

May 5, 2024

TRUSTING IN THE GOD WHO REIGNS

Psalm 115

(4 of 5 in a series of selected Psalms)

I've often said that outside of Scripture my favorite book may well be Martin Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. During a particularly difficult time in my life, I would wake up, read the Scriptures, and then read Luther's letters. What I love about them is that some of them are gentle and encouraging, like the one he writes to his father when he is greatly ill. But others carry strong and biting rebukes. And you know, if you've been there, that sometimes when you're facing difficulty, you need both. There are some days you need gentle encouragement, but there are others when someone needs to say to you, "Just stop it." And when I needed each of these—especially the latter—Luther was a trusted friend. But even his rebukes can make you smile. One such example comes from his letter to Gregory Brueck in August of 1530.

Gregory had held political office, but he resigned his post in 1529 to help with the legalities of the work of the Reformation. He was an impressive figure. But no matter how impressive, he faced doubts and struggles, just like we all do at times. In August of 1530, Luther got word from a mutual friend that Gregory was really starting to doubt whether the work of the Reformation would succeed, so he wrote him a letter. Luther's main point was that Gregory needed to trust the Lord to carry out his good causes.

In the middle of his letter, Luther wrote: "I have recently seen [a miracle]. . . . When I looked out of my window, I saw the stars in the sky and the whole beautiful vault of heaven, but I saw no pillars on which the Master rested it all. Yet the sky did not fall, and the vault of heaven still stands fast. But there are some who look for the pillars and would like to touch and feel them. And when they are unable to do so, they become alarmed and tremble for fear that the sky will fall down for no other reason than that they cannot feel and see the pillars under it. If only they could do this, they would be satisfied that the sky is secure."¹

The first time I read that quote, it hit me in two ways. First, he's obviously exposing that unless we can figure out how everything might work out and account for every detail, we can sometimes find it hard to trust the Lord. Again, as if we want to see the pillars used to hold up the sky. But of course, we don't see all the details. The Lord rarely reveals them. We walk by faith, not by sight. But, second, Luther also exposes that the Lord performs miracles all around us each day. The fact that he causes the sun to rise, clouds come out, rain fall, etc. are the most amazing works that the Lord does. And we have the audacity to look at our lives sometimes, unable to see how things will work out, and start to doubt how God can really use this for our

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XVIII, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 156.

good while he's performing all these miracles around us. It sounds preposterous when you say it out loud, doesn't it?

Yet the struggle to trust the Lord is real. Perhaps things don't turn out as we expect in some area of our lives, or we face some difficulty, or we simply can't understand what the future might look like when so many around us seem to be able to outline theirs, and suddenly we are gripped with anxiety and struggle to think that the Lord will do us good. We struggle to trust him. And if you're there, then Psalm 115 can help.

It's tough to categorize Psalm 115. On the one hand, it looks like a psalm that might fit the category of a national lament when the whole people of God are suffering. For example, verses 1-2 begin with the psalmist saying, "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?'"

With these words, the psalmist seems to be implying that the people of God are suffering and deserve it. Maybe he's crying out from exile or after some military defeat that they've suffered because of their sin. And so he cries out to God to do something, but he knows he can't ask for mercy on the basis that they deserve good from God. He knows they don't deserve it. And so he doesn't appeal for mercy for their sake but simply for the sake of God's glory, to illustrate that he is the faithful, good, and great God. After all, the nations are acting like God can't do anything to deliver his people, and so the psalmist says to the Lord, "Don't allow the nations to keep ridiculing your great name, asking where you are. Do something—again, not for our sakes, but—for the sake of your great name!" And so you can see why some might categorize this psalm as a national lament where the psalmist cries out on behalf of the whole nation in the midst of their suffering. That's certainly what's going on in verses 1-2.

However, you can see that this psalm doesn't continue on like a lament psalm, with the psalmist outlining all the details of how they're struggling and laying out his complaint before God. Rather, it's bold. It's an answer to the nations would say, "Where is your God? Is he unable to help you?" The psalmist's first declaration to the question, "Where is their God?" is "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (v. 3), and so on it goes. In other words, this psalm declares why we should trust our God, even in the midst of our struggles. We actually see this exhortation to "Trust in the LORD" declared three times right in the middle of the psalm (vv. 9-11). And so I want to highlight a number of reasons that the psalmist shows us for why we should trust the Lord, even in our struggles. The first is that God is absolutely sovereign.

God is absolutely sovereign

I've already noted it, but the psalmist's first answer to the challenge of his enemies that our God seems to be absent or unable to do anything is to say, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (v. 3). When he notes that God is in the heavens, he's declaring that he's not confined to earth, like man. Rather, he reigns from above, over all that is going on down here. Moreover, he does whatever he wants. There is no one and nothing that can stop God from

doing anything he pleases. He is absolutely in control over everything. That's what we mean when we say God is sovereign. Therefore, really the word "absolutely" in my point is unnecessary, but I want to stress that there is absolutely nothing that prevents God from doing exactly what he wants to do. Everything he desires—all that he pleases—he does.

This is an obviously first reason to trust our God, even in the midst of our struggles or confusion. There's nothing that prevents him from doing what he wants to do. You and I may see all kinds of limitations. We may not be able to figure out how something might work out. But our God does not have those limitations. He is in the heavens and does all that he pleases. But that's not all. Second, we should note that everything else we can trust in is less than God.

Everything else we can trust in is inferior to God

This reason is simply saying, "If you don't trust God, what or whom are you going to trust?" And whatever the answer is, it'll be inferior to God. Let me explain what I mean. In verses 4-8 the psalmist mocks the gods of those very nations that are trying to mock and deride our God. The psalmist points out that they worship idols, things that they've formed and crafted with their own hands. He writes, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them."

We know exactly what he's saying, don't we? Idols are just foolish. I remember a few years back as Tom and I were visiting some of our church planters in Botswana, we took to time to go to a Hindu temple. We met the priest over the temple, and he was kind enough to give us tour. And at one point, he showed us his god—or perhaps one of his gods. It was a wooden statue someone had carved, exactly like the psalmist describes. The statue had eyes but couldn't see, hands but couldn't feel, a mouth but couldn't speak, and it was just the product of someone's carving. And the priest put a banana on the ground in front of him. So, I asked, "What is that for?" He answered, "For him to eat." And I thought what you're all thinking, "But you and I both know he won't, indeed can't, eat it. You're going to come back tomorrow morning and pick up that uneaten banana and eat it yourself or throw it away. But your god can't eat that." That's what the psalmist is pointing out, and he concludes in verse 8 by pointing out that foolish people trust in these false gods.

Now, here's my point. You and I may not have carved statues in our homes that we claim are our gods and in whom we trust. However, anything that we trust in instead of trusting in God is a lot like trusting in one of those hand-carved gods. Now, we might say, "No, I'm trusting in my ability to figure things out" or "I'm trusting that if I take the right job things will work out" or "I'm trusting that if I just get enough money things will work out" or a number of other things. But in each case, whether we're trusting in our own selves or someone or something else, anything that we trust in instead of God is much more like a carved statue than God. In other words, there's an infinite divide between God and all else. The triune God is uncreated, and literally

everything and everyone else is created. In that divide, you and I fall on the side of that carved statue—a created thing.

So why would you trust in anything or anyone else besides our God when everything else is an infinite step down from him? I've often thought the same thing about traditions that pray to saints. Why pray to a creature when you have access to the creator? It's foolish. So, trust him. But there are more reasons. Next, we can add that our God has proven himself to be faithful to us.

God has proven himself to be faithful to us

In verses 9-11 the psalmist explicitly commands his hearers to do what has been implied throughout, namely, trust the Lord. He says it three times, calling Israel, the priests, and all who fear the LORD to trust in him. And in each occasion he gives the same reason, saying, "He is their help and their shield."

This language of God being their help and shield is used repeatedly in the Old Testament. For example, in Psalm 33:20 we read, "Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield." It's used to indicate the Lord's protection and care and provision for his people. Consistently as Israel reflects on God as their protector and provider, they reference him as their help and shield. Consequently, when the psalmist tells everyone to trust in the Lord in verses 9-11, he reminds them that God is their help and shield. That is, he's telling them that God has shown himself to be faithful in caring for, providing for, and protecting them. Therefore, why shouldn't they trust him?

And can't we say the same? Certainly there have been so many times in our lives that the Lord has shown himself to be faithful to us and to care for us. He's shown himself to be your help and shield. Perhaps it was with financial provision, or getting you through a week you didn't think you'd survive, or getting you a job, or blessing your family, or whatever. Think on these things. If God was faithful to care for you then, why do you think he wouldn't give you all that you need (even if it's different than what you want!) now?

And it would be shameful for me not to mention at this moment that he's already met your deepest need in providing Jesus. This is Paul's point in Romans 8:31-39. If your Father already gave you his Son in order to save you, why do you think he won't graciously give you everything you need to persevere and live a God-honoring life throughout this time? Of course he will. So, trust him. And yet there's more, we can also add that God has promised blessings to his people.

God has promised blessings to his people

After exhorting Israel to trust in the Lord, the psalmist adds a declaration that God will indeed bless his people. He writes, "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" (vv. 12-13).

Now, you can see that this is a restatement of the groups in verses 9-11: Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord. In the earlier verses, those groups are exhorted to trust the Lord. Now, they're being told that the Lord will bless them. In fact, a blessing is pronounced upon them in verses 14-15 that they would be given increase and blessed by the Lord. But how can they be so sure?

Well, note that he claims God will bless them because, as he states it, "The Lord has remembered us." This notion of remembering is referenced throughout Scripture as well. For example, in Psalm 98:3, a psalm about singing praises to the Lord, the psalmist declares, "He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel." Now, when he says the Lord remembered, that doesn't mean that he had let something slip his mind and then it came to him—as is what happens to us. To remember means to demonstrate his faithfulness to his covenant promises. That's why the psalmist said he remembered specifically "his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel." Another way to say that might be to say, "He demonstrated his faithfulness to all his covenant promises."

I think that's what the psalmist is saying here. The Lord will be faithful to everything he's promised. The psalmist may well be remembering God's promises to bless those who obey him and curse those who disobey him in Deuteronomy 28. It may well be that the psalmist thinks, "We've seen the Lord's curses in our disobedience," which is what got us into this place where the nations are mocking our God (see vv. 1-2), but now as we turn to him, we can count on his promise to bless us. Whatever the specific promise, the psalmist is looking to God's promises as a reason to have confident trust going forward.

And don't we have promise after promise as well? If we are struggling to trust that God will give us what we need, we merely need to remember his promise to give good gifts to those who ask or to withhold no good thing from his children. If we are struggling with how anything can be made of the mess of our lives, we can remember his promise to work all for our God. If we are wondering how we might have our needs met, we can remind ourselves of his promise to provide these things for us as we seek his kingdom. And that's just a sampling.

God has made promises that he will certainly keep. And so we can speak confidently about our hope in him. We can trust him, no matter what things look like around us. But let me finish with one more note. We should trust the Lord because trusting him is a blessing and privilege.

Trusting the Lord is a blessing and privilege

The psalmist ends by noting in the last three verses the privilege and blessing that is ours. First, he notes that he has given us the earth over which to walk in faithfulness. He first made the world and gave Adam and Eve dominion over it. And though we forfeited that position of glory and brought sin and death into the world, it is still true that even in a fallen world we largely demonstrate our reign over the creation God has given us. But the biggest privilege he's given us is the blessing of being able to praise and glorify him.

The psalmist points out in verse 17 that the dead do not praise the Lord, writing, “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence.” And then he counters this, saying, “But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!” (v. 18).

Now, this contrast could be simply between the living and the dead. In other words, he might simply be saying that in terms of life on this earth, once you’re dead you don’t get to praise the Lord in this life, while those who continue living do. That may be the contrast—between the dead and the living. But I actually think it’s a contrast between the wicked and the righteous. This isn’t immediately apparent from verse 17 because he simply mentions the dead not praising the Lord, and we’re all going to die—whether we know the Lord as our savior or not. However, note a couple of things in verse 18. First, he uses the first person pronoun: “we.” And throughout this psalm, first person pronouns are used as a reference to God’s people. And, second, notice how long he envisions us praising the Lord: “from this time forth and forevermore.”

We must see the blessing that is ours in being able to say, “Lord, I trust you with my life, my children, my future, etc.” It’s a privilege to entrust our lives to one who is sovereign, loves us, has given us a multitude of promises, and has proven himself faithful. The psalmist notes the blessing of blessing the Lord, and one of the clearest ways we bless the Lord according to this psalm is by trusting him.

Therefore, note that it is a privilege and blessing to be able to trust the Lord. The wicked man does not do this. But your eyes have been opened to see the work of his hands. Your ears have been opened to hear his promises. Your heart has been opened to receive and love his Word. So let’s realize the blessing we have in getting to trust the Lord.

I know that walking by faith is hard. We don’t see how things are going to work out. In Luther’s words, we struggle to trust because we want to see the pillars that are holding up the sky. We want to be able to see and touch every detail about how the Lord will bring about our good. And yet the Lord often keeps from us his perfect plans for our lives and what details he’ll use to bring that about. But if we need reasons to trust him, let’s remember Psalm 115 and the reasons given here. And let’s never forget our main reason to trust the Lord: he met our deepest need with the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. So let’s declare our trust in him now as we come to the table. Amen.