

God's People under Pressure – Psalm 123

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Psalm 123 – A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ To you I lift up my eyes,
 O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
- 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.
- 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.

ESV

As part of their perseverance, God's people must strive against their own remaining sin, the world's mentality, and Satan's subtleties. In addition to these daily battles, all who endeavour to walk in all good conscience before God will experience times when they are gripped by unusual tribulation. Psalm 123 provides counsel as to what God's people should be and do during such pressure. This brief Psalm of Ascent¹ has universal application for all who contend earnestly for The Faith delivered to the Saints but who suffer distress under the ridicule of those who sit in the seat of the scornful. It is obviously a cry for help, for we find the Psalmist pleading with God, "Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud."

The circumstances that provoked the writing of this Psalm were that God's people were literally saturated with scorn and contempt. The Hebrew word for "filled" conveys the picture of someone who has gorged himself at a meal and when his host asks him, "Would you like more," his response is, "I'd love more, but I'm stuffed to the brim." God's people during this protracted period of severe persecution cried out, "Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those at ease; with the contempt of the proud." If there were a progression between contempt and scorn, perhaps it would be this: Contempt is a heart attitude verbalized by scorn.

The Sources of Scorn and Contempt

Those Who Are At Ease

Notice the *source* of this scorn and contempt. Two sources are indicated in Verse 4: "Our soul is exceedingly filled

¹ Briefly, the Psalms of Ascent refer to Psalms 120-134. It is most likely that the grouping of Psalms is a reference "to the pilgrimage up to Jerusalem, or the processional ascent of 'the hill of the Lord'" while pilgrims were on their way to the Temple for the feasts, although "Not every psalm in the group was necessarily composed for this purpose." See, Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), I, p. 43 and Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), II, p. 429.

with the scorn (1) of those who are at ease and (2) with the contempt of the proud". Who are those who are at ease? How are they defined? This concept is repeated throughout Scripture. You have an example of this category of people in Amos 6:1, "Woe unto those that are at ease in Zion." Those at ease in Zion, though they sit in the congregation of the righteous, will not pass the bar of God's judgment (Psalm 1:5). Their condition, as those numbered among God's covenant People, is one of carnal ease within the Visible Church. Generally they have an orthodox reputation. Their religious pedigree leads them to the false conclusion that because of their external, religious status, *ipso facto*, all is well with their souls. However, they hold contempt for all who make Jehovah and His purpose central to their lives. All who are at ease within Zion embrace a comfort-zone, Laodicean religion that Christ hates. For the Lord Jesus Christ warned the Church of Laodicea that because they were "neither hot nor cold He would vomit them out of His mouth." (Revelation 3:15,16). This comfort-zone compromise is a direct contrast to those who have a Spirit-filled witness and who, at great personal cost, "go unto Christ without the camp, bearing His reproach" in faithful, fervent discipleship. Those who are at ease in Zion are more preoccupied with what men think of them than with what God knows about them, and they "glory in appearance and not in heart" (2 Corinthians 5:12).

This posture of ease within Zion holds contempt for all who submit to Christ's all encompassing claims of absolute, unrivalled affection and trust and who, with full purpose and endeavour after new obedience, seek to live out their Redeemer's claims upon them in practical godliness. Indeed, all those at ease assume they possess eternal salvation while with hostile hearts they dispute and despise Christ's own terms of discipleship; that is, self-denial, cross-bearing and following Christ. Indeed, they oppose (whether secretly or openly) all who follow Him in obedience to His Word. Their disdain for diligent discipleship manifests itself when they are confronted with the biblical Gospel, which recognizes no salvation apart from a radical repudiation of self as the governing principle of life (*cf.* Mark 8:34-38). In their attempt to legitimize their religious position

and sometimes prominence, they scorn, and if convenient, even slander all uncompromising allegiance to Christ whenever such testimony challenges their religious reputation by exposing their hypocrisy. They are the Fifth Column within the Visible Church, who subscribe to a comfort-zone religion produced by perhaps the worst heresy in the Church today; namely the profession of an historic confessional Faith which is not at the same time an expression of Spirit-filled Christian discipleship! Such hypocritical professors are the dry rot that is sapping the North-American confessing orthodox Church of its power with God and with man.

The Proud

Secondly, the identity of “The Proud.” How are they defined? Here is the picture of a perishing people, who in the common grace of God, benefit abundantly from God’s material and temporal mercies but live in absolute indifference to the God who gives those mercies. Because they bask in the benefits of God’s common grace, but are oblivious to their need for any grace, they are strangers to redeeming grace! They acknowledge no god but their own cleverness; sense no need of Divine aid, Divine provision, or Divine providence. Indeed their world-life view eclipses the authority of Christ and His Word as interpreted by the Holy Spirit. Hence they don’t pray. They aren’t thankful to God for the breath they breathe or for their sanity. Their fundamental assumption in life is that they are the captains of their own destiny and the master of their own fate. They are ‘self-made men.’ But apparently this is only so because they view the whole of life through the blinded vision of a proud heart.

Here then is the source of this scorn and contempt. It comes from “those who are ease in Zion,” who spew out their venom against any impinging examination of their religious status and reputation. It also comes from “the proud” who play ‘God’ under the canopy of His gracious goodness and daily provision.

The Proper Activity

Looking in the Right Direction

Having identified “those who are at ease” and “the proud,” we must then ask, “What activity and attitude does the Psalmist exemplify for all who march in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ under persecuting pressure. What example may they follow?” Well, the activity in which the Psalmist engages is to *look in the right direction*. Verse 1, “Unto You O Lord, I lift up my eyes, You who dwell in the heavens.” That is, he first of all deliberately focuses his expectations in a given direction. We say to someone, “Don’t expect any help from him.” What we mean is don’t focus your expectations on that person. What then is the meaning of the phrase ‘to look’ in the context of this Psalm? It means to resolutely focus your expectation in the direction of the unchanging God who is called ‘Jehovah.’ God’s character is revealed in His names. The Psalmist is not in this situation looking to ‘El Shaddai’ the ‘Most High’ or to the ‘Lord of Hosts,’ but he is looking unto ‘Jehovah,’ that name for God which refers to Him as the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. This is most significant in this strained setting, for the Psalmist is extremely aware of the type of compassionate help he needs in the midst of this oppression from those who are at ease, from the contempt of the proud. Yet God’s servant by faith is even more conscious of the permanent presence of God, who has pledged never to leave or forsake him. To us, living this side of the revelation of God-in-Christ, we know that Jehovah is manifested in His fullness in the Lord Jesus Christ. “He who has seen Me”, Jesus said, “has seen the Father.” Furthermore, he looked to Jehovah as an *enthroned Jehovah* who reigns from His heavenly throne of supreme, unshakable authority and power.

Most of our problem, when under scorn or contempt or any concentrated form of pressure, is that we look in the wrong direction. We may look *inward* to see if we can figure out how to resolve our problems, or we look *outward* pinning our hopes on man. If we do look *upward*, it may not be with steady confidence in the God who cannot lie and who has promised that, “He will not withhold any good thing from those who walk uprightly.” But when the believer is living by faith, he can say,

“Yes, our situation is hard. We’re being scorned and mocked, but no amount of pressure from mere creatures is able to shake God’s throne of absolute sovereignty!” That’s the perspective of Psalm 2. Here the nations are raging and the rulers take counsel together with the avowed purpose of casting off the rule of God, but He who sits in the heavens, in a place of unrivalled authority, has set His Son upon His holy hill of Zion and “has made Him Head over all things for the sake of the church.” The very first move of the Psalmist then was to focus his whole soul upon Jehovah’s throne, providing him the position and frame of reference he needed and within which he could resolve his present problems. He is engaged in the activity of looking in the right direction.



“Do you see yonder wicket-gate?”, Pilgrim’s Progress

The Proper Attitude

Next, the Psalmist sought help by merging the right activity with *the right attitude*. Apparently he is calling upon God to behold His people's proper attitude as well as cautioning God's people to be careful to have the correct attitude. So he says, "Behold, as the eyes of servants look to their master or the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to You who dwell in the heavens." The word 'behold' means to pay attention. This then is a mutual summons to the Creator and the creature to give their immediate attention to this plea for help. It's not enough for the creature to look in the right direction unless God at this precise intercessory time beholds His servant looking in His direction with the right attitude. What then comprises a right attitude?

An Attitude of Submission

The Psalmist first of all demonstrates *an attitude of submission*. He looks unto an enthroned Jehovah with an attitude that parallels that of a servant to his master and of a maid to her mistress. The very words 'servant' and 'master' place us in the context of submission. We have here the picture of an oriental servant with his hands folded, and his eyes intently fixed, waiting for the first sign of his master's glance bidding him pay attention by giving him a signal to respond to his command. It is agreed that in oriental circumstances servants were far more guided by physical gestures than by verbal directives. Their submission was so sensitive and absolute that the servant intently watched for the slightest gesture from his master, and when he perceived his master's will he would instantly respond. The Psalmist looked in the right direction with an attitude of submission, without a hint of complaining. Much of our praying is motivated by discontent with the state of our present circumstances, which deprives us of blessedness in the present. Now while it is very true that blessedness can include what distresses us, yet it doesn't contradict the truth of this experience. The same Apostle who said that he had learned to be content in whatever state he was also had such comfort of the Holy Spirit in his present weakness that he was able to rejoice in all his tribulations. He took

pleasure in his necessities. Tribulations for Paul or the Psalmist were therefore not necessarily outside of the sphere of genuine blessing. The Psalmist says, we're filled with scorning and contempt and he cries "Lord intervene," but there is no trace of whining in his pleading. Rather, his pleading with the Lord flowed from a heart that was willingly bowed beneath the discipline of God's providence. God's people must begin where he began. He says, "Lord, You are enthroned in heaven and those who sit in the seat of the scornful could be silenced in a moment if You will it." When some youths mocked God's prophet (2 Kings 2:24), God sent bears out of the woods to kill them. Similarly, when a captain with fifty soldiers in anger ordered Elijah off the hill, God sent fire out of heaven to consume them (2 Kings 1:9-14).

Apparently the Psalmist had sufficient acquaintance with how God dealt with His people in the history of Israel so as to instill confidence in his servant. God will not be mocked and in His providence will silence every opposition to His truth and every opponent of His people. Therefore, if God doesn't intervene, the Psalmist realizes that in grace He may prepare His servant as a weapon of righteousness to bring both "joy to the righteous but terror to all evildoers." So then, before we request the Lord to intervene in our circumstances, there must be an attitude of submission to His providential dealings with us and of godly contentment in our present state, not trying to interfere in our circumstances by attempting to manipulate them with our own schemes.

God's servant, therefore, looks intently toward God with this right attitude, namely an attitude of absolute, utter submission to the wise providence of the Lord his God. Is this what we do as believers during periods of pressure? What is the first thing we do? We complain! We look to God, not from the posture of absolute submission but from a position of insubordination. We say, Lord I deplore my circumstances – You must change them! Isn't that the attitude of many of God's own believing people? But the attitude and activity of faith brings serenity to the righteous soul in adversity. When evil and danger threaten the man walking by faith, he looks to God as his

hiding-place and exclaims, "Though a host should encamp against me, my heart will not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me, He shall set me upon a rock." (Psalm 27:3, 5)

Through faith comes the recognition that no affliction, no illness, tribulation, persecution or any perplexing periods in our lives are outside of God's sovereign control. Nothing that can come from any external sources or that can arise out of our own being is an accident. Nor are there neutral enclaves within which we exist beyond the reach and involvement of our sovereign Creator. The Triune God we confess to believe in "does uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions and things from the greatest even to the least by His most wise and holy providence." (cf. WCF v.i) Therefore, nothing just happens. No event is a coincidence without purpose. Jeremiah, in a period of great darkness in his life, prayed, "O Sovereign One, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm. Nothing is too difficult for You." (Jer. 32:17) Here is God's prophet, under the harsh persecution and drudgery of imprisonment, reasoning by faith that if God has accomplished the far greater act of creating the universe by giving His fiat order, He can do the lesser thing of being his refuge, strength and present help in trouble! By faith he knew that it is God's grace that motivates His special providence with His redeemed. This is the believer's sweet solace in distress. So then, the Psalmist takes the posture of submission and says, "Unto You who dwell in the heavens." Whatever I ask of my God, my request is made to Him from a posture of absolute submission. "As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, so our eyes look to the Lord our God".

An Attitude of Expectation for Provision and Protection

Secondly, notice that the Psalmist's attitude was also characterized by *expectation* in two directions: *provision* and *protection*. Once a man was made a slave, it was no longer his responsibility to provide for himself. The master, whose property he became, assumed full responsibility for his slave's provision.

This is precisely the reason why the Saints have been such a mystery and a paradox to the unbeliever. God's redeemed children are happy, and they testify that the source of their happiness is in losing their freedom and by losing their freedom they have found true freedom! And the puzzled unbeliever shakes his head and says, "What on earth are you talking about?" You see, the believer has given up false freedom, even the great tyranny of his own self-will, only to find true liberty in doing the will of God. Then there is that wonderful recognition, "He who spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also with Him freely give us all things?" If I am God's property by right of creation and purchase, then I'm His bondservant. It is my Master's responsibility to meet the totality of my needs. Therefore, the attitude of the Psalmist is not only one of submission, but also one of expectation as he looks to his enthroned Lord. Certainly he observes and experiences scorn and contempt toward himself, but he steadfastly refuses to wield the arsenal of fleshly weapons. Rather, he casts all his care upon the Lord, knowing that He cares for and provides for him. So the believer is expectant concerning the provision of God.

Now, still under the attitude of expectation, is the matter of *protection*. The believer is not only expectant concerning the provision of God but also concerning the protection of God. One law that applied to slaves was that when someone tried to seize the estate, it was the responsibility of the master to protect his slave. So the Psalmist says, "as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master and the eyes of a maid to her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God until He has mercy upon us." How wonderful it is to be completely vulnerable and yet to be so thoroughly protected! Here again the Saints have been a puzzling paradox to the world. They walk about bearing their chests, and yet they say, "We're invincible." And the puzzled unbeliever exclaims, "What do you mean?" Well, if you're a Christian you understand what I'm talking about. You have no reputation to defend or any cause to promote. You're a bondservant of Christ. If men ride roughshod over you, that may teach you to humbly confess your own unworthy ease, for God resists the proud but exalts and gives grace to the humble.

God's wise incentive for all who seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness is His own assurance that every protection and provision will be provided in order to enable His servant to accomplish just that! If this is your true heart's desire, then you are neither ambitious for poverty or for wealth, for to you "to live is Christ and to die is gain." What wonderful freedom it is to know that I am invincible until my Master's purposes with me are finished! After my task for Christ is finished, who wants to hang around? Isn't that what the Apostle says in Philippians 1? He says, "I am hard pressed between the two, whether to be with Christ which is far better, however, to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account." But, he trusts his wise and gracious Lord whose timing is impeccable! "As the eye of a servant looks to the hand of his master, so our eyes look to the Lord our God" with an attitude not only with submission, but also with expectation, trusting in God alone for all His provision and protection.

An Attitude of Patience

An attitude of submission. An attitude of expectation for provision and protection. Consider now an *attitude of patience*. Notice this word "until". "So our eyes look to the Lord until! Until! This is a word expressing a measure of time. "Until He has mercy upon us." Now here again our natural anxiety and bondage to time shows itself again and again. God has His own plan and His own good time to speak to us and His own free ways to roll back the scorn and contempt of men. Yet we repeatedly attempt to bring God to the bar of our own finite wisdom, and we say, "Lord you must act now or there is no point in me continuing to pray." Our unwillingness to persevere in prayer is an eloquent testimony of our bondage to impatience; but the attitude of the Psalmist was, "As the eyes of a servant looks to the hand of his master so our eyes look to the Lord our God." How long are we to look? "UNTIL!" "UNTIL!" "Until He has mercy upon us." So the proper attitude includes also an attitude of patience. The Psalmist cried, "I am weary with my crying. My throat is dried. Mine eyes fail while I wait for my God." (Psalm 69:3)

Waiting for the Lord is one of the hardest things for us to do. Abraham got in trouble when he wasn't willing to wait for His God. God gave him a promise, but Abraham became impatient and decided that he would have to help God to fulfill His promise. He endured much suffering through the sorrowful consequences of his impatience. Oh, how much we need to learn and relearn that a right attitude of looking to God in distress is with an attitude of patience, which honours God! For if we fall short of this perspective: "Our eyes look to you Lord – until!", then we have ceased to look to Him *alone* for His provision and protection and will not experience the fulfillment of that wonderful principle and promise of godliness that if we honour Him, He will honour us." (1 Sam. 2:30) The great principle of godliness here is that faith, which works by love, finds all it requests when it resolutely obeys the injunctions of God's word to trust, delight, commit, rest in Him and wait for His leading. Psalm 37:34 encourages God's faithful servants with these words, "Wait upon the Lord and keep His way and He shall exalt you to inherit the land."

An Attitude of Humility

There is a fourth aspect to this right attitude and it is the *attitude of humility*. For *what* is the Psalmist waiting upon God? "So our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has –" what? Justice? No! Until He has *Mercy* upon us. "Have *mercy* upon us O Lord." But aren't God's faithful, covenant people in the right and aren't those who are at ease in Zion and the proud in the wrong? Well, if they're wrong and God's people are right, surely the Psalmist shouldn't be praying for mercy! He should rather pray for Justice to be done to these hypocrites and grant the faithful what they deserve. No! The faithful above all are conscious of their own shame, the lack of purity in our lives that has so grieved the Spirit as to cause the withdrawal of His presence and power from His sanctuary, so the Psalmist pleads only for mercy. Even in this situation, when deluged with calamity, even here, God's most consecrated servants have enough corruption, failure, and all round spiritual decay to warrant God letting loose the venom of unregenerate men upon

them by lifting His restraint from those whose scorn and contempt is toward them.

Rather than focusing on the prejudice from those born after the flesh who have not the Spirit of Christ, children of Grace should be much more alarmed with themselves. Their own selfishness casts reproach upon Christ, and their lack of the sacrificial service tarnishes their testimony. Therefore, the only right attitude before God for redeemed sinners, which God won't despise, is a broken and contrite heart. It is an attitude that is clothed with humility, pleading for His mercy. This is the beginning of judgment at the house of God. Every sin and every other judgment of this post-modern culture may be laid at the door of the Church!

Many today who preside over 'churches' serve up a confident 'gospel' message of goodness for all, while embracing the rampant descent into moral and ethical incoherence under the guise of pluralistic charity. It is precisely here that God's servants are most tempted to cry, "It's not right that God's faithful, covenant people should be treated this way while the proud at ease, outrageously and blasphemously calling evil good and good evil, are allowed to flourish. Lord, please bring justice!" Oh no! The faithful Church's most pressing need is not external relief from the pressure of the ungodly. The supreme need of the Church is, with humble fear of her dreadful Judge, to seek Him for His mercy for herself. When God's people draw near to Him in worship, offering up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to Him, He draws near to them. (James 4:8) However, some religious services today easily accommodate every condemned innovation designed to be meaningful to men. Other services, in pharisaic pride, may offer a true *form* of worship but isolated from the *soul* of worship. The Lord loathes both! God approves and receives worship offered to Him from humble, pure hearts from blameless lives, from those who love and obey His truth.

God's true worshippers worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. If we seek to worship God with our lips, with proud hearts, far from Him, whether we do it with the instructions from His Word or with unbiblical innovations denounced by His Word, a desolate sanctuary devoid of His manifest presence will be our

portion. But when the Lord finds true, humble worship of Him in adoration of His majestic greatness as the King of Glory, He will shake the temple with His visit. Is there something in my life and the life of our church that grieves God's Spirit and merits His judgment? Our plea then is for God to revive His work in the midst of these years and in His deserved wrath to remember mercy. The cry of the hour is to plead with God that everything that hinders the Holy God from making His face to shine upon our arid altars be removed.

But oh, what marvelous encouragement and hope God gives to His Redeemed when they pray not for justice but mercy. Mark's Gospel records an eloquent example of a blind beggar named Bartimaeus pleading for mercy. Hearing the Lord coming near him, he asked who this important man was. When he was told that Jesus of Nazareth was coming by, he cried out, "Son of David, have mercy upon me!" Some sternly told him to be quiet. After all, what audacity for a mere beggar to ask for mercy! But he cried even louder, "Son of David have mercy on me!" The Lord's reaction in coming to a complete halt in response to the beggar's call for mercy no doubt flooded his heart with hope, for the record says, "*And Jesus stood still!*" What caused the Lord to stand still? It was the pleading of a blind beggar crying for mercy! This cry for mercy has the same effect upon God's only-Begotten Son to this very hour.

The Fruit of Obedience

The Church will be Blessed, The World will be Blessed

Every visitation upon the church has come on the heels of the Saints looking in the right direction, with the right attitude, offering up their desires to God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of their sins and thankful acknowledgement of His – what? Mercies! Mercies, Brethren! What is agreeable to the Father's will? It is that we should honour His Eternal Son by giving Him the pre-eminence in all things. And when we do so, Peter tells us two results will follow. First, those "at ease in Zion" will be put to shame because of their divisive course, which trashed the apostolic mandate to "preach the Word, be diligent in season and out of season, to reprove,

rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.” Indeed, they will be humiliated that their scorn and contempt has distanced them from every faithful servant of God. Concurrently, “The Proud,” seeing the Lord Jesus Christ cherished with radiant affection and the chief desire of His people, will question them about the secret of their lives. When they see them rejoicing that they have been counted worthy to suffer scorn and contempt for His Name, their testimony won’t be ignored! This is the supreme vantage point from which God’s prepared people, with hearts on fire for Christ, make disciples, giving them reasoned defense (apologetic) of the hope that is in them. It is from such witnessing that the Spirit is pleased to demolish the barriers of unbelief and to grant those who are dead in trespasses and sins a sight of God incarnate, the wonder of His dying for sinners, the just for the unjust that he might bring them to God.

Here is the sea-worthy ship firmly beneath the feet of “fishers of men.” From this stable base we may confidently pursue rescuing the perishing, caring for the dying and building the Kingdom. Conversely, the religious community whose walls have been broken down by doctrines of devils and the ease that proves eternally fatal is not the church that Christ is building. But when His Church continues steadfastly in the Apostle’s doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers, the Lord adds to that Church as many as are being saved. And Brethren, when lost sinners, by grace through faith, turn from their bondage of self-will and flee in naked embrace of Christ and then with love obey His commands from the heart, our heaven will be two heavens!