

# **Psalm 117: Commentary and Study Guide**

## **Psalm 117**

**Praise the Lord, all you nations!  
Extol him, all you peoples!**

**For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.**

**Praise the Lord!**

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### **Part 1: Commentary - Exposition of the Psalm**

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# PART 1: COMMENTARY - Exposition of the Psalm

## A. THE SECTIONS OF THIS PSALM

This psalm divides easily into two main sections, and a very appropriate closing (a repetition of the theme of Section 1).

### *SECTION 1: The Command.*

**What is to be done:** praise/extol the LORD

**Who is to do it:** all you nations/peoples

### **SECTION 2: The Reason.**

**Because of...** his great love toward us

**Because of...** his "forever faithfulness"

### *CLOSING: The Command Repeated*

**What is to be done:** praise the LORD

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## B. A LOOK AT THE WORDS

### *SECTION 1:*

The one who is to be praised is the LORD. In the English Bible, the word "LORD," when capitalized, indicates the name of God (which in the original Hebrew language was represented by the consonants YHWH). It is translated "Jehovah" or "Yahweh" in some translations. This is the name that God used for himself, when he entered into a covenant relationship with the nation of Israel.

The word "praise" occurs very frequently in the Old Testament. We are commanded to speak highly of the LORD, to glorify him with our speech, to boast about him. The parallel word, "extol" (sometimes translated as "laud") occurs less frequently, usually in reference to addressing someone or something, often loudly.

"Nations" has primary reference to non-Israelites. It is sometimes translated "Gentiles," or (when there is a negative connotation) "heathens" or "pagans." The parallel concept ("peoples") refers to a "community of individuals."

## **SECTION 2:**

The word "love" includes the connotations of favor and kindness, and can carry the idea of being undeserved (that is, the result of the giver's <God's> mercy and pity). It can be translated as "great love" (implying its vastness) or "unfailing love" (implying its permanence). In this passage, the word "great" is translated from a different word that includes the idea of "prevailing" or "triumphing," and has connotations of strength.

The "faithfulness" of the Lord refers to his "trustworthiness." It is related to the idea of being "truthful" (and is often translated as "truth" in the KJV). The word "endures" is supplied in the English translation to convey the connection of the two words "faithfulness" and "forever." (The word "is" could be used.) The Hebrew simply implies the connection ("the faithfulness of the LORD... forever"). The word "forever" might be literally translated: "to the vanishing point of time." But it quite simply means "always." It does not imply that time is going to "vanish," and that the "forever" will come to an end!

## **CLOSING:**

The closing statement ("Praise the LORD") is identical to the phrase in verse 1, but with a shortened form of God's name ("Yah," instead of "Yahweh"). It is from this phrase that we get the word "Hallelujah" ("Hallelu" = "praise" and "Yah" = "LORD"). [The New Testament also uses this phrase ("Alleluia," in some Bible translations) in Rev. 19.]

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## **C. OTHER VERSES WHICH USE THESE WORDS**

You are encouraged to examine this theme as it occurs elsewhere in the Bible. A concordance or a reference Bible would be helpful. If you have neither of these, just start reading through the Psalms. You won't read too far before you find other Psalms of praise!

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## PART 2: STUDY GUIDE: Questions and Things to Think About

### A. SPECIFICALLY ABOUT PSALM 117

#### **VERSE 1 (& END OF VERSE 2):**

- The words "praise" and "extol" are commands. According to this verse, to whom does it apply (or who has the obligation to do these things)? What are some of the implications of this? Are nations "religiously neutral"?
- Does this command have application to nations of the past, to presently existing ones, or to future ones? (Can you find verses which support any of these ideas . . . or all of them?)
- Find some of the other commands regarding the actions and attitudes of nations toward God. Why were these commands given (within the context of the verses in which they occur)? In what ways do/should these verses have application today? In what ways do/will they have application in the future?
- What does the Bible say about *us* (as individuals) praising the Lord? What effect should the presence of this command (for *nations* to praise the Lord) have on us (as *individuals*)? When and how are we to do so? Where? (The issue of "why" - that is, reasons for doing so, will be brought up later.)
- Is anyone "exempt" from this obligation? Explain.

#### **VERSE 2:**

- Find some other verses which mention God's love and faithfulness. What else (in addition to the few things mentioned in Psalm 117) do you learn about these attributes of God?
- What are some other reasons for praising the Lord?

- Find out something about some of God's other attributes. What significance do they have for you?
  - (Optional) As with the other Psalms, this psalm was originally sung. You might find it interesting to try to come-up with a tune for this Psalm. Singing it would help you remember what it says. [The purpose would be to help you remember what the Psalm says. Use any translation you want, or even paraphrase it in your own words. And don't worry... it does not have to be "professional"!]
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## B. A FURTHER LOOK AT GOD'S LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS

[NOTE: Some of these questions may be difficult and thought-provoking. They are the type of question that is best thought about for a while, rather than giving a hasty answer. Think about (meditate on) the Scriptures and how they relate to such questions. Read other passages. As necessary, be ready to modify your view, as you come across other, perhaps complementary, perspectives in other Scripture passages. Don't worry if you don't have the "final answer" today... or even this week or next month. Understanding God's Word is a *growing* process (compare to 2 Peter 3:18), not a matter of "instant comprehension."]

- How does God's love/faithfulness display itself? What is the extent of it?
- Think of other examples of God's love and faithfulness...
  - in creation, in your life, in the lives of others
  - in big things, in little things
  - before you became a Christian
  - in good circumstances, in adverse circumstances [You may have to "look backwards" to the adverse circumstances to see his love/faithfulness. In our weakness and "little faith" (Matthew 6:30, etc.), it is often more difficult for us to see good things while we are in the middle of bad circumstances, than after they are over. Yet Rom. 8:28 remains true!]
- What does the Bible say about the unchangeable nature of God? (Support your statements.) What does this imply when we do not see his love/faithfulness - when, figuratively, "clouds" cover it?
- How might his love/faithfulness be displayed in adversity? sin? impending disaster? death? Does *any* circumstance exist in which his love and faithfulness does *not* exist? Explain.
- Does God's love and faithfulness extend to non-Christians (i.e., those who will *never* become Christians)? How? Are there limits?
- Do the opposites of love and faithfulness ever exist in God? If so, when, or under what circumstances? [Are these "opposites" incompatible, or can they coexist with love and

faithfulness?] Does God show these "opposites" (if they exist) to unbelievers? disobedient believers? any other group of individuals? [See: "CONCERNING THE OPPOSITES OF LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS" - immediately following the next question.]

- How is God's love/faithfulness a pattern for OUR responses - our actions/reactions to the circumstances of life? What does the Bible say about people/Christians and their expression of love and faithfulness (or lack of such an expression)?
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## C. CONCERNING THE OPPOSITES OF LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS

*First, a few observations:*

It seems to me that there is a difference in emphasis between the word "great" (which is applied to God's love) and the word "everlasting" (which is applied to his faithfulness). "Everlasting" implies "*never* ceasing or ending" but "great" does not seem to have the same connotations.

Using a concordance, I can find at least some verses, in which words that seem to be the opposite of "love" are used of God. (An example is Psalm 5:5, in which the words "hate" and "abhor" are applied to God.) But I have *not* been able to find any passage in which the opposite of "faithful" is applied to God. (Can you find any?)

I can also find passages (especially in the Psalms) in which the opposite of "love" is used of people who love and serve God. (Look at Psalm 139:19-24.) But I cannot find the opposite of "faithful" used in connection with them (except in the sense of condemning it as sin).

*This leaves me with these conclusions:*

God's love is great... but does the opposite characteristic ever exist in God? Yes, under certain conditions. It can also rightfully exist in those who belong to him, under certain conditions.

God's faithfulness is unending... but can the opposite characteristic ever exist in God? NEVER! And do we ever have a right to be unfaithful? It is not an option.

*What is the significance of this?*

First, if it is our tendency to view "love" and "hate" as being so mutually incompatible, that we cannot fathom how both words could apply to the same individual, what are the implications? Could it be that *our* definitions of these words (or the ways we use them) do not match up with the way the Bible uses them? Give it some thought! The question

is: *If* these words *do* have a valid application to God and to his followers, then under what circumstances? When, how, why, (etc.)? How should we view such seemingly opposite concepts?

If these concepts *complement* each other in the Scriptures (even though people often view them as "contradictory"), might other seemingly "contradictory" concepts also co-exist as complements to each other? [Suggested examples: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Or, Jesus as man and Jesus as God.] The world around us may have taught us that such concepts "contradict," but in reality they "complement" each other. The Bible has the final say on the issue!

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## D. A LOOK AT OURSELVES, IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE/FAITHFULNESS

- In what areas/circumstances of life do you find it *easy* to praise the Lord? ...to acknowledge his love/faithfulness? Why? In what areas do you *fail* or *have difficulty* in doing these things? Why?
- When you compare/contrast your answers to the above two questions, what do you learn about yourself? Most likely, you will find a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. To whom goes the "credit" for each - the strengths and the weaknesses? [Can you take credit for your strengths? Can you blame God (or the devil) for your weaknesses? Explain.]
- With regard to your weaknesses/sins, what can/will you do to change? How can/will you reinforce godly attitudes?
- How do your strengths and weaknesses affect GOD'S love and faithfulness toward you? In what ways do your strengths and weaknesses show the greatness of his love/faithfulness? (Of course, if your weaknesses show the greatness of God's love/faithfulness, that does *not* cause them to become "good" or "justified" - we cannot defend sin under *any* circumstances.)
- In what ways is God's reaction toward you a pattern for your reaction toward others? How should *you* respond toward others...toward friends? enemies? non-Christians? those who fail you?

Dennis Hinks © 1993

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