

The LORD's Side Psalm 124

A week ago, this past Saturday, as I stood browsing in a gift shop located inside of the Von Trapp Hotel and Restaurant in central Vermont, there were the expected earworm songs playing throughout.¹ *Doe, a deer, a female deer/Ray, a drop of golden sun; Edelweiss, edelweiss, every morning you greet me/ strong and white, clean and bright, you look happy to meet me*, etc. In the hours and days following our visit I would hum or whistle these tunes without much thought. All poetry-lite and singable tunes, which serve to brighten a few moments or lighten the day's load in some way. Yet, what many of you have discovered is that most pop tunes and clever choruses have little power to sustain the weary.

Maybe a few of these songs sung by Israelite pilgrims rose to earworm status. One might think that the physical drain of climbing up to the city of Jerusalem was a reflection of their continual uphill battles—with their enemies, with their personal and corporate sins, with their wounding circumstances (both self-inflicted and those in which they had no control over). As Matt pointed out a few psalms back, one might also sensibly conclude that some of these songs were a reflection of the many ways in which we all experience life—there are moments of clarity, victory, and joy, and there are moments of confusion, defeat, and sorrow. God's people sing in major keys, and in minor one. Psalm 124 falls more inside of the first. It's a psalm of thanksgiving and praise, with some similar themes we've noted thus far in these songs for these travelers.

But the characteristics worth highlighting bear small resemblance to the music in that Vermont gift shop, or what you might hear on 104.5—The River. Attached to these pieces is a breathtaking composition of a unique sea of providences amidst these wayfaring sufferers. And the song's content is divine revelation, which unfolds the ways and will of the one, true God, who tabernacled among us in His Son. Here we find meat meant to sustain and drink meant to strengthen those who journey in perilous times and circumstances. Here is a timeless word for those that have known the stings of hatred and mistreatment, of doing what is right and suffering for it, of being an enemy, not by combat but by simply standing on the good confession of Christ as King of all of life. If you're in here, you've tasted bitter pills like these on some level. But if said King is on the throne of your heart this day, you've also come to understand that the flavor of truth can offer us moments that calm or even overtake such vicious realities.

I. Worth repeating: God's position to assure His people

[1] If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—[2] if it had not been the LORD who was on our side... We're not given clear, contextual details of David's ascent psalm here. But whatever he intended to convey, he did so drawing lines. God has a people, and He is on their side. But some are not sided with Him. There are those belonging to His kingdom marked by childlike faith, and there are those outside His kingdom marked by resistance and unbelief.

Part of our problem, with the limited perspectives and wisdom we possess, is that we can't always determine who is on what side. It reminded me of a basketball summer camp I attended my sophomore year of high school in Haywood County. Kids, this was 1992—a long, long time ago!

¹ As many of you know, the von Trapp family's story was loosely expressed through the 1959 movie release called *The Sound of Music*.

We were issued maroon jerseys for a scrimmage, and the team we were playing were issued brown ones. Now, unless you're colorblind, you might be able to see why I kept throwing precise passes to those on the other team! We're sometimes utterly fooled into thinking that particular individuals and groups are in the LORD's camp, when indeed we come to discover later that it was not so, or vice-versa. This schools us to not be so confident in what we initially see in others. When taking spiritual temperatures, all of our thermometers are prone to error.

But this is not the angle we have here. The musical repetition is a call to remember that God has indeed acted mightily in the past for a particular people—Israel. In fact, one commentator points out that these words, *was on our side* is the past tense of the Hebrew idea of *Immanuel*, which signifies a present tense reality of God being immediately present among His people.² God with us now. But David is composing in similar ways to other songwriters who knew the mercy of David's God. He's reflecting on ages where God was unquestionably with Israel, and the reflection is giving focus through the tears and angst for the current needs.

So, the repetition of verses 1 & 2 conveying God's position of favor in past events is meant to be a balm to immediate wounds, a recent help for recent troubles. But this is an if/then psalm. What if God was not on the side of these pilgrims seeking to sing their way through the difficulties of life? And this song specifies that difficulty, the difficulty of other people who are angry, frustrated, hostile, even to the point of bloodthirst. That's the evil that David poetically brings into the light. But it's an evil which could have been a lot worse!

II. Worth recalling: God's power to preserve His people

[1] If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—[2] if it had not been the LORD who was on our side when people rose up against us, [3] then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us...

a. The intensity of opposition

Sometimes, the intensity of our physical hunger is manifested in the way we consume our food. If we're just grazing through or having significant conversation over a meal, then that most likely means we've either past "starving" status or we never really reached that point to begin with. But when we've gone all day without a square meal, we talk less and with quicker pace consume what's before us. The conversation time shrinks, and so does our chewing time. When our hunger is intense, our actions tend to show it. As the song unfolds, David imagines the life of Israel without the protective power of their God, ***If it had not been the LORD who was on our side when people rose up against us, [3] then they would have swallowed us up alive.*** David knows personally and reminds the nation that the hunger of God's enemies to consume God's people is so intense that these enemies would have ***swallowed them up alive.*** The aggression described reveals the intensity of their hunger to harm and destroy. The hate and anger of the godless is often worse than a ravenous beast utterly uninterested in toying with its food, swallowing its prey whole.

The poetic horror film keeps rolling off David's pen as he employs metaphors related to the destructive powers of water. If not God, ***[4] then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent***

² Longman and Garland, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Psalms*, 902-903.

would have gone over us; [5] then over us would have gone the raging waters. Now, the anger of God's opponents leaves the heart hungry to destroy and works its way into outward expression. Similar to joy, anger unexpressed is an incomplete anger, yet no less dangerous to its host. The master Rabbi instructed us on the dangers of anger spilling over in one's life.³ Unchecked, anger floods its host and other lives close by, being the root cause of much destruction in this world. Like raging waters, it often comes in a flash, is gone, and leaves nothing left standing. Proverbs 24:7, "*Wrath is cruel, and anger is overwhelming...*"

In the context of anger, we can see God coming to the aid of His people in His Word, taking sides as it were. God took sides after Nebuchadnezzar, in a fit of rage, heated the furnace 7 times hotter than normal to burn up the 3 Hebrew men who refused to bow to him. And God's rescue was described like this, "*The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them.*"⁴ The king's anger had zero effect on the welfare of these men. God was on their side. He can ably manage the anger and fury of kings and nations just fine. Psalm 2 states that He's so *not-rattled* by the nations raging against Him and against His Royal Son, that we read, "*He who sits in the heavens laughs...*" This is sovereign poise, purposed to calm us when our enemies are not calmed.

The first martyr of the church, Stephen, experienced the destructive powers of human anger. After his sermon on the historic rebellion of the whole nation, here is how Luke wrote of the Sanhedrin's intense emotional response to Stephen, "*Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.*"⁵ And we know how that story ended. We could make our way to the central event in the history of the world—the death of Christ—and notice the footprints of anger through that event. Matthew 21 tells us that the chief priests and scribes were indignant at "*the wonderful things [Jesus] had done.*" Imagine what kind of anger sees sufferings relieved, yet it still persists at the One who relieved it! One would think that relieving sufferings would always bring applause, but among humanity, that's not always the reality. Stephen and Jesus met a hungry anger, a cruelty mingled with jealousy, a strong, dark emotion intent on devastation.

Our text is not the first time David has borrowed from the world of water to express intensity. In 2 Samuel 5, after the Philistines heard of David's coronation, we read this, "*...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.'* [21] *And the Philistines left their idols there, and David and his men carried them away.*" Did you notice the turning of the tide? Instead of God's enemies flooding over God's people, God is the one who washes over His enemies like a breaking flood. He has a people for whom He exerts his limitless power.

³ Jesus does so in Matthew 5:21-22. For a clear, comprehensive treatment on Jesus' teaching regarding anger, I highly commend the readable commentary called *The Sermon on the Mount* by Charles Quarles, specifically pages 108-115. In fact, you would benefit by simply buying this commentary and using it in your daily studies.

⁴ Daniel 3:27

⁵ Acts 7:54

The flood, the torrent, and the raging waters. If water had emotions, then these words would certainly describe the instabilities associated with anger. But one of the questions you might be asking, “What is the world so angry about?” It’s an old question I alluded to earlier, “*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?*”⁶ Maybe the easier question is, “What is the world NOT angry about?” Is the world angrier than it was in antiquity? The first century? The Dark Ages, or during the Reformation period? What man or pollster can accurately measure? But what of the particular rage of our day? Are there distinctions from then to now? Perhaps the number of outlets for anger, or the ease of access to more voices. Maybe the visual component of this digital age compounds the problem. And, tied to these is what Carl Trueman coined as “The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self,” where personal satisfaction to the neglect of all else is the new determination, with no blushing involved. The late Tim Keller wrote, “American culture, which pits self-fulfillment against self-sacrifice, will produce revenge...as a response to any mistreatment...In such a culture...revenge and anger are considered authentic.”⁷ If Keller is right, then we are situated in a profoundly fuming and sad mess. To stay weaponized with anger and releasing it is, in part, the path of genuine self-expression. There are multiple trigger points, but not the least among them are many aspects of the gospel itself. “You are sinful and lost without the grace of God.” “Christ is the only way to the Father.” “You must turn from your sin and cast all your hope of eternal life in what Christ has accomplished in your place at the cross.”

It’s not hard to draw ire in our day. Beyond our own borders, the church in various parts of the world have it worse than us. But to our text, how many times has the LORD mercifully calmed and turned off the raging heart-waters of those who oppose our faith? The history of martyrdom shows us that not every evil and angry hand is stayed, but how many more hands would have shed blood without His gracious power in operation? We all can and should do the kind of reflection that this song persuades us to do. If our collective stories of God’s preserving work in our lives were in book form just up to this point, from every birth here to today, I would say (and you might agree upon reflection) that we would be in dire need of more bookshelf space.

b. The defying of odds

[6] Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! If we’re here, and we’re a part of the bride of Christ, we can’t help but to join in David’s praise. The unbelieving enemies of the cross are compared here to that of an undomesticated, wild animal. Coupling this with the *swallowing alive* idea of verse 3, the allusion to *teeth* adds to the hostile nature of those at cross purposes with God and His purchased people.

But the metaphor David uses to reveal just how close to being destroyed God’s people have come, or just how timely God’s rescue has taken place, he expresses in simile form in verse 7, ***We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped!*** Implied in this escape is the sinister plan behind it.⁸ Bird snares don’t naturally appear. There is planning regarding bird habits to answer the question of how to catch it; bird sizes to answer the question of how big or small the trap needs to be; what purpose the bird might serve once captured, and so on. Not all anger acts in haste. Sometimes those who seethe with rage are able to devise

⁶ Psalm 2:1

⁷ Tim Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?*, 36-37.

⁸ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 647.

calculated tactics to destroy what and who they hate. And sometimes they do it to heighten the humiliation of their subjects, or the suffering of their subjects.⁹

But the reflections here are on not so much on the ingenuity or strength of those who have *escaped*, but on how such escape took place in the first place. The snare was broken, made ineffective and useless by the power of our kind Heavenly Father. This word picture David expresses not only points to how God rendered ineffective the actual *snare*, but like birds with little strength or leverage to escape, so are God's people so often in times of trouble. Satan, and those under his waning and fading jurisdiction and sway, must be ever contending in frustration. Why? Because of God's grace which never stops being exerted towards His children. One commentator conveys well the textual swell projecting forth God's kindness in the face of danger, "As the imagery goes on, it becomes more beautiful. Tender ideas are associated with the escape of a bird from the snares which the art and cruelty of man has contrived, to deprive it of life, or rob it of liberty."¹⁰ ***Blessed be the LORD***, then, is the reasonable and joyous response of God's people who think on any length of what could have befallen them along life's paths.

Many of you have known the clutches of evil, of being completely vulnerable to it, or of feeling that you simply can't make it through or escape it. *But God*. So close to losing life as you knew it, losing faith. It was a close call, but this truth stood up, whether you knew it at the moment or not—***if it had not been the LORD who was on [my] side***. We've all had physical close calls. Sometimes, we've measured the difference between life and death in inches, or centimeters even. "It just missed the artery," "Another second and that eighteen-wheeler would have....," "I was supposed to be in the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11th, 2001." And these are simply the things that we've been enabled to see with our eyes and hear with our ears, and God deserves honor for such kindnesses. But what of the thousands of other times where, without a confident prayer, without unmistakable faith, with no knowledge of how close we were to a destructive hate, a successful evil scheme, and God steps in to exert His power to rescue?

But move on past the physical for a moment...we were kept, time and again, from making that wretched decision, even though we desired it—a decision that could have set us on a course of ruin! And some choices we've made were indeed wretched, yet, here you are, my brother, my sister, in Christ, enjoying the privileges of being His child, enabled to wrestle with sin, His joy bubbling up, His hand stirring inside of your sorrows to conform you to the Man of sorrows. ***Blessed be the LORD!***

David, singing Israel's song, sings our song, too. In fact, our playlist is up to 4 flawlessly inspired hits. So, have you blessed the LORD, Psalm 120, for hearing You in your distresses? Have you blessed the LORD, Psalm 121, who has kept you from the full force and rage of evil, for keeping your goings out and comings in? Have you blessed the LORD, Psalm 122, for binding you to a community where there is a sweet measure of peace within? Have you blessed the LORD, Psalm 123, for giving you eyes to see Him who is enthroned in the heavens, covering the whole of your life with His mercies?

⁹ In the middle of the 4th century, the northern African city of Alexandria was a hotbed for persecution. The Foxe's Book of Martyrs records how the Christians of that city were captured, eviscerated, and cast down for the hungry swine population of the city to feast upon. This practice with some measure of planning was not for the health of the hogs, but to shame believers, and it was for the unbelieving to witness with malicious pleasure the unimaginable pain of such horrors. See *The Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 51.

¹⁰ William Plummer, *Psalms*, 1106.

Yes, the opposition is intense, and oftentimes rather frightening. But we join in this song to imagine what life would be like without God on our side. We join in this song to recall God’s power over what destruction and ruin could have marked our lives. We bless the LORD for His providential rescue, both seen with gratitude, and unseen with a relief of released praise.

III. Worth restating (or re-singing): God’s provision to help His people

[8] *Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.* The word structure from Psalm 121:2 only veers slightly with small nuance—*our help is in the name of the LORD*. When we see this idea in scripture, we should think of the totality of all that God is for His people. His *name* represents His character and His acts, He loved Israel through her rebellion, judged the nations who rejected His revelation and mistreated His people, and He crafted creation to resound His glory in a million ways. Jeremiah the prophet spoke of God in these exact terms—as faithful, as a judge who shields and defends, and as Creator.¹¹ And to David’s point, will this **LORD, who made heaven and earth**, fail to watch over our lives with the same power and wisdom He exerted in creation? Is He not capable of delivering us from every evil, angry scheme that mankind can throw at His church? In other words, if He crafted the quagmire of black holes, the stunning beauty of sunsets, and the metal-melting volcano that can throw boulders 2 miles in the sky, then is He really able to ward off the worst that this world can heave towards His children? **Blessed be the LORD**—we have a resounding answer from this psalm, and that psalm; this narrative and that narrative; this epistle and that epistle. Help—second by second help—is for those who know this God. ***Our help is in the name of the LORD.***

Conclusion

Is this God on your side? Have you clutched the greatness of His loving heart by faith in Jesus Christ? Have you known the tenderness, and the loving discipline of His fatherly help? When we hover over this song of David, and try to make sense of the whole, it’s an incredibly father-heavy sermon. God, protecting His flock, gathering them under the wings of His providential care over and over and over and over again. Saints, let’s bless the LORD together in these moments.

If you’re here this morning, maybe you’re angry and having a difficult time pinpointing exactly why. Maybe you know precisely why your heart can’t shake the gnawing agitation. Every believer in this room this morning would invite you into the *still* waters and green pastures of life in the Son of God. But we’re also inviting you into more than that—a kingdom whose King will show Himself to be just the Lord and Father your heart longs for. By trusting Christ, you are moved by grace over to God’s side. And He will “establish you and guard you against the evil one.”¹²

¹¹ Note these in the book of Jeremiah: God is Faithful—32:41, God is Judge—11:20, God is Creator—10:12.

¹² Notice the context of this 2 Thessalonians 3:1–3 passage, “*Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.*” Same essential context as Psalm 124. The agreement of its parts is one of those pillars that show the Word of God to be just that.