

**“The Lord on our Side”**

Psalm 124

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**A Song of Ascents. Of David.**

<sup>1</sup>If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—

let Israel now say—

<sup>2</sup>if it had not been the LORD who was on our side

when people rose up against us,

<sup>3</sup>then they would have swallowed us up alive,

when their anger was kindled against us;

<sup>4</sup>then the flood would have swept us away,

the torrent would have gone over us;

<sup>5</sup>then over us would have gone

the raging waters.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed be the LORD,

who has not given us

as prey to their teeth!

<sup>7</sup>We have escaped like a bird

from the snare of the fowlers;

the snare is broken,

and we have escaped!

<sup>8</sup>Our help is in the name of the LORD,

who made heaven and earth.

**When Struggling: Look Up and Look Back**

I remember climbing up to the Great Wall of China in the summer of 1997. It was a hot, humid day. We had the option of taking the cable car, but I was only 23 years old, so I had to climb up the hard way. I counted more than 1,000 steps on my climb up to the Wall. Getting to the Wall just gave me the opportunity to climb more steps up to the guard tower on the top of the mountain. It was hard, indeed. I had to stop in a couple of places to catch my breath and assess the scope of the struggle. When I did so, it helped to look up and to look back, to see where I was going and to realize how far I had already come.

In life, sometimes we can feel like we're on an uphill trek and running out of breath. Last week, we looked at Psalm 123, and we heard the psalmist's lament and distress at the scorn and contempt of the proud –

*Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.*

*<sup>4</sup> Our soul has had more than enough  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud.*

But the psalmist did something very helpful in Psalm 123. He looked up:

*To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*

*<sup>2</sup> Behold, as the eyes of servants  
look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maidservant  
to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
till he has mercy upon us.*

Having looked up, the Song of Ascents now leads us to the next step in getting relief when we feel overwhelmed, as Psalm 124 helps us look back.

Psalm 124 is a Psalm of David, and it was probably written some 500 years before Psalm 123. Most Bible scholars believe Psalm 123 was written in the years after the return from exile. If you read Nehemiah, the rebuilding of the walls was a work carried on in the face of dangerous threats and also one that had to endure the scorn of those who were at ease and the contempt of the proud.

Listen to the opening of Nehemiah 4 –

*Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. <sup>2</sup> And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves?<sup>[b]</sup> Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" <sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!"*

The scorn and contempt of Sanballat and Tobiah fit perfectly as a background to Psalm 123, which might have been written by Nehemiah or maybe Ezra. If the scholars are right about this background for Psalm 123, then when we turn to Psalm 124, we go back more than 550 years, from 444 BC when the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt to around the year 1000 BC, during the reign of King David.

## A. If the LORD Had Not Been on Our Side (vv. 1-5)

In the early years of King David's reign, the Philistines attacked violently, determined to kill King David, as they had killed King Saul, and bring a final end to the pesky monarchy of Israel. We read about these attacks of the Philistines in 2 Samuel 5:17-25:

*17 When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to search for David. But David heard of it and went down to the stronghold. 18 Now the Philistines had come and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim. 19 And David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?" And the LORD said to David, "Go up, for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand." 20 And David came to Baal-perazim, and David defeated them there. And he said, "The LORD has broken through my enemies before me like a breaking flood." Therefore the name of that place is called Baal-perazim. 21 And the Philistines left their idols there, and David and his men carried them away.*

*22 And the Philistines came up yet again and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim. 23 And when David inquired of the LORD, he said, "You shall not go up; go around to their rear, and come against them opposite the balsam trees. 24 And when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then rouse yourself, for then the LORD has gone out before you to strike down the army of the Philistines." 25 And David did as the LORD commanded him, and struck down the Philistines from Geba to Gezer.*

### I. For Israel

Probably immediately after these great and unexpected victories for the people of God over their fierce enemies, David wrote Psalm 124. As a wise leader with a heart for God, David wanted the people to remember in song that it was the Lord who gave them their victory.

Without the Lord's help, the Philistines would have indeed overwhelmed Israel. The Philistines had dominated Israel for over 100 years, from the days of Samson through the kingship of Saul. They were battle-hardened warriors, and while the Lord had given His people some victories over the Philistines, the superior military might of the Philistines could not be doubted.

David says that without the Lord's intervention - "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side" - Israel's enemies would have devoured them and deluged them. They would have been swallowed up and swept away. Instead, the Lord had broken through like a flood and swept the Philistines away.

Over and over again, God brought Israel to a place where they were completely without hope apart from Him:

1. In the Exodus, God brought Israel to the edge of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army in pursuit. They were stuck between the world's greatest army and the impassable Red Sea. *If it had not been the Lord who was on their side, they would have been devoured by the Egyptian army or drowned by the Red Sea.*
2. In the days of Gideon, the Midianite army swept over the land and stole everything, filling the Valley of Jezreel with over 130,000 soldiers. God gave Gideon an army of only 300 men, so Israel would know the truth: If it had not been the Lord who was on their side, those 300 would have been swallowed up by the 130,000 Midianites, instead of being able to surround them and chase them from the land.
3. About 130 years after King David, King Jehoshaphat led Judah. The Moabites, the Ammonites and the men of Mount Seir assembled a huge army and came in against Judah. In 2 Chronicles 20, we read:

*"Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. <sup>4</sup> And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD.*

*<sup>5</sup> And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, <sup>6</sup> and said, "O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. <sup>7</sup> Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? . . . O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." – 2 Chronicles 20:5-7, 12*

God gave Jehoshaphat some strange marching orders: He was to put the choir in front of the army, to lead the people of God in singing praise and thanksgiving to God as they marched into battle. If it had not been the Lord who was on their side, those poor singers would have been doomed! But when the army reached their enemy, they found they had already been defeated and killed, and all Judah had to do was loot the bodies!

## **2. For the Church**

Of course, God's protection of His people didn't end with the Nation of Israel. The church has repeatedly faced opposition and threatened extermination throughout her history:

1. In 64 AD, the Roman Emperor Nero decided to blame the Christians for the burning of Rome. He executed the apostles Peter, Paul and Andrew and spread a campaign of terror against Christians throughout Rome. How could the church survive the public execution of its most

prominent leaders? If it had not been the Lord who was on their side, the early Christian church would have been swallowed alive by Nero's madness.

2. The most widespread persecution of Christians in ancient Rome came in the late 200's & early 300's under Diocletian and Galerius. These persecutions culminated in an empire-wide edict that all Christians were to be rounded up and executed if they were unwilling to sacrifice to the Roman gods. This "Great Persecution," as it is known to history, would certainly have swept away Christianity in a flood if it had not been the LORD who was on their side.
3. In China, from the 1950's through the 1970's, Mao Zedong attempted to stamp out Christianity. He had tens of thousands of Christian leaders executed and he scattered thousands more across the country in labor camps. Estimates are that approximately 500,000 Chinese Christians remained in communist China under Mao in the early 1950's. By 1979, when the Chinese government decided to officially allow Christians to worship in state-supervised churches again, the Christian population of China had grown to over 10 million. How could widespread, systematic persecution of the church have led to a 20-fold multiplication of Christianity? This would never have been possible if the LORD had not been on their side! Today, estimates of the number of Christians in China vary from 80 million to 120 million.

#### 4. For Us

Can we look back at our own lives, and sing with David and the Israelites, "*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side*"? Where would we be without the LORD? We have not faced intense, violent persecution from foreign armies or oppressive governments, but still, where would we be without the LORD?

We would be lost in our sin, guilty and condemned. We would be alone in the world, not knowing God, not being reconciled to Him and enjoying communion with Him. We would be deceived, believing lies and not set free by the truth found in Jesus alone. If it had not been the LORD who was on our side – Let US all together say – If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, the enemies of our souls – the world, our own sinful flesh, and the devil would indeed have swallowed us alive and swept us away!

#### B. Blessed be the LORD (vv. 6-7)

When we remember and realize how different our lives would have been without the LORD, we can then sing on with David and the Israelites –

<sup>6</sup> *Blessed be the LORD,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth!*

<sup>7</sup> *We have escaped like a bird  
from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped!*

## 1. For Israel

For Israel, the LORD brought them deliverance from their enemies and freedom. Under David and Solomon, they enjoyed a period of long peace and security. For almost 80 years, during the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel enjoyed peace and security from their neighbors and the unified kingdom expanded to more than twice its size, controlling the whole area from Egypt to the Euphrates River in present-day Iraq.

Israel not only escaped from the snare set by the Philistines, they dominated the Philistines and all of their immediate neighbors for generations to come. Sadly, they forgot the source of their success, grew complacent and arrogant, and became divided under Solomon's son, Rehoboam. The Northern 10 Tribes, the nation of Israel, soon started worshiping idols, golden calves set up by their king, Jeroboam.

So many times, when God's people got freedom and prosperity, they took the blessings of God for granted and became corrupt and idolatrous, turning away from the LORD. God would often discipline His people at these times, bringing them into danger or oppression, so they would see their need and cry out to Him. Then, he would rescue them from the snare of the fowlers. The snare would be broken and they would escape.

## 2. For the Church

Many times in church history, too, God's people have been delivered from persecution and set in safety, only to turn away from the Lord. In 1509, Erasmus visited Rome, and Martin Luther visited Rome two years later, in 1511. What these two men saw in the capital city of Christendom sickened them both: gross immorality, rampant corruption, blasphemous masses said in Latin, open prostitution for priests and bishops. It was a cesspool of immorality and greed.

Thankfully, God used Erasmus and Luther's writings and the printing press to expose the immorality of His church and to launch the Reformation, which would be instrumental in strengthening and purifying Christ's church and delivering God's people from the trap of the corruption of the church of the Late Middle Ages.

God's people often wander into the fowler's snare, but God's grace delivers them and brings them out again.

## 3. For Us

Could we testify to the same thing? Can we say . . .

*"Blessed be the LORD,  
who has not given us  
as prey to their teeth!*

*<sup>7</sup>We have escaped like a bird*

*from the snare of the fowlers;  
the snare is broken,  
and we have escaped!”*

How many times have we wandered away from the Lord and gotten ourselves into temptation or doubt or some other trap laid by the enemy of our souls, and how often has the LORD brought us out?

What hope does a bird have when it is caught in the snare of the fowlers? It cannot fight its way out. It cannot force its way to freedom. The devil is a master trap-maker. He has been trapping people from the very beginning. If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, his traps would have held and we would have been lost. But the LORD breaks the snare. He sets the prisoner free.

### **C. Our Help in the LORD (v. 8)**

The last verse of Psalm 124 gives the summary meaning of the whole Psalm:

*Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.*

#### **1. Connection to Psalm 121**

If this verse sounds familiar, it might be because it's very similar to Psalm 121:2 –

*My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.*

The close similarity of these lines is probably not a coincidence. Psalm 124 was written by David, and it was probably well known to the writer of Psalm 121, which is probably written some time later. So, David's song giving thanks to the LORD for His deliverance inspired a later pilgrim to Jerusalem to sing of the help that comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

David says, “*Our help is in the name of the LORD*” – The name of the LORD – YaHWeH – is a way of speaking of the fullness of the LORD's character, all of His attributes. Our help is in the holy, mighty, wise, loving, foreknowing, sovereign, good and just YaHWeH, who is all of these things and more, who never changes in any of His attributes, and who brings all of who He is to be our help when we call out to Him by faith.

#### **2. Connection to Our Lives**

Do we see our great God unchanging, eternal, unfailing, ever-wise, powerful and loving as our help in any and every circumstance? He is our only help and He is an all-sufficient help. If He is our help, no one and nothing can stand against us. But if He is not our help, we are helpless, we will be swallowed alive and swept away.

We need the constant reminder of this truth, for we are so prone to look to ourselves or to other resources. Because God loves us, He sometimes brings us into snares to remind us of our need for Him. If you find yourself in such a snare this morning, and you're wondering how you can possibly escape, stop trying to free yourself. You can't fight or force your way to freedom. Your help must be in the name of the LORD. He alone breaks the fowler's snare. If He is on your side, your deliverance is secure in Him. If He's not, you can't set yourself free no matter how hard you try!

So, how can you know if the LORD is on your side? Well, are you on His side? This reminds me of when Joshua entered the Promised Land and was heading to Jericho, the first walled city on the other side of the Jordan. Joshua encountered a mighty warrior, and he asked him: Are you for us or for our enemies? The warrior said, *"No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come."*

Joshua knew what to do then:

*And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?" And the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

So, how do you know if the Lord is on your side? Are you on His side? Have you come to know Him, trust Him, love Him, and worship Him?