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Psalm 123  
A Song of Decrees  
I lift Up My Eyes to You  
Looking to the Lord for Mercy in Affliction

Psalm 123 is the fourth psalm in the collection of psalms held together by the common designation “of Ascents” in their titles.

The term “ascents” comes from a Hebrew root meaning “to go up.” This word appears in the last line of the Chronicler’s history as part of the report that Cyrus of Persia, having conquered the Babylonians, would allow the exiled people of Judah to return to their homeland and to worship God in the soon-to-be-rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. The word to the exiles concerning anyone who would return to Jerusalem was, “Let him go up” (2 Chronicles 36:23). Thus, “ascents” in the title of Psalm 123 denotes ascent to Jerusalem and/or to the temple on Mount Zion.

Psalm 123 is a lament, a cry for mercy that represents a community that has been despised and oppressed, a community that is looking to God for mercy.

It is a heartfelt prayer, an appeal to the mercy and grace of the Lord. It is a part of a series of Psalms (120-134) called the “Songs of Ascents,” which were traditionally sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. With profound humility, the psalmist acknowledges his servitude and dependence on God. The Psalm is a touching plea for deliverance from the mockery and contempt that the author has faced.

It reminds us that in times of difficulty and scorn, our eyes should be fixed on the Lord, from whom our help comes. Despite the trials and tribulations, we face, God's mercy is always within reach, if only we humble ourselves and ask for it. This Psalm encourages us to echo the faith of the psalmist, to rely fully on

God's mercy and compassion, and to keep hope even in times of contempt and scorn.

### **KJV Psalm 123**

**1** Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.

**2** Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us.

**3** Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt.

**4** Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.

### **What Psalm 123 means**

**Verse 1:** Heaven is the home of God. The Hebrew word also means "the skies".

**Verse 2:** The notes on Psalm 120 explain the word "LORD". The psalmist (the person that wrote the psalm) has had enough of words that are not kind. He looks to God for help. He looks to God like a servant looked to the hand of his master or her mistress. A master or mistress would use their hand to tell a servant what to do. That is why he said this. A mistress was a woman with authority.

**Verses 2 - 3:** "Have mercy" is an important Christian prayer. You say a prayer when you speak to God. To ask God to "have mercy" means to ask him not to punish (hurt) you when you have done something wrong. Instead, you ask him to be kind and to forgive you.

**Verses 3 - 4:** Sometimes people think and say things that are not kind about you. We call that "contempt". "Proud people" think that they are more important than they are. When powerful people make poor people work for little or no money we call this "oppression". Also, when powerful people are cruel to weak people, we call that "oppression" too.

In the opening verses, the psalmist declares his humbleness before the Lord and his unwavering dependence on Him. The psalmist compares himself to a servant, eyes fixed on their master, waiting patiently for mercy and direction.

The psalmist presents his predicament - he has had enough of scorn from the proud and contempt from the arrogant. The plea for God's intervention becomes more intense, illustrating the depth of his affliction and his trust in God's deliverance.

Although, this Psalm is short, and a fit example to show the force of prayer not to consist in many words, but in fervency of spirit. For great and weighty matters may be comprised in a few words, if they proceed from the spirit and the unspeakable groanings of the heart, especially when our necessity is such as will not suffer any long prayer. Every prayer is long enough if it be fervent and proceed from a heart that understand the necessity of the saints.” (Martin Luther, cited in Charles Spurgeon)

## **A. The afflicted looks to the LORD.**

### **1. (1) Where to look.**

The psalmist declares his intention and action - to lift up his eyes to the LORD. This means that his eyes are not on his circumstances or himself, but on the LORD.

“It is good to have someone to look up to. The Psalmist looked so high that he could look no higher. Not to the hills, but to the God of the hills he looked.” (Spurgeon)

By remembering where God is, the psalmist grows in trust and confidence. Earth may have no mercy or help, but heaven has plenty of mercy and help.

We see a progression in these Psalms of Ascent, beginning with [Psalm 120](#).

- In [Psalm 120](#) we lament our surroundings.
- In [Psalm 121](#) we lift our eyes to the hills of Zion.
- In [Psalm 122](#) we delight in the house of the LORD.
- In [Psalm 123](#) we look above the hills to the LORD in heaven.

“The goal of the pilgrim is not Jerusalem, as important as that city was, or even the temple in Jerusalem, as important as it was, but God himself, whose true throne is not anywhere on earth but in heaven.” (Boice)

## **2. (2) How to look.**

The example pictures a waiter or a butler standing behind his master seated at dinner. The servant looks to the hand of his master for the slightest indication of need or want, to instantly meet the need. With that same intensity, devotion, and steadfastness, the psalmist looks to God.

“They stand where they can see Him; they should have their gaze fixed upon Him; they should look with patient trust, as well as with eager willingness to start into activity when He indicates His commands.” (Maclaren)

“This is not an endorsement of slavery, of course. It is a way of saying that the disciple’s dependence on God and submission to God should be no less total than the most obedient servant of an earthly master.” (Boice)

Morgan says the picture of the servants looking to the hands of the master suggests at least three things:

- *Dependence*: The hands of the master provide all that is needed.
- *Submission*: The hands of the master direct the servant’s work.
- *Discipline*: The hands of the master correct the servant.

“Here, then, is the true way of looking for help from Jehovah. It is that of dependence, obedience, and response to correction.”  
(Morgan)

The psalmist *waited* to mention God by name, so as to build a sense of anticipation. The looking is fully described before the One looked to is named.

“The psalmist creates a suspense by drawing out the use of the divine name.” (VanGemeren)

“Do we look to God like that – reverently, obediently, attentively, continuously, expectantly, singly, submissively, imploringly? Probably not, but we should.” (Boice)

“Creation, providence, grace; these are all motions of Jehovah’s hand, and from each of them a portion of our duty is to be learned; therefore, should we carefully study them, to discover the divine will.” (Spurgeon)

“We have too long acted on our own initiative; let us wait on our exalted Lord for the indication of his will.” (Meyer)

This is how long the psalmist will focus his attention toward the LORD. He does not demand an immediate answer but will persevere patiently until the LORD extends His mercy.

To be a servant or handmaiden in the house of a Master of such character gives confidence. When we have a problem or need, we come to the Master, whom we trust to help us. And so we come, lifting up our eyes to him, humbly bringing our needs, patiently looking to him to supply our needs, for we know he will.

And he does have mercy on us. Abundant mercy to rescue us from the captivity of our sins, and then overflowing grace to meet our needs, one by one, as we come to him with faith and humility.

You may be crushed, humiliated. Your life may have collapsed. You are at the bottom. But you know this: You can come before your Master with your plea and he will hear you. He is far greater than any enemy who has come against you, far more powerful than any obstacle you may be facing. Come before him, lift your eyes to him, offer your request, and then know that he hears you and will answer you according to his wisdom and grace.

## **B. The afflicted pleads for mercy.**

### **3. (3) The request for mercy.**

The psalmist wasn't content to only wait for mercy; he begged for it. He demonstrated that waiting on the LORD is not a passive thing. He repeated the request for mercy, showing the intensity of his plea. The Master he looked to who would look upon him and help.

The psalmist needed God's intervention and mercy because he felt filled with the contempt put on him by others.

Exceedingly filled is "to be saturated"; to have the appetite fully satisfied – as applied to one who is hungry or thirsty. Then it comes to mean to be entirely full, and the idea here is, that as much contempt had been thrown upon them as could be; they could experience no more." (Barnes, cited in Spurgeon)

Sometimes others show contempt to us, and it just rolls off like drops of water. Other times we take contempt from others, and we let it fill us – sometimes until we are exceedingly filled. These times lay us low and make us feel that only the mercy of God can save us.

"It is illuminating that *contempt* is singled out for mention. Other things can bruise, but this is cold steel. It goes deeper into the spirit than any other form of rejection." (Kidner)

#### **4. (4) The reason mercy is needed.**

Scorn is never easy to bear, but it is especially painful when it comes from those who seem to be at ease, who seem to have few problems or difficulties in life.

“This had become the chief thought of their minds, the peculiar sorrow of their hearts. Excluding all other feelings, a sense of scorn monopolized the soul and made it unutterably wretched.” (Spurgeon)

“The reason people ridicule what they oppose, aside from it being so easy, is that it is demoralizing and frequently effective. It is effective because it strikes at the hidden insecurities or weaknesses that almost everybody has.” (Boice)

“The injurious effect of freedom from affliction is singularly evident here. Place a man perfectly at ease and he derides the suffering godly and becomes himself proud in heart and conduct.” (Spurgeon)

This made the contempt heaped on the psalmist even worse – knowing it came from the proud and arrogant. Yet the psalmist was satisfied to wait for God’s mercy.

“The proud think so much of themselves that they must need think all the less of those who are better than themselves. Pride is both contemptible and contemptuous.” (Spurgeon)

Nevertheless, this psalm is filled with the unspoken confidence that the mercy of God will triumph over the contempt of the proud.

“This sweet psalm, with all its pained sense of the mockers’ gibes and their long duration, has no accent of impatience.” (Maclaren)

Contempt "...can be an honor ([Acts 5:41](#)), and it is something Christ Himself accepted and made redemptive." (Kidner)

"To set the life toward worship in an ungodly age is ever to be the object of scorn and contempt. What matters it? The eyes of Jehovah's pilgrims are lifted to the throne set high above all the tumult and strife of tongues." (Morgan)

You Israel has now come to Jerusalem the eye of hope. They are looking to the One who dwells in the heavens. The nation of Israel continued, and one very special day, the promised Messiah was born into the human race in the little town of Bethlehem.

If you find yourself laughed at and criticized because you belong to Jesus Christ, you are part of a very elite group, and you do not have to be embarrassed or start looking for a place to hide! There is grace available at the throne of grace for the God of all grace, so lift your eyes of faith to Him.

Sources:

KJV Bible

Warren W. Wiersbe

J. Vernon McGee

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