

July 7, 2013 by Steve Brandon



Looking Up

Psalm 123

- 1. Filled with Contempt (verses 3b-4)**
- 2. Looking for Grace (verses 1-2)**
- 3. Pleading for Grace (verse 3a)**

God's people have always faced a measure of opposition. You can go back into the Garden of Eden and see it. Cain killed Abel because "because his deeds were evil and his brother's [deeds] were righteous" (1 John 3:12).

Joseph was a righteous man. Yet, he was hated by his brothers, who sold him into slavery. Further, Israel was enslaved and oppressed by Egypt, a godless nation, for four hundred years.

And the opposition didn't always come from pagan people who knew no better. There were times when it came from within. Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery. And yet, time and time again, the people of Israel -- those who saw the power of God in the plagues -- turned against Moses on several occasions [\[1\]](#). In David's day, it was his own son, Absalom, who turned against him (2 Sam. 15). In Jeremiah's day, it was the king of Israel that imprisoned Jeremiah (Jeremiah 32) and had him cast into a cistern, where he sank deep in the mud (Jeremiah 38:6).

Sometimes the opposition has been political, as when Sanballat and Tobiah attempted to discourage the workers from rebuilding the wall, because they hated the Jews (Nehemiah 4). Sometimes the opposition has been personal, as when the satraps trapped Daniel regarding his relationship to the Lord, because they didn't want him to rule over them (Daniel 6). Sometimes the opposition was religious, as when the Pharisees arose and arrested Peter and John, who were drawing people to believe in Jesus and away from traditional Judaism.

God's people have always faced a measure of opposition. And the greatest example of this, of course, is the Lord, Jesus Christ. When Jesus came and walked the earth, He was hated by the religious establishment of the day. The reason is simple: His righteousness exposed the sin of the Jewish leaders. And the darkness hated the light. So they killed Him, by hanging Him upon a cross. It was the clash of two kingdoms: The kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

And in our day and age, the same battle rages. All followers of Christ, at one point or another, will face opposition. Paul said to Timothy, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 4:12). And, to those who were in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, he encouraged the disciples to continue in the faith, saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

My question to you is this, "How will you respond when such opposition comes into your life?" Notice, I didn't ask, "How will you respond if such opposition comes into your life?" Because, it's not a matter of "if." It's a matter of "when."

Trouble is brewing all around us. This can be on the national level or on the personal level. In recent weeks, our supreme court has struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) as unconstitutional. This means that the road has been paved for same-sex marriage to spread across our nation like wildfire. This will mean some tough choices for how Christians respond. It may very well bring persecution.

But, listen. DOMA wasn't struck down in a vacuum. It's not like the Supreme Court justices merely came up with this idea out of the blue. Our society is drifting. And it is drifting fast. It is becoming increasingly godless all the time.

I saw this last week in a chance encounter with someone in the airport. Last week I was flying home from Denver, from "The Huddle" with the Crossway Chapel group. As we were going through security, there was a nice-looking family in front of us. They had three small children. And the father was struggling a bit with the hassle of security with small children.

Trying to be sympathetic, I told him of how I understand how difficult it is. I told him that my wife and I have gone through security in much the same way that he is going through it right now with our little children. I told him that we have five children. He looked at me and said, "Why?" and then carried about his business.

A few seconds later, as soon as it was appropriate, I told him, "Children are a gift of the LORD" (Psalm 127:1). He turned again to me and said, "That's a lie." And then, he quickly continued on through the metal detectors.

I was shocked. Here was this man, with a nice looking family and three young children. If you didn't know any better, they would fit right in with us at Rock Valley Bible Church. And yet, this man had a very anti-children, anti-God perspective. His children were a burden to him. I wouldn't doubt that he was an atheist, who objected to my use of "the LORD" when I said, "Children are a gift of the LORD". Perhaps he believed that God doesn't exist.

Church family, I submit this to you: Just try to be a little bold with your faith and you will discover these types of things come up frequently.

And the question is this, "How will you respond when such opposition comes into your life?" It's one thing to face something like this passing by in the airport. It's another thing when this is your neighbor or coworker. How will you respond?

In our text this morning, we find the author facing some opposition in his life. And in our text, we find out how he deals with it. I invite you to look with me in your Bibles to Psalm 123. Again, this is one of the "Songs of Ascents." You can see this Psalm identified as such in the superscription.

These were the songs that Israel sang as they went up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. There are fifteen of these Psalms, beginning at Psalm 120 and ending at Psalm 134. We are looking at these Psalms to help our hearts with matters of worship.

As I said, the Psalmist in Psalm 123 is dealing with opposition. He is dealing with those who are against him. And how does he deal with it? Let's read our text:

Psalm 123
To You I lift up my eyes,
O You who are enthroned in the heavens!
Behold, 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 is gracious to us.
Be gracious to us, O LORD, be gracious to us,
For we are greatly filled with contempt.
Our soul is greatly filled
With the scoffing of those who are at ease,
And with the contempt of the proud.

Obviously, the way that he deals with the opposition in his life is to look to the Lord. He lifts up his eyes to the heavens, where the Lord is enthroned. He looks up to the heavens, looking for God's grace to come down.

I have entitled my message this morning, "Looking Up," because that's where the Psalmist looks when facing opposition in this life. He lifts his gaze up to the LORD. His actions are great examples for us.

We don't know who wrote these words. Nor do we know the exact circumstances surrounding their writing. But, we do have a hint as to why he wrote it. Our clue comes in verse 3 and 4, ...

Psalm 123:3-4
... we are greatly filled with contempt.
Our soul is greatly filled
With the scoffing of those who are at ease,
And with the contempt of the proud.

This is where I would like to begin my message this morning, in the second half of verse 3. I will begin here because it is there that we find out why the first two verses were written. They flowed from the experience of the Psalmist. After we understand why verses 1 and 2 were written, they will come with greater force.

We find in verses 3 and 4 that the Psalmist (and the community) was ...

1. Filled with Contempt (verses 3b-4)

That is, they were greatly despised and hated. The context of Psalm 123 as a Song of Ascents, certainly puts these people as Jews in the midst of a pagan society. They were certainly experiencing the clash of worldviews.

We have seen this before in these Songs of Ascents. In Psalm 120, ...

Psalm 120:5-7
Woe is me, for I sojourn in Meshech,
For I dwell among the tents of Kedar!
Too long has my soul had its dwelling
With those who hate peace.
I am for peace, but when I speak,
They are for war.

Here I am, dwelling in a land far away from God's people. There is constant conflict. They hate peace. They are for war. What sort of conflict is he experiencing? A worldview conflict, which resulted in verbal clash.

Psalm 120:2-4
Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips,
From a deceitful tongue.

What shall be given to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
You deceitful tongue?
Sharp arrows of the warrior,
With the burning coals of the broom tree.

Lying lips and deceitful tongues, which pierce deep within, like sharp arrows and burning coals. What's his solution? Crying to the LORD.

Psalm 120:1
In my trouble I cried to the Lord, And He answered me.

This is almost exactly the message of Psalm 123. The verbal assaults are coming. And, the answer is the LORD. Verse 3 speaks of "contempt" against the community. Contempt is that hateful attitude of despising and resisting someone else. Contempt is an attitude of scorn or disgrace or dis-respect. This all comes out in words of hatred. Verse 4 speaks of "scoffing." Surely, this is "scoffing" at the people of God, making fun of them, showing them no respect.

It is no accident that these assaults are coming from the proud and arrogant. Verse 4 describes them as coming from "those who are at ease." Verse 4 also describes them as coming from "the proud."

I do believe that a modern-day parallel to the situation of Psalm 123 is what is happening with the homosexual agenda of our day. If you at all say that homosexuality is a sin, you are labeled a bigot; you are labeled a homophobe; you are thought to be Puritanical and prudish. And I don't care how much kindness you attempt to surround your words with, this is the way of our society. We have a clash of worldviews.

Christians are scoffed today. Christians are held in great contempt today. Don't think that this is anything new. The community in Psalm 123 was saturated in this sort of thing.

Look again at how much contempt and scoffing they have faced. The New American Standard translates it as, "...we are greatly filled with contempt" (verse 3). And in verse 4, "Our soul is greatly filled With the scoffing of those who are at ease".

The verb used in verses 3 and 4 is most straight-forwardly translated, "saturated." "We are saturated with contempt. We are saturated with the scoffing of those who are at ease." The New American Standard translators have attempted to catch this meaning by saying that "we are greatly filled."

The idea of this word is a wet sponge that is full of water. It can take no more. And the Psalmist says here that the contempt and the scoffing of the arrogant have reached their limit. They are "fed up" with the opposition that has come against them.

It is helpful to look at the other major translations here, because they are all different but they are all getting at the same idea.

The English Standard Version, ...

Psalm 123:3-4
... we have had more than enough of contempt.
Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,

The New International Version, ...

Psalm 123:3-4
... for we have endured no end of contempt.
We have endured no end
of ridicule from the arrogant,

The New King James Version, ...

Psalm 123:3-4
... For we are exceedingly filled with contempt.
Our soul is exceedingly filled
With the scorn of those who are at ease,

They are "greatly filled." They have had "more than enough." They have "endured no end." They are "exceedingly filled."

I think that it's safe to say that the Psalmist (and community) has reached the breaking point. There's no more that they can take. The ridicule, the scoffing, the mocking -- it has come upon them too much. They are going to burst. They are going to react. They are the volcano that is going to explode!

You say, "What has brought them to this point?" Words. The words of the proud (verse 4). The words of those who have it easy (verse 4).

Apparently, there were some proud people who had it all, and they were looking down upon the godly who were struggling.

Now, we don't know what words were being said here. We don't know what exactly the circumstances were. We just know that it was really bad. Proverbs 15:1 says that a, "harsh word stirs up anger." Proverbs 12:18 says that the rash word is, "like the thrusts of a sword." Proverbs 11:9 says that, "with his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor."

The crushing of these words was great. Ben Patterson, chaplain of Westmont College, said, "Contempt and ridicule cut deep. They are a species of malice more vicious than murder. To have your fill of contempt is to feel the pains of hell itself."

Something to this effect was taking place. The pains of those against the Psalmist and against his community were great!

It reminds me of Asaph's troubles as recorded in Psalm 73. In that Psalm, Asaph describes how easy the wicked have it. They prosper in their wickedness (verse 3). Their bodies are fat (verse 4, 7). They are always at ease (verse 12). They increase in wealth (verse 12). "They mock and wickedly speak of oppression. They speak from on high" (verse 8).

They say, "Why are you following the ways of God? Can't you see that we are the ones who are living the good life? What use is your following after God?" And Asaph almost caved in. His feet almost slipped (verse 2).

What saved Asaph? God did.

Asaph describes the time when he went into the sanctuary of God. He saw the reality beyond this life. Sure, the wicked may prosper today. Sure, all may seem well with the wicked. But, all that seems well is not well. God will cast the wicked down to destruction (verse 18). Sure, they may be prospering now, but their doom is sure. God will destroy them in a moment! (verse 19).

Then Asaph says those memorable words, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:25-26).

And so, coming back to Psalm 123, what does the Psalmist do? He doesn't fight back. He doesn't threaten the scoffers who are at ease. He doesn't argue with the proud. Instead, he lifts up his eyes. He looks to the heavens.

And in verses 1 and 2, we find him, ...

2. Looking for Grace (verses 1-2)

Psalm 123:1-2
To You I lift up my eyes,
O You who are enthroned in the heavens!
Behold, 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 is gracious to us.

These words are similar to Psalm 121, "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; From where shall my help come? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth." Here in Psalm 123, we see the Psalmist lifting up his eyes to the heavens. And, again, he seeks his help from the LORD.

When the Psalmist is looking to the heavens, he is looking with the eye of faith. He is looking for relief. He is finding things rough here upon the earth. He is looking to the LORD for help. What's so good about this Psalm is that verse 1 is applicable to all of your problems in life, not just the problems being faced in this Psalm.

If today finds you in financial difficulty, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help. If today finds you in marital conflict, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help. If today finds you with cares and anxieties upon your heart, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help. If today finds you dealing with difficult children, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help. If today finds you overwhelmed with responsibility, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help. If today finds you sick with some disease, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help. If today finds you apart from Jesus Christ and without the hope of forgiveness, you can do the same thing: look to the one enthroned in the heavens for help.

Perhaps you remember the story of Charles Spurgeon, arguably the greatest preacher who ever lived. Spurgeon grew up in a preacher's home, and yet wasn't saved. He shared how he struggled with his sin for about five years, trying to rid himself of the burden of sin, but was unable to do so.

Then, one cold December Sunday morning, when he was 16 years old, he was attempting to walk to church. But, due to the snow-storm, he was unable to do so. So, he attended a church service in a church building that he stumbled upon, it was a little primitive Methodist chapel. And in that chapel, Spurgeon said that there were a dozen, perhaps fifteen people present. Due to the snowstorm, the regular pastor was unable to get to church either. So, a layman was the preacher that morning. His text was Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else."

In his autobiography, Spurgeon spoke about how simple the sermon was. The preacher (probably unprepared) simply repeated the phrase, "Look unto Me." "Look unto Me." "Look, ... look, ... look." He said things like: "Look unto Me; I am sweating great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hanging on the cross. Look! I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend and sit at the Father's right hand. O! Look to Me!"

That morning, Charles Spurgeon looked to Jesus for help and discovered the relief from his burden of his sin. From that day onward, he could say with the hymn-writer, "Redeeming love has been my theme and shall be till I die."

And so, if this morning finds you apart from Christ, "Lift up your eyes" to Him who is "enthroned in the heavens!" (verse 1). Look to him for help. As someone has said, "It's not what you're doing that gets you to Heaven, it's where you're looking. Look to Jesus."

This has always been God's cure. Do you remember when the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people of Israel? When these serpents bit the people of Israel, they died of the poison. The people repented and came to Moses, saying, "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us" (Numbers 21:7). When Moses came to the LORD, God instructed him to "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live" (Numbers 21:8).

And Moses did so. And those who looked up to the serpent were healed! What a great picture of how God works. When sick or in trouble or in need, He simply wants for us to look to him for relief and rescue. He want to rescue us in a way that makes it clear that it was His doing and not our own. And thus, all glory will go to the Lord.

Jesus used this illustration of the serpent when speaking with Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

So, look to Jesus. Look to Him and be healed. Look to Him and be saved!

The book of Hebrews climaxes with this thought. This is how we must live, ...

Hebrews 12:2

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is the life that God calls us to live, a life looking to Jesus.

In verse 2, we have a word-picture describing our look to the LORD.

Psalms 123:2

Behold, 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 is gracious to us.

The Psalmist pictures us as servants. The Psalmist pictures us as slaves. He pictures us as looking intently to the hand of our master, with readiness and willingness to please and to obey. This was the hand that directed the every movement of the servant. Various movements of the hand expressed various desires of the master. It has been said that "if the master had to open his mouth, the servant already failed in his duty."

But, there is more. The hand of the master was the provision for the servant. The servant was dependent upon the master for everything. Food came from the hand of the master. Clothing came from the hand of the master. Shelter came from the hand of the master. Anything that they received came from the hand of the master.

Servants in the ancient world were vulnerable. As everything came from their masters, they were at his (or her) mercy. All they could do is hope for the kindness of their masters to provide everything they needed.

How apt is my point. Servants were Looking for Grace (verses 1-2). They were looking for the kindness of their master toward them to provide for them.

And in verse 2 we see our disposition as well: "So our eyes look to the LORD our God, Until He is gracious to us." This is our standing before the LORD. We are servants of the Most High, expecting nothing but His mercy and grace.

We don't stand before the LORD as His employer, as if we are due anything. We stand before the LORD as His servant, looking for grace.

The good news is this: our God is a gracious God. He is lavish with His mercy. It overflows. It abounds.

This is what God proclaims in Exodus 34:6-7! "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin."

When Jesus told a story about His heavenly father, he described him as one who was lavish in His grace and mercy. One who was ready to

give half of his estate away to a sinful, wasteful child. One who was ready to forgive him and restore him when he comes back repentantly.

When Paul described the kindness of the LORD, he used words like, "God, ... being rich in mercy. God, ... [having] great love toward us. God, ... [having] surpassing riches of His grace and kindness" (Eph. 2:4-7).

This isn't to deny His justice in any way. For, the Bible clearly declares that He is just and right and will punish all iniquity. Continuing in Exodus 34, "He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (verse 7). God will punish all sin. That's why Jesus came and had to die. He had to die for the sins of those who would believe, that we can freely enter into heaven. Because our sin has been dealt with on the cross.

The good news is this: our God is a gracious God. He is gracious to those who wait for Him.

When the Psalmist paints us as slaves, waiting and hoping for God to be gracious, those are the very ones to whom he extends his grace. We'll see this in our last point.

In this Psalm, we see the psalmist Filled with Contempt (verses 3b-4), Looking for Grace (verses 1-2), and finally, ...

3. Pleading for Grace (verse 3a)

Verse 3, ...

Psalm 123:3

Be gracious to us, O LORD, be gracious to us,

Here the cry is for grace. The cry is for mercy. He is desperate. It's repeated, because it is an earnest prayer. This is the cry that God loves to hear.

Do you remember the story that Jesus told of the two people who went up to the temple to pray? One of them was a Pharisee (Luke 18:10). The other was a tax collector (Luke 18:10). The Pharisee stood up and prayed to himself as if God's blessing was due to come to him. He said, "'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'" (Luke 18:11-12).

In contrast to this man stooped the tax collector. He didn't come into the temple. Rather, he stood his distance. He wasn't standing tall. Instead, he was bent over beating his breast. His prayer was nothing about his own achievements, but all about pleading for God's mercy. He said, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

Do you remember what Jesus said about these two men? Listen carefully to the words of our Lord, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

God loves the humble who cry to him for mercy. Do you remember when Jesus was leaving Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem? On the outskirts of the city, there were a couple of blind men. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" (Matthew 20:30). And when the crowd tried to quiet them down, they cried out all the more, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" (Matthew 20:31).

Jesus heard their cry and went and attended to their need.

Luke 20:32-34

"What do you want Me to do for you?"

They said to Him, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened."

Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

Time after time in the ministry of Jesus, we see Him showing favor toward those who come to Him in humility. We see it in the story of the syrophenecian woman, who said, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27). We see it with the woman with the hemorrhaging problem, "If I only touch His garment, I will get well" (Matthew 9:21). We see it with the centurion who said, "I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8).

And so, I ask you, "Is this how you come to the LORD?" Do you come Looking for Grace (verses 1-2)? Do you come Pleading for Grace (verse 3a)?

God loves to hear the cry of such people. God loves to answer such a cry. But, toward the arrogant and boastful, God turns a deaf ear. "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

In this Psalm, we see both. We see the humble. We see the proud.

Verse 2 describes the servant in humility looking for God's help, claiming nothing of his own. Verse 4 describes the proud. They are "at ease." They look down upon others.

The reality is that the proud of this world will oppress the humble of this world. Verses 3 and 4 are nothing new. Verses 3 and 4 will continue for years to come. If you come to experience the contempt of the proud and the scoffing of those who are at ease, look up! Look to the LORD

for your help!

And the simple question is this: are you proud or are you humble? Are you looking up to God for help? Or, are you looking down upon your fellow man?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on JuLY 7, 2013 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Exodus 14 - Red Sea; Exodus 15 - the bitter water; Exodus 16 - Manna; Exodus 17 - Water from the Rock; Numbers 12 - Has God spoken only through Moses?; Numbers 14 - Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram