

# When the Problems are Insurmountable, and You are Distressed, Weakened and Greatly Discouraged

## *Psalm 115*

### INTRODUCTION AND OTHER REMARKS

#### Me

One of the “Egyptian Hallel” Psalms likely sung at the Passovers after the exile. See notes on 113 for more information. LEADERSHIP: It may be that I do well to think about this as a leadership psalm. As Allen says, “A priest’s encouragement,”<sup>1</sup> or how a leader leads discouraged people through times of discouragement and suffering. What was the result of this Psalm?

#### Word Study

The pair “love and faithfulness” occurs again here.

#### Leupold

Aside from this more or less formal feature, as to contents the psalm is unique in that for the first time it presents a strong polemic against idols. The section involved (vv. 3—8) appears again in Ps. 135:15—18 and is not entirely unique in the Old Testament Scriptures. Compare similar briefer utterances in Dent. 4:28; 28:36; Hab. 2:18; Jer. 2:8; 16:19; Is. 42:17; 57:13; Ps. 96:5. The obvious note of sarcasm, here legitimately introduced, appears also in the lengthier accounts of the manufacture of idols that Isaiah offers in 40: 19f.; 44:9—17. The apocryphal book of the Wisdom of Solomon has some similar passages: 13:10—19; 14:12—21; 15:7—17.<sup>2</sup>

#### Allen

But it is clear that different voices feature in the psalm, which is consequently a liturgy. Vv 9—11 are best understood as a priest’s encouragement (cf. 27:14) and an antiphonal response (cf. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 498; Weiser, *Psalms*, 716—17) involving another singer or choir. Vv 12—13 originally presuppose a prophetic voice (cf. 85:9-14 [8—13]) or perhaps a priestly one. Taking up the formal language of vv 9—11 and identifying himself sympathetically with the congregation in v 12, the speaker reports Yahweh’s positive hearing of the complaint and can declare the certainty of blessing.<sup>3</sup> ... Psalm 115 is a stirring lesson to the people of God in every age concerning survival in an alien, hostile environment. It teaches the necessity of rising above life’s questions and paradoxes on God-given wings of prayer and faith. The reality of a relationship with God imparts strong resistance to rival human ideologies and creates a hope so certain to believing hearts that its prospect can already induce praise (cf. Rom 5:2; 8:88-39; 1 Pet 1:3-9).<sup>4</sup>

### BACKGROUND

#### Me

Is this exilic in a similar sense as Psalm 137 appears to be? What was it like coming back from exile?

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 797

<sup>3</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, pp. 108,109.

<sup>4</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 111.

## Leupold

If we set the time of the composition of this psalm shortly after the return from the Babylonian Captivity, this feature of the psalm is most readily understood. For during their residence in Babylon the captives had had ample opportunity to observe both the prevalence and the futility of idol worship and to reflect thankfully on the enlightened position that Israel held on this question. For that matter, the folly of idolatry must have become strikingly apparent.<sup>5</sup>

## Allen

The background of this cultic liturgy is a situation of national demoralization, probably longstanding in view of v 14 (Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 498). A precise cultic setting cannot be determined. Luke (*ITQ* 34 [1967] 34 7—57) suggested that it was the renewal of the covenant at the Feast of Tabernacles. He stressed—probably too much—the renunciation of false gods in vv 4—7, comparing Josh 24:14—15, 20. As to date the psalm may be pre-exilic (S. Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien* 5, 45, who posited either the early post-exilic or the late pre-exilic period; Weiser, *Psalms*, 715 [even if proselytes are indicated in vv 11, 13]). But more probably v 14 reflects the small population of postexilic Judah (cf. Ezra 9:8, 15). Kraus (*Psalmen*, 964) and Preuss (*Verspottung*, 252) regard the rationalistic, matter-of-fact way in which idols are lampooned in vv 4—8 as evidence of the psalm being later than the heated controversy of Second Isaiah.<sup>6</sup>

## 115:1

## Leupold

It might be suggested that the order of the thoughts of this petition should proceed in about the following fashion: Deliver us, O Lord, for the nations are dishonoring Thy name because of our helpless state and are taunting us and saying, “Where is their God?” Help us on the basis of Thy steadfast love and faithfulness. The glory will then be Thine, not ours, for we cannot save ourselves. But the psalmist is concerned about the honor of his God and, therefore, puts the last thought first, leaves the plea for help unstated though implied, and reveals the basis on which such help may be anticipated from God: His steadfast love and His faithfulness. The result is that the first verse has become a classic expression of how to give God all honor and glory and disavow man’s achievements in God’s sight. Furthermore, as a result of this order of thought careless reading of the psalm has overlooked the fact that this is really a plea for help which is rather uniquely stated.<sup>7</sup>

## Allen

**God’s people in post-exilic Judah are in a state of distress and weakness.** They bring their trusting petition to him in the temple. They appeal to his honor in vv 1—2, referring obliquely to their needs by citing the mocking taunt of surrounding pagan states. Yahweh’s reputation is at stake, and this is the community’s concern rather than any self-seeking, as they crave his intervention. They take their stand upon the promises of God and his covenant relationship with them as grounds for hope of deliverance. Taking the sarcastic question of v 2 literally, they affirm that their covenant God occupies the supreme place of supernatural power. At this point the psalm corresponds to the Christological passage Eph 1:20—23. They continue their praise indirectly by dismissing the gods of other nations as earthly and man-made idols.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 797.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 797.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 110.

**115:2****Leupold**

The fact that the nations are represented as saying, “Where is their God?” shows how desperate Israel’s lot must have been at the time. Outsiders could not detect that the Lord was with His people or doing anything for them. Observe the same taunt in Ps. 79:10 and 42:3. But whenever such disparaging remarks are being made, the glory of God is being indicted. For, in the last analysis, He it is alone who can help and has valiantly supported His people at all times. This complete brushing aside of the glory of man in favor of the glory of God finds expression elsewhere in the Scriptures: see Dan. 9:18, 19; Is. 48:9, 11; Ezek. 20:9, 14; 36:21—23.<sup>9</sup>

**115:3****Leupold**

The God who has not been acting but has been appealed to do something fills His devout children with great confidence, a confidence which is all the stronger when the utter impotence of the idols is considered. Thus in this section the first verse is a fine statement of the undoubted and boundless power of God. To provide a dark background against which the brightness of this truth stands out the more strikingly, the remaining verses sketch at length and almost tauntingly the total incapacity of the idols till in the last verse both idols and their worshipers are lumped together as being of one kind. ¶By the statement: “But our God is in the heavens,” the writer does not create a deistic being who is removed from the earth as a scene of activity. The opposite is rather the case. Even as Christ has ascended far above all heavens that He might fill all things, so this claim is the equivalent of saying: He sits enthroned on high, where only He may sit who rules all things in heaven and on earth. The second member of the verse requires such an interpretation. For “He does whatever He pleases” does not connote caprice or unpredictability. It assumes that what He pleases is always good and perfect and asserts that He infallibly carries out His desires. “He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased” (*KJ*) does not make this statement say enough. It removes the situation into the past and predicates nothing about the future. The Hebrew perfect presents a case of general validity (a gnomic aorist). The contrast between this unlimited capacity of God and the total incapacity of the idols could scarcely be stated more strongly<sup>10</sup>

**115:4****Allen**

There follows a satire of divine images as dumb, blind, deaf and devoid of any powers their personal form might indicate. Yahwism was unique in the ancient Near East as an aniconic religion: the community’s faith is bolstered by exploiting the basic difference here. It is an implicit testimony to the power of the true God and to the potential of those who trust in him (for v 8 cf. 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5).<sup>11</sup>

**115:5****115:6****115:7****115:8**


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<sup>9</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 798.

<sup>10</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 799

<sup>11</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 110

**115:9****Leupold**

At this point the assumption that successive lines were appointed to be sung by different groups becomes almost imperative otherwise the change of person from the second to the third cannot be accounted for. Whether the ones entrusted with the first line of each verse were the Levites might be questioned. In any case, the Levites were qualified instructors of the nation, and these lines are instruction. The lesson to be impressed, as the threefold repetition indicates, is the lesson: “Trust in the Lord.” This comes with fine propriety after the untrustworthiness of the idols has set the trustworthiness of God into clear light. The reason the response is not worded in the same person as is the summons may, as some interpreters have suggested, be due to the fact that “there is a note of humility, a feeling of being far removed” (*Abstandsgefuehl*) that prompts men to speak thus. On this assumption we could, however, dispense with supposition that a separate choir is necessary to render the second half of the verse.<sup>12</sup>

**Allen**

A priestly voice intervenes, taking up the theme of trust and applying it to the troubled congregation. He calls upon laity and fellow priests alike, upon the whole religious community, to exercise faith. He is backed by an assurance from (an)other voice(s) that Yahweh is able and willing to defend them. Fuel for faith materializes in vv 12—13: another temple minister, probably a prophet, declares that he has received an assurance that Yahweh will honor his covenant promises. He can affirm that the community which has heeded the call to trust may confidently expect divine blessing. He seeks to bring comfort to their hearts by repeating the verb “bless” (cf. 121:7, 8). A priest, perhaps the figure of vv 9a, 10a, 11a, now imparts this blessing (cf. Num 6:23—27), specifying its content as a gift of abundant life to the numerically diminished community and focusing upon the Giver, the traditional source of blessing and power. The renewal of an ancient promise of increase in population (cf. Gen 22:17; Deut 1:11) meets them at the point of their present need.<sup>13</sup>

**115:10****115:11****Leupold**

The majority of writers of the present time refer the expression they “that fear the Lord” to the proselytes, as *Rashi* stated. True as it is that proselytes are referred to as early as I Kings 8:41 and again in Is. 56:6; and true as it is that they are to be found in the New Testament, practically under the same name (Acts 13:16; 16:14; 18:7, 13), yet, though the debate still rages hotly, *McCullough* has effectively disposed of this supposition by pointing out that “it is improbable. . . that proselytes were present in the temple in sufficient numbers to form a special group of worshippers.” ¶Those who have appealed for the Lord’s help have now been admonished to believe that He will grant it.<sup>14</sup>

**115:12****Leupold, vv 12,13**


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<sup>12</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 800.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 801.

The recipients of this blessing are now listed. They are the same three groups that were mentioned in vv. 9—11. The concluding phrase “both small and great” seems to refer to young people and old people. Since the bestowal of the blessing was reserved for priests, the assumption is not unwarranted that in public worship the *priests* may have chanted these verses.<sup>15</sup>

### Allen

As the priest took up the congregation’s word in v 9, now they smoothly take up his words in praise. Yahweh claims for himself the divine sphere of the heavens and so he possesses transcendent power, they reaffirm (cf. v 3). He it is who has entrusted the earth to mankind as his stewards. The uncompromising implication, which they can boldly pit against foreign political dominance, is that he is the sole God and has a unique claim to man’s vocal gratitude. This, rather than making idols (v 4), should be man’s concern! True, the privilege is temporary according to the general tenor of OT faith.<sup>16</sup>

### **115:13**

### **115:14**

### Leupold

These two verses are not as far removed from the general purpose of the psalm as it may seem at first glance. For one major disadvantage of the nation of Israel after its re-establishment was that it was few in number. Healthy growth in numbers was in Old Testament time: always regarded as a signal blessing from God. This marked a basic need of the nation. It could never be strong if it were not sufficient strong in numbers. Here the word of blessing includes the present generation and those to come. On the whole the statement is reminiscent of Deut. 1:11. To this initial blessing is added a more comprehensive one which, by specifying nothing, includes everything needful and leaves it to the wisdom of the almighty God “who made heaven and earth” what He would be pleased to bestow. This statement seems to be reminiscent of Gen. 14:19.<sup>17</sup>

### **115:15**

### **115:16**

### **115:17**

### **115:18**

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<sup>15</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 801.

<sup>16</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 802.

## **When the Problems are Insurmountable, and You are Distressed, Weakened and Greatly Discouraged**

### *Psalm 115*

#### **BACKGROUND**

Many scholars place it in the post-exilic situation when Israel was being set free and allowed to go back to land and homes that had been devastated, to an economy that was in ruins, to a county that had been raped by the pillages of war and neglect. People were discouraged, there was so much to do, and resources seemed so thin. The throbbing long-term demoralizing and depressing problems led to a sense of hopelessness. To top it off, the taunts of the nations around them was stinging in its reminder of their problems.

**In the midst of any problem, people need to be reminded of the main issue, v1.**

*The issue isn't so much of what the problem has done to someone, as great as that may be. The issue is how to live life in a way that reflects on God and his glory, v 1.*

A person's hurt and discouragement may be great.

The bigger issue is how to handle hurt and sorrow in a way that please God and bring him glory. Life isn't about me, it is about God.

*Who is God, what has he said, what has he done and what does that mean to me?*

"Love and faithfulness," v 1c.

**In the midst of problems, people many receive searing taunts and verbal discouragement, v 2.**

*You'll never make it. It is hopeless. God has let you down. If God is good, why has he let this happen to you? Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic.*

**You need to be reminded of your God's greatness and your taunter's God's inability, 3-8.**

*Who is God, What has he said, what has he said, what has he done and what does that mean to me?*

He is in control, v 3 alive, powerful, in heaven.

*And therefor worthy of your trust, praise and obedience.*

They are dead, lifeless, and it is foolish to trust in them, 4-8.

## All people great and small are encouraged to trust in Jehovah, 9-13.

*House of Israel, Aaron, “those who fear”*

Trust, 9-11

*Take God at his word and act accordingly*

He is a help and a shield, 9-11

*He aids in difficult times*

*He protects in difficult times*

He remembers, 12

*Does not imply that he forgot, but he chooses to act according to his promises.*

He blesses, v 13

*He chooses to act kindly, positively in ways that are genuinely helpful*

Small and great

*Not just super saints he helps, but all kinds of saints he helps.*

In the form of a prayer, the people are reminded that the Lord will “add” to needy, humble people,<sup>18</sup> -14-15

*It isn’t hard for the maker of heaven and earth to meet the needs of his people, 15.*

God made his domain and man’s, v 15.

Therefore, give him glory and praise, he is worthy!

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<sup>18</sup> Remember the statement of Psalm 113:7-9

**All people are encouraged to praise Jehovah now while they are in their God-given domain, 16-18.**

*God is in heaven, ruling wisely and perfectly from that place, v 16a*

*For now, man is called on to live life and bring praise to God on this earth (v1), 16b.*

*Dead people can offer no praise to God on this earth, v 17.*

*Whether things are going well or not, while man has life and breath, now is the time to praise God. This is his chief objective, to praise God and enjoy him, 18.*

**By trusting him, 9-11**

*He is loving and faithful, v 1.*

*He is a help and shield, 9-11.*

*He will remember and bless, 12-13.*

**By seeking God' glory, not simply man's relief, v 1.**

*The prime issue is not relief, it is the Glory of God!*

**But God does grant relief in his time and way to those who trust in him.**

**God is good to bring these trails into our lives to remind us of the truth of verse 1.**