

Short and Sweet Praise

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[0 : 00] Will you please be seated? We're going to look together at Psalm 117, which was our first Bible reading this morning.

And if you could turn that up, it's on page 492 in the Black Bibles in front of you. Let's pray together as we begin.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your powerful word, which reveals your character to us, which shows us your plans for this world and your plans for us.

We pray that you would work in each one of us now powerfully by this word, that you would be shaping us, challenging us and changing us to be more the people that you want us to be in Christ Jesus.

Amen. Well, are you a planner? Are you the sort of person who makes grand plans and puts them into action about how things will happen?

[1 : 13] And how successful are the plans that you put into action? When I was at university, I used to spend great slabs of time with my friends planning in the university coffee shop.

We weren't planning the takeover of the world. We weren't even planning our next essays, unfortunately. But using individual packets of sugar, we would plan touch rugby moves.

So we'd have perhaps the artificial sweetener as the opposition and the little packets of real sugar as us. And we'd say, if we pass the ball along here and along here, that'll shift them there.

And then bang, through the middle, we'll be able to go. And sometimes these plans worked. More often than not, they failed dismally.

Some years later, post-uni, I was part of another great plan. And this plan was to set up two of our friends from the beach mission team.

[2 : 17] We decided that these two people would be fantastic together. And so we needed to come up with a way to engineer things so that we could get them together. So we put the plan into motion.

We even had a code name for this great plan. And we thought that the way to go about it would be by setting up a triple date. We thought, you know, these two will be great together and the focus of the night's got to be those two.

But it'll be too much pressure if we just send them off on a date together. There's safety in a crowd. So we thought, okay, we'll have Dave and Kathy and Mark.

Maybe you can invite Carolyn. And Tim. Okay, who will I take? I rang around a few friends and they couldn't come. In the end, I invited someone called Anna who I'd met recently.

And the plan was all set to set up Dave and Kathy. Well, the plan was an absolute failure. As the night went on, it became quite clear to all of us that Dave and Kathy didn't really have that much in common.

[3 : 26] The chemistry wasn't there. There was no fireworks. Our attempts to set them up fell flat. It was a complete and utter failure.

Although there were some unforeseen side benefits, as it turns out. Well, they weren't completely unforeseen, actually. I am a planner, after all.

You can ask Anna about that if you see her after the service. What about your plans? Are you the sort of person who makes grand plans? And how successful are the plans that you make?

Sadly, often our plans don't work out the way that we always intend them to work out. Some years ago, Anna and I planned a holiday to Queensland. We'd been looking forward to this holiday for ages.

We'd had a really busy, hard year and we were just keen to get away on this holiday. We'd paid for it. We were all ready to go. And then one week before we were about to head off, Anna said airlines collapsed.

[4 : 40] And our holiday was lost, gone like that. Maybe you've had some plans that have fallen flat like that too. Maybe you've had plans for work or plans for relationships or plans for your children or plans for retirement that haven't worked out the way that you'd intended.

As the saying goes, the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray. Well, that may be true of mice and men, but what about God?

What about God's plans? Is God the sort of person who makes plans? And if God makes plans, how successful are God's plans?

In a world of setbacks, sickness and sin, where our plans often fail, can we take any confidence in God's plans?

Well, Psalm 117 addresses this issue. And so let's have a look at it together. Actually, there's some interesting trivia surrounding Psalm 117.

[5 : 53] It is actually the shortest chapter in the whole of the Bible, just two verses. So perhaps we can all hope for a short sermon this morning and get out of here a bit early.

But more interesting perhaps is that if you count up all of the chapters in the Bible, Psalm 117 is the exact middle chapter in our English Bibles.

I should point out that I'm not the person who discovered that, although I have checked it, which might tell you something about my personality. But it is actually the very middle chapter of the Bible, as well as being the shortest chapter in the Bible.

But what does this chapter have to teach us? Well, as we have a look at it, the first side looks very straightforward. It's a call to praise God because of his character, because of God's love and his faithfulness.

But there's actually something very unusual going on in this psalm. And you get at what is unusual by having a look at the characters who are involved. Just have a scan through and see who the characters are or the groups of characters referred to in this psalm.

[7 : 04] Perhaps most obvious is the Lord God, who's mentioned first. And he's praised in this psalm, as we said, because of his character.

He shows steadfast love and he is faithful. And then the second character or group of people that you see there is the nations or synonymously the peoples.

And as we read that, our minds immediately jump to think, OK, well, this is referring to the whole world. It's calling on the whole world to praise and extol God. And that's not bad.

That's capturing largely what it's talking about, but it's missing something quite important in that phrase, nations and peoples. And you really get at what this phrase is talking about by having a look at how those terms, nations and peoples, are used throughout the rest of the psalms.

So I'm just going to flick through some psalms and read you. And I want you to listen for how those terms are used. So I'm going to start with Psalm 2. This is how Psalm 2 begins.

[8 : 14] Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? You see those two terms, nations and peoples.

And as the psalm goes on, it's talking about these nations and peoples, these nations outside Israel plotting against Israel's king and against God himself.

Or if I flick through to Psalm 44, verse 2, you with your own hand drove out the nations, but our fathers you planted.

You afflicted the peoples, but our fathers you set free. Again, nations and peoples in contrast to the fathers of Israel who were planted in the land of Canaan.

And later on, in Psalm 44, verse 14, you have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.

[9 : 20] Those two terms used again together to refer to these non-Israelite nations and peoples in contrast to Israel.

And one more, just for good measure. Psalm 47, verses 2 and 3. For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

He subdued peoples under us and nations under our feet. Again, the contrast in those last two verses that I read to you, the nations, the people who are non-Israelites, contrasted with the us who are Israel.

Israel. So, when we think about the nations and the peoples being referred to here and being called on to praise and extol God, we're right to think of the whole world as long as we keep in mind that the particular reference here is to the non-Israelite nations who are being called on to praise and

extol God.

And that's a helpful hint for working out this last character in the psalm. If you have a look again at Psalm 117, verse 2, there's one more character left.

[10:39] For great is his steadfast love towards us. Who's the us being referred to in the psalms?

Well, this psalm is written by an Israelite and it's for use in Israelite worship. And as we've seen in those other psalms that we've just read, there's often a contrast between the nations, the peoples and us, Israelites.

And I think that is exactly what is going on here in Psalm 117. The us there is referring to the Israelites. It is us, Israelites, in contrast to the nations and the peoples.

So here in your psalm, we've got three groups of people. We've got God, we've got the nations and peoples and we've got us, Israelites. And that puts us in a position to see what is really very strange about this psalm.

Let me read it again. Praise the Lord, all you nations. Extol him, all you peoples. Why? For great is his steadfast love towards us, Israelites.

[11:57] And the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord. That is really very strange. The nations, the non-Israelite nations are being called on to praise and extol God.

Why? For his great love, not for them, but for Israel. Now that is very strange.

If I was to say to the boys in my Sunday school class, boys, I want you to say thank you to me because I'm giving all of the girls in the class a chocolate bar.

I would have a riot on my hands. Why should they be thankful? Because someone else is getting benefits.

And in the same way we might want to ask, why should the nations be praising and extolling God because he's showing love and faithfulness to Israel?

[12:59] In these two verses we have a puzzle. We've got a tension that needs resolving because what is commanded here doesn't seem to make any sense except that we know that as we read through the Bible that God has promised that he will do great things for the nations.

He will bless the nations and he will do it through Israel. God's great plan is laid out in Genesis chapter 12.

This is what God says to Abraham. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

God promises great things to Abraham and great things to the people of Israel but at the end of it he says that through Abraham and the people of Israel he is going to bring great blessing to the nations and you see that's why Psalm 117 makes sense because the nations there are being called to look at the way that God has treated Israel.

[14:29] Have a look at God's steadfast love. Have a look at God's faithfulness. Look at the way that God has kept his promises to Israel and if that is how God has treated Israel isn't he then going to keep that last part of his promise and also bring blessing to the nations.

Therefore the nations and the people should praise God because of his faithfulness and steadfast love to Israel. And so here in the very middle chapter of the Bible we're reminded of the whole story of the Bible that God is going to bring blessing to people of all nations through Israel.

And of course when this Psalm was first written and first read the plan hadn't yet been fulfilled. It was kind of on the distant horizon.

But for us in 2005 we can look back and see that God has done it. God has fulfilled this plan and he's done it in the person of Jesus Christ.

One of my favourite passages in the New Testament involves the faithful old man Simeon who had been waiting to see how God's plan would be fulfilled.

[15:59] And one day the Holy Spirit takes him into the temple and he sees a little baby and he holds the little baby in his arms and he says these words Sovereign Lord as you have promised you may now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in the sight of all people a light for revelation to the Gentiles which is the same word for nations and for glory to your people Israel that faithful old man knew that he was holding in his arms the fulfilment of God's plan this child would fulfil that promise to bring blessing to the nations and some thirty years later as he hung on the cross taking the sin of the world upon himself and then three

days later rising victorious from the grave victorious over sin and victorious over death he fulfilled the plan of God by his death and resurrection so that any person from any nation who puts their trust in Jesus can be one hundred percent right with

God have their sins forgiven and be part of God's family God's people and Psalm 117 is picked up in exactly this way by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 15 this is what he says quoting Psalm 117 and showing the way that it has been fulfilled in Jesus welcome one another therefore just as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God for I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs Abraham and in order that the Gentiles the nations might glorify God for his mercy as it is written therefore I will confess your name among the

Gentiles and sing praises to your name and again he says rejoice oh Gentiles with his people and again Psalm 117 praise the Lord all you Gentiles and let all the peoples praise him and again Isaiah says the root of Jesse shall come the one who rises to rule the Gentiles in him the Gentiles shall hope the whole movement of the Bible everything that is going on is an outworking of God's great plan to bring people from every nation through Christ to him and to bring them blessing and when Jesus returns the fulfilment of this plan this great plan will be seen I love in Revelation chapter 7 where you see people from every nation tribe people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb before Jesus and what are they doing they're doing exactly what

Psalm 117 calls on them to do praising God praising Jesus for what they have done God's promise to Abraham expressed in a nutshell in Psalm 117 the very middle chapter of the Bible fulfilled in Jesus and brought to its magnificent conclusion with people from every nation praising God for what he has done well friends I want us to hear this morning very clearly that whatever happens with our plans God's plans work when God puts a plan into action because of his steadfast love and because of his faithfulness he is going to see it through to completion God's plans do not fail he sees them through because he is faithful and he's full of steadfast love and the challenge for us this morning is to respond appropriately to this great character of God psalm 117 calls on us to praise and to extol God for his love and faithfulness ultimately expressed through his son Jesus and we need to ask this morning is that something that we have done and is that something that we continue to do perhaps there are people here this morning who have never responded to the love and faithfulness of God expressed in Jesus and I want to encourage you this morning to do this God's whole plan worked out through the Bible and through history has been in order to bring blessing to people of every nation he wants to bring people into relationship with himself through Jesus God has gone to great lengths for you with his plans and you need to respond by submitting to Jesus by bringing all of your plans all of your hopes all of your desires under the lordship of Jesus and therefore receiving the great blessing that relationship with God through Jesus brings and therefore praising and extolling God for his faithfulness and love to you but there are those here this morning who have submitted to Christ and surely this passage is also calling on us to praise and to extoll

[22 : 39] God I hope that this morning you have been reminded of the great plan of God and the great length that God has gone to for you most of us here this morning are members of the nations non-Jews Gentiles we are the people who this psalm was addressed to we were outside of God's people but because of Jesus and because we trust and follow him we've now been included in God's people and received the blessing that comes from that relationship we have now seen the outworking of God's plan expressed in Psalm 117 we've seen God's faithfulness and God's love for Israel bring about the fulfillment of the promise and will be extended to us and it's very easy for us to take for granted the great thing that

God has done for us but instead this morning what we need to do is remember again the extent of what God has done and not let this magnificent display of love and faithfulness wash over us but instead respond to God by praising him for his great character extolling him for his love and faithfulness and living out our relationship with him in our words in our thoughts and in our actions amen mix more and in■■ we with his new hello good you