

The Hallelujah Chorus

Psalm 117 March 2, 2025

In the AD 1295, Marco Polo returned to Venice with his father Nicolo and his uncle Maffeo. Gone for 24 years, their family had long given them up for dead. In fact, the 3 Polos weren't recognized at first when they arrived at the Polo estate. But, once they were cleaned up and identified by relatives, the weary travelers called for a feast that very night.

At the meal, Marco shared about the places they had been - Sumatra, Java, Tibet, India, Ceylon, Burma, and Mongolia. Moreover, Marco told of a king - one richer and more powerful than all the kings of the world. His name was Kublai Khan and he ruled over the largest contiguous empire in history.¹ Marco Polo had not only been welcomed in to the dazzling courts of this great king, the king made him his friend, had sent him out on missions, and given him great rewards.

It sounded like a fable. After all, the Polos had arrived in coarse clothing - old and torn. But then Marco, Nicolo, and Maffeo ripped open the seams of their tattered traveling garments and out spilled piles and piles of gemstones. Diamonds, pearls, emeralds, and rubies. The people of Venice had never seen treasures so great in size and number.² The story was true. The King was real.

Psalm 117 might come up on a trivia night for two reasons: First, it is the shortest chapter in the Bible. Second, it is actually the *middle* chapter of the Bible. The song may be little, but it isn't trivial. Derek Kidner writes, "the shortest Psalm proves to be one of the most potent." It reaches to every corner of the globe - a universal call to praise. But it also extols the greatness of heaven's King.

As we've looked at almost 70 of the Psalms in the last few years, we've learned that there are collections of songs within the book. Psalm 117 is part of a group called the Egyptian Hallel Psalms - Psalm 113 through 118. As Israel's history developed, these songs became associated with the annual religious festivals, especially Passover. Eventually, Psalms 113 and 114 would be sung *before* the eating of Passover and 115 through 118 sung *after* the meal.³

And it is for this reason that Psalm 117 reminds me of the Marco Polo's dramatic banquet. Because this Psalm invites all of us in to hear the story of the greatest King, Who shares His Kingdom, lavishes His treasures, changes history, and makes us His friends. A King Who redefines everything we thought we knew about the world and who has called *all* of us - no matter who we are, where we're from, what we have, or what we've done - into relationship with Him.

Psalm 117:1 - ¹Praise the Lord, all nations! Glorify him, all peoples!

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mongol-empire>

² Manuel Komroff *Marco Polo*

³ Frank Gaebelin, Willem VanGemern, Allen Ross, J. Stafford Wright, and Dennis Kinlaw *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. Vol. 5.*

In Hebrew, the opening and closing of the song are the same: *Hallelujah!* This is a Hallelujah chorus. Thanks to the Bible, *hallelujah* is a familiar word to us, but what does it mean? It's not just giving God an attaboy, not just that passing feeling of "oh wow" we sometimes have when we see an impressive card trick or hear something interesting. A hallelujah is a special kind of reaction.

The word "connotes being sincerely and deeply thankful and satisfied" in the Lord.⁴ It is an essential part of human life. One Bible dictionary puts it this way: "The frequency and mood [with which this word is used] emphasizes the vital necessity of this action."⁵

The *object* of our hallelujah praise is presented very clearly: We are to praise *Yahweh* - the One true God revealed on the pages of Scripture.

There are so many religions in the world, so many philosophies and perspectives. But there's only *One* God. There is no other.⁶ And here all the nations of the world are commanded to worship the God of the Bible. Deism isn't enough. Spiritualism isn't enough. Meditation isn't enough. The One true God demands that you respond to His revelation - that you acknowledge Him, turn to Him, surrender to Him.

In the last few years, a lot of big time comedians have adopted no-cell-phone policies at their shows. Dave Chappelle, Kevin Hart, Chris Rock, John Mulaney, and others. If you want to go to their show, you have to lock up your phone. If you take your phone out, *you're* taken out of the venue.

I saw an interview with Dave Chappelle where they were talking about this policy and the interviewer was totally on board and they were saying that, really, if the audience didn't go along, they were only cheating themselves.

These people have said, "If you want to be a part of what I'm doing, this is the requirement." And, whether we agree with their policy or not, they sell out arena after arena.

God has requirements for us - commands and precepts and principles. He requires that we go *His* way and not our own. This response to God is somewhat encapsulated in the word, hallelujah. Acknowledge God, believe Him, be filled with thanks and satisfaction as God works in your life.

But here is where this little song becomes absolutely radical: "Praise the Lord *all nations*."

Remember: This is a song sung by Israelites in the Temple or at their Passover celebrations. The *nations* refer to the Gentiles outside of Israel's borders and outside the Mosaic covenant. Not only are they *outside*, in the Old Testament they were almost always at *odds* with the Jews. In fact, the *next* time we see "the nations" referenced in the Psalms is right next door in Psalm 118 where the nations *are* gathered in violent opposition against God's people.

⁴ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

⁵ TWOT

⁶ Isaiah 46:9

There are other Psalms where we see “the whole earth” praising God, but this is the *only* one where we specifically see the Gentile nations joining in.⁷

This line would remind Israel that, *one day*, God *would* reconcile the whole world under His authority and His truth. But not only that, singing these words *should* have reminded them of their calling to be light in the dark. To be a beacon of God’s love and salvation *even for Gentiles*.

This had always been the plan. Back when God chose Abraham to start the family of faith, which would grow to be the nation of Israel, the Lord said, “Abraham, through *you* all the peoples of the earth are going to be blessed.”⁸ In the Law we read of this evangelical intention. In Deuteronomy the Lord tells Israel, “Follow My statutes and ordinances because, when you do, the nations of the world will see it and think, ‘Oh, we want to have a relationship with a real God they way you do.’”⁹

Of course, this reminds us that *we* are meant to be lights in this world. If you’re a Christian, *you* are meant to preach the Gospel through the way you live your life. The words you speak, the choices you make, your attitudes and actions, so that a watching world will see the love of God and the grace of God and be drawn to Him. Your life is designed to be a beacon of the grace of Jesus.

Sometimes we forget that *that* is our function - not our only function but a *major* function that we’re *all* commissioned into: Go and make disciples. In God’s eyes, every Christian is a missionary.

Now, we might look at this first line and say, “Fat chance the nations of the world would really turn to God.” And it is a rare thing, but it *has* happened. Look at the city of Nineveh in the book of Jonah: *Everyone* from the greatest to the least repented and turned to the Lord. Look at historical revivals like what happened in Wales in the early 1900s. Stories are told of police precincts having nothing to do, so they closed down and formed choirs to sing at the revival meetings.¹⁰

But, we recognize that those sort of wide-scale turnings to Christ are few and far between. Ultimately, this looks forward to the day when the Lord Jesus comes and establishes His physical, global Kingdom on the earth and all nations *will* bow before Him in obedience and worship.

But in the second line of verse 1 we see it’s not just about *nations*, but the people within them. Any person in any nation can glorify God. That’s possible because you and I were *designed* to glorify God. That is the purpose of your life. Isaiah 43 says we were created for God’s glory.¹¹

How do we bring glory to God? Good news! Your heart can bring glory to God. Your lips can bring glory to God. Your hands, your feet, your home, your wallet, your day-to-day life - *all of it* can bring

⁷ John Goldingay *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150*

⁸ Genesis 12:1-3

⁹ Deuteronomy 4:5-7

¹⁰ <https://jeanlutrachsel.org/the-welsh-revival/>

¹¹ Isaiah 43:6-7

glory to God. 1 Corinthians says your body can bring God glory.¹² Peter says our suffering as Christians and our regular conduct can bring God glory.¹³ In 2 Corinthians we see our ministry and preaching and generosity can bring God glory.¹⁴ In John we learn that even our *deaths* can bring God glory.¹⁵ In Colossians it's set out plainly: Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord.¹⁶

We can glorify the Lord through great actions and small, in the home or out of it, from the solitude of a prayerful heart or in public proclamation of the Gospel. But all of us have been created for this purpose: To glorify God and to be crowned with glory and honor by Him¹⁷ as He transforms us more and more into His image, set apart for His purposes.

Psalm 117:2a - ²For his faithful love to us is great; the Lord's faithfulness endures forever.

What does Yahweh do with all His unstoppable power? With His undefeated record? With His authority and strength and freedom to do anything He wants? He uses His power to love *you*.

This is *hesed* love which is based on compassion, loyalty, and mercy - an *active* love that rescues a weaker person in need. God doesn't *have* to save us. He *wants* to save us because He loves us.

Verse 1 already showed us that *this* love is extended to everyone. All the people of all the nations of the world. And the rest of the Bible shows us that anyone is welcome. Israel was the chosen nation to *show* the world that God loved them all. That His active love was also extended to Ruth the Moabitess, Rahab from Jericho, Naaman the Aramean, Uriah the Hittite, Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian, Cornelius the Roman, the Samaritan woman at the well. You and me.

God's love toward us is *great*. The word means it is a love that has prevailed in power.¹⁸ Prevailed over what? Well, in Psalm 65 we read that our iniquities "overwhelm" us, and the same word is used there as is used describing God's love for us here. Meaning that God's love has prevailed over the sin that hold us captive in guilt and shame and failure.

Not only does God's love prevail, it also protects.¹⁹ The love of God through Christ Jesus is our atonement and shield and refuge. And so, He prevails over our sin and protects us from death.

This song shows God fighting foes we could never hope to stand against and overwhelming us with His kindness.²⁰ And what good news that His tender mercy, His faithfulness will *always* endure.

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:20

¹³ 1 Peter 4:16, 2:12

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:13

¹⁵ John 21:19

¹⁶ Colossians 3:23

¹⁷ Psalm 8:5

¹⁸ STEP Bible

¹⁹ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*

²⁰ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

I read a story this week of an Italian couple who got divorced after being married for 77 years!²¹ The husband was 99 years old. The wife was 97.

We never have to worry about God's love for us growing cold. His faithful love endures forever. The *greatness* of His love never lessens, it never weakens. Which also means that every single thing He has promised to us out of His love will absolutely come to pass.

The song ends where it began:

Psalm 117:2b - Hallelujah!

The song leader practices what he preaches. He's commanded all of us everywhere to look on the revelation of God's love and power and then to respond with praise and then *he* praises!

Real praise happens when a person is in right relationship with the God of the Bible. Real praise flows from knowledge and revelation. His work is brought to our attention and we respond with adulation. Or we learn something more of Who God is - His heart, His kindness, His goodness, His character and we run into His loving embrace, thanking Him and lifting His name high.

The more we understand what God has revealed about Himself, the more we will see how great His faithful *love* is. And that's what God wants. Yes, His is strong and yes, He is holy - yes, we need to know those things and understand what they mean. But when God called Moses up to Mount Sinai and said, "Ok, I'm going to show you Who I am," He appeared to Moses and said, "I am gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth."²² And after that revelation, Moses worshipped. Yes, God warns us of the wrath that must pour out on sin, but He warns us about it *so we can avoid it* - so He can save us by His love and grace.

God *loves* you and invites you into a lifetime relationship where He saves you and transforms you and rescues you from sin and the grave and then you begin to glorify Him as you live out worship and evangelism to a lost and dying world so that *others* can be saved just like you. The offer is open to anyone. Everyone. The nations of the world.

Sadly, we look around and agree with Psalm 2: The nations rage and the people plot in vain against the Lord Jesus.

One day there will be no more opposition. All the nations of the earth will bow in worship and harmony before the King of kings. But before that wonderful day, there will be a time of great judgment where those who *refuse* God's love will be destroyed by His wrath.

You can be saved from that judgment by believing on the Lord Jesus - by accepting the gift of salvation by grace, through faith.

²¹ <https://williamstrachanfamilylaw.com/2024/03/guinness-book-world-records-marriage-divorce>

²² Exodus 34:1-7

During the feast at the Polo estate, Marco and his father and uncle changed robes after each course. They had taken off their tattered rags and now were sporting beautiful, luxurious garments. But each time they changed into a new robe, they carefully folded the previous robe and then presented it as a gift to one of their guests. "This," explained Marco, "is in strict accordance with Mongol custom."²³ The robes they were handing out had been presented to *Marco* by the Khan himself.

What a greater King is Jesus, Who not only gives of His riches to His servants, but He laid down His own life to save you from your guilt. He doesn't give you a robe of satin or velvet, but a robe of righteousness which is full of life and strength and hope and peace and promise and eternal reward.

Praise *this* King and His unfailing love! And now we who have been welcomed into His family can go out with the Good News that there is room for *other* weary travelers to come in and be refreshed by His grace, saved from death, protected by His power.

²³ Komroff