

The Call to Praise

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 135:1-3, Psalm 148:1-2, Psalm 117

The shortest chapter in the Bible. That's probably what most of you know about Psalm 117. An answer to a Bible trivia question. A Biblical oddity. The psalm that your smart aleck nephew yells out when you ask what Psalm you should read at the family reunion.

But don't look down on this little psalm. Brevity has its advantages. When you're forced to be brief you cut out the fluff and get right to the point; you don't get side tracked and convoluted. And so it is with Psalm 117. We know exactly what the Psalmist is saying. What does the Psalmist want us to do? The Psalmist wants us to praise. Who does the Psalmist want to do the praising? Everyone. Not just Israel. Not just the church. All the people, all the nations. Why should we all praise? Because of the Lord's hesed and emeth, his love and faithfulness. Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord!

It's right for the psalmist to call everyone to praise, because the urge to praise is universal. The impulse to praise is in all people. Whether or not they are religious, as people navigate this world people move through the experience with wonder and awe. They are moved by the wonder of human love, or the beauty of a Michigan spring, or the beauty of a piece of music, and wonder wells up within them. They can't help themselves. And when they feel that well filling up, praise is the verbal expression of that wonder and awe.

In his book *Poet's Choice*, poet and professor Edward Hirsch goes through poetic writings from all over the world. Hirsch tells us that poetry is ancient. It has been around for as long as there has been language. Poetry is also universal. Just about every written culture has these stylized language forms that they use to express themselves. And in every place that people write poetry, they use that poetry to praise. Here's a quote from Hirsch: "Praise is clearly inscribed in the Egyptian pyramid texts, the oldest lyrical fragments in existence. It is the defining motive in the Illiad (the praise poem of Achilles)." The great British poet W.H. Auden poet goes even further. He says, "every poem is rooted in imaginative awe." Wherever people have written poetry they've used that poetry to praise. Even when that poetry isn't specifically religious, it still recognizes the hesed and the emeth, the beauty and the goodness, that God has knit into the fabric of creation. Tonight this choir, these instrumentalists, and these soloists will lead us in praise. Psalm 117 called us to praise the Lord and that's exactly what we will do. But before we do that I want to briefly say three things about praise and its place in our lives.

First, not only is praise universal, it is what we are made to do. Robert Barron, the brilliant catholic bishop, talks about how the creation story in Genesis 1 is structured like a parade of God's created wonders. First comes sun and moon and stars, then comes mountains and rivers and streams, then the trees and plants and flowers, then the birds and cattle and creeping things, and finally at the end comes human beings. All of it is made by God, all of it is formed by the word of his mouth, and after he's done, what does God say about the stuff he's made? "It is good! It is good! It is very good!" God rejoices in the goodness of things!

Our role is to join God's refrain. Through our praise we echo and expand God's original "It is good!" Sometimes we might do that through a poem that mediates on some part of nature. Other times we might do that through the singing of a choral anthem.

Or we can praise God by naming things. That's right, naming things. Do you remember how in Genesis 2 Adam was given the task of naming the animals? That wasn't simply a task of assigning a sound to represent that creature; in the Bible when you name something, the name expresses that person or that thing's character. Jacob is called Jacob because he is a grabber. Abraham is called Abraham because he is the father of nations. Peter is called Peter because he is rock...at least eventually. So, when a Christian biologist goes out into the woods and studies the intricate beauty of, let's say, frogs and toads, when she discovers the fearful and wonderful way they are made, and when she writes that down and proclaims this marvelous construction, she is naming the animals. She is discovering their true character. Her naming of that animal is a kind of praise to that creature's Maker, and the praise is all the more fulsome when the name of the Lord is part of the praise.

Which leads us to the second aspect of praise. Praise is magnification. The very first chorus of tonight's piece picks up on that: "O Praise the Lord with one consent and magnify His name." Psalm 117 has the same sense of things. The psalmist calls us to extol God's name. That word 'extol' is an interesting word. In the Hebrew it can mean praise; it can also mean sooth or still or calm. That's an interesting combination. Why would a word for praise also mean to sooth or still or calm? I think it has to do with focus. To really praise something well, you have to have focused attention on the object of your praise. You have to zoom in on it. It's a little like Psalm 46:10 – "be still and know that I am God." Focused attention is the first move of praise. Sometimes praising God means being still and paying deep attention to God and his wondrous works.

If you came in through the west entrance tonight, on your right you would have passed by a planter. Did you notice it? It's there all the time. It's a circular urn about this big. That urn is always full of some sort of decorations and tonight there was a brand new arrangement! Yellow flowers in front, tall purple flowers behind and in the very back some ivy twinging. It's gorgeous! It is a perfect little spring altar of praise. Did you notice it??? Or, like me 99% of the time, were you so busy about your day that you just went by without noticing. My guess is most of you missed it. If we'd been a little more still and calm, if we'd had a little more focused attention, if we'd spent even 20 seconds looking at this tiny garden, we would have been moved by its beauty and moved to praise. Praise for the person who puts that little garden together – whose name I will not mention because she wouldn't like that – but more importantly praise to the God who made all the bright and beautiful things.

Last point: Praise helps combat anxiety and stress. The Bible calls us to praise, not because God needs to hear compliments all the time, not because God wants to be flattered, God calls us to praise because he wants us to enter into the joyful song of goodness. The call to praise is for our sake, not his! The world is beautiful and it is good. God is love. He has poured out his grace in creation. He has poured out his grace in the gift of his Son. Love and goodness all around us like a kind of song. When God calls us to praise, he calls us to hear the music, to feel the music, and finally to join the song. In *Poet's Choice*, Edward Hirsch has a nice way of describing this part of

praise. He says that “Praise restores us to the world again, to our luckiness of being.” Praise reminds us of the miracle of the verb “to be.” Praise reminds us of the basic blessedness of life.

And we do need reminding. There are real problems in our life. Things that keep us up at night. There are real problems in our world. Watch the news for a half hour and you are ready to spike the remote. Between our personal problems and society’s problems, it’s very easy to get in a cycle of fear and worry. When that happens we need, we desperately need, someone to say, “Hey! Hey! Snap out of it! Life is good. God is good. The world is full of his hesed and emeth! So come on! Let’s praise!”

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