

A Little Psalm With A Big Message

Psalm 117

Introduction: 1) In His classic work on missions *Let The Nations Be Glad*, John Piper notes, “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.”

2) These words capture what Psalm 117 is all about: missions to the nations who do not worship God in order that they may worship Him.

3) Psalm 117 is both the shortest Psalm in the Psalter and the shortest chapter in all of the Bible. Spurgeon however is exactly right, “this psalm, which is very little in its letter, is exceedingly large in its spirit, for, bursting all bounds of race or nationality, it calls upon all mankind to praise the name of the Lord.” Luther loved it, and wrote a 36 page commentary on it. That is 18 pages per verse!

4) Psalm 117 is a part of a sextet of songs, Psalms 113-118, known as the “Egyptian Hallel.” Built around the emphasis of Psalm 114, a celebration of the Exodus, these 6 songs were sung as the Hebrews gathered to celebrate the Passover, God’s great act of salvation on their behalf. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the memorial meal, and Psalms 115-118 were sung afterwards. Jesus and His disciples would have sung these very psalms on the night they celebrated the Passover, just before His betrayal and arrest (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26).

5) Interestingly two other sections of the Psalms are known as Hallel (“Hallelujeh”) psalms. Psalms 120-136 is called the “Great Hallel” and Psalms 146-150 conclude the Psalter on a Hallelujah or praise note.

6) Psalm 117 is anonymous and the fifth of the Egyptian or Exodus hallels. Cosmic and international in scope, it reveals the heart of God toward the nations. He loves them (v.2) and desires that they worship Him (v.1). Paul quotes this little jewel in Romans 15:11 as evidence that God’s redemptive love and purpose has always included the nations, just like He promised Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 15:8-12 as he strings together four Old Testament text demonstrating that it was always God’s plan for the nations to glorify Him: “Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: ‘For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name.’ and again he says: ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!’ And again: ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!’ And again, Isaiah says: ‘there shall be a root of Jesse; And He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, In Him the Gentiles shall hope.’” In 2 short verses Psalm 117 brings the whole world before our eyes. Now, just what do we see?

I. The Lord is to be magnified among the nations.

117:1

- The Psalm follows a command/reason pattern. We are told what to do in v. 1 and why we do it in v. 2. Classic Hebrew parallelism is seen in both verses as the second line in each verse reinforces the truth in line one.
- Further, the Psalm opens and closes with the same word, “praise” or “hallelujah.” Psalm 117 is a universal invitation to people everywhere to praise and brag on Jehovah because of His merciful love and faithfulness. No God is like our God!
- The hymn is indeed short, but then there are times for short hymns and long hymns, short prayers and long prayers, short sermons and long sermons. Here just a few words, 30 in our English text, are sufficient to bring home the point that the loving and faithful God should be praised and glorified by all the people groups of the earth.

1) **God desires that all the nations praise Him.**

- The psalm begins with a call to praise (Heb. *hallu-yah*) the Lord (*Yahweh*). Ronald Allen notes that, “Praise is a choice, not a feeling. We are not to praise the Lord only when we feel warm and fuzzy inside. We are to praise Him even in our most troubled moments. For even during those times, He is still our God” (Praise, 4).
- Now what follows is an unexpected surprise. Normally it is the people of God, the covenant community, who are called to praise the Lord. But not here. No, it is the *goyim*, the “nations” (*NASV, NIV, ESV, HCSB*).
- Nations does not refer to political states but people groups, different ethnic and linguistic groups. The “Joshua Project” (www.joshuaproject.net) list 16,320 different people groups in the world with 6,741 as unreached. The percent of unreached people groups is 41.3% totally 2.72 billion people. Of 6,500 total languages in the world, 2400 have some or part of the Bible in their language. 4100 do not! At this moment, the 4,100 language groups have no hope of praising King Jesus as Lord of the universe. They are perishing headed toward hell, and yet our great God desires that they would praise Him and be saved.

2) **God desires that all the nations extol Him.**

- The word extol means to boast, laud or praise. It has the idea of bragging on someone. It means to make much of someone. Our God is to be shown by His people to be great, good, and awesome. We are to gossip, in a good way, about the great God we know, love, worship and serve.
- Ill. My bragging on my kids and now my grandkids. Point: we talk about what we love. We brag on what we delight in.
- “Peoples,” like nations, refers to ethnic, language and cultural groupings of people. “Tribes” is a good word to capture what is being said. Note it is in the plural (peoples). It occurs this way more than 230 times in the *ESV*. Tribes live around the world and down the street. They are people who share common language, culture, interest, ideals and values. Whether a mile away or 10,000 miles away they need to be confronted with the God, the only God, worthy of praise, worthy of

glory. And they need to hear the message in a way that they will understand. Religious jargon out! Common language in.

- Missions is a cross-cultural strategy and lifestyle that aims to help people stop making much of themselves and to start making much of Jesus. It aims to show them that none other is worthy of such worship and devotion. It aims to show them that our maximum joy and pleasure is found only in the praise and adoring of this God.
- I love what John Piper says on this, “The reason God seeks our praise is not because He won’t be complete until He gets it. He is seeking our praise because we won’t be happy until we give it....Missions is calling the world to do what they were created to do, namely, to enjoy making much of Christ forever.”

Translation: The Lord is to be magnified among the nations.

II. The Lord is to be magnified because of His nature.

117:2

- There is a rhyme and reason to God’s call to magnify Him among the nations. It is not arbitrary, whimsical or misplaced. It is not the “because I said so” of a celestial bully or capricious deity on a cosmic ego trip. No, it is a call rooted in the very nature and character of God that when rightly understood, causes us to rise up and worship Him because we must, because we want to.
- And what can we say about this God? He is great in His love for us and He will be faithful to love us forever. Wow! What a God. No wonder we show praise to Him.
- Verse 2 is based and grounded in one of the greatest Old Testament verses in the Bible, Exodus 34:6. There the Bible says, “And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.’”

1) Our God is a God of love.

- Once more the beautiful and rich Hebrew word *hesed* appears in our text. The various ways English translations attempt to capture its meaning is instructive:

NKJV: merciful kindness	NIV: love
NASV: lovingkindness	ESV: steadfast love
HCSB: faithful love	NLT: unfailing love
- And note, the text says His lovingkindness is “great.” This is a strong and vigorous word used of the stronger side in a battle or overflowing flood waters. Ideas like “mighty” or “prevailing” capture something of the significance of the word. Interestingly it is fronted in the Hebrew text for emphasis, so that literally the verse reads, “Is mighty over us His lovingkindness.” God floods His children with His love. Illustration: Tim Akin being hit by a car when he was 3.
- Now, how do we apply this to the mission of God to reach the nations? Missions is telling the nations to praise and extol Christ and then giving them the evidence for why they should do so. We don’t just say “glorify the one true and living Christ” but we give them good biblical and theological reasons why they should.

One is He is a God of love. He loves you. He loves me. He loves the world (John 3:16). First John 4:8 and 16 tells us it is the essence of His nature and character. Our God is a God of love. But, there is a second.

2) **Our God is a God of faithfulness.**

- If our Lord's steadfast love is great, His faithfulness is eternal, everlasting, it endures forever. God made a promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 that all the earth, all the peoples, would be blessed by his descendents. From Abraham came Israel. From Israel came Jesus. God kept His word.
- "Truth" in the *NKJV* is once again better translated as "faithfulness" (*ESV, NIV, HCSB*). The root meaning of the word is "to be firm or unshakable." It is also the basis for our English word "amen." Of course the two ideas are inter-related. If He is always truth it is because He is always faithful, and if He is always faithful, it is because He is always truth.
- What God has promised to do for us in Christ is as certain and sure today as on the day He made them. And, it will always be this way, now and forever. God's character cannot change and His promises cannot be broken.
- Call on Him and you will be saved. But, to call on Him, you must know about Him. This is God's heart. This is our mission. Praise! Hallelujah! (The Lord is implied).

Conclusion

- * Derek Kidner was right when he said, "this tiny psalm is great in faith, and its reach is enormous" (411). He is also correct when he notes it finds its prophetic fulfillment in Revelation 7:9-10 where we read, "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"
- * John Piper is theologically on target, "Missions exist because worship doesn't." So, let's get busy for Jesus and see Psalm 117 fulfilled so that all the nations might sing "Hallelujah" to our God and to the Lamb.