

PSALM 117

¹ Praise the LORD, all you nations!

Extol God, all you peoples!

² For great is God's steadfast love towards us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures for ever.

Praise the LORD!

(NRSV: New Revised Standard Version)

1. All you nations,

Come praise the Lord!

Let everyone praise God.

2. God's love is wonderful.

God's faithfulness never ends.

Shout praises to the Lord!

(CEV: Common English Version)

1. Praise the Lord, all you nations.

Praise God, all you people of the earth.

2. For God's unfailing love for us is powerful.

The Lord's faithfulness endures forever.

Praise the Lord!

(NLT: New Living Translation)

1. O praise the Lord,

All ye nations: praise God, all ye people.

2. For God's merciful kindness is great toward us:

And the truth of the Lord endureth for ever.

Praise the Lord.

(KJV: King James Version)

Psalm 117 is the shortest psalm in the Psalter. It's as if the psalmist gave up after two verses. Or is it that the two verses the psalmist composed seemed so perfect and complete, they just felt like reciting/singing them over and over again? Whatever the case may be, I have included four English translations of the psalm, translations that provide subtle variations which help bring out the meaning a little more richly perhaps. See what you think.

Verse 1 tells us to do something and that something is "Praise the Lord." And in case the word "praise" needs more of a boost, the NRSV also tells us to "extol" God. To extol is to praise enthusiastically.

And who is being called to praise God enthusiastically? All nations and all peoples. In the ancient world, gods were often in competition. My god was against your god, and if we defeated you, our god was the stronger one. Alternatively, the gods of the empires became conquering gods, and so, the idea that the God of the psalmist should be everyone's God can be interpreted as the kind of God who not only conquers other gods, but other peoples too. And yet, for a people who had known enslavement and suffered conquest by empires for much of its history, the universality of God the creator is a vision to unite peoples in all their diversity rather than conquer them. If everyone praises one God they will be more reluctant to "other" their neighbour as competitor or enemy. If we all have one God we are also family. All life is a creation in the image and out of the creative imagination of God. Isn't this a powerful vision for the universality of one God? No one people own God. God is yours just as much as God is mine. Your experience of God may enlighten my own experience and understanding if I am open to your experience as equally worthy to my own.

OK, so why should all peoples praise God? Verse two tells us. God offers us: 1) a love that is "steadfast", "great", "wonderful" "unfailing", "powerful, and "mercifully kind"; and 2) a "faithfulness" that is "enduring", "never ending", "unfailing", and "true". Is there a difference between 1) and 2)? How do they describe different dimensions of the experience of God?

The faithfulness series of words speak to an experience of God always being there. This is especially precious in the difficult periods of life. Do you feel God is there for you, faithfully by your side come hell or highwater? And how about the steadfast set of words? They point to an experience of love that is shown us regardless of our failings. Have you experienced God's "merciful kindness" and "steadfast love" that finds ever new ways to meet you where you are even when there are times you may not be all that loveable in your misery, resentment or self-pity? "Steadfast" means God will not give up on you no matter how many times you may fail and how deeply you may fall. If God is so steadfast with us and if we can believe this deep in our heart, it also challenges us to be steadfast in our pursuit of justice and care for others regardless of how challenging this can sometimes be.

To praise God for God's steadfast, merciful, kindness love and God's forever, enduring faithfulness is a beautiful thing if we can get inside the experience, feel it and believe it. By reciting these words over and over again, or even as a practice daily or several times a week, perhaps our spirits may open up a little more to encounter again the God who is always and everywhere here.

PRAYER: We praise you, O God, and we praise you enthusiastically! Fill our hearts with such fullness so that praise is not a big reach for us, so that praise is something that can arise spontaneously from within us. May we know you anew as a love that is steadfast to us and a love that is faithful to us. You will always be here for us and you will never give up on us... Give us the faith and hope to internalize such affirmations, O God... May we not only comprehend them with our minds but absorb them with our hearts... Amen.