

Psalm 123 “A Song of Ascents: What Are You Looking At?”
Psalm 121, 123, 124, 125, 130
Colossians 3

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Psalm 123 is the fourth of the Songs of Ascents.
It builds especially on Psalm 121.

“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.”

Psalm 123 focuses our eyes:
“To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!”

What are your eyes looking at?
In Psalm 121, I am looking at the mountains –
which reminds me of the LORD, the Creator.

Created things *can* be good for focusing your eyes on the LORD!

Sometimes we cannot lift our eyes high enough!
We cannot get above the mountains.
And so the mountains will do for now!

Because when I see the mountains surrounding Jerusalem,
I am reminded that the LORD surrounds his people! (Psalm 125)
I am reminded that the LORD is our help and our deliverer (124)

Is that the way you look at created things?
Do the created things draw your mind and eye to God?

Or do you become so fixated on the creature,
that you lose sight of the Creator?

If you would use created things to point you to the Creator,
it requires discipline.

The Psalms regularly inculcate this spiritual discipline
of seeing the Creator through his works.

Psalms 121 and 125 do this with the mountains –
Psalm 124 does this with the floods and torrents –
Perhaps especially appropriate given the flooding of the Mississippi!

Sing Psalms 121, 124, 125
Read Colossians 3

To whom do you look?

Do you look to your husband to make everything right?

Do you look to your wife to make you happy?

Do you look to your boss – your colleagues – for approval?

If you do, then one of two things will happen:

either you will grovel, and do anything you can to make them like you;

or you will overcompensate and alienate people in order to avoid getting hurt!

Psalm 123 calls us to lift up our eyes to the one who is enthroned in the heavens!

Because when you see him –

then you cannot possibly be swayed by mere human opinion.

1. To Whom Do You Look? (v1-2)

¹*To you I lift up my eyes,*

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

Notice the starting point!

“To you I lift up my eyes”

In other words, the Psalmist suggests that my eyes have been cast down.

My eyes have been looking in other directions.

And now I come and lift up my eyes to you.

What have you been looking at?

Who have you been looking to?

Where have your eyes been directed?

There are few words used more often in Hebrew than the word for “eyes.”

And of its 900 occurrences in the OT, 400 are not even translated!

In Hebrew, if you want to say, “It seemed good to him”

you would say, “it was good in his eyes.”

The idea of “seeing” in scripture

includes the idea of *knowledge* (seeing as insight –

even in English the idea of “insight” – seeing into something –

suggested a profound sort of knowledge);

but seeing also includes the idea of *judgment* (“it was good in his eyes”),

or discernment.

Think of the language of someone with a “piercing glance” –

how the eyes of the LORD see through all our smokescreens,

and thereby he judges rightly.

Seeing, knowing, judging –

the themes come together in Genesis 3, when Eve *saw* that the tree was good for food,
and that it was a delight to the eyes,
and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise...

When you see and know the good, then you will do the good.

Eve believed that she saw and knew the good –
“the tree was good for food, and a delight to the eyes...”

Sometimes you *know* that what you are about to do is evil.

Usually, there is at least a little prick of conscience!

But when your eyes are set on earthly things,
when your desires are oriented to the stuff and status of this age,
then you can easily persuade yourself that you are pursuing the *good*.

What do you see when you look to the heavens?

Hebrews 2 has that famous statement,
“At present we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.
But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor
because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (Heb 2:9)

What matters more to you?

The ones who inhabit the earth?
Or the one who dwells in the heavens?

As Martin Luther put it,

“Turn your eyes thither, and see that God, with his beloved angels and his elect,
looks down upon you, rejoices in you, and loves you.”

²*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.*

What does it mean to “look to someone’s hand”?

Psalm 104 speaks of how the animals look to God’s hand for food (104:27-28).
Psalm 145 uses similar language (145:15-16).

The idea here is the idea of dependence.

We are utterly dependent upon God for provision.
We look to him, like slaves to our master/mistress.

There is only one other passage that connects the eyes of the servant
with masters and servants – and particularly maidservants and mistresses!
Genesis 16 speaks of how Hagar became pregnant
and thus “her mistress became dishonorable in her eyes.”

Some have imported modern class struggles into the ancient world
by suggesting that when the servants looks to his master’s hand,
he looks with fear and trembling –
and so looks to the LORD to have mercy on him,
because his master won’t!

That’s why I brought up the story of Hagar and Sarah.
Because in the case of Hagar and Sarah, the roles were reversed.
Because Hagar was pregnant, and Sarah was not,
the maidservant mocked her mistress!

Let me ask you, ladies,
would there be anything worse?
I realize that nowadays you would not recommend that your husband get a concubine
but in Sarah’s day that was precisely what a woman would recommend!
Sarah acts in faith – trusting God’s promise that her husband would father many nations.
[Remember that at this point, God had not yet promised
that Sarah would be the mother of the promised seed!]

They have tried to have a baby for decades,
with no success –
and so now she suggests that he take a concubine –
and even provides the candidate (according to the custom of that time),
so that the resulting children will be considered Sarah’s legal children.

But when Hagar got pregnant,
the text of Genesis says
that her mistress became contemptible in her eyes.
Psalm 123 says that the eyes of a maidservant look the hand of her mistress.

But in Genesis 16, the maidservant has exalted herself over her mistress!

I cannot imagine that it would ever be an easy relationship –
the barren wife and the pregnant maidservant –
but when the maidservant becomes haughty,
and no longer looks to the hand of her mistress,

she becomes insufferable!

And so the plea of Psalm 123 –

“have mercy upon us, O LORD...for we have had more than enough of contempt...
from those who are at ease...and proud”

is very much the plea of Sarah.

In the same way that a servant is dependent upon his master –

in the same way that a maidservant is dependent upon her mistress –

we are dependent upon the LORD our God.

Leslie Allen comments:

“The community acknowledges, and pleads, that the covenant relationship (‘our God’) places them in the position of slaves before their divine master.

They are utterly reliant upon him.

The corollary of this relationship

is that he has committed himself to support them as his protégés.

For this help they have been waiting and will wait on expectantly,

conscious that they have no other help save his.” (161)

But notice the shift in the pronoun from verse 1 to verse 2.

“To you *I* lift up my eyes”

“so *our* eyes look to the LORD our God”

Just like Psalm 121,

where the speaker of verses 1-2 is a singular “I” addressing the LORD,
and then the speaker verses 3-8 addresses the plural “you” –

so also here the “I” who lifts up “my eyes” to the LORD,

does so on behalf of the “we” who look to the LORD our God.

Think about Jesus.

He is the one who lifted up his eyes to his Father.

And as such he became a merciful and faithful high priest to his brothers –

the “we” who look the LORD our God.

When you see this singular (Jesus) – plural (us) distinction in Psalm 123,
you begin to understand how to sing Psalm 123!

Because we look to Jesus as the *one* who is enthroned in the heavens –
the one who sits at the right hand of the Father.

Think back to Paul's language in Colossians 3:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,
where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

Paul's language of “set your minds on things above, not on things that are on earth”
is reminiscent of Psalm 123's “To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens.”

Paul also connects this spiritual vision with *knowing* (set your minds on things above)
and judging/discerning – “put to death therefore what is earthly in you.”

And when you have this sort of spiritual vision,
when you set your minds and hearts on things above,
it transforms how you relate to other people.

As Paul says later in chapter 3,

“Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters,
not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers,
but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.” (v22)

I would suggest that Paul is commenting on Psalm 123 here.

Yes, servants look to their master's hand for provision –
certainly you are dependent upon your boss for your paycheck! –
but you are not to give “eye-service” to your master.

“Eye-service” means looking good when they are watching,
but slacking off when they are not around.

“People-pleasing” means that you are more concerned with what people think of you
than with what God thinks of you.

“When people are big, and God is small” in our eyes
then we are more guided by what people say, than by what God says.

But what do you do when no one is watching?

If your heart is sincere and you fear the Lord,
then it shouldn't make a difference whether anyone is watching.

Your eyes and your heart are set on things above –
where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father –

and so (as Paul says)

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,
knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.
You are serving the Lord Christ.” (v23-24)

So Psalm 123 says that we are to look to the Lord our God
in full dependence upon him.

We are to fix our eyes upon Jesus,
the author and finisher of our faith...

But what are we looking for?

The end of verse 2 tells us:
we look to the LORD our God until he has mercy upon us!

Which is the answer to our second question:

2. For What Do You Look? (v3-4)

You can see the stair-stepping of Psalm 123
in the various repetitions throughout the Psalm:

as eyes look to hands (in verse 2)
have mercy upon us (verses 2-3)
more than enough of contempt (verses 3-4)

These repetitions help us see the flow and movement of the Psalm.

³ *Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.*

⁴ *Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.*

What do you look for?
You look for mercy.

Psalm 123 is beautifully illustrated in the apocryphal story of Susanna.

The story is told of a woman named Susanna who was very beautiful.

There were two elders of the people who lusted after her,
of whom it was said that “they perverted their minds
and turned away their eyes from looking to heaven
or remembering righteous judgment.” (Susanna 9)

If your eyes are fixed on earthly things,
then you will not be able to set your minds on heavenly things!

When they discovered their common lust for this beautiful woman,
they conspired to lay a trap for Susanna,
and when she refused to submit to their advances,
they falsely accused her of adultery with another man.

And as they brought their false charges against her,
“she, weeping, looked up toward heaven,
for her heart trusted in the Lord” (Susanna 35)

And the Lord had mercy and delivered her,
by sending a wise young man who revealed their devices.

When your eyes look to the LORD –
you look for mercy.

Or, to say it another way,
Susanna looked for God – in his mercy –
to vindicate her – to justify her –
in the face of her false accusers.

The prayer “Have mercy upon us, O LORD”
is a prayer for justification!
for judgment *against* our enemies and *for* us!