

**Trust in the Lord, He Is Our Help and Shield**  
**Psalm 115**

**Main Idea:** The Psalmist exalts the superiority of God over man-made idols, exhorting God's people to worship and trust in God alone.

- I. Not to Us, But to His Name Be the Glory; Not the Dead, But the Living Praise Him (115:1-3; 16-18)**
  - A. Not to us, but to His name (1-3)
  - B. Not the dead, but we the living (14-16)
- II. What Idols Can't Do; What God Does (115:4-8; 12-15)**
  - A. Idols are worthless (4-8)
  - B. God blesses His people (12-15)
- III. Trust in the Lord, He is Our Help and Shield (115:9-11)**

Various leaders have cited this popular first verse at pivotal points in history (Duncan, “Non Nobis Domine” [Not to Us, O Lord]). My favorite of these occasions involves the resilient William Wilberforce. This famous British statesman fought to abolish slavery for forty-six years. Wilberforce also loved the Psalms. He was known for reciting Psalm 119 by heart. He also loved Psalm 115. After Parliament finally passed a bill to abolish slave trade, this little 5’3 warrior went home to mediate on Psalm 115:1, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” (ESV, Kidner, 404). What an appropriate response to a major victory! We should follow Wilberforce’s example. If the Lord ever accomplishes anything through us, then let us be quick to give Him all the glory.

On a personal level, my bride and I had some friends sing a modern version of Psalm 115 at our wedding. Our prayer was for the Lord to be glorified in our lives and marriage. In addition, one of my favorite Christian rap songs comes from Shai Linne, who sings “The Glory of God.” The song begins with the line “Not to us, not to us, but to your name be the glory,” repeated several times. Then the artist proceeds to exalt the greatness of God with edifying lines. Here are a few lines:

Not to us, not to us  
But to your name be the glory (x 12)

Let us consider the God who is there  
Possessing a glory that's not to be shared  
God vs. anyone ? not even fair  
How could you dare to try to compare  
The self-existent, self-sufficient  
Omnipotent, Beneficent  
Faithful God whose word we can trust  
Perfectly holy and perfectly just  
His beauty, there's no end to it  
Transcendence is infinite  
Knowledge and wisdom, intricate  
Steadfast love is intimate

We see in his laws, he is the boss  
Nothing about him is evil or false  
Pure perfection ? zero flaws

All of his attributes meet at the cross  
The place where Jesus Christ was smashed  
To satisfy God's righteous wrath  
Rose from the grave on my behalf  
Through faith in Christ He lights our path  
Makes believers part of his fam  
How does a holy God pardon a man?  
Perhaps even harder to understand:  
From the beginning was part of his plan

Imagine it  
I can't explain the half of it  
Our brains can't even fathom it  
And language is inadequate  
To characterize the Lord on the throne  
With spiritual eyes his story is known  
From Him & Through Him & To Him is everything  
Surely to God be the glory alone  
From Him & Through Him & To Him is everything  
Surely to God be the glory alone

Not to us, not to us  
But to your name be the glory (x 12)

Amen! Surely to God be the glory alone!

Psalm 115:1 is a prayer for all Christians, at all times. We are meant to live for God's glory, not our own. In whatever we do – in word, action, or thought – we should long to bring glory to God (1 Cor 10:31). Does this verse to reflect your heart's desire?

While verse 1 is the most popular verse in the Psalm, the central exhortation appears in the middle of the Psalm. The Psalmist is encouraging Israel to *trust the Lord*, in a particularly stressful season. The context is unclear. It actually reflects various points in Israel's history (eg., the exodus, the exile, or return from exile). If you find yourself in a season where it's difficult to worship the Lord, and trust in the Lord, then you can identify with Psalm 115. The Psalmist is trying to lift the spirits of the saints by extolling the greatness of God, over against the worthless idols of the nations, in order that God's people may worship and trust Him.

I have chosen to follow the chiasmic structure of Wilcock, to help us see the Psalm as a whole, and to emphasize this need to trust in the Lord. You will see below how parts one and five correspond to each other (verses 1-3 and 16-18); how parts two and four correspond to each other (verses 4-8 and 12-15); and how verses 9-11 stand as the central section. This central section seems to have two voices; one speaks to the assembled worshipers, and the other speaks about the worshipers (Wilcock, 1892). Below is the proposed structure:

Not to us, but to His Name be the glory (1-3)  
What idols can't do (4-8)  
Trust in the Lord, He is their help and shield (12-15)  
What God does (9-11)  
Not the dead, but the living praise God (16-18)

Based on this structure, we will begin our exposition at the two ends, and work toward the middle of the Psalm.

Not to Us, But to His Name Be the Glory; Not the Dead, But the Living Praise Him  
(115:1-3; 16-18)

***Not to us, but to His Name (1-3)***. The Psalmist opens with the declaration that God, not men, should receive glory, “Not to us, Yahweh, not to us, but to Your name give glory” (1a). At the center of the universe is not self, but God. Since the garden, humanity has tried to compete with God’s glory (cf., Rom 3:23). Because of sin, we want to be our own king. We want praise. We don’t want to submit to God’s authority. But God will not share His glory with another (Isa 48:11). And our greatest good, and highest joy, will come when we live for God’s glory, not our own. Our problems in life come when we fail to live for God’s glory.

In our “selfie” culture today, we desperately need the message of verse 1. Self-absorption doesn’t satisfy, it turns off others, and it dishonors God. Tim Keller states, “There’s nothing that makes you more miserable, or less interesting, than self-absorption” (*King’s Cross*, page). The cure for this is to become “God-absorbed.” We need a dynamic encounter with God that makes us long for Him, and His glory, rather than our own glory and our selfish desires. We need to live by the lines from A.B. Simpson’s hymn:

Not I, but Christ, be honored, loved, exalted;  
Not I, but Christ, be seen be known, be heard;  
Not I, but Christ, in every look and action,  
Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word. (“Not I, but Christ”)

In the second part of verse 1 the Psalms tells us why God should receive glory: “because of Your faithful love, because of Your truth” (1b). God’s mercy and faithfulness are two attributes identified with God’s covenant faithfulness to His people (cf., Ex 34:6). His loyal love and truthfulness are sufficient reasons for us to live for God’s glory.

In verse 2, the Psalmist cites the taunt of Israel’s enemies. Then he provides a retort to the taunt in verse 3.

Why should the nations say,  
“Where is their God?”  
Our God is in heaven  
and does whatever He pleases. (115:2-3)

You can imagine the mighty nations looking at weak Israel, at various points in her history, and mocking them. “Where is your God? Look at your condition! You talk about God’s power and love, and yet look at your family! Look at your nation! Where is your God?”

This concern for the Lord’s reputation among the nations appears throughout the Old Testament (cf., Ex 32:12; Num 14:13-14). And Israel was called not simply to defend their religion, but to make God’s fame know among the nations (cf., Josh 4:24; 1 Kin 8:41-43). Israel must give an answer to this taunt, not merely to look sensible in the eyes of culture, but to commend this God to unbelieving Gentiles.

The retort in verse 3 says it all. The Psalmist confesses that God is sovereign. God is “in heaven” (3a; cf., Ps 113:4-5). And this God “does whatever He pleases” (3b; cf., Ps 135:6; Isa 46:10), meaning that He is working out His sovereign will despite what one may think. Did God accomplish His purposes in Israel’s trials in the Exodus and exile? Yes. Did these enslavements

somehow stop His redemptive mission? No. Did the Messiah come? Yes! In Daniel 4:35 and Jonah 1:14 the Gentiles confess this too, once they realize who the real Lord is.

Speaking of the Messiah, you can hear this sort of taunt at the crucifixion, as the enemies mockingly said things like, “If you are the Messiah, why are you on a cross? Why don’t you save yourself!” And yet, in the midst of the agony of Golgotha, our God, was redeeming lost humanity. Today we have the same responsibility of commending our God – who is mocked by many – but who stands as the hope of the world.

The fact is God’s sovereign purposes are higher than many want to accept. The unbeliever’s vision short-cited. If one can’t affirm God’s absolute sovereignty, one is left only with what the human eye can see and comprehend. And the result of human wisdom alone is skepticism, agnosticism, or atheism. We must remember that God doesn’t promise to stop all tragedies and sicknesses, or resolve all evils, until the coming of Christ. He is free to act, and free to delay, but one thing we must confess is that He reigns over all, and He does all that He pleases. For some, this answer won’t do. But for we who believe, it causes us to long for this glorious day. Our God is in the heavens, reigning, and one day He will correct all wrongs, and reverse the curse.

These three verses remind us that the wicked don’t ultimately prosper. Psalm 73 is correct. They may prosper for a season, but we must take the long view. God is still sovereign. And God will work out all things according the council of His will (Eph 1:11). So trust Him.

***Not the dead, but we the living (16-18).*** At the end of the Psalm, the Psalmist reiterates God’s heavenly position in verse 16, “The heavens are the LORD’s, but the earth He has given to the human race” (16). This time the writer says that the heavens belong to the Lord (16a). God reigns over all the earth. God has delegated responsibility to man to work the earth as stewards of His creation (16b), as He reigns from heaven.

In light of the privileged position, as steward-worshippers, the Psalmist presents an important contrast in verses 17-18:

It is not the dead who praise the LORD,  
nor any of those descending into the silence of death.  
But we will praise the LORD,  
both now and forever.  
Hallelujah!

The Psalmist doesn’t have the complete understanding of the eternal state, but He knows enough to know that the spiritually dead won’t praise God after death (17; cf., Ps 6:5; 88:10-12); but those who belong to God will praise the Lord now and *forever* (18; cf., Rev 5:8-14).

So what’s the point of verses 17-18? It’s simple. Praise God while you have breath and you will praise Him after your breath is gone! Don’t waste your life, living for substitute gods.

Therefore, at the beginning and ending of Psalm 115, the Psalmist urges us to worship God alone. This high, God-centered, heavenly minded, kingdom-oriented vision reminds us of the opening of the Lord’s Prayer.

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt 6:9-10)

Jesus says, “pray like this.” Pray with a desire for God’s glory and God’s name to be regarded as

holy; for God's kingdom to come, and God's heavenly will to be done. In the words of the Psalmist pray, "Not to us, O Lord, but to your name be the glory." The Lord's Prayer, and Psalm 115:1 sounds strange in a self-centered world, but it's the foundation of the Christian life. Like Jesus instructed us, let's pray sincerely in our prayer closets, and not with empty Pharisee-like phrases (Matt 6:5-9), for God's glory to be known through us. And when God does some work through us, let's assign all glory to Him.

### What Idols Can't Do; What God Does (115:4-8; 12-15)

In these verses the Psalmist exalts the superiority of Yahweh over the idols of the nations. He deconstructs idols in verses 4-8, and then describes the nature of the covenant-keeping God of Israel in verses 12-15.

***Idols are worthless (4-8).*** After stating that God does whatever He pleases (115:3), the Psalmist tells us what pagan gods can't do:

Their idols are silver and gold,  
made by human hands.  
They have mouths but cannot speak,  
eyes, but cannot see.  
They have ears but cannot hear,  
noses, but cannot smell.  
They have hands but cannot feel,  
feet, but cannot walk.  
They cannot make a sound with their throats.  
Those who make them are just like them,  
as are all who trust in them. (115:4-8)

The Psalmist's description here resembles several Old Testament texts, like those found in Isaiah 44 and 46, where the prophet expounds on the folly of "god-making" and how to "transport a god" (Isa 44:9-20, 46:6-7; cf., Ps 135:15-18; Jer 10:1-9; Hab 2:18-19). The prophets and the Psalmist here describe the folly of bowing down images of "silver and gold," "the work of human hands" (115:4), instead of worshiping the Maker of heaven and earth (Ps 115:15). These images have no power. Jeremiah said that idols were like scarecrows in a cucumber field (Jer 10:5) – they can't walk, talk, or do anything. Idols are the product of the sinful imaginations of people. Why worship man-made things, instead of the Maker of all things?

The Psalmist highlights the worthlessness of idols by showing how human they look, but how lifeless they actually are. He says they have "mouths" but can't speak (115:5a); "eyes" but can't see (5b); ears but don't hear (6a); "noses" but can't smell (6b); "hands" but don't feel (7a); "feet" but don't walk (7b); and they make no sound with their "throat" (7c). In short, they are nothing, and can do nothing. They're made, and then they rot. So why worship them and trust in them?

Idols were attractive to Israel because the surrounding nations worshiped them. And they were attractive because idols didn't speak, like Yahweh speaks. Notice the emphasis on the idols lack of ability to speak (5, 7). It was much easier to submit to a silent god, than a talking God, who calls you to holiness. People today may not reject God in theory, but they don't want a talking God, who makes demands on their lives. They want a silent God.

Idols are still attractive today because, like Israel, our hearts are wicked. We want to love, trust, worship, and find satisfaction in things other than the God of the Bible. Idols don't merely include idolatrous images of false religions (though it does include them). Idolatry is a heart

problem. One can make a substitute god out of anything.

Most recently, Tim Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods* is very helpful for discerning the common idols of the day, idols such as money, sex, and power. There's a "mental aspect" and a "heart aspect" to idolatry. Mentally, we indulge in idolatry when we have thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It consists of embracing false teaching about God. John ends his first letter, after talking about false teaching says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn 5:21; cf., Jn 4:24). Heart idolatry involves trusting in anything other than Christ to give us meaning, significance, joy, and salvation. This could involve a house, a car, an investment, a relationship, sexual pleasure, peer approval, and much more. What is it that excites you? What do you spend time, energy and resources on? For what do you make sacrifices? Whatever this is, it's an idol. And there can be no spiritual growth without the detection of idols, and the destruction of them.

So how do you destroy an idol? Take note of this Psalm! What is the Psalmist doing? The Psalmist is deconstructing idols. He's showing us the stupidity of loving and trusting in anything other than God! You may need to speak to your idol too! You may need to pray and ask the Lord to show you that money, sex, power, peer approval, entertainment, comfort, X-box, sports, or alcohol – cannot satisfy, will not save, and will not bring you meaning. Deconstruct your idols. See it for what it is, and then elevate your vision of God, based on Scripture, that you may adore God rather than idols.

If you don't destroy your idols, and replace them with the worship of God, then verse 8 is the result: "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them" (ESV; cf., Ps 135:18). Here's a super-important principle regarding worship: *You become like that which you worship* (see G.K. Beale, Beale, *We Become What We Worship*). The Psalmist says both the idol-makers and the idol-worshippers become like the worthless idols that they worship. In 2 Kings, the writer says that Israel "went after false idols and became false" (2 Kin 17:15, ESV; cf., Rom 1:21-32). When one worships worthless idols, they will live a spiritually worthless life. In contrast, those who worship the living God, will grow into His image. Paul says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18, ESV). By constantly beholding the glory of Christ, we become more like Him. This is how transformation works. Beholding leads to becoming. The Spirit does this work in our hearts. f

So what are doing to behold the Savior? Are you beholding Him daily in the Scripture? Are you beholding Him in corporate worship? Are you beholding Him in your heart throughout the day?

***God blesses His people (12-15).*** After giving the central exhortation, to trust in the Lord in verse 9-11 (which we will cover next), the Psalmist describes God's grace toward His people. You can't miss the emphasis on how God "blesses" His people. Five times He mentions God's blessing.

The LORD remembers us and 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—  
small and great alike.  
May the LORD add to your numbers,  
both yours and your children's.  
May you be blessed by the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth. (Ps 115:12-15)

The three-fold call to trust the Lord in verses 9-11 is complimented by a three-fold assurance of God's blessing on each group of people in verses 12-13 – "Israel" (9, 11), "the house of Aaron" (10, 12b), and those who "fear the Lord" (11, 13). The Psalmist is assuring all of God's people – both "small and great" – that blessing rests upon the person who trusts in the Lord. Even though the people may experience affliction, God "remembers" His covenant (12). To deliver and bless them is a fulfillment of His promises (VanGemerren, 722). This blessing is indiscriminate – the religious leaders ("the great") and the social outcasts (the small") may experience God's blessing when they trust in Him. Both Jew and Gentile – all who fear Him, may enjoy this blessing.

God is the giver of all blessings, both material and spiritual blessings. Our "daily bread" is a gift from God. And in Jesus Christ, we have received every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3). All who have faith in the Son enjoy the blessing of forgiveness, adoption, inheritance, and everlasting peace in a New Heavens and New Earth. And this blessing is granted to every person on the planet – both the small and the great – who repents and trusts in Christ.

Next, the Psalmist prays for God to grant increase to small Israel with the blessing of children, both in the present generation, and in the generations to come (14). The Psalmist is praying for the people to once again become fruitful and multiply. The Psalmist asks for God's blessing with confidence because He knows the nature of God's covenant love, and based on the fact that God is the "Maker of heaven and earth" (15).

What a contrast between the Living God and dead idols! The Living God blesses, fulfills promises, and dispenses grace on both the small and the great. His blessing, fulfilled promises, and abundant grace have been experienced by all who have trusted in the redeeming work of His Son, our Savior. Dead idols, in contrast, never provide what they promise. They only leave you longing for more. They never bless, only deaden. They never grant grace, only condemnation. The only logical response is to trust in the Lord, not in created things. That leads us to this middle section, the central exhortation.

### Trust in the Lord, He is Our Help and Shield (115:9-11)

Instead of trusting in created things, the Psalmist urges the people to trust in Yahweh. The Psalmist speaks to the worshipers in the beginning of each verse, and then someone speaks about the worshipers in the second part of each verse:

Israel, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and shield.  
House of Aaron, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and shield.  
You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!  
He is their help and shield. (115:9-11)

Notice it's a three-fold call to trust in the Lord, to three groups of people (Israel, Aaron's house and God-fearers), and it contains a three-fold promise of protection to those who trust in the Lord ("He is their help and shield"). This Psalm seems to have arisen out of a liturgical setting, in which one group called for trust in the Lord, and the other group sang about God being the help of His people (VanGemerren, 721). Thus we see the community of faith reminding one another of the blessings that they enjoy. This is one of the blessings of the church today. We

need brothers and sisters to encourage us to find our help in the Lord.

This phrase “He is their help and shield,” reminded Israel that they have nothing to worry about because God is their shield. This phrase could be said of everyone who places faith in the Lord Jesus Christ today. He is our ultimate help, and our ultimate shield. Not that He will shield us from earthly affliction, but that we will ultimately be shielded from our greatest enemies – death, Satan, and the wrath of God – because Jesus took our punishment for us. And we know that anything that does befall His saints in this life, then it’s not purposeless. He is with us always, and we have nothing to fear (Heb 13:5). So until we see Christ face to face, our call is to “trust the Lord.” Put your confidence in Him, not in idols. If you’re trusting in the Lord, then you can know the peace and joy of the Lord. Then you can say with the Psalmist, “For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name” (Ps 33:21, ESV).

In a lecture given in one of my classes, my friend Steve Timmis argued that there are three ways to read the whole Bible coherently, or three ways to understand the “storyline of the Bible.” These really aren’t three different ways, but three different emphases or applications, and they have significant overlap. They include: (1) a formal summary of the Bible, (2) a dynamic summary of the Bible, and (3) an existential summary of the Bible. (I like to call these categories the following: (1) a *theological* reading of the Bible, (2) a *communal* reading of the Bible, and (3) a *personal* reading of the Bible). The first involves the categories of *creation, de-creation, recreation, and new creation*. This form appears with various popular types of outlines today. It emphasizes important theological progression of the biblical storyline. The second reading involves the dynamic framework, which can be summarized in this idea: *God has always planned to have a people for Himself – a people which He reveals His glory to, and displays His glory through*. One can read the Bible through this lens, noting the communal/relational dimension of the biblical story, that is, God and His people. But the third reading, the existential summary, involves a two-word summary: “Trust Me.” This reading emphasizes *our personal response* to creation, de-creation, recreation, and new creation. It emphasizes our personal response to the fact that we are made for community. We enter the Christian life by *faith*, and we continue in the Christian life by *faith*. God’s command and invitation to sinners is this: “Trust Me.”

So, let us trust the Lord. Trust Him in hard times, and good times. In times when you are perplexed at what He is doing, you can trust that He is in control, and that He is good. How do we know this? Calvary. The cross is all the proof that we need that we can trust in the Lord. Does God keep His promises? Yes!

So in the words of Proverbs, “Trust the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov 3:5-6, ESV). In what are you trusting? Trust in the Lord. He is our help and shield.

### Reflect and Discuss

1. Why is verse 1 central to the Christian life? How can you live a more “God-absorbed life” and a less “self-absorbed life?”
2. In light of verse 2, how do unbelievers mock the Christian faith today? How should we respond?
3. What does verse 3 teach us about our response to the taunts of unbelievers, and what does it teach us about God’s sovereignty?
4. What do verses 4-7 teach us about idols? What are common idols today? What idols do you struggle with?



5. What does verse 8 teach us about the relationship between worship and our character?
6. In light of this whole Psalm, how does the exhortation to “trust in the Lord” encourage/challenge you?
7. Explain the relationship between trusting the Lord and the blessing of the Lord in verses 9-15.
8. What do verses 17-18 teach us about making our lives count here on earth?
9. How should this Psalm affect how we pray? How should it affect our desires?
10. Take a few moments to pray through this Psalm.