

Sermon | Psalm 115

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[0 : 00] To many of us, this is just an ordinary warm day in a warm building, but to some of you, this is bringing back fond memories, right? National Baptist Memorial Church was pretty warm.

And then who here was a part of Advent when we were in Casa? Yeah, a few, right? Right. The advantage of that building was that there was a hole in the roof, so some of the air could escape out. So, yeah, God is good. And they're checking on making sure the AC is working well.

They're going to see if they can turn it on or something. They're on it. They're on it. We are almost halfway through our study of Psalms 113 to 118. These psalms are called the Hallel Psalms. Hallel means praise. Psalm 113 begins with the command, praise the Lord, or hallelujah.

Today's psalm, Psalm 115, ends with the same command, praise the Lord. Psalm 113 set the stage, asking who is like the Lord our God? We saw how great God is, and yet the great God stoops down to care for the poor and the weak. Psalm 114 shows how God's greatness and his stoopiness, his imminence. Stupidness, that's a theological term. His imminence, yeah, was demonstrated in the Exodus, okay? God rescued Israel from slavery, and then he descended and dwelled in the midst of his people. Today we arrive at Psalm 115. At the center of this psalm is a scathing commentary on the practice of idolatry. It would be easy to let ourselves off the hook here. After all, there's not many in this room who are going about carving silver and gold into statues and sending them around our house and bowing down and worshiping those statues. Yet, when we peer into our hearts, we realize we do this all the time. All the time. Martin Luther wrote, anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say that really is your God. So what about you? What does your heart truly rely and depend on? Where do you look for security, meaning, fulfillment, happiness, or comfort? When you're pressured or tense, what is the thing you go to?

What is the thing that if you finally got it, you think would finally make you happy? We know we should say God to all those questions, but our hearts usually identify something else.

[2 : 55] Today we're going to look at those idols and how we can be free of them. But first we'll look deeper into this psalm. We're going to look at the psalm, look at our idols, and see how we can be free of them.

Let's pray. We need your help to understand your word, Lord. Without your spirit, we are blind to your glory, deaf to your word, and incapable of speaking back your praises. Without your spirit, we are too prideful to admit what's wrong with us, and then to experience your healing and forgiveness.

So open our hearts to your word. Open your word to our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. England had just won an historic battle against all odds. Greatly outnumbered on the fields of Agincourt, England relied on its archers and light infantry to defeat a much larger and heavily armored French army. In this dramatic portrayal of these events, Shakespeare records Henry V being given news of their victory. And Henry says, do we all holy rites let there be sung the non nobis and the te deum.

All the psalms have Latin names to them, and this psalm, Psalm 115, is named the non nobis. It's the first three words. Non nobis domine. Not to us, O Lord. This is one of the most famous psalms from the Bible. It's appeared throughout history to celebrate victories and to give God credit for them. It was sung in the fields of Agincourt. History records that when it was sung, the soldiers were required to bend the knee at the first verse. When the bill was signed in England abolishing the slave trade, William Wilberforce meditated on the first verse of this psalm. However, when this psalm was written, Israel had not just secured a victory or seen God recently work on its behalf. Israel seemed to be in a bad place. How do we know? Look at verse two. They're being taunted by their enemies. The person writing the psalm was offering praise to God in expectation that God would deliver them, that he would be their help and shield, that he would richly bless Israel in the future, that he would do what the gods of the other nations can't do, for those gods are dumb, inanimate objects made by human hands.

Those who trust in God will flourish. Those who trust in idols will become like the idols, dead. The psalm, and many like it, are very instructive. They offer praise to God from a place of expectation and longing and need. They're statements of trust. God has proved himself for me and to us over and over, and he will prove himself again, and I will not put my trust in anything else.

[5 : 41] Now, when we read and interpret a psalm, we ask two questions. First, why was it written? That helps us understand the psalm. The second is, why was it put in the psalms here? Like, why is Psalm 115 not Psalm 82 or 148? Well, let's look at what becomes, what comes before this psalm.

Psalm 113, we looked at it two weeks ago. It answered the question, or asked the question, who is like the Lord our God? Well, certainly not these little idols of silver and gold.

The psalm right before this, Psalm 114, recounts the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. And so this psalm stands as a judgment on the idolatry of Egypt and on the idolatry of the nations surrounding Israel. It brings to mind the ten plagues. Moses had received instruction to tell Pharaoh to release his people from slavery. Pharaoh refused, and so God sent plagues as judgment on Egypt. And they seem a bit random at first when you look at the plagues. A swarm of locusts, turning a river to blood, sending frogs. I mean, I would have sent dragons, fire-breathing dragons.

That seems like a more dramatic demonstration of judgment. But God was bringing judgment on the idolatry of Egypt, okay? So they worshipped the Nile as a source of life, so God made it a source of death.

They worshipped the sun, so God made the sun dark and brought a profound darkness on the land. They worshipped frogs. So how do you like these frogs, Egypt? And ultimately, Pharaoh himself, who viewed himself as a god, was judged. Sweeping judgment and victory over all of Egypt's idols.

[7 : 30] And yet, throughout its history, Israel constantly gave into the temptation to adopt the gods of the nations around it. They set up idols all over their own land and worshipped them. I mean, they had just escaped from Egypt, and they had made it into the wilderness when they had collected all their gold, melted it down, fashioned a golden calf, and said, Israel, this is the god who brought you out of Egypt.

This is your god. Idolatry would plague Israel throughout its history. Now, idolatry has two major consequences among many.

The first is idolatry is dehumanizing. When God created humanity, male and female, he made them in his own image. They were to reflect back God's own image. And turning away from God, that image and reflection becomes marred. Israel, in its worship of God and in its obedience to God, was supposed to fulfill its original intention for humanity. But when Israel worshipped that which is not God, the image of God was reduced in themselves. Idolatry is dehumanizing. It says so in verse 8, right? Those who make idols become like them. So do all who trust in them. The second big problem with Israel's idolatry is that it derailed the mission God gave to Israel. Israel was to declare to the nations that they stood under God's judgment. But God would show mercy to those who turned to him. Instead, the exact opposite thing happened. Instead of calling the nations to repentance, Israel would adopt the lifestyles of the nations around them, their beliefs, their idolatry. The image of God was not filling the earth.

The glory of God was not being proclaimed. The worth of God was not being cherished. Come on, Israel. But Israel is a mirror to us. It's a mirror for us. When we see Israel, we see ourselves. When we see them guilty of, we know ourselves are guilty. We find ourselves dehumanized by giving the honor that is due to the creator to created things. We find our mission as the church constantly getting derailed. We've looked at what the psalm says about idolatry. So let's answer the question, how are we guilty of idolatry? What are our idols? Remember Luther's quote from earlier.

He was reflecting on the first commandment, do not have other gods before me. Luther writes, a god is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is your God. Three prominent gods in our culture today, three things that our culture sets its heart upon, are money, sex, and power. These things are inherently good things.

[10 : 47] They were created by God for us to enjoy and to use for his glory. They are intrinsic to our being made in God's image. Idolatry happens when a good thing becomes an ultimate good.

We derive our worth from these things. We feel like we can't be happy unless we have them. Incidentally, we find we can never have enough of them. They never keep their promises except to destroy.

And when they're threatened, we move to protect them fiercely. They're dehumanizing. Poor I was and sought for rich is something that would satisfy. But the dust I gathered around me only mocked my soul's loud cry.

Money, sex, and power. Those are the big three, but there's plenty of others. Good things. Things that we can turn into idols. Success, reputation, comfort, order, ease, work, being right.

How do we discover our idols? I'll suggest four ways to do that. Two questions and two other things. Four ways to ask. Four ways to uncover what our idols are. The first is a question. What do you think about when you daydream?

[12 : 03] What does your mind go to? Another way to ask that is what is the last thing you think of before you fall asleep? Try that tonight as an exercise. Our thoughts often go to that one thing that will finally bring us happiness.

If I can just get this one thing, or this one experience, or this one person, then I'll be happy. Second, second way to unearth your idols is when do you find yourself getting angry?

Usually an idol lies underneath our anger. For me, it happens at around 9 30 at night, most nights in our house. It's after my kids should already be in bed and be asleep. We have four boys. Three of them share a room.

And two of those boys are extroverts. So it is impossible. It will never happen. That our boys, all of them, will be asleep by 9 30. And yet somehow, I'm surprised when a boy comes down and he's still awake.

I act surprised and indignant. What are you still doing awake? Oh, you're thirsty? You're not allowed to be thirsty. It's 9 30. Go to bed.

[13 : 22] And then five minutes later, down the steps, what is it? Oh, there's a fly in my room and I can't get to sleep. A fly. A fly? Man up. It's just a fly. Get over it. Because nature. Now go to bed.

The parents in the comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, used to seem like unrealistic to me until I became a parent. And they are a sea of calm compared to what I am at 9 30 at night.

Because I've made a big idol out of Ease. Ease. Ease is the idol that I take out every night after my kids go to bed. Set it on the TV. I offer to it a drink offering, usually gin and tonic.

Like, I've become a grandma already. Turn on Netflix. I browse Netflix. I don't even, like, often actually turn on a film.

I just add things to my queue. Things I think will make me look sophisticated next time I bring this film out. Browse Twitter. It's a daily liturgy. Every night. Well, most nights.

[14 : 29] Every time I do it, though, this liturgy trains my heart to desire it even more. And I turn into a fool when that idol is threatened.

My idolatry, my anger is so destructive. My idol worship is so destructive. It would be much better if I would just calmly enforce the rules. Is that so hard? Oh, you're awake still.

You've come downstairs. You've broken the rules. These are the consequences for breaking the rules. This is what we agreed on. I mean, that's not so hard, is it? Instead, I act like a fool.

And after bedtime, our house is an unsafe place, and Dad is an unsafe person. This is really the home my children are going to remember when they grow up. What are they going to believe about their Heavenly Father based on the way their father acted?

My idolatry distorts the image of God. And it derails my mission as a father.

[15 : 29] A third way to discern our idols is to ask someone else. Usually our idols are in blind spots, and we can't see them. Other people can see them just fine.

If we would just ask them, we would find out what they are. So ask your housemates. They know. Ask your significant other. Ask your friends.

Ask your parents. They know. They remember. And you still have those idols. As part of our training to be missionaries, I had to call people who knew me well and ask them how I do conflict.

Like, how am I being received? How do I act? The exercise wasn't an exercise about idolatry per se, but conflict can often reveal our idols. So, like, for instance, if your idol is control or power, you're going to try and win every argument.

Anyways, when I called my parents, both of my parents said that I shut down whenever a conflict arises. I would shut down and I would shut them out, and I just refused to engage in the argument.

[16 : 39] And here again is my idol of ease coming out. I was causing damage to our relationship because the message they were receiving was, I don't care.

I don't love you enough to work out this difficult thing between us. My idol was destructive. Now, I said to ask someone else what your idols are.

It's a good thing to discuss our idols with each other because we often share the same idols. And they can be destructive as a community and derail our mission as a community. A fourth way to expose your idols is to be so immersed in the living God that you'll see the dead, lifeless gods that have been stealing your loves and your loyalty.

We're halfway through the Hallel Psalms, the Praise Psalms, and just before halftime, we read in verse 18, but we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the Lord. Not only does worship expose our idols, but it removes them as well. We've looked at what the psalm tells us about idolatry.

[18 : 10] We've looked at our own idols. Now we'll look at how we can be rid of them. Our hearts are constantly and dynamically oriented towards a goal, an end.

It's usually a vision of the good life, something we believe will ultimately bring us happiness. Everyone's heart is like this. Our worship of God, our immersion in the living God, directs not just our minds, but our desires toward God and his kingdom.

We confess to following too much the devices and desires of our own heart. That's in our prayer book, right? Every week in worship, we have forgiveness pronounced over us. And in taking communion, we're fed spiritually with what our hearts truly need.

And if we're doing it right, we're spending time with Christians throughout the week, praying, worshiping, spending time alone in prayer and in the Bible. These practices of worshiping on Sundays combined together with regular times of prayer by ourselves and with other Christians can be called spiritual formation.

Now everyone experiences spiritual formation because everybody worships. Therefore, everyone is being oriented towards something. Everyone is going through some kind of spiritual formation. Dallas Willard writes this, Spiritual formation, without regard to any specifically religious context or tradition, is the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite form or character.

[19 : 32] Make no mistake, it is a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admirable of persons have had a spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed.

We all become a certain kind of person, gain a specific character, and that is the outcome of the process of spiritual formation understood in general human terms.

At Church of the Advent, we're going to be looking a lot over the next eight months at spiritual formation. What forms us as Christians? Our core groups will relaunch in September, and we'll be simplifying, focusing more on the practices of prayer and community and life together.

We believe that our core groups will be an attractive place of rest and worship for us and for those we would want to invite into our community. We want to be spiritually formed.

We want our hearts and desires to be formed. But where do we start? We want to repent of our idols. We want practices to uproot and replace them with a desire for God.

[20 : 39] But how do we begin? Do we just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and get to work? When that doesn't work, we work and try harder? No.

That's not how it's done. That doesn't work. We begin by admitting we desire other things besides God, and we're powerless to turn from them in our own strength.

Look at verse 8 again. Those who make idols become like them. So do all who trust in them. They become mute, blind, deaf, lame, lifeless, dead.

Do those things sound familiar? These things used to describe us. Ephesians 2 says, You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, carrying out the desires of the body, and the mind.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. By grace, you have been saved.

[21 : 52] Mute. Blind. Deaf. Lame. Dead. That was us. And why those things sound familiar is because those are the things that Jesus came to fix.

Those are the things that he did. He came to fix. He came to make the mute speak. The blind see. The lame walk. The deaf. Here. And the dead. To live again.

Turning from our idols begins with Jesus. With being enamored with his beauty. Grateful for his grace. Transfixed by his beauty and grace, we repent of our idols and then thrown him in our hearts.

And then God takes these remade people, these sons and daughters, transfixed and enamored by his mercy and grace, and he turns them loose.

On a broken world, he is determined to restore and make new. Praise the Lord. Hallelujah. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[22 : 50] Amen. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Holy Spirit, be working in us even now as we sing, even now as we proclaim our faith, and especially as we come.

to take bread and wine, Lord. In this meal, you are going to feed us spiritually. You can transform us right here. We can leave here being more transfixed and enamored with your grace and mercy that's found in your Son, Jesus Christ.

Why would we worship anyone else? We know there is no other God but you, God. So teach our hearts even in these next 10 to 15 minutes.

We love you and we want to love you more. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.