

**Hit Me with Your Best Shot:  
Sticks and Stones That Break My Bones,  
and Words That Really Hurt Me.**

A Sermon on Psalm 123

by Rev. J. Scott Lindsay

Theme:	It is better to be despised (by the world) and need God's mercy than to be esteemed (by the world) and receive God's judgment.
Subject:	Persecution, rejection, being despised, enduring ridicule and contempt
Doing?:	Encouraging faithfulness in the face of ridicule and contempt, and depicting the common experience of God's people as they endure the ridicule of the arrogant and proud.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sticks and stones may break my bones,  
but words can never hurt me.

Rubbish! I don't know who first came up with that saying, but it was a crazy person, whoever it was. Nobody in his right mind who has lived long enough to be insulted or ridiculed by another person could say those words with any integrity. The fact of the matter is, words *can* hurt and words *do* hurt. All of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

We will be looking at Psalm 123 and the experience of God's pilgrims, then and now, as they endure(d) the very real and very hurtful ridicule and contempt of the arrogant people around them. Even further, we'll look at how, in the midst of that experience, there is a choice that has to be made. The issue is not whether we will experience rejection in this life. The issue is: whose rejection will we choose?

## II. BACKGROUND

This psalm is the fourth in a series of fifteen psalms known as the "Songs of Ascents." It is another "road song" sung by the people of Israel as they traveled to Jerusalem on one of their annual pilgrimages. Now, as we saw before, Psalm 120 would appear to be one for

the beginning of a journey, sung perhaps even before the journey began. Psalm 121 would be for some place along the way, but very close to the city of Jerusalem. Psalm 122 would have been sung by the people as they entered the gates of the city itself.

Psalm 123 is not so easily located. It could have been sung at any point in the journey. And, at the end of the day, being able to work this out exactly is not terribly important for understanding the sentiment of the psalmist's words here. For our purposes, then, we will regard this as a "general road song" that, like the others, expresses something of the experience of being God's people in a world that does not appreciate that reality.

### **III. FIRST MOVE**

The world doesn't like God's people very much. The experience described here is one of being ridiculed, despised, looked down upon and generally regarded as being insignificant. All of that comes from being identified as one of God's special people.

As we saw in the study of Psalm 120, living faithfully as one of God's people, has the effect of setting you apart from your peers — not because you look or dress all that differently, but because you have a different value system, a different life orientation. This different orientation becomes evident in various ways: through the choices you make; through the things you do and do not do; through the way you speak; through the way you respond to success, failure, tragedy and hardship. The collective result of all those things will distinguish you from the people around you. That was as true in the psalmist's day as it is in our own.

The fact of this difference is noticed by the parties on both sides. That is, just as you are aware of the difference between yourself and those around you, so are they. And because you are consistently choosing to go against the grain, to choose a position other than the status quo, because you are unwilling to compromise on your beliefs, you are perceived as being "difficult," "holier-than-thou," "elitist," and all sort of other things — things which may have never entered your mind. But the reality is that you are perceived this way, whether it's true or not, and whether you like it or not.

Now when people perceive this sort of thing going on, when they think that you are somehow setting yourself up as better than they, they can respond in all sorts of ways. They can ignore you, they can attack your position, they can belittle you, and, if they're upset enough, they can assault you physically. There are all sorts of ways that they can respond.

In this psalm, the response in view is the ridicule and contempt which arise from the arrogance of those who reject God and who, as a result, have nothing but contempt for those

that follow him. It is a response that seeks to tear down the godly person through words and insults, through belittlement and mockery, laughter and derision.

That sort of a response is certainly not limited to the experience of the psalmist. This sort of rejection, as well as other kinds, was very much a part of God's people in every age, right up to and including Jesus' own experience. He too endured the derision and scorn of his contemporaries. Isaiah 53:3, a passage which speaks prophetically of Jesus the Messiah, describes him in just this kind of way:

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.”

Acts 5, especially verse 41, shows that the apostles too were familiar with all of this:

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”

The apostles too were marked people, they too had been disgraced and despised on account of their faithfulness to Jesus the Son of God. And for them, the disgrace they suffered was like a badge of honor — like the medals you see draped across the chest of some of these war veterans. To the apostles, the fact that they had been ridiculed and despised because of Jesus was a badge of honor and a privilege.

As it was for Jesus and the apostles, so it continues for Christians today, in all sorts of different ways.

A few years ago now, I had a debate with the president of the La Trobe Atheist Club and, after I was given an opportunity to present my position, he started into me. However, he didn't deal with the substance of anything I said. Instead, he started ridiculing me personally, and the church, and Christians in general. So, when I realized what he was doing I just stopped him at that point and said, “I have an idea. Let's forget the discussion, and the fact that we are supposed to be debating *ideas*. We'll just stand here and call each other names for about half an hour, and then we can all go home. How about that?”

You see, he didn't want to talk about ideas. He didn't really want to think about what I had said. The main reason this guy had invited me to speak was because he saw it as an opportunity to ridicule me and to demonstrate his contempt for the Christian faith.

That is what it is like for God's people. The degree to which you experience this may vary. You may know of other people in other situations who have to deal with this in far

more serious and even dangerous ways. But the fact remains that this experience is common to God's people in every place and in every age. As a result, you can expect to find yourself on the receiving end of things like ridicule, contempt, mockery, and disgust — from some of your family perhaps, from some so-called friends, from people at work, at school, from lecturers, neighbours, etc. This has always been the experience of God's people and it will remain that way until Jesus comes back.

Now of course, knowing all that doesn't change the fact that it still hurts when you have to go through these sorts of things. It is never a pleasant experience to be insulted and put down — to be thought stupid and slow and ignorant and archaic — to be regarded as hopelessly out of touch with the rest of the world. It hurts to be passed off as insignificant, to have the truths and values which you hold so dear simply dismissed as being of no great importance.

It is painful when people you know refuse to take you or your point of view seriously. And adding to the pain is the realization that, when you are despised, there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. There is a certain helplessness in knowing that the way other people respond to you and think about you is completely out of your hands. You cannot change their attitude. You cannot change their hearts.

I was at a dinner once with a couple who were clearly not Christians and who were both proud of the fact that they were quite accomplished in their respective fields. We talked about them for a long time. After spending some considerable time finding out about them and getting to know them a bit better, the conversation went the other way as they began to ask about me. Once they got over the initial shock of discovering that I was a Christian, they continued to be "polite," but their clear contempt for all things Christian was only slightly restrained.

Now my natural, gut-level reaction in those sorts of circumstances is to want to "take them down a few notches" — to go on the attack and demonstrate through question and argument the futility of their own thinking — to "show them a thing or two," tying them up in knots with their own words. In other words, my natural reaction is to want to hit back, to hurt them. Why? Because they are hurting me.

I don't know about you, but it's times like that when I think I can, in some small way, identify with what the psalmist is saying here. I know what I *feel* like doing when these sorts of things happen to me, but what should I actually *do*? Should I simply hit back in anger and with a desire for vengeance?

#### IV. SECOND MOVE

If it's true that the world doesn't like God's people very much (and it is), and there's not a lot we can do in terms of changing the attitudes of those around us (and there isn't), then the only issue is how we are going to respond in the face of that.

- A. In verse 2 there is an intriguing comparison between the response of a slave to his master and a maid to her mistress. The situation of the psalmist, in the midst of being ridiculed and despised, is somehow mirrored in the situation of this slave and this maidservant.

Now this is, as I said, an *intriguing* comparison because the exact point of the comparison is not, at least not to me, immediately obvious. Think about it for a minute. What do servants do? Servants, among other things, look to their master attentively to know how they might serve him, should he suddenly want or need something. Likewise is the maid to her mistress. In other words, the servant and the maid are not watching attentively in expectation that their master/mistress is suddenly going to take them out to dinner. They are not anticipating that at any moment they are going to be given the night off. They are not staring at their master/mistress waiting for them to show them mercy. They are watching because their master might suddenly ask for them and want a prompt response from the servant. So, it would seem, the point of the comparison here is not really how or for what the servant or maid looks to his/her master/mistress.

Rather, the point of the image would seem to be that of helplessness and utter dependence. That is, for both the slave and the maid, it is true that the outcome of their lives — good, bad or otherwise — is entirely in the hands of the ones whom they serve. If hardship comes their way, it will be at the hand of the master or the mistress. If mercy comes their way, it will be by the same hand. Whatever the outcome, both are in a position of utter dependence upon the one whom they serve. And thus, the only one who has the power to change anything is the master/mistress.

This, it seems to me, *is* the point of the comparison. The psalmist recognizes that, although he is the victim of the arrogant and proud people around him, he is still not at their mercy, because they are not, ultimately, the ones in charge. The psalmist recognizes that, just as for the slave and the maid, if hardship continues to come his way, or if he experiences mercy and grace — both of these things, ultimately, can only come with the sovereign permission

of the Lord and thus, it is to him that the psalmist appeals for mercy — not to someone else, least of all his detractors.

This, then, is the first “port of call” when it comes to the godly person’s response to contempt and ridicule — to look to God, to pray to God for his mercy to be shown in the circumstances of your life. You don’t become obsessed with your enemies so that it then becomes the controlling factor in your life. You become intensely focused on the person of God. He is our great obsession.

- B. Now it is — again — interesting when you think about what the psalmist has requested of God. He asks for mercy. Now he might have asked for justice, or he might have asked for the destruction of his enemies. But he asks for mercy. Why ask for mercy? Again, the imagery of verse 2 is, I believe, helpful here. The utter dependence of the psalmist on God, like that of the servant and the maid, means that he is counting on God to deliver him because, at the end of the day, God is the only one that can. The psalmist recognizes the sovereignty of God in his own circumstances and so does not presume or want to presume upon that sovereignty in any way.

So the psalmist prays for mercy which is, basically, a rather generic prayer. It is a non-directive prayer because the request for mercy might be answered in any number of ways by God. God could respond mercifully in ways that the psalmist could never imagine. So, the psalmist does not try to second guess what the mercy of God will look like. He just asks for mercy.

## V. CONCLUSION

The psalmist’s response in the face of ridicule is instructive for us, too. When we are in similar situations, our own gut-level response should be to turn to God as the one in whose hands our future lies, as the one on whom we are ultimately and utterly dependent for the outcome of our life. Now that’s not a terribly earth-shattering statement, but it is profoundly true and I want to take a couple of minutes to think about the implications of some of this, as we draw this study to a close.

- A. Firstly, as has already been mentioned, you may not find yourself, at this point in your life, in situations where you experience a great deal of ridicule on account of your faith. You may be fairly well protected from that, at the moment. And that does happen. But if that is true for you, then it is worth doing a little “heart check” to determine why this is the case. It may be that the reason you have not been singled out for your faith is because you have

successfully managed to hide that reality from your colleagues and friends. If that's the case, if that's a description of you then you need to stop it right now and learn how to be who you are, where you are, all the time.

Or it may be the case that you are not hiding your faith from anyone but then, you don't have to do so because you have so surrounded yourself with Christian "things:" Christian friends, Christian activities, why even your mechanic is a Christian. You have so insulated yourself from the world that you couldn't be ridiculed if you wanted to be. If that's a description of you, if you have built yourself a "monastery without walls," then you need to stop it right now and look again at the life and pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ who spent so much time with lost people that he got a reputation as a drunkard and a glutton. If you don't have a reputation, you need to get one.

Those are two reasons why Christians sometimes don't experience the anger and disdain of others — two bad reasons. However, sometimes it is also true that, in spite of the fact that you are living openly and faithfully, and in spite of the fact that you are very much involved in the lives of non-Christians, you still do not experience a great deal of what the psalmist is talking about here. If that is the case, then rejoice and be thankful. Enjoy it while it lasts.

At the same time, you should never forget the fact that while it may not be so hard for you at the moment, it certainly is that way for your brothers and sisters in Christ in many places in the world. You can rest assured that every time you *read* this psalm there are hundreds of thousands of Christians all over the world who are *living* this psalm, even as you read it. And that thought should drive you to your knees in prayer for the mercy of God on their behalf.

Even closer to home, while you may not in your life see a great deal of this, you can look around this room and see a lot of children who will grow up and who are growing up in a very different sort of world, a world that is increasingly intolerant of a Christian worldview. I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but sometimes I go into their rooms while they are sleeping and I think to myself, "What in the world have I done?"

We need to be praying for the children. It is not going to be easy for them. We need to pray for mercy, on their behalf.

- B. Secondly, and finally, as we think about the nature of our prayer for mercy, particularly as those who live on the other side of the cross, we need to remember that demands of the gospel mean that our prayer for mercy in the

face of ridicule will be more than a prayer for relief. Yes, we are only flesh and blood. Yes, it is certainly painful to have to experience these things, and it is perfectly legitimate to pray for relief and protection from these things.

But as Christians we should realize that our prayers should be for more than mere relief. They should also be for the salvation of those that ridicule and despise us. We should pray for God to open their eyes, so that they might see their blindness, rebellion and folly. We should pray for God to cure them, as only he can, of this heart disease called “sin.”

And if we are to pray for this, then certainly we are to work for this. Ridicule and scorn become so much fuel for the fire. They should drive us back to the work of the gospel even more because we know that the gospel is the only answer. That is the only thing that will make a difference in the end, as God changes the hearts of men and women.

Until that happens, we must persist under pressure. We must be willing to endure hardship. We must be prepared to be despised and rejected and treated as insignificant. And when it all becomes a bit too hard, when we are wavering in our faith, we need to remember this: it is better to seek mercy in the face of ridicule than to seek approval in the face of judgment — better to be despised by the world and in need of God’s mercy than to be esteemed by the world and receive God’s judgment.