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The Climb of Your Life: The Altitude Psalm 123

There are many treacherous things about mountain climbing: the weather, the steepness of the climb, the crevasses. All of these are pretty obvious. But there is another risk that is more subtle. You don't see it. It sneaks up on you. And you have no way of knowing how you will be affected by it until it hits you. Altitude. The higher you go, the harder it is to get enough oxygen to sustain you in your exertions. Mt. Everest is nicknamed the "Highest Garbage Dump in the World" because its flanks are littered with thousands of oxygen tanks that have been used and discarded by climbers desperate for air in that hostile environment.

One of the things they teach you in preparation for a climb is how to breathe... with every step, a deep, violent exhale and a deep breath. If you don't breathe intentionally, you will not get enough oxygen in your system, and that is generally a bad thing. Everyone is affected by altitude differently. Some get nauseous. When we climbed Rainier, we passed more than one person off to the side, vomiting. Some get terrible headaches and must turn back. Others, like me, just get really tired.

The higher you climb the more you realize the stark contrast. You are in this glorious setting—breathtaking vistas, glimpses of life as you have never seen it before, stars that shine like beacons... so much that is glorious and wondrous—yet the harsh environment makes it hard for you to completely experience it because you are so busy sucking wind!

We are continuing in the *Climb of Your Life* series based on the Psalms of Ascent which pilgrims sang as they made their way up to Jerusalem. And last week, in Psalm 122, we finally reached the House of the Lord. The psalmist was so excited. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'...And now we're here... inside Jerusalem's walls!" Do you hear his excitement? He has completed his journey and is standing in the gates of the Holy City. He is experiencing the glory of God, the glory of the worshipping community. He is so giddy, he can hardly contain himself.

And then the service is done. He packs up his things. He walks out of the temple and right into a hostile environment. It sucks the wind right out of him. Psalm 123 is about experiencing the glory of God in the harsh environment of this broken world.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience... a moment where you felt the presence of the Lord so powerfully? You walked out of the place flying high only to be shot down by the circumstances of life? That happened to me earlier this year. Worship had gone well, I walked out of church with a sense of joy, basking in the glory of what the Lord had done, only to discover that my car window had been broken out, my registration and garage remote control stolen and my house had been broken into. Talk about sucking the wind out of you.

But that's nothing compared to what my friend Rob experienced. He was invited to preach in Sudan. People walked barefoot from 60 miles away to hear him. Rob said he felt the glory of the Lord in that place; the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit upon them all. But when they were done and walked out, he was thrust back into the harshness of that region. His host asked if he had noticed that there was no cemetery in the village. He had not and asked Why? "Because," the man answered, "So many people have died here that they just set the bodies outside for the hyenas to take. I only wish that they were always dead first."

Rob was horrified. To go from this profound experience of the presence of God back into a despairing, hopeless atmosphere... it wasn't just a dog-eat-dog world... it was a dog-eat-human world. He told me he had never had a more profound sense of spiritual schizophrenia... from the glory of the Lord, to the grit and grimness of a broken world. It sucked the wind right out of him.

That is the cruel contrast we experience in this morning's psalm. Our pilgrim was just standing inside the walls of Jerusalem experiencing the glory of worshiping God on this holy mountain surrounded by other pilgrims. It was literally a spiritual mountaintop experience. And then... then he walks out and realizes that he still is in a hostile environment. He steps back into a world of heartbreak and brokenness. We hear it in the last two verses:

"...for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud." Another translation puts it this way: "We've been kicked around long enough, kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men, kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes.

What he is saying is this: "God, because we love you and want to worship you, because we want our lives in obedience to you we are treated like garbage. People have contempt for us, they scorn us. They ridicule us. They are disgusted with us; they think we are superstitious and stupid."

Have you ever felt that way? Because you dared to believe in God—because you are trying to follow Jesus in the way you live your life, spend your time, spend your money, treat your family—you are treated with ridicule? A mom wants to raise her kids in the church, and her husband thinks it's a ridiculous waste of time.

A high school guy resists the pressures of his friends to party or have sex, and they are disgusted with him. An employee wants to go to church on Sunday morning, and his boss makes fun of him.

It's the altitude! This world is a hostile environment in which to be a true Christian disciple. The culture is trending against us, the lawmakers are trending against us, the news media is trending against us. We are the only religious group that it is okay to ridicule; to scorn in news shows and humiliate in sit-coms. We have experienced the glory of God in our lives...but we live in a hostile environment that scorns us.

I'm not sure why we should be surprised. Jesus couldn't have been clearer about it. In Luke 21:17 Jesus told his disciples, "All men will hate you because of me." In John 17, Jesus prays these words about his disciples: "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world... my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."

But here's something more disheartening about this text. The language of the psalm suggests that his enemies—the people who have contempt for the worshipers of God—are themselves, Jews. The rich, powerful, secular Jews who claim the same faith, but who have no interest in the God of that faith. In other words, the people who ridicule and despise the pilgrims are not Gentiles—not outsiders. They are their own people... the rich, powerful residents of Jerusalem who consider these worshipers to be superstitious radicals.

It's not just those on the outside who make life hard. Some of the worst attacks come right from within the church. My friend tells me how frustrated he gets on Facebook when people who portray themselves as Christians use that venue to tear down the Church. Have you ever been attacked by a fellow believer? I have. It's the most bitter wound of all, isn't it? It's hard enough to receive the contempt of the world...but when you are wounded by friendly fire, it is truly heart breaking, isn't it?

So how do we deal with this conflict? Between the moments when we experience the glorious presence of God...and those when this world kicks us in the teeth, treats us with scorn and breaks our heart. We cry, "Mercy!" That's what the psalmist did. When he realizes what is waiting for him outside the temple...the harsh reality of this hostile environment... he cries out, "Mercy, mercy, mercy!" Three times! "Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us, for we have endured much contempt."

When was the last time you prayed "Mercy" to God? It's actually a very powerful prayer... just that word. "Mercy! Mercy! Have mercy on me! I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. I feel attacked and I need your deliverance. Mercy, God! Have mercy!" The wonderful thing about this prayer is that we are

not asking for something that God is reluctant to offer; not begging Him for something that is outside His character. When we cry "Mercy" to God, that is right in his wheelhouse! We are asking him for that which is completely consistent with his character.

He is not a God who clings to anger or who delights in crushing his disobedient children. We are asking Mercy of a God who has already proven that Mercy is his very heart. When Adam and Eve fell in the garden, God's mercy clothed and protected them, even in their disobedience. When the Israelites were crying out in Egypt, God's mercy delivered them. And ultimately, God's mercy sent his son to die and rise and save us from our own sin. We deserved judgment for our disobedience. God offered mercy instead, because that is his heart.

When we find ourselves gasping for spiritual air... whipsawed back and forth between the glorious experience of God in our lives and the gritty, gloomy, grime of this antagonistic world, we cry out Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!

But that's not all. What else do we do, according to this psalm? We lift up our eyes! Not like we lifted them in Psalm 121; we don't lift our eyes to the hills...where the idols are located. In fact, we don't even just lift up our eyes to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem as in Psalm 122. No, the trajectory of our gaze is up, up, up! Not the hills. Not the temple. No, the very heavens themselves where sits the throne of Almighty God.

Did you notice how many times "eyes" appear in this Psalm? "I lift up my **eyes** to you..." 2- As the **eyes** of the slaves look to the hand of their master, as the **eyes** of the maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God...

Some commentators named this the "Psalm of Eyes." Others called it by the Latin phrase: *Oculus Sperans*; "the eyes of hope." And I think it is here that we find the real help for facing the wind-sucking inconsistencies between glory and gloom. We lift our eyes UP! Notice what happens when we do. We lift our faces up. When lift our heads up. We lift our voices up! Where once we were downcast and despairing, now we reflect a sense of hope and trust.

And we lift our eyes UP to the Lord. Not at the same level, as if we were dealing with a peer. Not down, as if we are looking at our servant...the one we expect to respond like a cosmic bellhop to our prayer requests. No...we lift our eyes UP to the Lord because He is God and we are not. He is Lord and we are Not. He is able and we are not. And when we look up to him, we do so from the position of humility and servanthood...the ONLY way we can approach God.

We lift our eyes up, and we also lift our eyes 'til... Verse 2: "...our eyes look to the Lord our God till he shows us his mercy." We lift our eyes to the God of mercy who loves us, and we don't stop looking to him until he brings the mercy only He

can bring and which we must have. We wait patiently until we see the mercy of the Lord.

But here's something else fascinating: what are we looking at in this psalm? The hand of the master... "As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress." Isn't that surprising? Why do we look to the Lord's "hand?" Because, in biblical times, servants would stand at the end of the room, out of the way, arms crossed, waiting...and watching. And do you know what they watched? Their master's hand, because the master didn't usually speak to the slave. He just motioned with his hand. And with that simple motion—which the slave immediately recognized and understood—his wishes were fulfilled. His directions were followed. He would point or crook his finger or flick with the back of his hand—and that slave, standing at attention—watching his master's hands intently immediately responded because now he now knew his Lord's wishes.

I think this is **the** key principle of this psalm. It is not enough, when life sucks the wind out of us, to cry out for Mercy. We also must turn our eyes to the Lord! We have to watch for His direction so we know what to do to receive His mercy! Too many people cry out "Mercy, mercy, mercy"...but they keep their eyes down! They keep their eyes on their problems. They keep their eyes on other people whom they can blame. They keep their eyes on their own fears or anxieties. Too many of us never look up as if we really believe that God will answer our cry. And so, when God moves to answer the cries of Mercy, they don't see it! They miss His cues. They just keep moaning and stewing in their pain, crying out "Mercy"...and they miss his help when it comes.

This psalm is even a parable of itself. It starts exactly where we need to start: by lifting up our eyes to the Lord. We don't even know why he is doing that in verse one. We only discover the problem ...the contempt and scorn...in the last verse. But the psalmist doesn't start with the problem; he starts with the solution. "I lift up my eyes to you..."

When I climbed Rainier, every time we stopped for a rest, I sat on my backpack...and I would fall asleep. I was oxygen-deprived. Even though I had one of the most incredible views in world...the harsh atmosphere made it impossible for me to focus. If it had been left to me, I might have just sat there, sleeping on my pack. But every time, our Sherpa would call out and motion to us: "Let's go!" And we would lift up our tired heads, stand up, replace our pack and keep climbing...until finally we reached the summit.

Have you ever done this with your kids in public? (Point to eyes and then to them?) "I'm watching you! I have my eyes on you! Isn't that exactly what this psalm is calling us to do? (Point to eyes and then to Lord) To say to ourselves, and to the Lord, "I've got my eyes on you! I'm watching you! Especially in this moment...when I am desperate for your mercy...I am not going to look at the

problem, I am not going to look at other people, I am not going to look at my own insecurities or inabilities...I am going to look at you. I will cry "Mercy"...and then I will watch your hand move.

"I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us!"

Benediction: Are you sucking wind right now? Are you struggling between the glory of a God who loves you and saved you... and the gloom of a world that thinks you are an idiot and wants to knock you down? The psalmist would say, "Cry mercy"...and then lift your eyes to see what God will do!

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Can you think of a time when you experienced glory and then immediate brokenness?
 2. What does the text say must be our only response to the condemnation we face in this world? What is the posture we take? What is the word we cry out? How does that speak to your life this moment?