

The collection of praise hymns known as the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 113-118) are framed by three acrostic psalms (Ps 111, 112, 119). The Hallel psalms were sung during the celebration of the Jewish festivals, especially the Passover. Traditionally, Psalms 113 and 114 were used before the Passover and Ps 115-118 after.¹ We may picture Jesus and the disciples singing these psalms as they worshiped together for the last time before Christ's Passion (Mark 14:26). These psalms prepared Jesus and the disciples for the dramatic shift in the epicenter of redemption from the Exodus to the Cross. On Good Friday and Easter Sunday salvation history reached its defining moment and the psalms gave the disciples insight and perspective, even as they do to believers today. The Passover liturgy has become a Eucharist liturgy, giving believers understanding and confidence as they face new challenges and idolatries. "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."²

The psalmist builds a case for continuous praise by exalting the divine testimony over our frail egos (Ps 115:1), by exposing the emptiness of a pagan idolatrous culture (Ps 115:2-8), by exhorting believers to trust in the Lord and receive his blessings (Ps 115:9-13), and finally by expressing the Lord's benediction, followed by our commitment to extol the Lord "both now and forevermore" (Ps 115:14-18). The psalmist balances a significant cultural critique of pagan idolatry with a strategic call for humility, trust, and praise. His spiritual direction frames the problem of cultural alienation with a call to self-denial, resilient trust, and meaningful praise.

It's Not About Us

*Not to us, Lord, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.*

Psalm 115:1

The unusually cryptic statement at the beginning suggests that the psalmist wants to get one thing straight right away. The psalmist will go on to emphasize that the Lord is our all-sufficient help and shield. He is our blessing, the source of our flourishing, and the reason we praise him. But first, he kicks our egos to the curb. The critique of idolatry that follows is not intended to give us a sense of cultural superiority or a martyr complex. Believers are directed to subvert their own egos and to resist confusing the glory of God with their own self-serving purposes. A classic case of an ego directed, self-serving defense of God's glory, was when Moses, struck the rock even though he had been ordered by the Lord to speak to the rock. His response to the people was filled with anger, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (Num 20:10). This illustrates how easy it is for us to merge God's glory and our ego into a mass of toxic hate for the very people we have been called to love.

¹ Wilcock, Psalms, 168.

² Allen, Psalms, 111.

The poetic brevity of the psalmist's epithet is disproportionate to the extent of the problem. We have made the clash with culture about us and we have taken the world's opposition personally. We make it about ourselves when we feel threatened and fearful of the pagan culture that surrounds us; when we feel it is our right, even our duty, to vent our anger and express our hate against those who violate the will of God. The self-absorbed wilful ways of the disciples before Pentecost are very different from the self-sacrificing boldness of the disciples after Pentecost.

The apostle Peter took the "not-for-our-sake" principle to heart when he wrote his letter to believers who were resident aliens in Asia. He counseled these believers who felt like foreigners in their homeland to "live such good lives among pagans that, though they accused you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet 2:12). His strategy for cultural engagement stressed submission and sacrifice as a positive and constructive approach. Instead of an embattled and embittered ego there was a resilient saint who sought the glory of God. To borrow the words of Oswald Chambers, the Lord says in effect, "*Identify yourself with My interests in other people,*" not, "*Identify Me with your interests in other people.*"³

There is a striking parallel between Jesus and the disciples praying as they left the upper room, "Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory," and Jesus praying in Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, takes this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The same understanding of God and his glory governs both prayers. When we pray for the name of God to be glorified we are submitting our will to God's will – our ways to God's ways. This is an essential first step in a biblical cultural critique.

Secular Idols

*Why do the nations say,
"Where is their God?"
Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
But 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,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.*

Psalm 115:2-8

³ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest* (Dodd, Mead & Company: New York, 1935), 292 (10/18).

The psalmist uses the world's question, "Where is their God?" to expose the cynicism and skepticism of the world. The psalmist challenges the premise of the question. Evidence for the living God abounds in his glory and in his love and faithfulness. But the nations insist on questioning this most obvious truth. They have no right to play so dumb, contends the psalmist, especially when the foolish question is coming from idol makers. They have taken an image, and by human design and skill, crafted a substitute for the living God. Idols can be either metal objects or mental constructs. Images sculpted in exquisite detail are no more or less idolatrous than mental concepts which contend that the earth is a speck of cosmic debris. The psalmist mocks the logic of a people who put their hope in inanimate statutes of wood and gold. But is ancient idolatry any more illogical than modern idolatry's assertion that the potter was made by the pot and the blacksmith was made by the horseshoe?

It is not breaking news to say that we live in the secular age where believing in God does not come easy. Today, belief in God is just one option among many. Exclusive humanism and expressive individualism are the radically new options "in the marketplace of beliefs, a vision for life in which anything beyond the immanent is eclipsed."⁴ We have gone from everyone believing in God, in at least in some kind of nominal way, to "the courage to face the fact that the universe is without transcendent meaning, without eternal purpose, without supernatural significance." In our late modern culture, materialism equates with maturity, and everyone follows their own spiritual inspiration. There is no determinative perspective outside the self. We have gone from a view of the person as body and soul in community to the isolated, imperial self, who must generate his or her own meaning. We have become a collection of individuals with a low view of human flourishing. As Anthony Bourdain famously said. "Your body is not a temple, it's an amusement park. Enjoy the ride." We have shifted from the God-created cosmos to a material universe produced by time and chance. This dramatic shift in perspective means that people are no longer even asking the question cynically, "Where is their God?" The nations have become like their idols, senseless. Their idols can't speak, see, hear, smell, touch, and move, and they cannot reason, understand, believe, and worship.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had the courage of his convictions, even if those convictions drove him mad. He sought "to think pessimism through to its depths and to liberate it" from Christianity, which he believed was an essentially cruel religion that asked people to sacrifice for nothing.⁵ Nietzsche argued there is no God. There is no divine promise. Salvation is a lie. Hope in anything other than the will to power is an illusion. Nietzsche drove skepticism and cynicism to its fatal and nihilistic conclusion. What other skeptics whisper, Nietzsche shouted from the rooftops. All talk of motive, purpose, freedom, and morality is meaningless. "I shall repeat a hundred times; we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!"⁶

Nietzsche gave narcissism its marching orders. If men, and Nietzsche meant men because he denigrated women as inferior beings, were true to their instincts they would reverence superior rank and the hardness of heart born of unfavorable circumstances. "Egoism belongs to the nature

⁴ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 22-23.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 56, 258.

⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. 16, 213.

of a noble soul.”⁷ “The noble soul has reverence for itself.”⁸ For Nietzsche there were only two kinds of people, the exalted and the exploited, the proud and the humble, the powerful and the petty, the hardened and “the doglike people who allow themselves to be maltreated.”⁹ Humility was unbecoming the noble soul. To exploit and dominate was a worthy goal for the man of superior rank and self-made self-worth.

Nietzsche followed-up his famous “God is dead” declaration with a question, “How shall we comfort ourselves . . . What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?”¹⁰ Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, two top tier philosophers from Berkeley and Harvard, claim that living in the secular age means admitting that there are no deep and hidden truths to the universe, much less revealed truths. But that does not mean we have to live in despair, especially when we have sports. According Dreyfus and Kelly the key to a hopeful life has more to do with riding a wave than abiding in the truth. Watching Roger Federer play tennis on the sacred grass of Wimbledon conveys a sense of the sacred.¹¹ Like a wave whooshing up, such an experience offers a moment of exhilaration and leaves a positive memory in its wake. In the whooshing up, Dreyfus and Kelly explain, we catch a glimpse of focused meaning. A meaning that lies both outside of us and within us.

Not surprisingly, the authors claim that this new sense of transcendence, this whooshing up, to use their expression, can be found most readily in sports. “Sports may be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily.”¹² It is beyond dispute, they claim, that sport now plays a kind of religious role in America. “There is no essential difference, really, in how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass. . .”¹³ That is not to say that sport is sacred in “any absolute sense. But there are moments in sport. . .during which something so overpowering happens that it wells up before you as a palpable presence and carries you along as on a powerful wave. . .That is the moment when the sacred shines.”¹⁴ In the modern pantheon of American deities sports ranks alongside money, sex, and power.

One simple statement of faith refutes the pagan cynicism and spiritual blindness: “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Ps 115:3). The psalmist begins there and then ends with an observation: “Those who make them [idols] will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” He sets up a contrast between God in heaven and man-made idols. It comes down to “trust.” Who are you going to trust? The God of heaven or the idol you made. It’s your call? The psalmist warns that we become what we love and trust.

⁷ Ibid., sec. 265, 405.

⁸ Ibid., sec.287, 418.

⁹ Ibid., sec. 260, 395.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, section 125, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated and Edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

¹¹ Dreyfus, Hubert and Kelly, Sean Dorrance. *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*. New York: Free Press, 2011, 195.

¹² Drefus & Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 192.

¹³ Ibid., 192-3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 194.

Trust in the Lord

*All you Israelites, 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 him, trust in the Lord –
he is their help and shield.
The Lord remembers us and will bless us:
He will bless his people Israel,
he will bless the house of Aaron,
he will bless those who fear the Lord –
small and great alike.
May the Lord cause you to flourish,
both you and your children.
May you be blessed by the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 115:9-15

The psalmist’s strategy for cultural engagement and his method for dealing with idolatry is disarmingly simple: Trust in the Lord. Given the surrounding culture’s skepticism and pervasive idolatry, we might expect a more complicated and involved answer. But the psalmist offers no agenda for changing the world nor a plan for refuting idolatry. Instead, he makes a direct appeal to the people of Israel, to the House of Aaron, and to the person who fears the Lord, to trust in the Lord. Each of his appeals to trust is answered antiphonally by a choir singing, “he is their help and shield.” There is no need for strategists or consultants or experts or even theologians. Everything gets worked out in worship. The fundamental need of the hour is to trust in the Lord.

The psalmists and the apostles were surprisingly simple in their call for faithfulness. The apostle John in the Book of Revelation describes at length the messy complexity of evil, but when it comes to giving spiritual direction to those who fear the Lord the challenge is always basic and uncomplicated. No one can claim confusion over the diagnosis and prescription. Five staccato imperatives make up Christ’s renewal agenda for the Church of Sardis: “Wake up! Strengthen what remains! Remember! Obey! Repent!” (Rev 3:1-6). The Holy Spirit does not belabor his spiritual direction. If we are trusting in the Lord, we will do what the author of Hebrews exhorted us to do and fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2). The path of discipleship is clear and straightforward and there is not reason to make it difficult. “A mind cluttered by excuses,” writes Dallas Willard, “may make a mystery of discipleship, or it may see it as something to be dreaded. But there is no mystery about desiring and intending to be like someone that is a very common thing. And if we intend to be like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves.”¹⁵ The “secret” to trusting in the Lord is simple. “It is the intelligent, informed, unyielding resolve to live as Jesus lived in all aspects of life.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Willard, “Discipleship,” 25.

¹⁶ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 10.

The parallel response to trusting in the Lord is the blessing of the Lord. The Lord is no one's debtor. He meets and exceeds all expectations. The poet makes sure that each expression of trust is matched and exceeded by the blessing of the Lord. There is a dynamic relationship between trusting in the Lord and being blessed by the Lord. Trusting believers place their faith in the Lord. They center their lives around the Lord. Miroslav Volf writes, “. . . Human beings flourish and are truly happy when they center their lives on God, the source of everything that is true, good, and beautiful. As to all created things, they too ought to be loved. But the only way to properly love them and fully enjoy them is to love them ‘in God.’”¹⁷

In the tradition of the Aaronic blessing, the psalmist emphasizes the relational blessings of the Lord (Num 6:23-27). The abundant life (John 10:10) does not primarily consist in the world's calculation of wealth, but in the richness of social (“small and great alike”) and generational (“both you and your children”) harmony. The psalmist leaves the same impression of God's great provision as the apostle does when he prays, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (Eph 3:20-21).

Forevermore

*The highest heavens belong to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to mankind.
It is not the dead who praise the Lord,
those who go down to the place of silence;
it is we who extol the Lord,
both now and forevermore.
Praise the Lord. [Hallelujah]
Psalm 115:16-18*

The psalmist celebrates the transcendent majesty of the Lord and recognizes humanity's divinely appointed stewardship of the earth. This straightforward truth flies in the face of the secular age with its doctrine of “immanentization” and “mundanization.”¹⁸ The late modern self contends that life is enclosed in material, nature-alone world and a life lived well has nothing to do with “the Maker of heaven and earth” (Ps 115:15). On the contrary, the psalmist's expansive horizon includes the “highest heavens” and “now and forevermore.” Embedded in his comprehension of transcendence and eternity is the conviction that death does not end all and that silence is not the last word. Those who extol the Lord will go on praising both now and forevermore. The psalmist's insights on eternity and everlasting life may be vague but they are true and in the course of salvation history the hope of the resurrection will be revealed. “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. . . . For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality” (1 Cor 15:42-44, 53).

¹⁷ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 58.

¹⁸ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 31,48.