

“Mercy in the Midst of Evil”
Psalm 123
(Preach at Trinity, June 30, 2013)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we've seen, Psalms 120-134 are a series of 15 psalms designated by the title, “A Song of Degrees,” or “A Song of Ascent.” They were originally contained together in a separate self-contained hymnbook but later added to Book Four of the Psalter.
They picture the ascent of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the feasts. They begin in a distant land and move closer and closer to Jerusalem.
 - A. In **Psalm 120** we find the distress and weariness of the pilgrim dwelling in a world of evil. He cries out to God for deliverance.
 - B. In **Psalm 121** we find him clearly looking upward towards the sure source of his help. Although this world is full of wickedness, trials and tribulations the pilgrim must never lose focus of the source of his help.
Psalm 121:1 KJV - "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."
 - C. In **Psalm 122** we read, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD." There is an air of joy at the thought of the pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem and their feet standing within the city. Their hearts are filled with great joy as they are called to corporate worship. As they consider entering into Jerusalem their hearts are lifted up to sing for the peace of the city. They are led to pray for its peace, prosperity, and wellbeing. Of course, this finds its ultimate fulfillment in the church.
2. But now as we come to **Psalm 123** we are again reminded of the reality of the struggles of the pilgrim living in a wicked world.
 - A. In **Psalm 120** he cries out in distress in the midst of a wicked world.
Psalm 120:1-2 KJV - "In my distress I cried unto the LORD, and he heard me. ² Deliver my soul, O LORD, from lying lips, and from a deceitful tongue."
 - B. Now in **Psalm 123** we again find the anguish of living in the midst of the wicked.
Psalm 123:3-4 KJV - "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."
 - (1) Some place the context of this psalm with the return of the exiles from Babylon back to Jerusalem. They found themselves scorned and held in contempt by those who lived around Jerusalem.
Nehemiah 4:1-3 KJV - "But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews. ² And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they

make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned? ³ Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall."

- (2) Consistent with this psalm they looked to the heavens and cried out
Nehemiah 4:4-5 KJV - "Hear, O our God; for we are despised: and turn their reproach upon their own head, and give them for a prey in the land of captivity: ⁵ And cover not their iniquity, and let not their sin be blotted out from before thee: for they have provoked thee to anger before the builders."

- C. We find here in **Psalm 123** in the midst of anguish there is comfort in God.
Psalm 123:1 KJV - "Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest in the heavens."

This is consistent with **Psalm 121**

Psalm 121:1 KJV - "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."

Again we find God's pilgrim walking through this life with his head lifted up towards his true home and towards his true King, the source of all comfort and hope.

Hebrews 12:2 - " Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith"

- 3. I want to set this before you under three headings:

The Pilgrims looked to a God unlimited in power

The Pilgrims looked to a God unceasing in provision

The Pilgrims looked to a God unreserved in pity

I. The Pilgrims looked to a God unlimited in power – **Verse 1**

- A. We are often inclined to turn our eyes downward to ourselves and to our own resources

1. They were being ridiculed and scorned.

- a. All of us dislike being criticized or ridiculed. It would have been easy to respond in like manner—to return insult for insult
- b. Instead they looked upward

1 Peter 3:8-9 NAU - "To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; ⁹ not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."

- c. Vengeance must be left to God

Romans 12:19-1 KJV - "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but *rather* give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. ²¹ Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. "

- d. How guilty are we of this. Our feelings are hurt and we try to get even. Someone hurts our feelings and we retaliate by speaking evil of them. Or we give them the silent treatment until we feel fully avenged and vindicated rather than looking to heaven.

- e. God's people have always been ridiculed, often just because we follow Christ.
 - 2. How did the psalmist respond? He looked to God. He responded with prayer
Psalm 123:1 KJV - "Unto thee lift I up mine eyes"
Verse 2 – "behold" - הִנֵּה (hinneh)
 - 3. Luther calls attention to the brevity of this prayer:
 "This psalm is but short, and therefore a very 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."
- B. Notice the direction and focus of his prayer
Psalm 123:1 KJV - "O thou that dwellest in the heavens."
- 1. This points to the greatness of God, the transcendence of God, the power of God.
 - 2. God is like nothing of our earthly experience – He is in the heavens
 - 3. This was the nature of our Lord's model prayer
"Our Father which art in heaven"
 - a. He is our Father – a filial relationship with God. It is warm, intimate and loving. We are mindful of the rich blessing of our adoption. We pray to our Father who cares for us, provides for us, receives us.
 - b. But God dwells in the heavens, high and lifted up, in splendor and majesty, worshipped by the angels. We must approach Him with holy reverence
- Ecclesiastes 5:2 KJV** - "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter *any* thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few."
- 4. This God who dwells in the heavens possesses power without measure. He created all things with just a word.
 Job said of God:
Job 9:3-12 NAU - "If one wished to dispute with Him, He could not answer Him once in a thousand *times*. ⁴ "Wise in heart and mighty in strength, Who has defied Him without harm? ⁵ "*It is God* who removes the mountains, they know not *how*, When He overturns them in His anger; ⁶ Who shakes the earth out of its place, And its pillars tremble; ⁷ Who commands the sun not to shine, And sets a seal upon the stars; ⁸ Who alone stretches out the heavens And tramples down the waves of the sea; ⁹ Who makes the Bear, Orion and the Pleiades, And the chambers of the south; ¹⁰ Who does great things, unfathomable, And wondrous works without number. ¹¹ "Were He to pass by me, I would not see Him; Were He to move past *me*, I would not perceive Him. ¹² "Were He to snatch away, who could restrain Him? Who could say to Him, 'What are You doing?'"
 - 5. We can look to the heavens to this God who rules over all things and wait for Him with confidence. He is able to do His holy will.

II. The Pilgrims looked to a God unceasing in provision – **Verse 2**

A. The psalmist gives an illustration of servants and masters

1. A servant was dependent upon the provision of his master

Psalm 123:2 KJV - "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"

- a. A gracious master provided well for his servants leaving them without need
- b. The master provided shelter, provision, and protection. We can see this in **Prov. 31**

Proverbs 31:15 KJV - "She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens."

2. But the servant not only looked to his master's hand for his provision, he looked to it for direction. He maintained a constant state of alertness that he might do his master's will.
3. It is a reminder to us of how we should be constantly alert on how we might serve and honor our Lord. It takes constant attention to God's Word that we might properly discern our Master's will.
4. Spurgeon gives an illustration in his "Treasury of David" "The people of the East do not speak so much or so quick as those in the West, and a sign of the hand is frequently the only instructions given to the servants in waiting. As soon as we were introduced and seated on the divan, a wave of the master's hand indicated that sherbet was to be served. Another wave brought coffee and pipes; another brought sweetmeats. At another signal dinner was made ready. The attendants watched their master's eye and hand, to know his will and do it instantly." Such is the attention with which we ought to wait upon the Lord, anxious to fulfil his holy pleasure, —our great desire being, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

B. But the emphasis here seems to be upon the master's care and the confidence the servant had in his master's care.

Psalm 123:2 KJV - "so our eyes *wait* upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us."

1. There is no doubt upon the gracious care of God
It isn't "if" He will provide for us but "how" He will provide.
The question isn't "if" He will provide but "when" He will provide
2. With confidence in God's provision the psalmist patiently waits upon God
"so our eyes *wait* upon the LORD our God"

Psalm 27:14 KJV - "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

III. The Pilgrims looked to a God unreserved in pity

A. Mercy ends **Verse 2** and opens **Verse 3** - "have mercy upon us."

1. In fact, the psalmist cries out "have mercy upon us" three times
2. In its basic sense mercy is God withholding His wrath upon those deserving of it. God is merciful towards guilty sinners through Christ who has covered our guilt.

3. In another sense the word נַזְר means "to be gracious or to have pity"

This is the sense here. It is a cry for God's pity

We read in Proverbs

Proverbs 19:17 KJV - "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD"

4. A.W. Pink said, "Mercy denotes the ready inclination of God to relieve the misery of fallen creatures."
5. In the face of the merciless ridicule and scorn of man the psalmist is crying out for God's pity.

B. This is our plea before God

1. We know our only claim upon God's blessings is by way of the work of our Savior and it is only by God's infinite mercy.

2. As God's people we find great comfort in the pity of God. The great blessing of God's justifying grace is He looks upon us with pity. He understands our weakness. He hears our cries. He wraps us in His tender care.

3. The glory of the Gospel is God's tender mercies

- a. Under the Law there is no compassion. The Law demands absolute obedience – rigorous perfection.

- b. Under the Gospel God shows pity upon our weakness.

Samuel Bolton – "In the Gospel God accepts affections for actions, endeavours for performance, desire for ability."

4. For God's people He shows unreserved pity. He cares for us, comforts us, keeps us, protects us.

Psalm 103:13 KJV - "Like as a father pitith *his* children, so the LORD pitith them that fear him."

5. God is mindful of us. He is mindful when we are falsely accused or unjustly criticized.

- a. Remember, if this is referring to the return of the exiles from Babylon they were facing ridicule because they were seeking to repair the city of God.

Those who were "at ease" (**V.4**) were attacking the servants of God.

- b. The world will also hate us when we serve Christ supremely. But when we face the scorn of men we are reminded that our greatest concern is what God thinks.

- c. We can take great comfort in His pity and care.

Conclusion:

Like these pilgrims of old we can find great comfort in

Our God, unlimited in power

Our God, unceasing in provision

Our God, God unreserved in pity