

THE SMALLEST CHAPTER Psalm 117

¹ *Praise the LORD, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.*

² *For great is his love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
Praise the LORD.*

INTRODUCTION:

War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy is well known for being one of the longest books in the English language (not counting reference books like encyclopedias). *War and Peace* contains over half a million words! I'll bet you've heard of the book even if you haven't read it.

Marienbad My Love by Mark Leach is about 34 times as long as *War and Peace*! That's a mighty big book!

It was easy to find the title of the longest book. People are impressed by that. But the shortest book? I had trouble finding that one. Someone suggested that *The Amish Telephone Directory* might be the shortest. Someone else thought that *Beauty Secrets* by Janet Reno might qualify. What about *Everything Men Understand About Women?* *Baseball Highlights of the Chicago Cubs* might be my favorite.

But to find a serious contender for the title of The World's Shortest Book...I could not locate even one. I think that is because we do not value that which is short. We have a tendency to overlook what is short. Why Randy Newman even said that short people have no reason to live! Being vertically challenged is a burden to carry!

This tendency to overlook that which is short may even carry over into our Bible reading. We may not truly appreciate the littlest chapter, the littlest verse, the littlest word and the littlest letter in the Bible. So during the month of July, that is what we are going to study: the littlest chapter, verse, word and letter in the Bible.

The 117th Psalm has the distinction of being the smallest chapter in the Bible. It is only 26 words in length. But that does not mean it is not important. Be careful not to overlook this little passage. It says a lot in a brief space! More than anything else, this brief text informs our worship of the Lord. That automatically makes this little chapter important.

I've quoted before that someone has observed that Americans are people who worship our work, who work at our play and who play at our worship.

If that is true, it ought not to be. We must take worship seriously because God does.

Ecclesiastes 5:1 cautions: *Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.* That is: be careful when you go before the Lord to worship Him. Worship is serious business and we had better be taking it seriously.

Psalm 117, this shortest chapter in the Bible, gives us some important insights on the subject of worship. First of all, this little chapter points out that we have two responsibilities when we come to worship the Lord.

I. TWO RESPONSIBILITIES:

A. Spotlight the LORD

The first responsibility we have is to spotlight the Lord. Psalm 117 commands, "Praise the Lord". The Hebrew word for "praise" comes from a root that means to shine a light upon. When we come to worship, we come to put the Lord in the spotlight.

That may be hard to remember. Sometimes, we think the spotlight is on the preacher and we treat the song service as if it were a pep-rally or a warm-up act before the main event: the sermon. But folk, I need to remind you that the sermon is not the main event. The preacher is not the star of the show. And worship is not ancillary to anything. Worship is the reason we are here and the Lord is to be the one in the center of the spotlight.

Not only is the preacher not the one in the spotlight, neither are the musicians. We have some excellent instrumentalists but they are not in the spotlight. We have some outstanding vocalists but they are not in the spotlight. We have folk who do a wonderful job leading us in prayer and giving communion meditations but they are not to be in the spotlight, either. God is in the spotlight.

One way we can help to insure that God is the one who is the center of attention is to be exceptionally thoughtful and careful about our terminology.

- This raised area at the front of the auditorium: let's call it a platform and not a stage. Stages are for performers who stand in spotlights and...perform. This is a raised platform from which worship can be led.
- Instead of calling it a song service, how about if we call it a time of praise? Does that keep the attention where it ought to be?
- You all? You are not the audience. You are the congregation or the church or the assembly but you are not the audience. You are supposed to be participants in worship, not mere observers. When

the church gathers to worship, there is an audience of one. When we see ourselves as an audience, we can think the show is for our amusement, our entertainment, or our enjoyment. What we do here is not supposed to be done to please you. It is to be done to please the Lord. The goal ought not to be your satisfaction but His. We can help to remind ourselves of that if we stop thinking of ourselves as an audience.

- To be honest with you, I have never felt comfortable being called “The Preacher”. For one thing, since we have that challenge that people are to practice what they preach, when people call me The Preacher, I always wonder if that is their way of saying I am a hypocrite: I preach it but I don’t live it. The other thing about being called “The Preacher” is that it sounds a little lofty. The term “minister” means a servant. I am a minister of the church (**A** minister of the church not **THE** minister of the church), a minister of the Gospel, a minister of Jesus Christ and a minister of the Word of God. I say that because I am to be a servant of the church, a servant of the Gospel, a servant of Jesus Christ and a servant of the Word. In case you care, I’d rather be called your servant or your minister. I think that helps to keep God in the spotlight and the servant where he belongs.

“Praise the Lord.” Shine the light on Him and make him the center of our attention.

B. Brag on the LORD

The Psalmist says, “*Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.*” I don’t know if you have noticed but I have a tendency, a propensity and a proclivity for stringing synonyms together. Often in triads, trios and triplets of three. I do that for emphasis, impact and impression. But I don’t know that the Lord resorts to such verbal gymnastics. I suspect that when He inspires an author to write, what is written is what God wants written.

In this case, the psalmist wrote that we are to “praise” the Lord and that we are to “extol” him. There are nuances of differences between those two words.

Whereas “praise” comes from a root meaning to shine a light upon, “extol” literally means to make exuberant statements about, to declare, to assert as facts. In that regard, “extol” means to praise or to boast about someone or something. When we come to worship God, we come to brag about Him.

We do that when we sing to Him. Songs like “*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty, Early in the morning our songs shall rise to Thee*” are

hymns that extol God. When we sing, “*Father, we love You, we worship and adore You, Glorify Thy name in all the earth*” we are bragging on God...and that is a very good thing for us to be doing.

We also brag about God when we sing songs about His attributes. “*Amazing Grace*” or “*Majesty, Worship His Majesty*” draw attention to God’s character.

Furthermore, we brag about God when we praise Him for His actions. The hymn says, “*Thou art worthy, Thou art worthy, Thou art worthy, O Lord, To receive glory, glory and honor, Glory and honor and power.*” Then the author proceeds to tell us why God is worthy to receive glory, honor and power. “*For Thou hast created, hast all things created; Thou hast created all things.*” We brag on God when we recount His marvelous deeds. Robert Grant wrote, “*Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite? It breathes in the air; it shines in the light.*” To praise God for what he has done is to extol Him and commend Him before others.

So these are two responsibilities that are ours when we come before the Lord to worship Him: we are to spotlight Him and then brag on Him.

II. TWO REASONS:

The psalmist tells us two responsibilities that are ours. And he gives us two reasons for fulfilling those responsibilities.

A. His Eternal Love

First of all, we are to worship the Lord because of His eternal love.

Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us.

If you have children, when did you begin to love them? Two of our kids were born to us and I saw them as they made their grand and tearful entrance into the world. They were bleating like sheep and covered in blood but I loved them the moment I laid eyes on them. They did not have to do anything to merit my love. I couldn’t help it, I was smitten: I loved them.

It was the same with our adopted children. They arrived on airplanes. Strangers brought them to us but while they were still across the arrivals lounges (the first in Minnesota and the second in New York), I loved them.

It is not for nothing that God has revealed Himself to us as our Father. He wants us to understand that His love for us is categorical, unconditional and eternal.

In last week's church paper from the West Salem Christian Church, I read a little illustration. Author, Janet George tells of a short flight she had from Tucson to Phoenix. She wrote, "Seated next to me was a young woman with a baby. The baby wore a beautiful white dress with a pink bow in her hair. The woman was smiling and the baby kept saying, 'Dada'.

"The woman explained to me that they were on their way home and daddy was waiting for them. Everyone was enjoying this adorable little girl...until the flight got underway. The mother had a thermos with OJ in it. She kept giving the baby a little fruit and a little juice; a little fruit and a little juice. It was becoming a turbulent flight. Every time the baby cried, she got more fruit and more juice. Soon with the bumpy ride, all the fruit and juice that had gone down, came back up. Everyone kept trying to assure the apologetic mother that it was OK...all the while handing her tissues and heading for cover.

"It was an absolute mess. The baby's hair was matted and messy. She had fruit and juice all over her white dress. And, needless to say, she and the mother didn't smell the most pleasant. As soon as the plane landed, the baby felt fine. 'Dada' she started again. Nobody else was feeling so well.

"As we got off the plane, I saw a young man who had to be 'Daddy'. He had on white slacks, white shirt and a white flower in his hand. In my mind, I thought I knew what was going to happen. As soon as he saw how dreadful his little girl looked, he would hold her at arms length.

"As I watched him run up to mom, she dumped the baby into his arms so she could go clean up in the restroom. The young father wrapped his arms around his little girl and kissed her. He stroked her hair. He kept saying over and over, 'Daddy's baby has come home'."

Janet George writes, "I watched him all the way to the baggage claim area. He never stopped kissing that baby. I thought to myself, 'Where did I ever get the idea that my Father God is any less loving than a young dad, dressed in white with white flowers, who doesn't care what his little girl looks or smells like: he's just glad she is home.'"

Do you get it? The poet who penned the 117th psalm, says we are to put the spotlight on God and brag about Him because His love is eternal. When you think about how you present yourself before the Holy God, and when you think that He is crazy in love with you

anyway, doesn't it move you to want to highlight Him and brag about Him?

B. His Enduring Truth

We are to worship God because of His eternal love and because of His enduring truth.

In our world, they tell us that the environment is changing and the economy is tanking. The medicines we were told were safe, they now say could kill us. The pleasures that turned us on have now turned on us. The politicians we trusted to lead us have led us astray. We are left to wonder if there is anything or anyone we can trust.

And the poet says, "*Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.*" God's reliability can be relied upon. He is faithfully faithful. His truth is ever true.

Since there is no one else and nothing else on which you can so confidently rely, does that not make God worthy of worship? Does that not make Him deserving of the spotlight? Isn't it justifiable to brag on Him? The lyricist of the shortest chapter in the Bible certainly thought so.

CONCLUSION:

When we gather for worship each week, we do so for the purpose of shining a spotlight on the Lord and bragging on Him. It really is all about Him and not about us.

Our motivation to worship is His love that lasts and His reality that remains. So, this morning, let's join our voices to tell Him we love Him. Will you please stand and sing with me?

INVITATION: #55 – "*Bless His Holy Name*"