

Selah

There is a very interesting word that is *in* the text of the Psalm we just read, although some translations choose to relegate it to a footnote (as ‘Today’s New International Version’, which we just read from.) The word is *Selah*. It occurs just after verse 3. The footnote in the TNIV says “The Hebrew has *Selah* here (a word of uncertain meaning).”

Some translations of the Bible simply place the word in the text as is, and don’t translate it. So if we were reading this in the New American Standard Version, we’d read: “May He remember all your meal offerings and find your burnt offering acceptable! *Selah*.” Same thing for the KJV and some others.

I don’t know of a version that actually tries to translate the word. If you dig into the scholarly writings on this you quickly begin to understand why it is that the translators put it in a footnote, or just ignore it. We find lots of theories - everything from “*the original Hebrew meaning has been lost*,” to, “*Jewish scholars agree it means ‘forever’*”. Others are convinced that it is simply a musical rubric – i.e., an instruction that tells the singers, or the choir director something about how to sing, or lead the Psalm at this point in public worship.

One ‘guess’ is that it means “lift up” – and I’ve read everything in that regard from “make your voice go higher” (as in chanting) or like on one of the jazz charts I used to play... you’d come across a note that would say (...*to flute, or to clarinet*), so, ‘lift up your instrument’. So many guesses!

And it’s not like the word is only used once or twice, so we can’t get an accurate feel for it. In fact, we find *Selah* 77 times in the book of Psalms, and 3 times in a poetic section of Habakkuk’s prophecy.

Now, you know me by now (I hope) well enough to understand that not having an explanation for a word that shows up so frequently in Scripture would... bother me! So, I’ve done a little digging around about this and I found something very interesting; and something that I hope will have meaning to you as well, here on this day that we set aside each year to celebrate God’s gift of music, as we focus on the importance of the act of worship in general.

What I discovered was that the word *Selah*, [celah], comes from a primary Hebrew root word [calah]

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which literally means ‘to hang,’ and by implication, to measure or weigh.

Now that’s not a big stretch when we think about it: in Biblical times, money, food and other valuable things were ‘weighed’ by hanging them or suspending them on a type of balance (something like our measuring scale) to determine their value. We find an example of this word [calah] in the book of Job, indicating something which is measured. Job 28:15-16 (The reference here is to ‘wisdom’)

*It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed out in silver.
It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, with precious onyx or sapphire.*

The word translated “bought” here is this word, [calah] and it means “measured against.” In this context, God is telling us that wisdom “cannot be *measured against* the gold of Ophir, or with precious onyx, or sapphire.” I.e., wisdom cannot be measured with the gold of Ophir. Because it is *beyond* that value. They don’t compare, you can’t buy wisdom with gold. We see this very same illustration again in other places in Job.

As this is then the root of our word “selah” it carries with it this meaning of ‘measuring’. So that tells us that *selah* is in these Scriptures to signal the reader to ‘measure’ carefully the meaning of what has been said. i.e., “here is some deep wisdom: *reflect on it* and understand its true meaning.” So, as we talked about a number of weeks ago, just as the Hebrew word Amen [*amen*] is an exclamation of confidence or truth and certainty of what has been said, so *selah* [celah], is an exclamation that we should measure and reflect upon what has been said.

So then, a good translation of *selah* might be, “Think about this”. Stop right here... pause. In a sense it *is* then, a musical instruction – but in a bigger sense it is much more than that. It is a *life* instruction, it is a worship instruction. Selah... ‘think about this’. Let this truth ‘soak in’ to your soul.

With pretty near every couple I marry here in the church, at some point in the pre-marital counseling I take them up here in the Chancel, and we stand in front of the Altar. And I explain my function as a pastor in a wedding service: my ‘job’ is to conduct a worship service in which the couple marry *themselves* by making public vows of commitment before God and witnesses. I don’t function as a *priest*, so there is no moment in a marriage service when I say the word, and ‘poof’ *now* they are

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married. That is not a Protestant understanding of marriage.

So, I tell them... if there is any moment in a wedding service when we could say, ‘You were not married *before* this, but now you *are* married’ it comes just after the exchange of their unconditional vows and the symbolism of that in the exchange of rings.

Then we walk up to the Altar and I show them in the Bible here how in the Psalms we come across this word, *Selah*... and how it is inviting us to “pause”. To “think about this”. To reflect on this deep truth. And I say, “You know, having just committed yourselves to one another for the rest of your lives, that would be a *selah* moment, would it not? And we’re then going to do that in this wedding service – we’re going to pause right here. We’re going to stop everything and give you a chance to breathe in the reality of your new situation in life.”

So the new couple will kneel right here... and typically Glenn will play softly. Because so frequently music is the language of *selah*. But the service pretty much comes to a halt. And we just pause. We consider. *We think about it.* Selah.

My point today is pretty simple, and I think you can surely see it coming... I wonder how many of us build *selah* moments into our lives generally? Because you know, the fact that David and the other Psalm writers felt the need to *write* this instruction into these Psalms kind of says to me that we just may not do it otherwise. It may not be something that we do without conscious effort.

We all know how busy life can get – and I’ll tell you, even retired people, children, *everybody* in our society today seems to be dealing with overload. We (Americans) are the hardest working people (hourwise) in the industrial world. We are living in a world of constant information overload – and technology comes up with new ways almost daily of ramming more information down our throats.

And you know, I’m a ‘techy’ guy, I love my wireless internet, PDA’s, and emails, IM’s, cell phones, texting and all that. I’ve had a FaceBook page for awhile but I’m resisting Twitter. For the time being. I love books and newspapers, too – (you know, those old fashioned things made out of wood pulp with words on in ink.) I love to gather information, to study. But I also realize that if we’re not careful we can become *so* connected, so full of raw information, that we *lose ourselves*. We lose the ability to

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process the things we're taking in. We lose the context, and a steady frame of reference.

We need space to do that. We need to breathe. We need to pause, to think about important things. To process deep truths. To let them 'soak in', so to speak. I think we need to contemplate.

We need *Selah*.

Now more than ever.

Author and pastor Eugene Peterson writes:

“Two commands direct us from the small-minded world of self-help to the large world of God’s help. First, “Come, behold the works of the Lord.” Take a long, scrutinizing look at what God is doing. This requires patient attentiveness and energetic concentration. Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works. But what of God’s works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable, if we simply look. They are everywhere. They are marvelous. But God has no public relations agency. He mounts no publicity campaign to get our attention. He simply invites us to look ...

The second command is “Be still, and know that I am God.” Be still. Quit rushing through the streets long enough to become aware that there is more to life than our little self-help enterprises. When we are noisy and when we are hurried, we are incapable of intimacy—deep, complex, personal relationships. If God is the living center of redemption, it is essential that we be in touch with and responsive to that personal will. If God has a will for this world and we want to be in on it, we must be still long enough to find out what it is (for we certainly are not going to learn by watching the evening news). Baron von Hugel, who had a wise word on most subjects, always held out that “nothing was ever accomplished in a stampede.”¹

Amen!

So, I think it would be an appropriate thing to not just talk about this, but to do it. A little practice. I have short video clip I'd like to share with you... let the truth *soak in*. “Be still and know... he is God.”

(FaithVisuals.com video based on Matthew 11: 28 – 30)

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Earth and Altar* (InterVarsity Press, 1985), pp. 77-79

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“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

....Selah...