

THE SHORTEST PSALM—A CALL TO WORSHIP
Psalm 117

Intro: Arthur Clarke, in his excellent commentary on the Psalms, raises a question which turns our thinking to the main emphasis in the Psalm. It is this: "How often do we come into God's presence with all praise and no prayer?" (p. 285).

The 117th Psalm is not unique in this, but this point about the Psalm is emphasized by certain other features.

In the first place, it is unique because it is the shortest of all the Psalms. This gives it a place of distinction in the Scriptures. We are going to learn this morning that a writing does not have to be long to be tremendously significant.

Secondly, we do not know who wrote it, nor do we know when it was written. So this leaves us to the Psalm itself to determine at least why it was written. But the lack of knowledge about the Psalm concentrates more attention on the Psalm and its message.

Thirdly, a careful reading of the Psalm will show that, from the Jewish standpoint, this is a missionary Psalm. It has to do with the Gentiles. And even though "this is often called a Temple-Psalm, sung either at the beginning or at the end of the service . . . or, by separate choirs or by the whole people, in the interval between longer psalms" (Lange, Vol. 5, p. 524), one wonders just how much of its message was actually taken into the hearts of the people of Israel who often seemed jealous to keep God and His Word to themselves!

It is this last point which gave the Psalm a place in the writings of Paul. As he is concluding his letter to the church at Rome, he emphasizes the fact that God has always included the Gentiles in salvation. He writes in these words:

"And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written;" (citing Psa. 18:49) "For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith," (citing now Deut. 32:43) "Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again," (citing our text this morning in Psa. 117:1) "Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people" (Rom. 15:9-11).

These he follows with a fourth quotation from Isa. 11:1, 10 worked together.

So we see that the Psalm deals with a most important phase of

salvation, which is always the same from Genesis to Revelation --namely, God has always included the Gentiles in His plan of redemption.

But let us look a little more closely into the Psalm.

Although we do not know the writer, it is safe to assume that he was a Jew. But this is the situation: A JEW IS WRITING TO GENTILES, AND HE SPENDS HIS ENTIRE TIME EXHORTING THEM. So let us center our thinking about this Psalm around the word, exhortation.

This will be our outline:

- I. Exhortation--to do what?
- II. Exhortation--to whom?
- III. Exhortation--why?

I. Exhortation--to do what?

It seems that the number two stands out in each point of our outline because, when we seek to answer this first question (to do what?), we find that there is one answer, but it is stated in two ways.

When we seek the answer to the second question (to whom?), again we find that he is addressing one group of people, but he describes them in two ways.

Finally, in answering the third question (why?), we find that there are two reasons to be found in one God.

What is the Psalmist exhorting his readers to do?

To praise the Lord. This is mentioned three times in the Psalm. (Point them out.)

The second word praise, however, in the original is different from the first and last, which are the same. The ASV, to bring this out has translated the second praise with the word, "laud."

The word which is used first and last in the Psalm is the word from which we get our hallelujah. In fact, this is the best translation of the final, "Praise ye the Lord." And it is a very interesting expression.

The word itself basically means to make a clear, bright and shining sound. This is the Psalmists way of describing what true praise, or worship, should be.

True praise contains these three elements:

- (1) It means making a sound which other may hear. While this would not apply to private worship, the Psalmist is speaking primarily of public worship.
- (2) It must be a clear sound. In other words, it must be a sound which can be understood. What people hear will not help them unless they understand what they hear.
- (3) It must be a bright and shining sound, i.e., attractive, pleasing. This does not mean that we adapt our worship to the ways of the world, but it does mean that the reality of our worship, the obvious joy and satisfaction we have found in worshipping God, will in itself attract others to the Lord.

So this is the picture you have. A redeemed Jew is addressing himself to redeemed Gentiles informing them that they are living in a world where men are total strangers to the God who has created them. Some of them in our own day are so far away that they think God is dead! BUT THIS IS THE POINT: ONE OF THE MIGHTIEST FORCES FOR EVANGELISM THAT WE HAVE IS IN OUR PRAISE TO GOD. IT IS IN THE CLEAR, BRIGHT AND SHINING SOUNDS OF PRAISE COMING FROM THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD THAT OTHERS WILL BE ATTRACTED TO HIM.

But I mentioned that there are two words here. The second is in the expression, "praise him, all ye people," or "laud him," as the ASV renders it.

This second word reminds us of God's holiness, and therefore, of His wrath. It is a word which speaks of restraining, or calming God down. It indicates that the only thing which will satisfy God's heart is to have men become worshipers, to be redeemed, to join the ranks of those who delight themselves in the Lord!

This same word is used in Psalm 89:9 for what God does: "Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them."

So as we praise the Lord, we give light, but we also warn. Worship is not optional. It is the very purpose for which we have been born, and nothing else we can be or do will satisfy God if we refuse to worship Him!

How delighted God must have been with the wise men who said, "We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him" (Matt. 2:2).

But let us go on to the second question:

II. Exhortation—to whom?

Will you notice that again we have one answer with two parts to it?

"All ye nations . . . all ye people."

In this parallel expression both refer to the Gentiles (and Rom. 15:11 confirms this), but what different ideas about the Gentiles do the two words picture for us.

A. "Nations."

By this word the Gentiles were forever set apart from Israel. It indicates those who were outsiders. The Gentiles were outside of God's immediate purpose for Israel. They were not natural sons of Abraham.

This idea is brought out beautifully by the Apostle Paul in Eph. 2:11, 12:

"Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world."

What ominous words!

Though God also chose the Jew by grace, yet no one could possibly be in a better position than the Gentiles to see that they are completely excluded from everything which has to do with God unless He is pleased to extend His grace to us.

We are Gentiles, "nations," outsiders.

B. "People."

This means that we are "literally those of one mother" (Girdlestone, p. 257). It is a word which means that it does not make any difference what kind of a Gentile you may be (American, African, Chinese, French, German, or any other), we are all together in the same plight.

Paul touched on this in Acts 17:26 when it is reported that he said,

That God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."

As Delitzsch has remarked, those who had been Gentiles "without distinction" and "without exception" were, remembering this, to praise God for all that He had done for them, so that others might come to know Him too.

But this leads us to our third point:

III. Exhortation--why?

Again we are confronted with the number two.

If you were to single out two reasons why you love the Lord, two reasons why you have come here this morning to worship Him, what would they be?

You have the Psalmist answer here in v. 2.

The first is:

A. "Merciful kindness."

In the Hebrew this is one word. It is best translated by either mercy or grace. It not only means that God will condescend to deal with those who are completely undeserving of His love, but also that He is anxious to do so.

And to this the Psalmist adds, "great," which means mighty, powerful. Regardless of how great your need may be, God's mercy is greater. He is able to meet your need.

We must remember this as we worship.

Note that the Jewish author of this Psalm puts himself right along with the Gentiles when he says, "Toward us."

"For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him" (Psa. 103: 11)--the same words as in Psa. 117:2.

The second is:

B. "The truth of the Lord."

"Truth" here means faithfulness. It means that God is dependable, firm, stable, certain--always faithful to His people in accordance with His Word.

In Deut. 32:4 when Moses led the children of Israel in song for the last time he had them sing these words,

"He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth (faithfulness) and without iniquity, just and right is he."

Are not His mercy and His faithfulness, experienced by every believer every day, sufficient reasons for us to respond to this exhortation this morning? Having these, do we lack anything?

Concl: What better conclusion could there be than that given by the Psalmist: "HALLELUJAH." "Praise ye the Lord."

Let me end as I began: "How often do we come into God's presence with all praise and no prayer?--remembering who we were, and remembering what He does for us every day.