

Lifeless Idols, Life Giving God

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Date: 27 April 2025

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[0 : 00] Please follow along in the bulletin or on the screen. Psalm 115.

Psalm 11.

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.

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.

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 men.

[1 : 47] The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do those who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the Lord. Good morning, Watermark Church.

Great to see you all. Thanks so much for that impassioned reading, Justin. I really liked it. Great emphasis. We've got a bit of a break in the preaching series.

And so we've chosen to speak on this psalm as a one-off today. And I've got some questions for you as we start to look at the passage together.

As we think about our lives and where we are heading, what would we say we are putting our confidence in to get us there, to stay the course? If we look back on our lives and what we've put our confidence in to get to this point, how would we answer that question as well?

[3 : 02] Education, intelligence, hard work, the support of our loved ones. And how has that worked out for us if we look at our lives today? One thing I've always followed very closely in general is the world of professional sports.

When it comes to performing when it counts, I think if you ask most athletes, they would say that they get their confidence from their preparation. The gym room, live drills, nutrition, sports psychologists, analyzing their opponents in the film room.

You leave no stone unturned. You put together a plan, and you put your confidence and your trust in that. That's a very old photo, by the way, in the middle, the last time Australia won the Rugby World Cup.

It was a long, long time ago, not even in this century. But I had to put it up there. I would guess here, no offense, that very few of us here are athletes today, but we do all live in a world that is full of messaging.

Often very attractive and desirable about what to put our confidence in for our lives, what to put our faith and trust in. Whether you are very Christian or very not Christian, or you'd say you're somewhere in between, what should you ultimately put your trust and confidence in?

[4 : 25] Today's psalm has a lot to say about that. It's actually part of the typical Jewish Passover feast or service, or Jewish Hallel, which means hallelujah. Said at the end of the service or meal, it's meant to help the Jewish people remind them that God alone saved them from slavery under the Egyptians.

Many people often attribute the first line of the psalm to kind of a humble praising of God in the midst of a victorious situation. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory.

William Wilberforce, for example, is said to have meditated on this verse upon him being able to abolish slavery in 1807, being part of that process.

However, as we will see, the backdrop of this psalm is actually quite the opposite. Not of victory, but of exile, of hardship, of suffering. It's actually a psalm of confidence under pressure.

But it's not about having confidence in the fact that we've put the right plan together, we're positioning ourselves correctly in our life trajectory, we've taken the best of A, B, and C life philosophy.

[5 : 39] It's not about having a plan or method at all. Not ultimately, anyway. It is a strong urge to confidence. That despite the world is full of other messages, or idols, as we will see, that disparage God, that can even look down upon Christianity, those idols will give us anything but.

In fact, that will give us the opposite. We should only have confidence and ultimately put our trust in God and his son, Jesus Christ. For in them alone, we will truly find life and blessing.

So, what's the historical context of this psalm, which I just alluded to? The exact author, time of writing, is actually not clear or agreed upon. But most commentators would say, they do link it to the period of time just after the Jewish Babylonian exile, around 580 BC.

So, because of their continuous turning away from God, God allowed the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to destroy Jerusalem's city wall and the temple.

The Israelites were scattered throughout Babylon and Egypt. God's people are now ruled by surrounding foreign nations and religions and the myriad hardships and pressures that come from that.

[6 : 59] In verse 2, we can see that these nations are questioning God's existence. Where is their God? They say. Is this a genuine question of intellectual inquiry?

Are they actually interested in the answer? No. This is a sarcastic comment. It's mocking and taunting. They are indirectly saying to the Israelites, you foolish people, worshipping a God you can't even see, that can't save you, that probably doesn't even exist.

Where is he? Where is the evidence? This is not too dissimilar from our experience sometimes, is it? As Christians, trying to live our faith out in the world, we can find that the world generally doesn't place a high value in Christianity.

It can even mock or look down upon it. I recall an old rugby song as I was preparing for this sermon that we used to sing when we used to, on the bus on the way home after a match, we used to sing this song, many songs, none of which I can really repeat here at church, but before I was a Christian, I used to sing these songs as well.

And one of the names of the songs was, Jesus Can't Play Rugby. And one of the lines in the song was, Jesus Can't Play Rugby because he doesn't even exist. Now that's quite overt, right?

[8 : 20] But oftentimes, perhaps more often than not, the pressure is more subtle than outright, right? Faith can be seen as outdated, anti-intellectual.

It should only be personal and behind closed doors. It's anti-inclusive, anti-progress, it's fantasy. Surprisingly, despite his weaker position, the psalmist's response in verses 3 to 8 is actually confidence in the face of this pressure.

Our God is in the heavens. He does all that he pleases, he says in verse 3. If you remember from Kevin's sermon a few weeks back on John chapter 3, Jesus uses similar language about himself to describe himself when he's talking to Nicodemus.

Chapter 3, verse 13, he says, No one has ascended into heaven except he who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man. This is very important because what is meant here is not that just God is in the heavens like he's just floating around in the sky, but he exists in the heavens, which means a realm where humans cannot be nor have any influence or power.

God exists sovereignly and separately from us. God also does whatever he pleases. What delights him? He is not influenced, he is not cajoled, he is not manipulated, he is not forced in any way.

[9 : 44] The idols of the surrounding ruling nations, however, were nothing like this. The Hebrew word for idol comes from the root to shape or to fashion. I've just got some images of some of the idols that the Jewish people would have been faced with during this time of the Babylonians.

By very definition, they were shaped by human beings. They may have been impressive to the eye, made from the most precious earthly substances, silver and gold, we see in verse 4.

They often had human features, as we see in verses 5 to 7. Mouths, eyes, ears, nose, noses, hands, feet. They often had human features.

They probably even appeared attractive as a result, maybe credible, maybe trustworthy, especially to the Jews in the situation they were in, right? I mean, they were being ruled by these people.

They were a minority, and these other people were worshipping them. But the fact is, these idols could never be more than the humans that created them.

[10:49] The human features accounted for nothing at all. They certainly could not bring life or blessing or save. As with many young kids, my two girls have soft toys that they're very close to.

They're two bunnies. One has been creatively called Big Bunny, and the other with similar creative flair has been called Pink Bunny. And they take them wherever we travel. They hold on to them when we play at home.

If we need to wash them and dry them, it has to be done before they go to bed so they can hold them at night, lest we incur a lot of crying and sobbing. It's fair to say that the girls place a lot of comfort in these dolls.

But can they save? Of course not. Imagine if one day our girls turned to Soda, my wife and I, and said, Mama, Baba, we don't need you anymore.

Don't worry about us. We've got it under control. We've got our bunnies. We'll be fine. What? They can't look after them. We gave them the bunnies in the first place, right?

[11:54] A big part of what the psalm is highlighting is the foolishness, the irrationality of the foreign nation's taunts and their trust in their idols. When compared to the true God who is in the heavens.

Of course, as educated adults in 2025, this situation may actually seem a little bit, this ancient situation may seem a little bit irrelevant, right? I mean, it doesn't really apply to us anymore.

We're not physically bowing down to statues or idols anymore. But you see, idols aren't necessarily just physical images or statues.

In fact, they are rarely that these days. In a very old sermon from the mid-1600s, it was called, Soul Idolatry Excludes Men Out of Heaven. An old Puritan teacher, David Clarkson, highlighted two types of idolatry.

The first, open outward idolatry, which is kind of referenced here in the psalm, is where one bows down with their body to a physical image. The second, or what he calls hidden or soul idolatry, is when the heart and mind is set on anything more than God.

[13:03] When anything is more valued than God, more desired than God, more sought than God, more loved than God. when we bow down to something that is not God in our hearts.

I think we can probably see that soul idolatry is more prevalent today. And if that is the case, then we can and do make anything at all into an idol. John Calvin, the famous theologian, put it this way, the human heart is a perpetual idol factory.

Look at how the psalmist warns the people about idol worship in verse 8. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them. In other words, what the psalmist is saying is you become what you worship.

Worshipping money makes us stingy. It makes us count our pennies, counting each and every sacrifice that we make for them. Worshipping our children will make us childish and immature in the way that we deal with their disappointments.

Worshipping our image will make us vain. It's not that you morph into the physical statue or idol that you're worshipping. But you do always share the same end destination.

[14:14] You suffer the same fate. Lifelessness. Death. As we see in these verses. Ultimately though, we make idols, and we've alluded to it earlier in the services, we make idols, things into idols, because they promise to meet our deepest desires and fears within us.

Fears like fear of man, fear of the future, fear of loneliness. Desires like security, comfort, rest, fulfillment, love, acceptance, being known.

This is very important to take note of, church. The desires of the heart are ultimately what motivate our actions and move us one way or the other. St. Augustine put it this way, My weight is my love, he says.

By it I am carried wherever I am carried. The Bible puts it this way, For where your treasure is, your heart will be also. So it's really worth spending time thinking about what these desires are for you.

It is also important to say, that just because you have desires doesn't mean they're bad. It's a perfectly reasonable thing to want to be loved, accepted, known, at peace in life, without fear.

[15:32] The issue is what we are putting our confidence in, to trust and satisfy those desires. Are you looking to God, who is in the heavens, the maker of heaven and earth, or are you looking to the things of the world?

Many of you will have read and seen the Lord of the Rings series. There is a character in the story called Gollum. Introduced as a kind of slimy, creepy monster guy.

As the story progresses, you find out more about Gollum and his background. You learn that he actually used to live a pretty normal life. That's up in, I mean, he looks a little maniacal there, I'll be honest, but he was normal just prior to that scene.

He was, his name was Smeagol, and he was just another unassuming hobbit, like many of the other main characters in the film, in the books. But one day, he and his relative, while they're fishing, stumble upon a magical ring that allows the wearer to become impossible, invisible, not impossible, invisible.

Smeagol's desire for power and control, relatively hidden until that point, is set alight. He actually ends up killing his relative so he can have sole possession of the ring, and over time becomes more and more enslaved by it.

[16:54] He calls it his precious. His behavior becomes obsessed towards the ring and cruel towards others, as he gives himself over to the ring's power, and he looks to protect it at all costs.

He is also subsequently disowned by his community. You see, the ring twists Gollum's mind and heart and body. His desire for power and control are actually in some ways achieved.

We may achieve some success in this world following these things. He does have power to an extent. It does extend his life to an extent. But he feels that without the ring, he is nothing.

And over time, he shrivels into a hideous looking creature that lives a completely isolated, hateful, and hopelessly enslaved life in the deepest cavern of a mountain range.

He is as good as lifeless, as good as dead. And if that wasn't clear enough, after the ring is accidentally found by someone else, and after chasing him relentlessly and trying to kill him to get it back, Gollum slips to his literal death after a final mad struggle for the ring, clutching to it and calling to his precious.

[18:12] So it is with verse 8 of the psalm. You become what you worship. You suffer the same fate. Lifelessness, death. This is very serious. We are in a precarious situation.

We need help. What should we do about it? What books do we need to read? What podcasts do we need to listen to? What AI chatbot do we need to query? Look at verses 9 to 11.

What should we do? The call is not to put a plan in place. The call is unequivocally trust in the Lord. The repetition three times highlights that this is actually a universal call for everyone.

Verse 9 says the house of Israel. That refers to the Jewish people. You are not Jewish, but watermark, well, I think, but watermark church, trust in the Lord.

Verse 10 says the house of Aaron. That refers to the Jewish priestly class, the religious leaders. Watermark elders and leaders, trust in the Lord.

[19:15] Verse 11, those who fear the Lord refer to all other true believers. All people in Hong Kong and the world who call themselves Christian trust in the Lord. Our standing in this world makes no difference.

We each equally need to trust in the Lord. There is still a major problem for us though because by this call that we read in verses 9 to 11, we could assume that we can trust in the Lord in and of ourselves.

But Israel's history, and if we're honest, our own personal history, is littered with examples of us failing to trust Him over and over again. This is why the Israelites are in their situation to start with. This is the problem of sin. The thing which takes the good things of the world and makes them the ultimate things. Idols above God, drawing us away from Him.

We need help. Well, the good news is God helps us. How does He do that? Let's move on. Let's look at verses 12 to 15. It kind of helped that this psalm is so well ordered, huh?

[20:22] The Lord has remembered 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. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children.

May you be blessed by the Lord who made heaven and earth. Life, blessing, flourishing. God's desire for us is to save us and to give us life and blessing and flourishing.

How does He do this? He gives us Jesus. The living God Himself. The opposite of a lifeless idol. The idols of the world are made of silver and gold. The work of human hands.

In verse 4. Jesus made of flesh and bone and spirit. The eternal, uncreated Son of God. The idols of the world have mouths but do not speak.

Jesus preached the kingdom of God to the masses. Jesus called His disciples by name. He calls each and every one of us by name. The idols of the world have eyes but do not speak.

[21 : 29] Sorry. The idols of the world have eyes but do not see. Jesus looked over the crowds, harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. He had compassion on them.

The idols of the world have ears but do not hear. Even in the midst of His own suffering on the cross, Jesus hears the plea of the thief beside Him and welcomes him into paradise.

He hears our plea and welcomes us into paradise. The idols of the world have hands but do not feel. Jesus reached out and touched them blind, the lame, the lepers, and heals them.

He similarly opens His hands to us to experience healing in His midst. The idols of the world have feet but do not walk. Jesus walked from city to city, proclaiming the good news.

He picked up His cross and walked to His own death to pay the price of our sins. I knew that would be a hard one.

[22 : 33] The idols of the world demand we move towards them, give more and more of ourselves to them.

They enslave. They entangle us. Jesus comes to us. Comes to us. The only thing He asks of us is that we trust in Him and rely on His perfect trust.

He releases us from slavery to sin. He sets us free. The idols of the world, Watermark Church, appear alive all around us but they bring death.

Jesus died and rose again. We've just celebrated Easter. He brings abundant, increased, overflowing life. He puts a new, clean heart in us. He puts His very spirit in us.

Those who trust in Him are a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come. Praise God. And just as the call to trust the Lord is universal, so the promise of life and blessing is universal for all those who fear the Lord.

[23 : 39] Whether you are Jewish, non-Jewish, Hong Konger, non-Hong Konger, rich, poor, powerful, weak, for anyone who trusts in Jesus, both the small and the great.

You know, God gives us Jesus, not because He needs us in some way, but because of who He is, His covenantal nature, His steadfast love and faithfulness.

This is why the psalmist cries out in verse 1, for God to preserve His own name's glory, for the sake of His love and faithfulness. Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory, for the sake of Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness.

Because whether it was the promises to Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or David, before this, God moves towards His people with steadfast love and faithfulness.

He always fulfills His promises to help, to shield, to give life and blessing. And He ultimately fulfills this in Jesus. God is so good.

[24 : 41] God is so good. Let's get practical. We've got all this in our head, and hopefully it's impacting our heart as well. But how can we actually grow in our applying of these truths to our lives, in order that we may live them out day by day?

More than just reading the Bible, praying, going to church, fellowshiping with one another, which are the basic fundamentals, so I'm not saying don't do those, do those first. But when we leave church today, we go back to our homes, to our workplaces, to our classrooms.

We saw earlier that God's desire for us is to shower us with life and blessing. This of course is wonderful as it is, but actually it doesn't just stop there with Him showering us with life and blessing.

More than this, God seeks for us who have that blessing, which He provides, to change us. Look at verse 18. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the Lord. Justin, you read that out better actually. The psalmist has gone from crying out to God at the start of the psalm, albeit confidently, to praising God at the end.

[25 : 53] Something has changed. It's not the physical external circumstances. We don't see any evidence that that's changed. So what is it? The heart has changed. The psalmist has seen, experienced, believed, and confidently trusted in God's greatness and goodness.

And as a result, he has confidently turned away from the lure of worldly idols and can even praise God in the midst of his struggles. So what might this change process look like?

I did say I'll try and get practical. The following is a high-level, four-step approach to help kickstart that change where we turn away from idols and trust God instead.

It's not a magical four-step formula, by the way, cure for idolatry. Life is not so black and white.

There's nuance, complexity. We have overlapping desires of sin that takes time to consider and talk about and ponder.

So you'll need time. I suggest you take what you might gather from this and talk it through from a trusted friend in more detail. First step, identify your idols.

[27 : 03] How can we tell if something is an idol? How can we identify it? It's not always easy, but I think these two questions could be helpful in figuring that out, like two sides of the same coin.

So the first one is, what makes life meaningless if you don't have it? And the second is, what would you sin to get or to keep? There are obviously many, many idols that could be listed from this, but as we walk through this process, I'll use just two examples to help color it out a little bit.

The first is, romantic relationships. Now I know this is a hard thing for many people here, so I don't take these words lightly, but we may feel that without a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a spouse, life is basically meaningless.

We can become so fearful of losing it that we would be willing to compromise to keep it, to live together before marriage, to sleep together before marriage, or we are absolutely devastated for a long period of time without any end in sight when we don't have it.

I think career is another one. I think it's a big one too in Hong Kong. We may feel that without a successful career, we lack meaning in life. This is actually something I'm struggling with right now.

[28 : 18] Thus, in order to keep it, we may engage in less than upright business practices, cover up our mistakes, massage the facts, paint a rosier picture of what we've done at work, tear others down that stand in our way.

So we've identified the idols. What's the second step? Identify the underlying heart desire that is drawing us to the idol. This, I think, is actually probably the most important step because ultimately this is our desires of what move us to worship these idols.

For relationships, the underlying heart desire may be the yearning for love and acceptance, a fear of loneliness. For career, it may be security, comfort, approval, self-regard, fear of the future.

And now that we have identified the what's, I'm flying through this, I understand, but now that we have identified the what's, how can God help us? Third step. Try and identify a scripture or a gospel's truth that speaks to that desire.

That speaks to the life that we find in Christ in the midst of having those desires. For romantic relationships and the underlying desire for love and acceptance, God's word in Romans 5, 8 says that God demonstrated his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[29 : 41] Here we can see God saying to us that through Christ, I love and accept you so much that I died for you. You can trust in me for your love and acceptance. For career and the underlying desire of security and confidence, God's word says in Romans 8, 32, He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Here we see God saying that through Christ, he will give you exactly what you need when you need it. you can have confidence and trust in Jesus for that. And the final step, pray through the scripture. Repent of your idolatry. Ask God to reveal any practical steps you might need to take action on. It could be to apologize to someone you've mistreated because in your mind they threatened your idol.

It could be just seeking prayer today because you realize that you have an idol and you need help with it. It could be admitting to your mistakes and stop massaging the facts or trying to paint yourself and lie and paint yourself in a better light at work.

It could be breaking off that unhealthy relationship. Fleshing this out with a trusted friend or even your CG may be really helpful. Okay.

[31 : 02] We've got practical. In summary, watermark, where do we ultimately get our confidence from in this life? Psalm 115 is a strong reminder that even though the things of the world promise us life and blessing and fulfillment, they will give you the opposite.

Giving your life to these things, these idols, will ultimately produce death, destruction, lifelessness for yourself and not just yourself, for the community around you as you sacrifice more and more of yourself to it.

But there is hope, thanks to God. In Jesus, we can experience this true life and blessing. the ultimate satisfaction of our deepest desires that speaks into every single human experience.

And we can have confidence in change even in the midst of those struggles. If you haven't made a decision yet to trust in God, the call is clear. Trust in the Lord Jesus.

He will be your help and shield. Please come and talk with me or a Christian that you trust. We would love to walk with you on that. For all of us in a world full of idols have confidence in and trust

only in God for he alone gives eternal life and blessing.

[32 : 16] And may we be like the psalmist in verse 18, changed from the inside, confidently saying in the midst of life's struggles, but we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen.