
Supplication for Mercy, A Song of Ascents.

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

² 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.

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 its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

Psalm 123

In many businesses and organisations today there are mechanisms designed to give feedback – either to leave some sort of ‘review’, or to voice one’s concerns about aspects of your consumer experience. These are not always successful or fair. On the one hand, ‘difficult people’ may choose to leave a ‘negative review’ which is not entirely fair. At the moment many social media platforms are being forced to grapple with this (as people leave reviews and the like which border on defamatory and negatively affect a person’s business). But on the other hand, there are mechanisms organisations can put in place to seek ‘feedback’ (either from employees or clients), and these are highly controlled to avoid and negative feedback. ‘Complaints’ and ‘Compliments’ can be helpful when feed into an organisation in a positive way.

Scripture urges us to bring our complaints to God. Psalm 123 is a fine example of this. Of this Psalm, Martin Luther says, *“This is a heavy sigh from an anguish-stricken heart, which looks all around and seeks friends, protectors, and comforters, but can find none. Therefore it says: where shall I find refuge, poor, despised person that I am? I am not strong enough to defend myself; wisdom and counsel fail me amidst the multitude of the onsets of my enemies; therefore come I to You, O my God; unto You do I lift up mine eyes, O You who dwells in the heavens!”*

Luther also says, *“This Psalm (as ye see) is but short, and therefore a very fit example to show the force of prayer not to consist in many words, but in fervency of spirit. For great and weighty matters may be comprised in a few words, if they proceed from the spirit and the unspeakable groanings of the heart, especially when our necessity is such as will not suffer any long prayer. Every prayer is long enough if it be fervent and proceed from a heart that understands the necessity of the saints.”*

Very often when people think of the Reformation in terms of an abstract theological debate. While intensely theological, the Reformation was not merely

about ideas; it was about correctly understanding the gospel for the good of the people and the care of souls. ...

There are two words that are pivotal here. The first is Luther's *Anfechtung*, a word that often defies English translation, but stands for "all the doubt, turmoil, pain, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man." And while Luther experienced this sense of woundedness or agonising struggle in degrees that seemed unusually intense, he also believed that his experience was common to being human. The other is "*see/sorge*" (the care of souls). This is the ministry of caring for people in their various struggles.

To whom do you go when you experience trial and trouble? It is good and helpful and appropriate to seek out the right counsel and resources to help in times of trial or trouble (various 'counsellors', professionals, and the care of family and friends). But the ultimate One to whom we can go is our loving Lord and God. Psalm 123 is a brief psalm making a single point: If you want to experience life in all its abundance, regardless of the circumstances, look to the Lord.

Psalm 123 has in its heading "Supplication for Mercy, A Song of Ascents". This is one of 15 psalms (120-134) that begin with this superscription (A Song of Ascents). These psalms may have been sung by pilgrims ascending the road to Jerusalem (which was on a mountain) for the three great festivals: Passover, the Feast of Weeks (which we know as Pentecost), and the Feast of Tabernacles

There is also a repeating three-fold pattern in these psalms where we begin with a psalm of trouble, then move on to a psalm of trust and then move on to a psalm of triumph (see below):

	1	2	3	4	5
Trouble	120	123	126	129	132
Trust	121	124	127	130	133
Triumph	122	125	128	131	134

We express our trouble, we express our trust, and we know the triumph that God Himself brings.

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 we visited "the thrones of the house of David." Now we lift up our eyes to the throne of God in heaven. Psalm 123 takes a step backwards from Psalm 122 but there is still progress overall.

Psalm 123 is a brief but powerful psalm. One thing it teaches us is that prayers do not always have to be long but simply sincere. God does not look at the

length of our prayers so much as the sincerity of our hearts. But the main thing this psalm teaches us is that we should be looking to the Lord for mercy.

The theme of “looking” is introduced in verses 1-2 where we find the word “eyes” used four times. And then the theme of mercy is introduced at the end of verse two and into verses 3-4 where the word “mercy” is used three times.

Psalm 123 is similar to Psalm 121 in that it encourages you to look up. You tend to go in the direction you are looking. If you’re looking down all the time, you won’t get far in life. But when you look up, you are following the direction of the Psalms of Ascent which together form an upward motion.

Psalm 123 is a song for when you’re at the end of your rope. Martin Luther called this psalm “the deep sigh of a pained heart.” When you are oppressed or persecuted, when you don’t know what to do, when you’ve had enough, Psalm 123 encourages you to look to the Lord and cast yourself upon Him. Put yourself in His hands and trust Him to do what is best. Look to the Lord for mercy in your time of need.

So, how do you do that? How do you look to the Lord for mercy in your time of need? Psalm 123 tells us three ways you should look to the Lord for mercy: (1) Look to the Lord as the king on His throne (v1), (2) Look to the Lord as a servant looks to his master (v.2), (3) Look to the Lord as your merciful Saviour (vv.3-4).

James 4:6 tells us: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Who are the humble? The humble are those who look to the Lord for mercy, crying out in desperation: “Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us.” (Psalm 123:3)

God gives mercy to those who look to Him for mercy. If you are a sinner, then you need God’s mercy. You need God’s forgiveness. You need to cry out like the tax collector in the gospel of Luke: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Luke 18:13)

Too often we cry out for justice, when we should really be crying out for mercy. Trust God. Leave it in His hands. Look to the Lord as your merciful Saviour.

A story is told of a mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. “But I don’t ask for justice,” the mother explained. “I plead for mercy.” “But your son does not deserve mercy,” Napoleon replied. “Sir,” the woman cried, “it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.” “Well, then,” the emperor said, “I will have mercy.” And he spared the woman’s son.

God not only sees your suffering. He cares about your suffering. That’s what God said to Moses in Exodus 3:7: “I have seen the misery of my people ... and I am concerned about their suffering.” (Exodus 3:7)

If you ever doubt that God cares about your suffering, you only need to look at God's Son, Jesus. Hebrews 2:18 says this about Jesus: "Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:18) Later in Hebrews 4 we read: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

God sees your suffering. God cares about your suffering. And God knows your limits. Going back to Psalm 123 now, the word translated "endured" in verses 3-4 is a word that means "to have had enough" or "to have had more than enough." Ever feel like you've had enough? Ever feel like you can't take anymore? That's exactly what the psalmist is expressing here. When you've had enough, when you've had more than enough, how comforting to know that God knows your limits. Psalm 103:13 says: "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."

Our Lord Jesus has taught us to look unto God in prayer as our Father in heaven. In every prayer we lift up our soul to God; especially when in trouble. We desire mercy from Him; and we will continue waiting on Him till it comes.

How good is it that ultimately we are not looking to the hands of earthly masters for care and consolation but are looking to the One who is enthroned in the heavens. Through the blood stained cross of Jesus Christ we have a sure and faithful advocate who is able and willing to console and encourage us in times of trial and trouble. And even more, these times can be providentially used to draw us into greater dependence and appreciation of our wonderful God and Saviour.

Many of us may be going through tough times. We may be struggling and hurting. We may feel scorned. But we know that God brings grace and peace. He will bring mercy and love to us. Let us call out to Him and trust that he will provide mercy and grace. And let us be sure to share with others that God provides for all who call upon Him and trust Him. In Jesus' name. Amen.