

Psalms 113-115: Part One of the Egyptian Hallel

In Book 5 of the Psalms, there are two great sequences of psalms which were sung at the three Pilgrim Feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, **the Egyptian Hallel (113-118)**, sung especially at Passover, and **the Songs of Ascents (120-134)**. What we can see quite clearly in both series is that the hearts of the people of God were full of joy as they celebrated the redeeming love and redemptive acts of their God. The combination of words and actions served to deepen the people's sense of thanksgiving and renewed commitment, at least for those who were spiritually sensitive.

The first of these groups is known as the **Egyptian Hallel** because it was used at Passover which commemorated God's deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt, the Exodus. In Luke's account of the Transfiguration in Luke 9, he tells us of the subject of the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah:

And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure [literally "exodus" in Greek] which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30-31)

Writing about the **Egyptian Hallel (113-118)**, F.D. Kidner states:

Only the second of them (114) speaks directly of the Exodus, but the theme of raising the down-trodden (113) and the note of corporate praise (115), personal thanksgiving (116), world vision (117) and festal procession (118) make it an appropriate series to mark the salvation which began in Egypt and will spread to the nations. (F. D. Kidner, *The Book of Psalms*, 401)

The tradition at the Passover meal is to recite **Psalms 113-114** before the Seder meal and **Psalms 115-118** after it.

1. Asking God to increase your awareness of His redeeming love and gratitude for his redemptive acts, read **Psalms 113 and 114**. Read the poetry slowly, reflectively. Our Palm Sunday Liturgy guides us to pray: "Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation, that we may *enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts*, whereby you have given us life and immortality; through Jesus Christ our Lord..." (BCP, 555)

What mighty acts of Jesus' Exodus/departure come to mind as you reflect on "praising our Triune God," speaking well of who he is, how he is/operates, and the "impossibilities" he accomplishes?

2. Who is being called to praise the LORD? What does "name" point to in 113:1-3? (All that God reveals himself to be) What images convey time and

space? Theologically, **113:4-9** displays both the transcendence and immanence of Israel's God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. How would thinking accurately about who God is and speaking well of God (even just to yourself and God!) impact your other relationships and activities in your family, work, church, community?

3. The New Testament does not contain any direct quotes from **Psalm 113**; however, one psalms scholar, Patrick Reardon, describes **Psalm 113** as a summary of **the Gospel of Luke** with both **Psalm 113** and **Luke** sharing the sustained theme of the "raising of the lowly." (Examples: Elizabeth, Mary, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man [16:10-31], the parable of the young runaway son [15:11-32], the humble tax collector and the haughty Pharisee [18:9-14].) Even Luke's version of the Beatitudes with its contrast between "blessed" and "woe" continues this "high-low" theme (Luke 6:21, 25 and Luke 6:20, 24).

Think of all the humble people we meet in Luke's gospel whom God exalts. Who are some of your favorites? This psalm directed faithful Israel back then and tells us now to "praise the LORD," to speak well of him, brag and boast about him, and be like Jesus, who was "always plugging His Father." (I recently heard a young Anglican priest say that!) Hannah's song in I Samuel 2, from the sanctuary in Shiloh, also has similarities to **Psalm 113**.

4. Read p. 294 of the Kellers' *Songs of Jesus* to join in the reflections about how Jesus the Son "stooped down" in the Incarnation to raise us up from the dust of death, lift us out of the ash heaps of burned out, barren lives, and settle us in His Risen life with God.

God's greatness is seen in his regard for the ungreat. In Jesus he proved to be great enough to become small himself. (Kellers, *Songs of Jesus*, 294)

5. **Psalm 114** is an amazing poetic summary of the Exodus from Egyptian bondage, giving of the Law on Sinai, and entrance into the Promised Land, calling ancient Israel and us now to "whirl and dance (tremble)" at the transformative power of the presence of the God of Jacob. What poetic imagery stands out to you and why?

Both the Red Sea and the Jordan River are overpowered by YHWH, demonstrating his power over "chaos." Ponder **114:2**. What do you learn about God's purpose for Judah/Israel/his chosen people? What did he choose them for?

Read p. 295 in *Songs of Jesus*. The Kellers' comments helped me think about what I allow to "spin my head," what I give my attention to, and how God gives me a heart to want to be his "sanctuary" and a will for my life to be a place of his

“dominion.” Noticing what we “tremble and spin” at, what we “dance and whirl” about sets the stage for **Psalm 115**, a psalm this group has focused on before.

6. Unlike the descriptive praise form of Psalms 113-114, **Psalm 115** is a communal, liturgical prayer with elements of lament and a strong note of confidence/assurance, “a liturgical prayer sung antiphonally with an emphasis on assurance.” (Ross, *The Psalms*, Vol. 3, 412)

Notice the use of *repetition* in **Psalm 115**. What might be the point of the *repetition* in verse 1?

The *nations (the world)* ask, and sometimes we join in, asking, “Where is God?”

7. The challenges of faith and trust in an invisible God tempt us to idolatry. What do you think is the appeal of idolatry? The Kellers comment on the biblical teaching of idolatry:

Anything more important to you than the real God is an alternate God. Idols have no power (verses 5-7) to give you the love, forgiveness, and guidance you need. But paradoxically they do have power to make you like them (verse 8) and to keep you both spiritually blind and unable to see as well as spiritually lame and unable to change. (Kellers, *Songs of Jesus*, 296)

Ask God to show you any blinding, crippling idolatry in your life now and/or recall how he has done that for you in the past.

8. How does **Psalm 115** renew your faith and confidence in God’s capacity and character? Notice the *repetition* of “trust” and then repetitions of “bless and blessed.” What *reasons* for praising God stand out for you? What obstacles block your joy and wonder in God and his mighty acts?

May our Risen Savior bless us with the capacity and freedom to trust him more and more and to flourish in His Risen Life. Praise the Lord!!