

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents
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Psalm 123 – Service

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

*I look to you, heaven-dwelling God,
Look up to you for help.
Like servants, alert to their master's commands,
Like a maiden attending her lady,
We're watching and waiting, holding our breath,
Awaiting your word of mercy.
Mercy, God, mercy!
We've been kicked around long enough,
Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men,
Kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes.*

The Message

English Standard Version

We continue to look at the Songs of Ascent, the songs the pilgrims would sing on their way to worship at the feasts in Jerusalem. These psalms weren't written on these pilgrimages, but they were compiled and sung along the way.

We try to learn to sing these songs with pilgrims, to slow ourselves down for the journey of faith. In our day when we can go such great distances so quickly, we sometimes become immune to the trudging walk of faith. This pilgrimage is different than flying.

Julie is gone this weekend, in Tucson to see her friends. She left our house at 5:30pm on Thursday and flew to Denver. She waited an hour, got on another flight and was in Tucson by 10:30. That's at least a thousand miles in six or seven hours. Sure, it's tiring, but could you imagine going that far by walking? Can you imagine taking your whole family in tow, including gear you'd need along the way? I enjoy looking around different airports, of the adventure of making flights and seeing new things. But the Song of Ascents is the same, long trip over and over. It's walking. Anna gets tired and starts whining after twenty minutes of walking. Imagine walking all day for a week. This trip becomes familiar in the small sites you'd see along the dusty path you take three times a year to worship.

A pilgrimage slows us down. A pilgrimage isn't done in an hour or an afternoon. It's slower than that. It makes us think. And in this psalm, we think of serving others. We think of how hard it is, how much we cringe against it. And we think of how God has served us.

The Servant's Posture

We first see the servant's posture – he looks up. The psalmist writes, *To you I lift up my eyes. O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*

We remember that our pilgrimage is one of faith, not merely one of duty. Sometimes we get the wrong idea, and we fall off the road on one side or the other. We can think that our walk with God is purely relational, and therefore particular and peculiar to us. We believe that he forgives us and accepts anything we put out before him because he is the God of love and will never care about our misdeeds or lack of devotion. On the other side, we can view God as a taskmaster, as a police officer, looking to give tickets to those not behaving correctly. We can be duty bound, coming to church every week to punch the time card without understanding or pursuing God as a person.

True Christianity is the proper balance and interplay of these. God is a person, and people are made for relationships. And God is the king, so he deserves and even demands to be worshipped and served as he wishes.

We look up to God himself. "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."³

"Service begins with an upward look to God. God is over us. He is above us. The person of faith looks up to God, not at him or down on him. The servant assumes a certain posture, a stance. If he or she fails to take that posture, attentive responsiveness to the master's commands will be hard."(61)

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² This message was given at Christ the King PCA church on "RUF Sunday," a Sunday in which we highlight the work of RUF.

³ Boice, 1088

To whom do you look up to? It's an interesting phrase, "Look up to." This phrase carries the meaning of a hero, a role model, a mentor. In our day, we are continually realizing that our sports role models are failures, are not worthy of much adoration. But we need role models. We need people to look up to. We fill that void with super heroes, but even they have problems. Batman is just a man, after all. Bruce Wayne has problems. Peter Parker has problems, especially girl problems. Everyone, even our heroes need help. But we still look up to people.

We should look up to God that way, and in a literal way. Although even the children's catechism will tell you that God is everywhere, we still think of looking up to him.

And we should look up to Jesus too. However, sometimes we get the wrong idea with both. We think of Jesus washing his disciples' feet and wonder if he just might like to wash ours today. We stick them out there to see. We think we can order him around, like a waiter. We'd like a superhero God who can be called into action when we want him to save the day. Or we might think of God as a hotline operator, God as expert, someone who is ready to answer our tough questions. Another option might be God as a bureaucracy to which we apply for assistance when we're in need. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "We go to the local branch office and direct the clerk (sometimes called a pastor) to fill out our order for God. Then we go home and wait for God to be delivered to us according to the specifications we have set down." Sort of like the UPS delivery man. Right to your door.

But if God is God at all, he already knows all our needs and our thoughts, our emotions, our bodies, our families, communities and nations. This heaven-dwelling God is over and above us in every way. Or else he is rather pathetic. Psalm 121 dealt with God's providence in this way.

God is the Creator; we are the creation. God leads us through difficulties and documents it with our experience of being guided. He did so with his people in Israel, and he does so with us now.

"We are not presented with a functional god who will help us out of jams or an entertainment god who will lighten tedious hours. We are presented with the God of exodus and Easter, the God of Sinai and Calvary. If we want to understand God, we must do it on his terms. If we want to see God the way he really is, we must look to the place of authority – to Scripture and to Jesus Christ."(63)

"The moment we look up to God (and not over to him, or down on him) we are in the posture of servitude." (63)

Matt Howell used to talk about a television show he wanted to shoot a pilot for. A barber, I think he name was Tony, would listen to people in his barbershop chair and then behind the scenes, help get them out of jams. I distinctly remember Matt saying over and over how Tony would "help them out of their jams." So many times, we just told him to be quiet.

God doesn't help us of our jams like Tony. He might never reveal to us all the reasons why some things happen. We may never fully understand all of our life or even anyone else's. Is that okay with you? Do you serve a God in heaven? You may not just totally get the virgin birth, or how Jesus is both God and man with two natures in one person for forever. Or how the Trinity really works. That doesn't mean Christianity is irrational or crazy; it may mean that we're talking about GOD.

This psalm uses four references to our eyes, our servanthood posture of looking up to the master. Charles Spurgeon applied this aspect of the psalm eloquently when he wrote:

"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. True saints, like obedient servants, look to the Lord their God *reverentially*; they have a holy awe and inward fear of the great and glorious One. They watch *obediently*, doing his commandments, guided by his eye. Their constant gaze is fixed *attentively* on all that comes from the Most High; they give earnest heed, and fear lest they should let anything slip through inadvertence or drowsiness. They look *continuously*, for there is never a time when they are off duty; at all times they delight to serve in all things. Upon the Lord they fix their eyes *expectantly*, looking for supply, succor and safety from his hands, waiting that he may have mercy upon them. To him they look *singly*; they have no other confidence, and they learn to look *submissively*, waiting patiently for they Lord, seeking both in activity and suffering to glorify his name. When they are smitten with the rod they turn their eyes *imploringly* to the hand which chastens, hoping that mercy will soon abate the rigor of affliction."⁴

Do you look up to God? Do you do so reverentially, obediently, attentively, continuously, expectantly, singly, submissively and imploringly?

The Servant's Cry

The servant looks up to his or her master. But what does the servant say? What does the servant of God want? The psalmist writes, *Mercy, God, Mercy!*

We're looking for mercy. Our expectation is mercy.

We just said that there is much that is mysterious about God. But that doesn't mean we can't know anything about him. "We cannot define God; we cannot package God ... We know very well what to expect, and what we expect is mercy." (63)

If you read and understand the Scripture, then you will see that God intends good for his people, and he will get his way with them. And you will see that very, very often they don't receive what they deserve. Whew.

There are other options you know. We could pray other things. "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.... We live under the mercy. God does not treat us as alien others, lining us up so that he can evaluate our

⁴ Found in Boice, 1089

competence or our usefulness or our worth. He rules, guides, commands, loves us as children whose destinies he carries in his heart.” (64) This is what we are supposed to pray, supposed to long for, but so often we don’t.

If we think we are good, then we wish God would notice, and we attempt to make sure everyone else does. We may feel mistreated or disrespected and long for justice to our oppressors. If we think we are bad, then we wish God would notice, and we try to hide our family or our evilness or our past because we don’t want anyone to know. We long for justice to our oppressors.

Longing for justice for our oppressors is fine, except for one thing. You just might want to consider that you might be one of those oppressors. But the Christian, while longing for justice, knows that he is a part of the problem. And he cries for mercy. He cries, and expects God come down from heaven and stoop in redemption.

For there is evil in this world. There is opposition in this land. There is strife in our very midst. What shall we do if we are servants of the Lord? This seems to be the sentiment of the psalmist when he cries: *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.*

Nehemiah 4 may help flesh this out for us. Some commentators think this psalm may have been written in the context of Nehemiah 4. You’ll remember that God’s people have been called to rebuild the wall, and Nehemiah has led them in the this task. They face evil opposition, and strife. From without and from within.

Nehemiah 4 recounts the ridicule God’s people receive from two men named Sanballat and Tobiah. This ridicule is demoralizing and frequently effective because it so often strikes at the hidden insecurities or weaknesses that we have.

The opposition to the church cries out loudly:

What are those feeble Jews doing? The Jews were feeble and they knew it. They felt small and insignificant. They felt outnumbered, outmanned and overwhelmed. This jeer struck at their heart at the most basic level.

Will they restore the walls? It was a fair question, but one filled with scorn. Before them lay a wall 1.5 to 2.5 miles in circumference that had been built by a people more numerous than they were. And would the Jews be able to complete such an undertaking. It looked laughable to think so.

Will they offer sacrifices? Derek Kidner thinks this connotes, Are these fanatics going to *pray* the wall up? This was an attack on the Jews’ faith, which wasn’t very strong at this period. Do you think worshipping Jesus will help you? Do you think prayer will help? Do you actually think going to worship is a good idea? Well, if it works for you, okay, but...

Will they finish in a day? This is going to take too long, and we all know they’ll give up.

Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble – burned as they are? This was an exaggeration by the opposition, trying to demoralize them into not even starting. The task wasn’t actually that bad. There was a vestige of the wall there that they had to build on. But ridicule often takes the absurd route.

What are they building – if even a fox climbs up on it, he would break down their wall of stones! Even if the Jews do make a go of it, don’t they know we’ll just come over, lay a finger on it, and knock it down again? It will never stand!

Have you felt these taunts? Have you wondered at these remarks?

They’ll never be able to start a church. They’ll never be able to start a school from scratch. That will never work. Even if they get it going it will implode in a year. How will you ever get ahead in life if you insist on giving away 10% of your money? You won’t have sex with me until we’re married – are you an idiot? We’ll see how long that lasts! You believe *what?* It’s time to get with the real world, sister.

Nehemiah heard these jests and jeers, and he did not retaliate. He didn’t snap back. He talked to God, not back to those who scorned his people.

He did pray though, just as the psalmist does. “He laid the problem before God, and asked God to intervene.” He didn’t bottle up his emotions, but said something, something to God.

And then Nehemiah went to work. “Since he had left the taunts of his enemies with God, he no longer needed to be concerned about them and could get on with the task God had given him.”⁵

God is so merciful to us. We did not, and do not deserve it. He may very well be merciful to them, whoever “they” are. Exodus 34:6 says, *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, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*

We must not retaliate in kind. We must pray. We must set to work. We have a great many tasks before us. Let us not be downhearted. Let us not be idle. Let us trust in God, and work as his servants, allowing him to guide and lead us.

Let us, in faith, believe it when we sing:

God, be merciful to me;

On Thy grace I rest my plea

Plenteous in compassion Thou,

Blot out my transgressions now;

Wash me, make me pure within;

Cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin

The Servant’s Service

⁵ Boice, 1092

There seems to be an urgency to this service, but we don't get any concrete examples in this psalm itself. It simply doesn't tell us what to do. It calls us to be servants, but gives us no tasks. What shall we think then?

Let's first realize that this is a voluntary service. It is one the Christian gladly gives to God. Yes, we do owe him everything in our lives, but we want to serve him. And one reason is because we figure out that we've been serving other things all along. We had thought we were free, but we had been deceived. We had been in bondage all along.

This servitude is an unpleasant experience. We are a nation of complainers, and a society of addicts. We are in slavery to time, money, bosses, alcohol, drugs, work habits, consumption, achievements, self-image, beauty, the bottom line, being with the right person, being well thought of, being cool, being smart, being successful... slavery all of it.

"A Christian is a person who recognizes that our real problem is not in achieving freedom but in learning service under a better master. The Christian realizes that every relationship that excludes God becomes oppressive. Recognizing and realizing that, we urgently want to live under the mastery of God."

We then are so happy to be with a master who calls us his children, who has adopted us. We long to serve him. We desire to serve him. Duty has become love. We look for ways to please him, to see him smile, to hear him praise us.

God is at work freeing his people from every form of bondage that sin uses to stunt or thwart or cramp their lives. So what is the result of this freedom? "There are sadly, numerous instances in our society of persons who, having been given their freedom, have at once squandered it, using it as 'an excuse to do whatever you want' (Gal. 5:13), ending in a worse slavery. For freedom is the freedom to live as persons in love for the sake of God and neighbor, not a license to grab and push." (67)

"As Psalm 123 prays the transition from oppression ('kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men') to freedom ('awaiting your word of mercy') to a new servitude ('like servants, alert to their master's commands'), it puts us in the way of learning how to use our freedom most appropriately, under the lordship of a merciful God. The consequences are all positive. I have never yet heard a servant Christian complain of the oppressiveness of his servitude. I have never yet heard a servant Christian rail against the restrictions of her service. A servant Christian is the freest person on earth." (68)

We are free to love and pursue God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And that should be enough. Really, it should be all you need to know. If you are a Christian, you are now free. You are now free to forsake all the enslaving masters in your life and pursue the one, true master who will love you like no other.

No man should have to read a magazine or a book or a website to know how to please a woman he wants to make his wife. He should watch her, listen to her, think of her, consider her. And then go about doing the things he sees would make her happy. You can't learn that from anything but the relationship itself.

If we want to know what to do, then we should look to Romans 12:1-2. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Do you want to be different, to be truly alive? Then you need to do this – you must put your life on the altar, give yourself as a living sacrifice. In some ways this is really, really hard and difficult. I realize that. But in other ways it's really pretty easy. You are putting your life on other altars. You're sacrificing yourself to other things. How about God? His mercy propels you to do this. You see his goodness to you and you are scared but delighted to give him your past, present and future and all that they hold. Paul says this is your spiritual worship. The work there is where we get our word, *liturgy*. Your service. Paul goes on to say that we can be liberated from the slavery of this world by the transforming work of God's renewal of our mind by his good, pleasing and perfect will. Very cool.

But go back a minute. There's a connection between worship and service. The New American Standard version translates this as *which is your spiritual service of worship*. Your spiritual service of worship.

Your spiritual service of worship.

Our RUF leadership team led a group to the Oklahoma Baptist Children's Home a month ago. They worshipped God by serving kids who have no home who are being loved by Christians in a denomination that isn't ours. That was a spiritual service of worship. Last year, the same team helped a woman named Mrs. Churchill whose house and yard was a complete wreck and was in major disrepair. Service. Worship.

Christ the King Church, do you know that the RUF students love and serve you? Who is it that helps the youth group? Who leads some of the Christian Education classes for kids? Who helps with the sound system? Which group invites more people to church than any other? Who helped organize the games the last few years for the picnic? Who sings for you in worship?

RUF, do you know that the people in this church love and serve you? Who is it that makes Finals bags for you with goodies in them? Who sets up and takes down the chairs? Who brings all the food you eat at the potluck dinners? Who pays for you to have a pastor who is specifically targeted to the students at OU?

I am always sorry that I see too few acts of servanthood. But I am always shocked by joy that I see so many. I see students giving up money and time to fix me and my wife dinner. I hear of students loving each other in astounding ways. I am aware of the church and the session going far beyond what is called for out of love.

I know, from eyewitnesses in this very church, that it was THE CHURCH that loved and served the hurricane victims before anyone else was there. People from THE CHURCH showed up with water, food and chainsaws, ready to help and are still doing so. People from THE CHURCH opened their doors to take in strangers in their midst.

Ah, friends but there is much left to do. There are poor in our very city. There are the uneducated and illiterate. There are those oppressed by violence. People, women, children being hurt by other people. There is injustice being done. There is

corruption. There is laziness and crime. There is selfishness and greed. There is Satan himself, dare I mention him, at work. There is wrong thinking and wrong doing at every turn.

We shall not give up building this wall. We shall not fight with the same weapons. We may use the courts, yes. We may win a few arguments, yes. We may erect some buildings, yes.

But we have the gospel, my friends, and it is a power that the world cannot deal with. We have worship and service. We have prayer and the very Word of God. We have Jesus Christ himself, the Suffering Servant, come to save sinners from their sins. Will that work? Will that be enough? Can you serve this master, this king, this prophet, this priest? This Savior?!

John 13:12-17 *12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 19 I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."*

He has served you. He has made you what you are, if you are in Christ. Ephesians 2:4 says *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*

If this is not descriptive of you, cry out to him to save you from your bondage. Cry out for mercy.

We need freedom in Christ. We need to be feed to serve.

Sometimes I don't want to serve my wife very much. Okay. A lot of times, maybe most of the time I feel that way. Sometimes I can muster up enough Christian virtue or just plain decentness to serve her. Mow the lawn. Do the dishes. Do a load of laundry. And put them away. And match the socks. Sheesh. What a martyr I am.

But I think when I'm thinking most Christianly, I think this: I love my wife. I love her for a million different reasons. One of the reasons is because she loves me. And that takes a billion different expressions. One of those is her service of me. She does these things for me. She would do *this* for me and has done so. I want to love her like she has loved me, even if just in approximation.

Jesus served you in ways you cannot even fathom. His service for you doesn't just help you. It isn't like going to get the oil changed or running to the grocery store for some queso (though I don't doubt Jesus would do those things, maybe, but I don't know). He served you by making you. By releasing you. By marrying you. By trading his life for yours. And that is truly something.

Ye Servants of the Lord

Philip Doddridge

Ye servants of the Lord,
Each in his office wait,
Observant of his heavenly word,
And watchful at his gate.

Let all your lamps be bright,
And trim the golden flame;
Gird up your loins as in his sight,
For awful is his name.

Watch! 'tis your Lord's command,
And while we speak, he's near;
Mark the first signal of his hand,
And ready all appear.

O happy servant he,
In such a posture found!
He shall his Lord with rapture see,
And be with honor crowned.

Christ shall the banquet spread
With his own royal hand,
And raise that faithful servant's head
Amidst the angelic band.