

# “Powerful Praise Forever”

Psalm 117

<sup>1</sup>Praise the LORD, all you nations;  
extol him, all you peoples.

<sup>2</sup>For great is his love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures  
forever.

Praise the LORD.

[NIV]

HOPE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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## I. Introduction

Some of the biggest meanings come from the smallest words, and some of the profoundest messages from the shortest passages. Martin Luther wrote, "This is a short, easy psalm, doubtless made this way so that everyone might pay more attention to it and remember better what is said."<sup>1</sup> He also lamented his own tendency to be lazy with such easy passages, as if a single letter of the Word of God was less important because of its size. I wonder if the shortness of this psalm isn't precisely why most of the self-congratulating Jews missed the whole point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And I wonder if the shortness of this psalm isn't precisely why most of us spend our time whining and groveling in life-draining self-pity. This psalm is the shortest chapter in the Bible. If we were more willing to consider small things important; if we were less willing to make ourselves big to be important, we might read this psalm for what it's worth. And we would spend our lives in exuberant and joyful liberty rather than self-pity.

While this psalm appears limited in size, it is the key to praise unlimited, love unlimited, truth unlimited, and life unlimited.

## II. Praise, Unlimited

Praise, Unlimited. <sup>1</sup>"Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples." Did I say consider small things important? Many big words are important. "Justification" is important. "Sanctification" is important. "Supralapsarian" is important. (Well, sort of.) But here is a word which I think is even more important, and it's a lot smaller. It is the word "all." "Praise the LORD, *all* you nations; extol him, *all* you peoples."

To praise the Lord and extol him is to acknowledge and declare that he is bigger—much bigger—than you are. It is to declare your utter dependence upon Him. It is to study and verbally advertise the virtues, works, and promises of God. It is to declare him as your God, while submitting to him as his child. It is to worship and serve him above all else.

So here in this shortest chapter is one of the shortest words... and it has the longest reach of any word. "All." Here is what drove the Jews batty about Jesus: when he said "all," he meant "all." The Jews were happy with the word "all," as long as the word "all" did not mean "all." It was okay as long as "all" only meant "all the Jews." But it was not okay when Jesus said, <sup>Mt28.18</sup>"*All* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of *all* nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey *all* I have commanded you."

Have you ever heard anyone complain about Christianity being too exclusive? Show them Psalm 117. The Apostle Paul caught the drift of this psalm when he wrote to the Romans, <sup>Ro10.12</sup>"There is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of *all* and richly blesses *all* who call on him, <sup>13</sup>for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" You see, "all" is as *inclusive* as you can get! "All" leaves *no one* out! Paul was proving from the Hebrew Scriptures (Joel 2.32) that God's love is 100 percent *inclusive* for *all* who receive it. No nation, no language, no culture, no people group is excluded. That means Portsmouth, New Hampshire is not excluded.

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<sup>1</sup>Luther, M. (1999, c1958). *Vol. 14: Luther's works, vol. 14 : Selected Psalms III* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

Paul does go on to say, of course, that the people must believe in Jesus to call on him, and they must hear of Jesus in order to believe in him, and they must have someone preach Jesus to them in order to hear of him, and the church must send a preacher in order to have someone preach Jesus. Later, Paul actually quotes Psalm 117 to encourage the church to practice inclusivity toward one another. This was part of how he built his case for the church to send him to preach the "allness" of Christianity to *all* the nations.<sup>Ro15.11</sup>

Thus this psalm has been referred to as the great missionary psalm. But I wonder if we don't need to send some missionary work to the hidden parts of our own souls where we are withholding the "all."

A couple of weeks ago I told you the entire gospel was contained in a single verse—the first verse of Psalm 115. <sup>115.1</sup>"Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness." To praise the Lord and extol him is to believe and proclaim that he and he alone deserves all glory and honor now and forever. Really, the whole point of justification and sanctification and supralapsarian is... *all*. Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be *all* the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.

I think we are pretty happy with Jesus as long as "all" doesn't mean "all." As long as submitting all our will, all our decisions, and all our attitudes means (at most) submitting most of our will, most of our decisions, and most of our attitudes to Jesus, then we get along fine.

But this psalm does not really leave us that option. To praise the Lord and extol Him means to submit *all* our will, *all* our decisions, and *all* our attitudes to Him. And since the psalm says *all* you nations and *all* you peoples, that includes us. Funny, isn't it? We say "tsk, tsk" to the Jews because they who had this psalm in their own keeping didn't want the "all" to include us gentiles. But then we, having been grafted in to the "all," turn around and don't really want the "all" to include the all in us, either. And so our praise becomes much less powerful than it might be.

Christ is not interested in having only part of us. That is why He sacrificed *all* of Himself... to gain *all* of us who will receive *all* of Him. Only when we receive *all* of Jesus and He receives *all* of us, do we praise the Lord and extol him with praise unlimited.

Consider the decisions you've made this past week. Review the purchases you've made. Think of the foods you've eaten and liquids you've drunk. Ponder the prayers you've offered, the requests you've lifted. Recall the complaints you've lodged, the grumbles you've growled. Contemplate the compliments you've paid, the words you've said. How many of these were in following with the precepts of the Lord? How many were in delighted accord with his commands?

The Law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments was not for the Jews only. It is for *all* the nations, for *all* the peoples. Jesus obeyed *all* the Law for *all* who call upon Him. Jesus suffered *all* the price for *all* the disobedience of *all* who call upon Him. Receive *all* the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then, and know the joy of having *all* your heart, soul, strength and mind transformed into the likeness of *all* His faithful submission to God.

### III. Love, Unlimited

And that leads us into the next big truth in this little psalm: Love, Unlimited. <sup>2</sup>"For great is his love toward us." Praise the Lord, *all* you nations; extol him *all* you peoples. Why? Because great is his love toward us. So say most English translations. Not bad... but not as good as it gets. In the original, the psalmist actually uses a verb rather than an adjective. "His love *prevails* over us." This is so important! You see, "great" as an adjective has become fairly weak. Lots of things

are great. Mountains are great. Many Puritan writings are great. Boeing 747's are great. John Calvin was great. The United States of America was great.

Yes, even our sins are great. Which is why we must translate this verse literally: "His love prevails over us." If you insist on using the word "great," fine... but say, "His love prevails greatly over us." Listen! If His love prevails over us, that means there is nothing—NOTHING—about us, within us, without us, over which He will not prevail. There is nothing so great, than which He is not greater. There is no sin in us, over which He will not prevail by judgment upon His own Son and lovingkindness toward us. There is no self-justifying work we attempt, over which His saving grace will not prevail!

Get the picture of this word! In Exodus 17 when the Israelites in the wilderness were fighting the Amalekites, Moses stood with the rod of God. <sup>11</sup>"As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning [*prevailing*], but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning [*prevailing*]." In 2Sam11 the messenger came back to David with the battle news, <sup>23</sup>"The men overpowered us [*were prevailing over us*]..."

Listen! Psalm 103 says, literally, <sup>11</sup>"As high as the heavens *prevail* over the earth, so great his love *prevails* over those who fear him." And how specific do you want me to be? Okay! Read Ps65: <sup>65:3ESV</sup>"When iniquities *prevail* against me, you atone for our transgressions." See? You think your sins great—indeed they are; you think they prevail—but God's love *prevails* so much more. <sup>Ro5:20NAU</sup>"Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

Recently someone described to me how the Spirit can wash over us during a worship service, leaving us nourished and refreshed. Yet there are also times when we remain unsettled even after the benediction. A very good thing to do in such a case is to remain in or return to the sanctuary after service, and set yourself before the Lord in quiet. It may be, that while you did not *feel* Christ's Spirit washing, prevailing, ruling over you during service... you just need a little time in quiet to remember his mercy, recount his covenant promises, and relax in his love. You may just need to re-engage in the reality that His love *IS* prevailing over you whether you feel like it is or not; and his love is never *not* prevailing over you.

As the prophet Zephaniah proclaimed, <sup>Zep3.17</sup>"The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty [*prevailing*] to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." A mighty fortress is our God! There is no sin, over which His atoning and cleansing blood cannot prevail. And if you receive His love, there is no sin in you over which His merciful and sacrificial love *will* not prevail! Such is the covenant of grace between Father and Son. He takes captive your captivity to sin! He sets you free! Once, the terror of God's righteous judgment for your sins prevailed over you. But now, His mercy triumphs over judgment. <sup>Jam2.13</sup> His love prevails over you and sets you free to follow his precepts with great delight in his commands. Greatly, indeed, does His love prevail over us.

#### IV. Truth, Unlimited

However, no matter how greatly his love prevailed over us, it would not mean much if tomorrow he might switch off his love. Thus the psalmist adds, "and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever." You may also read that as, "the truth of the Lord endures forever." Truth, Unlimited.

Would you say it is true that 1+1=2? Can 1+1 ever not=2? Does 1+1=2 even if you are being struck by lightning on a mountain trail? Does 1+1=2 even if you are half way to the ground, and your parachute has not deployed despite all your frantic efforts? Does 1+1=2 even if the world is fading from your eyes because on account of your Christian witness the government deems you unworthy of health care? Yes, 1+1 still = 2. And yes, it is still true that God is God, God's Law is

God's Law, man is man, Christ is Christ, we add nothing and receive everything, and when we receive the Head, we are received into the everlasting body of Christ.

The truth of the Lord endures faithfully forever. There are no timeouts in God's love toward us, either in this world or in eternity. God's love *never* takes a coffee break from prevailing over us. Jesus Christ has satisfied God's Law and God's love once for *all*, for *all* who love him and call upon his name to save them. God will not break the promise he made to his Son Jesus Christ, when he said, <sup>Ps2.7</sup>"You are my Son; today I have become your Father. <sup>8</sup>Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession."

Long have I asked the question, "How can I employ the history of the sufferings of the Church of Scotland, or of the Huguenots, for the edification of the Church in Portsmouth?" The answer has just as long eluded me, for I stumbled over a rough stumblingblock. I'll tell you what that stumblingblock is, and it is this: focusing your attention on the saints who suffered. If you marvel at the martyrs you not only dishonor them, but you miss the Master of their sanctification.

The Lord has brought me through the frustration to behold its cure, and its cure is this: behold the faithfulness of God, prevailing over souls to sustain them and preserve the Church through the valley of the shadow of death and right into eternity. <sup>Ro8.11</sup>"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

If you are so amazed with the martyrs themselves, you will be amazed at agonizing beauty. All their perseverance, all their steadfastness, all their testimony to the Lord—is very, very beautiful. But it cannot save you. Only the Lord Jesus Christ, who saved them through severe trial, can save you. So when you study the lives and deaths of saints, make sure you are studying the faithfulness of God who lived and died so that he might raise every single saint from death to life. <sup>Ps115.1</sup>"Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness."

## V. Life, Unlimited

Finally, then, I said this little psalm is the key to Life, Unlimited. Do you know what it feels like to be alive? "Praise the Lord." That is what it feels like to be alive. You cannot praise the Lord if you are not alive. You have no love for the Lord if you have not received His love prevailing over you. You have no desire—no will whatsoever—to be faithful to the Lord if you still spurn the Lord's ever-enduring faithfulness. If you do not love the Lord and if you have no will to be faithful to Him, then you have no idea what it feels like to be alive.

I know, I know, you think you do. You know what it feels like to breathe, to raise your heartbeat, or to wake up. You even know what it feels like to be exhilarated on a mountain or in the waves. You know what it feels like to be infatuated or even to have sincere and prolonged affections for another person. You know what it feels like to make a new discovery or read a book that makes you giddy or makes you cry. All this can *only* assure you that your soul is still united to your body.

But if you do not love the Lord, if you do not behold Him as God over all heaven and earth, if you do not praise Him because His love prevails over you; if you do not extol him because his faithfulness endures forever... then you do not know what it feels like to be alive. In fact, you are *not* alive. You are dead in your sins along with a huge portion of people in the world. Take no comfort in your wide-path majority. You will not stop Christ's kingdom from prevailing to the ends of the earth, no not for one second.

To the contrary, the Lord Jesus Christ rules in the midst of his foes.<sup>Ps110.2</sup> Take notice of the fact that throughout all history, you will never find a single true Christian who was ever prevented from instantly entering glory upon his or her death. You will never find a single believer whom all the belittling or beheading persecution ever prevented or even delayed for a nanosecond, being a living stone in a great castle—a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

No, the great God who created the heavens and earth for His own glory not only deserves eternal praise... but to him *belongs* eternal praise!<sup>Ps111.10</sup> Don't flatter yourself into thinking you can steal or withhold such praise from Him, when He secured it by the blood of His very own Son!

Rather, give up your self-praise. Receive God's prevailing love, rest in His unfailing faithfulness, and... and... and... **PRAISE THE LORD!** That is to say... **LIVE! LIVE! LIVE, UNLIMITED!**

Know the joy of knowing that <sup>Ps111.6</sup>"He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations. <sup>7</sup>The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. <sup>8</sup>They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness. <sup>9</sup>He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever—holy and awesome is his name."

You see, *this* is how He is giving to his people the land of other nations. What once were vast territories of idolatry and ignorance of gospel life, are now being given over to gospel faith and growth. What once were vast states of enmity to Christ are now being subdued by His grace to himself, ruled and defended by him. I'm talking about individual souls—fortresses crumbling to be rebuilt in Christ. I'm talking about families infiltrated by patient yet relentless prayer and testimony from friends or other family members. I'm talking about groups of people oppressed by anti-Christian governments. I'm talking about churches once dead, now reborn with evangelical witness.

The glorious singing of hymns of praise at the prayer meeting yesterday overflowed into the streets of our neighborhood. There have been times in history when a person walking down the street would have heard such praise from most of the houses he passed. Now he hears the sounds of death—no godly praise at all.

The land of other nations indeed! People coming to know what it feels like to be alive, to receive God's prevailing love, to rest in His unfailing faithfulness, and to *praise the Lord!* Would you dare call that unfaithful or unjust? No, that is life—Life, Unlimited. Praise the Lord. Who will dare say our God cannot prevail over the streets and homes of Portsmouth?