



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 123

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Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *A Song of Ascents*
- It is another in the series of Psalms sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem at feast time
- The author is unknown, and it is not thought to be written by David
- Some think it was written by some other person in later times; and at a time when the people of God were much exposed to men's scorn, hate and contempt
- Some are of opinion, it was written by one of the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews were suffering by the Babylonians



Introduction

- The reason for believing it was written during captivity is that the psalmist speaks in the language of the children of the captivity
- Also, some think the Psalm may have been written about the time of Nehemiah's first visit to Jerusalem
- It was a report of the miserable state of the remnant of the returned exiles which made him to go there (Nehemiah 1:3); and he speaks repeatedly of the contempt and scorn with which the Samaritans and the heathen neighbors of the Jews viewed his efforts for the restoration of the city



Introduction

- Others think it was composed within the Macedonian period in the times of Antiochus, who magnified himself against God and His people, profaned the sanctuary, and took away the daily sacrifice, (Maccabees 1)
- Still others are of opinion it was written a little before the coming of Jesus Christ, on behalf of those who were waiting for Him, and who were scorned, put down, and mocked by the proud Scribes and Pharisees
- Psalm 123 is the fourth of the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) and the first that is a prayer



Introduction

- This prayer Psalm is short but powerful and a very fit example to show the force of prayer not by depending on many words, but on fervency, zeal, and eagerness of spirit
- It is a community lament Psalm that, based upon trust in God, petitions God for help in the face of scorn
- In Psalm 120 the psalmist was surrounded by trouble and all alone; now he may face persecution, but he does so along with the rest of God's people
- In Psalm 121 he lifted up his eyes to the hills; now he lifts up his eyes to the Lord
- In Psalm 122 he spoke of *"the thrones of the house of David"*



Introduction

- Now he lifts up his eyes to the throne of God in heaven
- In this Psalm, as the pilgrims approach the earthly throne of God, they lift their eyes to the Lord's heavenly throne and pray for mercy, grace, favor so that they can continue their journey into God's presence
- In this Psalm, the psalmist asks God's help, because he and his people have suffered contempt and scoffing
- This Psalm has been beautifully called the Eye of Hope
- It encourages the oppressed or persecuted one to look to the Lord and put himself in His hands and trust Him to do what is best



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Afflicted Looks to the Lord 123:1-2
- The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy 123:3-4

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- The psalmist opens his prayer by deliberately lifting his eyes above the earthly scene, above those other thrones that have shown such contempt for God and His people
- This means that his eyes are not on his circumstances or himself, but on the Lord
- The lifting of eyes is a gesture of the lesser looking to the greater
- It is a gesture of submission, reverent, and respect
- It also expresses yearning and hopeful expectation
- The uplifted eyes naturally and instinctively represent the state of heart which fixes desire, hope, confidence, and expectation upon the Lord

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- The psalmist looked so high that he could look no higher
- Not to the hills, but to the God of the hills he looked
- The verse is expressive of holy confidence in God, and a comfortable hope of receiving good things from Him
- As, on the contrary, when one is ashamed and defeated with a sense of his sins and of his own unworthiness, almost out of all hope, cannot lift up his eyes to heaven, or his face before God
- People rush in their prayers, but perhaps one can learn from the psalmist to start by focusing on the One *who dwell in the heavens*

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- This is how Jesus told the disciples to start their prayers
- He taught us to begin our prayers with, *“Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name”* (Matthew 6:9)
- God is everywhere, and yet it is most natural to think of Him as Being above us, in that glorious place which lies beyond the skies
- St. Augustine confirms that it is befitting of the believer to ascend through the Psalms of Ascents, as though on a ladder, to Him who dwells in the heavens; ... He who does not ascend by his heart would fall

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- St. John Chrysostom says, “He is said to dwell in heaven, not as though confined by place – perish the thought He fills all things, after all – but rather as though resting upon the powers there, for He is said to dwell also in human beings: ‘I shall dwell in them, and walk among them’ (2 Corinthians 6:16)”
- While verse 1 is classified as an individual lament, verses 2-4 are classified as a community lament, because the psalmist says, “our” and “we” instead of “I”
- The psalmist uses the word eyes four times—once in the first verse and three times in verse 2

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- Hands are instruments for doing—for making—for directing—for giving—even for punishing
- *look to the hand of their masters*, The psalmist is saying that he and his community are looking for God's help—for his guidance—for his support
- *look to the hand*, To direct them in their work, to point out unto them what they shall do; which is often done by a motion of the hand of the master
- The servant looks to the hand of his master for the slightest indication of need or want, to instantly meet the need

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- With that same intensity, devotion, and steadfastness, the psalmist looks to God
- This is how people must approach God when they are seeking His mercy
- They must not only look to the Lord as the king on His throne
- But they must also look to the Lord as a servant looks to his master
- Commentators offered different interpretation to this verse
- Some have supposed that the allusion is to the fact that servants, when in danger, look to their masters for protection

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- Others, that they look to them for the supply of their needs
- So as the servants of a household are dependent on the master of the household and look to him for the supply of all their needs, so Israel acknowledges its dependence on Him, and looks to Him to relieve its present distress
- Others, that when the servants have been guilty of an offence they look to the master alone for pardon
- However, many believe that the true idea seems to be, that they look to *their masters* with reverence and respect; that they attentively mark every expression of their will

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- And that they are ready to obey their commands on the slightest intimation of their wishes - standing in a waiting posture, with no will of their own
- People must take the attitude of a servant towards God
- What does it mean to take the attitude of a servant towards God?
- It means to be attentive to His will
- The servant in Psalm 123 has his eyes focused on his master, looking for the slightest gesture, the smallest wave of a finger to indicate his will
- And so, we learn from this Psalms that God not only watches over us, but we are to watch Him

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- Our daily prayer should be: “Lord, what will You have us to do? How may we serve You today?” Be attentive to His will
- And then wait patiently for His timing
- The word *until* is important; it indicates that there is a period of waiting before the sought after help arrives
- *Until He has mercy on us*, This is how long the psalmist will focus his attention toward the Lord
- He does not demand an immediate answer, but will persevere patiently until the Lord extends His mercy
- And then be responsive to His commands

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- The servant watches and waits in order that he or she may do what their master commands
- Commenting on the use of the word *until*, St. Augustine says that it does not imply that believers will cease to look to the Lord after gaining the Lord's mercy
- Scripture often uses the words 'until' or 'till', meaning (continuation), as in the following examples
- *"He did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son"* (Matthew 1:25)

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- *“Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny”* (Matthew 5:26)
- *“For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet”* (1 Corinthians 15:25)
- *“Then he sent out a raven, which kept going to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth.”* (Genesis 8:7)
- The psalmist has nothing to do but wait and has no other resource
- We ought to remember that we are the servant, He is the master
- All of creation is dependent on God and looks to Him

The Afflicted Looks to the Lord

123:1-2



- We read in Psalm 104: *“The earth is full of Your possessions ... These all wait for You, That You may give them their food in due season. What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good.”* (Psalm 104:24-28)
- In this Psalm the servant looks to his master knowing that his master will take care of him
- And we look to God as our Master knowing that He will take care of us
- Philippians 4:19 gives us this wonderful promise *“And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”*

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- Verses one and two suggest a covenant relationship for this community with the heavenly King, thus giving a basis for the plea in verse 3
- The trouble the praying community brings before the divine King is the contempt or scorn they face
- The psalmist is being mocked and persecuted for his faith, and so in desperation he cries out to the Lord for mercy
- The supplicants are represented as standing and urging this petition, feeling that help could come only from God; looking only to Him; and watching His countenance, as servants do their master's

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- He demonstrated that waiting on the Lord is not a passive thing
- He repeated the request for *mercy*, showing the intensity of his plea
- The psalmist needed God's intervention and mercy because he felt filled with the contempt put on him by others
- According to St. John Chrysostom, their supplication to God to save them from such tough conditions, it is for the sake of His mercies, and not for worthiness on their part
- *exceedingly filled*, The Hebrew word here used means "to be saturated"; so, here it means to be entirely full

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- Contempt has been shown them in every possible way and they are thoroughly despised that they could experience no more
- These pilgrims have endured contempt, ridicule, scorn from those who look down on them, and they have simply had enough
- But rather than fight back, they look to their King to have mercy on them
- St. Augustine says, “All that will live piously according to Christ, must needs suffer reproof, must needs be despised by those who do not choose to live piously, all whose happiness is earthly.”

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- Verse 4 states the nature and the source of the contempt which they were called to bear
- These mockers are identified as 'the proud' or arrogant
- This *scorn* is never easy to bear, but it is especially painful when it comes from those who seem to be *at ease*, who seem to have few problems or difficulties in life
- *those who are at ease*, Those who live in careless confident security, regardless alike of the judgements of God and the sufferings of men, Job 12:5; Amos 6:1; Zechariah 1:15
- *the proud*, They trampled on God's people, thinking they magnified themselves by belittling them

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- The *proud* may mean those who are proud of their natural abilities; of their wealth and riches, and of their honors and high places
- They do not look up to the heavenly king, but look down upon those around them
- The arrogant look only to themselves, not to master, and certainly not to the heavenly King
- The pilgrim community looks to the heavenly King for a word of mercy and grace, a word absent from their current world
- This Psalm is filled with the unspoken confidence that the mercy of God will triumph over the contempt of the *proud*

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- Contempt can be an honor, *“So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”* (Acts 5:41)
- Psalm 123 can fit a variety of circumstances in both the ancient and contemporary world, and it is adaptable for life
- St. John Chrysostom says, “do not panic if temptation comes, dearly beloved; rather, recall the words of the inspired author, *‘It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes’* (Psalm 119:71). Accept disaster as a medicine, use temptation probably, and you will succeed in attaining greater relief.”

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- Psalm 123 is the cry of a person who has nothing left to do but pray
- According to St. Augustine, 'scorn' and 'contempt' are one and the same; So are 'at ease' and 'proud'
- Those who lean upon their riches in haughtiness and pride, scorn those who trust in the promise of eternal life by the Lord Christ; on account of that it is not perceivable in the present time
- The true Christian, even though he may be rich and wealthy, yet he considers himself poor, because he anticipates the heavenly riches and wealth and does not boast what he possesses now

The Afflicted Pleads for Mercy

123:3-4



- The true Christian counts what he has, as not his, but he is just a steward on what is the Lord's
- At the same time, the true Christian feels that he is rich, for he needs nothing, nor covet anything
- St. Ambrose relates it to the work of God that reaches us through Jesus: "Christ is everything for us. If you wish to cure a wound, He is doctor; if you burn with fever, He is fountain; if you are oppressed by iniquity, He is justice; if you are in need of help, He is strength; if you fear death, He is life; if you desire heaven, He is the way; if you flee from darkness, He is light; if you seek food, He is nourishment"



Discussion

- This Psalm starts off very similarly to Psalm 121. What is the similarity? How is it different? What's significant about the difference?
- What does it mean to lift your "eyes" to God?
- Verses 3 and 4 describe the psalmist's motivation. What does he want from the Lord? Why? What are others doing to the psalmist and how does this make him feel? Can you relate to his struggle?



Discussion

- Who are the people that scorn at believers?
- Why do believers sometimes seem so downcast, while unbelievers appear to be at ease?
- This Psalm ends rather suddenly. Why do you think some of the Psalms leave themselves open-ended? Why do some Psalms seem to leave the reader hanging with tension... or with an unresolved feeling?