

The second set of three psalms follows a similar pattern to the first. We begin with distress and lament, followed by danger and dependence, and conclude with arrival and deliverance. The sojourner's journey to Jerusalem confronts the world's contempt and navigates the dangers before arriving in Jerusalem. It is right and good for Christians to track these psalms as they "press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [them]" (Phil 3:12). The physical journey to Jerusalem is analogous to the Christian's path of discipleship.

As in Psalm 120 the psalmist endures "no end of contempt" (Ps 123:3). It is as if he dwells in a strange land with people hostile to the covenant promises of Yahweh (Ps 120:5). He feels like a foreigner in his own homeland. Where he lives and works is far removed from the congruence and peace of Mount Zion. Instead of looking up to the mountains – to the spiritual high places of the pagan culture (Ps 121:1) – the psalmist's eyes look to the Lord.

"I lift my eyes to You"

*I lift my eyes to you,
to you who sit enthroned in heaven.
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.*

Psalm 123:1-2

There are many places to look. The psalmist might have looked with contempt upon those who showed him contempt. He might have looked with resentment upon those who should have worked to improve his situation. He might have looked down on those he was in a position to bully and upon whom he could take out his frustrations. There are always places to look. But the psalmist looked to the Lord God. He looked up to the one who sits "enthroned in heaven." The expression, "I lift my eyes" implies deliberation and intentionality.

In the upper room Jesus "looked toward heaven and prayed, 'Father, the hour has come'" (John 17:1). Humility and adoration provide the right posture for true spirituality. Jesus looked up to pray, not within to reflect. Like the psalmist, his prayer was not an inner dialogue, but a real conversation with the Father.¹ He who on bended knee looked into the eyes of the disciples as he washed their feet now lifts his eyes to heaven as he prays to the Father, "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). The striking paradox, none other than God the Son in communion with the Father, in the final act of his mission: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Within this short psalm is also a striking paradox. The psalmist likens his submission before the Lord to a slave before his master. The way a slave looks to his master – the way a female slave

¹ Webster, *The God Who Prays*, 40.

looks to her mistress – is how he looks to the Lord. The “look” says a lot about a person. The eyes don’t lie. Arrogance, envy, greed, pride, shame, and resentment can all be read in the eyes. Just as you can read respect, honor, humility, love, and compassion in the eyes. The psalmist’s eyes are on the exalted Lord and if we could see into his eyes we would see a look of confidence and trust because he was looking to the One seated on a throne high and lifted up. Surely whatever temptation to envy or resentment that he might have felt was corrected by looking up to the Lord. The psalmist emphasizes “eyes” and “hands.” “Eyes” signify the attention of the whole person to the Lord and “hands” signify God’s power and authority. The psalmist is intent on putting his whole life in the hands of God.

“Have Mercy on Us”

*Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us,
for we have endured no end of contempt.
We have endured no end
of ridicule from the arrogant,
of contempt from the proud.*

Psalm 123:3-4

However, this analogy of servitude stands in tension with the situation of oppression. Why does the psalmist who has “endured no end of ridicule from the arrogant” and “of contempt from the proud,” paint himself as a submissive slave before the majesty of God? Why doesn’t the psalmist call for justice against his arrogant and proud oppressors instead of asking three times for mercy for himself? The paradox deftly articulates that the only way to freedom for the oppressed is service to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It is significant that the apostles embraced the identity of a slave to describe their new found freedom in Christ. In *Ephesians*, Paul did not hesitate to call the followers of Jesus, “slaves of Christ” (Eph 6:6). In spite of all the cultural baggage associated with slavery, Paul co-opted the language and imagery of the slave and used it to define his relationship to Christ. Far from rendering believers passive to social pressures, Paul sought to make them immune to social pressures. “Believers are not to return to the bondage of an honor-shame culture where everything revolves round what status is achieved in human eyes.”² For Paul the bottom line is the Cross: “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings” (1 Corinthians 7:23). Ultimately the only freedom worth having is the freedom found in Christ, because only that freedom sets us free from the selfish social values of the world, from the dog-eat-dog world of cut-throat competition, and from the law of sin and death.³

As justified as a call for justice might be, it would have missed the psalmist’s fundamental need for forgiveness. The psalmist’s plea, while couched in the context of oppression, had the Spirit-guided wisdom to cry for mercy. When we come before God our chief need will always be for

² Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 562.

³ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 168-169.

God's merciful forgiveness rather than God's judgment against others. Psalm 123 offers a paradigm for the prophet Isaiah who declared the Lord's woes of judgment against oppressors, but when he himself has a vision of the Lord high and lifted up and seated on a throne all he can say is, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:1-5).

Those who ridicule the faithful and show no end of contempt for them are described by the psalmist as arrogant and proud. They pride themselves on their self-sufficiency and scorn the faithful for their dependence upon the Lord. The picture the psalmist paints looks suspiciously like upperclass Israelites who are in the evil habit of oppressing their fellow Israelites. Psalm 123 resonates with other Psalms, like Psalm 73, and with the Prophets who exposed the sinful rebellion of those who prided themselves on belonging to the house of David.

There is no resolution to this lament psalm other than to wait for the mercy of God and keep moving toward Zion. We are to keep our eyes "ever on the Lord" (Ps 25:15). The psalmist asserts, "My eyes are fixed on you, Sovereign Lord; in you I take refuge – do not give me over to death" (Ps 141:8). Psalm 123 reminds us to fix our eyes on Jesus. We are on a redemptive pilgrimage from death to life, from sin's depravity to salvation's deliverance. We are not following a religious tour guide or spiritual director, exploring religious sites and sharing spiritual experiences. This is not a pilgrimage from birth to death, nor a quest for spiritual enlightenment.⁴ This is not the faith journey that many talk about in vague, existential terms. This is a journey to the cross and we fix our eyes on Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2). Jesus is not our mystical mascot, but our mediator before God, who saves completely and "lives to intercede" for us (7:25). We say with the psalmist, "Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us" (Ps 123:3).

⁴ Webster, Preaching Hebrews, 116.