

# The Shortest Psalm

Psalm 117

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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning or joining us online or on the phone, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

As we get started this morning, I wanted to pass along a note from one of the students enrolled in our Bible correspondence course program. We get letters on a regular basis, and this is one that Patsy passed along a week or two ago. We've been grading and returning roughly 800 lessons a month lately, and if you would like to enroll, simply send us your name and address, and we will get you started with the first two lessons. You can study those, and answer the questions, and return those to us to be graded, and we will return the results along with the next two lessons, and so on, until you complete each series of lessons and receive a certificate of completion. We have an introductory course explaining God's plan of salvation, we then continue with a study of James, then to Luke, then to Acts, and then a study of 1 Corinthians. But this note comes to us from Wendy, who says, "I want to thank you for getting me back to my Bible. I haven't read the Bible or went to church in years, so I took my Bible and just opened it and started reading. I felt great, so I read a lot and I loved it. I love your lessons. Please keep them coming! Thank you so much. Wendy." Our goal is to connect people to the word of God. We cover the postage in both directions, so this is a decent chunk of our weekly budget, but we are glad to do it, and if you would like to jump in, please let us know. These lessons are also available for download on our website: [www.fourlakeschurch.org](http://www.fourlakeschurch.org), under the "GET IN TOUCH" tab.

We are here this morning to worship God (which we have done), but we are also here to preach the love of God who sent his Son to save us. He died in our place, he was buried, but he was raised up on the first day of the week. We obey this good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and by obeying the Lord's command to be buried with him in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And as a part of our invitation to you, we've been sharing examples of what this looks like. And today, we have several, starting with an update from the Centergrove congregation over in Kannapolis, North Carolina. They posted a few days ago and they say, "We want to welcome our newest member, our new sister in Christ, Julissa García to the body of Christ!! Her conviction already has inspired and motivated others. Her heart is second to none and she has chosen to, in her own words, fully open it to God.

We love you Ju and we pray for your journey ahead. We are with you! And most importantly God is with you!!!” We also welcome Julissa to God’s family this week!

This next update comes to us from the Lord’s church over in Raleigh, North Carolina (two from North Carolina today)! They say, “This past weekend we were able to celebrate Jesus bringing back two of his lost sheep. We celebrate Jesus’ ability to save and restore. Mark was baptized and Melissa recommitted herself to Jesus and His church. Welcome them to the family of God and please pray for them.” I love this! And I don’t know what it is, but I love this guy! He just seems like somebody I would like to get to know. I would love to hang out with this guy at Pizza Ranch someday. But I also love how they note that his wife was restored to the church. And this is so important. Even after we obey the gospel, sometimes we wander, and we need to come back. Melissa has come back, and for that we are thankful.

And then I feel like I need to share something that is NOT from North Carolina, so I’d like to very quickly share two more, with the first post coming to us from Johnny from somewhere in the Philippines, who wants us to know about two baptisms this week, done by two students at a Christian college over there. This is all we know, but good news from the Philippines this week!

And then the last two come to us from the Lord’s church down in Cuba. They simply refer to a “Day of joy,” that “these two young [people] have given themselves to our Lord Jesus.” Awesome! And we share these examples by way of encouragement. If you have not yet done what these people have done, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship this morning, or give me a call, send a text, or send an email using the contact information in our bulletin or on the website, and we would love to study together.

As you might have noticed, I have been looking through those sermon request cards that you guys turned in roughly a year ago, and as I look through those cards, several keep coming to the top of the pile, including one that contains a single word, the word “SHORT.” Now, I know that this good brother could not possibly be asking for a short sermon, because I know that all of us appreciate the preaching of the word of God; therefore, I know that we want as much of it as possible. And then I thought, “Well, maybe he was asking for a lesson on Zaccheus, the “wee little man” who was so short he had to climb up into a tree to see Jesus (from Luke 19). But no, I preached on Zaccheus back on December 9, 2007, so that must not be it. Well, maybe he wanted a sermon on the shortest VERSE in the Bible, “Jesus wept” (in John 11:35), but I preached on that back on October 8, 2006, so that couldn’t be it. So what I’ve concluded is that he must have been asking for a lesson on the shortest CHAPTER in the Bible. Surely, that must be the message here!

This morning, then, I want us to study the shortest chapter in the entire Bible. Does anyone know which chapter that is? Let me give you another clue: The shortest chapter is also the middle chapter. The Bible, of course, contains 1,189 chapters, and the middle chapter is the 595<sup>th</sup> chapter; there are 594 chapters before it and 594 chapters after it. You can count those real quick, but I might as well let you know that the shortest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 117. So, I want to invite you to be turning with me to Psalm 117. If you just let your Bible fall open to the middle, there’s a pretty good chance you’ll be somewhere near it: Psalm 117. Psalm 117 has only two verses in it and contains 17 words (in Hebrew).

Well, at this point, it may be easy for us to assume that there’s not too much in this little psalm. In fact, it might be easy to assume that since there’s not much in here, surely today’s sermon will be much shorter! And I think we might understand why someone might assume that a short passage might be less important than a longer passage. However, I’d like to suggest a comparison. I would direct your attention to the container on the table up here: Our son made this, by the way. But I’ve learned something over the past few years: When I wake up at 2 in the morning, and as I’m coughing as the smell of tear gas fills my lungs, I know that he’s

working on something that will be put into these very small bottles. Why is that? In the kitchen or in the pantry, those things that come in the smallest of bottles are often the most potent, aren't they! What we have up here is blueberry hot sauce. Many of us love blueberries. No problem there. But the next three ingredients on the list are "Ghost Peppers," "Scotch Bonnett Peppers," and "Habaneros." When I put a few drops of this on my breakfast burrito, I tell people: I'm not crying; no, my eyeballs are sweating! Well, in a similar way, I would suggest that we are dealing with a small bottle this morning!

I hope you have made your way to Psalm 117 by now. You've probably had time to memorize it by now. But before we get to the text itself, and as we look at the bigger picture, I'd like to point out that Psalm 117 is actually part of a larger group of Psalms known as the "Egyptian Hallel." We've studied all of the Psalms over our past 24 years together (in our Wednesday evening studies), and those of you who have been here for at least part of that might realize that the book of Psalms is actually a collection of songs, written by a number of authors, over a period of at least 900 years. Roughly half are written by King David, but others are written by various authors, including Moses, and Solomon, and the Sons of Korah, and many (including this one) are anonymous. But the "Egyptian Hallel" is a group of psalms that are placed together specifically to be sung at the Passover, to help remember that time when God's people celebrated their first Passover as they left the land of Egypt. The reference to Egypt comes in Psalm 114:1, and the "Egyptian Hallel" psalms include Psalms 113-118. Psalm 117, then, is in this section and would often be sung after the Passover meal. They would eat, and then they would sing, and this is one of those songs. Let's keep this in mind as we study.

And as we look at these two verses, I think it'll be pretty obvious that this is a psalm of praise. Even with only 17 Hebrew words, it starts and it ends with a call to praise. And before I put the text up here, I'd like to just briefly explain an image we'll be using as a background. I took this back in September, on one of the most challenging hikes I've ever done, hiking out to Iceberg Lake in Glacier National Park. My goal was to swim in the lake, if at all possible. I camped at the Apgar Campground and drove across the park on the Going-to-the-Sun Road and got to the trailhead just before sunrise. I wanted to do this hike a year earlier, but it was closed due to grizzly activity. It was open on the day I was there this past September, though, so this was the time to do it. The hike was just under 10 miles round trip, and I was the first one there that morning. I got there, and it was COLD! I don't know if you can see it, but there's ice on the other side of the lake. I stood there for some time contemplating what was about to happen. I knew I didn't want an audience, so I finally took the plunge (very briefly) before hiking back out. But on the way back out, I was pretty much overwhelmed by what I was seeing, and I stopped right there on the trail I said, "God, I am completely overwhelmed by what you've done here!" It was a moment of praise, and so this came to mind as I studied Psalm 117 this week. So, let's look together at Psalm 117 (the entire chapter):

***Praise the LORD, all nations;  
Laud Him, all peoples!***

***For His lovingkindness is great toward us,  
And the truth of the LORD is everlasting.  
Praise the LORD!***

As we think about what we've just read, I want us to notice the COMMAND (what we are being told to do here). Then I want us to notice TO WHOM THIS COMMAND IS GIVEN (because it's rather unique in the Psalms). And then I want us to notice the REASON for this command (and the command is not random but is given with an explanation).

I. But first of all, this morning, let's notice the COMMAND, and it comes twice in these two verses: PRAISE THE LORD!

The word for *"praise"* (in verse 1) goes back to a word we might recognize as "hallel," as in "hallelujah." I am so thankful for the songs Josh had us sing before the lesson this morning. Both of those use the word "hallelujah," multiple times! "Hallelujah" is simply the word "praise" ("to shine," "to glorify," "to boast"), combined with "Jah," which is a shortened version of "Yahweh," or "God." So, "hallelujah" simply means, "to praise the Lord," and that's what we have here at the beginning (and also at the end) of Psalm 117, *"Praise the Lord."*

On one hand, to be able to praise the Lord is a tremendous privilege. But on the other hand, this is also a command, an expectation. On one hand, as I experienced on that trail, praise is the natural expression of being in awe of God, "God, you are so awesome! Praise the Lord!" But what I really want us to notice here is that praise is expected; praise is commanded! As I understand it, in this context, the author isn't just praising the Lord himself, but he is commanding it. He is calling for it.

And we see a similar thought in the second line up here, *"Laud Him!"* To *"laud"* is to praise verbally, to say it out loud, to make that praise known publicly. This word is used just a few times in Psalms, including Psalm 63:3, where King David says, *"Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will PRAISE You."* Spoken words are involved here. One commentary suggests that it's the idea of bragging on somebody. When I'm out and around, I will often brag on our children. I am so proud of what they're both doing, and that praise finds its way out in things that I actually SAY to people. Or, we may say positive things out loud about a spouse or about a team. The team does well, and we tend to talk about it (not me personally, of course, but some of you might)! But that's what it means to *"laud"* or *"extol"* (as some translations put it). We brag on someone using words. And these words may be spoken, but words of praise may also be sung – out loud, either alone or together as a congregation. We come together to praise the Lord. So, this is the command, "Praise the Lord!"

II. Well, as we continue, let's also notice TO WHOM THIS COMMAND IS GIVEN – THE COMMAND TO PRAISE IS GIVEN TO ALL NATIONS, TO ALL PEOPLES.

To the Jewish people, *"nations"* normally referred to "the others" or "gentiles," non-Jews. In fact, the Hebrew word here is "goy" or "goyim" [goy-uhm]. And in the second part of verse 1, the author refers to *"peoples."* This is a term that refers to people groups or ethnic groups. The word is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to small tribal units, to people grouped together by a common language or culture or family history. The command to praise, therefore, is addressed not just to the Jews here, but to all people of every language in every place. We might think of John's vision in Revelation 7:9, where he saw *"...a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"* This is what the author of Psalm 117 is commanding. Oh, and by the way, notice how the nations in Revelation are worshipping the *"Lamb."* Remember: Psalm 117 is one of those "Passover Psalms." In a sense, then, this passage is prophetic, looking forward to a time when all nations and peoples would praise the Lord, when all nations would be invited to partake in God's Passover (a reference to Jesus). God, then, is not some tribal deity, ruling only over the Jewish people, but God is deserving of praise from all people everywhere. And even back then, God had a special relationship with the Jewish people, but he was always concerned about the nations. In fact, that's why God blesses Abraham, so that *"all the families of the earth"* could be blessed by his *"seed,"* or by a descendant of Abraham. This descendant, of course, was Jesus. In a sense, then, Psalm 117 is an "echo" of that promise first made to Abraham.

And this brings us to the passage Silas read for us earlier. In Romans 15, as all nations were being welcomed into God's kingdom, there was some tension between those from a Jewish background and those from the nations. And in that context, in this tension over what kind of food everybody could eat when they all got together for a church potluck dinner, in the middle of these disputes over food, and wine and meat sacrificed to idols, Paul has to remind each group that God wants them to get along. ***"Therefore, accept one another,"*** he says, and his point is that God always intended for the Gentiles to be a part of his kingdom. And to prove this, he quotes from the Law, from the books of history, from this Psalm, and also from the prophets – from all four major divisions of the Hebrew Bible. And this is where Psalm 117 is quoted in the New Testament, where it's used to prove that God has always wanted Gentiles to praise him. And it's quoted by Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee of Pharisees, who becomes a missionary to the Gentiles. **\*\*PPT\*\*** Nevertheless, this command for all the nations to praise him has been God's intention from the beginning. Psalm 117, then, is almost a prophecy – looking forward to the New Covenant. We might even say that Psalm 117 is the Old Testament version of the Great Commission, ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations"*** (Matthew 28:19).

And here's something else to note: Since it's not ascribed to King David, some have suggested that this Psalm might have even been written at some point after the fall of Jerusalem. And if that's the case, the author of Psalm 117 might have had some experience over in the Babylonian Captivity, rubbing elbows with ***"all nations,"*** with ***"all peoples."*** And some of God's people had a huge impact on those ***"nations"*** and ***"peoples."*** We think of Daniel (and his three friends) as well as Mordecai and Esther, and the others. And even before that, we think of Naaman, and Rahab, and Ruth. God has always been interested in the ***"nations"*** and ***"peoples"*** of this world. So, all ***"nations"*** and ***"peoples"*** are commanded to ***"Praise the Lord!"***

### III. As we come to the last two lines of this short Psalm, we come to the REASON for the command.

And I love that (although he could have), God doesn't just say, "Because I said so!" But instead, the author steps back and gives two reasons. We praise God, 1.) ***"For His lovingkindness is great toward us,"*** and 2.) for ***"the truth of the LORD is everlasting."*** There are so many characteristics of God he could have given here, but these two are right up there at the top. So, we start with God's ***"lovingkindness"*** being ***"great toward us."*** ***"Lovingkindness"*** is how the NASB translates this, and it's a word that's used roughly 250 times in the Hebrew Bible, in nearly every book. Other translations may refer to God's "goodness" or "kindness" or "mercy" or "steadfast love." It's a word that describes God's covenant love for his people. His love, therefore, is "loyal." His love is based on a commitment. And it's based on mercy, even when we don't deserve mercy. In fact, that's what mercy is – love, even when we don't deserve it, or especially when we don't deserve it. It's the Old Testament way of saying ***"God is love."***

Probably the best explanation of this is found in Exodus 34. We're heading in this direction in our Wednesday evening class, but as Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Law, the people rebel down below (under Aaron's leadership, or lack of it), and they build a Golden Calf. This is an act of treason against the Lord. Moses comes down, he sees what is happening, and he smashes the tablets (the Ten Commandments) to the ground. Three thousand people die on that occasion, but ultimately, God relents, and as he gives the people a do-over and as he issues a fresh copy of the Ten Commandments, the Lord says to Moses (in Exodus 34:6-7), ***"The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished..."*** And he continues, but the point is: God forgives! The people deserve to die for what they've done, but God had made a promise to love them. And this is what the author of Psalm 117 wants

the Gentiles to know: Yes, you might have also rebelled against God yourselves, but the God we serve and the God we praise is a God of ***“lovingkindness.”*** And this God can be your God, too.

But I also want us to notice that God’s lovingkindness is ***“great toward us.”*** When I come to the word ***“great,”*** I think of something being large, or amazing – and that’s it, in a sense, but the language experts tell us that this word communicates the idea of God’s lovingkindness being strong or mighty. His love conquers us, in a sense. And remember: As an “Egyptian Hallel,” they would have had Egypt on the mind, so perhaps the thought is: God’s love conquers us, just as God conquered the Egyptians. The love of God dominates. His love overpowers us. The same word is used in Genesis 7 to describe the waters of the flood ***“prevailing”*** over the earth. The word is used elsewhere to describe a warrior ***“prevailing”*** over an enemy. But, this is what God does: He overpowers us with his love. We might think of that time (in 2 Samuel 9:3) when King David went looking for someone to whom he might show the ***“lovingkindness of God.”*** And they find Mephibosheth, lame in both feet, a descendant of King Saul, and King David indeed demonstrates God’s ***“lovingkindness”*** to this man. Any normal king would have brought Saul’s bloodline to an end, but King David basically brings this man into his own family and restores his royal inheritance. This is what God does for us. His ***“lovingkindness”*** is undeserved and truly is ***“great toward us.”*** His love towers over us. The love of Christ ***“controls us”*** (as Paul will go on to say in 2 Corinthians 5:14).

Well, the second reason for praising God is because ***“the truth of the Lord is everlasting.”*** The word translated here as ***“truth”*** is used over a hundred times in the Hebrew Bible, it’s the basis of the word “AMEN,” and it’s a word that’s sometimes translated elsewhere as “firmness” or “faithfulness.” It’s the idea of firm and unshakable; steady or trustworthy. We praise God because he is, and was, and always will be. His truth is ***“everlasting.”*** His truth has no expiration date.

By the way, when Jesus arrives on the scene, the apostle John looks back on the life of the Lord Jesus, and John says (in John 1:14), ***“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*** Isn’t that Psalm 117? Like his Father in heaven, Jesus is also described as being ***“full of grace and truth.”*** Grace without truth isn’t trustworthy; truth without grace sounds just as terrible in the other direction, but as John would testify about Jesus (in John 1:17), ***“grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”*** And so we worship the Lord for who he is. If there is hope for Israel, then there is also hope for us as Gentiles, ***“For His lovingkindness is great toward us, and the truth of the Lord is everlasting.”*** We also have some very good reasons to praise the Lord.

### Conclusion:

And the Psalm ends just as it began, with a ***“Praise the Lord.”*** Like just about all sings we sing these days, we have some repetition. The unending chorus. A crescendo of praise. It is short, so I want to encourage you to memorize this Psalm and pass it along to a friend this week, because if God’s lovingkindness stops with us, then we probably haven’t really understood his lovingkindness. This needs to be shared.

As we come to the end, do you remember how we said at the beginning that this is one of those Psalms that God’s people would sing right after the Passover meal? In Matthew and Mark, Jesus eats the Passover with his disciples, he institutes the Lord’s Supper, ***“This is my body, this is my blood,”*** and so on. And then, Matthew and Mark both include one more little detail. After establishing the memorial to his own death before it happens, both Matthew and Mark say that, ***“After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”*** After telling his disciples that he was about offer himself up as the Passover Lamb, pouring out his blood for the sins of the whole world, there’s a good chance these men sang together,

*Praise the LORD, all nations;  
Laud Him, all peoples!*

*For His lovingkindness is great toward us,  
And the truth of the LORD is everlasting.  
Praise the LORD!*

Jesus, then, most likely made his way to the cross with this song on his heart.

In just a moment, Josh will lead us in a song, but before we sing, let's go to God in prayer.

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you this morning for being a God of lovingkindness and truth. You've saved us with the gift of your only Son.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus, our Passover. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)