

Psalm 135 – Yahweh over idols

Introduction

Good morning everyone. [My name is Andrew for those of you I haven't met, and I'm a member of the 10am congregation.]

This week we're continuing our series of sermons in the Book of Psalms, looking at another psalm of praise. Psalm 135 is one of corporate praise, calling all of Israel to praise the Lord. It also refers to many other parts of Scripture. As we'll see, the psalmist draws on familiar and significant moments in Israel's history to tell the story of God's power, goodness, and compassion. And by following in the psalmist's spiritual footsteps, we can meet God who redeems us through Christ.

Structure of the psalm

Firstly though, a brief outline of the structure. The first and last lines are identical and cap the psalm as an enclosed unity. They also clearly indicate the intent of the psalm – that being to praise the Lord.

After the opening line, we're told who the direct audience of the psalm is, namely, 'you who minister in the house of the Lord' (v2). Broadly the audience is Israel, the servants of the Lord, but there seems to be some specific attention given to the priests that minister in the tabernacle or temple as the ones that are able to make tangible acts of praise through sacrifice and various offerings. But again, verse 4 also has the whole nation in mind – 'For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.' This is also one of those references to other Scripture. Yahweh called Israel his 'treasured possession' as they gathered around Mt Sinai just before he met with Moses and gave him the 10 commandments (Exodus 19:5).

After introducing the audience we get to the main body of the psalm, verses 5 to 18. This comes in two parts that centre around the key moment of praise in verses 13 and 14. This turning point that holds the two parts together says 'Your name, Lord, endures forever, your renown, Lord, through all generations. For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.' These lines convey the essence of the psalm – that the Lord is above all other gods and he will bring about good for his people. Again, there's another reference to Israel's history here, specifically Exodus 3:15 where Yahweh first reveals his covenant name to Moses, saying 'This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.'

Part 1 of the main body, verses 5-12, makes the supremacy of the Lord clear – the psalmist says 'I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is

greater than all gods.' He then backs up this claim by recalling some of God's work in history. His work in Heaven, including controlling the storms; and his work on Earth, like sending the plagues on Egypt and bringing his people out of slavery. God is the Lord of creation and redemption.

Part 2, verses 15-18, on the other side of verses 13 and 14, speaks of the futility of trusting other gods. So there's the authority of the Lord as sovereign, and then the folly of trusting idols. Those idols are made by humans, can't speak or see, and can't save the people that worship them. Again the author draws from other parts of scripture. Verses 15 to 18 come directly from Psalm 115, pretty much word for word.

The psalm then closes, similar to how it started, with a call for Israelites, the house of Aaron, and the house of Levi to praise the Lord.

Key themes and theology

So that's briefly the structure I think we're working with. And with that outline in mind, I want to draw out a couple of the key themes in the psalm. Firstly, the Lord (Yahweh) is categorically over and above the gods of other nations. And also how the personal nature of Israel's God is special and unique.

Yahweh is greater than the idols

The psalm calls us to to praise the Lord because he is absolutely and unquestionably superior to the gods of other nations.

It's likely that early on in Israel's history the Israelites did believe in the existence of other gods. But always, Yahweh alone was Israel's God. And his authority and sovereignty was not to be questioned. Time and again Yahweh proved this to Israel and eventually, through prophets like Isaiah, Yahweh was placed more and more into his own category of divinity. In Isaiah 44:6 God says, 'I am the first and I am the last, apart from me there is no God.' And the idea of other gods, idols, is mocked. Isaiah 44 goes on to tell how a craftsman cuts down a tree and 'Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts meat and eats his fill.... From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me! You are my god!" [but the idols] know nothing, they understand nothing'.

This sentiment is repeated in Psalm 135. 'The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.' The folly of idol worship is made all the more clear by comparison with the Lord. While the nations craft their idols with their own

hands, Israel herself was formed by God. The nations fashion gods for themselves, the true and living God fashions a people for himself.

Verse 6 says 'the Lord does whatever pleases him'. There is no competition or competing priorities for God, he just does as he wills. This means the Lord is more powerful than any other being, and to be chosen as his treasured possession is not by merit but by grace.

And not only is the Lord the most powerful of the gods, he is also compassionate. These are the two elements of verses 13 and 14 that stand at the centre of the psalm. Firstly, 'Your name, Lord, endures forever' – 'name' here doesn't just mean the word used to refer to God, but also includes his nature, his character, his strength. Yahweh is the God above all other gods, without rival or threat, and that will endure forever. And then verse 14, 'the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.' Unlike idols, God is able to act in the world, and he acts with compassion to vindicate and save his people.

The psalmist puts forward evidence of this by recalling the exodus and the journey to the promised land. The importance of the exodus in the history of Israel cannot be overstated. Verses 8 to 12 in Psalm 135 remember these events and they are repeated again with slight variation in the very next psalm, so clearly this was important to Israel.

The mention of Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan is somewhat more obscure than talking about Pharaoh. Once Israel had left Egypt during the exodus, God had promised to take his people to Canaan, the land promised to Abraham as an inheritance generations earlier. However, because the people failed to trust God pretty much as soon as they left Egypt, Israel had to wait 40 years, or one generation, to enter the promised land. After these 40 years, Israel approached Canaan from the plains of Moab, to the east of Jerusalem. But along the way two kings refused to let Israel pass through – Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan. The Lord delivered these kings over to Israel and consequently, God's chosen people could enter into the land God had prepared for them. These were tangible historical events that demonstrated to Israel the grace and faithfulness of God. When wondering about their standing with God Israel could remember these events as a demonstration of God's faithfulness. And the outworking of this remembering is praise.

Yahweh the personal God

The second theme is essentially an extension of the first, and that is that the Lord is a personal God. The comparison here is to the idols of other nations described in verses 15 to 18. These idols can't see or speak. They

don't know or care about the people that worship them. On the other hand, the Lord has personally chosen Jacob (that is, Israel) to be his treasured possession. God made Israel a nation, but the other nations have to make their gods with their own hands. The gods of other nations are mute and incapable of action, but the Lord has compassion on his servants and will vindicate his people. God cares about his people. But those that trust in idols, will end up like the idols – in verse 18, 'Those that make [the idols] will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.' That is, senseless and powerless.

Interpreting after Jesus

Psalm 135 called ancient Israel to praise God because he is sovereign over creation, because he is compassionate and vindicates his people, and because the idols of the nations were senseless and powerless. But what does this psalm mean for us now? What does this mean for our lives and how we interact with God? Taking my queue from Psalm 135, I'm going to draw on a few different places in Scripture to start thinking about this.

Firstly, though, we need to try and close the historical gap between the time of the psalm and us today. Most striking is the role of idols in ancient culture. This is not something that most of us would be conscious of or have direct contact with.

Paul explores the dynamics of idolatry in his letter to the Romans. He explains that God's eternal power and divine nature were evident to Gentiles in creation (as it is to people today), but even though they knew God in this way through observing and living in his creation, they neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him. Instead they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things instead of the Creator. This is the essence of idolatry: worshipping and serving created things instead of the Creator. And Psalm 135 adds to this that idols are trusted by those that worship them. Our trust should in Yahweh the creator, who made the world and will vindicate and save his people, rather than created things. Trusting idols leads to being senseless and powerless; trusting Yahweh leads to praise and to eternal life.

One example that I've come across recently of the more subtle idols that exist in our culture is a modern philosophy of science. There are prominent scientists that ascribe a sort of transcendence to the laws of physics, which describe the forces and movements of the universe, in a way that replaces God. This isn't deifying science or nature exactly, but giving the mathematical principles that have been observed in the universe a sort of pre-existence and transcendence that goes beyond our reality. This does away with God and replaces him with just properties of the universe he

created. In this view, we trust and count on created things instead of the Creator.

You and I might not look to science to save and vindicate us, but we can still ask the question – are there things that I worship and serve, idols that I trust to save me other than God? There's a foolishness about this, because only the true and living God can save me. He's the one I should praise.

Now, God's special possession mentioned in the psalm is the nation of Israel. But in the New Testament, that description is extended to the Church. In 1 Peter 2, writing to churches in modern day Turkey, Peter says, 'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy' (1 Peter 2:9-10).

There's a lot of familiar language from Psalm 135 there. In the New Testament, the people of God, his special possession, is not Israel, but the Church – all those that belong to Christ. Like Psalm 135, Peter also says that because we are God's special possession, we may declare his praise. We are called to praise our God because he is sovereign as the God of creation and redemption. For the church, the great act of redemption we remember is not so much the exodus as it is the cross of Jesus. Instead of remembering the defeat of Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan, we remember the defeat of death itself as Jesus rose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and sent his Spirit to be among us.

You may also have noticed that much of the psalm seems to be directed towards the priests. These are the people that were able to perform sacrifices and offerings according to the law of Moses. The ministers of the house of the Lord are mentioned in verse 4; Aaron, the first high priest is named in verse 19; and Levi, the father of the tribe from which all the priests and temple assistants come, in verse 20. The New Testament, however, puts a new spin on the traditional system of making sacrifices. No longer are priests and complicated logistics required to facilitate your sacrifice. We are all directly involved.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus was the last blood sacrifice, and now we worship God by offering ourselves and our praises as sacrifices. 1 Peter 2, also calls the believers 'living stones being built into a spiritual house', and a 'royal priesthood', and a 'holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'

What are those spiritual sacrifices? Romans 12 calls us to offer our bodies as a 'living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship', Paul says. And Hebrews 13 says, 'Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased' (Hebrews 13:15-16). So our spiritual sacrifices are (1) our praises to God, and (2) the good works that God has created us to do.

Recalling the history of God's actions in the world is one way we can offer praise to God. Psalm 135 recalls God's action in the exodus from Egypt and the journey to the promised land. Verses 13 and 14 declare that God's people will be vindicated in the future. The psalm is not so much about what God is doing right now, necessarily, but about what he has done in the past and what he will do in the future. Sometimes it's hard to think up words to praise God when life has just been difficult. But the Bible shows us how to look to what God has done and what he has promised us, and take up praise nonetheless. As we remember that Jesus came and died for us, and that he was raised to life again to reconcile us with God the Father, we meet the God who will vindicate us at the last day, and will have compassion on us in the present. In fact it's through our praises – as we tell the story of the true and living God who has rescued us through Christ – that we are reminded that the idols we're tempted to trust are senseless and powerless, and their hold on us is broken.

Conclusion

So, we've seen Psalm 135 is based firmly on who God is and what he has done in history. It shows us that the natural outworking of reflecting on this is praise. Our God is above all other gods, and he cares about his people. We are his special possession who he has rescued and brought out of darkness into his wonderful light. As we meditate on all that God has done for us, let us join with the psalmist in declaring his praise. Let's pray.

Lord, your name endures forever, your renown through all generations. God we praise you for all you've done for us. And especially for Jesus's life, death and resurrection, and the hope we have in him of eternal life. Father, we pray that you impress these truths on our hearts and lead us to praise by your Spirit as we meditate on your work. We ask you guide our hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. Amen.