



more than full

psalm 123

Catching Up on the Story

Over the last few weeks, we've been journeying with Israel toward Jerusalem and the Temple. We imagined traveling with friends and family on the long road leading up to the city. We stopped to take in all the sights, sounds, feelings, and emotions associated with such a pilgrimage.

With joy, we entered the city and ascended the Temple Mount gazing at the place where God's presence rests. While we rested in the joy of being in the place where God is, we confessed our need for God's peace to reign. We recognized that the world around us was not at peace. We named the fact that so often, our lives are not at peace. Our deep hope is rooted in the history of God's restorative movements in history, in Israel's history, and our own. God has brought salvation for God's people and will do so again.

We confessed that our ability to imagine the peace that God can bring is limited. So, we've called out to God, who we confess is "able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" to bring peace upon this world, and we've asked that we might have the strength and courage to be agents of God's peace in the world, too.

Psalm 123

To you I lift up my eyes,
 O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
As the eyes of servants
 look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid
 to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
 until he has mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,

for we have had more than enough of contempt.
Our soul has had more than its fill
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

I Lift up my Eyes

Continuing with the pilgrimage imagery we've been using this Advent, we can imagine that the pilgrims have made it to the Temple and are now in the Temple complex, taking their place in the appropriate court. The Temple itself contained a series of courts that progressively moved toward the Holy of Holies. There was a court for Gentiles, a court for women, and a court for men.

We have stood in awe of the outside majesty of the Temple, but now the weight and importance of the place press down on us. I'm sure you've had an experience like this before. You've taken a trip to a monument, cathedral, or even sports stadium. Viewing a structure from the outside, while potentially awe-inspiring, is nothing like entering the building. Have you ever felt a sense of awe, importance, reverence, or sacredness upon entering a significant building?

I imagine that's what the psalmist is feeling at this moment. The pilgrimage enters a new phase as the pilgrim is faced with the sacredness of the Temple. Whether or not the psalmist would have recited this psalm to himself or if a group of pilgrims sang the psalm together, we do not know. The weight of the moment combined with the recent confession of the lack of peace in our world and our lives propel the psalmist to utter the following words, "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!"

Knowing that the help needed will not come solely from human hands, lifting the psalmist's eyes in reverence and awe amounts to a confession of the smallness of humanity in contrast to Israel's God. This confession is not self-deprecating, however. It is a confession that realizes that salvation must come from someone greater.

Verse two describes how the psalmist looks toward God. The

psalmist looks toward God like a servant looks to their master, as the maid looks to her mistress. These images may seem foreign to us as American society does not look fondly toward positions of servitude or subservience. It is the American dream to be the master, not the servant, the mistress, not the maid. Traditionally, the relationship between masters and servants has not been congenial, and we dislike placing ourselves in that role.

Regardless of the feelings verse two evokes, the sentiment is clear. The psalmist understands himself to be in a specific kind of relationship with Israel's God, a relationship in which the psalmist does not occupy a position of authority. The psalmist relies on the hand of God to guide, protect, and provide for their continued existence. Mercy is what the psalmist needs. The psalmist is confident, indeed, convinced that the master will notice their constant gaze and grant them the mercy they very badly need.

More than Enough

The second strophe of the psalm includes verses 3–4. It is here that a more formal call for mercy is made. At this point, we might be inclined to believe that whatever the psalmist is suffering from is a result of God's punishment. There are many examples within Israel's literature where Israel calls God to abate from delivering the punishment Israel deserves. We don't get that sense from this psalm. What the psalmist suffers from is not a punishment from the hand of God. It is, however, the natural forces of evil and injustice that plague our world. In this way, the psalm is a continuation of Psalm 122's longing for peace.

The psalmist does not give us a detailed description of the evil or injustice from which they have been suffering, only that they have had more than their fair share. The psalmist's soul is full and overflowing with contempt and scorn received from those who fancy themselves better or more worthy.

If we take this psalm as being recited or sung by a group of pilgrims who have made their way to Jerusalem and the Temple, the Psalm becomes much more corporate. It is not just that the individual has suffered at the hands of the proud, thus detracting from their quality of life; the whole community needs rescuing.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. The psalmist uses the image of a servant and a maid looking intently to their master for help. What kind of reaction does this image evoke in you? Why?
 2. Why would the psalmist say they lift their eyes to the heavens like a servant or maid to their master or mistress? What's the image that comes to your mind?
 3. Have you ever had to look to someone in a position of authority or power greater than yours for help? What was the situation? How did you feel doing so?
 4. The psalmist understands that his or her status as compared to God is small and insignificant. It's one of a servant or maid. Do you have a hard time thinking of yourself as a servant or a maid? Why or why not?

5. Does thinking of ourselves as servants or maids compared to God cause you any difficulty? Why or why not?
 6. Have you ever had to ask someone for mercy? If so, what was that like? Has anyone had to ask you for mercy? If so, what was that like, and did you grant mercy?
 7. What does our psalmist mean by “Our soul has had more than its fill, of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud?”
 8. Who’s causing the scorn and contempt? What do you expect the psalmist hopes God will do about it?
 9. Why would a pilgrim read or sing this psalm on their way to or while at the Temple? Does the plural language change how you read the psalm?

10. This psalm doesn't end on a positive note. Why is that? How does ending on a negative note make you feel? Why?

11. What might God be calling us to do?

12. What might God be calling us to become?

So What?

Lament can be a powerful tool in dealing with life's distressing times. It's used frequently in the Bible, many times in the Psalm, as a way of crying out to God for salvation. But it's more than just complaining. Lament doesn't just name the problem allowing the one lamenting to sit and wallow in their misfortune. Lament names and calls out the evil and injustice in the world and expresses a quiet hope about who will bring relief.

Psalm 123 doesn't exactly end on an upbeat note. The psalmist isn't very specific about the situations that might be causing the psalmist to lament the current lack of peace he or she experiences, but there is a particular hope regarding the one who will intervene in the psalmist's situation.

In confidence, the psalmist lifts up his or her eyes to the Lord, the only one capable of bringing mercy and relief. Yet the psalmist does not lament or hope alone. The psalmist is strengthened by the presence of his or her fellow pilgrims. They have journeyed this far

to the place where God's presence resides, and now they can unburden themselves of all that weights them down.

As we enter the third week of Advent, we do as the psalmist has done. We have journeyed with each other to this place to lift our voices and our eyes to the God of the universe. We name the injustice, the hurt, and the pain from which we suffer, but we do so in confidence that mercy and healing are on the horizon. We do so knowing that the one whose birth we eagerly anticipate is the beginning and the end, the Lord of creation, the suffering servant, the crucified yet resurrected savior of the world.