

Psalm 124

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening. It's a great pleasure to be with you tonight back among friends here at St. Columbus. And we have this series of Psalms, and there's so many great ones to choose from. We're going to be looking at Psalm 124 together tonight. And I'm reminded of a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson is best known for being a novelist, *Treasure Island*. But he also wrote a collection of poems versus for children. And one of those verses goes something like this, The world is so big and I am so small. I do not like it at all, at all. And if we're honest, the world is big. And the world can seem scary, it can seem frightening, and we can seem very small, very insignificant, very weak, very vulnerable. And in Psalm 124, David is reflecting upon life, not life in the ideal or in the abstract, but real life, real problems, real difficulties. And you see, the Bible is great because it tells you the story as it is. Life is tough. There are challenges of one sort or another. But before we jump into the Psalm itself, I'd just like to make two observations.

The first is where we find this particular Psalm. It's in that group of Psalms, the Psalms of Ascent. And it reminds us that the Christian life is an uphill journey. What we have here are a series of songs that the people of God, they're singing, they're on their way to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a city on a hill. So literally, they are moving towards Jerusalem, and they are moving up. Now, any upward journey, if you know Edinburgh at all, we have a lot of hills in this city. There are a lot of steep walks where you feel very keenly that this is a city built on seven hills. Rome might be that city too, but Edinburgh certainly has many hills. So the Christian journey is an uphill journey. And if you're not yet a follower of Jesus, let me correct any misapprehension that you might be. If you're not yet a follower of Jesus, do not think that you come to believe in Jesus and life becomes carefree and all the problems disappear. I can't promise that to you because it's not true. It's not real.

And I think any Christian here tonight would be honest with you and say, the Christian life is tough. But I also think the second observation is that this is a life that's meant to be lived together. As we open the 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, what you have here is that collective singing of the people of God. We were just doing that.

We were joining our voices together. We were being led in praise, but it wasn't a concert. We responded with our own voices. And what you have here in these opening words is, it seems to me you have the voice of one. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

[3 : 23] And then he says, right people, let's hear it. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side and the voices are not one now, but the voices, the voice of the multitude. So if the Christian life is an uphill journey, that's a journey that's best lived in community, in family, in company. I need you on this journey. You need me. We need each other because it is a tough road. It is uphill. Now the sentiments of this Psalm are very much corporate. We, us, our. Many of the Psalms are very personal. The Lord is my shepherd, Psalm 23. Psalm 121, I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. So the Christian life, of course, is personal. You have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that is uniquely you. But the Christian life is corporate, collective. We need one another. And as you look in the Bible, in the New Testament, over 100 times, this phrase, one another is used. Love one another, encourage one another, build up one another, provoke or prompt one another to good deeds. It is absolutely impossible people to do anything with one another on your own. We need to do that in community.

So that kind of sets the scene. Uphill journey best made in the company of others. Now I said this is a big world and it can be a scary world. David identifies four motifs. And each of these scenes in and of itself is overwhelming. The combined effect is to emphasize how vulnerable, how weak and how dangerous life actually is. I come from the United States. I come from New Jersey. We have the best sand beaches in our state, not just in the United States, but in the world. If you don't believe me, come and see. Come to Long Beach Island. But there was one summer, summer of 2017, that there was an internet sensation. Mary Lee had hundreds of thousands of followers up and down the coast, and particularly in New Jersey.

Wherever she was spotted, people wanted to know. The reason why people were very interested in Mary Lee is that she was 3,456 pounds. She was 16 feet and 55 years old, and she was a great white shark. And people who like me, who like to swim in the sea, kind of like to have an idea of where she might be. So if I'm going to surf city, Fifth Street, and Mary Lee is in the neighborhood, I might just sit on the beach. Because this apex predator becomes the key predator wherever she goes. Now I don't think Mary Lee could swallow me in one go, but I think two bites would do it.

And many of you here, it would be one swallow. That's how big this animal is. And that's the idea that David is conveying in that first motif. Let's sing together people, if the Lord had not been on our side, when people rose against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive. You see, David is a poet. He's a songwriter. You know, he's using these illustrations or illusions in a creative way to say it's just like this massive creature that is so big, the enemies are so vast, the opponents are so many, that this creature would swallow you whole. Motif one. The second motif that we have here, the second scene, is in verse four. Then the flood would have swept us away.

The torrent would have gone over us. Then over us would have gone the raging waters. So he changes the scene from the creature that's so big, it could swallow you to the flood that is so strong.

[7 : 47] It would sweep you off your feet. The torrent of water that was so big and so powerful that it would leave nothing and no one in its path. So you get the idea. David's building up a picture here.

In the New Testament, we are often confronted with the three great enemies and they're named the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world, that way of thinking and living that's out there, the flesh, that way of thinking and living which is in here, and the evil one who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy. David is kind of identifying these foes, but he's identifying them in a more creative and a more poetic manner. So the creature is so big, it will swallow you. The flood, the torrent, that's so fierce, it will just sweep you away. And then the third, which you find in verse six, is the prey that has sharp teeth. So the first scene is being swallowed alive. The second scene is being ground into bits. We're not given a choice here, but neither of these images is particularly pleasant. But David is reflecting upon life as he has lived it. And I think we need to be honest, especially if we've been on the journey for a while, let's be honest and say, the challenges are there. You don't need to look for them. The challenges are there within, the challenges are there outside, the challenges are there, and they are powerful and they are many. And the fourth of these images we see in verse seven, we have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fallers.

The snare is broken and we have escaped. So now the scene is this, usually with some sort of rope or spring, the trap is set and the unsuspecting prey, the bird, the pheasant or whatever is particularly tasty, springs the snare, all of a sudden the bird that once was free is now captured.

It's in the snare, it will soon be in the pot, it will soon be dinner. So you get this cumulative picture here, that the people of God are up against it. Their foes are many and their foes are varied and their foes are powerful. And in and of themselves, they cannot deal with one, let alone all.

We go to the New Testament picture, the world, the flesh and the devil. We can't even control ourselves, let alone other people. We can't go against head to head against the evil one.

[10:34] So you and I are up against it. We are fragile, we are weak, we are vulnerable, we often are isolated. That's yet another reason that we need to be together. We need to worship together, we need to learn together, we need to grow together, we need to serve together, we need to encourage one another.

There are many different ministries in the Bible, many different gifts. I would encourage you to exercise the gift of encouragement. I have yet to find the biblical gift of criticism.

It's well exercised, but yet I've never found it on the page of Scripture. The biblical gift of discouragement, again, I haven't found it in the 66 books of the New and Old Testaments, but the gift of encouragement coming alongside of someone. Let's try not to make a difficult situation worse. Let's try to encourage men and women, brothers and sisters along the way.

But what is the encouragement? Is it just try harder, do better, or look on the bright side of life, or things could get better? No, because what you have in this psalm at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, is the Lord is present. Now, I'm not a Hebrew poet, but I am told that Hebrew poets emphasize certain truths by where they place those truths. So, if you want to emphasize a truth, put it at the beginning of the poem, or if you want to emphasize a truth, put it at the end of the poem, or if you want to emphasize a truth, put it in the middle of the poem. Now, David was no mean poet, so he does all three at the beginning. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now the balance has shifted. Now the scene has changed.

That sea creature that could swallow you a whole, well, you're no longer against that creature yourself. The Lord is on your side. And when the Lord is on your side, one can be a majority.

[12 : 38] You might feel in many situations, maybe you're at work, maybe at school, maybe even in your family circle, you might be the lone Christian. But when the Lord is on your side, you are not only on the winning side, that you are on the strongest side, if the Lord had not been on our side. And notice at the beginning, middle, and end, it's that block capital Lord, which is the way in which the Old Testament highlights the fact that God has a personal name. He reveals himself by name. He's a personal God. He wants to be known personally, and he makes himself known personally. He's not abstract. He's not a theological idea, but he is a personal God with a personal name. The God who always is, is the God who always was, and the God who always will be.

We use the term Jehovah or Yahweh. He reveals himself by name. He is dependable. He's reliable. He's steadfast. He's sure. And there he is at the beginning. And he's there on our side. He's right there with us, so that this massive sea creature will not swallow us whole. He's right there so that the torrent will not sweep us away. And then in the middle of the psalm, when you're dealing with that creature with the sharp teeth, blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth. He's protecting. He's preserving. He's present. He's powerful. He's loving. He's caring.

And you see, this is the great combination that we have in God. We have a God who is willing to help, and we have a God who is able to help, a God who is powerful, and a God who is personal, a God who is in control, and a God who loves. I'm grateful for Fin was praying for the, for prisoners, folks who are incarcerated. And there's a growing number of people behind bars, or well, actually, there's a reducing number of people behind bars, because we just can't hold them all. Maybe our police must be so efficient that they are arresting so many people that we just can't hold them. So we have to release some of them early. But I remember one scene in Edinburgh prison. We used to have young offenders. Now it's all 21 and over. But I remember one time meeting this guy, he was, had to be 16, you have to be at least 16. But he looked 12. You know, he came to here on me. He looked like he should be at school, not in jail. And I said, because as a chaplain, you meet with people. And I said, is there anything I can do to help you? I'm one of the chaplains here. Can I help you in any way? And he looked at me honestly. And he said, yes, can you take me home?

I said, I can't do that. I know you want to go home. I'd want to go home. But I don't have that power. I don't have that authority. I'm willing to help, but I'm not able to help. You see, that's the thing, is that very often, these qualities come in isolation. Those that are able to help, they have the power, they have the authority. They're not willing. But and those who want to help, they're willing to help, they don't have the power. Not so with our God. Our God is able, and our God is willing. He's able to help, and he's willing to help, and he demonstrates. And I think that's one of the lessons of this psalm, is that on the Christian journey, don't just look forward to the hill that lies ahead. Look back. Look back and see God's hand at work in your life.

See his fingerprints in the very, the challenges, the crises, the difficulties, the disappointments. Look, very often you don't see them at the time, but you look back and you see the way in which God was there. You thought he might not have been there. You see the way in which God helped. You thought he wasn't interested. You'd see maybe with clarity looking back. And I think that's what David is doing. He's speaking to a people that are moving forward, literally to Jerusalem, but he's encouraging them to look back and to see God at work. The God who didn't give them as a pray to the teeth, the sharp, vicious teeth. And the final refrain in verse eight, our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. At the beginning of every service in Geneva, this was the call to worship. John Calvin would read these words, Psalm 124 verse eight, as a constant reminder to the people of God, as to the God who they were worshiping, the God in whose presence they gathered. One of the great puritan commentators, Thomas Manton, he was commenting on this passage and he said this, the Lord who made heaven and earth, as if the psalmist had said, as long as I see heaven and earth, I will never distrust. I hope in that God, as long as I see these two great standing monuments of his power before me, heaven and earth, I will never be discouraged. So David said, let's look back and let's see the way in which God has rescued us.

[18 : 04] But let's look around. Let's look around. Let's look up at the heavens. Let's look around at the earth. Let's see what God has done. Let's see what God has made because the measure of power is seen in the heavens and the earth. God has the ability and demonstrated that ability to call something out of nothing. I can't do that. You can't do that. There are unique words in the Bible of which God alone is the subject. No one can say to nothing be something except God.

And when he calls something out of nothing, that's a lasting monument or memorial. So you can look back in your own life experience. You see God's hand, his deliverance, his protection, his presence, his care, his concern. And then you look around and you see his creation, what he has made and what he has made from nothing. So if God can make heaven and earth by speaking it into existence, then by comparison, remember I said that the world can seem very big? Well, actually, from God's perspective, the world is very small. He's big, the world small. From our perspective, the world's big, we're small, but from God's perspective, he's big and the world small. And when you have that perspective, maybe the world is not so frightening after all. Maybe we are not so vulnerable after all. Maybe we are not so weak after all because if the Lord is on our side, then we've got a strong one with us. If he is with us and if he is for us, then we need not fear. We need not be anxious, worried, careful or concerned in any way. So at the beginning and at the middle and at the end, the Lord is present. And if you're going through something, trials, difficulties, challenges of one sort or another, your family, this church family, as an occasional preacher,

I don't know. I don't know what's going on. I don't know what people are dealing with, but I know the God who is here, who is with us, who is for us. And I know the God who is able and willing to help. So do we see life as David sees it? Do we see our own lives framed in our knowledge of the Lord who is with us and not against us, the Lord who is present and not absent, and the Lord who makes all things? If you turn with me to the New Testament, I'd like to read just a few verses from a different major biblical author. David is a key biblical author, of course.

The Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 8 begins with the same proposition. I think it's interesting when the same statement is picked up by two different authors. If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say. And then we come to Romans chapter 8 verse 31. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? So David is saying, look at your experience individually. Look at your experience collectively, people of Israel. Look at the heavens and look at the earth. The Apostle Paul comes to the same conclusion as David that the Lord, God Himself, is on our side. God is with us. And how does he draw that conclusion? Well, I guess one answer is what shall we say to these things, meaning the previous eight chapters, all that he was telling us in the book of Romans up until this point.

But notice how he signposts us from verse 31 into 33. He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

[22 : 13] Who shall bring any charge against God's elected is God who justifies. Who is to condemn Christ Jesus who died more than that who was raised is at the right hand of God who is indeed interceding for us. It's often been said, it's not what you know, it's who you know.

You may know very little about the Christian religion. You may know very little about the Bible. And in fact, that's all of us. We actually all know very little, very little about God.

We know very little about the Bible. Why? Because God is infinite and eternal. We are finite, flawed and fragile. So whatever knowledge we have by comparison is very small. But what the apostle Paul is saying is this. Look at the cross. Look at the empty tomb.

What is the conclusion? God is for us. How do we know He's for us? He gave that which was most precious to him, his Son. He gave his Son so that we might be secure. He gave his Son so that we might be forgiven. He gave his Son so that we might be set free. And I think the thought expressed in 1-4 by David and the thought expressed in Romans 8 by the apostle Paul is the same thought.

God is for us. We see it in the created world. We see it in our experience. And we see it in the cross of Jesus Christ, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, and He is seated at the right hand. Many times in pastoral ministry, many times people come to you and they come to you with big questions. Most people don't ask simple questions because most simple questions can be answered simply. The questions that people come to you are difficult questions. Why? Why is this happening? Why did this happen? Why me? Why now? Now I used to think as a pastor, as a preacher, that I was the guy that needed to have the information. I was the guy that needed to answer the questions. No. I don't know. It'd be ridiculous for me to suggest why a certain series of events happened in your life. You know your circumstance far better than I do. So anything that I might add would just be a pious platitude. But what I do know, I know someone who does. I know someone who has the answers. I know someone who has the strength and the power.

[24 : 45] I know someone who has the wisdom. I know someone who is able and he's seated at the right hand of God. And he's for me. He's not against me. He's demonstrated his love by dying for me on the cross and being raised to life from the dead. So the apostle Paul is saying, this is my confidence.

This is our confidence and this is your confidence. This is our hope. This is our help. And this hope and this help has a name. And he's called Jesus Christ. He's the Son of God. He's the Savior of the world. He lived. He died. He rose again and he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

God is for you. Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War was often asked, Mr. President, is God on our side? And he famously responded, I'm not so interested whether God is on our side. I want to make sure I am on his side because his side always wins.

So if you're here tonight, you're not yet a believer of Jesus. You're literally sitting on the sidelines watching, listening, singing, hearing the prayers. I would urge you to come to know Jesus. Come to know him. Come to trust him. Because then and only then can you say with me and with us that God is on our side because you have identified yourself as being on his side.

And his side is the only one that wins. This world is so big and I am so small. I do not like it. At all, at all, said Robert Louis Stevenson. You can forget that verse. Remember the poetry of David. If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Amen.