

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

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## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Psalm 123:1-4      *"Look to the Lord"*

Psalms 120-134, labeled "Songs of Ascent," were composed in various circumstances, but collected as a series that were sung by pilgrims on their way up to the great festivals in Jerusalem. Some are plaintive – prayers for help – reflecting the situation the pilgrim left to start his journey: Psalm 120 spoke of the verbal abuse the pilgrim had endured, and his prayer that God would avenge him. Some, like Psalm 122, celebrate arriving at "the gates" of Jerusalem. Some, like Psalm 123, reflect the heartfelt outpouring of a pilgrim who has brought his grief and suffering to the LORD in his sanctuary.

As the pilgrim pours out his faith in God, his plea for mercy, and his lament over the treatment he has received, we get a picture of what his pilgrimage means. It is a turning away from the contempt of the world in order to seek the grace of God. But even as the pilgrimage nears its goal, the memory and the hurt of the scorn and contempt he has received from the world have not disappeared, and the pilgrim still pours out his heart to God. He is "getting there," but he is still not at ease.

#### 1) *The Contempt Of The World*

Why is that? Because like believers before and since, he has suffered the contempt of the world. It is the story of individuals and of communities, of Israel as a nation that was held in contempt by her neighbors because of her monotheism, her strict moral code, her religious observances.

Little has changed, for Israel, for the Church of Jesus Christ, and for individuals. We have talked before about the verbal abuse that believers can suffer, but here we go beyond that to scorn and contempt. You can encounter it today, even in our supposedly "Christian" society. Parts of our "elite culture" despise Christianity, or indeed any religion that is "taken too seriously." Our courts, our educational establishment, the world of academia, the fine arts, the sciences, the environmental movement, are frequently hostile to belief.

You may find it in your workplace if you attempt to hold to high moral standards in a culture where corner-cutting, financial cheating, deceptive promises are everyday currency. You may find it in public life, which many influential people insist should be kept free of all religious input. You see it when profound moral and ethical issues are labeled "ideological and political." You see it when an intelligent adult embraces faith and

religious observance, and she is deserted by her former "friends." You find it in family settings, where the "church-goers" are held in derision by the others, and are accused of "dragging their religion into everything."

Contempt is a challenge to faith. Contempt for belief and faith is one of the forms that sin takes in a fallen world. But contempt is not only directed at "religious" people. It is a sin that is pervasive and deadly in all human relationships and communities. Contempt is the acid that eats away many marriages. It is usually silent, but it can show itself in any number of ways, and it is very hard both to live with and to deal with. To disdain and despise another person is to reduce them to an object of low or no value; to have no respect for them as persons. It poisons the relationships of husbands and wives, parents and teenagers, brothers and sisters.

Contempt shows itself on a larger scale in the way one group of people views another. You hear it in the "off-the cuff" remarks that are threaded with obscenity, derision, ethnic and racial epithets. At times it's astonishing in its ferocity. Someone told me recently of their shock at the virulent anti-Catholicism they encountered in the speech of another Christian.

Every month, people send me "chain" e-mail letters in the hope, I suppose, that I will forward them to the congregation (I almost never do!). One I received months ago I have kept, because its tone stuck in my mind for a long time after. It purports to be a letter written by a woman to her nephew serving in Iraq; in fact it was written by a political speechwriter and columnist. In part, it runs: *"In the meantime, when I hear a story about a brave marine roughing up an Iraqi terrorist to obtain information, know this: I don't care. When I see a fuzzy photo of a pile of naked Iraqi prisoners who have been humiliated in what amounts to a college hazing incident, rest assured*

*that I don't care. When I see a wounded terrorist get shot in the head when he is told not to move because he might be booby-trapped, you can take it to the bank that I don't care. When I hear that a prisoner, who was issued a Koran and a prayer mat, and fed "special" food that is paid for by my tax dollars, is complaining that his holy book is being "mishandled," you can absolutely believe in your heart of hearts that I don't care."*

That, dear friends, is not just feigned anger, that is contempt. Change the words to make it a Christian whose Bible has been trampled, and you will begin to feel what the pilgrim in Psalm 123 suffered at the hands of people who thought he was *less of a human being* than they were. There are still plenty of people around our world in 2006 who are held in contempt, scorned, persecuted, subjected to violence, because of their faith, their ethnicity, their birthplace. Contempt and its first cousin, abuse, are still widespread.

What is wrong with contempt? It goes beyond rejection; it cuts deep. It treats as sub-human, people who are made in the image of God. It despises other people to reinforce someone's own sense of self-worth. It is a cover for guilt. And it is against the Law and the will of God. It is no coincidence that we also use the word "contempt" to describe rejecting the authority of the courts; when we act in defiance of God's will in our dealings with other people, we hold his law in contempt; we hold God himself in contempt. These things ought not to be; and contempt ought *never* to be found in the mouth of a Christian!

## 2) The Grace Of God

But what do you do when you are on the receiving end of scorn and contempt? Our

natural instincts are to fight or flee. We long to “get into the face” of the scorner, and fight back on their terms: deride them, make them feel of no account. Or - if our personality makes us avoid conflict - we are more likely to want to flee, and to engage our “escape fantasies.” We picture getting into our cars and driving west until we “reach the sunset.” We dream of disappearing on a Caribbean island or in the Rocky Mountains. For a moment, we’re certain - despite all knowledge and experience! - that “the grass really is greener on the other side of the fence”!

This is the reaction of the person who has “had it” - which is precisely the language and atmosphere of Psalm 123. The NIV makes it sound as though the pilgrim has “endured” much scorn and contempt - perhaps silently feeling sorry for himself. But the original tone is much more vigorous: the pilgrim has “had more than enough” (RSV, ESV); he “can’t take more abuse” (CEV).

What to do? He has turned away from the contempt towards God. He has *looked up* to God: “I lift my eyes to you.” He has decided he will handle contempt by giving it all to the LORD. He has realized that the way to deal with the contempt of the world is to look up to the God who rules over the world. He has decided that prayer is the only way to bear the contempt of other people.

Just as Jesus would later teach his disciples about prayer, the pilgrim begins by looking up and in effect saying “Our Father, who art in heaven...” “I lift my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven.” Like the pilgrim who looked beyond the hills to find God as his helper (Psalm 121), he has to get his eyes and ears off the world’s level and up to the LORD to seek relief. He asks God for mercy! He acknowledges that the LORD alone is capable of handling what he cannot handle himself.

“O Lord, have mercy!” That is the cry of the believer in every hard situation - whether we are being despised, persecuted, or abused. We pray that way because God alone has the power to change the situation, and he is the one to turn it to. We turn from the abuse of the world toward the grace of God, in confidence that he will hear us, that he does care for us, that he is wise enough to know what to do in our situation, that he has the power to change what we cannot change.

“O Lord, have mercy!” If you have not prayed that way over your family situation, it’s time you did. If you have not prayed that over your workplace, you should. If you do not pray that every day over the state of our nation and the state of the world, you owe it to your fellow human beings to pray that God will look down mercifully and graciously on his hurting world and do something about it! “His hand” is the one that can restrain evil, that can change people, that can make nations and empires rise and fall. His hand alone can protect, guide, and provide for the faithful ones who call on him, and many others besides.

Notice the evocative images the pilgrim uses to describe what happens when you pray to the LORD for mercy. “As the eyes of a servant look to the hand of his master; as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, our eyes look to the LORD our God.” The trained and disciplined servant is always on the lookout for a signal, a sign, a wave, a word from their master. The believer who has asked God for mercy is always alert for an answer, a sign, a signal from God that their prayer has been heard and is being answered.

Some believers live their lives with a vivid, constant awareness of God “speaking” to them - in events, in other people, in words of Scripture, in what some people call

“coincidences” but they are sure are the providential acts of God. Some other people are only rarely and dimly aware that the Lord may be “speaking to them.” But all believers, everyone who calls themselves a Christian, has – we must assume, if they truly are Christians – at some time had the clear sense that God was telling them to do something, was calling them to some decision, was revealing his will for them. Perhaps it would be good exercise for all of us to “clean out our ears,” or “get new batteries for our hearing aids,” or turn down the TV or the music, so that we *can hear* God speak to us more clearly and perhaps also more often than in the past!

Or – shifting metaphors again – perhaps we need to *open our eyes* to what God is showing us. If we have prayed for his grace and mercy to be shown in some situation or relationship, we should be looking carefully to see where and how the Lord is at work. Perhaps it’s in us, perhaps it’s in someone else, perhaps it’s in some circumstances. Whatever God is up to in answer to our prayers, or the prayers of other people for us, we need to be more alert to *what he is doing in our lives* – “as the eyes of a servant look to the hand of his master” so we should “look to the LORD” for his commands, his signs, his pleasure.

Notice finally that the pilgrim knows that one prayer, one cry to God, is not enough. He will pray “till he shows us his mercy.” The great *until!* We are never to assume that all answers are instantaneous; we have to learn patience, we have to endure “until” the LORD acts on our behalf.

Jesus showed us the way – he experienced the scorn, the contempt, the derision, even the violence of a world that considered him of no value. He faced it silently, he placed his trust in his Father in heaven, he endured all they had to throw at him until he was finally

vindicated. His plan and his call is that his disciples will do the same.

“To you, O LORD, I lift my eyes... our eyes look to the LORD our God... O LORD, have mercy upon us!”

Let us pray...