

The Mountain Retreat

FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions

Frequently Asked Questions
About Christianity, Answered
Honestly!

What Does Selah Mean

-by Tony Warren

What does the word Selah mean? There has been much conjecture and speculation by some theologians, and due in no small part to this speculation, Christians are frequently confused as to the true meaning of this word. Having been told everything from, "*the original Hebrew has been lost,*" to "*Jewish scholars agree it means forever,*" it's easy to understand their confusion. In addition, many are assured that because this word appears only in the psalms and a poetic section of Habakkuk (which is not true), they are justified in "assuming" that it is just a musical term indicating an interlude. I have even read that Selah is from an Aramaic word, and it really means worship. All of which serves not to enlighten the Church, but to confuse the issue.

With all of these "experts" making such contradictory statements, one tends to wonder, "*can we even really know what Selah means?*" The answer to this question I believe is yes. And the answer really shouldn't be subjective or left to conjecture, for there is much we can learn about this word from the Hebrew in which it is written, from allowing the scripture to be its own dictionary, and from comparing scripture with scripture and allowing God to be His own interpreter. All of these things can give us a solid illustration of this word's true meaning.

Selah, [*celah*], is from the primary Hebrew root word [*calah*] which means '*to hang,*' and by implication to measure (weigh). This is readily understood because in Biblical history, money, food and other valuables were 'weighed' by hanging or suspending them on a type of balance (the equivalent of our measuring scale) to determine their value. We find an example of this word [*calah*] as it is literally translated 'valued,' in the book of Job, indicating that which is measured.

Job 28:15-16

- "It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof.
- It cannot be **valued** with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire."

The word translated valued is the exact same Hebrew word [*calah*], and it quite obviously means "measured against." In this context, God is telling us that wisdom "cannot be **measured** against the gold of Ophir, with the

precious onyx, or the sapphire." Here the translation 'valued' is to illustrate the *measuring* of something for an exchange. i.e. wisdom cannot be measured with the gold of Ophir. It is beyond that value. In verse nineteen we see this very same illustration again.

Job 28:19

- "The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be *valued* with pure gold."

Again, this word translated valued is the Hebrew word [*calah*] meaning measured. This passage is declaring of wisdom that, "The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither can it be *measured* against pure gold." In other words, it is beyond comparison or measuring against. And by these type examples of comparing scripture with scripture, noting a word's context, and how it relates to other words, we can very easily begin to see the true meaning of words. And in this context, this means "measured" against something else, illustrating that wisdom cannot be measured, not even with with pure gold.

So seeing that this Hebrew word [*calah*] means to 'measure,' as in weighing something in the balances, we better understand how the word Selah [*celah*], which is derived from it, is illustrating that we should measure or value what has been said. In other words, just as we would say today, the diplomat should, "*weigh what he says carefully.*" Or if we were to say that, "*The lawyer measured his words to the Jury.*" Or again, if we said, "*we should consider the Professor's words wisely.*" All those sentences are speaking of the very same thing. And the word [*celah*] is used in this very same way. It is an illustration that we should 'measure' or value carefully what has just been said. And you may not realize this (because it's so seldom brought to light), but it is not only in the Psalms and Habakkuk, it is also a word which is used in the lamentations of Jerusalem. And of course, it is 'hardly' illustrating a musical stop or poetic notation there.

Lamentations 1:15

- "The Lord *hath trodden under foot* all my mighty men in the midst of me: he hath called an assembly against me to crush my young men: the Lord hath trodden the virgin, the daughter of Judah, as in a winepress."

The four words translated '*hath trodden under foot*' is actually the very same Hebrew word Selah [*celah*]. Here in the lamentations or mourning of Jerusalem, God is illustrating that the Lord has "measured" or weighed all the mighty men in the midst of her. In other words, it is an illustration that they were weighed in the balances, and found wanting (Daniel 5:27), thus their judgement is required. So again we see the word is illustrating measured. And just so that there is no confusion, note carefully that the second part of that verse where it says the Lord hath "trodden [*darak*] the virgin," is an entirely different word, and indeed means to tread. No doubt in this context, this is why it was thought the word [*celah*] should also be translated trodden.

As we know, this word is extensively used in the Psalms. And the reason is because the psalms are a prayer

book, divinely-inspired songs of the people of Israel, often messianic, allegorical, and historically parabolic. That is to say, history, replete with spiritual meanings. The Selah is there to signal the believer to 'measure' carefully the meaning of what has been said. i.e., here is wisdom, reflect and understand. 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.

Psalms 4:4

- "Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah."

Psalms 9:20

- "Put them in fear, O LORD: that the nations may know themselves to be but men. Selah."

Psalms 57:6

- "They have prepared a net for my steps; my soul is bowed down: they have digged a pit before me, into the midst whereof they are fallen themselves. Selah."

Psalms 62:8

- "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. Selah."

Psalms 89:3-4

- "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant,
- Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah."

Whether of urging our meditation upon our sinfulness, declaring God is our refuge, or speaking in 'types' about Christ, this word is an exhortation for us to be wise and measure or weigh what has been said that we understand. It is used in the Psalms seventy-three times, and is also used in Habakkuk three times. Each time it is illustrating that we should measure wisely or '*weigh*' solemnly what is said.

Habakkuk 3:13

- "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah."

This is not a passage to pass over lightly as just a simple narrative. Here is wisdom and spiritual understanding. Whenever we see this word in scripture, we should understand that the Lord is exhorting us to 'weigh' these things thoughtfully, and to reflect and consider in good sense judgment, what is 'really' being said.

And despite claims to the contrary, there is no substantive Biblical evidence that Selah is an interrupter to pause the music while voices continue, nor is there sound evidence that it is for the pausing of voices while the music continues. These ideas are based upon the conjecture and theories of it being a music stop. It is a presupposition rather an well researched conclusion. But what we do know is that it is a word which means to weigh or measure. And in these contexts, to weigh the preceding Word of God and wisely consider them. It is a signature exhortation from God for our thoughtful reflection and weighing of what we have just read.

Selah

..may the Lord who is gracious above all, give us wisdom and understanding, and guide us all into the truth of His Holy Word.

Amen!

Peace,

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