



Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Phill Marsh on the morning of the 22 February 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

SONGS OF ASCENT - PART 4, THE LORD IS MERCIFUL

Psalm 123

A Song of Ascents.

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

**²Behold, 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.**

**³Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.**

**⁴Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Songs of Ascent are a series of fifteen Psalms (120 through to 134) that were sung by pilgrims as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the major festivals and to worship the living God.

We left the Psalmist last week expressing a song of joy and gladness in regard to the prospect of heading to worship God in Jerusalem. Here in Psalm 123 however, we find a song of lament. The Psalm begins as personal lament (note the singular personal pronoun 'I' in verse 1), but develops into the corporate lament of all those making their way to the temple. Their lament points to the scorn and contempt that they face in their move to worship God. The Psalmist is not clear as to the specific source of this derision (whether pagan or from within Israel itself), only to note that those who mock are living an untroubled existence and are proud, seemingly sure of their lack of need for the God of Israel and quick to ridicule those who think otherwise.

The weight of this ridicule has become too much for the pilgrims to bear, and so we see them make an impassioned plea to the Lord for relief; for His mercy. The Psalmist's cry goes beyond a simple 'get us out of here' request however. His cry is rooted in a deep understanding of who God is and who we (the Psalmist, his community, and by extension the Church) are; he cries out in confidence and yet with humility.

If we are to live out the Psalmist's humility and confidence as we call on the mercy of God, we need to establish his viewpoint in regard to:

- i) Who God is, and,
- ii) Who we are.

2. Identity

a) Who God is

In his description of God, the Psalmist begins with mention of the throne of God,

Psalm 123:1

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

Here the Psalmist is not identifying the location of God, but rather building upon an idea expressed in the previous Psalm (as we considered last week, to listen click [here](#)),

Psalm 122:5

**There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.**

The throne was a place for judgement, for righteous rule. The people would come before the throne of David in Jerusalem seeking justice from a righteous King. David sings of the throne of God in Psalm 9,

Psalm 9:7-8

**But the LORD sits enthroned forever;
he has established his throne for justice,
and he judges the world with righteousness;
he judges the peoples with uprightness.**

In Psalm 123, we see God's throne of righteous rule, judgement and justice set not in an earthly location where kingdoms rise and fall, but established in the heavens. In the Psalmist's eyes, God sits enthroned above all, with the power to judge and bring justice for all eternity. He will face neither coup nor defeat – The Lord sits enthroned forever.

John gives a glorious picture of the throne of God in the book of Revelation,

Revelation 4:1-11

**¹After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."
²At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.**

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

**"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!"**

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the

twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

John's descriptions of what he sees in his vision of the throne of God are much like those of Ezekiel and Daniel, in that they were all grasping for words to describe the indescribable. Faced with a mind-blowing vision of a God too amazing, too awesome, too glorious for words to explain adequately, he leans heavily on simile and metaphor: "It was kind of like..." and "it had the appearance of...". The point that John drives home is the glory and wonder and power of this throne. Here, the Lord sits enthroned and is worshipped by his creations in a never ending cycle of praise and worship; worshippers facedown before the throne.

John mentions the throne again later on in the book of Revelation as he points towards the Lord's judgement,

Revelation 20:11-15

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Again we see echoed the picture David gives in Psalm 9 of a righteous God enthroned in the heavens, ruling over all and bringing judgement and justice to the world.

And so we find that the Psalmist in talking of God being *enthroned in the heavens* is placing Him high above all things, eternally fixed and secure with all power belonging to Him; over all of creation – both ruling and maintaining it.

This image of God brings perspective to the Psalmist's self perception,

b) Who We Are

Psalm 123 begins with an instant contrast between the Psalmist and God. We find the Psalmist *lifting his eyes* to the throne of God. As much as the phrase elevates the position of God, it also positions the Psalmist. He is low. Low in mood due to mocking and contempt that has gone beyond what he is able to stand, but also low in relation to God,

Psalm 123:4-5

**³Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.**

**⁴Our soul has had more than enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.**

We have already established the elevated position that God holds – ruler over all - and in the first half of the Psalm we see how the Psalmists responds to this truth.

There are two responses to the we can offer in the light of this ruling God:

- i) Rise up and rebel against the Creator, Maintainer and Ruler of all things;
- ii) Or submit to the King.

Having already established the eternal-ness and security of His throne, we can immediately see the flawed logic underpinning the first response. The Psalmist and his community choose the second,

Psalm 123:2

**²Behold, 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.**

The people of God recognise their position as servants before a master, and submit to the will of God, waiting patiently for Him.

3. Dependence, Submission and Slavery

For many, the idea of submitting to God, of giving Him complete control of their life, is at best frightening or distasteful. Such concerns are understandable. In his letters discussing the papacy with Bishop Mandell Creighton, John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton produced his now well known quote that pointed to the problem of individuals in positions power,

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”

The examples of those in history who have gained power and abused are manifold and painfully apparent. There seems to be some truth in Lord Acton's statement. Yet it is possible to find people in power who are perhaps not corrupt but still do damage to those beneath them with their ignorance, mistakes and failings.

It is no wonder that so many are scared of handing over control of their lives into the hands of another.

Whose hands they are in makes the difference.

The picture in Psalm 123 is not one of subjugation and oppression. There is no abuse of power, no fattened master with his life eased by malnourished servants. We find the Psalmist and his community *looking to the hand* of God. The picture is of dependence. The Psalmist and his community look to their master for provision and protection.

They know that God is good,

Psalm 73:1

**Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.**

That he is wise, all knowing and has good plans for them,

Jeremiah 29:11

**For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for
welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.**

The pilgrims are at the end of their resources, desperate for help, but they know that not only is God their only help, but He is a good help. In the Gospel of John we find Jesus asking his disciples if they are going to leave him too after his hard teaching has caused the crowds to leave,

John 6:66-69

⁶⁶After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

The words of Peter mirror the mindset of the Psalmist – there is nowhere else to go; Jesus is the only help, but more than that, Jesus is a good help – He alone has the words of eternal life.

The Apostle Paul talks of the benefit of this submission, this slavery to God in the book of Romans. He points to two states of existence: Slavery to sin or Slavery to God,

Romans 6:20-23

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

His argument is simple. We have two choices. Slavery to sin leads to shame and death, whilst slavery to God results in freedom from those things, holiness and the gift of eternal life. Viewed from this perspective, the prospect of submitting all to God begins to reveal itself as the only logical recourse.

4. The Depth of the Call for Mercy

Only in understanding the Psalmists grasp on who God is and who he and his community are before God do we truly get a picture of the depth of the Psalmist's cry for mercy. It is enormously beyond a simple 'Get me out of trouble' prayer. It is an appeal to the relationship between God and His people, rooted in an understanding of the fundamental character of God as revealed to Israel in Exodus 34,

Exodus 34:6

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"

This revelation comes after Israel had turned its back on God and rebelled against Him, resorting to idolatry in the form of constructing and worshipping a golden calf. In the face of Israel's constant failings, God consistently shows Himself to be merciful, gracious, loving and faithful.

And so the Psalmist cries out to the God of mercy. He and his community recount their sufferings before the Lord and call for his mercy, waiting and trusting patiently,

Psalm 123:2

till he has mercy upon us.

We see a curious mix of confidence and humility in the Psalmist's cry for mercy. Humility in that he knows who he is addressing and recognises his position before the throne, yet confidence in that he knows who God is. He knows him to be good, gracious and merciful. The Master that he

can depend on. Who God is, simultaneously provides the Psalmist with cause for the utmost humility and the strongest confidence.

5. Application

a) Know God, know yourself

Search the scriptures, ask God to reveal more of Himself to you. A fuller understanding of God, leads to a greater understanding of who you are before God. Understanding God's character should provide Christians with both confidence and humility.

b) The Church will suffer and be mocked

.. and is currently suffering and mocked. It is unlikely that you have felt the full extent of the suffering and persecution that much of the Church faces daily. We should not be surprised by the Church's suffering. Jesus warned to expect nothing different,

John 15:18-20

¹⁸"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.

Peter speaks of the suffering of the Church in his first epistle,

1 Peter 4:12-19

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸And

**If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"**

¹⁹Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

Here we see joy for the Christian who suffers for their faith (v. 13) as it brings glory to God (v16). This is coupled with the call for those that suffer to trust God (v. 19) who we know to be loving, gracious and merciful.

c) Call on God's mercy with confidence and humility

In light of our understanding of who God is, we should respond as the Psalmist responds and cry to God for mercy: for both ourselves and for our brothers and sisters worldwide, who suffer for His name. We should do so with humility, as servants to a master, but also with confidence because we know who God has revealed Himself to be.

Hebrews 4:16

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.