

New Year Service: 2018

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[0 : 00] Well if we could, for a short while, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read in the book of Psalms and Psalm 115.

Psalm 115 and if we just, I'd like us to walk through this psalm but if we just read again at verse 1. For the psalmist says, Biblical history but also British history.

Because in 1415, after a victorious battle in France, King Henry V, he commanded his army to kneel down before God and sing with thanksgiving the words of Psalm 115.

Not unto us Lord, not to us, but do thou glory take. But there was one more occasion where Psalm 115 found its place in British history.

And that was on the 26th of July, 1833. That was the day on which William Wilberforce, after a lifetime of campaigning for the abolition of slavery, he heard that the Abolition Act of 1833 was finally passed.

[2 : 09] And when, on hearing the verdict, William Wilberforce, he quietly retired to his room at the age of 74, blind, unwell, and it was only actually three days before his own death.

But William Wilberforce, she retired to his room to meditate upon the words of Psalm 115. And upon meditating on this psalm, William Wilberforce, she prayed to the Lord, and he said, Not to me, and not to us, O Lord, but to your name be the glory.

You have done this. I've spent my life battling this, but you've done this. Lord, you've done it. And, you know, it's clear to see that from all these examples of British history, Psalm 115 has had an impact upon the Lord's people.

In which the Lord's people, they came through battles, they passed through darkness, and they overcame what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. And then standing on the threshold of a new beginning, when they looked back, all they could see was that it was nothing of themselves. They didn't do it. They didn't have the strength to get through it. They didn't have the resources to keep going. They didn't have the ability. But they're saying, the Lord did it. And because the Lord did it, they wanted to give him all the glory, honour, and praise.

[3 : 37] Not unto us, Lord, not to us, but do thou glory take. But as I said, Psalm 115, it's a psalm which not only made itself a place in British history, but also a place in biblical history.

Because Psalm 115, it was written at a time when the Israelites were on the threshold of a new beginning. They had returned from 70 years of being in exile in Babylon.

And during which their time in Babylon, they had been living in a foreign land under the rule of a foreign king. And they were made to worship foreign gods.

Their past was dark. It was full of division. It was full of idolatry. It was full of sadness and sorrow because they were in exile. But now after all these years, the Israelites, they were returning to the land of Israel.

And they were returning to rebuild and to repair what had been torn down. And of course, they were not to forget what had happened in the past. They were to learn lessons from the past.

[4 : 43] And they were to see how the Lord had brought them through the past and all their experiences to stand upon this threshold of a new beginning. And as the Lord's people, this psalm is reminding them to move forward together.

And you know, this psalm, it's all about the Lord's people. It's all about the church of Christ. That's what Psalm 115 is about. And I want us just to apply this psalm to our own situation as a congregation at the beginning of a new year.

Because what we see in this psalm is that on the threshold of a new beginning, there was four points. Praise from the people. A plea to the people.

A promise for the people. And a prayer on behalf of the people. I'll repeat that. On the beginning, on the threshold of a new beginning, there was praise from the people.

A plea to the people. A promise for the people. And a prayer on behalf of the people. And so we're going to go through these four points in Psalm 115.

[5 : 54] So first of all, on the threshold of a new beginning, there was praise from the people. Praise from the people. Look again at verse 1. It says, Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Why should the nations say, where is their God? Our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases. Now, Psalm 115, it's part of a group of six psalms called the Hallel Psalms.

And the psalms which are part of this Hallel group, they're the psalms numbered between Psalm 113 to Psalm 118. And they're called the Hallel Psalms from the word Hallelujah, which means praise the Lord.

And as a group of psalms, the Hallel, they seek to give to the Lord the Hallelujah. They seek to praise the Lord and exalt and praise the Lord for his wonderful works of salvation.

They are the Hallel. And they were, and they still are, they're sung by the Jews during the feast of Passover. And of course, you remember that the purpose of the Passover was to remember the experience of the children of Israel when they were delivered from bondage and slavery in Egypt.

[7 : 16] You remember the Passover, it was when the angel of the Lord passed over all the houses in Egypt, the Israelite houses, and it passed over because they had blood, blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorposts and upon the lintel.

But, you know, when we sing these Hallel Psalms and when we meditate upon them, we have to always remember that these Hallel Psalms, they were sung during the Passover, yes.

But these Psalms, they would have been the last words that Jesus sung before his trial and crucifixion. And even though the horrors of Calvary, they loomed for Jesus, you know, he was still singing about the work of salvation.

And he was still praising the Lord that that work of salvation would be to the glory, honour, and praise of God the Father. But what's interesting about this Hallel Psalm, Psalm 115, is that it was not only sung by Jesus, but also the fact that it was written and sung in the face of those who worshipped false gods.

Because when the Israelites, when they returned from exile in Babylon, they returned to praise the Lord together. They returned from exile with praise in their hearts and praise upon their lips because they were going to rebuild their lives and rebuild the temple and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

[8 : 45] They were on the threshold of a new beginning and they were singing praise as a people. There was praise from the people. But you know, when the nations considered what was happening, they questioned the Israelites.

And they were saying, as it says in verse 2, where is their God? They're asking them, where is your God? What is your God doing? How could your God allow this to happen to you?

How could your God allow all the divisions and the darkness and the destruction and all the deaths that took place? How could your God allow this to happen to you? Where is your God?

But you know, the resounding testimony of the Lord's people in the face of a world that worships false idols. The testimony was in verse 3, our God is in the heavens.

He does all that he pleases. Our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases. And you know, in that statement alone, there is so, so much.

[9 : 48] Because there is the acknowledgement that God is sovereign. And that despite the uncertainty of the past, and all that went on in the past, it's the confirmation.

They're testifying to the fact that the Lord is still working all things together for good for his people. But more than that, in these words, there is the submission to God's will.

Our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases. And that's why there's praise from the people on the threshold of a new beginning. Because they're acknowledging that they should give the Lord all the praise and all the honour and all the glory that he deserves.

It's not unto us, Lord. Not to us. But do thou glory take. It's all about the Lord, not about themselves. But you know, this is what I love about these verses.

There is praise from the Lord's people. And there is this desire to give the Lord all the glory. All because of his steadfast love and faithfulness.

[10:51] That's what it says in verse 1. Not to us, O Lord. Not to us. But to your name give glory. For the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

And I love those words because those words, steadfast love and faithfulness, they're translated in the New Testament as grace and truth.

And you know, that's how the Apostle John described Jesus. He described him as one who is full of grace and truth. He is, John, as he introduces us to Jesus, he says, this is the eternal word.

He was made flesh. He dwelt among us. We have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father. And guess what? He's full of grace and truth.

Full of steadfast love and faithfulness. And so what we ought to see here in these opening verses is that there is praise from the people. And they're giving all the glory to Jesus.

[11:52] Because despite all that they've been through in the past. Despite all that they've experienced in the past. Jesus has done in them and for them exceedingly, abundantly, above all, more than they could ask or even think.

And you know, is that not our testimony today? At the beginning of a new year. And is there not praise from us as a people? That despite all that we might have been through as individuals or as a congregation.

And maybe all the changes that you've experienced in your home and in your family. The one constant you have had is this Jesus. This one who's full of grace and truth.

This Jesus who never changes. He's the same. As we were saying to the children yesterday. He's the same yesterday. Today and forever. And this Jesus, he promises never to leave us.

Never to forsake us. He's this Jesus who is full of grace and truth. Full of steadfast love and faithfulness.

[13:02] And you know, it's a reminder to us of who this Jesus is. And what this Jesus does. And it should result in praise from us as a people.

And so on the threshold of a new beginning, we see in this psalm that there was praise from the people. But there was also a plea to the people. A plea to the people.

You look at verse 9. It says, O Israel, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield.

You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield. And what we can see from these three verses is that there is this threefold plea to trust the Lord.

And that threefold plea, it's said in contrast to trusting the false idols of this world. And the psalmist, he describes all the false idols of this world.

[14:02] He describes them in verses 4 to 8. Because he says in verses 4 to 8 that these idols, they're not like our God who is in the heavens. They're not like our God who does whatever he pleases.

Because he says that these idols, they are the work of men's hands. They're made of silver and gold and wood and metal and stone. They are the gods of their imagination.

And they have mouths, he says, but they do not speak. They have eyes, but they do not see. They have ears, but they don't hear a thing. They have noses, but they can't smell. They have hands, but they can't hold.

They have feet, but they can't walk. And what the psalmist is saying about all these idols is that they're dead. They're dead idols. He's saying that in contrast to our God who is in the heavens, who is the living and true God, in contrast to him, all the gods of this world are dead.

They're dead idols. But then the psalmist says in verse 8, Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them.

[15:14] Those who make these idols are dead because those who trust in them are dead. They're dead spiritually. They're dead in their trespasses and sins, walking according to the course of this world, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind.

And you know, there are so many today who put their trust in all that they can see. They put their trust in all that they can feel and touch.

They put their trust in all these things that will eventually fade and perish and decay. And they make them their gods. They put their trust in them. They make them first in their lives and they give their time to them.

They worship idols. And that doesn't mean that they bow down to a particular structure. You know, idolatry, it's far easier than that. Because idolatry is putting anything before God.

Idolatry is giving something or someone else the primary place that God deserves. Idolatry is giving something or someone else, like maybe our home or our family or our wife or our husband or our children or our grandchildren or our hobbies or even ourselves.

[16 : 32] Putting all these things before God. My friend, idolatry happens when we give something or someone else the place that God deserves.

Idolatry happens when we trust something or someone else, when we should trust the Lord. It happens, idolatry happens when we fail to confess, not unto us, Lord.

Not to us, but do thou glory take. You know, it might seem obvious to us that idolatry and trusting in idols or anything other than the Lord, it's vanity.

It might seem obvious that trusting in anything other than the Lord is just empty and futile. But, you know, we have to remember that idolatry was the means of Israel's downfall. And throughout the history of the Israelites, it was always idolatry that led them away from worshipping the Lord.

Whether it was the golden calf, you remember, in the wilderness, or they repeatedly turned to all the false gods during the period of the judges, or Baal worship during the period of the kings, Israel's history was marred by idolatry.

[17 : 47] Idolatry was even the reason why the Israelites ended up in Babylon. Because for decades, the Lord had sent prophet after prophet, saying to them, pleading with them, turn from your idols, turn back to the Lord, repent because judgment is coming.

But they refused to listen. They did what was right in their own eyes. They continued with their idolatry until the Lord finally brought judgment and exiled them into Babylon.

And, you know, we can see now why the psalmist is issuing to us this threefold plea as they're standing on the threshold of a new beginning. They're looking to the past and seeing it was full of idolatry.

What a mess it was in, full of darkness. Their past had been a past of trusting other things and not trusting the Lord. And with this plea on the threshold of a new beginning, the psalmist is calling the people of God to go forward and not to look back.

He's calling them to learn from the past, but to prepare for the future. And he's saying to them, don't go back to your former ways. Don't go back to the darkness and the idolatry.

[18 : 58] Make a new start. Make a new beginning. And he's saying to them, he's pleading with them, O Israel, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield.

O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord. He is their help and their shield. And you know, it seems to me that this threefold plea to the people, it addresses everyone in the congregation.

It seems that the psalmist, he addresses the Israelites as the people of believing worshippers. O Israel, trust in the Lord. And then he addresses the house of Aaron.

They are those who held office in the congregation. The priests, they were from the house of Aaron. They were Levites. And they helped facilitate the worship of God, whether it was through sacrifices or singing or music.

And then those, it says in verse 11, those who fear the Lord were those who were not Jews. They weren't, you could say, part of the people of God. They weren't committed to it, but they were still part of the congregation.

[20 : 08] But regardless of what part of the congregation these groups were from, the psalmist plea is the same. Trust in the Lord. He is your help and your shield.

Don't look to idols. Don't look to the other gods of this world. Don't put your confidence in man. He's saying, make a new start. Have a new beginning. Turn over a new leaf.

Trust in the Lord, for he is your help and your shield. Trust in the Lord, because he is your provision and your protection. And you know, I can't help but apply this to us as a congregation.

Because like it was for the Israelites, there's a threefold plea being issued to us as a congregation. And it's been issued, first of all, to the members of the congregation.

Trust in the Lord. He is your help and your shield. You are the believing worshippers. But there's also a plea here to the office bearers of the congregation, those who serve in the congregation, the house of Aaron.

[21 : 09] He's saying, trust in the Lord. He is your help and your shield. But then there's also the plea to those who fear the Lord. Those of you who are part of this congregation, you wouldn't say that you're a committed Christian, but you're committed to your church attendance.

You're committed to coming to the Lord's house. You attend church regularly. And your place is always to be found here because you fear the Lord.

That's your desire. You want to be here. And what we've been reminded here is that this plea is for you too. This plea is for you too. Because the plea to the people who fear the Lord is, trust the Lord. He is your help and your shield. Trust the Lord because he is your provision and your protection. And my friend, like it was for the Israelites, the plea to us as a people on the threshold of a new year, it's to make a new start and move forward together, trusting in the Lord who is our help and our shield.

Because he's the only one who assures us of his provision and his protection. He's the only one who will keep us in the year ahead. And so on the threshold of a new beginning, we see in this psalm that there was praise from the people, a plea to the people, and then thirdly, a promise for the people.

[22 : 41] A promise for the people. It says in verse 12, the Lord has remembered us. He will bless us. He will bless the house of Israel. He will bless the house of Aaron.

He will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great. And in these verses, the psalmist moves from a threefold plea to the Lord's people to trust the Lord.

He moves to this all-encompassing promise for the Lord's people to cling to. And what's so beautiful is that the psalmist addresses, he addresses every family, every individual, every office bearer, every generation within the congregation.

And he says to them, as it says in verse 12, the Lord has remembered us. The Lord has remembered us. Now, of course, when the psalmist says that the Lord has remembered his people, he's not saying that he had forgotten them.

Not at all. Because the word remember, it's a covenantal word. And so when the psalmist says that the Lord has remembered us, he means that the Lord is going to act according to his covenant of grace.

[24 : 00] The Lord is going to act according to his covenant of grace. And you know, that's what we see throughout the history of the Lord's people. When Noah had been in the ark for over five months, waiting for the water to subside, sitting on the top of Mount Ararat, we're told in Genesis 8, verse 1, God remembered Noah.

And what that means is that the Lord was going to act according to his covenant of grace. He was going to let them out. When the Israelites cried to the Lord for deliverance from bondage and slavery in Egypt, we're told that God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and with Jacob.

He remembered his covenant. The Lord was going to act according to his covenant of grace. And so when the psalmist says to us, the Lord has remembered us, he means that the Lord is going to act towards us, not according to our sin, but according to his covenant of grace.

And my friend, when the Lord acts towards his people according to his covenant of grace, he blesses us. He blesses us.

That's why the psalmist issues this promise of blessing to the people. The Lord has remembered us. He will bless us. He will bless the house of Israel.

[25 : 27] He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great. And as we can see, the words he will bless, they're repeated four times in only two verses.

And they clearly emphasize to us the all-encompassing promise of blessing to every family, and to every individual, and to every office bearer, and to every generation within the congregation.

And you know, I love this word, bless. Because, well, we've looked at it many, many times, and as you know, it's a royal term. And the word blessed, it literally means to kneel.

In the sense of kneeling before a king in humility, and reverence, and honour. And I suppose, well, the emphasis of the word can be explained using the illustration of, well, the Queen's New Year's Honours list.

I'm sure you've all heard of it, and you've seen it on the news. People like Ringo Starr, and Barry Gibb, and Nick Clegg even, they're all going to be knighted. And there are also loads of other people from all walks of life, and they're receiving MBEs, and OBEs, and they're being knighted and made dames.

[26 : 47] They're receiving all these honours. They receive these honours from the Queen. And that's the image that the word bless is portraying to us. It's the image of a king standing up from his

throne.

And those who are in the presence of the king, they're kneeling before the king. And they're kneeling before the king with their head bowed and their hand outstretched, and they're receiving from the king what they don't deserve.

They're receiving something from the hand of the king that's been graciously given to them.

Something that they don't deserve. And yet, the king is graciously and freely giving to them what they don't deserve.

He's blessing them. He's blessing them. Because blessing, it only comes from the gracious and merciful hand of the king. And this is the promise for us as a people.

as we stand on the threshold of a new year. That the Lord, the king of his people, King Jesus, he has remembered us. He hasn't abandoned us.

[27 : 54] He hasn't forsaken us. He hasn't left us. He has remembered us. And he's going to act according to his covenant of grace. He's going to act not according to our sin, but according to his grace and his mercy.

And he's going to act by blessing us. Giving to us what we do not deserve. He's going to give us what none of us deserve.

He's going to bless us as the promise is in Ephesians 1. He's going to bless us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ. He's going to do it in us and for us exceedingly, abundantly, above all, more than we could ask or even think.

And this is what's so beautiful about this promise of blessing. It's all-encompassing. It's a promise of blessing to every home, to every family, to every individual, to every office bearer, to every generation in the congregation, both young and old.

Because even though the past year may have been difficult for you as an individual, the hope that's found in this psalm and the promise that's given in this psalm is that you can rejoice on the threshold of a new beginning because the Lord has remembered you and that he promises to bless you.

[29 : 22] And this isn't just hopeful thinking. This is according to a covenant promise that God has made. So he's promised to remember you. He's promised to bless you.

And he's promised to do it all according to his covenant. All according to his covenant. The Lord has remembered us. He will bless us.

But you know, the psalmist, he doesn't leave it there. Because having expressed that there was praise from the people and a plea to the people and a promise for the people, the psalmist issues lastly and briefly, a prayer on behalf of the people.

A prayer on behalf of the people. Look at verse 11. Sorry, not 11, 14. This is the prayer. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children.

May you be blessed by the Lord who made heaven and earth. The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence.

[30 : 28] But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord. And so as the Lord's people begin this new chapter in their lives, the psalmist brings this Hallel Psalm to a close by praying for them.

And what he prays for is that the Lord's blessing would be upon them as a congregation. He prays that the covenant promise of God's grace will be realised in their experience.

He prays that they will grow as a congregation. He prays that they will grow in grace and in the knowledge of their Saviour as a congregation. He prays that they will increase in number as a congregation.

That there will be more families and more individuals in every generation coming to worship in the congregation. My friend, the psalmist prays that the Lord, Lord's people, will be blessed by the Lord. They will be blessed by the one who keeps covenant. That's what he says. May you be blessed by the Lord who made heaven and earth. And that title, Lord, it means the one who keeps covenant.

[31 : 43] The one who keeps his promises. The one who keeps the covenant of grace. He's saying, the Lord, the one who keeps covenant will bless his people according to his covenant of grace.

The Lord will bless his people according to his promises. And you know, this prayer of blessing, this benediction, it reminds me of, you know, what Aaron was commanded to say to the Israelites when

they were on the threshold of a new beginning.

When the Israelites, when they had crossed through, well, when they had gone through 40 years of the wilderness and all that the wilderness had for them, they came to the river Jordan. They're standing on the banks of the river Jordan and the Lord says to Aaron, the high priest, that he's to pronounce a benediction on them.

He's to bless them. And Moses and Aaron, they're standing before the people and Aaron, he lifts his hands and he says to the people, the Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. The Lord pronounced his benediction upon the people on the threshold of a new beginning.

[33 : 08] And you know, may that blessing be ours as we stand on the threshold of a new year and maybe respond to the Lord's blessing. blessing. We have to respond to the Lord's blessing just like the Israelites did.

Because having experienced praise from the people and a plea to the people and a promise for the people and a prayer on behalf of the people, the Lord's people, they responded in verse 18 by saying, we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the Lord. Lord, may that be our response. May that be our response as we begin 2018 together.

And as we go forward in strength of God the Lord, we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, that our life's song, not only today, but every day from now on, that it would be as the psalmist was reminding us, that it is not unto us, Lord, not to us, but to Thou glory take, that Thou, Lord, would us receive all the praise, the honour, and the glory, for we deserve nothing from Thee.

[34 : 41] What we do deserve is Thy wrath and Thy curse. And yet, Lord, Thou art one who is gracious and merciful to us, a God who is willing to bless us, a God who is willing to give promises to us, and seal them in and through Thy Son, Jesus.

Help us, Lord, then, we pray, not to look inward, but to look upward, not to look to the left or to the right or to other people, but to put our trust in Thee and in Thee alone.

And, O Lord, we pray especially for those who are still strangers to Thee or those who have not committed their life to Christ, that this new year would be a new beginning, that they would make a fresh start, that they would start by seeking the Lord while He may be found, and calling upon Him while He is near.

All bless us together, we pray, bless us as homes and families, and continue with us, we ask, not because we deserve it, but only because the Lord gracious.

Cleanse us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. We're going to conclude by singing the words of that Psalm, Psalm 115.

[36 : 00] Psalm 115, it's page 394. I could ask whoever is presenting to sing verse 1 first, and then from verse 1, we're singing from verse 12.

So verse 1 and then 12 down to the end of the Psalm, where it says, Not unto us, Lord, not to us, but do thou glory take, unto thy name in for thy truth, and for thy mercy's sake.

And then verse 12, The Lord of us hath mindful been, and He will bless us still, He will the house of Israel bless, bless Aaron's house, He will.

And on to the end of the Psalm. So these verses, to God's praise. not unto us, Lord, not to us, but do thou glory take, unto thy name and for thy mercy's sake.

The Lord of us God's heart might for me, and He will bless us still.

[37 : 36] He will, the hands of His request, bless Him, from the hands He will.

O, to come and give, I fear the Lord, He will, and surely bless.

The Lord will do, you are to sit, in our own own place.

O, blessed are ye of the Lord, who with the earth and heaven, The heavenly heavens are God's mighty, Earth, tomb, and sun's again.

The dead Lord who, to silence go, God's place to not report, But thanks for we forever will, Bless God, praise Him, the Lord.

[39 : 47] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen. Amen.