

Plural Nouns & the Praise of Yahweh

Introduction

The Text

Psa 117:1–2

¹ Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!

² For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord!

A Wild God & 2 Plural Nouns

- A. How big is your God? How wild? Can you domesticate Him to fit into your little life? Can you tame Him down to sit politely with you while you sip your tea and do your morning devotions? To borrow from the introduction of last week: can you get Him to stay within the bounds of Sunday—“You can talk to me on Sundays but don’t you bother me on Mondays; this is your time, that’s my time”? Does He know His place? Is He a household idol, a tribal deity...or is He the wild and free God of the universe—YHWH, I am who I am?! Have you invited Him to play a supporting role in your story...or has He invited you into the crazy rush of His?!
1. This Psalm is just this latter kind of invitation! God is saying: “Get in my story...Every one of you!”
 - a. It’s amazing, things are not always what they seem. We are looking at the smallest Psalm in all the Psalter, but truly it has the largest reach. We might think it would be one of the quietest—2 verses and the song is over; but truly it is one of the loudest—in it we hear the erupting voices of the church universal. It might appear on the surface to be one of the tamest, but as we get beneath the verses and see what’s really here, truly, this Psalm must be understood as one of the wildest. In fact, God’s love in this Psalm is shown to be so wild, so wide, so all-encompassing, that we actually might be a little uneasy with it!
- B. You might be saying: “Where are you getting all this? Wild, free, crazy? What are you talking about?” I’m getting all this from 2 plural nouns. I’ve been enchanted for weeks now by these two plural nouns: “Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! (v. 1).”
1. We might be in the Old Testament, but we’re not just talking about Israel here. We’re talking about “all nations”, “all peoples”. We’re talking about Jew and Gentile—Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, American, Mexican, European, Asian, African, and on we could go. We’re talking about everyone everywhere praising the Lord! That’s a wild, free, and crazy love!

- a. I wonder how much weight you give to the grammar of the Scriptures? We are there in these plurals! That’s my salvation! That’s your redemption! I don’t care what you’ve done; how guilty you come in feeling this morning; how hopeless your week was—you are here in the plurals. This is an invitation into His love. You are welcome here! Grammar matters. Our eternal destinies hang on these 2 plural nouns! Read your Bibles carefully.
- C. This morning, as we consider this Psalm together, I have 2 headings for us: (1) A Love as Wide as the World; and (2) A Joy as High as the Heavens.

(1) A Love as Wide as the World

What Is this Praise?

- A. Some might be wondering if I’m getting ahead of myself here. What is this praise that all nations and all peoples are called to? Twisting the arm? Praise by force? Is it an “every knee shall bow and tongue confess” sort of a thing—where even the enemies of God, though they hate Him, must confess He is over them? No! The logic of our text pushes us in another direction:

“Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever...(vv. 1-2a).

1. “For”—His love and faithfulness are the basis of this praise. It’s a praise from delight!
2. “Us”—It would seem to me that the 2 plural nouns of v. 1 find their way into the plural pronoun of vs. 2: “For great is His steadfast love toward us...” God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are toward not just Israel but all nations and all peoples. And this is where things start to get crazy!

The Backstory of God’s Steadfast Love & Faithfulness

- A. When we consider the backstory of these two words “steadfast love” (hesed) and “faithfulness”, we are immediately taken to [Exo 34:6](#), the very first time the Lord takes both of them together upon His lips!
1. God had just brought Israel out from Egypt. He led them to Mount Sinai where He entered into covenant with them, and they with Him: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” ([Exo 24:7b](#)). Moses goes back up the mountain to receive “tablets of the covenant” ([Deu 9:9](#))—the 10 commandments written on 2 tablets of stone. He comes down to find all of Israel guilty of covenant infidelity—worshiping a golden calf (the image of creatures Adam was supposed to subdue and have dominion over). And Moses breaks the tablets against the mountain. God threatens to pull away from Israel, lest He consume them. But Moses intercedes. And he begs God: “Show me now your ways” ([Exo 33:13b](#)); “show me your glory” (v. 18). Don’t leave us! So the Lord had Him cut two more tablets of stone (He’s not done with Israel!).

And then, with Moses on top of the mountain once more, God shows him His glory (at least as much as Moses could handle):

Ex 34:5–8

⁵The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

⁶...“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

- a. This self-declaration of God’s glory, His name, His character, becomes Israel’s hope. In it we see that God is both holy and righteous and just. But we also see that He is merciful, gracious, loving, faithful.
 - i. But we get this strange sense that there is a wonderful imbalance in Him—that the center of gravity in His attributes leans towards grace and mercy. For He keeps steadfast love “for thousands” (probably “of generations” [Deut 7:9]), but He only visits iniquity to the third and fourth.
 - (1) This is what we get when through Ezekiel God would tell us: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked [raw justice], but that the wicked turn from his way and live [abounding love]” (33:11a)! Do you remember the parables in Luk 15 and the “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (v. 7)?!
 - ii. Already, we start to see that this mercy and grace, this love and faithfulness, could not be spent on a single nation, it was always threatening to break out and envelope the world!

B. But, nonetheless, in the context, God’s commitment to Israel is in view. We have not only a declaration of His character but also one of His commitment to and covenant with them. So we must ask: How in the world does our Psalmist take these words with this backstory and apply it to the Gentiles? Is he just theologically errant? How did this Psalm slip into the Psalter?

Who Is This Steadfast Love & Faithfulness for?

- A. This leads us to ask a most significant question: Who is this steadfast love and faithfulness for? Another way we could phrase it: What was the point of Israel?
 1. To cut straight to the point, let me quote from one notable scholar: “The whole purpose of God in choosing Israel was so that the nations would eventually do so.

The overall thrust of the Old Testament is not Israel against the nations, but Israel for the sake of the nations.”

- a. Israel is set apart from the nations with the goal of bringing in the nations! We might not immediately get this because, in our sin, we try to set ourselves apart in way that excludes others. I have certain skills that others don't, I'm set apart when I go in for the job interview. I don't want you to have what I have. I don't want you included. This is how Israel, would be tempted to take it, but it is not what God intended. This is not how sanctification, being holy or set apart, works in the Kingdom of God. Israel was set apart with a view to the nations and a desire for the outsider to come in!
 - i. It might be memorable to see this Psalm as depicting Israel in poetic form. For, while this Psalm is the smallest in all the Psalter, it truly has the largest reach—with global worship in view. Similarly, Israel, while “the fewest of all peoples” (Deu 7:7b), was chosen by God to be a light and blessing unto them all!
- B. Have you ever wondered why the Old Testament takes up so much space in your Bible? We tend to think it's all about Israel and when that didn't work out God aborted the mission and took up a new one in the New Testament, a mission that's finally relevant to us. But that is not the case at all! It has been His plan from the very beginning to go after all nations through this nation. O how I want to make your dusty Old Testaments catch fire!
1. Let me show you how the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord, while for Israel, is also (and especially) for the world: from the beginning of redemptive history; through the middle of redemptive history; to its final, climactic, and eternal end!

(1) For All Nations & All Peoples from the Beginning of R-H

- A. Again, we go to the backstory. For God's activity with Moses and the people of Israel, His redeeming of them from Egypt for Himself, all have historical precedent behind it. Consider how the Exodus narrative begins: “²³...the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham...” (Exo 2:23-24).
1. It is to the covenant with Abraham, then, that we should turn. You might remember what God says to Abraham when He first calls Him: “¹...Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:1-3).
 - a. This final promise is refined a bit more in Gen 22:18a: “...in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”

- i. Abraham, the father of Israel, through Him, and His offspring, God is mediating blessing to the world! Paul would later refer to this as God preaching the gospel beforehand to Abraham, and foretelling that He “[would justify the Gentiles by faith](#)” ([Gal 3:8](#)).
 - 2. So even back with Abraham, something more than Israel is in view—all the families of the earth, all the nations of the earth, blessed, even justified by faith!
- B. But we can keep going back. For the promise to Abraham grows out of the promise made to Shem, one of Noah’s sons. After an incident with Noah and his 3 sons, Noah declares the destinies of each. He first curses Canaan, the son of Ham. But then he turns and blesses the other 2:

[Gen 9:26–27](#)

²⁶ “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.

²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant.”

- 1. You say: “What is the point of this?” Well, if we keep reading, Abraham comes in Shem’s line, and he becomes the father of Israel to whom God will give the land of Canaan. And from Japheth came many of the peoples that settled in Asia Minor and Europe, Gentiles. Paul’s missionary journeys—Asia Minor and Europe! Japheth has been brought in to dwell in the tents of Shem.
- C. But we can keep going back. For the promise made to Shem grows out of an even more ancient promise given in [Gen 3:15](#). Theologians refer to it the first gospel. It’s the promise that an offspring would come who would overturn the works of the devil.
 - 1. And this is where God’s global mission becomes clearest of all. For who was this promise made to? Adam and Eve—the parents not of a family or a nation, but of all families, all nations. The gospel of this coming offspring is for the entire world! Nations, peoples, tribes may split and separate from this point on in mankind’s story, but the gospel is still relevant to, this promised seed is still coming for, them all!
- D. The steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord was certainly for Israel, but it was also for all nations and all peoples from the beginning! What we see in [Exo 34](#), then, is just the early buds on the branches of this tree. It’s the first growth of a much grander program. As we follow Israel’s story through the canon of Scripture, this is precisely what we find. What begins with a few buds eventually gives way to an entire universe in bloom!

(2) For All Nations & All Peoples through the Middle of R-H

- A. There are so many examples along the way that display God’s love for the nations even as He’s developing this nation. It’s there in the law, the historical books, the Psalms, the prophets. I want to highlight only one: Jonah. He’s called by God to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment on it for its evil. But he doesn’t want to go. He

rebels but God puts him in the belly of a fish (3 days and 3 nights) and gets him to go to Nineveh.

1. But why didn't he want to go? We might think it was because he was scared they'd not like his message and hurt him, even kill him. That seems reasonable to me, but that's not it. Later, when he delivers the message of judgment and the people repent and God has mercy on them, we are given our answer:

Jonah 4:1–3

¹But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

²And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

³Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

- a. So why didn't he want to go? He knew the love of God was wild and free. He knew the steadfast love of the Lord could save even Assyrians, and he hated that fact. He didn't want Nineveh to be invited in, on his team.

2. What is this book doing in the canon?

(3) For All Nations & All Peoples to the End of R-H

- A. The same thing all the promises were doing back in Genesis. The promises, Jonah, Israel, the entire Old Testament, they're all pointing us forward to the coming Messiah—the only One who wouldn't get sidetracked with concern for His own glory; the only One who wouldn't be troubled by the lavishness of God's grace, but would manifest it at every point especially for the outsider. Israel became ingrown, but Christ came to regain and fulfill her mission:

1. He is the One who would give to the world "the sign of Jonah" (Luk 11:29). He would go down into the belly of the grave—3 days and 3 nights. Jonah went into the belly for his own sin. Christ would go there for ours. And when He rose He would call all people to Himself, and even the worst of sinners could come, forgiven, justified in Him!
2. He is God's ultimate answer to Moses prayer: "show me your glory." We do see "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). He is the steadfast love of the Lord incarnate.
3. He is the one offspring of Abraham to whom the promises were ultimately made (Gal 3:16).
4. He is the one who makes a way for Japheth to come into the tents of Shem, granting repentance to the Gentiles, abolishing the dividing wall of hostility.
5. He is the promised seed who has overcome the works of the devil in sin and death.

6. And with His blood, He has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9) and in 7:9 this pan-national church is described as in heaven, and they’re singing, victorious because of the Lamb!

Great & Enduring Forever!

- A. We’re starting to make sense of those words that qualify the steadfast love and faithfulness of our God: “great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever” (v. 2).
 1. Of particular interest to me is the word “great.” O the word here! It’s the reason for my introduction. In the Hebrew it means: prevailing, manly, vigorous, mighty, describing lions, warriors, and even the floodwaters when they covered the earth: “The waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered” (Gen 7:19).
 - a. Nothing could stop the waters from prevailing. Every mountain was eventually overcome. But catch this! The vehemence with which God poured out His wrath on the earth because of our sin, in Christ, becomes vehemence in the opposite direction! It is now not the waters of His wrath that prevail but the waters of His steadfast love! It is this love that cannot be contained. It breaks every barrier. It comes after the worst of sinners. And it will not stop. It will “endure forever.”
 - i. We’ve taken the long road to a simple point: His love is wild. He won’t give up on you. There is room for you in the plural nouns of Psa 117:1! His steadfast love and faithfulness are yours in Christ.

(2) A Joy as High as the Heavens

For Us

- A. Returning to our Psalm, what ought to be our response to such things? “Praise the Lord” (v. 2b), and this last part of v. 2 wraps around and connects us back to with where we began: “Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!” (v. 1). We are invited to join in singing the heavenly chorus, even while we live here on earth, because His love won’t stop.
 1. The Psalmists can’t get over this! The steadfast love of the Lord is for them! The graph spikes at the Psalms. When they are feeling guilty, steadfast love of the Lord. When they are overwhelmed with trial, steadfast love of the Lord. When they are overjoyed, it is because of the steadfast love of the Lord. Our prayer and devotional life ought to orbit around this reality. It is the merging of that Pauline triad: praying always, giving thanks always, rejoicing always!

For Others

- A. But, as we’ve seen again and again, this steadfast love and faithfulness is not only for us, but others, even people we wouldn’t want it to reach.

1. As Paul is laboring for the sake of unity among those in the Roman church, he would quote v. 1 of this Psalm in Rom 15:11 to support one magnificent point of application: “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (v. 7).
 - a. Because God has made room for us in those plural nouns, we ought to make room for one another. We cannot rejoice in the welcome mat laid out before the gates of heaven while also locking the doors to our church sanctuaries. He has loved us, even us! He can help us love one another!
 - i. What boundaries have you drawn? Who are your Ninevites? Your Gentiles? Is it your spouse? Your children? Your neighbor? Your boss? O I beg you, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God!”