

**Message from the Master**, Broadcast Date: **January 13, 2008**

**Sermon Series:** Little Psalms for Big Problems

**This Sermon:** [Big Problem] = Fickle Love – Faithful Lord (Psalm 117)

**Speaker:** Forrest Bivens

“They say if you only stop looking/ Love will come knock on your gate/ But I say love is fickle/ And I'm getting tired of the wait/ Yes, I say love is fickle/ And I'm getting tired of the wait.” These are lyrics of a popular rock song (sung by Eileen Hazel) on the obvious subject of fickle love. They are by no means the only song lyrics on the subject that may be found on the lips of popular singers. The Dixie Chicks, a familiar Country Western singing group, sing these words: “Oh love, oh love you fickle thing/Such pretty words and golden rings/It was a broken dream right from the start/ Bless their tortured, tangled hearts.” With rhyme and rhythm they sing about “a blast of confusion coupled with delusion” as people break promises of love to people and in doing so break hearts and shatter happiness. Too often the result is, as the song puts it, “tortured, tangled hearts.” And I doubt if there is a person listening to this that doesn't know the feeling to some degree or isn't aware that fickle love may be found everywhere in our society and world.

We are this morning in a series of sermons that speak of “big problems” that confront us in life – and the problem we focus on today is that of Fickle Love, undependable or short-lived love that lacks long-term commitment. We professing Christians are not immune to the problem – and sometimes find ourselves giving as well as receiving fickle love. But our primary focus is on “little psalms” from the Bible that offer a solution or remedy for the big problems that we face. And this morning's focus is on Psalm 117 – the shortest psalm of them all. In this small package is a great gift: the reminder of God's faithfulness and faithful love for us and those around us. Here are the words of this short yet delightful Psalm 117:

**<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.**

That's it. Two short verses and 29 simple words in English. It is a straightforward invitation and command to all people, all nations, to praise and speak highly of the Lord. And it gives the main reason why we should all do this. It is because of the faithfulness and love of God that endures forever. Psalm 117 is the seventh in a collection of praise psalms (often called Hallel Psalms to reflect the Hebrew vocabulary) This series began with Psalm 111. This one is probably intended to serve as a doxology and conclusion to the whole group. Perhaps it was written as a separate psalm so that it could be used as a doxology for a variety of occasions, much like our traditional, so-called “common doxology” – “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” Professor John Brug wrote, “This is the littlest psalm of them all, but it is gigantic in its theme. This little gem sweeps across space and time. It echoes from one end of the world to the other. It embraces all the peoples and brings hallelujahs to the heathen. It celebrates love and mercy that stretch beyond time into eternity.” Yes, it does all this. The message of God's faithful love is the best answer to human fickle love. **This is a message we desperately need, a message intended for all mankind, and a message that is directed to each of us individually.**

**This is a message we desperately need.** The problem of fickle or here-today-and-gone-tomorrow love in our world is nothing new or unusual to people. I recently stumbled across a New York Times article from a full 125 years ago – from September of 1882. It told of a lawsuit being brought a German Reformed pastor in Pennsylvania – and the charge was breach of promise. It seems that during his seminary student days the pastor had lived with a family, had become close to a daughter in the family, and apparently made promises of undying love and marriage after he had finished his schooling. At it turned out, however, he had met another young woman and married her soon after his graduation and ordination – and the abandoned woman was now bringing him to court for having broken promises and being cruel and giving false hope. I suspect such a story made the New York Times primarily because it involved the clergy, who are often juicy targets for the public press, but I cannot imagine that this sad story was or is such a rare one in our world. Today’s court system likely wouldn’t even entertain such a lawsuit unless it expected to be flooded with legal cases and was willing to deal with an almost endless number of broken promises and an almost equal number of “tortured, tangled hearts” that may be found among us.

Love is in large part an emotion and emotions are often quite changeable and changing. Broken promises and broken hearts may be traced back to Adam and Even following their fall into sin. Animosity, suspicion, and self-love riding roughshod over love for the other person were early evidences of human alienation from God and from each other. Fickle love is a big problem in human relationship everywhere – in the business world as well as in romantic relationships and family ties. As someone has put it, “Love is like an antique vase. It's hard to find, hard to get, yet easy to break.” The Bible is also quick to add this clarifying truth: “Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). Fickle love is a pervasive problem because of our broken and inexcusable separation from and rebellion against God. Our failure to be and behave as he has commanded breeds lovelessness and selfishness. That’s my main problem and yours – and it is the deadly disease that afflicts all mankind. Fickle love is not funny; it is fatal to the hope of eternal life, because it reflects sin and **is** sin. And that is why the message of Psalm 117 is so valuable and needed.

And something else: **This is a message intended for all mankind.** Here again are the words of the psalm: **Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.** The words are directed to all nations and all mankind. Interestingly, this is a psalm that was used whenever Israel celebrated the Passover. It reminded the Israelites that the Lord is not a God only for them, but for all people. St. Paul, in Romans chapter 15, refers to this psalm to explain the basis of his missionary work among the Gentiles. God loves and actively seeks to inform all nations and peoples of his saving love in Jesus Christ. His faithful and enduring love is just what the world needs – and precisely what the world receives in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is an illustrative story that has been around for quite a while, one that reminds us of the unique love and saving activity of our Lord Jesus for everyone. It is the story of a person who lost his footing & fell into a deep ditch filled with mud. He kept sinking deeper & deeper in the mud. The more he struggled to get out of the ditch, the deeper he sank. As he was sinking in the

mud various philosophers and religious gurus came by. Buddha, Confucius, Joseph Smith of the Mormons, Charles Taze Russel of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science, holy men from Hinduism and Moslems representing Allah of Islam – these kept passing by, looking at the man sinking in the mud and mire, and offering their best counsel. But the similarity of their advice and offers of assistance were obvious. "My, what a predicament you are in. Here is a paper that tells you ten ways to get out of ditches! You are in a terrible condition, but I have good news for you. If you'll take 5 steps toward me, I'll take 5 steps down to meet you, and then together we will walk out of the ditch." The man trapped in the mire started reading, eventually tried all ways to get out of the ditch, and eventually learned that he really couldn't take the 5 steps (or even one step) to begin the saving process." The dying man discovered that the harder he tried, the deeper he sank. The more he struggled, the more frustrated he became as hope faded. Then, then Jesus came by. Jesus looked at him, took off his crown and his royal robes, and got down in the ditch with him and carried him fully up and out of the mud and mire of the deadly pit. He did this freely and fully, all in love. And he then assured the rescued person, "I will never leave you or forsake you. I will be with you always, to the end of the age." All of this is to say that if we are looking for a definition of love, we should look not in a dictionary, but at Calvary. All of mankind is invited to look to Jesus, behold this true God becoming a human being, contemplate his humble life and innocent death endured on our behalf, and see this as God's way of lifting us up and giving us safety along with forgiveness of sins. As the poet has expressed it: "From sinking sand He lifted me. With tender hands He lifted me. From shades of night to plains of light. Oh praise His name, He lifted me." That is what love means. It means that Jesus Christ has lifted us out of the muck & the mire of our sin, and has put our feet on solid ground. The Bible puts it this way: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10).

**Finally, we note that this is a message directed to each of us individually.** The fact that God's faithful love is for the whole world means it applies to you and me personally. Christian writer Max Lucado put it this way: "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, your photo would be in it." That's a nice way of reminding ourselves that each of us remains fully known and special to him. I recall reading about a mother who was asked by a census taker how many children she had. She responded, "Well, there's Scott and William and Jennifer and..." "Never mind the names," the man interrupted, "Just give me the number!" The mother, becoming indignant, replied, "They haven't got numbers; they've all got names." Our saving God, who knows how many we are still calls us by name and knows us intimately and loves us faithfully, forever.

This faithful love for mankind and for us individually is precisely what is needed to be understood and appreciated among us if the problem of fickle love is to be addressed in a helpful way. Only those who know and embrace and rejoice in God's love for them and Christ's saving work for them are given the power to rise above petty, selfish, and unreliable love. "We love because he first loved us" is the simple yet profound message of the Bible. If we do not love God first, we cannot love our neighbor as ourselves in any suitable or consistent way. Talking about our desire for faithful love doesn't bring it about. The gospel of Jesus Christ does. It not only reminds us we were a lot worse off in our sin than we once thought, but it also assures us we are loved and so much better off than we could have imagined. God's faithful and enduring love is at

the heart of it. And the invitation of Psalm 117 remains very much in place. **Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord.**

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we confess our weak and shallow expressions of love toward you and our neighbor. We also acknowledge your strong and saving love in Christ for us and all people. In your love, forgive us and assure us of pardon, peace, and give us the power to love with a love that better reflects yours. Lead us and many others to praise you as our eternally loving Lord God. Also hear us as we join to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.