

Small Psalm, Big Vision

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Date: 30 January 2022

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[0 : 00] Please turn again with me to Psalm 117. Psalm 117. 7.1 millimetres.

That's about the size of Noah's pinky fingernail, less than one centimetre. That's the diameter of a perished washer which caused the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger on January 28, 1986 on liftoff.

I remember it well. 7.1 millimetre washer, the same size as Noah's pinky fingernail. If you dropped it on the floor, that's the washer, not his nail, you'd have trouble finding it.

And yet the failure of that tiny little washer caused one of the greatest disasters in NASA history, killed seven prominent American astronauts, and put the space shuttle program on hold for two and a half years.

Smallest thing can make the biggest difference. A wee hole in your tooth. A tiny stone in your shoe. A tiny washer failure.

[1 : 25] These things can destroy your life. A small gesture of love. A wee word of encouragement. A tiny glimpse of beauty.

These small things make life worth living. The smallest of things, you see, can make the biggest of differences. Now this psalm is the shortest chapter in the Bible.

In the original Hebrew language, which I tried to translate directly for you, it's made up of only 17 words. It is tiny compared to what follows in Psalm 119.

But when you understand this song for what it is, its impact is far larger than its size. It may be small, but the gospel it proclaims is mighty and everlasting.

And this evening, we want to concentrate our minds for a short while on these 17 sacred words.

[2 : 29] Praying for, as small as this psalm may be, it would have an impact far greater than its size upon our hearts. And we'll consider three things about this psalm.

First of all, it's a song of praise. It's a song of salvation, secondly. And then it's a song of mission. Song of mission. Praise, salvation, mission.

Big topics for a small psalm. A song of praise, first of all. A song of praise. As I said, there are only 17 words in the original Hebrew language in this psalm.

And of those 17, three are praise type words. Praise and extol in verse 1. Praise in verse 2.

So over a sixth of the words in this psalm are commands to praise. I think we get the idea of the kind of theme of this psalm.

[3 : 33] It's a praise song. You don't really have to go searching for a hidden meaning. It's stating you in the face. The writer's calling upon every one of us to praise and worship God.

Not just any kind of praise and worship. The psalm begins and ends with the words, Praise the Lord. Or praise Yahweh.

The psalm is directing our praise toward God. The word translated, we translate as praise, is Hallel. The Hebrew word is Hallel.

As in Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Yah being the name of God. Hallel, praise, Yah the Lord. Now, if you should do a word study on the word Hallelujah in the Bible, you'll find it referenced only four times in our English versions.

Four times. All of them are in Revelation chapter 19. All of them. A chapter describing the great praise songs sung by the multitudes in heaven.

[4 : 48] And so let me suggest in the first instance, Praising God here on earth is a foretaste of praising God there in heaven.

Praising God here on earth is a foretaste of praising God there in heaven. There aren't many things we do on earth will continue to do in heaven.

You know, when we talk about heaven, we often describe it as a place with no tears. No pain. No death.

We talk about the things of this life that will not be there. But the one activity in which we can engage here and we shall continue there is praise.

I can't think, maybe you can, of many psalms we could sing in their entirety in heaven. But Psalm 117 is most definitely one of them.

[5 : 54] Praise, you see, is a foretaste of heaven. It's an appetizer, as it were. There may be times when we're praising God that our hearts explode with the worship of Jesus for the wonder of his cross and resurrection.

There may be times in praise where we draw so close to God and our hearts are so filled with joy. These are foretastes of heaven. When all the angels, filled with sinless hearts, shall cry out, Hallelujah.

But of course the problem is in Psalm 117, we're not in heaven. We're in this world. And for that reason, perhaps, like me, some of you have to praise God through gritted teeth.

You're not always in that situation where the world's a rosy place and you feel like praising God. Caught in that Romans 7 type quandary, we want our hearts to be in it.

But the truth is that our minds are very far away from praise. They're thinking about a thousand other things. And for that reason, let me suggest that in the second instance from Psalm 117, praising God here is not an option.

[7 : 15] Praising God's a command. It's a command. These three type praise words in Psalm 117 are all in the imperative voice.

The Holy Spirit is saying to all of us this evening, or rather he's not saying to us, you know, among all the other thousand things that you think about throughout the day, wouldn't it be nice if from time to time you gave God some praise?

Rather, the Holy Spirit is saying to us all, you put all those thousand things to one side and you give me praise. This threefold imperative to praise in Psalm 117 is not an optional extra.

It's a command from the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings to worship him. In other words, get on with praising God even if your heart isn't in it. George Buller was an outstanding 19th century Christian.

And he used to say, Pray until you pray. Pray until you pray. And this Psalm is saying to us, Praise until you praise.

[8 : 28] Praise until you praise. Keep on praising even if your heart's no in it, until your heart is in it. Because sometimes the very last thing you want to do is to praise.

But that's the very time to praise God. You know, for that reason, I've started listening to UCB1 in the car, United Christian Broadcasters, DAB Christian Radio Station, which plays praise songs and has discussions and things like that.

Because I'll get into the car and I'm tired after a difficult meeting, perhaps. I'm cheesed off. Because the traffic's bad. Someone's cut me up in the expressway.

Whatever. And I'll turn the radio on. And before long listening to these praise songs, I'm thanking the Lord for the words I'm listening to. And sometimes I'm even joining in the music of praise.

We all love our mood music, every one of us. But there are times in the Christian life, you know, we just have to praise. Until we praise. But then you say to me, is this not a really insensitive command here?

[9 : 39] Because surely there must be times in our lives it would be inappropriate to sing Psalm 117. So, for example, you're in hospital. The next day you're facing a life-changing operation.

Would it not be better to sing Psalm 46, calling out for God to be your refuge and strength, rather than Psalm 117, praising God? Well, let me suggest in the final instance in this point, praising God is to be like Jesus.

Praising God is to be like Jesus. This psalm, together with others, we'll look at that in a moment, were sung on the night of the Jewish Passover.

Which means that Jesus and his disciples sung this very psalm in the upper room the night of his betrayal, the night before he was crucified.

Within a matter of hours, Jesus is going to face horrendous suffering, the destruction of his body, the desolation of his mind, the devastation of his soul.

[10:48] But facing it all, he praises God in the words of Psalm 117. You know, if you'd been there in that upper room, there's not many words, which we use in common Christian language, which would have been used by Jesus and would have sounded exactly the same.

But if you'd been there in the upper room, you'd have heard Jesus' tuneful voice, we don't know what his voice sounded like, or whether he could sing or not, but it would be calling out, hallelujah, praise the Lord.

If you've only got a few words left to say in this life, use them to praise God. Because in so doing, you're following in the footsteps of your master, Jesus. So, of the 17 words in this Psalm, three are commands to praise God.

Praising God here on earth is a foretaste of praising him in heaven. Praising God is not an option, it's a command. Praising God is to be like Jesus. You see, it's a very small Psalm, this.

But it does pack a punch. How do you measure up? So, it's a song of praise. Second, it's a song of salvation.

[12:04] It's a song of salvation. This Psalm is one of a group of Psalms called the Egyptian Hallel. The Egyptian Hallel. They stretch from Psalm 113 to Psalm 118.

And they're all characterized by the use of this word, praise, hallel. They're written to praise God for his miraculous deliverance of the Jews from their slavery in Egypt.

Hence the name, Egyptian Hallel. Praise is to God for his salvation of his people from Egypt. So, these are songs of salvation.

Songs the Christian must sing, even if, in her context, the salvation reference isn't our salvation from slavery in Egypt. but our deliverance from sin and condemnation through Jesus Christ.

Because the God to whom we owe our salvation is the same God who delivered the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt under Moses. It's the same love and grace, the same power and righteousness.

[13:13] So, this is a song of salvation here in Psalm 117. God's got the right to command us to praise him and not tell us why.

Because he is, after all, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. He has the right to do that, but he never, ever calls us to obey him without first declaring his grace toward us.

He never calls us to obey him without first declaring his grace toward us. this is who he is in the face of Christ. And it says in Psalm 117, Great is his steadfast love toward us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

this is the song of salvation. The steadfast love and faithfulness of God demonstrated ultimately in the cross of his son, Jesus Christ.

Whatever view you have of God which is different from this one is wrong. It's wrong. Because time and time again in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, his love and faithfulness, his grace and mercy are his characteristics most prominently featured.

[14:36] I'd like to draw your attention briefly to two things. The extent of his love and the endurance of his faithfulness. The extent of his love and the endurance of his faithfulness.

The extent of his love first of all. It says, Great is his steadfast love toward us. The word we translate there as grace would be better translated as strong or mighty.

It's used in many contexts in the Old Testament. For example, David's mighty men. These are fierce warriors. Not so much great in number but mighty in skill and strength.

I love the way in which Andrew Boner speaks of the use of this word in the context of Noah's flood. He says, The mighty love of God toward us prevails as did the deluge waters over the mountaintops.

Even as the mountaintops weren't sufficient to overwhelm the floods. So God's mighty love toward us prevails.

[15:48] Steadfast love of God overwhelms us even as a mighty flood prevails against the land. The steadfast love of God fights for us even as a mighty warrior fights against his enemies.

That's how great his love is. So mighty. So strong. The cross, the ultimate weapon of the steadfast love of God overwhelms all its enemies and defeats all its foes.

It might still belong only in sci-fi movies but the love of God is like a force field. A force field.

The weapons of our enemies cannot penetrate. The mighty love of God is an impregnable shield extinguishing all the arrows of our enemies.

And in Romans 5 we read these marvelous words we read these words he says God demonstrated his steadfast love same word toward us in this while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

[17:03] How mighty the saving love of God. God rescued slaves from the land of Egypt. He rescued sinners from the dominion of darkness. And the psalmist as he surveys the history of God's dealings with his people he becomes a man of only a few words because sometimes few words beat many words.

He says mighty is his steadfast love toward us. Mightier than empires. Stronger than philosophies. Mightier than the darkness of a winter's night and the ferocity of a winter storm. Don't you ever doubt that love. Not for one moment.

One mark of going backwards in your faith is that you stop praising God. That's one mark. But that's only a symptom of a deeper spiritual illness. You've forgotten how mighty God's love is toward you. You've forgotten the cross. But consider this from the psalm itself. Great is his steadfast love towards us.

[18:16] See those two words? Towards us. It's toward you. God's face is not turned away from you no matter how you feel at this precise moment in time.

His love will always shine brightly upon you. Mightier than the sun in the sky. Though you should hate yourself and though the whole world should hate you remember this and remember it well. God's love for you is mighty and strong. And if you doubt that ever look back to the cross and see Jesus dying there for you.

The extent of his love. But then we have here the endurance of his faithfulness. The endurance of his faithfulness. Not satisfied with the overwhelming mightiness of God's love.

The psalmist doubles up his praise. He says and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. As if the greatness wasn't enough. He adds endurance.

[19:25] That faithfulness that just keeps on going. the love of God fills the three dimensions of space and the faithfulness of God fills the fourth.

Love and faithfulness always. The word we translate as faithfulness is one with which we are familiar in the context of prayer.

Amen. Truly let it be so. Amen. Faithfulness and truthfulness dependability and reliability they are words with similar meanings when it comes to God's single minded devotion to us.

He's faithful to all his promises. He made a series of promises to Abraham and he kept them all. That's ultimately why he delivered his people from their slavery in Egypt.

He had promised them a land of their own and until he rescued them from their bondage in Egypt they would never possess it. His love and faithfulness toward them is what brought them out of Egypt.

[20:34] And it took God hundreds of years to fulfill his promise but fulfill it he did. Because God's not a slave of time but he is reliable. Remember what Peter says?

With the Lord a thousand years is as a day and the day is as a thousand years. but the Lord is not slow to keep his promises. That's what Peter says.

It's the endurance of the faithfulness of God which eventually led to a stable in Bethlehem and a cross outside Jerusalem and a garden tomb from which was raised our Lord.

God. It took many thousands of years but God's promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed was finally kept in the coming and the dying and the rising of his son Jesus Christ.

Salvation extended to all nations as we'll see in a moment in the gospel of his son. this enduring faithfulness of God it outlasted the Egyptians and the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Greeks and the Romans and the Ottomans and in the fullness of time Christ was born.

[21:57] Just as God delivered his people from their slavery in Egypt so according to the enduringness of his promise through Jesus Christ he released them from the dominion of darkness and brought them into the kingdom of his son.

You know they say all good things come to an end. You know sometimes I really don't like going on holiday for that reason because I know that this good thing will come to an end.

that's not true in the case of the faithfulness and the love of God. Simply not true. He was reliable yesterday.

He is faithful today and he will be dependable tomorrow. To the faithfulness of God every one of us owes our salvation, our forgiveness, our peace and our joy in faith.

The grace and mercy we experience from our Father's hand every day. eternity. You know because we're creatures of time none of us have a concept of eternity. We have nothing with which to measure the infinity of eternity other than in the old language we used to call it length of days without end.

[23 : 14] Scientists can't describe it. Philosophers can't define it. But the faithfulness of God fills it all. Now if you were to count the number of times the steadfast love and faithfulness of God are used together as a couplet in the Old Testament it would come to a very, very, very big number.

I stopped counting at 100. This is the living heartbeat of a devotion we find throughout the Bible, the whole Bible. Praise directed toward the God of mighty love and enduring faithfulness.

This is grace and truth. And you know, we see them painted most perfectly in the face of Jesus Christ. And for that we worship Him.

A song of praise, a song of salvation, and very briefly, a song of mission. A song of mission. Little washers, especially that faithfully used on the space shuttle, are incredibly small, or can be incredibly small, but they serve a huge purpose.

And Psalm 117 is somewhat the washer of the Old Testament. 17 words encompassing the whole story and theology of the Old Testament.

[24 : 43] Read the story of Joseph. Okay, Joseph and Potiphar, Joseph and the Ishmaelite traders, Joseph and Pharaoh. And you're here in Psalm 117 with the love and faithfulness of God.

Read the prophecies of Isaiah, Isaiah 42, Isaiah 26, Isaiah 53. You're here in Psalm 117 with the mightiness of the love of God and the enduringness of His faithfulness.

Out of the 17 words in this Psalm, three are praise words, three are the name Yahweh, or Lord, small capitals, but four correspond to the phrases all nations, all peoples.

Praise the Lord, all nations. Extol Him, all peoples. Now some suppose that Old Testament religion hated strangers, especially Gentiles.

the nations are there to be destroyed, not loved, annihilated, not won over to the grace of God.

Psalm 117 puts paid to that idea. By the time Jesus was born, the Jewish religion had become xenophobic and toxic toward Gentiles, but it was never meant to be that way.

[26 : 07] It was never meant to be that way. Remember the promise that God made to Abraham? that through his seed, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Remember that? These are the Egyptian Hallel Psalms written to give God praise for his deliverance of his people from their slavery in Egypt.

But in this Psalm, Egypt too is comprehended and included in this call to praise and worship the God of Israel.

Israel. Those who are called are at present the enemies of God. The Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, they are all called by this tiny Old Testament Psalm to praise the God of Israel for his mighty love and his enduring faithfulness.

people. So ultimately therefore, this is a Psalm of mission. You know, as surely as we sing Psalm 67 traditionally at the end of missionary meetings where the Old Testament Jews pray for the nations to come and worship their God, so we can sing Psalm 117 just as easily.

[27 : 24] Here is a Psalm of evangelism, not to be sung by those only interested in their own culture, their own people and their own nation, but Christians who look outwards.

Christians who want to obey the great commission of Jesus by going to make disciples of all nations. This shortest chapter in the Bible is filled with evangelism.

The reason we go out with the gospel ultimately is that the name of Christ is not being praised by the nations and by these peoples. There is no sound of praise coming from these lands.

God is not being praised for his love and faithfulness in these places by those people. God is not being worshipped for the sending of his son Jesus Christ. It was said of the English town of Kidderminster after the ministry of the 17th century Puritan Richard Baxter that there was scarce a house in the town where songs of God's praises were not sung.

for us here in this particular area of Glasgow the situation is almost completely reversed. In this neighborhood that is scarce a house where the songs of God's praises are sung.

[28 : 46] And that is the ultimate motive for mission and evangelism. the nations and the peoples do not praise the Lord for his mighty love and his enduring faithfulness.

In China 150 years ago no one sung of the mighty love and enduring faithfulness of God expressed in the cross of Jesus Christ.

But now an estimated 100 million Chinese people are God worshippers and Christ disciples. And that change has not come about through military political or social means.

No little red book for those Christians in China. It's not taken place by the invasion of a foreign army or the dogma of a ruling political party.

It's the gospel of Jesus Christ. proclaimed whispered declared spoken the tiny wee washer of gospel transformation in the most populated nation on earth.

[30 : 03] The apocryphal story and I think it is apocryphal not real. I heard it when I was a kid. The apocryphal story is told of a rather straight-laced free church up in the north north in the early 20th century.

Now in those years many travelling folk or tinkers as we called them back then would stay in a village and they would stay there for a month or two and then they'd move on to another village only to return the next year and so on and so forth.

That's the way they lived. We call them travelling folk now. We used to call them tinkers back then. Well, in this particular village there was a free church where a tinkerman would come and sit upstairs at the back of the balcony.

This was no usual tinker because he was a Christian man. During the service if the preacher called the congregation's attention to the cross of Jesus Christ this tinkerman would call out from the back of the balcony imagine there was someone sitting in the back of the balcony there hallelujah praise the Lord.

Now such things may happen in other churches but not in a strict early 20th century highland free church. And the minister especially was disturbed by the tinkerman's exclamations of hallelujah from the back of the balcony.

[31 : 28] And so after one particular service he took the tinkerman aside and he said to him look if you stop shouting out hallelujah when I'm preaching I will give you a nice blanket to keep you warm on these cold winter nights in Sutherland.

And the tinkerman who himself was perhaps a little bit simple minded thought it was a good deal a great deal a nice warm blanket so he readily accepted the offer of a nice warm blanket and he'd be silent.

Well the next Sunday he took his seat at the back of the balcony he was determined to keep his mouth shut and to hold on to that lovely nice warm blanket but the preacher wasn't doing him any favours. The preacher was telling him how Jesus' death on the cross had won our forgiveness and the tinkerman at the back of the balcony was becoming red in the face until finally he stood up and at the consternation of the minister shouted blanket or no blanket hallelujah you know I like to think of Psalm 117 that way blanket or no blanket whether I'm rich or whether I'm poor whether I'm happy or whether I'm sad whether I'm up or whether I'm down whether I'm sick or whether I'm well hallelujah might be the shortest chapter in the Bible but its size its impact goes way beyond its size it might be as small as a tiny washer the size of Noah's pinky fingernail but it can make or break your spiritual life my brother or sister in Christ where is your song of praise let's pray Lord it's not about us remove from our hearts and minds that selfishness which says it's about me about how I feel and my emotional state my mental state Lord we long for the time when this part of Glasgow and all Glasgow shall be characterised by the singing of your praises by men and women who are so enthused by the message of the gospel so enraptured by the forgiveness of their sins that they're willing to say blanket or no blanket praise the Lord in Jesus name we pray these things Amen Amen Thank you guys remember when we said you■■■