**The Little Missions Psalm Gloriously Displayed In The Life of**

**John Gibson Paton: Missionary to Cannibals!**

**Psalm 117**

Introduction: 1) Charles Spurgeon called John Paton the “King of the Cannibals” (Paul Schlehlein, *John G. Paton*, xv). Such is an appropriate and accurate description of this brave missionary who risked his life and sacrificed much that a tribe of murderous cannibals in the New Hebrides Islands might praise the Lord for his steadfast love and faithfulness that endures forever.

2) As far as we know, the New Hebrides had no Christian influence before John Williams and James Harris from the London Missionary Society landed in 1839. Both of these missionaries were killed and eaten by cannibals on the island of Erromanga on November 20 of that year, only minutes after going ashore. Forty-eight years later John Paton would write, “Thus were the New Hebrides baptized with the blood of martyrs; and Christ thereby told the whole Christian world that he claimed these islands as His own: (autobiography, 75).

3) In his classic work on missions *Let The Nations Be Glad*, John Piper notes, “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.” These words capture well what Psalm 117 is all about: missions to the nations who do not worship God in order that they might worship Him.

4) Psalm 117 is both the shortest Psalm in the Psalter and the shortest chapter in all of the Bible. Spurgeon, however, again is exactly right, “this psalm, which is very little in its letter, is exceedingly large in its spirit, for, bursting all bounds of race or nationality, it calls upon all mankind to praise the name of the Lord.” Luther loved it and wrote a 36 page commentary on it. That is 18 pages per verse!

5) Psalm 117 is a part of a half-dozen of songs, Psalm 113-118, knows and the “Egyptian Hallel.” These 6 songs were sung as the Hebrews gathered to celebrate the Passover, God’s great act of salvation on their behalf. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the memorial meal, and Psalms 115-118 were sung afterwards. Jesus and His disciples would have sung these very psalms on the night they celebrated the Passover, just before His betrayal and arrest (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26).

6) Interestingly, two other sections of the Psalms are known as Hallel (“Hallalujeh”) psalms. Psalms 120-136 is called the “Great Hallel” and Psalms 146-150 conclude the Psalter on a Hallelujah or praise note.

7) Psalm 117 is anonymous and the fifth of the Egyptian or Exodus hallels. It is international in scope, and it reveals the heart of our God toward the nations. He loves them (v. 2) and desires that they worship Him (v. 1). Paul quotes this little jewel in Romans 15:11 as evidence that God’s redemptive love and purpose has always included the nations, just like He promised Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.

Translation: What I want to do in this message is provide a brief biography of the wonderful missionary hero John Paton. I will then follow an expository pattern through Psalm 117 and show how particular aspects of John Paton’s life and writings wonderfully match us with the psalm.

Brief biography:

Paton wrote of his own life and his aspiration for his children: “Let me record my immovable conviction that this is the noblest service in which any human being, can spend or be spent; and that, if God gave me back my life to be lived over again, I would without one quiver of hesitation lay it on the altar to Christ, that He might use it as before in similar ministries of love, especially amongst those who have never yet heard the Name of Jesus. Nothing that has been endured, and nothing that can now befall me, makes me tremble – on the contrary, I deeply rejoice – when I breathe the prayer that it may please the blessed Lord to turn the hearts of all my children to the Mission Field and that He may open up their way and make it their pride and joy to live and die in carrying Jesus and His Gospel into the heart of the Heathen World!” (444, emphasis added).

He could write these words because of an unalterable conviction that gripped his soul: “Whatever trials have befallen me in my Earthly Pilgrimage, I have never had the trial of doubting that perhaps, after all, Jesus had made some mistake. No! my blessed Lord Jesus makes no mistakes! When we see all His meaning, we shall then understand, what now we can only trustfully believe that all is well – best for us, best for the cause most dear to us, best for the good of others and the glory of God” (488).

John G. Paton, was born in Scotland on May 24, 1824. He sailed for the New Hebrides (via Australia) with his wife Mary on April 16, 1858, at the age of 33. They reached the island of Tanna on November 5. In March the next year both his wife and his newborn son died of the fever. He served alone on the island for the next four years, under constant danger, until he was forced to leave the island in February 1862. He felt he was a terrible failure.

He married again in 1864, and took his wife, Margaret, back to the New Hebrides, this time to the smaller island of Aniwa (“It measure scarcely seven miles by two,” 312). They labored together for 41 years until Margaret died in 1905 when John Paton was 81.

The natives on Aniwa were cannibals and sometimes ate the flesh of their defeated fors. They practiced infanticide and widow sacrifice, killing the widows of deceased men so that they could serve their husbands in the next world (69, 334): Paton writes, “Their worship was entirely a service of fear, its aim being to propitiate this or that Evil spirit, to prevent calamity or to secure revenge. They deified their Chiefs…so that almost every village or tribe had its own Sacred Man…. They exercised an extraordinary influence for evil, these village or tribal priests, and were believed to have the disposal of life and death through their sacred ceremonies…. They also worshipped the spirits of departed ancestors and heroes, through their material idols of wood and stone…. They feared the spirits and sought their aid; especially seeking to propitiate those who preside over war and peace, famine and plenty, health and sickness, destruction and prosperity, life and death. Their whole worship was one of slavish fear; and, so far as ever I could learn, they had no idea of a God of mercy or grace” (72).

Paton admitted that at times he wondered whether these people ever could be brought to the point of trusting Christ (74).

He pressed forward learning the language and reducing it to writing (319). He built orphanages (“We trained these young people for Jesus,” 317). They “trained the Teachers…translated and printed and expounded the Scriptures…ministered to the sick and dying…dispenses medicines every day…taught them the use of tools…” etc. (378).

In the next fifteen years, John and Margaret Paton saw the entire island of Aniwa turn to Christ. Years later he wrote, “I claimed Aniwa for Jesus, and by the grace of God Aniwa now worships at the Savior’s feet” (312). In 1897 he “published the New Testament in the Aniwan Language.” Even to his death he was translating hymns and catechisms and creating a dictionary for his people even though he was unable to be with them any more (451).

During his years of labor on the islands Paton kept a journal and notebooks and letters from which he wrote his massive Autobiography in three parts from 1887 to 1898.

Paton outlived his second wife by just two years and died in Australia on January 28, 1907.

Today, about 85% of the population of Vanuatu identifies as Christian, with just over 20% being evangelical. The sacrifices and the legacy of this missionary to the New Hebrides are difficult to put into words. Our great God did a great work in and through this man that the people of Aniwa would praise the Lord for his steadfast love and faithfulness that endures forever! Now to our text. Two simple and overarching observations.

I. The Lord is to be magnified among the nations 117:1

* Psalm 117 follows a command/reason pattern. We are told what to do in v. 1 and why we do it in v. 2. Classis Hebrew parallelism is seen in both verses as the second line in each verse reinforces the truth in line one.
* Further, the Psalm opens and closes with the same word, “praise” or “hallelujah.” Psalm 117 is a universal invitation to people everywhere to praise and extol on the Lord because of His steadfast love and faithfulness. No God is like our God! Verse 1 can be studied in 2 parts.

1) God desires that all the nations praise Him.

* The psalm begins with a call to praise (Heb. *Hallu*) the Lord (*Yahweh*). Ronald Allen notes that, “Praise is a choice, not a feeling. We are not to praise the Lord only when we feel warm and fuzzy inside. We are to praise Him even in our most troubled moments. For even during those times, He is still our God” (*Praise*, 4).
* Then what follows is an unexpected surprise. Normally it is the people of God, the covenant community Israel, who are called to praise the Lord. But not here. No, it is the *goyim*, the “nations” (*NASV, NIV, ESV, HCSB*).
* Nations does not refer to political states but people groups, different ethnic and linguistic groups. As of August 2018 the “Joshua Project” ([www.joshuaproject.net](http://www.joshuaproject.net)) list 17,012 different people groups in the world with 7,085 as unreached. The percent of unreached people groups is 41.6% totally 3.14 billion people. These people groups are perishing and headed toward hell with no gospel witness, and yet our great God desires that they would praise Him and be saved.

2) God desires that all the nations extol Him.

* The word “extol” means to boast, laud or praise. It has the idea of bragging on someone. It means to make much of someone. Our God is to be shown by His people to be great, good, and awesome. We are to gossip, in a good way, about the great God we know and love, worship and serve. And, we are to do it among “all peoples.”
* “Peoples,” like nations, refers to ethnic, language and cultural groupings of people. “Tribes” is a good word to capture what is being said. Note it is in the plural (peoples). It occurs this way more than 230 times in the *ESV*. Tribes live around the world and down the street. They are people who share a common language, culture, interest, ideals and values. Whether a mile away or 10,000 miles away they needs to know and hear about the God, the only God, worthy of praise, worthy of glory.
* A passion for the praise of the Lord among all the nations and all peoples was planted early in the heart of John Paton by godly, mission-minded parents. One particular section of his autobiography explains this with crystal clear clarity!

“My dear Green Street people grieved excessively at the thought of my leaving them, and daily pled with me to remain. Indeed, the opposition was so strong from nearly all, and many of them warm Christian friends, that I was sorely tempted to question whether I was carrying out the Divine will, or only some headstrong wish of my own….

Some retorted upon me, “There are Heathen at home; let us seek and save, first of all, the lost ones perishing at our doors.” This I felt to be most true, and an appalling fact; but I unfailingly observed that those who made this retort neglected these Home Heathen themselves; and so the objection, as from them, lost all its power. They would ungrudgingly spend more on a fashionable party at dinner or tea, on concert or ball or theatre, or on some ostentatious display, or worldly and selfish indulgence, ten times more, perhaps in a single day, than they would give in a year, or in half a lifetime, for the conversion of the whole Heathen World, either at home or abroad. Objections from all such people must, of course, always count for nothing among men to whom spiritual things are realities. For these people themselves – I do, and always did, only pity them, as God’s stewards, making such a miserable use of time and money entrusted to their care.

On meeting with so many obstructing influences, I again laid the whole matter before my dear parents, and their reply was to this effect: -“Heretofore we feared to bias you, but now we must tell you why we praise God for the decision to which you have been led. Your father’s heart was set upon being a Minister, but other claims forced him to give it up. When you were given to them, your father and mother laid you upon the altar, their first-born, to be consecrated, if God saw fit, as a Missionary of the Cross; and it has been their constant prayer that you might be prepared, qualified, and led to this very decision; and we pray with all our heart that the Lord may accept your offering, long spare you, and give you many souls from the Heathen World for your hire.” From that moment, every doubt as to my path of duty for ever vanished. I saw the hand of God very visibly, not only preparing me for, but now leading me to, the Foreign Mission field.” (56-57). Thus it is no surprise that as a young boy Paton sensed the call to be a missionary. Speaking specifically of his Father’s influence he would write, “As we rose, from our knees [in prayer], I used to look at the light on my Father’s face, and wish I were like him in spirit – hoping that, in answers to his prayers, I might be privileged and prepared to carry the blessed gospel to some portion of the heathen world” (Schlehlein, 6). I have little doubt it was the spirit of his Father that gave John Paton 1) the courage to go and 2) the fortitude to stay among the cannibals of the New Hebrides!

* The courage to go: Paton once was confronted by an older saint who sought to discourage Paton from going to the New Hebrides. He chided him with the words, “The cannibals, you will be eaten by the cannibals!”, Paton calmly replied: “Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer…. The old gentleman, raising his hands in a deprecating attitude, left the room exclaiming, “After that I have nothing more to say!” (*Autobiography*, 56).
* The courage to return and stay: I give but one example: the death of his precious 19 year old wife and baby boy. Paton writes: “In a moment, altogether unexpectedly, she [my wife] died on March 3. To crown my sorrows, and complete my lonliness, the dear baby-boy, whom we had named after her father, Peter Robert Robson, was taken from me after one week’s sickness, on the 20th of March. Let those who have ever passed through any similar darkness as of midnight feel for me; as for all others, it would be more than vain to try to paint my sorrows!” (79).

He dug the two graves with his own hands and buried them by the house where they lived. He would add in his autobiography: “Stunned by that dreadful loss, in entering upon this field of labor to which the Lord had Himself so evidently led me, my reason seemed for a time almost to give way. The ever-merciful Lord sustained me… and that spot became my sacred and much-frequented shrine, during all the following months and years when I labored on for the salvation of the savage Islanders amidst difficulties, dangers, and deaths…. But for Jesus, and the fellowship he vouchsafed to me there, I must have gone mad and died beside the lonely grave!” (80). But my brothers and sisters, Jesus was faithful! Listen to the heartbroken cries of this wonderful man of God: “I felt her loss beyond all conception or description, in that dark land. It was very difficult to be resigned, left alone, and in sorrowful circumstances; but feeling immovably assured that my God and Father was too wise and loving to err in anything that he does or permits, I looked up to the Lord for help, and struggled on in His work”…

I do not pretend to see through the mystery of such visitations – wherein God calls away the young, the promising, and those sorely needed for his service here; but this I do know and feel, that, in the light of such dispensations, it becomes us all to love and serve our blessed Lord Jesus so that we may be ready at his call for death and eternity” (85). The Lord is to be magnified among the nations.

II. The Lord is to be magnified because of His nature 117:2

* There is a rhyme and reason to God’s call to magnify Himself among the nations. It is not arbitrary, whimsical or misplaced. It is not the “because I said so” of a celestial bully or capricious deity on a cosmic ego trip. No, it is a call rooted in the very nature and character of God, that when rightly understood, causes us to rise up and worship Him because we must and because we want to.
* And what can we say about this God? 1) He is great in His love for us and 2) He will be faithful to love us forever.
* Verse 2 is based and grounded in one of the greatest Old Testament verses in the Bible, Exodus 34:6. There the Bible says, “‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.’”

1) Our God is a God of steadfast love.

* Once more the beautiful and rich Hebrew word *hesed* appears. The various ways English translations attempt to capture its meaning is instructive:

NKJV: merciful kindness NIV: love

NASV: lovingkindness ESV: steadfast love

CSB: faithful love NLT: unfailing love

* And note, the text says His steadfast love is “great.” This is a strong and vigorous word used of the stronger side in a battle or overflowing flood waters. Ideas like “mighty” or “prevailing” capture something of the significance of the word. Interestingly, it is fronted in the Hebrew text for emphasis, so that literally the verse reads, “Is mighty over us His steadfast love.” God floods His children with His love.
* Now, how do we apply this to God’s mission to reach the nations? Missions is telling the nations to praise and extol Christ and then giving them the evidence for why they should do so. We don’t just say “glorify the one true and living Christ.” We give them good biblical and theological reasons why they should. This God is a God of love. He love you. He loves me. He loves the world (John 3:16). First John 4:8 and 16 tells us love is the essence of His nature and character. Our God is a God of love.

Paton had one particular moment when the truth of this verse was especially precious. When his life was again in danger, he was directed to climb and hide in a chestnut tree. At the mercy of the natives, he did as he was told. Here is his description of what transpired: “Being entirely at the mercy of such doubtful and vacillating friends, I, though perplexed, felt if best to obey. I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush. The hours I spend there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets, and the yells of the Savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe as in the arms of Jesus. Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among those chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior’s spiritual presence, to enjoy His consoling fellowship. If thus thrown back upon your own soul, alone, all alone, in the midnight, in the bush, in the very embrace of death itself, have you a Friend that will not fail you then?” (200). Our God is a God of steadfast love.

2) Our God is a God of faithfulness.

* If our Lord’s steadfast love is great, His faithfulness is eternal, everlasting, it endures forever. God made a promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 that all the earth, all the peoples, would be blessed by his descendents. From Abraham came Israel. From Israel came Jesus. God kept His word.
* The word “faithfulness” is *emet* and is often translated as “truth.” The word means “to be firm or unshakable.” Of course the two ideas are inter-related. If He is always truth it is because He is always faithful, and if He is always faithful, it is because He is always true.
* What God has promised to do for us in Christ is as certain and sure today as on the day He made them. And, it will always be this way, now and forever. God’s character cannot change and His promises cannot be broken.
* These truths clearly captured the heart of John Paton and moved him to put it all on the line for King Jesus. Let him speak for himself:
* “Nothing so clears the vision and lifts up the life, as a decision to move forward in what you know to be entirely the will of the Lord.”
* “Our continuous danger caused me now oftentimes to sleep with my clothes oh, that I might start at a moment’s warning. May faithful dog Clutha would give a sharp bark and awake me….God made them fear this precious creature, and often used her in saving our lives” (178)…[not a cat!].
* “My enemies seldom slackened their hateful designs against my life, however calmed or baffled for the moment…. A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in his hands, and felt immortal till my work was done. Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; (*Autobiography*, 117).
* “…when natives in large numbers were assembled at my house, a man furiously rushed on me with his axe but a Kaserumini Chief snatched a spade with which I had been working, and dexterously defended me from instant death. Life in such circumstances led me to cling very near to the Lord Jesus; I knew not, for one brief hour, when or how attack might be made; and yet, with my trembling hand clasped in the hand once nailed on Calvary, and now swaying the scepter of the universe, calmness and peace and resignation abode in my soul” (*Autobiography*, 117).

Few have known better than John Paton that our Lord’s great steadfast love and faithfulness endures forever!

Conclusion: 1) Derek Kidner was right when he said, “this tiny psalm is great in faith, and its reach is enormous” (411). He is also correct when he notes it finds its prophetic fulfillment in Revelation 7:9-10 where we read, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” Such a promise should drive us. It certainly drove John Paton.

2) John Paton’s take on life is best summarized in these words: “God gave his best, his Son, to me; and I give back my best, my all, to him.” (*Autobiography*, 444). What a wonderful way to think! What a wonderful way to live! What a wonderful way to die! May God, by His grace and for His glory, raise up more John Paton’s so that as Spurgeon said, “no one tribe of men shall be underrepresented in the universal song which shall ascent unto the Lord of all” (*TOD*, vol. 3, 97).