

Psalm 117

SI: Many of the Psalms are about our hearts and our emotions.

They give us a framework for thinking about our feelings ways that lead us to connect with God.

But this Psalm is about God’s big plan and how we can be connected to something much larger and more glorious than anything in our little lives.

Psalm 117 is the shortest Psalm, but it has the widest reach.

If you opened your Bible right in the middle, it would open up to this Psalm.

The message of Psalm 117 is the heart of God.

INTRO: Years ago we had some next door neighbors whose lives were chaotic. We thought we could help them, but instead we got sucked into their drama.

They started coming over all the time with crazier and crazier problems.

One time the husband appeared and said he needed to talk to me.

He was covered with dried blood and his hands were shaking so bad he could barely light his cigarette.

The wife would come over and bend Allison’s ear about her health problems, and her sex problems, and her prescription drug problems.

Adrienne and Eliza were about eleven and nine at the time and they’ve recently admitted to us that they would creep down the hall and listen.

We spent lots of time and emotional energy trying to figure out what to do and how to help, but nothing got better and we felt guilty for not doing enough

Then we were talking to a good friend of ours, someone in this church, and he said:

I grew up in a family like that.

They love drama. They thrive on chaos. They want to suck you in.

Be kind to them, talk to them about Christ, but don’t try to fix their problems.

It gave us the big perspective that we needed.

It’s easy to get fixated on drama of various kinds.

Sometimes we get sucked into the drama of other people’s lives, soap operas in our families or workplace, or even in church.

There is celebrity drama and sports drama which consumes many people.

There’s the 24 hour news cycle of political drama.

I think one of the easiest dramas for thoughtful Christians to get sucked into

is the culture war in America—transgenderism, feminism, socialism, atheism—all these ideologies that are confident and bold and having their hour.

What’s going to happen to America and church when they fully gain upper hand?

I read an article recently that argued freedom of religion is incompatible with human dignity and a just society and should be ended.
We certainly need to be wise and thoughtful and well-read, but you can easily find yourself riding a roller coaster.

Whenever you get sucked into any of these dramas your world shrinks, and as a Christian you lose perspective on who God is and what he's doing and what our role is in his story.
All these other dramatic stories distract us and we forget God's story and what he's calling us to do.

What we need is to see God afresh. We need to see his character afresh.
We need to see our role in his story afresh.

Psalms 117 was a worship song sung by the people of Israel.

It's the shortest Psalm. But don't let that fool you.

It's like a little chili pepper.

Part of the reason it's so powerful is that it was meant to shift the perspective of the people of God.

Any time they got too wrapped up in the drama of their own lives or their nation, any time they thought the story was about them, Psalm 117 would shift their perspective so they could see the big picture again and reorient themselves towards God and his character and what he was using them for.

I've been thinking about this Psalm because of our trip to Chile.

We've been praying the Lord will help us encourage our missionary friends and fellow Chilean Christians we meet. But we also want something for ourselves.

We want to expand our vision of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is not just the American church and its struggles.

The Lord is God of all nations. He wants people everywhere to worship him.

So let's read this Psalm and let it expand our perspective.

I want to look at it under two headings:

1. The big message
2. The big drama

MP#1 The big message

In the Ancient Middle East, in the place and time this Psalm was written,

religion and politics were identical.

Every nation and people group had its own gods.

There were the gods of Babylon and Mesopotamia, of Egypt, of Canaan.

The gods had territories and boundaries. Everybody believed that.

The theology of Israel was radically different.

It said that the God of Israel, whose name is Yahweh, is also the God of all nations and all peoples.

You need to appreciate how radical this sounded back in that time and culture.

Nobody believed that about their gods.

Even if one nation conquered another nation, they would just add the gods of the conquered nation to their own collection because they figured, since we have this new territory under our control, we need the god who goes with it.

But Yahweh, the God of Israel, claimed Lordship over all nations.

One interesting place this comes through is in the 10 Plagues of Egypt.

When Moses told Pharaoh to let God's people go and he refused,

the Lord hit Egypt with 10 Plagues that culminated with the death of the firstborn.

Bible scholars have pointed out is that many of the plagues were pointed at particular gods of Egypt.

The Egyptians worshipped the Nile River as the source of life for their land.

One of the plagues was the Nile River being turned to blood.

They had a frog god, a cow god—there were plagues of frogs and livestock.

And the Egyptians' top god was the sun god. The ninth plague was darkness.

So the 10 Plagues showed that the gods of Egypt were no gods at all, but that

Yahweh is the true God over Egypt. This appears over and over in the OT.

One more example that's probably intended to be funny is when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant in a battle against the Israelites.

God allowed the ark to be captured because the Israelites themselves were using it like a lucky charm. They thought if they took the ark into battle, they had God in a box and were bound to win. So God allowed them to be defeated.

But when the Philistines took the ark, what happened?

They set up the ark in the temple of their god Dagon.

They were adding Yahweh to their own god collection so they could count on him the next time they had to go into Israelite territory.

But the next morning when they came into the temple, the Dagon statue had fallen on its face in front of the ark and its head and hands were broken off.

Making the point that Yahweh is God of the Philistine people too.

Those examples happened in the context of judgment.

Egypt and Philistia were being judged for their persecution of God's people, but that's not the context or message of Psalm 117.

This Psalm calls all nations and all peoples to worship and extol the LORD.

Praise the LORD all you nations, extol him all you peoples.

Nations and peoples mean every ethnic, national, tribal, linguistic people group. God's desire is for all nations to worship and praise him.

CS Lewis wrote a book on the Psalms and he says that for the longest time, even after he became a Christian, he couldn't understand passages like this one. He wondered, why does God want people to worship him?

Only people with a personality defect want other people to worship them.

Unstable dictators demand that their subjects worship them.

God doesn't need the worship of his creatures. So why does he call for it?

This really bothered CS Lewis until he realized that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows in praise. When you really enjoy something, you praise it.

If you love horses or motorcycles or stamp collecting or football or if you have a favorite author or a favorite beach, you spontaneously praise the excellencies of those things. You talk about them freely to anyone who will listen.

And, CS Lewis says, it goes an important step farther than that.

Praise completes and fulfills your enjoyment.

The only way you get the full joy out of something is when you can turn to someone else and say, Isn't that beautiful! Did you see me hit that golf ball?

Did you taste that ice cream? Wasn't that good!

Admiration is the highest pleasure.

So the reason God wants us to praise him is not because he needs it, but because he knows we won't be happy until we give it.

We all have a need to see infinite beauty and enjoy it so much that it spills out of us in authentic praise. God wants us to have the highest pleasure.

And his praise is especially pleasurable when the whole kaleidoscope of humanity, in all its many variations and colors and languages worships him.

We get a little taste of this through missions.

Our letter in the bulletin today is from Dina Petrou who directs the Damaris House in Athens that rescues women enslaved in the sex trade. Dina has told us how these women are refugees from all over the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe. It breaks your heart, but also, can you imagine how beautiful it would be to hear

them all praying in their own home languages to this Lord Jesus who they've met for the first time through Dina.

How their hearts that have seen so much ugliness and cruelty, are now experiencing the pleasure of praising the God of perfect beauty.

In a context like that, you really can understand how praising God heals.

This comes into sharper focus when you see why the nations are praising the LORD Not because of his power or his judgments.

Praise him for his love toward us. Actually, it says his great love toward us. Commentators point out this Hebrew word has a nuance of winning or prevailing. It's used in the Old Testament to say things like Israel was great in battle.

They were winning. Nothing could stand against them.

That's God's love. When he sets his affections on a person, his love wins.

Paul says in Romans 8, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

He has that list: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, neither height nor depth, angels, demons, any power, present or future.

The love of God is the great message and prevailing power of missions and Gospel.

But not only the Lord's great love, he's also praised because his faithfulness endures forever. This word faithfulness is actually the Hebrew word amen.

It can be translated truth, steadfastness, or reliability.

Over the years this word took on two important uses.

You see the first use here in this Psalm.

It came to be used to describe God himself.

In fact, there are passages where he's called literally, the God of the Amen.

The second use is one we're all familiar with.

We use it as believers to express agreement with what God says.

God says something, and we say Amen, affirming the fact that God is truthful.

Amen is untranslatable. You can visit Christians anywhere in the world who speak any language, you might not understand a word when they pray, but when they come to the close, you will know this word. Amen.

That's also the glory of this Psalm. The nations and peoples in all their differences, will be united by Jesus in a common voice of praise to the faithful God.

We could go on, but let's think about how this big message of the nations praising the Lord for his love and saying Amen together is working out.

Is this just a fantasy, or is it real?

MP#2 The big drama

It starts with Abraham, the father of all who believe in Jesus Christ.

What was the great promise the Lord gave to Abraham? Do you remember? The Lord promised him that he would be given an heir, a son, through whom blessings would be extended to every people and nation. “And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

That promise to Abraham is the starting point of a theme that is carried right through the Old Testament—that one day, the salvation of the Lord would extend through Israel to all the nations of the earth.

God reaffirmed the promise to Isaac and then to Jacob.

He told both of them, All nations will be blessed through you and your offspring.

This promise of blessing to the nations is celebrated in the Psalms, not just Psalm 117, others too.

Over and over again, the worship songs of Israel echo the promise that the Lord will make himself known among all nations and extend the blessing of his covenant favor to every people.

When you turn to the writings of the prophets, this theme appears again.

Isaiah says that “in the last days, the mountain the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains and all nations will stream to it.”

Zechariah speaks of “many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities” going to the feasts of Judah and seeking the Lord.

Amos speaks of David’s tent being enlarged and the Gentiles coming into that tent.

There are personal stories of non-Israelites coming to the God of Abraham.

Not many, but significant because they foreshadow nations coming to Christ.

Rahab, a Canaanite woman. A citizen of Jericho. A prostitute.

She put her faith in the God of Israel and sheltered the spies.

Do you remember what became of her?

She married a prince of Judah and is one of the great-grandmothers of Christ.

Ruth, a Moabite. An idol worshipper. She believed in the God of Israel

and followed her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem where she married Boaz

and she too is listed as one of the great-grandmothers of Jesus.

We don’t have time to talk about Naaman, the Syrian captain, and the Ninevites who repented under Jonah’s preaching, and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, who we will see in heaven because at the end of his life he believed in the one true God. Each of these individuals is a little fulfillment and appetizer of God’s promise to bless all nations through Abraham.

The Old Testament is permeated with this promise of a future age of salvation and blessing for all nations. Even though Israel often failed to be a light to the nations, the Lord's promise did not change. And that brings us to the New Testament and this age in which we live.

The Promised Son of Abraham was born in Bethlehem.

And the baby Jesus was not just visited by the shepherds of Israel, but also by the wisemen who were Magi from the east—Persians. Then Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again for our salvation. And what were his parting words?

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's Abrahamic.

And he said: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

After Jesus ascended into heaven he sent the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit empowered the church to preach the Gospel to the nations. That's what Pentecost was, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to empower the church to reach out beyond its Jewish roots and take the good news of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his salvation to all nations.

From Jerusalem the Apostles took the Gospel throughout the Roman empire, into Europe, and from there it has spread around the world.

There are places the percentage of believers has shrunk. Think of Europe.

But in far more places it is growing.

Back in August I read an article that I didn't believe at first.

I thought it was Christian fake news. The title was Iranian Official: Mass Conversions are Happening Right Under our Eyes

The gist of the article was that at a meeting this past May, Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Alavi, addressed a gathering of Shiite Muslim leaders.

And in that meeting he admitted that there are large numbers of Iranians converting to Christianity from Islam.

A few interesting details.

He said many of these are ordinary, working people, and that whole families are coming to faith in Christ.

But it's not all working people. There are university students and even a few high profile Iranians, including a well-known athlete.

What was also interesting was that he did not use any of the usual rhetoric claiming that this was due to Western influences or an American plot to undermine Iran.

He admitted that this is organic and indigenous in character, not Western.

Furthermore, one of the epicenters of these conversions is the city of Qom, which also happens to be the heart of Islamic studies in the country.

Numbers are hard to nail down.

It's generally agreed that in 1979, at the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, there were 500 Christian Iranian converts in country. Now everybody agrees there are at least 500,000 and perhaps as many as a million Christians.

As I said, I was skeptical because it was published by a Christian news agency. But I found a similar article on, of all places, the NPR website.

It was a little different. It was about how many Iranian Christian converts are fleeing as refugees to Turkey, where they are converting other Iranians living there and how this is causing tensions with the Turkish authorities.

The NPR reporter speculated that these Iranians were converting as a kind of immigration strategy to get to the West. They would claim religious persecution. But the actual facts she reported undermined her theory.

One Iranian woman he interviewed named Farzana explained how she had become disillusioned with Islam. She had a coworker in her beauty salon was a Christian convert and she invited Farzana to a secret church in Tehran.

Here's a quote from Farzana:

Once she began trusting me, she gave me photocopied writings and said, I'm giving these to you as a gift. Go read them. These are the word of God.

Farzana became a Christian, was baptized, was threatened by the Iranian secret police and left for Turkey, where she's part of a church.

It's clear this was not a strategy to get to America by this woman.

She was enamored by the faithfulness and love of the God she never knew.

She read the life-giving word of God on a photocopied sheet and it changed her.

God's big drama, his love for the nations and his claim over the nations, is not over, it's ongoing, and will continue to expand until Christ returns.

My application for us today and our faith lesson is pretty big and broad—it's that we all have our individual problems and concerns and struggles.

God cares about those, he cares about the things you're going through in your family or work, the dramas that can't help but worry you at times.

But one of the helps he gives you, one of the things God wants you to do, is to lift your eyes and see this great message and this great work he is doing. Pray for the nations of the world, pray for the church around the world,

pray for those who have been called to go, our missionary partners,
even those in our church, our Greece team going in a few months—
Who will be working with Dina and these women in the Damaris House.
We all have a part in this.

And let this expand your perspective and fill you with admiration and joy
in our loving and faithful God!