

Looking to God for Mercy

Psalm 123

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A Song of Ascents.

*To you I lift up my eyes,
 O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
 Behold, as the eyes of servants
 look to the hand of their master,
 as the eyes of a maidservant
 to the hand of her mistress,
 so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
 till he has mercy upon us.*

*Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
 for we have had more than enough of contempt.
 Our soul has had more than enough
 of the scorn of those who are at ease,
 of the contempt of the proud.*

Apparently, most of us think other people are much happier and have much less misery in their lives than we do. While this is not a new phenomenon, social media has apparently only made it worse. In his sermon on Psalm 123, Josh Squires cites a 2011 study by Stanford University, published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, which reported that students at Stanford consistently underestimated the number of bad experiences their peers had and overestimated the number of good experiences they had. Even more, the study found that this made students feel worse about themselves – after all, if everyone else around them had a better life than they did, why wouldn't they feel miserable about it. Perhaps social media has just made more widespread and prevalent a practice Christians have been carrying out on Sunday mornings for years – acting like everything in life is great, even when it's not. (Of course, that 2011 Stanford study came from the pre-political days of Facebook, when people actually shared about their life experiences on social media.)

Psalm 123 is the 4th in the Songs of Ascents, and with it we come to the presence of God – from starting off on the journey in Psalm 120, to heading up the hill climb to Jerusalem in Psalm 121, to entering the city gates of Jerusalem in Psalm 122, to now entering the presence of God in worship. Yet Psalm 123 is also the beginning of a second series of 3 psalms. Psalms 120-122 form the first trio of these Songs, moving from despair to hopeful longing to joy; now Psalm 123 moves us back to despair again, but it is an even more worshipful and God-centered despair.

One thing we learn, if we connect the despair of Psalm 120 to the despair of Psalm 123 is that when we come to God, enter His presence and lift our eyes to Him, we should not come pretending as if our lives are free from pain and sorrow. Even though we come to give thanks, as we saw last week in Psalm 122, still we come honest and even desperate before God, as Psalm 123 models for us.

Where Our Eyes Look

The first issue addressed in Psalm 123 is the issue of our eyes –

*To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*

1. To You

Notice where the psalmist has fixed his attention – on God. “To You” is in the emphatic position in the Hebrew. It comes first in the Psalm to emphasize the importance. It’s not “I lift up my eyes to You,” but “To You I lift up my eyes.” The Songs of Ascents have emphasized the gathering of God’s people and the joy of being called together with the people of God, but the focus in worship is not to be on the other people who are with you, but on God Himself.

God is the only right object of our worship, the right focus of our desires and longing. As we look to Him and to Him alone, we are truly worshipping.

2. I Lift My Eyes

The eyes are powerful. Where we look is the focus of our attention. Psalm 121 began “*I lift up my eyes to the hills*” and this is echoed here, but the focus is clearer: “*To You I lift up my eyes.*”

The eyes are one of the most powerful images used in the Psalms, denoting the focus and attitude, reflecting the heart:

- *Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death – Psalm 13:3*
- *For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down. – Psalm 18:27*
- *My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. – Psalm 25:15*
- *For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness. – Psalm 26:3*
- *Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated. – Psalm 36:1-2*
- *I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. – Psalm 69:3*
- *Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. – Psalm 119:18*

If we ponder what the Psalms say about the eyes, we might conclude that it’s time for an eye exam: Where are our eyes? What has our focus and our attention? How are our eyes – haughty and arrogant or longing and looking for God in humility? What do we set before our eyes? Why?

Maybe it’s time for us to say with the Psalmist, “To You I lift my eyes, You who are enthroned in the heavens.”

3. You Who Are Enthroned in the Heavens

To say that God is the One who is “enthroned in the heavens” or who “sits in the heavens” is more than just confessing that He is higher than we are, it is a strong assertion of His absolute sovereignty.

*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all. – Psalm 103:19, ESV*

Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. – Psalm 115:3, ESV

We are looking to the One who is able to answer, who is able to save. This very much parallels the idea of Psalm 121:1-2

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,

who made heaven and earth.

Charles Spurgeon says powerfully of verse 1 –

God is in heaven, God resides in one place, and God is evermore the same, therefore will I look to him. When we cannot look to any helper on a level with us, it is greatly wise to look above us; in fact, if we have a thousand helpers, our eyes should still be toward the Lord. The higher the Lord is the better for our faith, since that height represents power, glory, and excellence, and these will be all engaged on our behalf. We ought to be very thankful for spiritual eyes; the blind men of this world, however much of human learning they may possess, cannot behold our God, for in heavenly matters they are devoid of sight. Yet we must use our eyes with resolution, for they will not go upward to the Lord of themselves, but they incline to look downward, or inward, or anywhere but to the Lord: let it be our firm resolve that the heavenward glance shall not be lacking. If we cannot see God, at least we will look towards him. God is in heaven as a king in his palace; he is here revealed, adored, and glorified: thence he looks down on the world and sends help to his saints as their needs demand; hence we look up, even when our sorrow is so great that we can do no more. It is a blessed condescension on God's part that he permits us to lift up our eyes to his glorious high throne; yea, more, that he invites and even commands us so to do.

How Our Eyes Look

As we look to God in worship, we are to look with a combination of humility and expectancy, as verse 2 says so beautifully –

Behold, as the eyes of servants

look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maidservant

to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,

till he has mercy upon us.

1. As the Eyes of Servants

We are servants. We are slaves. To be a slave to another is a very degrading and humiliating condition, and yet God is the best of all masters, and to be enslaved to Him is to be set free from all other lesser slave-masters that might seek to dominate us. Indeed, to be able to look to the Lord of the Universe, the One enthroned in the heaven, just as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master or as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress is a high honor, a humiliation that exalts, a stooping low that lifts us high.

2. To the Hand of Their Master

Servants and maid servants were completely dependent on their masters and mistresses for all things – for their food, clothing, health, welfare, for their defense and for their very lives. So we are with the Lord. We are helpless without Him. Everything we have and everything we need comes from Him and from Him alone.

In his commentary on Psalm 123, Calvin says, “*God is our defender, and takes our life under his guardianship; God, I say, who purposely disarms us and strips us of all worldly aid, that we may learn to rely upon his grace, and to be contented with it alone.*”

3. Our Eyes Look to the LORD our God

The Psalms are always very intentional in the use of titles and names for God, and here in verse 2, it is “*our eyes look to the LORD our God.*” The LORD is the covenant name for God – YaHWeH, and it denotes His unchanging faithfulness. I AM who I AM, and I WILL BE who I WILL BE. He is the One who has covenanted His faithful love to His people, and He is our God, which is Elohim, the Mighty One. He is our Mighty One, our strong and powerful one. Ours.

Notice also how the language has shifted from the personal singular to the communal, plural – from “I lift my eyes” to “our eyes look.” We put things in opposition to each other that the Bible puts in partnership with each other.

For example, we pit God’s sovereignty against human responsibility – It’s either God’s job or it’s ours. Either God does it or we do it. But notice here in Psalm 123, we have a determined will of looking to the Sovereign One. God is high and enthroned and sovereign, but the psalmist doesn’t take this as an excuse for passivity or apathy, but rather as grounds for personal and passionate resolve to look to the Lord.

We also pit the personal against the communal or corporate. Either my worship is personal and individual, or our worship is corporate and communal, but not both. But Psalm 123 is strongly and passionately both. “I lift my eyes” and “our eyes look.” We’re in this together, but each of us is called to be in this personally and together.

Why Our Eyes Look

So, why this determined, focused, humble, expectant looking unto God? It’s as simple as it is powerful . . .

I. Till He Has Mercy on Us

We need the Lord to have mercy on us. Three times in quick succession in verses 2-3 –

till he has mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,

This is a very short psalm, one of the shortest in the Bible, but there’s space enough for a three-fold repetition of this plea.

The word repeatedly used here is the Hebrew word *Chanan*, which means to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior, to favor, to have pity on. This is what we need from God. This is why we come to worship Him. We don't come just to be filled up with more academic or intellectual information about God. We also don't come primarily so we can be told how we ought to be living our lives, for practical instruction and life application principles. We come for mercy, we come for God to stoop down to us in kindness, to favor us, to have pity on us.

Ultimately, God has done this for us in His Son, Jesus Christ, whose coming was the ultimate act of *Chanan*. He stooped all the way from heaven to a manger and then all the way from the manger to the cross in order to favor us, in order to have pity on us and secure God's kindness to us.

This is why we must come to God through faith in Jesus Christ if we desire mercy. For God has already given the very best mercy, the very best condescension, the very best provision He could give in His dearly loved Son, and if we won't come through Jesus, by faith in Him, through Him to access God's mercy, then we cannot come to God at all. Jesus' death and resurrection and continual intercession for us have opened the door of mercy and have turned the throne of the One who is enthroned in the heavens into a throne of grace.

2. Our Soul Has Had More than Enough

But what is the immediate cause driving this psalmist and these worshipers to look to the LORD our God for mercy? He says twice – “*for we have had more than enough . . . our soul has had more than enough.*” Do you ever feel that way, like you've had more than enough?

Sometimes we might eat so much that we feel absolutely miserable, the overload of food making us sluggish, sleepy and struggling with a stomach ache. But at other times, it's not our bodies but our souls that have had more than enough. We're just overly full. We've had enough and we've had more than enough. But more than enough of what?

3. Of the Scorn, of the Contempt

*Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.*

One of the major themes of the psalms – indeed, of the whole Bible – is that this fallen world is in active rebellion against God in many ways: The world hates God and resents His rule. The world ignores and neglects God in its discourse. The world plots against the kingdom of God and the people of God. The world mocks those who trust in God.

So, Psalm 2 opens:

*Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
2 The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,*

³ “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”

And Psalm 42 opens:

*As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.*

² *My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

When shall I come and appear before God?^[b]

³ *My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”*

Later, Psalm 42 says:

*As with a deadly wound in my bones,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”*

And Psalm 73 opens:

*Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.*

² *But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.*

³ *For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

⁴ *For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.*

⁵ *They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.*

⁶ *Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.*

⁷ *Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.*

⁸ *They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.*

⁹ *They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.*

¹⁰ *Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.*

¹¹ *And they say, “How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?”*

*¹² Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.*

I could quote so many other places, but these are more than enough to make the point. Then again, you probably didn't even need me to quote any psalms to know "*of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.*" Our culture is thick with the mockery of God and His people. The media, the entertainment industry, the intelligentsia, the Internet pundits – they have no patience and no love for the people of God. The rich people seem to have no need of God. The smart people seem to have no thoughts of God. The immoral people have no love for God. Scorn and contempt is all they seem to offer to the God who is enthroned in the heavens and His people who serve Him here on earth.

Where do we go when we've had more than enough of it all? Do we go online and rant against the unfairness and madness of it all? Do we call in to a talk radio show and vent our frustration? Or do we go to God? Do we lift our eyes with resolution and desperation to the LORD our God until He has mercy on us? Will we gather together as the people of God on the Lord's Day and cry out from our hearts – "Lord, have mercy on us!" and will we keep looking until He answers.

And what will it look like when He answers? What does it look like when the Lord does give mercy? Well, that's what Psalms 124 and 125 are going to show us, as we look at them in weeks to come.