

Psalm 123

Littlebourne - 26th June 2022 - Psalm 123

We're looking at another of the Psalms of Ascent.

Our last Psalm was about going to the house of the Lord, going to Jerusalem. You might remember my central point for Psalm 122 was that Christ is our Jerusalem - that it's through Christ that we approach God and worship Him, it's Christ that unites us together in this and it's Christ in whom we find our security and peace. No longer do we have a temple to meet with God, no longer do we worship in the offering of sacrifices to God, but we have the one true sacrifice that allows us to worship God wherever we are and commune with God in all circumstances.

This Psalm tells us more about who it is we are worshipping - how we interact with God, aspects of our relationship to Him.

▮ *A Song of Ascents*

As I'm sure most of you will remember, the Songs of Ascent are probably Psalms that were sung on pilgrimage to the temple - they are songs for ascending to the temple which was on the hilltop in Jerusalem.

We have seen something of a progression so far - Psalm 120 was about lamenting our surroundings, Psalm 121 about looking to the hills of Zion, Psalm 122 about looking to the temple, which stood on those hills and now we look further upwards.

v1

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

The Psalmist starts with lifting his eyes upwards, towards the heavens where the Lord God is enthroned.

Looking upwards is a theme in our worship quite often - we place the cross high up on the wall behind me, we build church spires that reach for the heavens. We think of God being up there in heaven. Maybe those pilgrims who would have sung this Psalm would have been looking upwards to the temple that towered above them as they ascended the hill into Jerusalem.

The ark and the cherubim in the Most Holy Place, at the heart of the temple, were in a representative sense God's earthly throne, but the psalmist knew that God's throne is far greater than any earthly throne. Solomon says this in 1 Kings 8:27:

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!"

Reading this verse made me think of Isaiah 6, Isaiah's vision of God. Isaiah 6:1-5:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"*

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Isaiah sees the Lord 'high and lifted up', 'sitting upon a throne'. The King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. The sovereign over all creation.

The next verse tells us how we relate to the King of Kings.

v2

*2 Behold, 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.*

We are as servants, as slaves, to the Lord our God. We belong to Him.

In the ancient near east, it was apparently customary to have servants on constant standby, looking to their master or mistress, always ready to do what was desired, which could be indicated by the slightest movement of the hand. The looking to the hands of the master indicates eagerness to obey, attentiveness.

Now it's natural to chafe at this idea. Nobody wants to be a slave. But what we learn in scripture is that everyone is a slave to something.

We say sometimes that 'everyone worships something', that is that everyone puts something first, puts something before all else - whether that be God, or someone else like their children or spouse sometimes, or more likely themselves. In the same way, everyone is a slave to something - they are of necessity a slave to that which they worship.

It might superficially feel more liberating to worship yourself, to be a slave to yourself rather than others, but this is slavery nonetheless. A slave to oneself is really a slave to one's own passions and desires and sin.

Paul writes about this in Romans 6 (verses 15 - 23):

15 What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. 19 I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 But 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. 22 But 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. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Everyone is a slave - either a slave to sin or to God - but the results are vastly different.

Now the slavery talked about in Romans 6 is not the sort of slavery of being forced to do things against our will - rather it's that our wills themselves are enslaved. We are born enslaved to sin in that we desire to sin and find sin more attractive than righteousness. Being set free from the slavery to sin, we see that righteousness is more attractive and pleasing God is what we will - we are in that sense enslaved to righteousness.

Now Paul goes on in Romans 7 to tell us about how we can be sort of double minded and how we are both truly set free from sin and yet still feel the desire to sin, as we all do, but the point is that everyone is enslaved in this sense.

So being slaves to God - owned by God and owing all to God - we look to Him for direction, guidance and instruction. We look to Him also for our needs - he supplies us all that is required. We are totally dependent on Him.

v3-4

*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 enough
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.*

The final two verses tell us of the suffering that has been endured by the psalmist and all Israel - some think that this Psalm dates from the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC because of this strong language.

The psalmist prays for God's mercy. He doesn't just wait, but he begs for it - looking to God and waiting upon God is not to be a passive thing, but an active one.

It's important to notice that the psalmist calls for mercy - he doesn't call upon God to smite his adversaries - he calls for mercy upon himself. This ties in to the obedience to God - the desire to obey God and the desire for vindication in the face of our adversaries are tied together. We can't ask God to deal with another's disobedience and be indulgent in our disobedience to Him. It doesn't work that way.

Christ our example

As always, Christ is our example in this. John 5:19:

19 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

Jesus' perfect obedience is our example of how to look to God and obey whatever is commanded - we are to look to God just as Jesus looked to the Father for instruction.

Similarly, Christ called upon God for mercy, in fact the kind of mercy shown in this Psalm - mercy from the contempt and ridicule and persecution of others. We looked at his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane - we saw how much he endured. Jesus models perfectly for us - for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross and despised the shame.

Conclusion

This whole idea of belonging to God is something we see often in scripture. What we read from Romans 6 earlier was one example - though note that Paul says in verse 19 "I am speaking in human terms" as if to say, this isn't slavery like you know it. The awful truth of slavery as seen in the culture Paul was writing to, and in much of world history, and even today, is used as an analogy for us to see the seriousness of sin and our enslavement to it. That we are then enslaved to God I think is likewise an analogy to tell us that we are bought from sin's grip over us - we don't escape sin's power by our own efforts, but rather Christ purchases us by his blood.

Jesus says in John 15:15:

14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you [slaves], for the [slave] does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

There are some aspects of slavery that we should apply to our relationship to God and some that we shouldn't. Similarly, some aspects of friendship we should apply and some not. We have a multitude of images for our relationship to God, because no human relationship is quite like it. We are the bride of Christ, we belong to Him in that sense. We are sons of God, we belong to Him in that different sense to.

Our belonging to God absolutely is about obedience and following God's instructions and guidance - but as Jesus says in Matthew 11 (v28-30):

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Following God is not always easy, but it's not as hard as the alternative.