

Psalm 123

Let Us Draw Near to the Throne of Grace

1. Background

This is another of the Songs of Ascents which alludes to the Aaronic Blessing (Num. 6:24-26). In this case alludes to the *central* benediction: “The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you.” Interestingly, the desire and prayer for the LORD to be gracious to his people is *central* to Psalm 123, forming a hinge between the two stanza of the psalm.

Commentators point out that the circumstances of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem after the exile was like that depicted by the psalm – despised by their more powerful and influential pagan neighbours. “The situation of the people as described in vv. 3-4 would match the circumstances of the postexilic community that collected the psalms of ascent. This could have attracted it to them, whenever it was written” (John Goldingay).

2. Structure

The psalm comprises two stanzas:

A¹ (vv. 1-2) *Expression of dependence on God’s help – mood of suspense*

B¹ (vv. 3-4) *Explanation of desire for God’s help – mood of urgency*

The stanzas are bound together by a triple repetition of “be gracious to us” (vv. 2d and 3a). The psalm also makes very liberal use of “terrace parallelism” (repetition of key words or ideas) to bind the whole together:

- “my eyes” and “our eyes” in vv. 1b and 2c
- “like the eyes” in vv. 2a and 2b
- “hand” in vv. 2a and 2b
- pairings of “servant” with “servant girl”, and “master” with mistress” in v. 2
- “gracious” in vv. 2d and 3a (twice)
- “sated” in vv. 3b and 4a
- “contempt” in vv. 3b and 4c

3. Notes

(a) *Our eyes are on our God, waiting for his grace* (vv. 1-2)

Notice the *abb’a’* structure of this stanza:

a¹ I lift up my eyes to the Enthroned One

b² ...as the eyes of servants to the hand of their master,

b’ as the eyes of a servant girl to the hand of her mistress –

a’ ...thus our eyes are to the LOUR our God, until he be gracious to us.

a and a’ refer to the psalm’s topic (our eager desire for God’s help); b and b’ give a double picture of this eager desire; and the second half of a’ provides a link with the prayer for help in the second stanza.

The effect of the long sentence which is v. 2, delaying the request to the last clause, has the effect of building suspense.

“Sitting in the heavens does not suggest remoteness or noninvolvement in this world but rather that [the LORD] is enthroned, and from there as sovereign [the LORD] can and does come to intervene in the world down below the palace” (Goldingay).

“The community acknowledges, and pleads, that the covenant relationship (‘our God’) places them in the position of slaves before their divine master. They are utterly reliant on [the LORD]. The corollary of this relationship is that God has made a self-commitment to support them as protégés. For this help they have been waiting and will wait on expectantly, conscious that they have no other help... Total dependence for the supply of needs is the point of the similes, which suits well the prayer and situation of vv. 2b-4” (L.C. Allen).

(b) *Be gracious to us, for we have had our fill of contempt* (vv. 3-4)

The first stanza moved from a situation of need (the servant’s need for his master’s provision) to divine grace – the second stanza reverses this, moving instead from divine grace to a situation of need (the contempt of the arrogant).

“The mood of the text finds parallels in the postexilic prayers of Ezra 9:8; Neh 9:32, 36-37” (Allen).

The Old Testament frequently condemns arrogance and complaisance. The arrogant behave as though they were gods, and the complacent indulge themselves in luxury without any regard to the poor. Together the arrogant and the complacent corrupt justice, grow in power and influence, amass wealth and property, and marginalize those who are weak (the fatherless, the widow and the foreigner). And they do this without any fear of God. They never tremble at the thought of him. In fact, God doesn’t come into their thinking at all: they don’t need his provision; they never look for his wisdom; they certainly don’t want his rule in their lives; and they despise (regard as weak and contemptible) those who do.

“The description of them as majestic or arrogant constitutes an implicit appeal for [the LORD] to act because the problem is not merely that the community is being ridiculed but because [the LORD] is being scorned. Further, the exaltation of these scorners at the end of the psalm contrasts with the exaltation of [the LORD] at its beginning” (Goldingay).

The psalmist’s response to the contempt of the arrogant is the main lesson here. He does not hit back, or water down his commitment, or step away from the fray; instead he cries out to God for the reality of the priestly blessing. He knew that “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” (Hebrews 4:15-16).