

# ASK. WAIT. THANK.

*SERIES: ASCEND*



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Psalms 123 & 124  
4th Message  
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I'd like to start by asking a question: What is something important that you have asked for?

There are a whole lot of really important things that we ask for. Even as independent as we are or think we are, we need to ask people for things. When we are born, all we do is ask. Ask for food. Ask for sleep. Ask to be cleaned up. As we grow up we gradually learn to do things for ourselves, but we never completely escape the need to ask. Asking is an integral part of the human experience.

This morning we are continuing in our summer series titled *Ascend*. We're taking this summer to work our way through the Psalms of Ascent: fifteen psalms that were traditionally used by God's people as they made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. These psalms led God's people into worship; they prepared them to reach the holy city; they brought them together on the journey.

This morning we're looking at two of those psalms: Psalms 123 and 124. These two psalms go together in a really cool way. They are a bit like a conversation. But only one side of the conversation. It's like we're listening to the psalmist on the phone with God and we can only hear what he says, but not what happens on the other side. In between these two psalms, something happens. God responds or acts or intervenes in some way. But we don't quite know how.

In Psalm 123, we hear the psalmist asking a question. A very important question. And then in Psalm 124, we hear him giving thanks. It sounds like that question has been answered in a big way. But we don't hear the answer. It happens in between these two psalms. All we get is silence. So we are forced to do what the psalmist had to do: wait.

These two psalms have a rhythm: a flow. Ask. Wait. Thank. And as it turns out, this rhythm or pattern is one of the main activities of the Christian life. It's like breathing in and out. In a lot of ways, this is what worshipping God is all about. Ask. Wait. Thank.

When I was in college, I took a music class for singing lessons. I've always wished I were a better singer. For years, I managed to convince myself that I was a better singer than I am. But I'm just not. Vocal lessons helped, but the best teacher in the world can't give me what God decided I shouldn't have.

The interesting thing about taking voice lessons is that the first thing they do is teach you how to breathe. That confused me a bit. I'm pretty sure I've been breathing most of my life and it seems to be working out pretty well for me. Why do I need to learn to breathe? But when you learn to sing, you need to breathe differently so that you can really sing.

You might have the same reaction here. You might think, I've been asking God for stuff all my life. I know how to ask. Why do I need to learn how to ask God? Well, maybe we all need to learn how to ask God so that we can really relate to him. So that we can engage in what it means to follow God. So that we can do what we've been trying to do this summer: worship.

This morning, then, is a little different. The last few psalms that we've looked at have given us some information about what it means to worship God. They have prepared us for worship: by answering questions about whether God really protects us and what this community is supposed to look like. But these two psalms actually take us into the process of worship. They become a model for us of how to do this. They are like training wheels for our worship.

So as we study these psalms, we're going to let them lead us in a process. Not just to learn from them, but to invite these words and images and phrases alongside of us and to lead us in the act of worshipping. It's like when you're learning a sport. You practice each step carefully so that when you get in the game, it comes more naturally. This morning we're going to practice asking, practice waiting, and practice thanking so that when we get in the game, we know how to relate to God. These psalms will train us in asking, waiting, and thanking.

## Asking for Favor

Let's start by reading Psalm 123:

### **A song of ascents.**

**<sup>1</sup>I lift up my eyes to you,  
to you whose throne is in heaven.  
<sup>2</sup>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,**

**so our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
till he shows us his mercy.**

**<sup>3</sup>Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us,  
for we have endured much contempt.**

**<sup>4</sup>We have endured much ridicule from the  
proud, much contempt from the  
arrogant.**

This Psalm starts by repeatedly talking about the eyes. The word shows up four times in the first two verses. We hear about the eyes of the psalmist, the eyes of a servant, the eyes of a maid and then our eyes. We are invited into the process. In every example the eyes are focused above; on God, on a master, on a mistress. If this psalm is about asking, then asking apparently starts with our eyes.

My kids attend a dual immersion Spanish elementary school. I remember in kindergarten when they were just learning Spanish there was one phrase that the teacher would say over and over again. I apologize in advance to all the Spanish speakers out there for my terrible accent. She would say “ojos a la maestra.” As far as I understand, that phrase means “eyes to the teacher.” She would repeat that over and over again. “Ojos a la maestra,” “ojos a la maestra,” “ojos a la maestra.”

In Kindergarten, most of the challenge seems to be getting the kids to pay attention to you. So you want them to look at you and keep looking at you. Maybe I should adopt that strategy when I’m preaching. If I notice you getting distracted I can yell, “eyes on the preacher!” Or maybe not ...

What you are looking at is what you are paying attention to. So asking God for anything begins with paying attention to him. I think that tends to be a hard thing for us to do. We get so easily distracted with so many things around us. It’s so easy to have our eyes focused on all sorts of things. We’re not really that different than kindergartners—moving from one thing to another. We rarely slow down enough to pay attention and look up at God.

The psalmist describes this kind of attention as the kind of attitude that a slave has toward his master. The kind of attitude that a maid has toward the lady she is serving. It’s completely focused attention. Those relationships serve as a great model for the kind of attention we give God.

A master provides his servant with so many things. Provision. Instruction. Security. Purpose. That’s why the servant looks at the master with such expectation. Everything comes from him. That’s the way we look at God. That’s our attitude toward God, even before we have

asked for anything.

We used to have a dog named Jade. She was a beautiful black lab, pit bull mix. I had always wanted a dog that I could teach to catch a Frisbee and Jade was it. She was great at running after and catching a Frisbee. She loved the Frisbee. I would walk down to the park with Jade at my side and I wouldn’t need a leash. I would just hold the Frisbee in my right hand and she would stare at it the whole time. It was more effective than a leash. She walked right by me, never taking her eyes off that Frisbee, waiting for the moment that I might throw it.

Do you have that kind of attitude toward God? Do you lift your eyes up toward him? Do you wait expectantly for him to act? This is how asking begins. This is the attitude we start with.

I don’t know about you, but a lot of my asking from God is pretty frantic and demanding. I’m in trouble or something isn’t going the way I want it to go and I just want something solved now. On my terms. In my time.

It’s like my kids yelling from their room, “Daddy, where’s my VBS shirt?” We’re trying to teach our kids and model for ourselves as well a better way of asking. We tell them not to yell from another room. Come find us. Don’t start talking until you can see our eyes. Then ask calmly for what you need. It’s not that we don’t want them asking for things. They are kids. They need to ask for our help. But we’re all working on asking with more respect and patience. I need to learn the same thing. It’s not just about the kids.

We don’t just yell to God from wherever we find ourselves, demanding he come to our immediate help. Asking starts with the right attitude. We turn our eyes to him. We slow down. We are humble and expectant, but not demanding and then we ask.

As we get to the end of verse 3 and into verse 4, we see exactly what the psalmist is asking for. The NIV says in verse 3 “until he shows us his mercy” and in verse 4 the request is repeated twice “have mercy on us.” This is a very important word that the Psalmist uses. It’s from the root of the Hebrew word for favor, grace, mercy. The root word is *chein*.

In this psalm, the NIV translates it as “mercy.” The problem is that in English, “mercy” is often associated with anger or punishment. We ask for mercy when we’ve done something wrong—when we deserve to be punished and want to be spared that punishment. That’s not at all what is in view here. The Hebrew word has a much more positive sense. It’s the word that features in the great blessing in

Numbers 6: 25, “May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.” I think the best translation is “to show favor.”

So as the psalmist gets to the heart of his request, we hear this cry for favor. Show us favor, O Lord. Show us favor.

Isn't that the question that most of us are asking most of the time? Whether we are thinking about our jobs or our families or our friends or our romantic relationships. One of the first questions that we tend to ask of each other is whether we have favor.

Several times in Scripture, you'll see someone approaching someone else and they ask the question, “Do you come in peace?” That's the question that we ask of ourselves as soon as we meet someone. Do we have their favor? Are they on our side or against us? When we feel that people —whether parents or teachers or bosses or spouses—are on our side then things are great. But when we feel like they aren't on our side—when we don't have their favor—then everything is a mess. It's terrible to have a boss or a parent or a child or a spouse who isn't on your side. This is the most basic thing we want from each other.

But what if what lies behind all of this is wanting favor from God? I think we want to know that the one who created us didn't look down after it was all done and say “oops.” We want to know that he looked down instead and says “Yep—that's it. That's exactly it.” This is what the psalmist is asking, “Show us favor, O Lord. Show us favor.” I'm convinced that this is one of the deepest cries of our heart.

So this psalm shows us first a certain kind of attitude—one of humility and expectancy. And then it shows us what to ask for. Ask for God's Favor.

It may seem obvious, but it's kind of a funny request. Even if this is what we really want from each other, we never really think to ask for it. It would be odd if I met you and one of the first things I said was, “If it comes down to it, will you be for me or against me?” We don't introduce ourselves by saying, “Hello, my name is Paul and I'd really like your favor. How about it?”

And yet, that is often what we are after. It's what we are trying to figure out from body language and social cues and all sorts of stuff. Are you with me?

The way we go about it is actually the opposite of the way the psalmist goes about it. Usually, if we want someone's favor, we try to get their attention. We try to impress them. Once I have their attention, I try to show them that I'm something special. I need to earn their favor. I'm funny or

I'm smart or I'm athletic or kind of wise or something. I get their attention and then I try to earn their favor.

The psalmist does the exact opposite. He starts by giving God his attention. He doesn't act flashy and show off and try to get God to notice him. He looks up at God. Like a servant with his master. Like my god with the Frisbee.

Then, he doesn't try to earn favor. He simply asks for favor. “Show us favor, O Lord.” He admits that he has had enough non-favor from other people. He's had enough people in the world who don't show favor. All they show is contempt or hatred or judgment or superiority. He's ready for some favor. So he asks for it.

That's incredible to me. We can just ask God for favor. Throw our attention on God and ask him to be happy with us. Not because we deserve it or because we impress God. We just ask him.

As I said earlier, we're going to let this psalm be a model for us this morning as we learn to worship. I suggested that these two psalms form part of a conversation. One side of a conversation. We've heard the psalmist ask for God's favor. We've seen his attitude, his attentiveness to God, his humility, and expectancy. And we've seen his simple yet profound request, “show me favor, O Lord.”

And then we wait. In between the psalms there is a pause. We've asked and now we wait to hear the answer. So we're going to take some time to do just that. We're going to take a few moments to think about all the things that you ask for. We're going to take some time to simply come to God and ask him for his favor as we wait. After we've allowed this psalm to guide our asking, we'll take a look at the next Psalm and see what comes next.

Take a moment now and turn your eyes to God. Ask God for favor. And wait.

## Thanking God

Now we get to Psalm 124. In the previous psalm, we talked about asking. We saw the attitude that we approach God with and the basic request for favor that we bring to him. In between these two psalms there is a pause. Something has happened. God has shown up in some way. He has answered the request in some powerful way. We know this because of what we see in this psalm. It's an incredible record of thanks.

Psalm 124 is organized into three main stanzas. The first two verses go together. Then the next three verses. Finally, the last three verses are related to each other. I'm going

to read it all, but I'll stop after each grouping of verses to point a few things out. Then after we've heard the whole psalm, we'll think about it as a whole.

Here are the first couple verses. Psalm 124:1-2:

**A song of ascents. Of David.**

**<sup>1</sup>If the LORD had not been on our side—  
let Israel say—  
<sup>2</sup>if the LORD had not been on our side  
when men attacked us,**

This is the beginning of a sentence: it's an "if" without a "then." The psalmist has started an idea and instead of finishing it, he repeats it. He starts off saying, "if the Lord had not been on our side" and then he invites all Israel into the realization that he is about to make. "Let all Israel say if the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us."

He's going to finish his sentence by going into a list of terrible things that didn't happen because God was on their side. So we don't know exactly what happened in between these psalms, but it seems like something good. God has proven whose side he is on. It's the psalmists. So credit is given to God.

Here's the list of those terrible things that were avoided in Psalm 124:3-5:

**<sup>3</sup>when their anger flared against us,  
they would have swallowed us alive;  
<sup>4</sup>The flood would have engulfed us,  
the torrent would have swept over us,  
<sup>5</sup>the raging waters  
would have swept us away.**

The picture that we can put together is that God's people were facing a dangerous situation. But because God was on their side, they came out OK. The events described here are impressive situations. Whatever they were facing, it is first pictured as a monster that could swallow them alive. A few other places in the Psalms, God's enemies are presented as monsters like this.

Then the comparison is made to a flood or torrent. This is likely a reference to the flash floods that could fill the valleys of Israel in the rainy season. They could come out of nowhere and sweep away everything in that valley. I went backpacking several years ago in Arkansas and camped next to a river. A few weeks after I had been there, I learned there was a flash flood in that valley that resulted in several fatalities. The waters rose up out of nowhere and swept away everyone in the area.

But these are the things that didn't happen to God's people. Why? Because he was on their side.

This is the answer to the question from Psalm 123. The psalmist has asked for favor. He has asked that God be on his side. And God shows that he is. He has looked with favor upon his people and they live to see another day. So God is credited with this amazing salvation.

Because of that, in the last few verses, God is praised. Here's Psalm 124:6-8:

**<sup>6</sup>Praise be to the LORD,  
who has not let us be torn by their teeth.  
<sup>7</sup>We have escaped like a bird  
out of the fowler's snare;  
the snare has been broken,  
and we have escaped.  
<sup>8</sup>Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.**

Praise be to the LORD. Thank you, God. The image here is beautiful. It's actually one that has been portrayed in a powerful way by one of our artists and you can see that over in our Fireside Wing in the art gallery over there. It's a picture of a trap. A trap designed to ensnare and eventually kill so that you can be devoured by your enemy. You are a bird caught in that trap.

Do you know this feeling? Think about all the things the psalmist has described. A monster coming up and swallowing a whole group of people alive. A flash flood surprising everyone and sweeping them away. Being trapped like a bird in a cage. Have you ever felt that way? Do you feel that way now?

These are not small inconveniences. This is the stuff that overwhelms us. The stuff that makes us feel like we might not be able to face another day. Financial crisis. The sudden death of a loved one. Mental health struggles. Addiction. Abuse. Depression. This is the kind of pain that presses upon us and we don't know if we'll be able to breathe if it doesn't let up. This is the stuff that knocks us on our backs.

You can't defend yourself from a monster that swallows you alive. If you're in the wrong place at the wrong time and you can't beat a flash flood. A bird in a cage has no escape. He is trapped.

The psalmist is saying that God saved my life. God took me out from that kind of situation. I owe everything to God. I used to be trapped in a cage, but now I'm free. Apart from God, the enemies would have rolled over me. Apart from God, I would have been engulfed by the floods.



This is true for me, but I often forget it. That's why this psalm is a helpful reminder of the kind of thanks I can give to God. I wouldn't be married if not for God. I wouldn't have adopted children if not for God. I wouldn't have a calling and a community apart from God. Most of all, I wouldn't have hope that the hard things in life will be redeemed and a better day is coming. Truth be told, I wouldn't have any of the good things I have if God weren't on my side.

The attitude that Psalm 123 demonstrated was complete attention and expectance on God. This Psalm shows the same attitude on the other side of a request: giving thanks to God because He saved us from the worst things in life. And he saved us from death itself. This is a reminder of the kind of thanks that I owe to God. Thanks for everything. And so, we are reminded of the simple act of thanking God. Thank God.

I am incredibly grateful to God. Mostly I'm grateful for the little things in life. The small prayers that he answers every day. I'm constantly amazed and I firmly believe that God answers small prayers. In fact, I think that's one of the greatest mysteries of God—why he would do that. But that's not what we're talking about here.

We're talking about complete gratitude and dependence. The gist of this attitude is "without you, I'd be lost." If you hadn't stepped in, my life would have been destroyed. If you weren't part of my life, I would be empty. I would be nothing without you.

No matter what kind of music you like, you have to admit that some ideas are best conveyed by country music. So it should be no surprise that a song by Keith Urban captures this idea as well as anything. Listen to these lyrics.

*The traveling, the singing, it don't mean nothing  
without you  
The fast cars, the guitars, they are all just second to  
This life, this love that you and I have been  
dreaming of for so long  
Would all be as gone without you, without you*

Everything would be gone without you. I would be nothing without you. That's the idea. That's the kind of thanks that we're talking about here. But we're talking about real life, not a country song. If God weren't on our side, we would be nothing.

I read an article on CNN just this morning about groups that are forming atheist churches. They get together and sing, spend time together, and listen to a message; they just don't believe in God. One person had written a song about gratitude that includes these lyrics, "I don't believe

in a great power to say thank you to. But that won't take away from my gratitude." (<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/22/church-without-god-by-design>)

Isn't that amazing? And curious? Doesn't saying thanks require someone to say thank you to? We know who to thank. We know that gratitude orients us toward God who gave us everything. We would be nothing without him.

This is a really nice thing to say in church. But we have to wonder whether it's really true. And one of the reasons we wonder is because we live among people who don't know God. And they aren't all that bad most of their lives. In fact, some of them seem to be doing better than us. What do we do that? Is it really true that I'd be nothing without God?

Well, yes. It is true. I can say that I would be nothing without God. That may lead to a lot of questions about other people and those who don't believe and how it all works. And there are ways of thinking about an answering those questions. We don't have time to go into all of those ideas this morning, but people have been wrestling with this question for a long time. Some of them have come up with some decent answers.

But when it comes right down to it, it doesn't really matter all that much. I don't know about other people. I don't know about you. All I know is that I would be nothing without God. My life wouldn't be what it is. I wouldn't have the blessings I have. I wouldn't have the eternal hope that I have. My pain wouldn't make sense. My life wouldn't make sense. I can honestly say that I owe it all to God.

I only have to answer whether this is true for me. And you don't have to answer that question for your neighbor or your co-worker or the guy who lives halfway around the world and has never heard of Jesus Christ. You just have to answer it for yourself. But I've got a hunch that if you take a really honest look at your life, you'll come to the same conclusion. God is the source of everything. You owe it all to God too.

And if you come to that conclusion too, then you are led to do the same thing we see this psalmist doing. Give thanks to God. Thank God for everything he is and has done for you. Thank God that you are even here to thank him. Without him, we'd be nothing.

## Conclusion

We started off by thinking about all the things we ask for. Safety. Provision. Health. New toys. Emotional well-being.

I've suggested that at the root of all that we want is simply the favor of God. In Psalm 123 we saw a beautiful picture of the kind of attitude to have when we ask God for favor. And we asked along with the psalmist.

Then we wait. We didn't see exactly how God answered the psalmist and I think that's intentional. I think that invites us to look for how God answers that prayer for us. How does God show us his favor?

Then in Psalm 124, we've been led into the natural response to an answered prayer. We give thanks. Not just for the small ways that God takes care for us, but with the realization that we owe everything we are to him. Our jobs, our resources, and our families.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that we were going to let this sermon actually guide us in our worship. We've spent some time asking God. During the worship that follows, I'd like to invite you to take this time to give thanks to God. Thank God for everything he has done for you. Thank him for your very life. Thank him for every good and perfect thing that you have.