

# Ps 117 – God is good enough to tell people about

**NT Reading: Rom 15:8-13**

## 1. You're telling me to believe in your God?!

The following story happened at North-western university in Illinois. In April 2012, a group of students from Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru for short) wore bright orange T-shirts around campus with the words "I agree with Markwell".

The T-shirts directed people to a website where people learned that Markwell was a Christian and there he explained what he believed. In particular he explained that he thought that we were all sinners, that we all faced the judgement of God and that we all needed Jesus' death and resurrection.

The response to the "I agree with Markwell" campaign was pretty massive. Lots of people were angry and upset. WHY?

Let me quote just one blog-post written in response to this campaign:

"The various forms of backlash that "I Agree with Markwell" has inspired, much of which has taken on a deeply anti-Christian tone, only proves my point. While I obviously don't condone insulting people or their religious beliefs and wish that people would be more civil, I'm not surprised that so many Northwestern students are so annoyed and angry at Cru. After all, they basically told us that we're going to hell. Their proselytism has, in a way, torn this campus apart."

In our modern world, there is almost nothing more insulting to people than being told that their beliefs are wrong – or that they should believe what you believe.

We live in a world where we have all been taught since we were very, very young, that religion is a private matter. What you believe is personal and it should be kept you.

And it's a truth that I think makes us very, very nervous about telling others that we belong to Jesus. Today, I want to look with you at the shortest Psalm in the Bible, and I want to show you how it encourages us to be bold about telling others what we believe.

## 2. The surprise of the Psalm

Our Psalm today is Ps 117. And actually, it's an incredibly unremarkable Psalm. It doesn't say anything, as far as I can tell, that isn't said in other (and sometimes much more striking ways) in other Psalms.

Furthermore – it's not only the shortest Psalm in the Bible – it's the shortest chapter in the Bible! So there really isn't very much opportunity for it to say anything surprising at all.

And yet – if we read it carefully, we will find it very surprising indeed I think.

Let's look at it together:

***Psalm 117:1–2 (NIV84)*** — <sup>1</sup> *Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.* <sup>2</sup> *For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD.*

Well – like I said, it's not very surprising at all, on first reading. But I think that that's partly because of the way that we often read the Bible, thinking of ourselves at the centre of it.

When you read this Psalm, do you do what I do? I read the us there in (v2) and I go – yes, great is God's love for me! Let's praise God together.

It's only natural that we do it, but sometimes it means that we don't quite hear what is actually being said.

You see – this Psalm was first written by a Jew for a Jewish audience. And if you take that into consideration, and read these verses again, you come up with a wholly different picture.

The Psalm is a cry from the Jews, from Israel, to all the nations around about them (or to the Gentiles, which is another word for nations) to praise the LORD – Yahweh – the God of Israel.

As this Psalm was originally spoken, what the Israelites were actually saying to all the nations with all of their customs and their religions around them – you would should praise and extol our God. Now as we all know – that is pretty offensive already. BUT the Psalm goes one step further. Why should you nations praise Israel's God?

Because he has been loving and faithful towards us. He has been loving and faithful towards Israel? Was the Psalmist crazy or what?

To kind of put this Psalm in a modern context, it's like the Taiwanese saying to the Chinese – you should worship our God because he's looking after us. Or it's like the Iraqi's saying to America – you should believe in our God because he's been faithful to us.

EITHER – it’s an absolutely ridiculous thing to say. OR they knew something that we didn’t.

How can the Jews say that everyone should praise and extol their God?

Well, to answer that question – we need to look at two key things.

### 3. The character of God

Why is God’s steadfast love and faithfulness to the Jews the reason that they tell all the nations to praise God? It’s because of what these words mean about God.

I don’t think it is too much of an exaggeration to say that these two words represent one of the fundamental descriptions of God in the bible. The English words “steadfast love” are actually one Hebrew word – hesed. And the word faithfulness is the Hebrew word Emeth.

(POWERPOINT)

I don’t usually teach people the Hebrew – but these are two of the fundamental words about God – hesed and emeth. Try them after me. Hesed. Emeth.

They are the words that God uses to describe himself when Moses asks to see him in Exodus 33-34.

(POWERPOINT)

**Exodus 34:5-7 (NIV84)** – *5 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. 6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”*

What is God like – he is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness.

SO – what are these things actually saying about God?

#### i. **Steadfast love**

You can see it there in the Exodus passage. His steadfast love is about his forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. The word is translated in other places as mercy or loving-kindness. One of the fundamental things about God is that he is a God who forgives. That is of his very nature.

God's steadfast love is about the fact that he forgives and saves.

And when you think about it from God's perspective, that is an amazing truth. Because forgiveness is a deep and painful thing.

We can sometimes brush over forgiveness because we haven't thought deeply about it. I mean something like forgetting to pick the milk up on the way home from work, or forgetting to hand the washing out. Those things happen – life is busy – we should get over them and move on right? Forgiving is just what you should do.

BUT of course – when deep and painful things happen – forgiveness becomes a lot more real.

<https://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/inspiration-motivation/stories-forgiveness#cheating-husband>

Christy Jones is a woman in her early 40s and she lives in Fort Washington. She opened her email one day to find the following message in her in-box:

“You don't know me, but I am no longer dating your husband...I'm sorry for any pain I caused your family.”

Let me read to you a bit more of her story:

After reading and rereading that e-mail, Christy called her husband at work. Voice shaking, she demanded an explanation. “Adrian was defensive at first, said it never happened, and even hung up on me,” she remembers. “But a minute later he called back, crying, admitted it was true, and begged me to forgive him.”

The story unfolded: Adrian and a customer had flirted. A one-night stand had turned into a four-month affair. In February 2012, when the woman asked Adrian if he would ever leave his family, he broke off the relationship. “I was furious,” says Christy. “It was hard for me not to tell Adrian that we were over and make him hurt as badly as I did.” Instead the pair talked and wept together all night.

“Once the initial shock passed, I was faced with a choice,” she says. “I could either fight for my marriage or let this event change everything.”

Christy made a conscious decision to forgive. It didn't happen instantly. For the next six months, she struggled with resentment and the fear that Adrian would not be committed to making the marriage work. “There were many times I asked him, ‘How could you live with yourself?

How could you look me in the eye and lie for months?’ And to get closure, I needed to know every last detail of the affair. It was extremely painful for Adrian to answer my questions, but he did so with humility,” she says.

What Christy’s story reminds us of is the fact that forgiveness in the face of great wrong requires enormous sacrifice.

When God tells us of his steadfast love – of his desire for forgiveness. That is something that he has done over and over again. Through thousands of years of Israel’s history – Israel ignored God. They did their own thing. They stole, they cheated. They worshipped idols. And again and again and again – God forgave them.

Israel wants to say to the nations – Praise God because he is a God of deep, deep forgiveness.

That is one reason for Israel to encourage the nations to praise God. The other is found in God’s faithfulness or truthfulness. His trustworthiness – his promise-keeping-ness.

## ii. Faithfulness

The first thing that I want to say about faithfulness is that it is actually the most exciting virtue imaginable.

Which I think we often miss. For most of us, faithfulness is a word which goes along with words like – **dependable, solid, hardworking – boring, stodgy. It’s like porridge** – it’s good for you but it’s not very exciting.

Faithfulness is not an exciting word. It is an attribute which is good to have BUT we would like to be something more. **But faithfulness should be one of the most exciting words in the English language.**

And actually, life is dependent on people who keep their word. How frustrating is it when the tradesmen promised to be there at 8am, and you took the morning off and it’s now 2pm and he’s not there? Or how bad is it when you order online and they say – 1-3 days shipping and two weeks later you’re in an email battle about the fact that they still haven’t delivered.

Faithfulness seems boring because when it happens, it feels normal. BUT faithfulness is at the heart of friendship and relationship. The person that you can speak the secrets of your heart to and who promises not to share them with the world – that is faithfulness. The person who tells you that they’ll come and help you move house, and arrives early, with food packed to share with everyone for lunch – that’s faithfulness.

That elderly married couple who've been together for 50 years and as you talk to them you realise that they've fought and made up, and lived through great pain and loss – and who are still keeping their word to each other – that is faithfulness. And it's a wonderfully exciting thing. Faithfulness makes for friends you can trust.

And at the very heart of the God who made the world is faithfulness – truthfulness – he is a God who keeps his promises. And actually – if you understand God's promises, then you realise that the nations around Israel should praise Israel's God for keeping his promises.

Do you know one of the greatest promises God has ever made? It was made about 2000 years before Jesus was born. And it was made to a man called Abraham, and it looks like this:

**(POWERPOINT)**

**Genesis 12:1–3 (NIV84)** — <sup>1</sup> *The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. <sup>2</sup> “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*

Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel. And God made many promises to him – that he would make them into a nation, and that he would give them a land to live in. And at the time of the Psalmist – God had kept all of those promises.

BUT the greatest promise of all was this one:

“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

God's promise to the nation of Israel was that they would be the source of God's blessing to all the peoples of the world. It was only through Israel that anybody could be blessed.

SO – how does God keep that promise?

Let's look at the second reading we had this morning:

**Romans 15:8-13** *For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised (that is, to the Jewish people) to show God's truthfulness (it's the same word as faithfulness), in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs (that's Abraham), 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” 10 And again it is said, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” 11 And again, “**Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.**”*

That last sentence is quote from our Psalm today.

What Israel already knew in part when the Psalm was written – God would fulfil perfectly would fulfil when he sent Jesus into the world to die for sins.

You see – Jesus came to die, the Bible says, so that the whole world might be forgiven. God’s steadfast love, God’s painful decision to forgive, and to forgive and to forgive again finds its fulfilment in Jesus.

Because what happens when Jesus dies on the cross? He takes all of our sins on himself. That is what forgiveness involves. In Jesus, God himself says – all of the pain and the mess and evil of your sin – I am going to forgive it by accepting all of the consequences of that myself.

Jesus comes to die on the cross so that the judgement that is due for our rejection of God falls on him rather than us.

And friends – just stop for a moment and think about what that means. God accepts and pays the price for all of the pain of our stuff ups. Every evil word, every jealous thought, every angry outburst, every lustful desire – all of the things that each and everyone of us has ever done – Jesus took them all on himself.

God kept his promise in Jesus – to bless the whole world. And at one and the same time displayed all of his steadfast love.

I’m new here this morning. And I don’t really know many of you at all. But I do know that there may well be people here today who know that they are sinful, know that they need forgiveness but they don’t know how to find it.

I want to say to you this morning – do you know, God knows you, loves you and gave Jesus to die so that you can be forgiven. If you want to be forgiven and right with God – all you need to do is to turn to him, to trust him, to admit your wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness. God is waiting with open arms to welcome you in – the God who is always faithful and steadfast in his love – please turn to him this morning.

#### **4. God is worth praising (so don’t be shy)**

BUT I also know that there will be others here this morning who know God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus and I want to point out to you another implication of this passage.

You see Israel were bold enough to say to all of the nations around them – you should praise our God because of his steadfast love and faithfulness to us.

That is something that our world tells us we mustn't do – but actually, at this point, your friends, family and work mates are profoundly wrong.

If the God of the Bible is the God of all of the world. And if your friends and family will one day stand before God in judgement. And if that God has given his Son for the forgiveness of anyone who turns to him.

It's not arrogant, or terrible, or destructive to say to your next door neighbour – you should praise my God because of his steadfast love and faithfulness.

In fact – it's just a loving thing to do. God is loving in a way that should blow our imaginations. He is faithful in a way that no one else could ever be. And he is saying – you can find forgiveness and life.

Friends – some things are good enough that they're not worth being shy about.

A few years ago – the last time that the Sydney Swans won the AFL grand-final, we planned the afternoon to go on an outing with our kids and my mother-in-law – talk about a planning mix up. I set the game to record and we spent the whole day avoiding hearing the result. Then on the way home in the car, my son shouts from the back seat – I think the Swans won.

How do you know? Well, there's a guy in that car with all of the swans gear on jumping up and down and giving us the thumbs up!

Here was a guy who was so excited about his team winning – that he wanted everyone to know.

And surely – a God who is as loving and faithful as our God has been in Jesus is exciting enough to let others know about.

At that point – it's worth messing with a few social conventions. We ought to be like Israel was in the Old Testament. We ought to stand up say

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It's not wrong, It's not divisive. It's an act of love that matches God's love for us. So whose someone you can tell about the steadfast love and faithfulness of God in Jesus?