

# IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH

**SERIES: STAND ALONE**

**LESSON: TILL HE HAS MERCY UPON US**

**PSALMS 123**

**SEPT. 26, 2021**

## MAIN POINT

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We lift our eyes in expectancy for God to grant us mercy. His mercy is sufficient for when we have had more than enough of what we can bear.

## PSALM CONTEXT

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Psalm 123 is one of fifteen Psalms known as “Songs of Ascent.” These series of Psalms are found from Psalms 120-135. The most likely background for these Psalms is that Jews would sing them on their journey to Jerusalem for worship and various festivals like Passover. Many of these Songs of Ascent are asking for safe travels, peace upon Jerusalem, and expressing joy for being in God’s presence.

## EXPLANATION //

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Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says.

**HAVE A VOLUNTEER PSALM 123**

**ASK Questions about what is observed in the text? Repeated words? (Eyes, look, mercy, more than enough)**

Psalm 123 is structured with an address (verse 1b), a posture (verse 1a and 2b), a request (verse 2c-3a), and a reason (verse 3b-4).

## THE ADDRESS: YOU WHO ARE ENTHRONED IN THE HEAVENS!

To the Jews who were traveling to Jerusalem for an annual feast, he or she might be tempted to think God dwelt in Jerusalem. The reason perhaps is because the temple, the sacrifices, and the festivals resided there. And while the temple, sacrifices, and festivals were all necessary ways for people to associate with God in the Old Testament, the Psalmist understood that the ultimate reality of God's presence was enthroned in heaven. Thus, the Psalmist addresses his prayer to the one "enthroned in heaven."

Describing God as "enthroned in the heavens" sounds majestic! Such a description acknowledges his majesty, sovereignty, transcendence, and holiness. The description implies the Psalmist understands that what God desires in heaven has implications on earth. Since we are to understand that heaven is greater than earth and since God is enthroned in heaven, then, by extension, his throne reaches to earth as well.

## POSTURE: LOOKING TO

When we pray, we commonly close our eyes and bow our heads. However, the Psalmist describes his posture as lifting his eyes (v. 1a) and looking to (v. 2b) God. Perhaps bowing our heads and closing our eyes is a good way to limit distractions and to help us focus. Furthermore, in Scripture it appears to be a good posture for confession and humility (Lk. 18:13-14).

In Psalms 123, the idea of lifting the eyes is one of *expectancy* for God to bring help. Psalm 121:1 is a good example when it reads, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" Like Elijah when he prayed for rain and then looked to the sky to see if clouds were forming, it is good for us to pray in expectancy, lifting our eyes to see how God might respond. We pray to a God enthroned in heaven above. He has all power, wisdom, and perfect timing at his command. Therefore, it is best to pray watching eagerly for him to respond. It is good to "look up." For we may not know how or when he will respond.

The analogy the Psalmist gives is of a servant looking to his master or a maid looking to her mistress. You can imagine a servant looking to a master in a couple of ways. In one sense, a servant looks to his master with a posture of humility. He awaits his orders. Implied as the servant looks to his master is also a readiness to fill those orders. In another sense, the servant is also looking to be blessed by his master. The servant looks to his master to reward his labor. While both ideas are likely present in the analogy, most commentators

believe the stronger sense of the verse is that a servant looks to his master for reward. If our labor is in our praying, we are to look to God with a readiness to receive.

**Have you ever been surprised by how God has answered one of your prayers?**

**Do your prayers require any readiness on your part to receive them?**

REQUEST: HAVE MERCY

The Psalmist emphatically requests for mercy. He says, "Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us." With the request being repeated twice, one gets the sense of desperation and need. His prayer is not elaborate, eloquent, or long. Yet, it is heartfelt, urgent, and humble.

The request for mercy is a general request for God to intervene. Other times, David and other writers request specific requests. At times, David will say, "Crush my enemies," "restore to me the joy of my salvation," or "make my enemies a footstool beneath my feet." Other times, he simply cries generally for mercy, perhaps knowing that God knows best how to address his situation. The Psalmist, although in urgent need, seems content also to wait to see just how God provides the mercy.

It is interesting to note how several people addressed Jesus in a similar way. Luke 18, referenced earlier, records a tax collector who prays. In the story, the tax collector's prayer is contrasted with a self-righteous Pharisee. Where the Pharisee thanks God for his own self-righteousness, the tax collector simply prays, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." So too, a blind man named Bartimaeus sits by the road begging when he hears Jesus is about to pass by. Knowing that Jesus was relatively close, Bartimaeus cries out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And when the crowd tried to silence him, he cried out "all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" (Mk. 10:47-48).

When one requests mercy, he or she acknowledges a helplessness. The tax collector had *no righteous merit* to stand before God. Blind Bartimaeus had *no privilege* to bid for Jesus'

attention. Thus, they cried for mercy. And that is the point: we all lack the merit or the privilege to have access to God in prayer. We can simply come because He has mercy. In fact, we have such a good God that he allows us to come confidently in search for mercy. Hebrew 4:16 says, “Let us then with *confidence* draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive *mercy* and find grace to help in time of need.”

REASON: WE HAVE HAD MORE THAN ENOUGH

It is difficult to know the exact background for Psalm 123. Specifically, the Psalmist mentioned that he has had more than enough *contempt* and *scorn* from the proud. A few scholars suggest that the setting is Jews traveling to Jerusalem after they have returned from exile. Even though they have return to their land, they still faced the contempt and ridicule of foreigners. Nehemiah 2:29 and 4:1 describes the Israelites being “jeered at” by Sanballat as the Jerusalem wall was being built.

I imagine that we have all been at a place of exhaustion or overwhelming circumstances. You have tried your hardest to keep it all together. You’ve tried to endure. But then you realized you are not able to withstand any longer. Notice this: when you have had more than enough to adequately handle, God’s mercy is more than enough to carry you through.

## APPLICATION //

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Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**A request for mercy can be very broad. Do you find yourself praying for specific things from God or mercy from God in general?**

**Not that there is always a right or wrong way to do it, but do you ever *lift your eyes* in prayer or do you *bow your heads*?**

**How do you take contempt and scorn? On a scale from 1-10, how bothersome is it to you when others look down at you?**

**Perhaps your group can do an exercise. Go around the room and allow each person to finish this sentence: I need mercy because I have had more than enough**

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**The Psalmist prays against those who scorn and are at ease. He voices mercy despite the proud who have contempt from them. Is there any bit of you that has scorn for others? Or contempt towards others? Perhaps on a scale from 1-10, how much scorn and contempt are buried in your heart?**

## **PRAYER**

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Close in prayer, asking God to press this truth that was studied.

I am sure you, as a class leader, are sensitive to your class each week in prayer. But this week especially may be a good time to pray over a few in your class who are in particular need mercy. You may already know (or they may share this morning) how they have had “more than enough of \_\_\_\_\_.” If so, don’t hesitate to take the time to pray over them.