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Exalting in God's Grace

Psalm 123

The year was 445 BC and God's people living in Jerusalem were exposed. To explain this adequately, we have to go back to the year 586 BC.

In 586 BC, the Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians who, as a safekeeping measure, transported hundreds of thousands of Jews out of Judah and dispersed them throughout the Babylonian empire.

In 539 BC, the Persian General Cyrus conquered Babylon and issued a decree allowing the people groups of his new nation to live wherever they wanted. This resulted in 42,360 Jews returning to Palestine to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Immediately these Jews encountered opposition when it came to rebuilding the temple. Accordingly, they focused on themselves and their own welfare, leaving the temple in ruins. So, in 520 BC, the Lord sent Haggai and Zechariah to encourage God's people to finish the temple, which they did in 516 BC.

A lot then took place politically in the ancient world, some of which we saw when we looked at the book of Esther. Yet, suffice it to say that by 458 BC, the Jews living in Jerusalem were a mess! While they now had a temple, nevertheless they lived in gross compromise and sin. Word spread throughout the Persian empire such that God prompted many Jews to return to Palestine in two different migrations in order to revive the worship and service of God: Ezra in 458 BC and Nehemiah in 445 BC.

While Ezra primarily focused on the fidelity of God's people to the Lord, Nehemiah focused on rebuilding the city walls — which once again resulted in severe and serious persecution. The key players in this persecution were these men:

- Sanballat who was the Persian governor of Syria/Samaria.
- Tobiah, who was the Persian governor, charged with overseeing the Ammonites.
- Geshem who was the Persian governor assigned to oversee an Arabian tribe that had settled south of Palestine.

Each of these men viewed Nehemiah as a pro-Persian governor and so a threat to their autonomy! And so, they attacked him and God's people. We read about it in Nehemiah 4.

Nehemiah 4:1-3, "Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy *men* of Samaria and said, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore *it* for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?' Now Tobiah the

15 Words of Exhortation for Christian Pilgrims

1. **Psalm 120**: We must ensure that the burdens of this life drive us to Christ.
2. **Psalm 121**: In our burdens, we must know that God will never abandon or forsake us.
3. **Psalm 122**: In Christ our identity is that of a worshipper who exalts in

Ammonite *was* near him and he said, ‘Even what they are building — if a fox should jump on *it*, he would break their stone wall down!’”

You might be tempted to think that this ridicule was no big deal. “*Sticks and stones...*” But it was! These men hated Nehemiah. In fact, Sanballat eventually would try to assassinate him (Nehemiah 6:1-13). Their ire was so great that Nehemiah had to divide the workers into two crews: one to rebuild the walls the other to stand guard with “spears” and “shields” and “bows” in hand (Nehemiah 4:16).

Why the history lesson? While it is quite uncertain as to the specific history behind Psalm 123, it most certainly would have been like the situation facing Nehemiah and God’s people. Consider these facts:

- It is believed by most that, outside of the five Psalms which David and Solomon wrote in this section,¹ the remaining ten psalms were written in, around, and during the era of Nehemiah.²
- Accordingly, many cite Nehemiah and the people’s struggle as an example of the pressure, difficulty, and persecution which God’s people face living in this fallen world- the very context of the Songs of Ascents.

Accordingly, Psalm 123 is another Psalm by which God instructed His people as to how they should respond to the serious trials and difficulties of this age.^{3,4} And once again, as this Psalm is poetry — which was intended to be taken as a whole — we don’t get to the setting and so the reason the Psalmist wrote this lamentation⁵ until v. 3b of the Psalm. While that makes for great poetry, it does NOT make for great teaching. Accordingly, I am going to begin at v. 3b with the setting.

The Setting, vv. 3b-4.

Psalm 123, 3b-4, “...we are greatly filled^{6,7} with contempt.⁸ Our soul⁹ is greatly filled with the scoffing of those who are at ease, *and* with the contempt of the proud.¹⁰”

The language used is severe. The word for “contempt” is **זַבַּח** (*buz*) which speaks of extreme hatred and so is translated as “despise,” “scorn,” or “utterly despise.” When this level of hatred occurs, murder often is the result.¹¹ The word for “scoffing” is **לַעֲגָה** (*laag*) which is an extreme form of “mocking” or “derision.” It is the word for “blasphemy” and is what is behind Christ’s words in Matthew 5.

Matthew 5:22b: “...and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell.”

While we might think that calling someone a “fool” (μωρός [*mōros*]) is NOT a big deal,

nevertheless behind this word is the “contempt” and “scoffing” referenced in our passage. As such, the “scoffing” and “contempt” referenced here did NOT run as water off their backs; it penetrated deep within their souls! Notice the language: “...we are GREATLY FILLED with contempt. Our SOUL is GREATLY FILLED...” This is a verbal threat or attack which shook the individual to his core!¹²

Such were the taunts that penetrated deep within the souls of God’s people, disturbing many! In such a situation, what ought we to do as a people of God? When, as in Psalm 121, we lift our eyes and see “the mountain” of problems and woe ready to crush us, what is our recourse?

The Recourse, v. 1a.

Psalm 123, 1a, “To Thee I lift up my eyes...”

This ultimately is our only recourse! It is fleeing to God for refuge!

Now we must take this as instruction from God when this world of woe and sorrow presses hard upon us! What do we learn here? At these times, we must NOT look to self, others, a government, a savings account, an authority figure, a gun, or anything else in this world; we must NOT dwell upon the attacks, threats, and injustice, RATHER, God’s call is for us to work with the labor pains of life so that our knee-jerk reaction is going to the Lord.¹³ Recall how James exhorted his persecuted brethren:

James 1:2-4, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have *its* perfect result [what does that mean? It means we work with the trials of life so that they might produce a specific result in us...] that you may be perfect [mature] and complete, lacking in nothing.”

That is the calling before us! When the trials and difficulties of life occur, the tendency at first is to take matters into our own hands and so cope in our own strength and reasoning. This Psalm calls us to abandon that approach. Spurgeon described it this way:

We must use our eyes with resolution, for they will not go upward to the Lord of themselves, but they incline to look downward, or inward, or anywhere but to the Lord. (Spurgeon, 2004, pp. 39-40)

Truly, we must disciple and so discipline our souls so that our gut reaction to the trials and difficulties of this world is to run to God. No doubt this is why David prayed:

Psalm 61:2b, “...when my heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”

We see it in Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 16:19a, "O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of distress..."

Accordingly, Korah wrote:

Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

This is the point of Psalm 123 and why this Psalm is in the Songs of Ascents. God wants us to train ourselves such that we take the trials and difficulties of life and use them to improve our relationship with God! David got it, listen to the exhortation he gave himself:

Psalm 61:5-7, "My soul [Just as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed, the key to thriving in the midst of the fire is talking to yourself... telling your flesh where to get off], wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken. On God my salvation and my glory *rest*; the rock of my strength, my refuge is in God. [And because of that, David exhorted any and all who might read this psalm...] Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us."

So, what is our recourse when the burdens of life press hard upon us? When we are humbled, depressed, and set at naught? It is to flee for refuge to the Lord! Truly, there is no better place for you or me! How so? That brings us to the assurance.

[The Assurance, v. 1b.](#)

Psalm 123:1b, "To Thee I lift up my eyes, O Thou who art enthroned in the heavens!¹⁴" -

What does this verse mean when it says that God is "enthroned in the heavens"? It means that regardless of what man might think or say, the Lord God Almighty is the one who ultimately rules over this world- calling the shots!

Isaiah 66:1a, "Thus says the Lord, 'Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool'..."

Because God sits in the heavens ruling over this world, the Psalmist drew the logical conclusion.

Psalm 115:3, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

Do you understand what this means? It means God's purpose and will for us is

unthwartable! The evil man or “nature” does NOT determine what happens in our lives. It is the will of our God that determines all things! What a comfort and hope. Consider what the Psalmist says:

Psalm 2:1-5, “Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed [Among other things, this is a prophecy of the Last Days when the world’s most powerful join together against the Lord and His people. Until then, behind each and every attack and action is this one, singular passion on the part of the wicked...]: ‘Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!’ [Yet what is God’s response?] 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them. Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury [In light of this, what ought our response to be? The response given by the Messiah...]: 6 But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

Family of God, how big is your God? That is the question! It is the question we must ask when:

- Our lives are threatened, or difficulty is upon us!
- Facing the terminal diagnosis.
- The pressures of the world weigh heavily upon us.

Don’t miss it: It was this question asked and answered by God’s people in the fourteenth century facing the Black Death¹⁵ (which would kill up to 54% of the world’s population; by comparison Covid killed up to 0.4% of the world’s population). Yet, because God was on the throne, many did NOT isolate, flee, or practice “social distancing” in fear of their lives. RATHER they went into the homes of those suffering and, among other things, read them Scripture!¹⁶

Such a far cry from how we respond today.

- We live as though God were weak and passive.
- We live as though God were far off and so deaf to our cries.
- We cling so tightly to our lives and so consider death to be our greatest enemy- which it is not!

And because of this, we call into question God’s love and ultimate purpose when it comes to our lives. This brings us to the final and yet MAIN SECTION of this Psalm, the consolation.

[The Consolation, vv. 2-3a.](#)

Psalm 123:2a, “Behold, as the eyes of servants *look* to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress...”

We have here another literary tool with which most of you are familiar. It is called Progressive Parallelism where the text makes a statement but then repeats the statement, progressing in thought. For example we see it in Psalm 99.

Psalm 99:1
“**The Lord** reigns.....let the peoples tremble;
“**He** is enthroned *above* the cherubim.....let the earth

In Psalm 123, the progression is from the “male servant” to the “female servant” which in Bible times reflected a growing degree of weakness, need, and vulnerability.¹⁷ Well, these weak and vulnerable servants stand before their “master”/“mistress” who held in their hand the power of life and death. Accordingly, how closely did these servants watch their earthly lord for the slightest hand gesture issuing forth a command?

That is the point the Psalmist here used to convey NOT the servile relationship of the servant to his master BUT the gaze of the servant — how transfixed our eye ought to be on “the hand of our Lord¹⁸”!

Psalm 123, 2b, “...so our eyes *look* to the Lord our God...”

The emphasis is on God’s transcendence, sovereignty, and authority. **יהוה** (*Yhvh*) speaks of who God is as God —that He has life in Himself. He is self-sustaining and self-sufficient. // **אלהים** (*Elohim*) speaks of God’s royal office by which He rules over the earth with unthwartable sovereignty and power.

Now again, in the case of the earthly servant to their master, their eyes are rivetted on the hand of their master out of fear of missing a command and so being in trouble. Yet for us, the emphasis is on the kindness of the Lord such that we don’t miss the slightest act of comfort, encouragement, or preservation.

Psalm 123:2c-3a, “...so our eyes look to the Lord our God until He shall be gracious to us [in the Hebrew, this expression speaks of a certain future act!¹⁹ God is going to be gracious to us- that is His nature. And so, the servant prays...]. Be gracious to us, O Lord, be gracious to us.”

Would you notice, the Psalmist here repeats the same word three times! Why the repetition? Recall, the Hebrew had no way of bolding, underlining, or italicizing a word, NOR did it have punctuation marks. And so, emphasis was denoted by word placement (either at the beginning or middle of a verse or pericope), sentence structure (like

Progressive Parallelism or Chiasms), or WORD REPETITION.

Speaking of the latter, you know something is important in Scripture when the text repeats a word or phrase. For example: Christ frequently made an appeal with these words:

John 6:47, "Truly, truly, I say to you..."

Paul wrote:

Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice!"

Yet, when a word is repeated three times, that brings the emphasis to the Nth degree. Recall Isaiah speaking of the Seraphim:

Isaiah 6:3, "And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.'"

Appealing to the people of God during the reign of the wicked king Jehoiachin, Jeremiah made this appeal:

Jeremiah 22:29, "O land, land, land, hear the word of the Lord!"

We see it in Ezekiel speaking of what awaited Judah in 586 BC.

Ezekiel 21:27, "A ruin, a ruin, a ruin, I shall make it..."

How many times does this Psalm repeat the word "gracious" or, more accurately, "merciful"²⁰? Three times! You can't get more emphatic than that in the Bible. Accordingly, THE FOCUS of this Psalm is the "mercy" of our Lord.^{21,22} Understand how important this is!

Whereas "grace" denotes favor, particularly toward the undeserving, the unique quality of "mercy" is that it is given to the pitiful, the weak, the undeserving, and so, the wretched; in this case to God's children who have endured great abuse at the hands of the powerful and arrogant and even now their lives are in danger! Randy Steele noted it this way:

Mercy... is described as 'kindness exercised towards the miserable' (Hodge, 1982, p. 427). Berkhof (1977) says it is 'the goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their deserts' (p. 72). '[It] is an essential attribute whereby God is inclined to come to the aid of a creature in his misery' (a Brakel, 1992, p. 125). (Steele, 2014)

From this we see that “mercy” (חַנּוּן [chanan]) speaks of the radical nature of our God. He is NOT put off by our weakness, arrogance, or laziness. He is NOT offended by our sin. RATHER our weaknesses draw Him to us to heal/comfort/encourage us. And get this: His “mercy” indicates that He does NOT uphold us with a lecture or stern look of disapproval. He does it freely, willingly, joyfully, and so zealously. Recall the words of Dane Ortlund comparing Christ to a doctor:

A compassionate doctor has traveled deep into the jungle to provide medical care to a primitive tribe afflicted with a contagious disease... a few brave young men step forward to receive the care being freely provided.

What does the doctor feel? Joy. His joy increases to the degree that the sick come to him for help and healing. It’s the whole reason he came.

How much more if the diseased are not strangers but his own family?

So with us, and so with Christ. He does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon, with distress and need and emptiness. That’s the whole point. It’s what He came to heal. He went down into the horror of death and plunged out through the other side in order to provide a limitless supply of mercy and grace to His people. (Ortlund, 2020, pp. 36-37)

It is this “mercy” — this overflowing of the heart of God toward us — that serves as the second basis of our trust and hope in God²³ (the first is God’s Sovereignty, v. 1b). We see it in David. After he committed so many sins in relation to Bathsheba, he nevertheless raised his eyes unto the Lord. On what basis?

Psalm 51:1, “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions.”

David’s confidence before the Lord was in God’s Kindness, His love, His compassion, HIS MERCY! It was on this basis that the greatest sinner is able to approach God.

Luke 18:13, “But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’”²⁴

As Paul observed it is:

2 Corinthians 5:14, “the love of Christ” that “controls us.”

In fact, Paul could NOT be clearer.

Romans 12:1a, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice..."

It is Christ's love/mercy which moves the Christian in life! While Paul could have referenced the wrath of God or His holiness. He doesn't. Rather, he references the love/mercies of Christ which is an affection more powerful than any other human affection or desire, trumping even the passions of lust!

Psalm 94:17-19, "If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have dwelt in *the abode of* silence. [How was God's 'help' appropriated in the life of the Psalmist?] If I should say [~think, believe], 'My foot has slipped,' Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, will hold me up. When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Thy consolations²⁵ delight my soul."

One must understand: God's compassion and grace; His MERCY is the cornerstone of our hope and confidence in life and in death!²⁶ It is what buoys us in life's storms AND is why the man or woman of God flees to the Lord in difficult times! They know God will hear them, comfort them, strengthen them, and ultimately protect them!

That is the Point of Psalm 123! In a world that hates us and seeks our ruin, our hope and confidence is NOT in our response, our moral superiority, our bold resistance, the resources or weapons at hand, or anything else! RATHER it is in the character of God!^{27,28} That is why in the midst of woe and sorry, God instructs us here to "lift up our eyes unto the Lord"!

That is the CALLING of this Psalm, to work with the pain, sadness, regret, guilt, indifference, or anger that often comes upon us life. We must ensure that these drive us to the kindness and goodness of the Lord! Eugene Peterson put it this way:

The prayer [of this psalm] is not an attempt to get God to do what he is unwilling, otherwise, to do, but a reaching out to what we know that He does do, an expressed longing to receive what God is doing in and for us in Jesus Christ. In obedience we pray 'Mercy!' instead of 'Give us what we want.' We pray 'Mercy', and not 'Reward us for our goodness so our neighbors will acknowledge our superiority.' We pray 'Mercy' and not 'Punish us for our badness so we will feel better.' We pray 'Mercy' and not 'Be nice to us because we have been such good people.' (Peterson, 2000, p. 64)

In this regard, in closing I draw your attention one more time to the analogy found in v. 2 of the "servant"/"maid" diligently gazing upon "the hand of their master." If we did that with the Lord our God, what immediately would we see? A nail pierced hand... which speaks of what?

Christian, when you are struggling, God calls us to fix our gaze upon Christ's hands! They

continue to speak of the heart of God when it comes to you!

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End Note(s)

¹ Psalms. 122, 124, 127, 131, 133.

² “None of these psalms gives much detail for helping us fix the time when they were written. Most scholars think of the majority as having been written in the early days after the Jews’ return from exile in Babylon, when the tiny group of people who came back to Jerusalem with high hopes found themselves scorned by their settled, more comfortable, malicious neighbors. That is certainly the note struck in the second of this psalm’s two stanzas. It is why they are looking so hopefully to God.” (Boice, 2005, p. 1090)

³ “If the traveler in Psalm 121 had to learn to look higher than the hills, this sufferer, even more hemmed in, has won the same victory. His words, soaring above his circumstances, set his troubles in a context large enough to contain them.” (Kidner, 2014, p. 471)

⁴ This Psalm is beautifully connected with the previous three Psalms. In Psalm 120, the Psalmist is burdened by the deceit of the world in which he lived. In Psalm 123, the Psalmist is burdened by the greatness of God. In Psalm 121 the Psalmist looked upon the mountain of trouble that came from living as an alien in this world. In Psalm 123, the Psalmist fixed his gaze upon the Lord. In Psalm 122 David longed to “give thanks” on account of “the name [character] of the Lord”. It is upon that “name” the Psalmist endeavors to gaze upon in Psalm 123.

⁵ “Psalm 123, the fourth Song of the Ascents, is categorized as a community lament, although it begins with the voice of an individual: *To you I lift up my eyes* (v. 1; see Psalm 121). In v. 2, however, the community of pilgrims adds its voice, *thus our eyes (look) to the Lord our God*. Once inside the city gates, the psalm-singers turn their eyes away from the world described in Psalm 120—‘the lip of falsehood’ and ‘the deceitful tongue’ (v. 2)—toward God and address God directly, asking the deity to show them *favor*. ¶ The lament begins with an ‘expression of trust’ that includes an invocation—a usual element of a lament psalm: *O the one who dwells in the heavens* (vv. 1–2). It is followed by a ‘petition’ (v. 3) and ends with a ‘complaint’ (v. 4). While the usual format for a lament psalm is: (1) invocation; (2) complaint; (3) petition; (4) expression of trust; and (5) expression of praise and adoration, McCann reminds us that community laments often end with the ‘complaint’ (or ‘petition’) element, and he further suggests that the next psalm, Psalm 124, will provide the trust, praise, and adoration that usually accompany the lament form.” (Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 903)

⁶ “The verb used here, *savats*, is likely translated this way because of its usual application to eating food. It's a striking hypocatastasis with ‘contempt’ in the place of food. As one might eat to the point of fullness and satisfaction, one also might eat to the point of gluttony and distension until further eating isn't possible. It's that latter condition to which the psalmist has arrived with reference to the spiritual derision of others. ‘... the “food” is rammed down [his] throat until [he] can take no more. [He] cannot stomach any more, to use an English idiom’ (Fountain, (no date), p. 6).” (Randy L. Steele, *Are You Ready to Worship?*, Kindle Version)

⁷ “The word translated overwhelmed is from the root *śāḥa*, which means, literally, ‘eat one’s full, be sated, have enough.’” (Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 904)

⁸ “Contempt is irritation directed at a person you feel is at a lower status. It involves disrespect. It usually includes cutting words (e.g., condescending words, name-calling, damaging words) that can break a person’s spirit. It could involve an attitude of disgust or an attitude of cool dismissal to go along with those words.” (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 199)

⁹ “The reference to ‘soul’ indicates that the problem has penetrated into the very heart of the person” (Motyer, 2009, p. 53).

¹⁰ Cf. Psalm 73:6-9!!

¹¹ “It is illuminating that contempt is singled out for mention. Other things can bruise, but this is cold steel. It goes deeper into the spirit than any other form of rejection; in the Sermon on the Mount it ranks as more murderous than anger (Matthew 5:22). It is particularly wounding when it is casual or unconscious; but if it is deserved and irreversible it is one of the pains of hell (Daniel 12:2).” (Kidner, 2014, pp. 471-472)

¹² So, truly, the setting is just like what Nehemiah faced. James Boice wrote of that time, ““Each of Sanballat’s five rhetorical questions and Tobiah’s taunt triggered a legitimate sense of weakness that Nehemiah and the others must have had. ¶ ‘What are those feeble Jews doing?’ The Jews were feeble, and they knew it. How could anyone as weak as they were hope to rebuild their city’s walls? ¶ ‘Will they restore their wall?’ Indeed! How could they restore a wall one-and-one-half to two-and-one-half miles in circumference? It had been built by people much more numerous and stronger than they were. How could they even hope to reassemble those huge stones? ¶ ‘Will they offer sacrifices?’ ... I think Derek Kidner is correct when he regards it as meaning, ‘Are these fanatics going to pray the wall up? It’s their only hope!’ The taunt was an attack on the Jews’ faith, which was not that strong anyway at this period... ¶ ‘Will they finish in a day?’ This means, ‘Don’t they realize what an enormous task they are taking on?’ ... ¶ ‘Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble- burned as they are?’ ... The walls were not crumbled, only tumbled, but the question was nevertheless effective in reminding the Jews of the overwhelming dimensions of the task. ¶ Tobiah’s taunt, ‘What they are building- if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones,’ had bite because, as archeological studies of these walls have shown, they did not turn out to be of the same quality

as those that stood before them.” (Boice, 2005, pp. 1090-1091)

¹³ “The goal of the pilgrim is not Jerusalem, as important as that city was, or even the temple in Jerusalem, as important as it was, but God himself, whose true throne is not anywhere on earth but in heaven. In the pilgrimage of this life it is always to God and to God alone we go and to whom we look for help and guidance here.” (Boice, 2005, p. 1088)

¹⁴ “He views the Lord enthroned in heaven, ruling as king over all (cf. Pss 2:4; 103:19; 113:5). As king, the Lord has the authority and the ability to change what occurs in his domain (Ps 115:3). Reflecting the spirit of Ps 113:5–9, the psalmist is confident that though the Lord rules in heaven, he cares deeply about what affects people on earth. As Goldingay observes, ‘Sitting in the heavens does not suggest remoteness or noninvolvement in this world but rather that Yhwh is enthroned, and from there as sovereign Yhwh can and does come to intervene in the world down below the palace.’” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 461)

¹⁵ Known as the Pestilence, the Great Mortality or the Plague. This was a bubonic plague pandemic occurring in Western Eurasia and North Africa from 1346 to 1353.

¹⁶ Christian History detailed the following: “Zwingli was on a mineral-springs vacation in August, 1519, when the Black Death broke out in Zurich. Though weak already from exhausting work, he hurried back to his city to minister to victims. Before long he himself caught the disease and seemed likely to perish. But his work not yet done, Zwingli recovered. His famous ‘plague hymn’ recounts his sense of trust and then his joy at regaining health. Stanzas 1-4 were written as the disease first struck, stanzas 5-8 as his health deteriorated. Upon his recovery he finished the final four quatrains.

Help me, O Lord, My strength and rock;
Lo, at the door I hear death’s knock.
Uplift thine arm, Once pierced for me,
That conquered death. And set me free.
Yet, if thy voice, In life’s midday.
Recalls my soul, Then I obey.
In faith and hope Earth I resign.
Secure of heaven. For I am Thine.
My pains increase; Haste to console;
For fear and woe Seize body and soul.
Death is at hand. My senses fail.
My tongue is dumb; Now, Christ, prevail.
Lo! Satan strains To snatch his prey;
I feel his grasp; Must I give way?
He harms me not, I fear no loss,
For here I lie Beneath thy cross.
My God! My Lord! Healed by thy hand.
Upon the earth Once more I stand.
Let sin no more Rule over me;
My mouth shall sing Alone to thee.
Though now delayed, My hour will come.
Involved, perchance. In deeper gloom.
But, let it come; With joy I’ll rise,
And bear my yoke Straight to the skies.”

(Christianity Today, 1984)

¹⁷ “The complementary images picture those who are vulnerable and needy appealing in submission and humility³⁸⁸ to those who are powerful.” (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 461)

¹⁸ “There was immense length of focus in verse 1; now the gaze is fixed intently on a single point near at hand, with the trained watchfulness of the servant who is ready for the smallest gesture. The comparison must not be pressed: these servants are watching for relief, not for orders; yet servants they are, still loyal and submissive.” (Kidner, 2014, p. 471)

¹⁹ “The key word here is the preparation of time limitation with which this phrase begins, ‘until,’ *’ad*. The verb of the phrase is found in the imperfect mood which is the closest Hebrew as a language comes to a future tense. The author is stating concerning God that ‘He will be gracious to us.’ It is a statement of certainty, a truth upon which you can depend. The Lord who is full of

grace and truth as a matter of being will be gracious to you according to his sovereign purpose. That being so, why wouldn't you look to him for necessary grace until he surely provides." (Steele, 2014)

²⁰ This is how every major translation renders this word except the NASB.

²¹ "We can equally well call attention to the word 'mercy.' It occurs three times (once in verse 2 and twice in verse 3) but is the dominant word in the second stanza. In fact, mercy is the most important word in the psalm, because it is what the psalmist is praying for." (Boice, 2005, p. 1092)

²² "Alexander (1864) states that verse three 'forms the centre of the psalm' (p. 512)." (Steele, 2014)

²³ "Richard Sibbes once said, 'There's more mercy in Christ than sin in us' (*Bruised Reed*, 13)." (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 202)

²⁴ Cf. Eph. 2:4-7!!

²⁵ "The second primary meaning of *nāḥam* is 'to comfort' (Piel) or 'to be comforted' (Niphal, Pual, and Hithpael). This Hebrew word was well known to every pious Jew living in exile as he recalled the opening words of Isaiah's 'Book of Consolation,' *naḥāmû naḥāmû ammî* 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people' (Isa 40:1). The same word occurs in Ps 23:4, where David says of his heavenly Shepherd, 'Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.'... God's 'compassion (*niḥûm*, a derivative of *nḥm*) grows warm and tender' for Israel (Hos 11:8)." (Bruce K. Waltke, 1990, p. 571)

²⁶ "Consider the example of John Newton, the hymn writer. When Newton was a young boy he ran away to sea and eventually went to Africa to participate in the slave trade. His reason for going, as he wrote in his autobiography years later, was that he might 'sin his fill.' Sin he did! But the path of sin is downhill, and Newton's path descended so far that he was eventually reduced to the position of a slave in his master's African compound. This man dealt in slaves, and when he went off on slaving expeditions Newton fell into the hands of the slave trader's African wife, who hated Europeans and vented her venom on Newton. Newton was forced to eat his food off the dusty floor like a dog, and at one point he was actually placed in chains. Sick and emaciated, he nearly died. ¶ Newton escaped from this form of his slavery eventually, but he was still chained to sin and again went to sea transporting slaves from Africa to the New World. It was on his return from one of these slave voyages that Newton was wondrously converted. ¶ The ship was overtaken by a fierce storm in the North Atlantic and was nearly sinking. The rigging was destroyed, water was pouring in. Newton was sent down into the hold to pump water. He pumped for days, certain that the ship would sink and he would be drowned. As Newton pumped water in the hold of that ship, God caused him to remember Bible verses he had learned from his mother as a child, half a lifetime earlier, and these verses led to his repentance, faith, and conversion. Right there in the ship! While the storm was raging! ¶ The ship survived the storm. The sailors were saved. Sometime later, after Newton had left the slave trade, this former slave of slaves studied for the Christian ministry and eventually became a popular preacher in England. He even preached before the queen. ¶ What was Newton's motivation? It was a profound awareness of the grace and mercy of God toward him. It was this John Newton who wrote, 'Amazing grace!- how sweet the sound- that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.'... ¶ In his most advanced years Newton's mind began to fail and he had to stop preaching. When friends came to visit him he frequently remarked, 'I am an old man. My mind is almost gone. But I can remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior.' Certainly the mercy of God moved Newton to offer his body as a living sacrifice to God and to seek to please him." (Boice, 2005, pp. 1093-94)

²⁷ "The confidence we have when we approach God, asking for mercy, is in God's own merciful character, not in our character." (Boice, 2005, p. 1093)

²⁸ "[This psalm] teaches that both individually and communally the worshipers of the Lord can turn with confidence to him with their griefs and hurts. They do not need to fear him or to approach him hesitantly, as though they are crossing the line with a human boss by talking to him about their personal, rather than professional, problems... In this respect Psalm 123 anticipates the exhortation of Heb 4:16: 'Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.' In a world that too often is cutthroat, the Lord's compassion is the confidence of his people." (Dr. Daniel J. Estes, 2019, p. 463)