

A GEM AT THE CENTER OF THE BIBLE: PSALM 117



Praise
THE LORD,
all you nations

PRAISE HIM,
all you people of the earth
FOR HE **LOVES** US WITH
unfailing love:

THE LORD'S
faithfulness
ENDURES FOREVER
praise the Lord
PSALM 117:1-2



A GEM AT THE CENTER OF THE BIBLE: PSALM 117

1A. INTRODUCTION:

Psalm 117, 118 and 119 together make up the shortest chapter of the Bible, the exact middle, and the longest chapter, respectively.

The verse in the exact middle of the Bible is Psalm 118:8. There are 594 chapters before Psalm 117 and 594 chapters after Psalm 117.

תהלים Chapter 117 Psalms

א הַלְלוּ אֶת-יְהוָה, כָּל-גּוֹיִם; שְׁבַחֵהוּ, כָּל-הָאֲמִיּוֹת. 1 O praise the LORD, all ye nations; laud Him, all ye peoples.

ב כִּי גָבַר עָלֵינוּ, חַסְדּוֹ-- וְאֱמֶת-יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם: הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה. 2 For His mercy is great toward us; and the truth of the LORD endureth for ever. {N} Hallelujah.

1b. The uniqueness of the psalm:

Psalm 117 is a psalm of praise. It is the 595th of the Bible's 1,089 chapters, making it the center chapter in all of the Scriptures. At just two verses in length, it is both the shortest psalm and the shortest chapter in the Bible. The Hebrew text contains only 15 words.

Psalm 117 is the fifth of sixth psalms categorized as an Egyptian Hallel (113-118). These six consecutive psalms as set as a unit in joyous occasion. It has been assumed that these were the songs Jesus sang on the Mount of Olives before He was crucified (Mt. 26:30; Mk. 14:26).

Despite its brevity, the song fulfills all the requirements of a classic hymn. James D. G. Dunn (b. 1939) and John W. Rogerson (b. 1935) comment:

Although Psalm 117 is the shortest psalm in the psalter, it is nevertheless a classic sample of the hymn in that it contains the basic elements, namely, invocations to praise and reasons why the Lord should be praised (Dunn and Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 421).

2b. The composition of the psalm:

Psalm 117 contains all the unusual aspects of charging all nations to praise the God of Israel. Given the fact that its theme corresponds to Isaiah 40-55, it has been suggested that the psalm was penned in exile, as its singers were in the midst of a catastrophic defeat.

3b. The importance of the psalm:

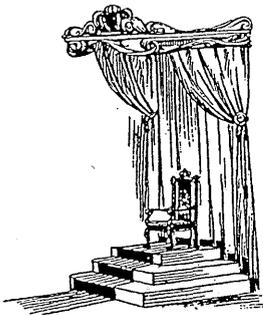
1c. Its central position:

Since God does nothing without a purpose, there must be a reason why this psalm of just two verses and only 17 Hebrew words is central to His Word.

2c. Its message:

1d. It is a messianic psalm:

The psalm is quoted by Paul in the New Testament in connection with the finished work of Christ. It includes a Passover invitation from Israel to the Gentiles (Rom. 15:7-13).



2d. It is a millennial psalm.

It looks forward to the time when Christ will reign in Israel over the world and His people are regathered to the Promised Land, dwelling peacefully and securely. They will be the head of all nations (Jer. 31:7) and through the psalm will invite people to come to Jerusalem and join them in their annual feasts of thanksgiving.

3d. It is a missionary psalm:

Paul appealed to it in Romans 15:11 to show that God always has loved the Gentiles. The Jews had been given special **light** from God, but the Gentiles would also have benefitted from the **love** of God. God does not just love the Jews, but Gentiles as well. That is the missionary message in Psalm 117. It is because God “so loved **the world** that he gave his only begotten Son.” It is not just the world of the **elect** as some Calvinists would contend, or just the world of the **Jews** as the rabbis would have said. It is the world in its totality. The Gentiles are part of God’s plan of salvation.

4b. The function of the psalm:

1c. The doxology concluded a longer psalm which is now lost:

This idea is unthinkable, because God would not permit any portion of His Word to be lost.

2c. The psalm may have been the introduction or conclusion of Psalm 116 or both.

3c. The psalm may have been a doxology intended to be sung after other psalms, or perhaps at the beginning or end of the Temple service. In many manuscripts, the psalm is joined with Psalm 118, but without any sufficient reason.



- 5b. The comprehensiveness of the psalm:

The conservative Lutheran pastor and poet Karl Gerok has written a very delightful devotional commentary on the psalms. His comments on Psalm 117 are worth noting. He writes:

One could take an entire year to hold Bible and prayer meetings every week over this psalm, for these two verses comprehend the entire **history of the church**, the entire **history of missions** and the entire **world history**. What indeed is the entire history of the kingdom of God from the days of Abraham to the end of days and to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ: namely, that it might be fulfilled what our psalm prophetically declares, 'praise the Lord, all ye nations; praise him all ye people!' (*Gerok, Die Psalmen*, 2nd edition, Vol. 3, 1891, 161-162, emphasis added. Translation by this writer).

2A. THE CALL TO PRAISE: 117:1

- 1b. The totality of the world is to adulate God: 117:1a

"O praise the Lord, all ye nations"



While Israel is God's special chosen people, the Lord nonetheless has always had the conversion of the heathen in mind as well. It may be remembered that the Gentiles feature prominently in God's program, not just in the book of Acts with the missionary efforts to the Gentiles in Asia and then in Europe. Note below some references of God's loving concern for the Gentiles

- 1c. The promise of the Proto-Evangel in Genesis 3:15

The gospel in paradise in the crushing of the head of the serpent is not just a promise for the Jewish people but the entire human race living under the curse.

- 2c. The promise to Abraham was that through him all the nations would be blessed, Gen. 12:3.

- 3c. The theme of the Psalms includes the salvation of the Gentiles: Psa. 98:2
The Lord hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen.

- 4c. The incarnate Son of God did not simply come to be the Savior of Israel but the Savior of the world. The angels proclaimed "good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people." (Luke 2:10)

- 5c. Simeon, holding the Christ child in his arms, speaks concerning the infant who was "prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." (Luke 2:31-32)





- 6c. Jesus Christ Himself proclaimed that He was a shepherd far beyond the borders of the land of the Jews and that His salvation included the entire world of sinners.

John 10:16

And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

- 7c. The Great Commission includes the discipling of all nations, not just the Jewish people, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Mt. 28:19).

2b. The tribes of the world are to adore Him, 117:1b



"Praise him, all ye people."

- 1c. The psalmist enjoins: "praise him, all ye people." He now uses a different word for praise, a comparatively rare word, one that appears only four times in the psalms. It is possibly an Aramaic word translated "laud Him!" by some scholars. The root meaning is to sing aloud. The word *shabach* means to loudly adore Him.

Allen P. Ross surmises that

the psalmist chose it to address the nations since Aramaic was spoken in the non-Israelite world and became the dominant language at the time of captivity. . . And with this second verb we have the object of "all peoples" (**הַגּוֹיִם**), perhaps also an Aramaic spelling. The two words, "nations" and "peoples," clearly show that the call is addressed to the people of the whole world: and if the call is expressed in both Hebrew and Aramaic forms, the universal appeal would be made stronger (*A Commentary on the Psalms*, III, (2016), 435).

The two praise words together, *hallel* from Hallelujah in verse two and *shabach* mean "to publicly worship the Lord by magnifying and exalting His name." Illustrations in Scripture abound how Gentile kings, noblemen and commoners experienced the help of God and how they responded in praise.

- 2c. The Syrian captain Naaman was healed through Elijah and confessed belief in the true God.
2 Kings 5:15 Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant.
- 3c. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar was prompted through God's providential intervention in his life to acknowledge that He, Jehovah, was the true God.
Daniel 4:34, 37 I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation . . . Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven,

all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

We may expect to see Nebuchadnezzar in glory.

- 4c. In His first sermon recorded in Luke 4, Christ related how both Elijah and Elisha ministered to the Gentiles, which so infuriated His townspeople in Nazareth that they attempted to kill Him.
- 5c. Christ showed compassion for the son of a certain Roman nobleman in Capernaum, and healed him. John 4:43-54
- 6c. Peter was commissioned to visit Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band (Acts 10:2). The account illustrates God’s concern for the Gentiles: Acts 10:34-36 Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: ³⁵But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. ³⁶The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all).
- 7c. The current situation in the world sees mostly salvation among the Genties. Some estimate that less than one percent of the 14.5 million Jews on earth are saved. But, on the other hand, there are many millions of Gentiles who have embraced the Savior and His salvation.

3A. THE CAUSE FOR PRAISE v. 2

“For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever.”

1b. The words “merciful kindness” is a translation of the Hebrew *chesed* which is often translated “lovingkindness.” Though difficult to translate, perhaps the best rendering is God’s “loyal love.”

1c. The loving triumph of the Lord: 117:2a

חַסְדּוֹ

The application:

The Jewish remnant will sing these words at a future time when they are delivered from refining the fires of the Great Tribulation. At that time they will look on Him whom they have pierced and God will be merciful to His people. One-third of the Jewish people will be saved during the tribulation (Zech. 13:8) and that remnant will enter with Christ into the kingdom (Rom. 11:26) and see the fulfillment of God’s ultimate loyal love.

2c. The lasting truth of the Lord: 117:2b

וְאֵמֶת

1d. God’s mercy and truth are God’s great attributes in the Old Testament. Graham Scroggie delineates the difference:

We may say that God displays *mercy* in making promises, and exhibits *truth* in fulfilling them. Both met in the covenant, at the incarnation,

and on the cross, both meet in the conversion of sinners, and both will be perfected when the saints reach heaven. *Mercy* without truth would be powerless and *truth* without mercy would be penal. But together they tell us that God can justify those who believe, and yet be just (Rom. 3:26) (*W. Graham Scroggie, The Psalms, 1965, Vol. 2, 142 [italics in the original]*).

2d. "The truth of the Lord endureth for ever."

The qualities of mercy and truth are inseparably blended, as one can see from Psalm 85:10:

Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other, That by two immutable things wherein it is impossible for God to lie, we might have the strong consolation.

Scroggie quotes Alexander MacLaren very fittingly:

And truth blends with mercy; that is to say—truth is somewhat narrower than its widest sense, meaning mainly God's fidelity to every obligation under which He has come, God's faithfulness to promise, God's fidelity to His past, God's fidelity in His actions to His own character.

2b. The true practical application of God's loyal love and truth find a consummate fulfillment in the sacrificial death of Christ.

John Phillips incisively writes:

Jesus went to Calvary to die for us, the Just for the unjust, to bring us to God. He took our *guilt* that we might take His *goodness*, took our *sinfulness* that we might take His *sinlessness*, took our *ruin* that we might take His *righteousness*. That was God's way of bringing mercy and truth together in an everlasting embrace. *That is our cause for praise (Exploring the Psalms, Vol. 2, 1988, 249 [italics in the original])*.

4A. THE COMMAND TO PRAISE: 117:2c

"Praise ye the Lord"

1b. The imperative:

The psalm concludes with the common call to praise: "Hallelujah," or "Praise the Lord." Although this is normally an exclamation in worship now, it remains an imperative. Everyone must praise the Lord. The psalmist suggests two reasons: everyone, everywhere is to praise the Lord for His great mercy and His enduring truth, or, more precisely, **for his faithful and enduring loyal love.**

הללויה
HalleluYAH

הללויה-יה. Hallelujah.

2b. The implications:

The fulfillment of this universal praise of God for His loyal love and lasting truth will be Realized in the Millennial Kingdom. At that time, according to the Apostle Paul, the Gentiles will "glorify God for his mercy," sing unto His name, rejoice with Israel, because in Him (the Son of David) "shall the Gentiles trust" Rom. 15:8-13). Merrill F. Unger has well said,

This psalm is prophetic of the Kingdom age, when all nations and races will praise the Lord for His redemptive grace and faithfulness to His covenants and promises to Israel, and through that nation restored and redeemed, bringing salvation to the entire world (*Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, I, 1981, 925).

5A. Conclusion:

God's faithful and loyal love is demonstrated throughout history – yet in a glorious way it is manifested in the redemption accomplished by God's love through Jesus Christ on the cross. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

The story is told about the renowned Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth. During one of his visits to America, someone asked him during a discussion period, "Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever gone through your mind?" He paused for a moment and then said, "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Let us follow the command of the psalmist and praise the Lord for His loyal love and lasting truth.



Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts

PSALM 117

Praise to God from all nations.

O all ye nations, praise the Lord,
Each with a different tongue;
In every language learn his word,
And let his name be sung.

His mercy reigns through every land;
Proclaim his grace abroad;
For ever firm his truth shall stand
Praise ye the faithful God.



Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts

PSALM 117

Praise to God from all nations.

Thy name, Almighty Lord,
Shall sound through distant lands;
Great is thy grace, and sure thy word;
Thy truth for ever stands.

Far be thine honor spread,
And long thy praise endure,
Till morning light and evening shade 166
Shall be exchanged no more.