nations say, 'Where, now, is their God?' But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." Four lessons:

A. Be careful not to take any of God's glory for yourself.

The repetition, "Not to us, not to us" shows the propensity that we all have for taking some of God's glory for ourselves. In Isaiah 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 Isaiah 48:11, He repeats, "For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; for how can My name be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another." But in spite of these clear declarations, we're all prone to take at least some of God's glory for ourselves.

The most common error with regard to salvation is that it is on the basis of our good works. Go up to anyone on the street and ask, "If you were to die and stand before God and He asked, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?" You will most likely hear, "I'm a basically good person," or some similar answer.

Even among those that profess to know Christ as Savior, there is a strong tendency to take at least some of the credit for salvation. For example, many say that the doctrine of election means that God foresaw who would believe in Him by their own free will, so He chose them. Contrary to Scripture (John 1:13; Rom. 9:16), they make salvation depend primarily on the will of man, not on the will of God. They make God's choice depend on something good that He foresaw in us, and thus His grace is no longer grace (undeserved favor). And, of course, then election would not be God's choosing us, but rather our choosing God. It robs God of His glory as the sovereign who chose and predestined us to salvation before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-6).

Even after God has saved us, we're still prone to take credit for things that are due completely to His grace. The Corinthians were

boasting in their spiritual gifts. Paul rhetorically asks them (1 Cor. 4:7), “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” All that we have spiritually is because God was gracious to us. 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.

C. H. Spurgeon said (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 48:294, 295),

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, and 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 and the grace of God—away with it, for it is not food fit for your souls to feed upon.

B. Be careful not to do anything that would tarnish God’s glory among unbelievers.

When God threatened to destroy the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness, Moses intervened in prayer, arguing that if the Lord did that, the pagan nations would conclude that He wasn’t able to bring them into the land (Num. 14:15-16). His prayer prevailed and the Lord pardoned the sinning people for the sake of His name.

But finally, after centuries of Israel’s sins, God raised up the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the majority of the citizens captive into Babylon. By their sin, Israel profaned God’s name among the nations (Ezek. 36:20). But God graciously promised that He would re-gather the Jews from the nations and restore them to the land, not for their sake, but for the sake of His great name, which they had profaned (Ezek. 36:23).

The application is, we should never do anything that would give unbelievers a basis for taunting, “Where, now, is their God?” It is especially tragic when pastors fall into sin and are exposed in the press. The world mocks us and our God. It is tragic when Christian businessmen are not ethical. Again, the world mocks our God. If we claim the name of Christ, we must not do anything that would tarnish His glory among unbelievers (2 Sam. 12:14).

C. God alone is to be glorified because of His lovingkindness and His truth.

The psalmist prays that God will give glory to His name, “because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth” [or, “faithfulness”]. *Lovingkindness* is another word for God’s grace. Our salvation, rooted in God’s choosing us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), is “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:6). God’s *truth* (or, *faithfulness*) means that what He says and does are always consistent with Himself. If He promises something, He will do it. Everything that God does for us magnifies His lovingkindness and His truth.

Do you meditate often on these two attributes of God? The shortest psalm in the Bible calls us to do so (Ps. 117:1-2), “Praise the Lord, all nations; laud Him, all peoples! For His lovingkindness is great toward us, and the truth of the Lord is everlasting. Praise the Lord!” If it were not for His grace, we’d all be lost, with no hope. If it were not for His faithfulness, none of us would endure. Meditating on these two qualities will cause you to glorify Him.

D. God alone is to be glorified because of His absolute sovereignty over everything.

Note, again, verse 3: “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.” This is one of many verses that teach that God is sovereign over everything in the universe. Psalm 103:19 proclaims, “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all.” The humbled Nebuchadnezzar declared (Dan. 4:35), “But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” The chastened Job declared (42:2), “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.”

In Isaiah 46:9-10, God declares, “For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’” After explaining that He will call Cyrus as the man of His purpose, God adds (Isa. 46:11), “Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I

will do it." Ephesians 1:11 says that God "works all things after the counsel of His will." (See, also, Ps. 33:10-11; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28.)

When the psalmist says that God does whatever He pleases, he does not mean that He is capricious or unpredictable. Rather, it means that He is able to accomplish whatever He purposes to do and He does it because it pleases Him to do it. While He is not the author of evil and evil greatly displeases Him, in another sense He is not frustrated by it and He uses evil to accomplish His sovereign purpose of glorifying Himself (see John Piper, *Desiring God* [Multnomah Publishers, 1996], pp. 34-43).

I find it ironic that some who are the most ardent proponents of biblical prophecy at the same time write books that deny God's sovereignty over all things, especially over our salvation. But the Book of Revelation clearly teaches that we can take comfort that God is in charge of history. He will use even the evil of the anti-christ to accomplish His sovereign purpose. He has ordained the specific number of martyrs (Rev. 6:10-11)! God didn't just peer down through history and let us in on how, luckily, it all will turn out in His favor! Rather, He ordained the events of history to display His glory. He alone is to be glorified.

2. To glorify God, avoid all idolatry (115:4-8).

The psalmist launches into a satirical attack against idolatry (see also, Ps. 135:15-18; Isa. 44:9-20; 46:6-7; Jer. 10:1-9; Hab. 2:18-19). He mentions the top of the line models, made out of silver and gold, not the cheaper wooden variety. But even the best idols are just manmade objects. The precious metal doesn't give them life! How ridiculous to bow down and worship them! As Hosea 8:6 sums up the argument, "A craftsman made it, so it is not God."

The psalmist says (115:5), "They have mouths, but they cannot speak." They can't reveal truth to us. They can't tell us how to live. They can't explain right and wrong. They cannot tell us about themselves. They cannot give us comfort when we suffer.

"They have eyes, but they cannot see" (115:5). They cannot see you in your circumstances. They cannot see those that bow before them. What good is a blind god?

"They have ears, but they cannot hear" (115:6). They cannot hear the prayers of those who cry out to them. The prophets of

Baal cut themselves and shrieked at the top of their voices all day long, but their idol could not hear them (1 Kings 18:26-29).

“They have noses, but they cannot smell” (115:6). In contrast to the living God, idols cannot smell the incense that worshipers offer to them (Phil. 4:18).

“They have hands, but they cannot feel” (115:7). They can’t reach out and take the gifts that are set before them. When we were in a Hindu temple in Nepal, the monkeys were feeding on the offerings that had been set before the idols. Dead idols, unlike the living God, cannot extend their hands to save or to heal.

“They have feet, but they cannot walk” (115:7). They are completely dependent on their worshipers to carry them in procession and secure them so that they don’t topple over. They can’t move! What kind of “god” is that?

“They cannot make a sound with their throat” (115:7). They can’t even let out an inarticulate grunt or groan. In short, they are completely lifeless and therefore, worthless.

But even worse (115:8), “Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.” People who do not know the living and true God are spiritually dead, blind, deaf, and dumb. They are insensible to spiritual truth. They are spiritually crippled. It is sheer lunacy to worship idols!

Most Americans don’t bow down to literal idols, although as I’ve mentioned before, we actually have an entire store here in Flagstaff that sells nothing but idols! I frequently see Buddhist prayer flags flying around town. Some have statues of Buddha or the virgin Mary in their yards or homes. Roman Catholic Churches, both here and abroad, are filled with idols. When we were in Nepal, we saw many westerners at the Buddhist temple, spinning the prayer wheels. These people come from cultures where the gospel can easily be heard, yet they travel half way around the world to worship a golden idol of a dead fat man!

But while we may abhor the practice of bowing before idols, there is still a principle of idolatry that we must constantly fight against, namely, the sin of putting anything or anyone in the place of God alone. Also, at the heart of idolatry is using the idol to get what you want. You agree to placate the god in some way, but your

aim is to manipulate it to get something. I find many professing Christians do the same thing. They try to use God to get what they want and then they put Him back on the shelf. They are not living daily in submission to His lordship. They are not devoted to Him in worship. They're just using Him when they think He might work for them. That is really just idolatry. It does not glorify God.

3. To glorify God, trust in Him as your helper, defender, and source of all blessing (115:9-15).

A. Trust in God as your helper and defender (115:9-11).

The psalmist calls out (vv. 9-11), "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."

Willem VanGemeren remarks (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:721), "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 and protection..." The three groups are all exhorted to trust in the Lord with the threefold assurance, "He is their help and their shield." The change of person (from direct address to third person) may stem from an intended liturgical use of the psalm, where one group sang one line, and another answered antiphonally.

The first group, "*Israel*," is comprehensive of the covenant people of God. Applied to us, we would say, "Church, trust in the Lord." You may come regularly to church or be a church member, but you still must trust in God to help you and defend you. "*The house of Aaron*" represents the worship leaders. Even those who work in spiritual things as their main job must be exhorted to trust God to help and defend them. "*You who fear the Lord*" probably focuses on those in Israel who truly followed the Lord. Their religion was not just cultural; it was real. And yet they needed the encouragement to put their trust in the Lord when trials hit. We glorify Him when we trust Him and He helps and defends us (Ps. 50:15).

B. Trust in God as the source of all blessing (115:12-15).

The psalmist encourages the nation (v. 12a), "The Lord has been mindful of us; He will bless us." Then he goes through each of the three groups again, assuring them (vv. 12-13), "He will bless

the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord." Then he adds, "the small together with the great." You don't have to be a spiritual superstar to receive God's blessings. You may be unknown or insignificant, but God takes note of you and He will bless you as you trust in Him. Then he adds (vv. 14-15), "May the Lord give you increase, you and your children. May you be blessed of the Lord, maker of heaven and earth." Unlike the dead idols, our God made everything that is. He can certainly supply our needs and the needs of our children when we cry out to Him!

The word *bless* occurs five times here in four verses. It shows us the importance of seeking and receiving God's blessing. Do you covet His blessing in your life? Do you pray for His abundant grace to be poured out on your family? How about on His church? Do you grieve when His kingdom suffers? Do you pray that He would be glorified by blessing and prospering His people spiritually?

Thus, God alone is to be glorified. If we fall into idolatry, we do not glorify Him. Rather, we glorify Him by trusting Him as our helper, defender, and source of all blessing. Finally,

4. To glorify God, praise Him all your days (115:16-18).

"The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth He has given to the sons of men. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence; but as for us, we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forever. Praise the Lord!"

The end of verse 15, which affirms God as the maker of heaven and earth, shows His sovereignty over all of creation. Verse 16, then, does not mean that God has retreated to heaven, with no further involvement on earth (as deists would believe). Rather, as VanGemen states (p. 722), "These verses form a symmetric contrast with the impotence of idolatry (vv. 3-8) so as to emphasize the unlimited power and freedom of the Lord." The last half of verse 16 affirms what Genesis 1:26, 28 state, that the Lord entrusted dominion over the earth to humans.

Verse 17 is not focused on the activity of the dead in heaven, but rather on earth (v. 16b). Along with verse 18, the idea is that we need to buy up present opportunities to praise the Lord and bring Him glory, because after we're gone, our voices will be silenced on

earth. As Spurgeon put it (*The Treasury of David* [Baker], 5:270), "Though the dead cannot, the wicked will not and the careless do not praise God, yet we will shout 'Hallelujah' for ever and ever." One way in which we exercise our dominion on earth is to praise the Lord all our days.

Conclusion

John the Baptist was an impressive man. He was miraculously conceived and filled with the Spirit while still in his mother's womb. Jesus said (Matt. 11:11), "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Yet when some of John's disciples were jealous for him when the word came that Jesus was attracting larger crowds, John made the classic statement (John 3:30), "He must increase, but I must decrease." 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 and 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" (Ps. 115:1).

Application Questions

1. What does it mean practically to glorify God? Are we taking glory for ourselves if we graciously accept a compliment?
2. Some argue that if God is sovereign over everything, then He must be the author of evil. Refute this biblically.
3. What are some ways that American Christians inadvertently drift into idolatry? How can we avoid this?
4. Does trusting God as our helper, defender, and source of all blessing require that we not use means or methods? How do we determine the balance here?

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