

**Key idea:** Faced by the contempt of the proud and arrogant, the eyes of God's people do not turn inwards or to anger, but to 'the One enthroned in heaven'.

**FCF:**

**Application:**

### **1. Where is your God now?**

'Where is your God now?'

Have you ever heard that question? Has anyone ever asked you that question? Have you ever seen that question raised or stated?

In some very rare examples, it is a heartfelt plea for help.

But, more often than not, it is a statement of scorn, contempt and pride and arrogance. It is a question brought out when people think the circumstances or events prove the stupidity of God, the irrelevance of God, the complete absence of God. It is a question that can be poured out onto God's people in an effort of denigration and dismissal.

It is not the only way God's people are scorned or treated as contemptible. It might be because they stand out for their stance on certain issues. It might be because they are troublesome in their presence in a largely homogenous community. It might be because the society they live in dismisses God, and all he stands for.

Now, we rarely face the sustained social pressure of such contempt and pride and arrogance. There are moments, but often we experience it more personally, in relationship, in family, in community. It might be subtle digs, full frontal attack, or just the cold shoulder and inconvenient scheduling.

What is your tendency when this contempt is poured out?

I have two tendencies, both of which I have indulged this week. On the one hand, I crawl into my own belly-button and drown in a pool of self-pity – ‘Woe is me!’ On the other hand, I lash out in what I think is righteous anger but it is really a defence mechanism that tries to cover my fears and worries.

This is not a unique situation for God’s people. I mean, if God’s people are representing God as he is, and as they should be, that is offensive to a world populated by 7 billion gods who think they are better than God.

What should we do?

Psalm 123 gives us this very clear piece of wisdom: ‘Lift your eyes to the One enthroned in heaven, for his sustaining favour’.

PRAY...

## **2. The Psalter**

We love the psalms, at least personally if not corporately! It sits, like our hearts, at the centre of the Bible. Its geographical place in the Bible matches its place for many of us in our emotions. It is 150

prayers which are poems or songs. It has been described as the hymn-book of God's people, and rightly so. It is one of the two most-quoted books in the New Testament (alongside Isaiah). It is full of favourite phrases like, 'as the deer pants for the water', 'I lift my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?', 'By the rivers of Babylon', and we could go on.

But it is a puzzling, even difficult book. Does it have a theme? Is there a discernible structure? How do I, in Narrabri today, understand phrases like 'you anoint my head with oil' and the statements of seeming perfection in soul by the psalmists? How do we pray/sing/state these prayers today?

You could just make a bald transfer – just read them as they are, and they remain God's word, and go from there.

But, let me make a suggestion of a simple 5 step process – I know, I'll get to Psalm 123 in a moment – that might prove helpful. This is not exhaustive or sophisticated but is a method I sue to understand these prayers within the flow of God's commitment to bringing blessing to this broken world.

### **(i) The times: genre/compose/compile**

The genre – the type of literature of the Psalms – is important. They are prayers which are poetic in form. In this sense, they use imagery, emotion, simile, metaphor and all the poetic tools to convey the revelation of God. This is not a letter, a history, a prophecy, a vision, an instruction manual. This is poetry.

These prayers were **composed** at certain points in the history of God's people. We are given indications that Psalm 90 was written by Moses, and Psalm 137 was written as God's people were in Exile in Babylon. In between there are numerous references to the Temple, to King David and King Solomon, to the gathering of God's people in Jerusalem. At points, we are given little sub-headings for the particular psalm – did you see the one for Psalm 123? These are part of the psalm, and they give us some details of their composure. But, outside this, these prayers seem often to float in some historical vacuum, and their pleas and praises could be relevant at many points in the history of God's people.

It seems that these prayers were then **compiled** at a certain point – and there is some debate about this. It seems most likely that that the final form – with even some of the sub-headings – was sometime during the time of the second Temple, after the exiles returned. At this point, it seems that the current structure – 5 books, with organization into sections (like the 'songs of ascent', Psalms 120-134) – was largely finalized.

## **(ii) The structure: Psalm 1 and Psalm 2**

It is almost universally recognized that Psalms 1 and 2 are the introduction to the whole Psalter (the book of Psalms). They lay out the key themes and ideas of the book as a whole.

Psalm 1 makes clear that there are two ways life can be lived – by being rooted in God's word or not! The first option is the option of wisdom, and leads to life as it should be. The second option is the option of the wicked and the foolish, and leads to a life with the

substance of chaff. This book, then, is part of the word of God that leads to life as it should be – set your roots in it!

Psalm 2 makes clear that, despite our aspirations, God has set his King above all the earth. As a coronation Psalm that was read at the coronation of Israel's kings, there was an obvious connection with the family of David. The wise person takes refuge in this King. The foolish person seeks to rebel against this King – and faces complete destruction. This book, then, is about the life of refuge in 'the One enthroned in heaven' by God.

I would be so bold as to suggest that you need these two psalms to understand and apply any of the psalms.

### **(iii) The moments: Israel's history and usage**

At this point, it is worth pausing to consider the possible context for the moment of this psalm's composition, and the moment when it might have been first used.

Now, there are explicit clues – Psalm 137 makes clear that the psalmist is sitting in Babylon, by the rivers. Other psalms give hints of authorship ('Davidic'), some give a hint of history (Psalm 3 suggests that the context was David fleeing Absalom). In each of these moments, it is worth spending time matching the tone and content of the psalm with the account of that event elsewhere.

At times there no explicit clues – and you can use some imagination, within the framework of the Bible, to imagine the moment of composition. For example, the famous Psalm 23 could have been written as David enjoyed his life as a shepherd, or when

he was on the run from Saul, or even (as I like to think) on his deathbed at the end of his life.

At other times, we are given very clear clues about the Psalm should be used – for example, the ‘songs of ascent’ (Psalms 120-134) – were to be used as God’s mob moved to Jerusalem for their gatherings as the people of God, coming in as individuals or family groups, walking up that hill to the Temple, moving into a mob gathered.

#### **(iv) Jesus: Luke 24:44, Psalms 1 and 2**

That helps us understand these prayers within the life of Israel, as God’s people. But we live after Jesus, a long way away – in time, in geography and in culture. The key for us lies in Jesus’ words in **Luke 24:44... READ.**

As we have seen time and time again in Matthew, Jesus is the endpoint of God’s commitment to dealing with the sin of this world. He is everything that God’s people are meant to be, in one man. He is the living embodiment of the Old Testament, and that means the prayers of God’s people in the Psalter.

If you briefly consider it, he is Psalm 1 – the man who is both God’s Word and who is rooted perfectly in God’s word (remember his responses to the Devil in Matthew 4:1-11?). If you briefly consider it, he is Psalm 2 – God’s king, ‘the One enthroned in heaven’, the Son of God dearly loved by his Father (remember God’s words at the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:17, and the imagery of Revelation 5?).

For us to understand and pray these prayers, we must see them, understand them, as lived and fulfilled by Jesus, first.

### **(v) Us: Colossians 3:16-17**

As people now brought into God's people by being connected to Jesus (remember the Sermon on the Mount), these then can be prayed and sung by us – because Jesus lived them and so brought us into God's people. They are to be our hymnbook!

Now, I know that I have spent well over half my sermon taking you through that process. But, if you get nothing else out of this time in God's word, take at least that – this is how I think we can faithfully handle and appropriate the Psalter for us as God's people today.

### **3. Where is your God now? (vs.3-4)**

The psalmist, whoever they are, has faced a hostile world – in fact, God's people have faced a hostile world – **look at verses 3-4... READ.**

As they gather, God's people know the world as a place where people throw this question at them – 'Where is your God now?' It is the question not of searching pain, but of contempt and scorn from those who think they can be God instead of God.

It is a question that God's people have asked any number of times in their existence – as they wandered the desert for forty years, as they lived in the chaos and invasions of the time of the Judges, as the righteous lived in desperate in the times of Amos and Habakkuk, as they lived in Exile and subjected to international ridicule, as they returned home and the local rulers laughed at their

efforts to rebuild the Temple. In all those instances, God's people were scorned, oppressed and treated with contempt. In all these instances, the presence of God was questioned – and his power and nature and character. In all these instances, there are circumstances for the composition of this prayer.

What does the psalmist do? Do they descend into self-pity? Do they lash out in self-reinforcing violence? Do they seek to take matters into their own hands?

#### **4. 'I lift my eyes to... the One enthroned in heaven' (vs.1-2)**

The psalmist states clearly what is to be done when God's people experience such contempt – **look at verses 1-2... READ.**

The eyes of the psalmist do not move inward. The eyes of the psalmist do not go red with anger. The eyes of the psalmist are lifted upwards, to the God-enthroned King of the universe, seated above all things and all humans.

It is an important moment because this psalmist is showing that he/she is rooted in God's word, just like Psalm 1 states. The psalmist is rooted in God's word because they quote from Psalm 2 to describe their only hope – 'the One enthroned in heaven'. In fact, in what follows we see the psalmist, and the people of God, displaying the truth of 'taking refuge in the One enthroned in heaven'.

That is the only way to avoid the destruction that the wicked and arrogant face, and bring. And the image that is used to emphasise



this dependence is one that would have been clear to the original readers – the dependence of the servant on the master.

This is not an image of subservience but of gracious responsibility and dependence. It is dependence by the servant – by God's people – because they know that their whole existence depends on dependence upon God's king. It is gracious responsibility by the master – who is committed to providing everything his dependents need.

### **5. 'Show us favour...' (vs.3)**

As these opening verses work a powerful image connected by eyes upwards, the request of the prayer is uttered – **look at verse 3... READ.**

The people of God – their eyes fixed on God's king, their vision fixed on the symbol of God's presence with them (the Temple – simply ask for God's mercy, his favour. It is the same favour as the priests declared to God's people consistently when they met, in Numbers 6:5. It is favour of the God who has chosen these people to represent him to the world that dismisses him. It is the favour that God's people need to represent him in the face of contempt and scorn. It is the favour that can only come from the author of life, the master of justice and judgement, the sole giver of mercy to those who would rather rebel.

There is no content for that 'favour', just the mere request for 'favour', as only God himself can give. And that is enough for God's people as they turn to leave, and face the continually scornful world.

## 6. Jesus...

We have already seen Jesus face the same scorn and contempt, haven't we, in Matthew 12:14, as the religious leaders move to destroy him?

And that is the fact right throughout his life – his family at one point think him mad, his own leaders plan to wipe him from the face of the earth, his own people chant for his death, and one of his closest friends betrays him. In this sense, he IS God's people.

But it becomes even more pointed in his last moments on earth. From the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, through to his answers at his own trial, right up until his final breath on the cross, when he gives his Spirit up to his Father – at every point, he turns his eyes upwards to his Father enthroned in heaven. He requests the merciful favour of God. He trusts that this merciful favour will be enough. At each point, he faces the scorn and contempt of the world who ask, 'Where is your God now?'

And it is, isn't it – **listen to Ephesians 1:20-23... READ.**

God's favour was enough to sustain Jesus – it raised him from the dead, through God's strength. It placed him as 'the One enthroned in heaven', above all rulers and authorities. It placed him as the only One who beats death, and who has unrivalled power. And he is this 'for the church, which is his body' – he is this for those who take refuge in him!

## **7. Us: Where is your God now?**

You have heard that question – asked not in desperate need, but thrown in scorn and contempt, through actions and attitude. We have heard it as God’s people, and we have heard it as God’s person. And as we live as both – individual and community – Jesus being Psalm 123 allows us to pray it.

This is the gentle and kind rebuke for a bloke like me, and perhaps you. It is the gentle push away from sinking into self-pity or lashing out in ‘righteous’ anger. It is the gentle push to raise my eyes up to the One enthroned in heaven, above life and death, for me, for favour to be placed upon me.

This is the reminder to turn first to prayer, to placing my request before ‘the One enthroned in heaven’. In pragmatic terms, it is well-nigh impossible to place a dependent request for favour from the LORD, and persist in self-pity or anger. In a real sense, this is what we must do consistently – faced by a world that thinks it can be God instead of God, we must ask God for his favour, whatever form that takes. Remember again what we learned in Matthew 6:33 and Matthew 11:28?

This is the reminder to be so rooted in the word of God, the revelation of God himself, that, faced by scorn and contempt, our eyes automatically move upwards and outwards, to Jesus enthroned. In this sense, let me lay a challenge before you – as individuals and as a community of God’s people. Let me encourage you to read one Psalm per day. As you read, please work quickly through those five steps we outlined earlier, and pray in line with one way Jesus fulfils that particular psalm. As we do this daily, and

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as people throw that scornful question at us, this rooting in the word of God will lift our eyes to the One enthroned in heaven, time and time again!