

"To You I Lift Up My Eyes"

SCRIPTURE TEXTS: Psalm 123:1-4 and Jude 1:17-21

Introduction

Last week, a pastor noticed that we are having a series on the Songs of Ascents right after we finish 1 Peter. And he told me that in his case, he went through both alternately. He'd preach on a passage on 1 Peter, then preach on a Psalm from the Songs of Ascents, then go back to 1 Peter.

That's because if you look at it, there's really much similarity between 1 Peter and the Songs of Ascents. Both talk about the pilgrimage of believers towards the Celestial City. And like the NT audience of 1 Peter, we shall soon discover here in the Songs of Ascents—particularly this morning in Psalm 123—that **the pilgrim on earth faces trials and oppositions because of his faith and love for God.**

When that pastor shared it with me, I thought, "Somehow, pwede nga rin naman alternately pagsabayin 'yong dalawang portions ng Scripture." But **in any case**, whether we go through the Songs of Ascents alternately *with* 1 Peter or *after* 1 Peter, there is still something special in the Psalms that you won't find in 1 Peter.

And that speaks a lot about the unity and diversity of Scriptures. Although there's one overarching message of the Bible about God's salvation found in Christ, and there are similar themes shared by different books in the Old and New Testament, there are still some differences between the writings of the authors whom the Holy Spirit inspired.

Given the nature, content, and style of the Psalms, John Calvin called the book the "Anatomy of the Human Soul." W. Robert Godfrey commented, "The Psalms teach us how to express our emotions to God in all the circumstances of our lives." So with the same theme of pilgrimage and suffering as Christians, these Psalms help us to see God and open our hearts to him as we go through our journey in the faith.

Now moving on to our text in Psalm 123, you immediately get the idea that the Psalmist is in great need. He cries to God: *"To you I lift up my eyes... our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he has mercy upon us."* Then in verses 3-4, it becomes clear why he cries out to God: he's experiencing contempt and opposition from others. *"We have had more than enough contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn... and the contempt"* (vv. 3-4).

And again, the key to understanding the overall message of this Psalm—and even the rest of the Songs of Ascents—is to follow the storyline of pilgrims who were heading and have now arrived in Jerusalem. I've been reminding you of that context in this series every Lord's Day.

These Songs of Ascents are used by pilgrims and even describe the pilgrims who go up to Jerusalem to worship God in the temple. In Psalm 120, the pilgrim recognizes the fallenness of the world he dwells in, and he longs for deliverance and seeks the presence of God. So in Psalm 121, he starts the journey, and confesses that God is his keeper from all the threats and dangers on the road. In Psalm 122, the pilgrim finally arrives in Jerusalem. There's gladness and high regard for the city that God has chosen to be the place of worship.

But the story seems to turn into a dark scene here in Psalm 123. [ILLUSTRATE] Parang sa movies lang. Sa simula mukhang masaya 'yong characters, things are going well. Then, suddenly, here comes the tragedy, the problem... Here in Psalm 123, **the pilgrim begins to experience contempt and opposition even *while inside Jerusalem, while inside God's chosen place of worship.***

And that is the reality of believers. As we learned last week through Psalm 122, Christians have already arrived in the Heavenly Jerusalem (which Hebrews 12 also teaches). As believers, you are in the "already but not yet" reality. You already enjoy the foretaste of heaven through the communion of the church here on earth.

But the message of Psalm 123 this morning will teach you that in your journey as pilgrims on earth, the church here will always be imperfect. Believers will face disappointments and oppositions **even inside the church**. And you should respond to it by fixing your eyes on Christ and asking God for help.

So let's discuss that message. *First*, believers experience disappointment even within the church...

Sermon Point 1: Believers have disappointments even within the church

Here in Psalm 123, the pilgrim who arrives in Jerusalem experiences scorn and contempt. He kept on repeating that in verses 3-4:

"Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are ease, of the contempt of the proud."

Sobra-sobra na, Lord. Grabe na 'tong pangungutya, pang-aatake, at pag-uusig ng mga tao. I just want to be in Jerusalem, to worship you, to rejoice in you, to follow you—but these people, they're opposing me.

Who are these people that oppose and ridicule him? There's no definite clue in the text. It could be people from outside who followed the pilgrim to Jerusalem. Just like the Judaizers who kept following Paul from one city to another in order to disturb his ministry.

Or most probably, these are the very people who reside in Jerusalem. Perhaps, the pilgrim was expecting that when he arrived in the city, *all the people* would be worshipping God. But as he looked, they don't share the same faith and convictions. Maybe some of them would even tell the pilgrim, "You know what, don't take that 'temple worship' too seriously." When he arrives at the temple, it is possible that he saw corruption even among the priests. And people must be laughing at him for his sincerity in worshipping and hoping in God.

Hindi 'yon imposible kasi kung titingnan natin sa history ng Israel, there's sin and corruption even in Jerusalem. "Not everyone born in Israel belongs to the true Israel," as Paul said, and so not everyone residing in Jerusalem back then were true worshippers of God.

And that's what greatly disappoints the pilgrim. The very purpose he went to Jerusalem is to escape the lies and corruption of people in his hometown. But then here, he encounters the same thing—in the very place where he's supposed to experience the glory of the gospel proclaimed and the bond of faith among the people.

Now we learned last week that Jerusalem is a picture of the gathering of God's people here on earth. And here's a question: Can this also happen inside the church? Can the believer also experience disappointment within the church?

Yes. And that raises a further question: "How is that possible? I thought the church is the people of God, the congregation of the redeemed?"

Well, this is where we consider the nature and character of the church. The church is both invisible and visible. On one hand, it is invisible; on the other hand, it is visible. And this doesn't mean that there are two separate churches (or two people of God) or two types of churches. Rather, there are two different characters or aspects of the *one* church of Jesus Christ.

As the *Church Invisible*, it consists of all the elect and the elect only, those whom the Spirit calls, regenerates, and converts, and who are united to Christ by true faith. Being invisible, only God knows who exactly are the true members of the church.

And each member could only know and ensure their salvation through the inward testimony of the Spirit with the Word.

Yet this spiritual church of Christ assumes a physical form, an external and visible expression. Hence, we also regard the second aspect of the church as being *visible*.

As the *Church Visible*, it consists of all who profess faith in Christ together with their covenant children. They are visible to the human eye, whether universally (churches around the world) or locally (our church). They externally confess their faith and share in the outward & visible means of grace that God appointed for the church: the Word, the sacraments, and all activities of the visible, local church.

But in this visible and outward aspect of the church, it is possible that it includes both true believers and false believers, true converts and hypocrites. There are many examples in the New Testament. Take for instance, Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and Simon the Magician (Acts 8). They professed to believe in Christ, they were baptized, and became members of the local church. But eventually, it turned out that they were not truly believers.

So in a local church, it is a mix of true Christians and false ones. And even among the true Christians, there will be mature ones and less mature ones.

So what is the point that I'm presenting here? Given the reality that the *visible church* is composed of both true believers and false believers, and both mature and immature believers—then it follows that the church in this side of eternity will never be without problems and imperfections. Similar to what the pilgrim encounters in Jerusalem, it is possible for **Christians to face disappointments and oppositions even within the church, even from those who profess to be Christians.**

Early this week, I watched a video of a debate in the Oxford Union on the issue of whether the Church of England should allow or not allow same sex-marriages. So there are two sets of people presenting their arguments, either pro or against. Among those who propose it, there are 3 bishops from the state church. And one courageous man, named Calvin Robinson, admonished them in his speech saying, "Don't lead people astray. Don't be the wolves in sheep's clothing. Don't be the false teachers that the Bible warns us about." Imagine, 3 bishops presenting their view to support what the Bible clearly abhors and suggesting that those who oppose it are 'unloving.' These are members and even leaders of the visible church, yet they themselves are dragging the church to apostasy.

I also talked with someone before, telling me: "Pastor, nakakapang-hina um-attend ng church. Kapag papunta ako ng church, masaya ako. Kasi never ko naman na-enjoy 'to dati. Hindi ako lumaki sa church. Kaso nakakalungkot, kasi kapag nasa church ka, may maririnig ka na puro reklamo at gusto lagi makipag-argumento,

instead of rejoicing and appreciating the Lord's Day." And that's sad when members go to a local church only to be stumbled with fellow members.

The church is supposedly the place where God's Word and the gospel is preached and lived out by its members. People in the church are supposedly the holy, grateful, gracious, patient, loving, and understanding people in the world. And what a disappointment indeed if that's not what you encounter in the churches today.

That's what the pilgrim experienced in Jerusalem, and that's also the reality of the church here on earth. Believers experience disappointments even within the church.

But how should you respond? Do you just leave and forsake the church? Gano'n ang response ng iba ngayon eh. One way or another, na-disappoint sa church. Eh since may problema din sa iba, hindi na lang mag-a-attend sa church. Mag-i-stay na lang sa bahay, all by himself or herself.

What did the pilgrim do? Did he flee Jerusalem because of its hypocrisy and failures? No. Rather he fixes his eyes on God, and cries out to God for help.

And that's our 2nd sermon point... Believers respond to such disappointments by focusing on Christ.

(The succeeding Psalms also teach more ways to respond to oppositions, but we'll only discuss one way here.)

Sermon Point 2: Believers respond to such disappointments by focusing on Christ

The whole Psalm 123 is actually a lament. In verse 1, he describes what he is doing, *"To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!"* (That is, God himself). Then in verse 3, he pleads to God for mercy.

How does he pray to God here? Well, first...

1. He acknowledges his complete helplessness

In verse 2, the psalmist uses a social reality to convey his dependence on God. *"As the servants look to their master, so our eyes look to our God until he shows mercy."* During the biblical times, servants or slaves owned nothing. They rely on their masters for food, shelter, and protection. That's all they need: The favor of their master.

And that's what the pilgrim also recognizes here. In the midst of his disappointments even within Jerusalem, he knows that only God can help him and protect him. He trusts not in himself or what he has; he looks up to God.

The second thing that characterizes the psalmist's prayer here is that...

2. He openly expresses his heart before God

"Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us..." "We've had more than enough contempt... our soul had more than enough scorn and contempt..." The repetition of those statements convey the intensity and urgency of the psalmist's plea before God. He opens his heart fully before God. And again, that conveys his state of neediness before God.

So he recognizes his helplessness and total dependence on God, understanding that God alone—who is enthroned in the heavens—can help him.

Now, what essentially is the Psalmist, and the Pilgrim, doing here? **He's focusing on God.** Yes, there's disappointment and opposition from people outside and even inside Jerusalem. But he must have realized that he came to the city, not for the people in it, not for the walls and structures in it—but for the Lord of Jerusalem. He came for the very purpose of worshiping God and communing with him. So in the midst of all those trials within Jerusalem, he looks up to God.

Brothers and sisters, isn't this what we are also called to do? Hebrews 12:1-2, *"... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...**"* As pilgrims on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem, we are called to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ.

Even here in Psalm 123, as we meditate on it, we see Christ. It points us and leads us to Christ. How? Well friends, it is Christ who ultimately had more than enough of scorn and contempt. He had more than enough disappointment even from the people surrounding him and lived with him.

"He came to his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 3:11). Did his family support him from the very start? No. They thought he was crazy (Mark 3:21)... Who betrayed him to the chief priests and soldiers? Judas, one of his disciples, who traveled with him, ate with him, perhaps even laughed with him... Who denied him? Peter, who denied him not once but three times. And in his last denial of Christ, he said, *"I swore to God. I do not know that man"* (Matthew 26:69–75)... The very people (the Jews) who heard him teach God's Word, who saw him heal the sick and perform many miracles, are the very same people who cried out, *"Crucify him! Crucify him!"*

Scorn upon scorn. Disappointment upon disappointment. Even from the very people that he loved.

But Christ kept looking to his Father for help and endured all these contempts and sufferings so that he could bring sinners—you and me—into the presence of God. At

the time that Christ bore our sins on the cross, and died the most cruel death, the curtain that hid the holy of holies in the temple was torn in half—signifying that the way to God is now made open. You can now go straight to God in a new and living way through Jesus Christ.

In fact, Christ has risen from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. Hence, you can now cry out, *“To you, O Christ, I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!”* Christ knows well all your sufferings and disappointments caused by people around you, and he himself is right there in the heavens ruling everything and pleading for you before the Father.

You only have to keep your eyes of faith looking at him, hoping in him.

As Jude 1:17-21, reads: *“... You must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ... ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”*

Those who come to the church will find opposition both outside and even inside the church. But you keep looking to Christ and wait and hope in him.

Now, how is this essential to us today?

Conclusion and Final Application

Well, there are many people who go to church hoping that that will help them change their lives. Perhaps, some of you here have come to this church or to other churches for the same reasons. You realize your sins or the chaos in your families or you have big problems and confusions in your life. So you go to church because you believe that is where you will see godly people, who can influence you and lead you to God. You believe the church is where you find the solution to your life’s problems.

But soon enough, you realize the imperfections of the people inside the church. “Ang suplado naman ‘nong asawa ni pastor or ni Elder... Ang sungit naman nitong taong ‘to, ang pangit pala ng ugali nito...” Etc. The more you get to know the people in the church, the more you see its ugliness and weakness. And you might be disappointed. It’s not what you expected from the church. Some may even go as far as to think that the church is nothing but a place of hypocrites. “Bible, Bible pa kayo dyan. Mga karnal din pala kayo.”

Well, friends, let me say this. In the first place, not all churches (that claim to be a Christian church) will be disappointing to you. Perhaps, the church you went to is not a true church after all. That’s why what you witnessed there is nothing but hypocrisy and clashes among the members. Hindi naman po lahat ng church gano’n.

But more importantly, when you come to church, you don't focus on the lives of the people. Even if that church bears the biblical marks of a true church, you will always find something wrong or disappointing in it. Nevertheless, you ultimately don't come to church just to be inspired by the people, but you come to church to behold the glory of God and his saving work in Jesus Christ. Yes, the people in the church should love you, serve you, and set for you an example of godliness. But the church doesn't produce these things by themselves. Every good thing that you will ever find in the church comes from the Lord of the church. So you don't take refuge and hope in the church itself, or the pastor, or the elders... but you take refuge and hope in the God and the Christ whom the church proclaims through the Word.

It is Christ who died for you to save you, not the church. It is to him that you go to by listening to his Word and speaking to him in prayer. The local church, especially the pastor, is just an instrument of God through which he pours out his blessing upon those who believe in Christ. Believe in him, draw near to him, hope in him.

Even to those of you who profess to be believers, and are members of this church, the same lesson applies. Hindi pa naman tayo umaabot sa state na mayro'n nang matinding divisions or stumbling blocks in our church—but some of you here experience disappointments one way or another even from those inside the church.

Perhaps, some of you have been experiencing some conflicts with fellow members of the church. Or you're confused about current issues and problems caused by some members. Or you're wondering why some people are no longer attending the church. "Ano na pong nagyayari kay ganito... ano nang nangyayari sa church..."

Yes, we must be concerned about our fellow members, and if there are issues, we must address it. And indeed your officebearers are addressing them po. But whether we like it or not, whichever church we belong to in this side of eternity, there will always be problems and disappointments among the members of the church.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day, you don't focus on them. You just bring them up to the Lord in prayer, and you fix your eyes on the Lord of the church. Don't get yourself distracted from the ultimate reason why you are here in the church. That is, to fellowship with God and to enjoy him. It is God who calls us to gather before him. And it is to him that we lift up our eyes for help and satisfaction.

So even if people come and go in this church, even if there are still issues among ourselves... as long as the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is still being preached and lived out in this visible church—though imperfectly—then this church should go on. Tuloy pa rin po tayo.

So beloved, let us go on in our journey in this life, fixing our eyes only upon our Lord Jesus Christ, who's now enthroned in the heavens—the author and perfecter of our faith, and the owner and builder of his true church. Amen.