

Psalm 123

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[0 : 00] Well, if you're in the building, Psalm 123 is back on page 4 of the bulletin. If you're at home, you'll need to get a Bible. Psalm 123, it's very easy to remember.

One, two, three. One throne in heaven. Two eyes to look to God. Three prayers for mercy. Let's close. No. That's it. I'll come back to the end. It's very, very simple. Everyone in the building doing okay? Do we need water? Is anyone going to faint? No? Okay. If you are, just let us know. If you're good to lie down on. So this is just a tremendous psalm.

And we're in our second week of this little group of psalms called the Songs of Ascent, a pilgrimage by the people of God that went up the mountain to Jerusalem because that was the place where God dwelt, in a little portable paradise, you remember.

[1 : 07] And the people went up to be in God's presence with each other in God's place. This psalm tells us that the hard reality is that for all of God's people on pilgrimage, there are a lot of people who will meet on the way of that pilgrimage who think that what we're doing is basically ridiculous, that you're wasting your time.

And they say, why do you spend all your time and energy toward God? I mean, why don't you just try and invest and make a little bit of paradise here and now? You seem so normal. Why don't you just relax and take your foot off this religion pedal? Just join us. And the psalm is about contempt. So if you look at the last two verses, contempt, scorn and contempt.

And the psalm is a cry of the heart of someone who's on pilgrimage to the one who's on the throne, verse 1. And the psalm teaches us the very most important and basic lesson about prayer.

So we've got two points. The psalm actually divides really nicely in two halves, one and two, three and four. And like every Australian, I'm going to do it in reverse. So let's look at verses 3 and 4 first.

[2 : 28] And I've called it a prayer for mercy in contempt. And if you look down there, verse 3, have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us. And he has mercy in the last verse three times because he says, I have had more than enough of contempt.

This is a food picture. I am over. I've had. I'm stuffed. I've been force fed disrespect and mocking and sneering and scoffing because of my faith.

It's been rammed down my throat. And we looked at the trustees this week. And the trustees said, this is incredibly relevant for us today. I mean, Christianity is no longer thought about or measured as to whether it's true or false, right?

Christianity, whenever people think of it, it's oppressive or distasteful or scornful. And, of course, what makes it worse is that so many terrible things have happened in the name of the church and the name of Christ.

And if you live in our culture, if you live on the West Coast, contempt for Christianity makes sense if there is no God or if he can't make himself clear through revelation. And so where our culture has turned is that the truth is in here.

[3 : 44] It's in my heart inside myself. And we find meaning by giving expression to my inner emotions, my inner desires and feelings. And for anyone to come along and set any limit on those desires or what I do with them has to be called oppression.

And I think a lot of people believe that today.

And if you dissent or publicly disagree with the sovereignty of my preferences and my emotions, you're just playing a power game and it's intolerable, oppressive and contemptuous.

So it doesn't really matter if you've been a Christian for a week or for a decade or for four decades. You and I will feel scorn. We will feel contempt, sometimes from people within our family.

And the psalm says what we do in that circumstance is we say to God, Lord, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us. And it's a cry for help because, I mean, there's no, the great realism of this is that contempt and scorn is painful.

[4 : 54] And so the great temptation is for us to minimise the pain, to avoid the pain and scorn, rather than looking to God for mercy. What we do is we try and play God and we develop strategies to try and avoid the pain.

And I thought this week of about 12 strategies. Let me mention a few to you. And I'm very unfamiliar with these strategies because I've tried them, all of them and others. And you might have as well. Here's one. The pre-emptive strategy. Whenever you feel in the conversation might be steering toward Christianity, anything vaguely spiritual, you pre-empt the conversation and steer it away into something more neutral.

We justify this to ourselves by saying, well, my friends, they'll just pour scorn on this. I need to wait for a better time. Here's another one.

This is from Charlie Skrine in London. He calls it the spiritual Stockholm strategy. You know, the Stockholm syndrome, if it exists, is when a victim of kidnapping begins to believe what the kidnappers believe and identify with their cause.

[6 : 00] And it's so easy in our culture to begin to think, well, Christianity is a bit contemptible, really. And to happily join those who think Christians just don't have our sophistication.

You know, they don't have the political views of the mainstream. They're not as attractive as we are. I don't want to be identified with those born-again Christians or those Christians that talk about the infallibility of the word of God or seem to always be talking about Jesus.

So you have this. There's a Stockholm strategy. Very close to this is a compromise strategy. This is where we just become a little bit less forthright about our faith.

Don't be quite so obvious. So when Christianity comes up, you try and you speak in general terms. Don't talk about Jesus, the person of Jesus. You talk about spirituality or your faith journey or...

Here's another one. The strategy is superiority. Anything sounding familiar? Is anyone still with me? Good.

[7 : 09] Thank you. This is where you become harder and more brittle in your beliefs and you begin to look down on others because they don't believe the same thing that you do as Christians.

It's playing the same game. It's returning contempt onto those who have contempt for us. It's a self-righteous strategy where you say they're blind, they're ignorant, deceived by Satan, but I'm not. Or there's the activist strategy. That's where we try and prove how useful we are by doing lots of very good things, hoping that people...

Hoping it'll remove the contempt and others will say, look, you know, what they believe is crazy, but gee, they make a positive difference. Didn't work for Jesus, did it? And there's no one who was more...

Did more to demonstrate compassion and care, healing and helping and mercy. But it did not remove scorn and contempt from him. And here's the thing.

[8 : 12] There are all kinds of suffering in this world and all sorts of suffering that you and I are going to be a subject to. But this one, contempt and scorn, is part of every single believer's pilgrimage.

And when Jesus came, he made it part of our salvation. For himself, Jesus became the man of sorrows, rejected, scorned, mocked, abused.

Part of his purpose was to come and to take the shame of our guilt and sin upon him. And he's called us to follow in his footsteps, to go to where he is and bear the reproach that he endured.

And it's very striking that in the Gospels, when Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him, he doesn't then give pictures of physical persecution.

He takes illustrations from conversations where he says, whoever is ashamed of me and my words, of him will I be ashamed when the angels come.

[9 : 13] You see, contempt and scorn can threaten our pilgrimage. And all of these strategies, they may reduce the pain short term, but we miss out on what God is really doing.

Because when we experience contempt and scorn, in the same way that when we experience anxiety, it is meant to drive us to prayer. It's meant to drive us to the one who is on the throne for mercy.

That's what the psalmist does, verse 3. He doesn't try and take control by a strategy. He prays, Lord, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us.

And the word mercy is a unique word here. It means someone to bend down. It's very powerful to bend down and stoop down and to pick us up and to help us.

And we don't know when he prays for mercy whether he's asking God to take away the scorn of contempt or help him to bear with it. What we do know is that he's not taking things into his own hands.

[10:18] Instead, he uses it to deepen the trust and communion with God as he lifts his eyes to God. Now, let me just stop here. That's the end of the first point. And I wonder if everyone could take out their bottle of water.

Just have a drink. You're looking faint to me. It's very good.

Does anyone not have a bottle of water? Anyone want one? Okay. So that was the first point.

Prayer for contempt.

Prayer for mercy in contempt. Second point, very simply, let's go to the first two verses. And that is we look to the one who is on the throne of heaven.

This is the thing, you know, when you experience scorn and contempt, it's just no help to turn inward and look inside your own heart. It doesn't work. What we have to do is we have to turn our eyes to God himself, verse 1, who sits enthroned in the heavens.

[11:26] Whose throne ascends over all circumstances and then come and lay ourselves in our troubles before him. So if you're having trouble figuring out what to pray for something, pray verse 1.

To you, I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in heaven. On the pilgrimage, the thing is, as we go through the pilgrimage toward the one on the throne, contempt and scorn, the temptation is to take our eyes off the one who is there and then we lose the path.

And if we put our eyes on him, it's the first step in our dependence. And how do we do that? Verse 2, we do it as a servant looks to the master, as a servant, as a maid servant to a mistress.

We put our eyes on God until he has mercy, it says here, which may say that it's going to take some time. Now, this is where it's so helpful on prayer.

Many of the current crop of books on prayer for Christians are about technique, centering prayer or listening prayer. The Bible emphasis is always on the God to whom we pray.

[12:35] That is why prayer has the power to heal us, because it turns us away from ourselves to him. We're not praying, my will be done, we're praying your will be done. We're not trying to manipulate God to get him to do what we need.

When we come to God in prayer, we're trying to seek his face, to gaze on him, to look at him, to look to him, to deal with him personally, to ask him to help us to rely on him.

See, the power of prayer is not in our praying and our technique and our striving. The power of prayer is in knowing God. That is why, for most of us, when we look at prayers in the Bible, they always seem so big.

I mean, most of our prayers today are, quoting someone else, finding a parking spot. Not wrong to pray for that, or for my family to be happy, or for a cool change, or whatever.

But the Bible teaches Jesus is to pray for his kingdom to come on earth, as it is in heaven. It's an infinitely larger prayer. And the problem with the small prayers, like the parking space prayers, is that you can usually answer them yourself.

[13:48] And you're not trusting God. But the Lord wants us to come to him empty-handed, weary and heavy-laden, and to say, I am completely helpless to do life on my own.

I am abject at loving others without your grace. And I've had a stomach full of contempt, and I need your mercy. Let me tell you about a woman called Anisia Faltonia Proba.

This is around the year 400 AD. She was the widow of the wealthiest man in the Roman Empire. And in 410, the Goths sacked Rome, and she travelled.

She upped with all her wealthy family, with her sons and daughters-in-law and maidservants and retinue and whatever else she had. And she travelled down to North Africa, to the city of Carthage, where she set up a community for Christian women.

Had a hard time there. In Carthage, she met the great Christian theologian, whose name is Augustine. And she said to him, can you tell me how to pray?

[14:54] What should I pray for? And in 412, he wrote her a long letter. It's about 12 pages long, and we have it today. And this is what he says. This is beautiful.

He says, before you know what to pray, you have to become a particular kind of person. What does that mean?

He says, and I quote, you have to account yourself desolate in this world, however great your prosperity may be.

I think that's brilliant. He says, you have to come to the place of saying that apart from Christ, we are desolate. It doesn't matter how rich, famous, or fabulous your family, we have to see that all those good things that God may have given us in our life cannot bring us lasting peace and happiness, but that our true consolation comes from Christ.

As we sang, on Christ the solid rock I stand, everything else is sinking sand. And he says, when you become that person, desolate, counting yourself desolate of everything in this life, then you know what you should pray for?

[16:10] He says, pray for happiness. Because if your happiness is all in Jesus Christ, you're praying that his will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And he says, try this. Go to Psalm 27, verse 4.

Begin with this. Here is what the psalmist says. One thing have I asked of the Lord that I will seek after. One thing, that I will dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Why? To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. That's why when Jesus teaches us to pray, of course he teaches us to pray that we would be protected from evil and have our daily bread.

Before we get there, our Father in heaven, we focus on God as he is in himself. We lift our eyes to him and we pray for his concerns. Hallowed be your name.

And I think this psalm, Psalm 1, 2, 3, teaches us to pray a little like Jesus did in Gethsemane, the night before he was betrayed, facing contempt that we would find unimaginable, you know, the desertion by friends, the cruelty of the mocking, the forsakenness by God.

[17:22] You remember he prays, Lord, if there's any way, let this cup pass from my lips. In his full humanity, he looks at this suffering and he prays, he recoils and he prays, Lord, please, if there's any way, please change these circumstances.

He says, I've had enough of contempt of the proud, please, Father, is there any way? And then he prays, not my will, but yours be done. And that is a statement of pure faith, seeking the face of God because he's convinced that God has his ultimate good in mind.

That all his joy is in the hands of the Father, even as he now walks into death, the face of death.

And the same Jesus who suffered that scorn and went to the cross and who was mocked and died for us, rose again and is seated at the right hand of that very same throne that we read about here in Psalm 123.

So, Psalm 123, one, two, three. One throne, two eyes, three mercies. One throne, whenever in the Bible heaven is opened, what do we see?

We see a throne. Throne of God, the picture of power and sovereignty and majesty. Above every other throne. And the one who is on the throne, dazzling in beauty, the source of life and happiness, he's the one to whom we pray to.

[18:49] One throne. Two, two eyes. One, two, three, three. We're to lift our eyes to the throne. Actually, we're to lift our eyes to the one on the throne. It's looking away from all those things that are so difficult for us.

You know, the anxieties that are bred. It means turning our face to him and setting our eyes on him in humility and submission as a slave to a master, focusing ourselves there.

And then three prayers for mercy. Three times the psalmist speaks about mercy, not taking things into our own hands, but praying for mercy because we have seen in Jesus Christ how rich God's mercy is.

And so in the book of Hebrews, we are taught, let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

And that's what we do every time we pray.