

## **Things to think about on your way to church**

### **Psalm 124 – We're going to meet the God who is on our side**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

We are continuing our series on things to think about on our way to church. By looking at the Psalms of Ascent, we will get a guide as to what the Psalmist thought important. Three times each year, the people of Israel were expected to make their journey to Jerusalem, and these Psalms may well have been sung on the journey to lift the spirits and to forge a bond of community. They may well have also been sung by the Temple choir on the different days of the feast and as the steps up into the Temple were climbed. All in all, Psalms 120 to 134 form an impressive body of spiritual thought to encourage godly worship.

However, I have to say that when my children were small, these kinds of things were generally a million miles away from my thought life. Petty squabbles in the back of the car, a nappy explosion and a whole host of other things that are routine for the happy chaos that is normal family life screamed more loudly than a quiet meditation on this or any other Psalm.

As we look at these Psalms it is not to add an additional layer of guilt onto those who faithfully attend church with their children. This is an excellent thing to do and is worth persevering with. Nor is it to add pressure to schedules that already seem to have more things to do than hours in the day. However, when possible, the subject matter of these Psalms does deserve our thought, and when we have a choice over what we fill our minds with, a study of the Psalms will reap rich reward. Let us begin then by reading the whole, short Psalm.

“If it had not been the LORD who was on our side,” Let Israel now say—  
“If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive, when their wrath was kindled against us; then the waters would have overwhelmed us, the stream would have gone over our soul; then the swollen waters would have gone over our soul.” Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

The Psalm easily falls into two sections with the first five verses rejoicing in the fact that it is Jehovah – the relationship name of God who keeps His promises to His people – who is on our side. Then in verses 6 – 8 David returns in praise to the LORD and rejoices in his current redemption. It is so important to recognise that it is all about God. If we take away the words that the translators have added to make the sense of verse 2, and help it to read better, we would be left with “Had it not been Jehovah! He was for us, oh let Israel say! Had it not been Jehovah! He who was for us when men rose against us.” It is vital to retain a right sizing of the God who is for us. In David’s Psalm 23 we get a similar thing. The English introduction to the Psalm is translated as The LORD is my shepherd. However, this translates the Hebrew Jehovah Rohi – just His name and it is because of Who He is that “I shall not want.” The emphasis there as in Psalm 124 is the

fact that Jehovah is the One who is in view. In the words of the children's chorus: "Our God is a great big God." In fact no matter how great an understanding and picture we have of God, it will always fall short of the reality.

I still remember a day when I was walking home from Junior school – I was probably in year 4 or 5 as it is called today. Some children from another school approached me menacingly. However, I confidently told them that if they did not leave me alone, I would get my big brother onto them! Happily, for me, it worked. The reality though was that my big brother was only a year and a half older, hardly any bigger than me, and whip thin – a long-distance runner rather than a fighter! By way of glorious contrast, the One who is on our side is the One who created the Universe. The One who is on our side is the One who sustains the Universe on a second-by-second basis. The One who is on our side neither slumber nor sleeps. The One who is on our side is the One for whom all things were made. We do need to focus on this at regular intervals. If you are anything like me, you too may find it amazingly easy to focus on the problems that arise day by day. If it was only one at a time, then each would be manageable. Too often, though, difficulties and decisions all arrive at once and it then can feel overwhelming. I feel inadequate for the task and soon become irritable and short with those who are around at the time. Sleep becomes a problem and time seems to evaporate!

At such times it is vital to pause and draw breath and to focus on the One who is on my side. God does not make mistakes, and He is not about to ruin His track record of perfection on me. Frequently I do not understand why things have happened, nor why He has allowed something I struggle with to happen, but I can know that He is on my side. In glorious confidence, I, like the apostle Paul can say,

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

This is not illogical escapism. It is not some self-help power of positive thinking either. There are plenty of things I do not understand and yet gladly make the most of. For example, I do not understand how memory really works, and yet I will happily anticipate eating a pizza as I remember how much I have enjoyed doing so in the past. For that matter, I do not really understand when my life actually began but have, for many decades, reaped the benefits of being alive. And stepping back and right-sizing God is not a form of celestial escapism. It is based upon the rock-solid evidence of previous performance.

In the Bible, I read about a young lad, running down into a valley and confidently challenging a giant of a man, trained and experienced in war. Whilst Goliath trusted in his weapons of war, David cried out,

I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied (1 Samuel 17:45).

For sure David faced a man about 10 foot tall. His appearance would have been terrifying, but David saw past that to see that His God was too big for even the universe to contain. He who measures the universe by the span of his hand and holds the waters of the ocean in the palm of his hand stood by David. With such a companion, David was right to have confidence. We do not know when it was that David wrote Psalm 124 but clearly, he had not forgotten the day when he fought and killed the giant Goliath.

For those Israelites making the long journey to Jerusalem there was cause for concern. We think of the story that Jesus told in Luke 10, about the man who fell among thieves who left him for dead by the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jesus' stories were frequently rooted in the

everyday, so one would assume that it was not unusual for someone to be attacked on the roads around Jerusalem. Some have suggested that these Psalms of ascent would also have been sung by the returning captives, as they made their way back from slavery in Babylon, to rebuild their lives in Israel during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, for example. Understandably, they would have worried about what lay ahead. Not just in terms of bandits along the road, but more generally about what the coming days would hold.

It is foolish to think that just because we are Christians our God will ensure that life will be rosy and kind. All too often it is not. In fact for the very reason that we are Christians, life will often be harder:

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

However, like the Psalmist, we can confidently affirm that it is the LORD who is on our side. It strikes me that the Psalmist knew that this realisation was too good to be kept secret and so encouraged all Israel to remind themselves that it is the LORD who is on their side! We too can play a role in reminding others of this. Particularly in the public worship of the Lord Jesus, as we remember Him collectively in church, usually on a Sunday morning, it is good to remind each other of what an incredible God we have. He alone could redeem us from the devastating consequences of sin. He alone could fit us for Heaven and give us a new life that can respond to God. What a great God we Christians have! Let us not grow weary of reminding ourselves and each other of this!

The history of Israel is full of examples for us to take comfort in and to learn what it means in practice to have the LORD on our side. In Exodus 14, Israel was facing certain destruction. Having escaped from Egypt, they were now being pursued by Pharaoh. Ahead lay death by drowning in the Red Sea. Behind the armies of Pharaoh. It was into this situation that Moses said:

Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD. ... The LORD will fight for you (vv. 13, 14).

The waters of the Red Sea piled up on either side of the desperate Israelites and they crossed the sea on dry land. Either side of them they had evidence of the power of their God. It must have been incredible to have been a part of that multitude and to witness the water walls from the bed of the sea. One would have thought that to have witnessed such a thing would have been memorable enough to last a lifetime. Yet how quickly we forget! Time and again during their wilderness wanderings the people forgot that it was God who was leading them. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I find this depressingly familiar to my own experience.

We can turn to 2 Kings 6:16,17 and find ourselves surrounded by an army of the Assyrians. Imagine awaking one morning to find the enemy army surrounding your city! This was just the experience of a certain young man who was a servant of Elisha. In terror, he alerted his master to their tricky situation. Instead of panicking, Elisha prayed, which is a fine example for us to follow.

Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, "LORD I pray, open his eyes that he may see." Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Again, I find myself thinking how familiar this is to my own experience. Too frequently, I find myself so focused on the minutia of a problem that I utterly fail to see the big picture. For the terrified young man, all he could see was the Assyrian soldiers besieging the city. He totally failed to see

the larger, more powerful army of the LORD. I do not wish to minimise the problems that you may be facing but would encourage you to look up and see just Who is on your side!

As a final example, we can turn to Daniel chapter 3. Whenever I read this chapter, I have in my head the children's chorus based on this story. Three brave men stood against Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man in the world at that time. With courage they told him that they would not bow down and worship his image. They knew their God was able to deliver them but what they did not know was whether God would choose to do so. No matter, they would never bow down and worship any but the one true God. In anger, Nebuchadnezzar had them thrown into a fiery furnace certain that they would perish and an example would be set of what it meant to disobey the king. You can almost hear the astonishment echo across the centuries as he said:

Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? ...Look! I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like a Son of God (vv. 24,25).

God chose not to spare his servants from the fire, but He certainly kept them in the fire and delivered them out of the fire. The God who showed His magnificent presence with His people throughout the Old Testament is the same God who David directed all Israel to contemplate and worship. Though times have changed, God has not. He remains able and willing to walk with His children today, every step of the way.

He was the One who was present with Mary, delivering her first child in the worst of circumstances amidst the turmoil and upheaval of a national census. The sceptic might sneer, "Where was God when she needed Him most?" Right there – in the manger!

He was the One who was present in the boat in the middle of a storm. As seasoned fisherman strained in fear of their lives, He slept, confident in His Father's promise to keep. He was the One who drew alongside Martha and her sister Mary and wept with them at the graveside of their brother Lazarus, though He knew the outcome of that situation. Not all battles are fought by armies. It is not always an armour-clad knight that we need to rescue us. Sometimes, it is the still, small voice of the One who is gentle and lowly that is sufficient for every situation. So if today you feel that the waters of guilt, grief, and grievance are rising up and crashing against your soul so that you think you are about to be overwhelmed, then stop. Like the Israelites of old say to yourself, "The LORD is on my side" and keep on saying it until you know it is true.

Let us now consider the second part of the Psalm:

Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

One can sense the freedom and relief in the Psalmist's words. David uses metaphor upon metaphor throughout the Psalm. He views himself as a prey animal – perhaps one of his beloved sheep, escaping from the fierce jaws of a lion or a bear. He views himself as a bird that escaped from the hunter's trap. "Our soul has escaped .... we have escaped" repeats the wonder and thankfulness of David who knew more than his fair share of strife. As a young man he was belittled by his brothers and then persecuted by the increasingly erratic King Saul. He faced the threats of life-on-the-edge from desert raiders and the mighty Philistines. As king he endured years of warfare as he strove to unite his kingdom and to secure and extend its borders. Within his own family he knew the grief of rebellion and rejection. Yet these multitude of problems did not lead to bitterness and a cooling of his faith in the benevolence of God. Instead, they forced him into ever closer union with the LORD.

That is a challenge as to how I face difficulties, and more importantly how they shape my character. Undoubtedly, we are influenced by circumstances, but they need not define who we are. Despite the many adversities that David went through, he emerged from them spiritually stronger, and more reliant upon His God. Instead of David's soul being downcast and depressed, there is a lightness to his words – they radiate a sense of joy in God. As we go to church, and for some, this may be just another prospect of trial and problems, do we consider the glorious freedom that is ours today?

In Christ, we are free from the penalty of sin:

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

In Christ, we are free from the power of sin:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

In Christ, we will be free from the presence of sin:

It has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as he is (1 John 3:2).

We are free from the awful judgement of a thrice holy God whose eyes are too pure to even look upon sin. We are free from the burden of having to keep the law to establish a relationship with God. Sadly, the Galatian Christians had not fully grasped this, and Paul had to strongly warn them to leave behind them the sense that they could in any way make themselves more acceptable to God in terms of their salvation.

In Christ, we are free from the burden of false responsibility. I serve not to gain His favour but because He has prepared small opportunities of service for me to do. The outcome, the response is none of my concern. Doing what He has asked me to do frees me from the responsibility of judging whether it is worthwhile or not. Obedience is always worthwhile, always the right thing to do. So if, like Noah, you serve faithfully for years with no apparent success, that is not a problem. God will always accomplish His purposes, and we do not need to fret about what they are. In Christ we are free from worry. My times, my very life are in His hand. He will care for us in all the everyday things of life, for we matter to Him far more than the sparrows or the grass of the field.

In Christ, we are free from the burden of expectation. He has made me, from the time that I was formed in my mother's womb, through the experiences that He has allowed, to the person I am today. I may wish that I were taller, stronger, cleverer, etc., but I am not. I am just me and it is "me" whom God has accepted into His family. In a world that is so absorbed by body image, by personality, by celebrity, and the like, it is so liberating to just be "me." I do not need to pretend to be anything other than me, and in fact, the more I try to be something other than me, the less I become the person I am. If God had wanted me to be able to preach like Billy Graham, he would have given me that gift. Had God purposed for me to be able to explain the Bible like Graham Scroggie, then He would have given me a laser-like mind. He did not and He does not make mistakes.

Like the Psalmist, we can rise from the snares of all this world sets up as important and enjoy the freedoms that we have in Christ. We have escaped from that which would tear down and destroy and life is ours to live for Him. So, as we make our way to church, and for all the other hours in the

week, let us fill our minds with this. God is for us. He is on our side, and we are free in Him. Blessed be the name of the Lord indeed!

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk entitled “We’re going to meet the God who is on our side” in the series “Things to think about on the way to church”, talk number T1456.

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