

## **Things to Think About on Your Way to Church**

### **Psalm 123**

### **We're going to meet the God who is merciful**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

#### **The context of Psalm 123 in the Psalms of Ascents**

We continue today with the study of the Psalms of Ascents and will be considering Psalm 123. The fifteen songs from Psalm 120 to 134 are Songs of Ascents or Songs of Degrees and were sung by the children of Israel either on their journey towards Jerusalem on the occasions of their three great feasts, or in going up to the hill on which the temple stood.

The Book of Psalms were written from a Jewish point of view, and they reveal the prophetic history of Israel through their highs and lows. We read of their many blessings and also of their sorrows, afflictions and the chastening that they had and will endure. In many of the Psalms we also see that they speak of Christ, His sufferings, His feelings as the Son of Man; and concerning the Glory of God. While they are predominantly for the Jew in a future day, there are many things that we as Christian believers in the Church today can find in them. Solace, comfort and guidance from spending time in reading and studying all the Psalms, so let us turn to Psalm 123 and read it together.

Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until He has mercy on us. Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud.

This Psalm is the fourth in the series of the Songs of Ascents and in these psalms we can see that as the people of Israel start their journey to Jerusalem, they have a greater appreciation of who it is they are going to meet. In Psalm 120 the writer looks around at the situation he is in and cries to the Lord for help. In Psalm 121 he lifts his eyes up to the hills and looks for earthly blessings. In Psalm 122 he finds a peace in the city, but when we come to Psalm 123 we find that he lifts his eyes above this earthly scene and fixes his gaze on the Lord God. It is an upward look, above this weary world to the heavens where the throne of God is. This is where he will find his help because his help is from the Lord.

These pilgrims were travelling along hazardous roads which would have sapped their energy and would have made their journey a weary one. They lifted their spirits by singing these songs as they travelled along. Dear Christian friend we need to lift our voices in praise and worship to the Lord to lift our spirits as we travel along life's path, especially as we go to church meetings. It not only cheers the soul, but I'm sure that as we individually, or collectively, raise our voices and sing hymns and Christian songs, we chase the devil away as he cannot stand to hear of the One who

loved us, who gave His life for us, and who watches over us on our journey homeward to heaven. Psalm 123 is a call for mercy especially for protection from those around who were despising and treating the Jews with contempt.

### **Who do we look up to?**

In verse 1 the psalmist begins with the highest note:

Unto You I lift up my eyes.

His focus was on Jehovah his God, the covenant keeping God who reigns above. Jehoshaphat was one who had his eyes on the Lord in 2 Chronicles chapter 20 when the Moabites and Ammonites came to fight Judah. We read in verse 12:

O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You.

The question we should ask ourselves is, "Who do we look up to?" This world is full of people who are held in esteem for what they say or do, and as believers we can often be looking at what this world has to offer rather than having the Lord Jesus as our main focus as we travel on our pilgrim pathway. Jehoshaphat certainly knew that there was only one Source of help and his eyes looked to God. Hebrews 12 vv. 1 and 2 tells us where we should be looking:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Life is not easy and sometimes Christians have to bare the contempt of this world both as individuals and as a collective body, the Church. There are many so called intellectual people who try to disprove what the Bible teaches that it can become very hard for young believers or children from Christian families as they get spoon fed false teachings in schools and from the media. Not only is it from unbelievers, but we can even see nowadays how some of those in Christendom pour scorn on those who are holding fast to the word of God. Let us then take some encouragement from Psalm 123 and let us lift our eyes heavenward to look to the Lord for mercy and for guidance in our pilgrim pathway. The words of the well-known chorus I learnt when I was young remains ever true:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
Look full in His wonderful face  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of His glory and grace

The second verse goes on to say:

Keep your eyes upon Jesus  
Let nobody else take His place  
And hour by hour you will know His power  
Until at last you see Him face to face.

Helen Howarth Lemmel (1863-1961)

## **God's hand**

The psalmist not only encourages us to look at the Lord, but in verse 2 he brings us to look at God's hand. There are some different views on how to interpret the picture of the servant and the master which depends on the kind of relationship between them. Some see it as a picture of a relationship of fear by the servant towards his master. The other thought, which better fits the message of Psalm 123, is that in ancient Eastern culture, the relationship of master and servant was one in which the master of the house would not give verbal commands to his servants, but he would use hand signals to which the servants would then respond to carry out the task. For this to work smoothly the servant would have to learn very quickly what was meant by the different signals to be able to carry out the command. The servants would have their focus on the hand of the master or mistress so that they could immediately carry out their will. As followers of the Lord Jesus, we should not only be gazing on His face but should be looking at His hands for guidance and our response should be one of obedience. Those servants of old knew what the master wanted them to do. Many Christians, especially those new to the faith, often ask the question, "How do I know what God wants me to do?" To be of fruitful service for the Lord there are some things that are necessary.

## **God's Guiding hand**

The first thing that is necessary is that we have to get to know the Master. By studying the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, is where we will find out who God is, and by reading about the Lord Jesus we can fully understand the character of God. Scripture tells us that as newborn believers we must start with the milk of the Word, but we have to progress on to solid food if we want to come to a full understanding of the ways of God (see Hebrews 6:12-13). There are many believers who are happy with the milk, but as we learn more there is a responsibility to be obedient to what the Word tells us so that we can be guided into doing the right service for the Lord. To be of any use in our secular employment we have to learn how to do the job correctly. So also to be a profitable servant in the work of the Lord, the Bible clearly tells us that we have to "be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2 v. 15).

Secondly, we need to pray and to tell God that we are willing to be used in His service and to be obedient to His commands. Proverbs 3 v. 6 says:

In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths.

There is a time of waiting on the Lord as we prayerfully think on our path ahead before we decide what to do. No matter where we are on life's journey, either on the mountain top where everything is rosy or in the valley in deepest despair, the hand of the Lord is there to guide us. Psalm 139 vv. 9 -10 say:

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.

The hand of the Lord not only directs us, but it also provides for our needs. The servant knows that it is the master who provides for all his needs, so too the Lord is the One who abundantly has and will provide for us. It is noticeable that the psalmist changes from the personal to inclusion of all who are faithful and are treading the same path. In the first verse of Psalm 123 it is the singular "I", but in verse 2 onwards he brings others in – "the eyes of servants" and "our eyes look to the LORD." As the people of God who look towards the Master or as the humble servants look to their masters or mistresses waiting for the sign, we eagerly wait and are sensitive to the Lord's specific guidance in our lives.

## **God's hand in the Psalms**

The word 'hand' is mentioned many times in the Bible – far too many to mention all, but here are some quotes from the Psalms:

Psalm 10 v. 12, "O God lift up Your hand! Do not forget the humble."

Psalm 31 v. 15, "My times are in Your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies."

Psalm 17 v. 7, "Show Your marvellous loving kindness by Your right hand, O You who save those who trust in you."

Psalm 37 vv. 23-24, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds him with His hand."

Psalm 95 v. 7, "For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand."

Psalm 145 vv. 15-16, "The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing."

What a wonderful loving and caring Lord we have who knows our needs and His hand provides. He knows all about us, and if your soul is filled with anger or with hurt, or you may be filled with loneliness or you may be bitter at those around you, then lift your eyes to the Lord and seek his mercy and know that in His graciousness He will provide. There is no one greater to turn to than the One who is enthroned on high. The author of Psalm 123 knew to turn to the almighty God, the One who made the heavens and the earth. We also read the words of the Lord Jesus to His disciples as He teaches them to pray in Matthew 6 vv. 9-13 that the One to address is seated in the heavens.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

## **Waiting for God's Guidance**

There is one word in verse 2 of Psalm 123 that is often overlooked and it is the word "until." When the pilgrims prayed to the Lord, they understood that there may be a time of waiting before they received their answers. Sometimes we look for immediate answers to our prayers, but God has everything under His control. Therefore, we may need to learn some lessons along the way before He opens His hand in blessing.

A biblical illustration of one who waited is found in Esther. Esther had to go to King Ahasuerus to plead for mercy for her people, the Jews. She went to the king's court uninvited and at great risk to her own life. The king could have signalled her death with a stroke of his hand so she had to wait and watch to see if she was spared and could enter into his presence. Esther was spared and she was able to help her people overcome the evil ones who wanted to destroy them. We do not have to go to the Lord in fear as He welcomes us to come into His presence so that we may in faith bring our requests to Him.

In the remaining verses of Psalm 123, the psalmist knows that all that is required, when in the hardest of circumstances, is God's mercy. As the people were making their way to Jerusalem to worship God, they knew that He was to be a loving and caring God and a God of mercy. Their desire for Him to have mercy on them is repeated three times, twice as a direct cry (vv. 2-3). The people of Israel were being mocked and persecuted for their faith, and they were desperate for help. The well of God's mercy never dries up and as the pressures in our lives build up, we ought to take our concerns to the Lord in prayer. It may be stress at work, or that we are troubled with sickness or disease, it may be family conflicts that are causing concern, or there may be the death of a loved one. We know that there is hope, because the mercy of God is new every morning and

if we call upon the Lord, He is faithful and waiting to dispense mercy to those that love Him. His mercy may come by relieving a situation or it may be that He gives us strength to overcome, or there may even be a change of heart from those who trouble us.

### **The mercy of God**

The mercy of God is often referred to in the Bible by other words like “compassion”, “loving kindness”, or “favour”; and we see all those characteristics in the Lord Jesus. We receive mercy from God only because of what the Lord Jesus suffered as our Saviour. The Lord came as a Man into this world but was rejected by His own people, Israel. They chose Barabbas - a thief, and cried, “Away with Him [Jesus] and, “We will not have this man to reign over us.” He endured shame and reproach from all mankind. He was wounded, beaten, spat upon, and nailed to a cross of Calvary. There He bore the wrath of a righteous and Holy God as He paid the price for our redemption. Mercy is the gift of God’s undeserved kindness and compassion so when we pray, “Lord have mercy on me”, the answer from God is “I will”, but only because of what the Lord Jesus has done. There is a hymn some often sing “Man of Sorrows What a name” and the second and fourth verses tell us this:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned He stood,  
Sealed my pardon with His blood,  
Hallelujah, what a Saviour.

Lifted up was He to die,  
It is finished was His cry.  
Now in heaven exalted high  
Hallelujah, what a Saviour.

P.P. Bliss(1838-76)

When we come as a sinner to Jesus for salvation, we have to humble ourselves. In Luke chapter 18, the Lord Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector who both went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee’s prayer was all about himself, boasting in what he had done but in verse 13 we read,

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner!”

If there is anyone listening to this message today who is still not saved, then confess that you are a sinner and accept Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. He is ever waiting and willing to receive all that humble themselves and cry for mercy.

We ought to be mindful that there is a day coming soon when that mercy will no longer be available. We read in Genesis 6 v. 3,

And the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever”;

and in Exodus 34 vv. 6-7, the words of the Lord God to Moses,

And the LORD passed before Him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty.

To those of us who are believers and have been shown the grace of God, let us, like the psalmist in our portion of scripture today, Psalm 123, lift up our eyes and gaze upon our Saviour, and worship Him. As we close our message today, let us lift our eyes above this earthly scene to worship our God and Father and His beloved Son the Lord Jesus, for the loving kindness that is bestowed upon us. When we open our hearts in praise and worship, then He will gladly open His nail pierced hands to fit us for service in this present scene.

### **His mercy is more**

As we continue our pathway of ascent towards our heavenly home, or meanwhile as we go to church meetings, I would like to leave with you ([see mp3](#)) the words of the hymn “His Mercy is More”<sup>1</sup>. The co-author of the hymn, Matt Papa, said that “Praise the Lord” is the real emotion that we should feel – that mercy “welcomes the weakest, the vilest, the poor” and allows us all to celebrate the fact that His mercy is more.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Psalm 123, talk number T1455, entitled “We’re going to meet the God who is merciful” in the series “Things to Think About on Your Way to Church.”

### Footnotes

1. Matt Boswell & Matt Papa. © 2016 GETTY MUSIC HYMNS AND SONGS / Getty MUSIC Publishing / Love Your Enemies Publishing / Messenger Hymns (Admin. by Song Solutions [www.songsolutions.org](http://www.songsolutions.org))

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