

RETURN TO JOY

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The Victim of Contempt Returns to Joy - Psalm 123

By Peter Eng

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The Victim of Contempt Returns to Joy

(Psalm 123, NASB)

A Song of Ascents, of David.

¹To You I lift up my eyes,

O You who are enthroned in the heavens!

²Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of
their master,

As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God,
Until He is gracious to us.

³Be gracious to us, O Lord, be gracious to us,
For we are greatly filled with contempt.

⁴Our soul is greatly filled
With the scoffing of those who are at ease,
And with the contempt of the proud.

“These people are a joke! What they are doing will never succeed. Look at what they are building. Why,

if a fox were to jump on that wall, it would simply collapse!”

This was the taunt of God’s enemies when Nehemiah returned from exile and was rebuilding the security wall around Jerusalem ([Neh 4:1-3](#)).

Nehemiah returned from exile to find Jerusalem in poor repair. He urged the people, “You see the bad situation we are in.... Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach” (Nehemiah 2:17). Nehemiah saw the need and the Lord stirred his heart. Nehemiah understood that he could do something about the dire situation, and the Lord called him to this impossible task.

Some are intimidated by work that is hard. Nehemiah is not numbered among them. He was unequal to the burnt gates and the rubble wall of his home city. But he would not be alone because this was God’s work. God had wired him differently. Nehemiah saw opportunities where others saw none. Nehemiah felt a passion to rebuild the city when others despaired.

Christians can look at our broken world and ask how we can ever rebuild it to the Eden God gave us. Christians can look at our community, our city, and ask how it can recover its spirituality, how the mind of a beast obsessed with greed can be given a human mind again.

Nehemiah had seen God at work in the life of Nebuchadnezzar, their conqueror and despoiler; the cruel destroyer of Jerusalem, no less. His mind was taken from him but restored so he will acknowledge the God Most High ([Daniel 4](#)). All of God’s people with eyes to see understood God’s message. Lest

anyone think that Nebuchadnezzar was beyond Yahweh's sovereign control, Yahweh will bring Nebuchadnezzar low and then restore him and turn his heart to acknowledge that Yahweh is the God Most High.

Nehemiah's eyes were fixed on the God who is able – the God who turned the heart of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar and Persian Artaxerxes alike.

When we say we are filled with contempt, it means we are contemptuous of others. But the Hebrew expression here means the opposite. When they were filled with contempt, it meant others were contemptuous of them, and they were filled with the contempt from others.

Here, an idiomatic translation is helpful: "Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy, for we have had our fill of contempt." (Psalm 123:3 NLT).

Nehemiah suffered from contempt. God's enemies harassed Nehemiah and told him all the things he could not do. But is this all there is to the story. If Sanballat, God's enemy, was truly contemptuous of Nehemiah, he would just sit back to watch Nehemiah fail. Instead he was actively spying on Nehemiah and worked hard so Nehemiah would fail.

The enemies of God are threatened by God's work, and used contempt to discourage God's servants. If God's work were truly so unachievable, why does the Adversary need to work so hard to obstruct it? Does not the obstruction show the great promise God has for his own work?

This Psalm of Ascents as the pilgrims headed for Jerusalem is a psalm that calls to mind the contempt of those who oppose the work of God. They speak ill of God's work. They attack God's servants. They are unhappy when Jerusalem is rebuilt.

This spirit of Sanballat is true in our own time. The Adversary still uses this trick and we must expose it. The Old Serpent tells us God's work is too much for us, and what we do is useless work. This psalm is powerful antidote to those of us who feel the sting of contempt.

³*Be gracious to us, O Lord, be gracious to us,
For we are greatly filled with contempt.*

⁴*Our soul is greatly filled
With the scoffing of those who are at ease,
And with the contempt of the proud.*

The psalmist says he has had his fill of contempt. It comes from those who are "at ease," those who are "proud." These people have no reason to fear. They are secure where they are. They seem to have all that life holds dear. The psalmist, however, struggles for a toe hold as he serves the Lord. So what does he do?

The word "gracious" or "mercy" occurs three times in these four verses. That should tell us something. Note the desperate dependence on God that the psalmist feels. "Be gracious to us, O Lord, be gracious to us." Why? Because we have had our fill of contempt.

Those who oppose God's work can seem so overwhelming, so justified in their contempt. "Your people are few. The people you have are poor. You have no money. You have no legal status. You are nothing." There was at least some truth in all these remarks of contempt to Nehemiah. That is why contempt works – it contains truth. And this continued barrage of contempt has successfully kept some people away from Nehemiah's work for God.

But the antidote to his discouragement is found in the grace and mercy of God. Grace is to receive from God what we do not deserve. Mercy is to not receive from God what we deserve. In this context, it seems that "gracious" (NASB) is an excellent translation. The psalmist is asking for God's grace, God's favor, as the answer to man's contempt.

He possesses the attitude of "poor in spirit." It is the attitude of dependency on God. Yes, it is true that he is not the equal of the work that God has called him to do. This is why he comes to God with total dependency.

The psalmist lifts up his eyes to the one who is "enthroned in the heavens." The sting of these earthly taunts cannot be resolved by more earthly

squabbles. He has neither the resources nor the spirit to fight the contemptuous. Instead the psalmist looks to God. He is reminded that God is king. He is enthroned and he is in-charge.

God's servant looks for God's favors. God's servant will do no more or less than he is empowered by his Master. He is like a man or a maid servant seeking the favor of the Master. He looks to the hand of blessing from his Master.

People today are too proud to be dependent on God. But the true servant of God is not ashamed to admit that he is waiting for a hand-out from God. He does not look to man for deliverance even though God uses people and moves them according to his sovereign design. He is looking for a blessing from the Master, not his fellow servants. He fixes his eyes on the Master who sits in the heavens. And he continues to do so "until he is gracious to us."

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O You who are enthroned in the heavens!

²Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,

*As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God,*

Until He is gracious to us.

Story of an Unequal Task

Imagine yourself a single woman with a call from God to serve him in Egypt. Any person serving alone in a strange country is a scary thing. But you are a woman. This makes you a hundred times more vulnerable in 1910 when women hardly travelled alone, much less in the Middle East.

You are bringing Jesus Christ, a message hostile to the locals who have only contempt for your message. You are not supported by, or approved by any real missionary society. You are not very well trained in the Bible compared to others. Your only means of support as you travel to Egypt, and when you arrive there are random acts of kindness. And your job? To start an orphanage, to house, feed and clothed the abandoned babies destined for the watery grave of the Nile.

Lillian Trasher (1887-1961) arrived in Asyut (Assuit) Egypt in 27th October 1910, and in within four months, on the 10th of February 1911, she started her orphanage. She did not have financial backing from America, but went on a donkey from town to town adopting unwanted babies and asking the locals for support to feed these children. She became known to the locals as "the lady on the donkey."

We must not imagine that she won the hearts of the locals easily. Many suspected she was adopting the babies to be shipped to America to become slaves. But her persistent faithfulness became apparent to all.

WW2 saw a new level of need. There was a time when Trasher became desperately short of supplies. She had no means to supply the hungry children. This was a time of war. People did not have provisions to spare. Politics interfered. Who is on whose side and who should get help? Lillian Trasher had only one recourse.

*As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
So our eyes look to the Lord our God,
Until He is gracious to us.*

Keep praying to God until he delivers.

The American Ambassador, Alexander Kirk summoned Lillian Trasher to Cairo to give her the news. A Red Cross ship was to deliver supplies to Greece. But Greece had fallen into German hands. The ship was ordered to dump their cargo at sea and return home. A young Scottish soldier learned of Trasher's work and after much persuasion had the captain dump the supplies in Alexandria, Egypt for Trasher to collect. She collected 2,600 dresses, 1,900 sweaters, 1,900 pairs of pants for boys, 3,800 blankets, 1,100 towels, 700 kegs of powdered milk, 1,200 sacks of rice, etc. God supplied when no man could.

When we are truly unequal to the task, it is so easy to become overwhelmed. There will be many adversarial voices of contempt, calling us to give up. There will be even well meaning friends asking us to

give up. But if the call of God remains, we can listen only to one voice—God’s.

You can imagine what it was for Trasher to run an orphanage through WW1, the Great Depression, WW2, the independence of Egypt from the British in 1952, the wars of Egypt with Israel, and the regime changes.

Egypt celebrated the centennial of Lillian Trasher, Mother of the Nile in 2010. In her lifetime alone, she saved more than 10,000 children and women. Today, many of Trasher’s children are all over Egypt as powerful witnesses of Christian love and God’s provisions. At a time when Christians in Egypt have every reason to fear, Trasher’s children are telling the country that Christians are good people, and should not be molested.

One woman without resources spent her life on the weakest and most vulnerable, in a country hostile to Christ. Today, she is recognized by all religions in Egypt for her work. But her work was not a social work as no social work can survive even a small fraction of the adversity she faced. She did God’s work as God’s servant, always depending on God’s provision.

The contempt of God’s enemies may hurt for a moment, but the victim of such contempt returns to joy in the Lord because he sees God’s grace. This is not to suggest there are no hardships. Hardships characterize the work of God’s kingdom. Dependence on God does not suggest we do not have our responsibilities. God chooses to work through people and we may be the very ones God is calling to bring joy to his servant who suffers from contempt.

All too often, the media highlights Christian foibles, and leave untold the story of God’s great work in our world today. We can become unwitting allies of the Adversary if we only affirm Christian failures and not rejoice with God’s successes.

Our very real God is working in our very real world. Invest yourself in God’s kingdom. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.



Lillian Trasher with Orphanage Children

Resources

[Janet and Geoff Benge. *Lillian Trasher: The Greatest Wonder in Egypt*. YWAM: 2004.](#)

Video of Lillian Trasher and her ministry: [Lillian Trasher - The Nile Mother](#)



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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.