

“Where Is God?”
Psalm 115
August 26, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Verse 1 could be taken in two ways. It could be a response to a victory, after which a person says, “Not to us, but to God be the glory.” William Wilberforce, the Member of Parliament largely responsible for passing the bill outlawing slavery in Great Britain, is reported to have meditated on this verse after the bill was passed. The sense is that of the football player in the end zone after scoring the touchdown, pointing to the sky as if to give credit to God. But the verse could also be read in exactly the opposite way, as a response to a negative event. It is as if this person is saying, “Answer our desperate need, O God, for your glory is at stake.”

Verse 2 makes it clear that the latter sense is the correct one. Israel is being taunted by the unbelieving nations around them, who are saying, “Where is your God?” We don’t know exactly what historical event prompted this taunt. It is possible that it was the Babylonian exile, when it must have seemed to many that the children of Abraham were to be lost and forgotten forever. “Where is your God, Israel, the one in whom you have put your trust?”

Though the question, “Where is your God?” is asked here as a taunt, it is a question that needs an answer. Where is God when things don’t work out as we think they should for the child of God? Years ago, I remember being asked that question by a Christian couple who needed a car but didn’t have much money. They had a friend who was able to purchase cars at auction, and he offered to let them go with him and buy a car at a wholesale price. They knew this was a risky venture, so they began praying and asked their friends to pray that God would lead them to buy a solid car and not a lemon. They found what they thought was the perfect car and got it for less than half the price it would have cost at a dealer. Not long after their purchase, the expensive repairs began to occur with relentless regularity. So they asked me the question, “Where was God in all this?”

This psalm calls us to trust God when he seems to be absent, when life is not making much sense, or when it feels like life would be easier if we weren’t followers of this God. So where is God when life doesn’t make sense?

I. He Is Active, Unlike Idols – v. 3-8

Verse 3 provides the answer to the question of the previous verse, **“Where is their God?” “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”**

When it says that God is in the heavens, it doesn't mean that he is far removed from the earth, but that he is in the place where earthly matters are determined. It would be like saying, "The general is in his office at the Pentagon." God is on duty, executing his plan, which no being in the universe will be able to veto. The emphasis in the statement, "he does all that he pleases," is on the word "all." God is completely sovereign over everything that happens in this world.

Beginning in verse 4, the psalmist engages in some mocking of his own, in this case of the idols of those who had been mocking his people and his God. God can do anything. What can man do? He can make idols. These idols, like all idols, start with God's good gifts. In this case, they start with God's gift of silver and gold, and then use these gifts against God. The silver and gold are used to fashion gods with human features that make us humans able to function: a mouth, ears, a nose, hands and feet. But these man-made idols have no ability to do any of those things. They are a sham. Seven times the psalmist points out what they cannot do. In some biblical literature, numbers have significance, and the number seven is the biblical symbol for perfection. The meaning is that these idols are perfectly imperfect. There is no limit to their imperfection and powerlessness.

Idols do have the power to do one thing, which the psalmist describes in verse 8. **"Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them."** With the promise of giving strength, idols actually make us weak. Just as they are weak, we become weak when we trust in them. We become spiritually blind and deaf, spiritually lame and unable to change. A little known Disney movie from several years ago was titled, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. It's about a traveling carnival called "Mr. Dark's Pandemonium Carnival." As it turns out, Mr. Dark is a type of Satan himself, and he is attempting to draw people into his carnival exhibits in order to enslave them. He does so by targeting the secret desire each person has that they think will bring them fulfillment. For some, it is restored youth, while for others it might be things like sex with the beauty of their dreams, athletic accomplishments or financial riches. But when they sell everything to get their secret desire, they are enslaved by Mr. Dark instead of satisfied. That's exactly what idols do to us.

It's always helpful to remember what the idols of our age are. There are the familiar ones of money and possessions. The list is extensive and includes such idols as technology, safety, politics, college football, perfect children, approval and being seen as right. None of these are bad in themselves and are actually all gifts from God. But they become idolatrous when we use them to take the place of God.

Let me mention at more length one of the strongest idols of our age, one that is particularly, and cruelly, aimed at our children. It is the idol of self-

determination, the idea that you can be whatever you want to be. It leaves God out because it starts with the wrong question. Instead of asking, “What is my dream for what I want to be and do?” we should ask, “What has God designed me for?” Let me give an example. Let’s say that I want to begin pursuing a dream of winning the Tour de France bicycle race. The training will be extensive, so I will need to quit my job in order to give myself full-time to such training. And I will need top-notch equipment and a coach. All of this will cost a great deal of money, and since no corporate sponsor would ever agree to fund a 61-year-old with average ability, I am going to have to fund it myself. So I will raid my retirement account to do this. I train faithfully for two years, doing everything my coach asks of me. If by some clerical error I gain a spot as a competitor in this race, I can tell you with a high degree of confidence that in an average 100 mile leg of this race, I would finish dead last, probably 2-3 hours behind the next to last person. You might be thinking, “Yeah, but you’re 61 years old. What if you had started this training when you were 18?” It is certainly true that had I trained for seven years from 18-25 years of age, I would undoubtedly be faster than my 61-year-old body is capable of. But I have done enough cycling to say with great confidence that I would still have finished dead last, but probably only by 1-2 hours instead of 2-3. The truth is that God is in the heavens and he does all that he pleases, and it has not pleased him to make me an elite-level cyclist. It would be idolatrous to pursue such a dream because it leaves God out.

II. He Is a Helper and a Shield – v. 9-11

The previous paragraph emphasized that God alone is the sovereign God, doing all that he pleases. That begs the question, “What does it please God to do?” The rest of the psalm answers that question. These three verses tell us that it pleases God to be the helper and shield for his people, and that is the reason they can trust him. Three times God’s people are urged to trust God instead of idols. And three times we are told that we are to trust him because he is a helper and shield.

Since our trust in God is significantly helped by seeing him as helper and shield, let’s look more closely at these terms. The word for “help” or “helper” is used over one-hundred times in the Old Testament, often in reference to God. He is Israel’s Helper. When we think of God as helper, many make the mistake of thinking that he comes alongside us and makes up for what is lacking in my life. If I am capable of getting 98 percent of the way there on my own, then God “helps” me by providing the additional 2 percent needed. Or even if we reverse that and say that we can only manage 2 percent ourselves and need God to make up the difference, the idea is still mistaken. The word “helper” is often used of God in the Old Testament in a military context. It is when Israel is attacked by armies far too powerful for little Israel. It is the idea of rescue for those who are helpless. It is Gideon with his three-hundred soldiers facing a

vast horde of Midianites. It is Joseph locked away in prison in Egypt, the young shepherd boy David facing the skilled, heavily armed and giant Goliath. We trust God because he comes to the rescue of his people.

God is not just a mighty helper, a rescuer, but also a shield. If the word “helper” highlights the power of God, the word “shield” highlights his sacrificial love. How does a shield protect? It does so by taking the blows itself. That is exactly what Jesus has done for us, taking the blows of judgment that our sins deserve.

I note that both words, helper and shield, put us in a position of weakness while God is in the place of strength. We are in the weak position of needing help and protection, while God is in the strong position of providing that for us. To say this differently, we will never learn to trust God until we are willing to be honest about our weakness, accept our weakness and even boast in our weakness. In her forward to Scott Sauls’ book *From Weakness to Strength*, Joni Eareckson Tada wrote the following:

Years ago, when I took that fateful dive into shallow water and broke my neck, never did I think that God was honing me for leadership. All I could do was retch at the thought of sitting down for the rest of my life without use of my hands or legs. But slowly over time, God began opening doors and expanding my sphere of influence. I became a leader by default. And no one was more amazed than I. Yet that’s also the way things happen in the Bible... God delights in handpicking people for leadership who are either stumbling bumblers *or* simply weak and ill equipped.

To trust God as our Helper and Shield transforms our view of our weaknesses. We can stop denying them, trying to cover them up or compensating for them in some way. We learn to do the shocking thing Paul did and boast in our weaknesses. **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me”** (2 Cor. 12:9). At the end of the forward I just quoted above, Joni Eareckson Tada writes, “It’s why I thank God for my wheelchair.”

What weakness are you living with right now? It could be your health, your marriage, your children, your finances, your job, or any number of areas you would not mind seeing changed. Your God does all that he pleases, and he is pleased to leave this in your life right now that you might learn to trust him as your help and your shield.

III. He Never Stops Blessing His People – v. 12-18

God does all that he pleases, and he is pleased not only to help you, but also to bless you throughout your life and even beyond your sojourn on this

earth. The word “bless” is used six times in this final section of the psalm. It is a promise that is both general and specific. It is general in verses 12-13, promising only that God will bless. I think it is general because the actual form a blessing might take will look different from person to person. For one person, it might be the blessing of a successful career, while such success for another might turn into a curse. Another might have the blessing of a blissfully satisfying marriage, while another Christian who is just as godly might suffer through a difficult marriage. God knows how to bless his people, and the blessings are tailored to each individual.

There are specific blessings mentioned too. The psalmist prays for the Lord to give increase, which is a promise for growth in numbers. Verse 16 says that while the heavens belong to the Lord, **“the earth he has given to the children of man.”** That is the blessing of a domain, a place to rule and a place to make a difference. Then the last blessing mentioned is one that is unusual in the Old Testament, the blessing of life after death. **“But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore”** (v. 18). We respond to God’s blessing by blessing him, and we are told here that we will be doing that forevermore.

CONCLUSION:

God never stops blessing his people, and it will become even clearer in the New Testament that this blessing is secured to us through Jesus. The taunt of verse 2, “Where is their God?” will be repeated centuries later. Jesus was mocked when he hung on the cross. **“He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him”** (Matt. 27:43). It is as if they are saying to him, “Where is your God now?” So where was his God while Jesus was suffering terribly this unjust punishment of crucifixion? He was in heaven doing all he pleased. And it pleased the Father to bruise the Son. Why? Because of love and justice. Justice demanded that sins be paid for, and Jesus was doing so. Love demanded that pardon be given. So Jesus was not delivered from the cross. Love and justice held him there so that God could bless you.