



## **Drawn to Christ: Psalms 120-134 (Part 3) – Our Help Comes from the Lord**

Douglas Corin – 5 September, 2021

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Good morning. Our help comes from the Lord. Psalm 123 to 125. These psalms, written generations before Jesus was born, offer Christians powerful teachings. From the words of these Songs of Ascent, we can take huge comfort and hope because they pull the curtain back to reveal our dependable God and show that we can confidently look to him to listen to our every need and respond. Let's pray.

We thank you, Father, for what we are about to read. And we ask that in it we'll see you more clearly, and ourselves, and that we'd be drawn through these words to Christ. We thank you for your fatherly care over us. You know the number of hairs on our heads. You're able to provide for our every need. And we ask and expect you to do that because of your promise. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Psalm 123**

Let's read together Psalm 123. Psalm 123. *"To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! 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. Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud."*

As we've done so far in this series titled Drawn to Christ, once again we'll look at the message of the psalm and then see how it bears witness to Christ.

"To you," he begins. He doesn't say "to me", but "to you". From the get-go, the psalmist, the psalm writer, shows his attention is on another. Who is this "you"? What's the writer's relationship? *"To you I lift up my eyes."* I lift up my eyes. I don't look across as your equal. I don't look down as your superior. *"To you I lift up my eyes."* For, if I look across, if I look down, I don't look towards you. To look towards you, I must look up. *"I lift up my eyes."* I look from below in humility. You are greater than me. I'm not on the same level. There's no comparison.

And how high do I lift my eyes? *"O you who are enthroned in the heavens!"* As high as the heavens are from the earth. But there's more to it than just being high above the earth in the heavens. In the heavens, you are enthroned. You're not just there. You're the king there. You are in the highest possible position of power and control and care over all. Here the psalmist as a poet uses physical, spatial language to show you the superiority of the one he's looking to. Yet in no way does he see the person as remote in attitude. Confidently, he lifts his eyes and speaks to the one on the throne.

But for what purpose do he lift up his eyes? The poet now uses illustrations. *"As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress."* In our culture, we're not so familiar with this illustration, but who of us hasn't seen, for example, the eyes of a pet dog never come off the owner's hand for an instant when that hand is holding food or a stick to throw? Where the hand moves, the eyes move. Or in primary school, the raised hand of a teacher at the end of the school day, restrains the class from leaving. Kids' eyes take focused aim on the teacher's hand until they get the hand drop that signals after-school freedom. But this psalm isn't talking about dogs or kids, pet food or after-school freedom. In the time and culture of the psalmist, the very life and wellbeing of servants lay under the powerful control of their masters. The eyes of servants, male and female, watched intently for hand signals. Not only of commands, but of provision and favour from the people they served. So our eyes look to the Lord, our God, until he has mercy upon us.

Note now that the psalmist no longer talks of himself alone in solitude; he no longer talks of "my eyes", but "our eyes" and "our God". He embraces others into his looking. His God is a God shared with others. His relationship to the Lord is not unique among the group, not exclusive, not shutting out others, but shared and common. Looking, for the psalmist, is a group activity. You can't for long lift up your eyes to the Lord your God without realizing you

are not alone. It's not just God's person who looks to him, but God's people who look to him. You look, belonging to a group.

*"Till he has mercy on us."* Look at that little word: "till". It shows a continuing, non-flickering stability of their gaze. So focused is their gaze that it's almost as though they aren't even blinking. What they want comes from the Lord alone. So their eyes are on him *"till he has mercy upon us."* It's not that the mercy is coming from the Lord and somebody else. Their eyes are not waiting in hope on themselves or on others. They don't shift their gaze from person to person, seeking help from this one and that one. Just the Lord. Eyes are locked on the Lord. Their eyes look to the Lord their God till he has mercy upon them. The word "mercy" pictures us a superior person stooping down to freely help a lowly person. So by looking to mercy, they are humbly admitting that they are lowly people looking to their superior for help. *"Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us."* Twice the intense cry bursts from his lips on behalf of other people.

*"For we have had more than enough of contempt."* At last, here at the end, we find out what's troubling them. Contempt. Lots of contempt. Long-term contempt, contempt piling up, filling up, suffocating. Overloading, overbearing, overpowering contempt. We've all been in experiences of some sort of contempt, whether it's in our school days or in the office, at work, and social situations. These people got contempt, contempt, contempt...

*"O Lord,"* they cry. Lord. The name of the God who made a covenant with them in our Bible is capital L O R D. The God who calls them his people. The God who is faithful to his people. Their God. To whom they belong. The contempt is towards the people who are God's people, therefore, towards God himself. He says, *"Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud."* Their scorers live at ease. Unlike the Lord's people. Pouring down scorning contempt on them, the proud show no respect. They look down in derision. People who lower their eyes to look down on others instead of lifting up their eyes humbly to God enthroned in the heavens. These are the proud.

As have seen from this walk through, this psalm is a lament which means it's a cry to God for help. And that's what... and in that way it's similar to Psalm 120, which was our first psalm last time. It's the lament of one person and a lament on behalf of the whole community of God. In what way does this psalm bear witness to Christ? And how does it draw us to Christ?

Remember this song is one of the Songs of Ascent which the people of Israel sung yearly on one of their three trips up to Jerusalem. So Jesus would have had these words on his lips.

I'm going to ask you to look at a few scriptures with me now from the New Testament. The first one is Hebrews chapter one. Hebrews chapter one. And we'll read verse eight. Hebrews 1:8. This is God recording what God says to Jesus his son. *"But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom.'" God the father refers to the son as God and talks about his throne. Therefore, when we read these Songs of Ascent, we can identify Christ himself as God, a member of the Triune God.*

From our knowledge of the New Testament, we can also identify Christ as the one who prays the psalm. He speaks the psalm on behalf of his people. In other words, he intercedes for his people. Let's look at a passage about that in Romans chapter eight. Romans 8. Romans 8:34. Who is it? *"Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."* Christ is interceding for us. A similar verse, which I won't ask you to turn to, is Hebrews 7:25, which says, *"Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."* So we can picture Christ now in heaven interceding for us, even still using the words of the psalms which are the words of God given by the Holy Spirit. He intercedes for us as one who has shared in our suffering. And you can turn to this one, which is also in Hebrews, Hebrews chapter four. Hebrews chapter four, verses 14 to 16. Reading from verse 14. *"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 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."* Christ is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. He intercedes for us with sympathy. He himself has experienced the scorn and contempt of Psalm 123. I'll read two verses to you. Speaking of Jesus, *"And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate."* That was from Luke chapter 23. And *"looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* That was from Hebrews 12. Christ suffered contempt, mocking, and shame. When we suffer the same, he intercedes for us with sympathy. He is able to intercede on our behalf.

And finally, this bears witness to Christ in the fact that Christ himself is the answer to the prayer for mercy. He is the one who will eternally relieve us of contempt. When the psalmist prayed, *"have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us"*, could he have even imagined the cost that God would pay to answer the prayer? That the son of God would mercifully stoop down to become man and live among us. That he would die the most contemptuous, scorned type of death on the cross in order to bring us mercy. When we pray, *"have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,"* we remember the price that God was willing to pay to answer us. His answer is to give us his son. So this psalm draws us to Christ that we may have life.

Before we move on to Psalm 124, I'll mention a few things about Hebrew poetry. The psalms were written in Hebrew. The psalms are poetry. In fact, one third of the Old Testament is poetry, including the poetry found in the books of the prophets where God himself speaks in poetry. There are very few rules to Hebrew poetry. It doesn't use rhyme and there are no rules about beat or rhythm. It uses picture language, similes and metaphors, like, *"as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master"* for example. It's compact, saying a lot in a few words. So it needs to be pondered and not raced through (which I'm doing a little bit today). Perhaps the most interesting thing about Hebrew poetry is the use of stair-like parallelism. I'll explain. When you're out on a well-used track in one of the hills out here... walking hills in the...in the city... you'll come across steps. Unlike the stairs in buildings where each step has the same dimensions so you can place one foot per step—up, up, up—the steps on these walking tracks are not regular. Between each level, you can go up and then walk, walk up to another level, walk, walk, walk up. You're repeating feet on the same level before moving up to the next level. That repetition describes Hebrew poetry. It repeats words, words on the same level, just progressing but on the same level. Then step up through a different word to another level. Look back at Psalm 123 for example. Let me turn to that. In verses one and two, you got "eyes," "eyes," "eyes," "eyes,"... four times on the same level. You also see "hand," "hand"... And then similar ideas are there: the servant and maidservant, master and mistress. Verse three has "mercy," "mercy." And verses three and four have "more than enough," "more than enough," and "contempt," "contempt." So in Hebrew poetry, this, this repetition of steps on the same level. You get the idea.

## Psalm 124

Now that you've passed your master class on Hebrew poetry, let's read Psalm 124. A Song of Ascents. Of David. *"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—if it had not been the Lord who was on our side when people rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped! Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."*

The psalm begins, "If the Lord had not been on our side... *if it had not been the Lord who was on our side.*" So the very first word is, "if" which is a word saying what's to follow is not actually what happened. It was against the facts. In fact, God was on their side. So we know that from the start. We also know straight away who the word "our" refers to: Israel, or the people of God. We don't know what's happened yet, but this one thing we know: the result was only because of the Lord. Not the Lord and others, but the Lord alone. The Lord had done what no one else could do. They owed it all to him.

He continues, *"when people rose up against us."* So unlike the previous psalm, 123, we learn early on what the problem was. Enemies. People rose up against us. Giving them the feeling of being towered over by them. *"They would have swallowed us up alive,"* like cruel beasts who don't even bother killing their prey before making a meal of it.

*"When their anger was kindled against us."* Kindled. That means their anger blazed up into flame. Into a fierce, destructive fire. And it says, *"Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters."* What is more powerful than a flood? I still remember, I think it was about ten years ago, watching the TV of the tsunami floods in Japan, watching cars, trucks, sheds, and whole homes being carried along by the flood... the force of the flood. Notice the similar words the psalmist uses, the same idea repeated: the flood, the torrent, the raging waters. And the word "raging" reminds us again of the anger from verse three. You also see the repetition of "over us," "over us." It's unescapable doom of an overwhelming enemy power.

*"Blessed be the Lord."* What a relief to hear those words! Remember the word, "if" at the beginning of the psalm? The terrible things he's just been saying, the terrible results from their enemy's anger didn't actually happen. But what could have stopped such powerful forces? What could have extinguished such flaming anger? What could have tamed the wild

beast? What could have stood against the raging waters? *"Blessed be the Lord."* Blessed be the Lord and the Lord alone. No one else gets the praise. He alone is powerful to stop all enemies. *"Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth!"* Like they're snatched out of the mouth of a lion. The Lord shows his total control. He is sovereign in all his actions. It was in his power to give them as prey. But he kept them from the devouring teeth.

*"We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers."* So he changes his picture language here, but similar idea. Snares don't go out hunting and attacking birds. Birds first have to fly to them. They get trapped because of the temptation of the food set there by the bird hunters. But once caught in the snare, life is over.

*"The snare is broken, and we have escaped!"* The unimaginable has happened. Escape from unavoidable death, from within the death trap itself. The snare is broken! What amazement! The narrowest escape returns the bird to freedom.

What's the lesson for God's people in all this? *"Our help is in the name of the Lord."* The beginning of the poem, the centre of the poem, and the end of the poem all give the one same reason for their escape: help from one person, the faithful God of his covenant people, the Lord. He made heaven and earth. Earlier we'd asked what could stop the fire, the wild beasts, and the flood? And we know that answer. We know. Why? Because God made heaven and earth. He's the creator with total control of his creation, including the protection of his people from their enemies. So this psalm is a shared song of thanksgiving, a song for the community of believers who remember God's past salvation. It ends with a triumphant confession of trust. The future is in God's hands.

So how does this psalm bear witness to Christ? How does it draw us to Christ? Well, as in Psalm 123, we can remember... we can imagine the psalm on the lips of Jesus year after year. Every year he repeated, *"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side."* As a man, Jesus identified with his people and recalling how God had saved them in the past. In his ministry years, he could also say this about his own life and that of his disciples as they escaped life-threatening situations, including murderous enemies, and storms. More especially, we can think of it as still on his lips to this day. As our priestly representative, he can bless the Lord on our behalf, for all who have escaped out of the snare of death and to eternal life with him in heaven. *"The snare is broken, and we have escaped!"* Yes, we too have escaped. Sin tempted us. It snared us, trapped us. Only because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection

was that snare broken. And we live forgiven and free. *"If the Lord had not been on our side..."* But the Lord is on our side and he draws us to Christ through this psalm.

## Psalm 125

Our last psalm this morning is Psalm 125. Psalm 125. A Song of Ascents. *"Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore. For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong. Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts! But those who turn aside to their crooked ways the Lord will lead away with evildoers! Peace be upon Israel!"*

*"Those who trust in the Lord."* Notice the ways this psalm describes the Lord's people. First, they're called, *"those who trust in the Lord"* in verse one. In verse two, *"his people."* In verse three, *"the righteous."* In verse four, *"those who are good"* and *"those who are upright in their hearts."* In verse five, *"Israel."* Who makes them this way? The one they trusted. The Lord. He alone is the one who makes his people... he is the one who makes them his people. The Lord alone makes them righteous. The Lord alone makes them good. The Lord alone makes them upright in heart. And the true Israel.

They are the people who trust in the Lord because they know the Lord can be trusted. Those people are like Mount Zion. Mount Zion is one hill in Jerusalem. It's not the temple mount, but it is the hill where David placed a tent for the Ark of the Covenant, the tabernacle of David, where the singers and musicians served. Zion is also used to refer to the whole city, along with its people and their covenant God. Mount Zion cannot be moved, but abides forever. The people are like Mount Zion. They cannot be moved. They are stable. Unmoving. They abide forever. Again, how are they able to do that? One reason, and one reason alone, the Lord.

*"As the mountains surround Jerusalem."* Now, Jerusalem is built on hills or mountains (including Mount Zion) and it's built on and among some of the highest hills in the region...in the region. For us, that area would be a little bit like going up into the hill country of the Gillies Range as far as elevation goes. Standing on one of the hills, we'd be able to look around and see all the other hills around about us. Even when you're driving down the coast

here, you look across inland and you see hills behind hills behind hills. So when it says, *"the mountains surround Jerusalem,"* it's not just talking, like, one ring of mountains around there, but there's mountains and behind, mountains. Plenty of mountains. And for David and the people that lived in the city, it was just so secure because attacking armies would have to come up a mountain, down into a valley, up a mountain, down into a valley... So it was a very, very hard city to capture. It was the security of the mountains which kept it safe. *"So the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore."* The surrounding protection from the Lord alone is what allows his people to abide safely forever.

*"For the sceptre of wickedness shall not rest."* The sceptre of wickedness refers to wicked rulers. It shall not rest. Unlike the Lord's people, the sceptre can be moved. It does not abide *"on the land allotted to the righteous."* Yes, the land is allotted. The Lord allotted it. It's been allotted, not to the wicked, but to the righteous. And why won't the sceptre of wickedness stay long over the land? *"Lest the righteous stretch out their hands to do wrong."* The Lord who surrounds his people protects them in this way: by the rulers that rule over them. To make sure that the wicked don't rule long because he knows temptation would overcome us. Temptation would be too great if wicked rulers hold power for too long. And in this way, also, we see the protection of the Lord as he protects us from sin. Thank you, Lord, for good governors in Australia.

*"Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts!"* So these people are not just good outwardly. They're not just pretending. They're truly good from the heart. And the psalmist asks the Lord to do good to them. Even in this time when they may have a wicked ruler, may the Lord do good to them.

*"But those who turn aside to their crooked ways."* The crooked ways are *\*their\** crooked ways. Perhaps they started off as somebody else's crooked ways, but now the people have made them *\*their\** crooked ways. They deliberately turn aside. They turn aside from the Lord. They turn aside from his people. They turn aside to the wickedness of the ruler. What will happen to them? *"The Lord will lead them away with evildoers"* like themselves. In freedom, they turned to their crooked ways. In captivity, the Lord will lead them away. away from Mount Zion, away from Jerusalem, and the Lord's surrounding protection, away from those who trust in the Lord.

And finally, *"Peace be upon Israel!"* Not on the wicked, not on those who were led away with evildoers, but only upon Israel. Those who trusted the Lord: Peace. Peace of conscience,

peace with God, the peace which abides with them forever. The psalm has been a communal psalm of confidence. It's also a communal lament asking God for help. *"Do good, O Lord, to those who are good."*

How does this psalm bear witness to Christ? How does it draw us to Christ? What a comfort this psalm would have been to Christ himself as he sang it. He, who more than anyone else, trusted in the Lord, truly is, *"like Mount Zion which cannot be moved, but abides forever."*

Christ is also the Lord who surrounds his people, protecting them from this time forth and forever more. He worded it differently himself, but expressed the same thought, in John 10:28 where he said, *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."* He is like the mountains which surround Jerusalem. The psalm draws us to Christ who gives his people peace. *"My peace I give to you,"* he said in John 14:27.

During this morning's psalms, we've thought of things like "eyes of servants on the hands of the masters." We've thought of contempt. We've thought of the fact that if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, of the torrent going over us, of escaping like a bird from the snare of the fowler. And we've thought about mountains which cannot be moved but abide forever, and being surrounded by those mountains, by the Lord. In each case, the psalm has borne witness to Christ. As he intercedes for us, as he himself became the answer for our prayer, and as the one who does good to us.

I think the more you read the psalms, the more deeply you get to know who Christ is. On the other hand, the more you read the New Testament and know who Christ is, the more you get to understand the psalms. It works both ways. But they are the psalms of Christ. Let's pray.

This morning, Lord, through your word we have heard various descriptions of you and your people. And the descriptions which give us confidence cause you're a very stable and dependable God. We conclude, Father, with the psalmist, *"our help is in the name of the Lord."* We know that he alone is the one who saves us. And we know in the New Testament that the name of Jesus is the name of the one who saves us. So we see Jesus in the psalms. There is salvation in no other name, but in the name of Jesus Christ. We thank you for making us your people. And we ask that you continue to do your good work in us and to treat us with goodness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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