

Psalm 115 - Powerless Idols

1. Levels of Idolatry.

When you read Psalm 115, vs. 1-8 immediately stand out. They contain a classic understanding of idolatry – an understanding we take for granted.

Ps 115:1-8 Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, *and* for thy truth's sake.

2Wherefore should the heathen say, Where *is* now their God?

3But our God *is* in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.

4Their idols *are* silver and gold, the work of men's hands.

5They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not:

6They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not:

7They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat.

8They that make them are like unto them; *so is* every one that trusteth in them.

As you read the verses, it is hard to imagine how anyone could look at idols and think they could do *anything*. However, as we think just a little bit more, we are all too familiar with human superstitions. The psalmists puts forth the true reality, but we also know that idolatry is very active even in our modern world.

This Psalm is primarily about idolatry because that is the one of the most outstanding characteristics about this passage, but we need to include blasphemy because it is so strongly related. Besides using an image or an object, vs. 8 identifies another defining characteristic of idolatry: *trusting* in them to provide and take care of you.

There are several levels of idolatry – the worst ones are the easiest to see

- Demonic power attached to a physical object.

This goes a step deeper than just superstitious association with something. Someone might carry around a lucky object thinking that it has some kind of power, but they might be willing to concede that it is possible that coincidence is more at play. The ultimate problem is when there is demonic activity that appears to be happening. The power is not going to be in the object itself, but people's respect for an idol invites the activity of the demonic in their lives. Vs. 4-6 make it plain that the idol itself is nothing.

- Religious artifacts that are really

just talismans.

Talismans are good luck charms. Even after I have taught about the nature of superstition, there are regularly people who will insist that they have seen things that "actually worked." They will hear the Word of God on the matter and ignore what God says because of what they "know" by their experience. Something doesn't have to be an image of a creature. All that is required is that people have some kind of trust in the object.

The Mormons have their "temple garments" and are offended if you refer to them as "magic underwear" – yet they say:

When you wear it properly, it provides protection against temptation and evil.

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<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/true-to-the-faith/temples?lang=eng>

Roman Catholics, among other things, are taught to put their trust in the *scapular*, a garment or even just a couple of pieces of cloth suspended on someone's shoulders. You can get mixed messages from using the scapular as a sign of devotion to being delivered from Hell. There are Brown, Red, Blue, White, and Black scapulars available. According to one teaching, Mary appeared and said,

"Take, beloved son, this scapular of thy order as a badge of my confraternity and for thee and all Carmelites a special sign of grace; whoever dies in this garment, will not suffer everlasting fire. It is the sign of salvation, a safeguard in dangers, a pledge of peace and of the covenant." In this apparition and gift, our Blessed Mother promised a special protection for all members of the Carmelite Order, and a special grace at the hour of death to all who wear the scapular so that they would not perish in Hell but would be taken up to Heaven by her on the first Saturday after their death.

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<https://ourladyofhope.net/brown-scapular-enrollment-july-16/>

Such practices can be found even in all kinds of Christian groups. This could involve being baptized in the Jordan river or anointing things with oil as a way to ward off the power of demons.

Author Hans Hillerbrand wrote about the extensive relics the Castle Church at Wittenberg, where Luther posted his 95 theses. Their extensive catalog included three pieces of the city where the Virgin Mary was born, one piece of a yarn which she spun, one piece of the house where she lived at the age of 14, four pieces of Mary's hair, two pieces of the earth of the

grave of Mary, one piece of the diaper in which Jesus was wrapped, one piece of straw on which Jesus laid when He was born, one piece of bread from the last supper, one piece of the cloth He used to wipe the disciples feet...the list actually goes on and on. As you read the list you can't help but be amazed at the sense of superstition...but this was not just something of the Middle Ages. This kind of thinking goes on today in all kinds of churches.

- Anything you serve and/or put your trust in ahead of God.

This does not have to involve superstitious respect and servitude to something that you put on your shelf with, perhaps, an incense holder. It doesn't have to be something you put in your pocket to bring you good luck.

People can make an idol out of money, jobs, vacation spots, education, entertainment, electronics, hobbies, cars, possessions, clothing, styles, and all kinds of external thing that we *depend* upon to fulfill your sense of well being and your needs. The key word here is *depend*. These things aren't actually bad in and of themselves, but we *turn* them into idols when we place them ahead of our trust and dependence on God. Idolatry ultimately is in the heart of the beholder.

- Anything we worship and reverence.

I include things we worship and reverence here, although this is actually blasphemy. Idolatry and blasphemy are closely related in the first two commandments.

Exod 20:2-5 I *am* the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

3Thou shalt have no other gods before me. [There is *one* mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ 1Tim 2:5]

4Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth:

5Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me;

Making graven images or bowing down to physical object is clearly idolatry, but worshiping other gods is blasphemy. When Jesus identified Himself as the one who was seated at the right hand of power who would come in the clouds of heaven, the high priest rent

his clothes and cried out, "He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy." (Matthew 26:65) For instance, celebrities might invite blasphemy, but not necessarily idolatry. When we reject God's leadership, we make a god of ourselves and blaspheme. This is what atheists do.

2. Idolatry is a slippery slope.

We start with seemingly innocent attitudes of just enjoying something. But unchecked, it grows from there. Many people are more enlightened today knowing that the image or material things do not have power. But then they put their trust in all kinds of things.

People put their trust in government to pass more and more laws in the vain hope that enough laws will fix the spiritual and moral sickness of our society.

People put their trust in jobs. More than ever before, workers are just pieces of equipment that you use and get rid of when they are not needed. It would be a mistake to say that you are not there to serve your employer leaving you to serve your own interests at work. Better yet, you are serving the Lord which means loving your employer.

People trust in riches. "If only I could get the perfect situation, the best area, the best house, the best job, the best quality." You will always be chasing the rainbow, because rainbows actually have no end.

Idolatry next appears as being wise in our own eyes and resisting God.

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof *are* the ways of death.

1Sam 15:23 For rebellion *is as* the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from *being* king.

This appears as finding all kinds of reasons to resist *select* principles and teachings of the Word. People pick and choose what they are willing to follow. They will give you what seems like the most excellent argument against the Biblical admonitions you present. They treat God's Word as a buffet. They pick and choose what they want and leave the rest because the rest is inconvenient. Stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.

By choosing what we *are* willing to cherish and celebrate we move on to greater idolatry.

Rom 1:21-25 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their

foolish heart was darkened.

22Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

23And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.

24Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:

25Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

We worship the creation more than the creator: sports figures for their physical bodies, actors for their human talent and the ability to focus on what it means to be human, financiers for their cleverness, politicians for their power.

We treat animals as people and give them human rights as we take more rights away from humans.

We admire art and movies which are only *representations* of life. And then art and theater become degraded and debased. Isn't it odd that with all of creation to appreciate and inspire the awesomeness of God people turn to cheap imitations?

We need to heed the lessons of the entire Old Testament which was written for our admonition. All through the Old Testament we see the people of God turning again and again and again to outright idolatry.

Ps 106:34-39 They did not destroy the nations, concerning whom the LORD commanded them:

35But were mingled among the heathen, and learned their works.

36And they served their idols: which were a snare unto them.

37Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils,

38And shed innocent blood, *even* the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood.

39Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions.

After all that Israel experienced leaving Egypt, it didn't take long for Moses to be out of sight before they made the golden calf and said, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." (Exodus 32:4)

As we look at Psalm 115 we see:

In vs. 4 the idols were made of gold...the more you have invested in something, the more you serve it.

In vs. 5 these idols have eyes but,

they can't see. They have mouths but, they can not speak. They are blind as they lead the spiritually blind into the ditch of despair. They are mute and can not tell those who follow them the path to paradise.

In vs. 6 They have ears but, they can not hear the cries of the worshipers as they slip into eternity that is filled with suffering and despair. They have noses but, they cannot smell the sulphur of hell that they have led their worshipers into.

In vs. 7 they have hands but, they can not gently caress one who is hurting and lead them to relief. They have feet but, they cannot walk over to crippled man to heal him of his debilitating disease.

In vs. 8 the maker of these idols are just like them. Blind, mute, deaf, and crippled.

3. Our trust is in the living God: He is not the God of the dead.

Many unbelievers and people who deny the inspiration of the Word of God start with a very misguided assumption. They have a picture of how unrefined, undeveloped, and unenlightened they think ancient man was. They look at how degraded man has become in the darkest of jungles and assume that, instead, that is how all mankind started. They try trace civilization back to where it had to begin all over again in the river valleys after the flood. They view man as starting off as animists thinking that there is some power in the rivers, trees, and rocks of nature. They think that religion evolved to there being personalities in the power, then demi-gods and gods, until the Jews achieved monotheism and ultimately a being of infinite power and presence. Finally, they see culmination of religion in the concept of a savior and resurrection.

However, all through the recorded history of the Bible, the doctrine of God and salvation never changed, much less evolve. Job, considered to be the actually oldest book of the Bible, contains the clearest concept of the resurrection:

Job 19:23-27 Oh that my words
were now written! oh that they
were printed in a book!

24 That they were graven with an
iron pen and lead in the rock for
ever!

25 For I know *that* my redeemer
liveth, and *that* he shall stand at
the latter *day* upon the earth:

26 And *though* after my skin
worms destroy this *body*, yet in
my flesh shall I see God:

27 Whom I shall see for myself,
and mine eyes shall behold, and
not another; *though* my reins be
consumed within me.

The Jewish concept that God was the most high is described in Psalm 115:1-3

Ps 115:1-3 Not unto us, O

LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, *and* for thy truth's sake.

2Wherefore should the heathen say, Where *is* now their God?

3But our God *is* in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.

The heathen ask, "Where is now their God?" because they cannot imagine a God who is greater than His creation. The Roman General Pompey discovered this in 63 BC as Rome came to dominate the land of Israel. When Pompey took Jerusalem, he went into the Temple, ostensibly to see the God of the Jews. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote:

The first Roman to subdue the Jews and set foot in their temple by right of conquest was Gnaeus Pompey; thereafter it was a matter of common knowledge that there were no representations of the gods within, but that the place was empty and the secret shrine contained nothing. The walls of Jerusalem were razed, but the temple remained standing.

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http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A*.html

The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote:

For Pompey went into it, and not a few of those that were with him also; and saw all that which it was unlawful for any other men to see, but only for the High Priests. There were in that temple the golden table; the holy candlestick; and the pouring vessels; and a great quantity of spices: and besides these there were among the treasures, two thousand talents of sacred money. Yet did Pompey touch nothing of all this; on account of his regard to religion; and in this point also he acted in a manner that was worthy of his virtue.

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<https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-14.html#S4.4>

Imagine his surprise to see a religion that did not have any idols! Pompey went in asking "Where is now their God?" He discovered what Jesus later said:

John 4:23-24 But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

24God *is* a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth.

The impact on finding no idols but

that the Jews' God was far beyond any dumb idol impressed him so much that he would not destroy the Temple. Instead, he had it cleansed and supported. God is as far opposite the earthly idols as you can get.

There is one more comparison between the idols and God.

Ps 115:8 They that make them are like unto them; *so is* every one that trusteth in them.

Just as the idols are dead, so also are those who trust in them. In contrast, God is the God of the living. When Jesus was challenged about the resurrection He said:

Mark 12:24-27 And Jesus answering said unto them, Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?

...

26...as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, *I am* the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?

27He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living: ye therefore do greatly err.

Compare this to the conclusion of Psalm 115 in the last two verses:

Ps 115:17-18 The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.

18But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and for evermore. Praise the LORD.

The dead are those who trust in idols. They will go down into Hell and their voices will never be heard – Hell is a place of absolute loneliness. The psalmist concludes that we will bless the Lord from *this* time forth. We know salvation at *this* time and then in glory forevermore.

4. Trusting in God.

We typically trust that God works in the lives of others, but not for ourselves. We trust that Jesus would lift *Peter* out of the angry sea. We trust that God would part the waters of the Red Sea for the Jews...but we are tempted to trust the arm of flesh instead. Hezekiah's trust was challenged by the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

2Chr 32:7-8 Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that *is* with him: for *there be* more with us than with him:

8With him *is* an arm of flesh; but

with us *is* the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.

What would trusting in God look like? Actually following through faithfully with at least the basics.

Attend all the church services. Someone might ask, "Where does it say in the Bible that you have to go to all the services?" Actually, the Bible requires *more* than that. If you lived in times of the Old Testament and all the meetings and study times that were required under the Law you would be doing *way* more. Today, church has several basic functions to fulfill. Churches follow the pattern of meeting our basic needs by having fellowship, prayer, study, teaching, and worship which are served by their basic schedule. Engage in evangelism...this is also basic. But people say, "I can't...I'm too busy chasing a dollar and trying to take care of things." Then they aren't trusting God.

Have a regular devotion time.

Tithe and pray about special offerings, but you don't have to pray about tithing.

2Cor 6:15-18 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?

16And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

17Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you,

18And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

There is more to learn, but it all starts with *trusting* Jesus to save you and turning your life and sin over to Him when you *ask* Him to save you. Make sure you are taking care of the basics. If you are ready for more growth, it will show and there *will* be more opportunity.

1. Levels of Idolatry. Ps 115:1-8, Exod 20:2-5
2. Idolatry is a slippery slope. 1Sam 15:23, Rom 1:21-25, Ps 106:34-39
3. Our trust is in the living God: He is not the God of the dead. Job 19:23-27, Ps 115:1-3, John 4:23-24, Ps 115:8, Mark 12:24-27, Ps 115:17-18
4. Trusting in God. 2Chr 32:7-8, 2Cor 6:15-18