

little psalm provides a fitting summary of the praise and worship of God's people. It proclaims with vigour the 'faithful love' and the 'reliability' of our Lord God in all His dealings with us, and it does so framed by the borders of praise and worship. Like yesterday's psalm, its characteristic 'Halleluiah' is at the end of the psalm and not at the beginning.

Public praise The first verse begins with the Hebrew words 'Hallelu – Jahweh' which means 'praise the Lord', and is the longhand version of the shorter 'Halleluiah' found at the end, but it is clear that the whole psalm is contained within this basic call to praise God. Praise happens when we accept that God the Creator is the one responsible for everything and we declare this in front of others. To a certain extent it is possible for our praises to be private, but without open, public praise of God, our religion becomes a rather meaningless private ritual derived from personal motives and not connected with the whole of our existence in the world. It is so important that our praise of God is as broad and extensive as can be, for how else can we call all nations (117:1) to join us in acknowledging the Creator of the world?

All people, from family groups to nations Whilst the first line of the psalm begins 'praise the Lord ...', the second begins with a similar phrase 'acclaim Him ...', where the word 'acclaim' also means 'commend' or even 'congratulate'. This word confirms the sense of public worship and testimony to God found both in this psalm, and also throughout the psalms as a whole (see the other psalms in this series). In addition, the call to praise goes out to the 'nations' and also to the 'people's'. Here, the two words used are firstly the word 'nations' which is used elsewhere for Gentiles (meaning non-Israelites) and secondly the word 'peoples' which can also mean 'family groups' or 'tribes'. The psalm is calling everyone, from small family groups to the greatest nations of the earth to join in the worship of their creator. So much of the Old Testament is locked up within the experience and history of the people of Israel, and although the Israelites and Judeans are indeed God's chosen people, their primary duty since God chose Abraham was to be a blessing to all other nations (Gen 12:3), and this psalm accepts that universal call of God without qualification. If the people of Israel of old could accept their universal calling from God, then surely we who celebrate the coming of Christ this Christmas time can accept that we are called to bring the message of God's presence in the world to everyone.

God's faithfulness and reliability At the heart of the psalm is the stated reason for our worship and praise of God. Essentially, we can praise Him because He does not change, and His characteristics do not change according to any earthly situation, time or need; He is utterly reliable. These sentiments are contained within two key words in verse 2; the Hebrew word 'cheseth' meaning 'faithful love', and the Hebrew word 'emet' meaning 'truthful' or 'reliable'.

Both these words are found throughout the Old Testament, especially where it speaks of God's 'covenant' relationship with men and women. The forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph had to learn that God was indeed a God who kept His promises whatever earthly circumstances prevailed, and the amazing stories of these four men and their wives and families is a powerful testimony to God's consistency in love and truthfulness. This is the reason why these stories are found in books of the Bible called the 'Law'; for they describe basic truths about God and how He deals with people. Indeed, the rest of the Old Testament is the story of how the people of Israel gradually fell away from the high standards of faith to which they had been called, and the faithfulness and truthfulness of God in the face of this rejection by His own people. Out of this dilemma, there arose a hope for a Messiah who would come to earth to demonstrate God's faithful love and truthfulness. This, of course, is Jesus Christ whose coming we celebrate at Christmas.

A Christmas psalm? At Christmas time, we frequently value the regularity of the feast; it comes around year by year, and our children all follow routines held within family traditions for presents, going to church specially, eating food and writing to Santa Claus! There is something deeply human and deeply divine about the regular and faithful maintenance of these traditions which speak to young and old alike (but in different ways), and even when we are tempted to try and change some of the elements of the feast, we are drawn back into the elementary truth of the story and all it means to us. God came down to earth in Jesus Christ; god became a human baby, so that the bridge between earth and heaven could be opened up!

Our Christmas festivities are made up of a combination of God's faithful and truthful work in the world (in sending Jesus) and the public praises and testimony to God which is performed through countless services, carol singing and other festive events. The more you read psalm 117, the more it can illuminate our faith help us understand the nature of God and the nature of our faith.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways does this psalm help illuminate your faith or help you understand the nature of God?
2. What does the term 'faithful love' mean to you, and why is it important that God does not change His love for people?
3. Why does it feel as if God is not always as reliable as we would like? What is really happening when we think God has failed us?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Psalm 117 is something of an enigma. Some students of Biblical matters have suggested that the psalm lies like a chapter at the very centre of the Bible (if psalms are counted as chapters) and therefore has some special significance as a summary of God's character and God's work. The psalm does indeed present us with such a summary, but I am hesitant to give it such weight, as if God used secret codes to embed within scripture the secrets of His wisdom! No, the truthfulness of God means that His revelation is always open and accessible, as it is in Jesus Christ, the man who is God.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Learn this psalm off by heart, and use it daily for a period of time. See what effect it has on your life as you allow its truth to affect you.*
- *Pray for all those who cannot come to terms with the idea that God is faithful and true, and therefore cannot be loved. This is a place of true desolation, where people can have little hope. Do what you can to bless and help those who are in despair.*

Final Prayer

Bring me to the end of this day, Lord Jesus, in peace and contentment. In peace because I have dealt with my sin before Your glorious throne and accepted Your forgiveness; and in contentment because I have heard Your word and responded to it. So may my worship be complete this Sunday; the day of Your Resurrection: AMEN