

## A Word About The Psalms

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by  
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Have you ever sat in church and thought, you hardly ever hear a sermon based on a psalm. I do, so, I end up thinking, “Priests should preach on the psalms once in a while.” And this week it dawned on me, “Hey, I could do that.”

Let’s begin with a little background on the Book of Psalms in general, and then we’ll talk about this week’s psalm – psalm 123.

The psalms have been called “the prayer book of the church” and they’re a part of almost all liturgies. Christians borrowed this practice from Judaism, which also places a great emphasis on the psalms as a model for prayer, sort of grab-and-go prayers for every occasion. This is probably because the 150 psalms in the Bible seem to express every human emotion and every human longing. So, you can usually find a psalm that suits almost any need. I remember once when I was going through a very hard time in my life when one morning, I read psalm 88 and had the incredibly powerful feeling that that psalm had been written just for me that very day. It perfectly summarized my deepest anxieties and pain.

The psalms are a form of ancient Hebrew poetry, and much is lost to us who cannot read them or hear them in Hebrew. But there’s plenty here for us anyway. A German theologian named Herman Gunkel, and his Norwegian student Sigmund Mowinckel, made the case that the 150 psalms can be grouped or categorized depending upon their theme or genre or purpose. For example, there are psalms of praise, psalms that recite the history of Israel, psalms that celebrate the coronation of a king. There are five psalms in a category called “Song of Trust” – one of them is psalm 23 – “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Gunkel and Mowinckel grouped the psalms into 12 different genres.

The psalms employ imagery the way most poems do. So, for example, when the writer complains that his enemies surround him on all sides and are shooting arrows at him, we can understand this as a description of a time of overwhelming hardship when we feel we will be defeated by our troubles.

You won’t be surprised to know that the most common genre is something Gunkel and Mowinckel called “Individual Complaint” or “Individual Lament.” This is the kind of psalm where the poet says something like, “My enemies are all around me, 10,000 on my right and 10,000 on my left, waters are crashing over me and I’m drowning, even those closest to me have abandoned me, I’m going down to the pits, my bed is soaked with tears, nobody likes me, and

everybody picks on me.” Does any of this sound familiar from your own life? But, the writer usually goes on to say something, “I know that you are with me, God, so it’s all going to be OK.”

So, if you’ve got a complaint to register with God, these psalms are a good source for all your gripes. Fifty-two of the 150 psalms – more than 1/3 – are Individual Laments, which sounds about right to me since I spend about a third of my time complaining about something.

This brings us to psalm 123, today’s psalm. It’s short – only five verses, and the complaint doesn’t come until the fourth verse. Listen for it:

Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy, \*  
for we have had more than enough of contempt,

Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, \*  
and of the derision of the proud.

What is this guy complaining about? What’s he griping about? At one level, it could be about anything. The contempt that the psalmist complains about could be interpreted as any hardship we might face: sickness, the loss of a loved one, trouble at work, interpersonal conflicts. So, we could interpret it as suitable to our time and place, to our individual and collective challenges with almost anything that vexes us. I think when most people read this psalm, that’s how they think about it.

But to the ancient Israelites, this psalm had a very particular meaning and it probably had to do with their migration from Egypt to Canaan – their Exodus and journey to the promised land. The indolent rich could be thought of as the pharaoh and the overseers who enslaved the Israelites in Egypt. The derision of the proud could be thought of as the reception they received when they got to Canaan. Nobody was nice to the Israelites, so they had a lot to complain about.

Here’s the thing: It didn’t have to be that way. They could have avoided all that derision and contempt if they had just blended in, if they had given up their strange religious practices, their clannishness, their stubborn insistence that there is only one God. They could have blended in if they had given up their God – the God of Israel, the maker of heaven and earth. They could have avoided contempt if they had followed that old saying, “If you want to get along, you have to go along.” After all, there were plenty of other gods to worship, so why stick with just one?

So, when you think about their complaint that way, this psalm has a different way of relating to our lives. More than being a general, all-purpose lament about how hard life can sometimes be, we can see it as a complaint that we get laughed at or dismissed for being faithful and vocal followers of Jesus. In this secular society in which we live, and in a society where the dominant image of a Christian is a Bible-thumping, science-denying, narrow-minded, bigoted, intolerant defender of the indefensible, it’s very difficult to be public about our own Christian faith.

The first four verses of psalm 123 are a plea to God for mercy and comfort in the face of mocking and derision and persecution for the steadfast faith the Israelites had for their God. So, when we read this psalm – when we pray this psalm – we can pray it as a generic plea for comfort and strength. And we can also read it and pray it as a call for God’s help in staying faithful to Jesus.

But, there’s a catch to the second way of thinking about this psalm, the way the ancient Israelites probably thought if it. We can only ask for God’s support in being faithful and vocal Christians if that’s how we actually live our lives. If we shy away from being upfront about our Christian faith, then nobody is going to treat us with contempt for that. If we hide the fact that we want to be faithful followers of Jesus, that we are members of the Jesus movement, then we have no fear of derision from our neighbors and co-workers.

If we read this psalm this second way, the way the Israelites would have read it, then it is as much a challenge as a comfort, as much a test of our faith as it is a statement about God’s mercy.

So, let’s read it again together and think about it in its original sense, and as we do, let’s see if we can commit ourselves to being a bit more open, a bit more public in our Christian faith, knowing that God will be with us to strengthen us.

All together now:

- 1 To you I lift up my eyes, \*  
to you enthroned in the heavens.
- 2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, \*  
and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
- 3 So our eyes look to the LORD our God, \*  
until he show us his mercy.
- 4 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy, \*  
for we have had more than enough of contempt,
- 5 Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, \*  
and of the derision of the proud.

Amen.

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**Note:** Below are two tables that show the twelve genres of the psalms, the first in numerical order, and the second with the psalms grouped by genre.

**Psalm Genres According to Hermann Gunkel**

1 Wisdom Psalm	51 Individual Lament	101 Royal Psalm
2 Royal Psalm	52 Individual Lament	102 Individual Lament
3 Individual Lament	53 Individual Lament	103 Individual Thanksgiving
4 Individual Lament	54 Individual Lament	104 Hymn
5 Individual Lament	55 Individual Lament	105 Sacred History ("Legend")
6 Individual Lament	56 Individual Lament	106 Sacred History ("Legend")
7 Individual Lament	57 Individual Lament	107 Individual Thanksgiving
8 Hymn	58 Individual Lament	108 National Lament
9 Individual Lament	59 Individual Lament	109 Individual Lament
10 Individual Lament	60 Liturgy	110 Royal Psalm
11 Song of Trust	61 Individual Lament	111 Hymn
12 Individual Lament	62 Song of Trust	112 Wisdom Psalm
13 Individual Lament	63 Individual Lament	113 Hymn
14 Individual Lament	64 Individual Lament	114 Hymn
15 Liturgy	65 National Thanksgiving	115 Liturgy
16 Song of Trust	66 Individual Thanksgiving	116 Individual Thanksgiving
17 Individual Lament	67 National Thanksgiving	117 Hymn
18 Royal Psalm	68 Liturgy	118 Individual Thanksgiving
19 Hymn	69 Individual Lament	119 Wisdom Psalm
20 Royal Psalm	70 Individual Lament	120 Individual Lament
21 Royal Psalm	71 Individual Lament	121 Liturgy
22 Individual Lament	72 Royal Psalm	122 Song of Zion
23 Song of Trust	73 Wisdom Psalm	123 Individual Lament
24 Liturgy	74 National Lament	124 National Thanksgiving
25 Individual Lament	75 Liturgy	125 National Lament
26 Individual Lament	76 Song of Zion	126 Liturgy
27 Individual Lament	77 Individual Lament	127 Wisdom Psalm
28 Individual Lament	78 Sacred History ("Legend")	128 Wisdom Psalm
29 Hymn	79 National Lament	129 National Lament
30 Individual Thanksgiving	80 National Lament	130 Individual Lament
31 Individual Lament	81 Liturgy	131 Song of Trust
32 Individual Thanksgiving	82 Liturgy	132 Royal Psalm
33 Hymn	83 National Lament	133 Wisdom Psalm
34 Individual Thanksgiving	84 Song of Zion	134 Liturgy
35 Individual Lament	85 Liturgy	135 Hymn
36 Individual Lament	86 Individual Lament	136 Hymn
37 Wisdom Psalm	87 Song of Zion	137 National Lament
38 Individual Lament	88 Individual Lament	138 Individual Thanksgiving
39 Individual Lament	89 Royal Psalm	139 Individual Lament
40 Individual Thanksgiving	90 National Lament	140 Individual Lament
41 Individual Lament	91 Wisdom Psalm	141 Individual Lament
42 Individual Lament	92 Individual Thanksgiving	142 Individual Lament
43 Individual Lament	93 Enthronement Hymn	143 Individual Lament
44 National Lament	94 Liturgy	144 Royal Psalm
45 Royal Psalm	95 Liturgy	145 Hymn
46 Song of Zion	96 Enthronement Hymn	146 Hymn
47 Enthronement Hymn	97 Enthronement Hymn	147 Hymn
48 Song of Zion	98 Hymn	148 Hymn
49 Wisdom Psalm	99 Enthronement Hymn	149 Hymn
50 Liturgy	100 Hymn	150 Hymn

Psalm Genres According to Hermann Gunkel

Enthronement Hymn	47	Individual Lament (cont.)	53	Liturgy (cont.)	126
	93		54		134
	96		55	National Lament	44
	97		56		74
	99		57		79
Hymn	8		58		80
	19		59		83
	29		61		90
	33		63		108
	98		64		125
	100		69		129
	104		70		137
	111		71	National Thanksgiving	65
	113		77		67
	114		86		124
	117		88	Royal Psalm	2
	135		102		18
	136		109		20
	145		120		21
	146		123		45
	147		130		72
	148		139		89
	149		140		101
	150		141		110
Individual Lament	3		142		132
	4		143		144
	5	Individual Thanksgiving	30	Sacred History ("Legend")	78
	6		32		105
	7		34		106
	9		40	Song of Trust	11
	10		66		16
	12		92		23
	13		103		62
	14		107		131
	17		116	Song of Zion	46
	22		118		48
	25		138		76
	26	Liturgy	15		84
	27		24		87
	28		50		122
	31		60	Wisdom Psalm	1
	35		68		37
	36		75		49
	38		81		73
	39		82		91
	41		85		112
	42		94		119
	43		95		127
	51		115		128
	52		121		133