

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

April 10, 2022 | *The Battle for Our Hearts*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Is faith in God becoming more challenging?

Read Psalm 115.

Ask God to open your eyes to see Him at work in your life and in the world.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Our faith in God must persevere during the times we cannot see Him at work.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Although the world will question God's presence and power, we must see through their taunts and trust in Him.

MEDITATE

"But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 115:18).

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces the lesson by considering a dilemma often used by philosophers to challenge our belief in God.

Q: *What are some things you depend on but cannot perceive through senses?*

Q: *Has the digital age made you trust more or less in things you cannot see and feel for yourself?*

There is a parable discussed among philosophers known as “the invisible gardener.” Its most popular form can be traced back to atheist Anthony Flew. Flew posed the parable like this:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well’s *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the Skeptic despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”

This parable points at the difficulty of believing in God. Why do we believe in God if we cannot verify our beliefs about Him? In Psalm 115, the psalmist faced a similar crisis. His adversaries, who had the upper hand, did not believe in his God or, at the very least, did not believe his God could compare to their own. Despite their accusations and evidence to prove otherwise, the psalmist remained resolute in his faith. Though he was currently down, he anticipated a day when his God would intervene and reveal Himself to be the true God over heaven and earth. Psalm 115 challenges us to do the same.

Q: *How do you maintain your faith while you are waiting for God to act?*

Q: *How do you maintain your faith when you are facing challenges in life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians today face a similar dilemma as the psalmist. We believe in a God who has acted decisively in the world, but when skeptics challenge our beliefs, we cannot take them to God and show Him to them. God is not like that. What we can do is argue that God is the best explanation for what we can see. Thinking about the parable of the invisible gardener, we must realize that the skeptic had the same problem as the believer. He could no more verify his beliefs about the garden than the believer could. Interestingly, Anthony Flew himself came to see this later in life. Although he denied the God of Christianity, he eventually became a deist and urged the British government to teach intelligent design in state schools. We can and must do more than this. Psalm 115 calls us to persevere in our faith while we wait for God to act on our behalf once again.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ Psalm 115 begins by acknowledging that God has more at stake in this struggle than the psalmist. After recognizing God's commitment to His own glory, the psalmist confronted the empty claims his enemies had made and declared his intent to stand firm on God's promises.

1. GOD'S CONCERN FOR HIS OWN GLORY
2. CONFRONTING THE ENEMIES' MESSAGE
3. STANDING ON GOD'S PROMISES

GOING DEEPER

+This section will expand on the points noted above and offer applications drawn from the psalmist's message.

1. GOD'S CONCERN FOR HIS OWN GLORY

▣ PSALM 115:1

🔍: *Why was the psalmist first concerned for the glory of God's name?*

🔍: *Why is God's glory foundational for His steadfast love?*

Although the psalmist was facing a faith crisis, he did not begin by defending himself or even by identifying the problem he faced. He began with God and His glory because he knew that God takes prominence before himself. The psalmist's words are amazing. He did not ask for deliverance or vindication. He only asked God to glorify His own name. The psalmist knew the key to his victory was for God to glorify Himself. If God would glorify Himself, the psalmist would be rescued because he rested in God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

❓: *Why is it good for us that God remains most concerned for His own glory?*

❓: *How can we show a deep concern for God's glory when we make requests of Him in prayer?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist's words may at first seem counterintuitive for us, but they are a good reminder that God does not revolve around us. God is first committed to Himself and to showing the world His greatness. This is good for us. A God who is committed to His own glory is a God who is worthy of our worship. This is a good reminder when we face crises and challenges. If the center of our lives remains stable and separate from us, we have a clear path forward in putting our world back together. If we are at the center of our lives, there is nothing to hold us together when disaster strikes.

2. CONFRONTING THE ENEMIES' MESSAGE

❏ PSALM 115:2-8

❓: *What is the intent of the question posed by the nations relayed by the psalmist?*

❓: *How does the psalmist's answer apply specifically to the challenge he was facing?*

As we have seen many times before, the nations fill two roles in the psalms. At times, they serve as a mechanism to multiply God's glory in the earth and at others, as in this psalm, the nations are those who have revolted against

God's authority. They are enemies of God and of the psalmist. The psalmist's words allude to a struggle in which the nations had apparently won the upper hand and now celebrated by taunting the psalmist. Their question is more of a challenge to the power of the psalmist's God than an inquiry. If the psalmist's God was so great, how had they gained the victory? The psalmist's response was that his God is precisely where He has always been. He resides in the heavens and does exactly as He pleases. The psalmist's response contains an implicit threat to the smugness of the nations. God is where He has always been and when He decides your victory is over, He will swiftly bring your downfall.

❓: *How can you avoid being caught up in moments of despair?*

❓: *Why is it wrong to assume your struggles are a sign of God's impotence?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist's determination to trust that God would have the final word is a reminder to us not to draw too firm a conclusion about what God is doing based on any occurrence in our lives. Some Christians are particularly susceptible to this mindset politically. If their side wins, they take it as a sign of God's favor on the nation. If their side loses, they wonder how God could allow the forces of evil to trample over them. Both outlooks could use a dose of reality from Psalm 115. We also see this mindset at work on a personal level. If life is going well, we think God must be happy with us. When we encounter hardships or trials, we wonder why God is angry with us. Psalm 115 encourages us to take a broader perspective. No matter what you struggle with in life, God remains where He has always been. Do not confuse your present situation, good or bad, with God's outlook on you.

❓: *Why are idols relevant to the psalmist's situation?*

❓: *How do idol worshipers become like the idols they worship?*

After responding to the taunts of the nations, the psalmist unleashed a taunt of his own. In asking "Where is your God?", the nations apparently took comfort in pointing to their idols of silver and gold. They always knew where their gods were. The psalmist rightly drew attention to how pathetic this was. Their gods were the work of their own hands, made in the image of created things, but they had none of the functionality of those things. Their

ears did not hear nor did their eyes see. Although the nations may have gained a temporary advantage over the psalmist, it is ludicrous to suggest they did so by the power of their idols. Their idols were empty and offered no hope of a future. The psalmist recognized a grave truth about the worship of idols. Those who worship empty idols are destined to become like them. Even though they have eyes, ears, mouths, and feet, they are dead on the inside, and they have no hope for the future.

Q: *Where have you seen idolatry practiced?*

Q: *How have Christians traditionally broadened the Old Testament's teaching on idolatry?*

APPLICATION POINT – An idol is anything we come to rely upon for blessing or guidance apart from God. This practice is explicitly condemned throughout the Bible. When the Bible discusses idolatry, it typically has in mind stone representations of a god. Usually, idolators believed in a higher entity that was represented by the idol, but in practice, the image always took over and became the essence of the deity. Idolatry is still practiced today throughout Africa, India, and in other locations. I have been to India and seen rows of idols lining the shelves of shops. People buy their gods from the store and set them in a place of honor in their homes. They show their devotion to their idol gods by treating them with reverence. As a Christian in these contexts, the whole practice feels so heavy. The message of Psalm 115 takes on a reality I have never experienced in America. These people depend on the idols that sit on their shelves. The God of the Bible has infinitely more to offer them.

It has become common, especially in Westernized contexts where the worship of idols is not common, to expand the Bible's teaching on idolatry to include habits that diminish our dependence and appreciation of God. We often refer to money, reputation, power, or sex as idols because people pursue these things with an energy that should be reserved for God. This expanded definition of idolatry does not speak to all the Bible has in mind when discussing idolatry. Part of the wickedness of biblical idolatry is the portrayal of God in material form, which is a degradation of His nature. Nevertheless, this expansion of idolatry is consistent with the Bible's teaching on the wickedness of idol worship and may even be alluded to in the Bible itself (Romans 1:21–23; 1 John 5:21).

3. STANDING ON GOD'S PROMISES

PSALMS 115:9–18

Q: *What three groups of people did the psalmist address in these verses?*

Q: *How does the psalmist's message affirm that God is better than idols?*

In response to the claims of idolatrous nations, the psalmist called on the people of God to trust in Him over empty and lifeless images. The God of the Bible is far greater. The idols of the nations could not speak, but God can reveal truth to His people. The idols of the nations could not move, but God can defend His people. A temporary defeat did not change this fact. God was their shield, and He was the source of their blessing.

The psalmist addressed Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord. This threefold address is meant to include everyone who worshipped the God of Israel. The house of Aaron refers to Aaron, Moses's brother, who was Israel's first high priest. His family or "house" was associated with Israel's priesthood, who served as mediators between Israel and God. They could not falter in their role as Israel's ministers. "Those who fear God" should include all Israelites but also included non-Israelites who worshipped Israel's God. Although God was primarily associated with Israel in the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of people from outside the people of Israel who worshipped Israel's God. Several of them, such as Ruth and Rahab, have major roles in the Old Testament's story.

Q: *How does God show Himself to be better than our idols today?*

Q: *Why is it crucial for church members to be free from idolatry?*

APPLICATION POINT – Israel's only hope was to remain firmly committed to their God. This was the only hope for the nations who taunted them as well. Today, the church finds itself in a similar situation. We live in a society that opposes God's rule, and their opposition to God takes the form of an idolatrous commitment against God's mandates for His creation. The world yearns for the church to join its rebellion against God and even attempts to coerce it into doing so. They taunt our commitment to God as old-fashioned, oppressive, and on the wrong side of history. Their only hope is for the church to remain committed to God by standing firm on biblical principles. As was the case for ancient Israel, the church is called to maintain the proper worship of God even if it must become countercultural to do so.

Q: *In what sense has God given the earth to the children of men?*

Q: *What is our role as stewards of God's creation?*

After creating the world and humanity, God instructed the first human couple to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it (Genesis 1:28). God has made humanity His vice-regents over His creation. We are called to rule with God's authority and transform the world into a theater of His glory. Psalm 115:16 alludes to this creation mandate. It is a reminder of what was at stake in Israel's struggle. The psalmist knew that while his struggles were tragic, they were only a part of a greater struggle encompassing the entire earth. Idolatry is a degradation of God's creation. It makes creation a parody of what God intended.

Q: *What is our role in carrying God's creation mandate forward?*

Q: *How will God's creation mandate be fulfilled?*

APPLICATION POINT – God never intended for the earth to become a playground for idolatry. The people of God are called not only to resist the allure of idolatry but to call others back so that the world may be transformed into a theater for God's glory. While the struggle will continue, the ultimate victory will be God's. After God intervenes in history and rids His creation of evil, heaven and earth will become one grand display of God's glory (Revelation 21:1–4). While the heavens are now His, one day God's glory will be known throughout the earth as it is in heaven. The people of God seek that vision by resisting idolatry and challenging the world's resistance to His rule.

Q: *What was the psalmist referring to when he described the dead who go down in silence?*

Q: *What was the psalmist's hope for the future?*

The psalmist had responded to the religious taunts of his enemies. Though they might have the upper hand at the moment, their victory was hollow because their gods were nothing. Then he made a taunt of his own. The fate of idolators was to become like the idols they worshipped, lifeless shells of what they were intended to be. They would not be able to join Israel in the praise of God. Their cries against the God of the whole earth would eventually fall silent. The psalmist, on the other hand, looked forward to an eternity praising God. The psalmist's hope and God's greatest gift to His creation is His praise.

❓: *Why do we value having a voice in the various arenas we find ourselves in?*

❓: *Why is God's praise our greatest hope?*

APPLICATION POINT – People hate feeling marginalized. One of the worst feelings in the world is to see something out of order and have no recourse to restore it. It is even worse when the disorder and disfunction lie within us. But that is the fate of unbelievers in the world. We do not escape the margins of life by abandoning the commandments of God but by embracing the saving grace of Jesus Christ. While we may at times find ourselves at the cruel mercy of a world that is hostile to the God we serve, we can have confidence in knowing that one day eternity will begin, their rebellion will be over, and our voices will sing the eternal praises of God. Like the psalmist, we find our hope in the eternal praise of God, not the momentary comforts of the world.

NEXT STEPS

The psalmist looked forward to a time when God's praises would resound unimpeded throughout the world, but he was struggling during a momentary victory by enemies. Many scholars believe Psalm 115 was intended to function as a reader-response hymn. The reader would read parts of the psalm and then the others would respond to him with a refrain. This hints at the importance of community when the enemies of God seem to have the upper hand. Our commitment to God is stronger through mutual encouragement. Take the themes of Psalm 115 and similar psalms and construct a reader response hymn addressing the current needs of your church. Take some time when your group gathers to encourage one another in the faith by reading through some of these exercises.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, you have more at stake in this world than I ever will. Help me to rest in your commitment to glorifying yourself in this world.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the hope I have in you. Apart from you, I would have only an eternity of marginalization and despair. In your grace, I look forward to the eternal praise of the Father.

God, help me to take the steps needed to rid my heart of idols. Help me identify the idols in my life. Help me repent of idolatry and embrace you as the unhindered object of my praise.

Father, help me to stand on the promises of your Word. I have a surer hope than anything my current circumstances may or may not reveal.