

Psalms 124

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[0 : 00] Let's turn for a moment back to that passage we read, Psalm number 124, and let me read the last verse again.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. With these words, John Calvin would begin every service in Geneva 450 odd years ago.

This verse to him summed up the sum total of the church's existence and experience from the beginning until the present and into the future.

And that as the people of God gathered, what they needed to know was who their God is and what their God has done and is able to do.

And he added these words, he said, David here extends to the state of the church in all ages, that which the faithful has already experienced.

[1 : 08] He not only gives thanks to God for one benefit, but affirms that the church cannot continue safe, except insofar as she is protected by the hand of God.

This is our hope. This is our confidence. This is why we are gathered today that we have the one who has created heaven and earth. We have the one who sustains all things.

And we have him who is our help. And just so that we know that when we use a phrase like the name, when we say the name of the Lord, our help is in the name of the Lord, that that's just a way of saying that everything that we know about God is captured in his name, his character, his nature, his power, his knowledge, his love, his grace, his mercy.

So all that he is, is all that we have, because we need him. And we'll see as we work through this psalm, that the challenges are many and great.

The dangers are varied and horrific, and yet God is there at all times. As I said earlier, this was a song of ascents, a song of climbing.

[2 : 32] And the Christian life is an uphill journey. Please do not consider the Christian life as a path of ease or a path of comfort.

The world can offer you a much more comfortable journey in life. The problem, of course, is the destination. The world cannot give you the destination that God wants to give you, but the world can give you comfort, or the world can give you ease.

But the Christian life is that uphill journey, which is tough. If you're walking uphill, you quickly can get tired or fatigued. But notice, too, that the journey of the Christian is an individual journey, but it is also a journey together.

From the very beginning of the psalm, we have the opening words, A moment ago, George led us in A Mighty Fortress is Our God.

He sang it, and we responded. He set the tune. He set the tempo. He set the pace. He pitched the key, and we responded. And that's exactly what's happening here.

[3 : 50] The people of God are journeying. They're moving upwards to Jerusalem. And as they're moving, they're singing. Because the journey is made easier.

The uphill steps are made lighter. Because they're walking together, and they're singing together. Verse 1 is the presenter, or the cantor.

The one who leads the singing. And verse 2 is the congregation. This large group of people that are coming from all different places, all different backgrounds, but are journeying together to the city of God, Jerusalem, to the house of God, the temple, because they are the people of God.

And they want to join together their songs of praise, and they want to unite together in this great journey. So the Christian life is uphill. The Christian life is a personal journey.

It's a journey that only you can make. And yet it is never intended to be an individual journey. That's why we're here today. We're not in our homes, setting aside the hour between 11 and 12 for personal devotion, for personal Bible reading, or for personal prayer, as important as that would be.

[5 : 05] We are gathered together as the people of God because we need each other. We need each other's comfort. We need each other's encouragement. We need to be reminded that this tough journey is one that many people are traveling.

And that's what fellowship is, and that's what worship is, is that you can carry or encourage or challenge at times.

And maybe this afternoon, if you have a concordance or if you have a computer, look up the verses in the Bible that use this phrase, one another. I think there's at least 11.

There may even be more phrases as to what we are to do one another. Bear one another's burdens. Encourage one another. Spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

So this psalm begins with a lone voice. And the lone voice is echoed or thundered back if the Lord had not been on our side when men attacked us.

[6 : 09] So it's an uphill journey and it's a collective journey. So I'd like to notice three things as we go into the psalm itself. And this is a psalm that has been beloved by many generations of God's people because it captures something of life.

It captures something of the life of faith. It captures something of the struggle or the trials or the challenges that is life. And let me tell you this, if you are a Christian, either you have experienced these struggles or you are experiencing them now, or if you haven't yet, I guarantee you, you will be able to identify in one way or another what is contained here.

First point is simply this. One, there is a battle and God is on our side. If the Lord had not been on our side, already we have a language of sides being taken, of battle lines being drawn, that there is a conflict and that there are two sides.

And the psalmist, David, is able to confidently say that if God was not, if God was not on our side, we would have been lost.

We would have been overwhelmed. We would have been overcome. In the midst of the American Civil War, the American president at the time, Abraham Lincoln, was often asked the question, Mr. President, do you believe that God is on our side, the side of the North or the side of the Union?

[7 : 50] And Lincoln responded, he said, Sir, my concern is not whether God is on my side. My greatest concern is to be on God's side.

For God is always right. So there is a battle. And you are asked today to take sides. And my question to you is, are you on God's side?

Are you on the side of God who makes heaven and earth? Are you on the side of God who sustains all things? Are you on the side of God who has sent Jesus into this world? Because this is not a time and this is not a place for neutrality.

You can't sit on this fence. You can't just step out of this battle. There are two sides clearly drawn. And David is saying God is on our side.

Not because we have this merit or it's not because we're good people and they're bad people. But there's a real vital relationship here. David is a man after God's own heart.

[8 : 56] David, and he knows that the people of God, are those who acknowledge God, those who trust God, those who follow God, those who want to be in God's presence.

So the first step is, are you on God's side? Because God's side, as Abraham Lincoln says, God is always right.

6th of December, 1941, America was existing in splendid isolationism. Up until that point, 1941 was known for a terrific baseball season.

Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, those were the big names up until the 6th of December. You see, the Americans were able to live isolated from the problems in the Pacific.

That was Britain and Japan. That had nothing to do with us. They could live in isolation from Europe. That was Germany and Italy and the other European countries.

[9 : 56] On the 8th of December, 1941, millions of American men signed up to join the Navy, to join the Army, to join the Air Force. The American economy was on a war footing, and everything had changed.

And you ask, well, what's the difference between December 6th and December 8th? The answer, of course, is December 7th. That the United States was attacked. That Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Japanese, and the Japanese and the Germans declared war.

So in one day, everything has changed. And you had to take sides. Are you going to fight? Are you going to flee? There is a battle, and God is on our side of the battle, because we are trusting in him.

We are believing in him. So, if you are on God's side, if your faith is in him, let us then look at the battle in more detail, because we're told that there are many dangers in this battle, but we have, and we have real enemies.

There are at least four images here that the psalmist captures to say, let me tell you what this battle looks like, and let me tell you what these opponents look like.

[11 : 17] Let me tell you how the enemies want to deal with you, and then when you understand that, you will better understand what God has in store, and how much he cares, and what he has done.

So, the opening refrain, if the Lord had not been on our side, if the Lord had not been on our side, and then when men attacked us. Today, Christians feel that we are in the midst of a battle that we are losing, or we are in the midst of a battle that has been lost.

The voices against are many. The voices in favor are few. One thing to keep in mind, the 20th century, if you look at the church as a worldwide organization, which it is, in the 20th century, the Christian church has advanced more than in any other century since the first century, since the book of Acts time, that what happened in the last century has no precedence.

We don't see that here. We see decline. We see decay. We see a small church and a big world. But you go to Africa, and you go to the African continent, which in our own generation, may soon reach the 50% mark of Christianity.

At the beginning of the 20th century, it was under 10%. You go to South America. Generation ago, countries like Peru, Brazil, were 1%, less than 1% evangelical Christians.

[12 : 59] Today, 15%, maybe 20%, hard to tell. But the church worldwide is growing. We don't see that here, but it is growing. Why? Because God has a plan and a purpose for this world.

But that doesn't mean that in those areas where there's growth that there's no conflict, quite the opposite. So whether we feel to be few or whether we feel to be many, let's look at what the battle looks like here.

First image in verse 3. When their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive. So the first image here is of a beast or of a monster, of an animal that is so big that it can swallow you whole.

That gives you a size of scale, doesn't it? An opponent that's so big that could just envelop you in one gulp. The second image is in verse 4.

The image here is a flood or a torrent or raging waters. The floodwaters that go over your head. The torrents that sweep you along.

[14 : 12] The raging waters that sweep you away. Again, we are unequal to such an opponent. The monster that can swallow you whole.

The waters that would engulf you or sweep you away. You're not going to withstand those waters. If you remember the Boxing Day tsunami and the footage that captured what happened on that morning.

That the water just kept coming and coming and coming and everything in its way just was carried along. Didn't matter whether it was people. Didn't matter whether it was chairs or parts of the hotel furniture.

Didn't matter. Everything was carried by that wall of water. The second image or the third image is slightly different at the end of verse 6. Who has not let us be torn by their teeth.

It's again an image of an animal or of a ferocious beast. But instead of the beast that is so big that it can swallow you whole this is a is a beast that will just tear you to bits.

[15 : 18] I don't know which image is more attractive being swallowed whole or being torn to bits. Neither really does appeal does it? But it's as if the psalmist is painting a picture in vivid colors and saying let's just understand the battle that we're in.

Let's understand the enemies that are raging against us. The monster so big he can swallow you. The waters that are so high they can engulf you or sweep you away. the animal whose teeth is so sharp that it can chew you up.

And then the third fourth image at the very end is the snare. Not just a trap that is set but a trap that has been sprung. We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare.

The snare has been broken and we have escaped. So the idea here is that a trap has been set and the bird comes into the trap or the net all of a sudden it's in the net.

It's in the snare. And if you understand the imagery a bird in a snare is soon to be a bird in a pot. It's soon going to be lunch or dinner. There's nowhere else to go.

[16 : 30] It's trapped. Each of these four images says to us that we cannot face this enemy alone. These enemies are too big.

They are too powerful. They are too strong. They are too vicious. And what's more we are already caught. We are already trapped.

The Bible describes sin in many different ways. But one of the ways in which Jesus describes sin he says sin is like slavery. When you sin or whoever sins is a slave to sin.

Now by that very definition we have an insight here. Because a slave is someone who is owned or controlled by someone else. And that someone else has greater power.

Makes sense doesn't it? If a slave had the ability to be free he or she would be free. If a slave had the resources to buy their freedom they'd buy their freedom.

[17 : 34] If a slave had rights they would exercise their rights. But they don't. We don't. We can't. You see sin keeps us in captivity just like the snare keeps the bird in a net.

We can't free ourselves. The bird can't free itself. Each of these enemies is too powerful for us to meet. That opening illustration again we come back to.

If the Lord had not been on our side are you on God's side? But let me tell you what it means when God is on your side. If you're not familiar with Romans chapter 8 or if you haven't read Romans chapter 8 in a while please take this afternoon after you look up the one and other verses to read through Romans 8 and when you come to the end of that chapter you'll read these words.

Verse 31 what then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us who can be against us? Because you might say I would like to be on God's side.

I'd like God to be on my side. But how can I know? How can I be sure? How do I know that God is with me? Well Paul says he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

[19 : 04] Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns Christ Jesus who died more than that who was raised to life is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us?

Not surprisingly the key is Jesus. The key to the children's address the key to every children's address is Jesus but the key to every sermon is Jesus.

Who are we to believe in John 3 16? We are to believe in God's one and only son. How do we know that God is on our side or that we are on his side? The answer is Jesus.

We trust in him. Why? Because of what he has done. Not because of what we've done. Not because of what we haven't done. Jesus Christ died.

More than that he's raised to life. More than that he's at God's right hand. So if we're talking about battles and if we're talking about enemies we need one who has all power.

[20 : 09] And we're told that Jesus Christ is in the place of ultimate power. As a left-handed person I don't like these illustrations but nonetheless the Bible says that the right hand is symbolic of power.

power. And if Jesus is at the right hand of God he is in that place of God's ultimate power and authority. Everything is under his control.

Everything is under his command. Now usually when I'm in Edinburgh I remind the congregation of Baclue that I'm from America.

So if in case you need to be reminded I'm from America. America. So I tend to use American illustrations. Maybe David tends to use Peruvian illustrations. So bear with me.

I'm not going to talk about Peru today but I will talk about America. Let me take you back to 1944. I took you back to 1941. I took you back to 1861 in the American Civil War.

[21 : 05] But let me take you back to 1944. The problem was the American and allied forces were trying to move east.

They were now in Europe. They wanted to cross the Rhine and cross into Europe. Into Germany itself. It rained for three months. With that level of rain, that level of snow, tanks are largely immobile.

The army was stagnated. It couldn't go anywhere. The general in charge of the Third Army, one George S. Patton, realized that his soldiers were demoralized.

They were bored. Morale was low. They couldn't do anything. Picks up the phone and he summons the chaplain, one James O'Neill, and says, Chaplain, do you have a prayer for good weather?

The chaplain said, give me an hour, I'll bring one to you. The chaplain brought this prayer. Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech thee of thy great goodness to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend.

[22 : 15] Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon thee that armed with thy power, we may advance from victory to victory and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish thy justice among men and nations.

Patton liked this prayer. He said, Chaplain, get that printed on 250,000 cards and have it distributed to every man in the third army. To that card, the general added his own Christmas good wishes with the following words, may God's blessing rest upon each of us on this Christmas day.

When those cards were distributed, something unusual had happened just a few days earlier. The German army, which was considered incapable of launching an offensive, launched an offensive.

And that offensive moved west. Remember, the Allies are going east, now the Germans are going west. The Allies are out of position, the weather is horrendous, and the Germans are now moving.

Patton has these 250,000 cards distributed to his men. It's now the 23rd of December, and by that date, the men had all received the cards.

[23 : 38] And for the first time in three months, there was clear weather. At this point, the generals were in confusion. How do we deal with this German offensive?

General Eisenhower is in charge, says to Patton, how quickly can you get? They had to get to this small place called Bastogne. How quickly can you get there, George? And he said, I can get there in 48 hours.

Eisenhower said, that's impossible. You can't move tanks that quickly. You can't move them in this terrible weather. You just can't do that. George said, I can get them there in 48 hours. So the third army turns around, moves to Bastogne.

Is it a coincidence? Is it a coincidence that 250,000 men were ordered to pray, commanded to pray, that rains that hadn't stopped for three months stopped, that clear weather prevailed, that tanks that couldn't move that distance in 48 hours moved that distance in 48 hours?

In Bastogne itself, the allies were outnumbered five to one. They were given an unconditional invitation to surrender. The commanding general in Bastogne responded with a one-word response, nuts, which I think was taken to mean no, because the Germans thought the allies can't get here.

[24 : 54] They can't get back in time. They're too far out of position. It's absolutely impossible. The army was surrounded. All they could do was surrender. They were in a snare.

They were trapped. They were caught. They were outnumbered by the enemy. There was no help and there was no hope until help came, until hope was restored. And when we look at God and when we look at our circumstances, we might clearly conclude, I am surrounded.

I am outnumbered. We are few and the enemies are many. We don't have help. We don't have hope. We don't have an answer. We don't have anywhere to turn.

And faith turns to God in the midst of the trouble. Faith turns to God in the midst of the battle. And faith trusts in God that he and he alone is the answer.

Now we have many enemies. But verses, the key verses for us today, the central verse of this psalm is verse six and the concluding verse, verse eight.

[26 : 01] If you look at the structure of the psalm, everything kind of builds to verse six. You have a structure that's what they call parallel and the parallel structure points to a central verse.

And the central verse says, in the midst of these four pictures of enemies, of opponents, of being surrounded, of being devoured, of being swallowed, of being overwhelmed, praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth.

Verse eight, our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and of earth. This psalm gives to us help.

And this psalm gives to us hope. As Calvin reminded us, this is a statement of what God has done in the past.

But it's not simply a history lesson. It's not simply a reminder of what happened to the people of God in generations long ago. And how God came to their aid and came to their rescue and isn't that wonderful.

[27 : 07] But this is a reminder of past events, of past deliverance for the people of God in their present trial or trouble.

So this is what God did in the past. This is David's testimony. And this is the testimony of God's people generation to generation. But what about you?

What about us? We don't live in the past. We don't live in Old Testament times. We don't live in the days of David. We aren't literally on that journey to Jerusalem.

What about us? Well, one reason that psalms like this are so precious and have been so popular is because what is true then is true now.

Why? Well, first and foremost, God doesn't change. His character doesn't change. His nature doesn't change. His commitment doesn't change.

[28 : 04] We change. You know, it's very often we can be hot, we can be cold, we can be strong, we can be weak, we can be fervent, we can be apathetic. But God doesn't change. God's word doesn't change.

God's truth doesn't change. So if God says there are trials and troubles, if God says there are enemies and opponents, if God says that going is tough, that's true then and it's true now.

But if God is our help then, then God is our help now. If God is to be praised in the midst of the trouble, in the midst of the torrent, in the midst of the teeth that are trying to grind us to bits, if he's worthy to be praised then, he's worthy to be praised now.

Because the deliverance, the mercy, the power, the grace is unchanged, is undiminished. When I said we were on an uphill journey, it reminded me that five mornings a week I'm on a treadmill.

Literally. So before I go to work, I go to the treadmill, I start off with boundless energy, and I barely finish my routine, and by the end of the routine, I am physically tired.

[29 : 21] And that's what we are like. The beginning of the day and the end of the day. You're tired at the end of the day. The beginning of the work week, the end of the work week, you're tired. The beginning of class, the end of class, you get the idea.

We get tired. We grow weary. We grow weak. Our resources ebb away. You get older. You get weaker.

God never gets weaker. God never grows older. God expends energy, but never gets tired. God continues and always is and always does.

And this is how God is so different from us, and God is different from anything that we can imagine, is that he gives and gives and gives. He works and works and works. He saves and saves and saves, and he never finds himself weaker, finds himself in an unable or incapable.

So here you have history, what God did. But here you have a present help for us as God's people. But more than that, it's not just that we have a message for yesterday, nor is it that we have hope for today, but we have confidence for tomorrow.

[30 : 38] Because you might be here today. You might not yet be a Christian. Maybe God is asking you, it's time maybe to declare which side of this conflict you're on.

Maybe it's time to declare whose you are and who you serve. But maybe you are in the middle of this battle, and maybe you are feeling this battle very keenly.

Well, God has a message saying, keep going. He's with you. He's on your side. He won't let you go. Even in the midst of all of this, are you able, in verse 16, to say, praise be to God?

Are you able to add your voice, your praise, your prayer? Because not only do we cry out to God for help in the midst of crisis, do we cry out to God in praise in the midst of crisis and say, God, if it weren't for you, I would have been overwhelmed already.

But what about tomorrow? What about next week? What about conflicts or trials or troubles that we can't even imagine now?

[31 : 43] God is there. Doesn't change. This world largely doesn't change. The details of this world do change. Technology changes. But human nature doesn't change.

The human condition doesn't change. The reality of the battle doesn't change. So you might not be in the midst of the battle right now. You might not feel that you are in the midst of the conflict right now.

But I guarantee you that at some point in your future, the words of Psalm 124 will hit home. And you'll say, I know exactly what David is talking about. I know exactly what he's talking about regarding the enemies.

I know exactly what he's talking about regarding the conflict. I know exactly what he's talking about regarding the ferocity and the danger that I am facing.

Then you can say the Lord, if he had not been on our side, all would have been lost. That praise be to the Lord because he has not let us be torn apart by their teeth.

[32 : 45] That the snare has been broken. We have not broken that snare. We have not effected our escape. Remember I said the image of sin is slavery. We need someone to release us from slavery.

We need someone to release us from the snare. And only God can break those bonds. Only God can cut that net. And only Jesus can set us free.

The great contrast we see in the Bible, Paul brings us out in Galatians chapter 4. Jesus brings us out in John chapter 8. Jesus says, whoever sins is a slave to sin, but if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, the Galatians who were struggling with legalism, you know, they were struggling with this new way of basically putting themselves into a new kind of bondage.

Jesus said, why on earth would you ever leave slavery, experience freedom, and go back to being a slave? It doesn't make sense. Because he says the gospel does this.

[33 : 51] The gospel message of Jesus takes people who are enslaved by sin. Enslaved by their own habits. Enslaved by their own selfishness. Enslaved by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And the gospel comes and cuts the snare and cuts the net and says to the captives, you are now free because someone else has paid the price.

Someone else has satisfied the debt. Someone else has fought the battle. And his name is Jesus. So the freedom that we have means that no longer are we slaves, but Paul wants you to know that you are sons.

Jesus says no longer slaves but free. Paul says no longer slaves but sons. Free people. Sons, members of a family.

Sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is who we are now. And this is what we will experience in fullness then.

[34 : 54] So the message before us today is a message of past deliverance. This is what God did. It's a message of present help. This is what God is doing and is able to do.

And what's more, it's a message of future hope and comfort. That our God will bring you to his desired destination. You won't fall by the wayside.

You won't be devoured by the enemy. You won't be overcome by the torrent. But he who is faithful, he will take you from where you are to where he wants you to be.

And that's why John Calvin says that this is the message of hope for every generation of God's people, for every generation of the church. Present help and future comfort.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. May God bless his word to each of our hearts. Let's pray.

[35 : 56] Father, thank you for your grace, goodness, love, mercy and kindness. Thank you for your power, your majesty, that you know all, that you see all, and that you are able to do absolutely everything.

Lord, speak to each heart here. To any who are uncommitted or unconverted, any who are unconvinced, Lord, persuade them in a way that only you can persuade. For those of us who are struggling with trials, trials, temptations, the world, the flesh, or the devil, give us renewed hope.

Give us renewed comfort. And give us the courage to move forward in faith. And Lord, whatever the future holds, Lord, remind us that you will take us through the future into that future destination and desire that you have for us as your people.

Hear us and help us, we pray. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. We're now going to the end.