

## Lifted Eyes – Psalm 123

### I. Introduction:

- A. We are told in the inscription of this **Psalm** that this is one of the *“Songs of Degrees.”*
1. The meaning of that phrase is a mystery, but there are several possibilities.
  2. One opinion is that with each of these fifteen special psalms there is a slight rise in spiritual temperature. That may be obvious to one person, but not to the next. I’ll you decide that in your spare time.
  3. Among a couple other suggestions, my Bible encyclopedia mentions that the pilgrims traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would sing these songs as they rose in elevation toward Mount Zion.
    - a. But I have to wonder how many times these could be sung in the 28 miles from Jericho to Jerusalem.
    - b. Did the travelers start over with **Ps. 120**, when they finished **Ps.134**, repeating and repeating them?
  4. In reality, most of the people who read these Psalms don’t spend much time trying to explain the title.
  5. They just glean the Spirit’s blessing from one and then move on to the next like butterflies or bees.
- B. Our psalmist says in **verse 1**, *“Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens.”*
1. Picture the Galilean Jews as they trekked west up the hill from the Jordan valley.
  2. What is the likelihood that they kept their eyes on the skies as they walked?
  3. Was the psalmist speaking figuratively or literally when he said his eyes were upon the Lord?
  4. Perhaps the answer to that question will work itself out as we consider other scriptures with *“uplifted eyes.”*

### II. For example, the LORD JESUS lifted his eyes to heaven from time to time.

- A. When He was about to feed the five thousand, *“He took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them...”*
1. And on an occasion when a deaf man with a speech impediment was brought to Him for healing, the Lord put His fingers into his ears, spit and touched his tongue.
  2. Then, *“looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, be opened.*
  3. *And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of this tongue was loosed, and he spake plain.”*
- B. So we are told that the Lord Jesus looked up toward Heaven.
1. Assuming the earth is a globe, and Jesus was in Israel, when He looked up, in what direction did He look?
  2. But when you look up, in what direction, in comparison to Christ, do you look?
  3. Isn’t it in almost the opposite direction? So where is heaven?
  4. Shouldn’t we look down, through the earth in order to look in the direction our Saviour did?
  5. Or rather, could it be that the looking was more symbolical than literal?
- C. More important than the physical direction, what was the Lord about to do when He looked up?
1. In these two cases, He was in the process of working a miracle.
  2. In that context, we ask, *“Why, and how, did the Son of God look toward heaven?”*
    - a. Was He rolling His eyes like a rebellious teenager, because more people were making more demands?
    - b. Or was this a habit, and He was often looking up? Was there something more than that?
  3. Why did Christ Jesus look toward heaven? Did He need something from Heaven to get the work done?
  4. Could His look signify a reconnection with His Father in a moment of a need or worship?
  5. Couldn’t it have been a symbolic declaration: *“This is for you, Father?”*
  6. Might it not have been a dedication to God of what He was about to do?
- D. Let’s just leave those questions unanswered for a few minutes.

### III. At a crucial point in his life, STEPHEN looked toward Heaven.

- A. *“He, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,*
1. *And said, Behold I see the heavens opened, and the son of man standing on the right hand of God.”*
  2. And moments later, godly Stephen was murdered.

- B. Not only did Stephen look up toward Heaven, he ***“steadfastly looked up INTO heaven.”***
1. Was this with his physical eye? Was the throne room of God just above his head?
  2. Certainly his murderers didn't see what he saw.
  3. I think that this was a special blessing given to the man in special circumstances.
  4. Nevertheless, if he had not spiritually, and probably physically, ***“lifted up his eyes,”*** he would not have been given this great blessing.
  5. And if we could have asked him at that moment, I think he would have told us that he could actually see, with his literal eyes, the throne room of God.
  6. But clearly, this was more than the use of physical sight.
- C. And again I ask, When did Stephen look? What was going on?
1. Stephen looked toward heaven at the most desperate time in his life.
  2. And if I had to guess, this was not the first time. It may have been a habit of his.
  3. Every morning and every evening, perhaps at the time of Israel's daily sacrifices, Stephen went to the Lord in prayer, looking by faith into the face of his Saviour.
  4. But... he never had quite the sight as he did at that moment.
- D. Of course, Stephen had never met Paul.

#### IV. The APOSTLE PAUL encouraged this kind of behavior.

- A. **Colossians 3** – ***“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”***
1. Stephen saw his Saviour there in Heaven; the Lord may have been sitting, but He arose to meet His martyr
  2. I have no doubt that Stephen's affections had been set on heavenly things for some time.
  3. He had learned to look toward heaven, not only for answered prayer, but for the return of the Saviour.
  4. It was no problem or difficulty for Stephen to look toward and into heaven at this moment in his life.
  5. Whenever he prayed, it was with an eye of faith that he actually looked into heaven.
  6. Stephen mostly likely knew **Psalm 123** and all the rest of the ***“Songs of Degrees.”***
  7. He may have been able to quote **Psalm 121**, as some of you might: ***“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”***
  8. ***“I will always be lifting my eyes toward the Lord, my help, the One who made heaven and earth.”***
- B. In **Hebrews 12** Paul exhorts people like Stephen – and people like us...
1. ***“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses,***
    - a. ***let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,***
    - b. ***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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”***
  2. When do we need to have our eyes on heaven?
  3. In the context of **Hebrews**, we need to run our eyes toward glory, as we are running the Christian race.
  4. To put it another way, we should be looking toward heaven as we live our day-to-day lives.
  5. It should be our habit, but more than that, it should be our desire to look toward heaven throughout our day.
  6. We should pray as though we were looking into heaven, not just flinging empty words toward the ceiling.
- C. But how natural it is for our eyes to drop to the road rising up in front of us, or to bushes at either side.
1. There are rocks and raised ridges in the way, which might trip us, and the snares of the devil lay ahead.
  2. Along the side of the road which we are asked to run, there are lions and wolves.
  3. As we heard last Sunday, Satan walks about seeking whom he may devour.
- D. It is natural for us to drop our eyes from heaven to the problems which surround us.
1. Sometimes those problems are so overwhelming that, along with our eyes, they take our breath away.

2. **David** confessed in **Psalm 40** – *“Innumerable evils have compassed me about; mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am NOT ABLE to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head; therefore my heart faileth me.”*
3. That is when we need to become **resolved**: *“I WILL lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.”*
4. No one should fault you for looking down from time to time, because we are all guilty.
5. But the exhortations and encouragements of God’s Word are to look up.
6. Again, David vowed, *“My voice SHALT thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning WILL I direct my prayer unto thee, and (I) will look up”* – **Psalm 5:3**.
7. Sometimes we have to say, *“Get thee behind me Satan, you’re in my way, I can’t see the Lord.”*

#### V. Now, let’s return to where we began – PSALM 123.

- A. This psalmist tried to lift his eyes toward heaven.
  1. Was he speaking of his physical eyes? Was Paul speaking of his physical eyes?
  2. Although there is nothing wrong, and probably a good many things right, about lifting your eyes upward, the meaning of Paul and the Psalmist were of spiritual sight.
  3. If heaven was above the head of Stephen, is it also above our heads as we look in a different direction?
  4. I suppose that is possible if all creation is contained within the sphere of heaven.
  5. But, again, it is not with our eyes that we look into the dwelling of God. It is by faith.
  6. If the Lord wants to bless us and to let us see more, as He did with Stephen, praise His name.
  7. But until then, we will continue to look by faith – which is *“the substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen”* with the physical eye.
- B. To whom should we try to look?
  1. To Jehovah, our God, **verse 2**. To the God who dwells in the heavens (plural).
  2. As I pointed out last week, there is an advantage in being at a great height.
  3. Figuratively speaking, but also in literal reality, from the Lord’s vantage point, He sees & knows everything.
  4. To whom should we look? To the One who is aware of all our difficulties and problems.
  5. **And** as **servants**, we look to the one who is our Master.
  6. Oh, but what a Master He is. He is the merciful one.
- C. I know that from a New Testament perspective we can get somewhat precise when it comes to the terms *“mercy”* versus *“grace.”*
  1. But in the Old Testament context the difference between them isn’t much.
  2. The Psalmist’s plea wasn’t for God to be merciful in the sense of withholding His judgment or chastisement.
  3. This was simply a plea for God’s help.
  4. The Hebrew word is translated about a dozen different ways, including both *“mercy”* and *“grace”* in almost equal numbers.
  5. It basically means to stoop or bend down in kindness. This is one reason why we look to heaven.
  6. In addition to protection, we need the Lord’s blessings to run the Christian race properly.
- D. *“Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.”*
  1. I have often wondered how it was just before the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or before any of the other festivals, which were supposed to be spent in Jerusalem at the temple.
  2. What percentage of people from Capernaum or Nazareth – Galilee in general – actually took time off work to walk down to Jerusalem either through Samaria or more likely along the Jordan River?
  3. How many in Israel sang the *“Songs of Degrees”* as they went to worship the Lord?
  4. And how many liberals laughed at the obedient pilgrims who made those frequent journeys?
  5. How many wealthy Galileans sat back in their ease and pride, reminding the godly poor that **they** had wealth **without** worshiping the Lord, while so many who did worship, possessed so little?
  6. The Jewish world back then was not much different from the world of modern Christendom.

E. *“O Lord, have mercy upon us; for we are exceedingly filled with contempt.”*

1. It was not that they had contempt for the proud unbelievers, but their souls were filled and disturbed by the contempt of the others.
2. *“O Lord, how should we respond to these godless people?”*

F. We need the Lord’s direction, not only in regard to the scorers and the proud, but we need the Lord’s direction for running the race in general.

1. *“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...”*
2. Stories abound about 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century maids and butlers, who knew their employers so well that they could anticipate their wishes. And at other times, all they had to do was watch the master’s hand or finger to understand what was to be done next.
3. Oh, that you and I had enough knowledge and understanding of the Lord that simply by watching His eye or his hand, we’d know what He would like us to do.

G. As those travelers walked in community and family groups, singing the songs of Zion and hearing the testimonies of their brethren & their peers, there was a period of traveling introspection, revival & then worship.

1. As they got nearer and nearer to the holy city, their hearts drew nearer and nearer to their God.
2. The purpose of those festivals and feasts was God-designed for spiritual renewal.
3. And when they finally arrived, singing the last of those Psalms of Degrees, their hearts rang out with:
  - a. *“Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord.*
  - b. *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord.*
  - c. *The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.”*

H. May God help **US** to *“lift up our eyes unto the hill of Zion, from whence cometh our help.”*