

I'd like to recognise the study guide provided by Ray Fowler in the production of this Study of Psalm 123 tonight.

Introduction

So we are continuing on what are known as the Psalms of Ascent. You will remember from our previous studies beginning at Psalm 120 that in Deuteronomy 16:16 the people were instructed 3 times a year to appear before the Lord – these were at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. It is thought these psalms were sung by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem on these 3 annual pilgrimages.

Now that we have already studied 3 of these psalms and now we are onto our fourth, there's a pattern that is forming. Psalm 120 describes how the psalmist is surrounded by trouble – Psalm 120 verse 1 “I call on the Lord in my distress”. Then in Psalm 121 we see how the Psalmist learns to trust in God – Psalm 121 verse 2 “My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth”. Then in Psalm 122 last week, as John said, we see the psalmist delighted and joyful at having joined the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Keep that in mind as we move into psalm 123 – trouble, trusting, rejoicing.

Let's read Psalm 123 now and let's hear your initial thoughts on what mood the writer portrays – is it one of trouble, is it one of trusting or is it one of rejoicing?

READ PSALM 123

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to you,
to you who sit enthroned in heaven.
- ² As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the Lord our God,
till he shows us his mercy.
- ³ Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us,
for we have endured no end of contempt.
- ⁴ We have endured no end
of ridicule from the arrogant,
of contempt from the proud.

There's a couple of things that immediately come to mind about this psalm:

1. It's short
2. There continues to be a deep reliance on God
3. It tells us that prayers do not need to be long, but just honest, sincere.
4. We should seek the Lord for his mercy towards us.

Psalm 123 is a psalm about looking for mercy. The theme of “looking” is introduced in verses 1-2 where we find the word “eyes” used four times. And then the theme of mercy is introduced at the end of verse two and into verses 3-4 where the word “mercy” is used three times.

So let's begin with a look at the word mercy

Mercy in Hebrew

- *One of the words for Mercy in Hebrew is the word Racham which means “to love or have compassion,” Psalm 116:5 The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.*

Mercy in Greek

- In the New Testament Greek, the words are *Eleemon*, meaning “to have pity on,” to “show compassion,” or to “be merciful;” ([Matthew 5:7](#)).

So what does the Bible say about God's mercy? Ephesians 2:4 tells us that God is full of mercy. Mercy fuels compassion, it's kindness, It is closely aligned to forgiveness. So if grace gives us what we don't deserve, mercy is what gets us out of trouble. By grace Jesus has saved us, and it's his mercy that flows from those words on the cross that said, “forgive them, for they know not what they are doing”.

You will also notice something similar to a psalm of only 2 weeks ago and that was to look up. It's what we read in Psalm 121. So many people in life seem to have their head weighed down. You won't go through a day without hearing words like depression, anxiety, loneliness, worry. These all come from a stance of looking down. When we look up, we are following the direction of the Psalms of Ascent which together form an upward motion.

Here's what the great Charles Spurgeon wrote about looking up. *‘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’.*

So this psalm reminds us that in the times of hardship and opposition we must look up, and there we will see a God full of mercy for us. It encourages you to look to the Lord and cast yourself upon him. Put yourself in his hands and trust him to do what is best. Look to the Lord for mercy in your time of need.

And so this psalm provides us with 3 ways in which we should look to the Lord for mercy.

- 1) Look to the Lord as the king on his throne.
- 2) Look to the Lord as a servant looks to his master.
- 3) Look to the Lord as your merciful Saviour.

I. Look to the Lord as the king on his throne (1)

First, look to the Lord as the king on his throne. Look at verse 1: "I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven".

QUESTION – when you are in need of help, who would be the person that you would go to first? Are they always reliable? When you are in need, you need to look to someone who can actually help you in your time of need. The psalmist knows exactly where to look. He lifts his eyes to the Lord whose throne is in heaven. We may not fully understand the scale of a throne in heaven, but this verse helps to articulate that God is sovereign, and nothing is limited in what he can do for us. Let's therefore consider who we are looking up to -

God is sovereign

[Psalm 115:3](#) 'Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him'

[Matthew 6:9](#) 'This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father^u in heaven, hallowed be your name"

Over the last 12 weeks we have had over 600 calls made into Together Ballyclare. When people have phoned they have had the resources not only of the churches available to them, but we also then have links into our councillors and into our MP. And yet even these resources are limited. God's throne is in heaven, and he is sovereign over all things.

Have you ever noticed that the Lord's Prayer is phrased in the plural? We don't pray, "My Father in heaven; give me today my daily bread," and so on. We pray "our father" and "give us today our daily bread." It's the same thing in Psalm 123. The psalmist starts off by saying "I lift my eyes up to you," but then in his actual prayer, he prays in the plural: "Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us." ([Psalm 123:2-3](#))

The Lord is not just sovereign over me. The Lord is sovereign over all things. And whilst the world may not all bow down to the sovereignty of God, he is control. Daniel 2:20-22 says "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;

wisdom and power are his.

²¹ He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.

He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.

²² He reveals deep and hidden things;

he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him’.

So when we think of praying, remember that we can come to the throne of God not just for our own needs, but for our community, our country, our world. Our God is bigger than all of this.

The next thing we recognise from the opening verse is God’s majesty

1 Chronicles 29:11 says that ‘Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all’. And because he is king on his heavenly throne, we worship his majesty. What a privilege it is to come before his throne in all its majesty. He is the most perfect being. Psalm 8 Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Alistair Beggs was interviewed about the majesty of God and he said these very simple words, “It’s starts with a realisation of who God is, and what God is. That he is really great. And we by comparison are really small”. And yet in all his splendour he desires to be close to his children.

QUESTION - In recognition of who God is as lift our eyes to him, the King of Heaven, the Lord of Lords, how can we ever reflect this in our worship?

Practical Consideration: *We must look in the right direction when we encounter difficulties.*

2. As we move on to verse 2, we are to look to the Lord as a Servant looks to his master.

As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy.

Have you ever been in a very nice restaurant where the waiter is extremely attentive to you. They will do anything to make your stay pleasant. With that same intensity, devotion, and steadfastness, the psalmist looks to God.

It’s possible when reading this verse about the role of a servant, we may think it to be very demeaning and unjust. However the teaching of the bible in the context of Old Testament times recognised that people did have servants to help them around the home and their land, however they were to be treated fairly. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 instructs that, “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be

guilty of sin". There was a recognition of poverty in communities as there is today, but people in lower positions were not to be taken advantage of.

So the Psalmist is painting a picture of the attentiveness of God's people seeking after his mercy in the way that a servant would be attentive to a master.

There's that familiar and beautiful picture in the bible of the young Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 where the Lord called out to the boy during the night and he replied, "Speak, for your servant is listening." He was attentive. And so it teaches us that we have to also be attentive to God when we seek after his compassion and mercy. Sometimes in the panic and the busyness of life, we are not attentive enough or still enough to see the signs from God and his will for us in an area of our lives.

QUESTION - So if we need to be attentive, how do we do this?

Last night at our house group, we were following a current series by Bob Goff called Everybody always. And last night we looked at what was in our buckets. Bob explained that all of us carry a bucket around every day and in it could be lots of things – it could be what we do, our jobs, how we use our time, it could also include our feelings, our worries, what we think about, what we believe, how we respond to different things. And Bob was challenging us that if Jesus instructed us through Matthew 25 to reach out to the hungry, the stranger, those who are sick, those in prison, then we have got to take stuff out of our bucket and fill it with the compassion that comes from God to make Jesus' priorities our priorities. But it got me thinking about what I fill my bucket with every day. And therefore if we are to be attentive to God more and more, we have got to fill our buckets with more time for him every day, we have got to set aside and commit to being attentive to his will. Otherwise our buckets will fill up with lots of other things.

And therefore, also tied into this is - **2) To wait patiently for his timing**

In this verse 2 the word "until" is important in "so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he shows us his mercy." The "until" indicates there is a period of waiting before that sought-after help arrives.

In my last job before entering into the ministry, every year the Company took us to the Gleneagles Resort in Scotland. In the evenings we would have company dinner together. The waiters would serve and then a few would stand at the sides of the room, waiting attentively for any guests to gesture that they needed something. These waiters spent more time waiting than they did serving. Is that not an interesting picture for all of us in Christian service?

We want to be active, and we want answers to our prayers right now, but God knows the value of patience and waiting. In his commentary on this psalm Martin Luther writes about God deferring his help and what we can learn from this: "For in that he defers his help, he does it not because he will not hear us, but to exercise and stir up our faith, and to teach us that the ways whereby he can and does deliver us are so manifold and miraculous that we are never able to conceive them. Therefore let us think that the thing which we ask is not denied but deferred, and assure ourselves

that we are not neglected because of this delay.” (Luther; Commentary on the Psalms called Psalms of Degrees, p. 116)

Question – has anyone found useful ways of waiting upon the Lord that are useful to share with the group?

As Servants, we are then to **be responsive to his commands**

Having the attitude of a servant requires us to be attentive. It requires us to wait patiently. And then we need to be responsive to his commands. Like the waiter in Gleneagles, when the guest gestures for attention they respond immediately. Remember when it comes to you and God: you are the servant, he is the master. Never get that the wrong way round. Yes we come to him with our issues. But he already knows the issues that we are worried about. So in being attentive to him, being still and patient before him, when God directs we must trust and obey.

So we look to God for his compassion in situations likened to that as a servant being attentive to his master. **But also we recognise are dependency on God in all things.**

Remember that the Master is not dependent on the Servant. It's the Servant who is dependent on the Master for all things. He looks to his master to meet his needs.

I think with one of the other psalms I have spoken about this before, wherein we must recognise our complete dependency on God for everything. In a time such as now where we hear of redundancies, where we see the bank of England announce that the UK economy has shrunk by 20%, do we see people coming back to a deep dependency on God. I don't think so. It's just more worry. Acts 17 tells us this – *“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and have our being.”*

But where are people's eyes fixed at present? They are more fixed on getting the economy back up and running. When will our world ever see clearly and fix it's eyes on God?

When we have a bigger view of God we will realise how we can face anything and we don't have to go looking anywhere else.

Let's look at the faith of King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 when he faced an enormous army consisting of three separate nations working together. It was a triple threat, and he knew that he did not have the resources to fight back. Let's read how he prays to the Lord.

20 After this, the Moabites and Ammonites with some of the Meunites^[a] came to wage war against Jehoshaphat.

² Some people came and told Jehoshaphat, “A vast army is coming against you from Edom,^[b] from the other side of the Dead Sea. It is already in Hazezon Tamar” (that is, En Gedi). ³ Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah. ⁴ The people of Judah came together to seek help from the Lord; indeed, they came from every town in Judah to seek him.

⁵ Then Jehoshaphat stood up in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem at the temple of the Lord in the front of the new courtyard ⁶ and said:

“Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. ⁷ Our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?

⁸ They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, ⁹ ‘If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.’

¹⁰ “But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt; so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. ¹¹ See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance. ¹² Our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

Should that not be the prayer of every people today “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you”

As God’s people we can recall the many faithful followers of his throughout generations and generations and know that our dependency in all things is on him. The writer the Hebrews after recalling the faithfulness of many said this in Chapter 12 ‘*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith*’.

So folks, let’s keep our eyes firmly fixed, knowing our only dependency should be on God.

REFLECTION – take a moment to think of something in your life right now, and in light of this verse 2, look to God for his intervention, be attentive to him in your looking, keep waiting, be fully dependent on him, and know that God will help you in your time of need.

So know he is on the throne – in majesty

Seek him as a servant seeks after his master.

And now in verses 3&4 look to the Lord as your merciful Saviour.

3. Look to the Lord as your merciful Saviour (3-4)

The psalmist writes: “Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us, for we have endured no end of contempt. ⁴ We have endured no end of ridicule from the arrogant, of contempt from the proud”.

Notice that the psalmist cries out for mercy twice in rapid succession. So we can imagine from this that he is desperate. He is being mocked and persecuted for his faith, and so in desperation he cries out to the Lord for mercy.

Psalm 42:3 the psalmist is in a difficult situation of persecution, as he cries out to God, “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

Standing up for our faith is increasingly difficult today. We can’t speak about it any more in the workplace. Thankfully we still have avenues into schools here, but in the rest of the UK it is extremely difficult. Our moral views are up for scrutiny finding people in the courts. And so crying out for mercy is becoming common.

But our hope is in the Lord and therefore the cry for mercy here brings with it huge promises to those who put their trust in God.

Firstly **God sees our suffering**

In [Exodus 3:7](#) we read about the Israelites: The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.” ([Exodus 3:7](#)) The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years, and they probably thought that God had forgotten them. But God saw their suffering, and he sees your suffering too.

Psalm 56 begins with David’s cry for mercy because his enemies are attacking him. He implores the Lord to help him and to punish his opponents. Then, with striking imagery, David recognizes that God knows his suffering: In verse 8 he says, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book”

The verb translated here as “you keep track” is closely related to the Hebrew word for book (*sefer*). David envisions God writing down his sorrows so as to remember them.

Question – have you ever thought God paid attention specifically to your sufferings in this way as you cry out for mercy?

B. He knows your limits

The Psalmist calls to God declaring “for we have endured no end of contempt”. “We have endured no end of ridicule”. In other words the psalmist is saying “We’ve had

enough”. Have you ever felt like that, that you’ve just had enough? That you want the issues to go away?

Paul tells us: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength but with your testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

When you’ve had enough, when you’ve had more than enough, how comforting to know that God knows your limits. Psalm 103 says: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.” ([Psalm 103:13-14](#))

Remain confident in knowing that God watches over us. He knows how we are feeling.

c. God opposes the proud

Finally, I wonder how you feel about situations that come your way where you feel attack or oppression and it’s come from someone else, do you seek revenge? I certainly do at times. Notice that the psalmist shows no bitterness and the matter is left in God’s hands. Remember it’s not for us to fight the battle against people. Our battle is with the powers of darkness, Paul says to the Ephesians (6:12) ‘For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’. Remember that all the opposition and struggles we face are not from God. The psalmist felt the contempt, the ridicule from the arrogant and proud.

And it’s God’s battle to win. Jesus has defeated all this. God says in [Isaiah 13:11](#): “I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.”

The arrogant and proud do not receive God’s mercy because they don’t think they need God’s mercy. And because they don’t think they need God’s mercy, they don’t look to God for mercy. And because they don’t look to God for mercy, they don’t ask God for mercy. And because they do not ask, they do not receive.

[James 4:6](#) tells us: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Who are the humble? The humble are those who look to the Lord for mercy, crying out in desperation: “Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us.” ([Psalm 123:3](#)) God gives mercy to those who look to him for mercy.

In the beatitudes, Jesus declares in Matthew 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. That word meek can also be translated as humble. For those who humbly seek the Lord and cry out for his mercy, their inheritance is clear.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 123 is the cry of a person who has nothing left to do but pray. When you have had enough, when you are at the end of your rope, don’t despair but look to the Lord.

Don't take matters into your own hands, but look to the hand of your master. Look to the Lord for mercy. Confess your complete dependence on God for all things. And then through Jesus you may approach God's throne with confidence, so that you may receive mercy and find grace to help you in your time of need.