

Psalm 124 “A Song of Ascents: Is God on Your Side?”
Psalm 120, 123, 124, 126, 129
Romans 8

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Is God on your side?

Nowadays there seems to be a general negative reaction to that sentiment.
“You shouldn’t be asking if God is on *your* side,
you should be asking if *you* are on God’s side!”

But Psalm 124 rejoices because the LORD is on *our* side.

In other words, Psalm 124 is utterly confident that *we are in the right*.

Our postmodern world wants to say “it’s more complicated than that” –
and often it is –
but sometimes it’s not!

We get some context from Psalms 123 and 126

We looked last week at Psalm 123,
and how our eyes look to the LORD.

When your eyes are fixed on Christ –
when your heart and mind is set on things above –
then you do not give mere “eye-service” to your earthly master,
because you are serving the Lord Christ.

In other words, the Psalms *assume* that the singer of the Psalm is right with God.
The Psalms *assume* that we are singing from the standpoint of one
who looks to the LORD for mercy and grace.

Likewise, in Psalm 126, the context is the mighty works of God –
the great things that he has done for his people.

Psalm 126 is oriented around verses 1 and 4 –

verse one which remembers how the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion –
which brought laughter and joy to the people of God;
verse four then asks God to “restore our fortunes like streams in the Negeb.”

The Negeb is the dry, fairly barren region in the south of Judah.

The streams of the Negeb are wadis that only flow when it rains.
When it rains, and streams are flowing in the Negeb,
that is a time of great celebration,
because it means that *this year* we will bountiful crops!
And so Psalm 126 asks the LORD, Restore our fortunes like that!

Sing Psalms 123 and 126

Read Romans 8

Athanasius wisely said

“in the words of [the Psalms] the whole human life, its basic spiritual conduct
and as well its occasional movements and thoughts,
is comprehended and contained.

Nothing to be found in human life is omitted.” (*Ad Marcellinum*, quoted in Mays, 1)

There is a reason why the Psalms have played a central role in the worship of the church
for three *thousand* years.

When you learn to pray from the Psalms, you are learning how to pray from God himself.
And as you consider that Christ himself would have sung and prayed these psalms,
you learn how to pray the Psalms from the great singer of the Psalms, Jesus Christ.

Psalms 124 is identified as “of David.”

This could mean “by David” –

but it could also mean “for David,” “about David,” or “to David.”

It does not help us identify *when* it was written,

because a Davidic psalm could have been written any time after David.

Given its placement in the songs of Ascents,

we are at least encouraged to think about it in an exilic/post-exilic setting.

But the comment “of David” should make us think about David as we sing this Psalm!

After all, David very much recapitulates Israel’s history in his life.

David’s exile in the land of the Philistines reminds us of Israel in the wilderness.

And as God was on David’s side through all his troubles,

so also God heard the cry of Jesus, the son of David,

when he lifted up his voice to his Father.

And because God hears Jesus –

who can be against us?

As Paul put it,

“If God is for us, who can be against us?

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?”

1. “If...then”: Cause and Effect in the Divine Economy (v1-5)

If you would summarize the point of Psalm 124,

it is this:

“but for the grace of God, we are dead.”

If the LORD had not been on our side,

we would have been destroyed.

There are two images juxtaposed in Psalm 124:
the picture of the overwhelming flood in verses 1-5
and the bird escaped from the snare in verses 6-7.

God's merciful intervention is the only reason we are still alive.
Psalm 124 follows Psalm 123.
The cry for mercy in Psalm 123
is answered with the shout of thanksgiving of Psalm 124!

If God was not on our side –
if he had not delivered us from our enemies –
we would have been overwhelmed and destroyed.

Blessed be the LORD!

Let me start by laying out some of the details –
and then we'll see how it all ties together:

Verses 1-5 set up the Psalm with an “if-then” statement.
There are two ifs in verses 1-2,
which use exactly the same words,
followed by a “when” clause:

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,*

This double “if” clause is then followed by three “thens” –
also including a “when” in verse 3 referring to the same “adam”
who rose up against us.

The word translated “people” is simply the word “adam” – “man” – in the singular.
The LORD is contrasted with “man”.

The reason why it is translated “people” here is because in verse 3 the pronouns are all plural –
the *they* of verse 3 refers back to the “adam” of verse 2,
which indicates that “adam” is being used as a collective noun.

Think of Psalm 118:6 –
“The LORD is my helper – what can “man” do to me.”
There as well, “man” is a collective noun.

So verse 2 is contrasting trust in the LORD with trust in man –
the fear of the LORD, with the fear of man.

When “man” rises up against you,
how do you respond?

The LORD is my helper – what can man do to me?
Or to use the concluding line of Psalm 124 – “Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.”

But there is something else going on here.

In verse 1 – the Psalmist “interrupts” the “if-then” clause by interjecting
“let Israel now say”.

In verse 2 – the Psalmist interrupts the “if-then” clause by interjecting
“when adam rose up against us.”

Adam is pitted over against Israel.

There is a very real way in which *humanity*
is pitted over/against *Israel*.

After all, just think about what happens if “adam” wins!

What happens if “man” succeeds in swallowing up Israel?

What happens if the flood of their anger drowns the people of God?

End of story!

And no, not just Israel’s story – but the whole story of salvation!

If the raging waters of *adam* suck Israel down into the grave,
then death wins – and all God’s plans for redeeming his people are moot.

Indeed, the irony of all this is that *adam*’s only hope –
humanity’s only future – depends on Israel!

Now, do you see how *sometimes* you can say, “the LORD is on *my* side!”?

The LORD is on your side, when *your side*
consists of God’s purposes for redemptive history!

The problem comes when we equate *our agenda* with God’s kingdom.

One of the most famous examples of this is the Civil War.

As Abraham Lincoln put it, just before the end of the war,

“Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God;
and each invokes his aid against the other...

The prayers of both could not be answered—
that of neither has been answered fully.”

The Union and the Confederacy were both convinced that God was on their side,

thus illustrating the peril of confusing *our* agenda with God's kingdom.

Indeed, from the standpoint of Psalm 124,
the Civil War itself – and all those whose agitation produced it –
was the raging tide of man
that nearly overwhelmed the people of God.

Mark Noll has pointed out that before the Civil War
politicians regularly cited Scripture in their discussions of policy.

After the Civil War, Scripture continued to be cited for rhetorical purposes,
but few politicians believed that the Bible had anything to say to matters of public policy.

The two main theological traditions that emerged from the Civil War
were theological liberalism
and dispensational fundamentalism –
and while those two movements share very little in common,
the one thing they do share is confusion regarding the kingdom of God.

The liberals thought that the kingdom of God was all about *this present age*.
The dispensationalists thought that the kingdom of God was all about *the millennial age*.

What both failed to see
is that the kingdom is both *already* and *not yet*.

It has already come *in Christ* who sits at the right hand of the Father.
The kingdom has been established in him,
as he has been brought through the waters of judgment.

Therefore we see the coming of the kingdom *now* by faith,
but not yet by sight.
It will only come *by sight* when our Lord returns.

The kingdom comes *now* by the power of the Holy Spirit –
as he convicts the world of sin and of righteousness.
The kingdom comes *now* by the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
by the breaking of bread and the prayers.
The kingdom comes *now* as the family of Jesus lives
as this new humanity that is shaped by the cross of our Savior –
a community that shares in the sufferings of Christ that we might also share in his glory.

Psalm 124 assumes that this is your agenda.
Psalm 124 assumes that the "we" of the Psalm
is at the center of God's purposes for history.

Because if it is not,
then verses 3-5 would have happened:

³*then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;*
⁴*then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;*
⁵*then over us would have gone
the raging waters.*

If the agenda of the church is *not* the agenda of the Kingdom of God,
then our enemies will destroy us!

Verses 3-5 echo the language of Isaiah 8,
where Isaiah says that because Jerusalem “refused the waters of Shiloh that flow gently”
“therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River,
mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory.
And it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks,
and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on,
reaching even to the neck,
and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.”
(Isaiah 8:6-8)

The coming of the army of Assyria is described in terms of the mighty waters of the Euphrates,
overflowing into Judah and washing everything away.

In recent weeks we have seen what this looks like –
in the pictures from the tsunami in Japan.

Then surely, “they would have swallowed us up alive”

This is the picture of a monster –
the grave (Sheol) opening its mouth and swallowing us alive
(think of the story of Korah and his rebellion in Numbers 16 –
where the earth opens its mouth and swallows the rebels!).

Now the grave is coming for us!

The word used for the “torrent” is the Hebrew word for “wadi” –
a dry stream bed which could become a raging torrent during heavy rains.

Psalms 124 reflects on this language.
If the LORD was not on our side,
then we would be washed away.

After the exile, Psalm 124 could only have been sung with a hint of irony.
Because when the Babylonians came,
Jerusalem was washed away by the flood.

And as we saw from Ezekiel,
because of Israel's sin,
the glory of the LORD had departed from the temple –
the LORD was not on our side!

This raging, roaring torrent is precisely what our Lord Jesus Christ has endured.
Because as Jesus hung upon the cross, the Father abandoned him.
God was not on his side,
but gave him over to the teeth of his foes!

All through the Old Testament, there are examples of the waters of judgment –
most notably:
the Flood which destroyed all humanity – but saved Noah and his family;
the Red Sea which destroyed Pharaoh's army – but saved Israel.

Jesus once spoke of the cross as a sort of “baptism” in the waters of judgment:
“I have a baptism to be baptized with,
and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50)

In the cross, Jesus passed through the waters of judgment.
He took the raging waters of Psalm 124,
so that the LORD might be on our side!

That's why Paul, in Romans 6, talks about our baptism into Christ
as a baptism into death.

We pass through the waters of judgment in our baptism –
think of how Paul speaks of the Red Sea as a type of baptism in 1 Cor 10,
and how Peter speaks of the Flood as a type of baptism in 1 Peter 3.

Therefore, we can sing in verses 6-7

2. “Blessed Be the LORD!” Escaping the Snare of Your Foes (v6-7)

⁶*Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth!*
⁷*We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped!*

Now the imagery changes –

from rescue from a watery grave,
to a bird freed from a snare.

A bird in a snare is about to become dinner!

But *blessed be Yahweh!*

Because he did not give us as prey to their teeth!
Our God has delivered us!

Notice that the specifics are not included in this Psalm.
Perhaps the Psalmist leaves it open-ended in order to make it easier to sing at any time!

“The snare is broken”
notice the passive voice!

How was the snare broken?
Who broke the snare?

This is a common feature in Old Testament (and NT) language,
called a “divine passive.”

God has set me free.
He is the one who broke the snare and released me from the trap –
but the passive voice is used to “increase the majesty of the ultimate agent,
namely God.” (Allen, Word Biblical Commentary, p. 166).

We have escaped because God has helped us –
he has done for us what we could never do.

3. “Our Help Is in the Name of the LORD, Who Made Heaven and Earth” (v8)

⁸ *Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

Verse 8 then concludes where Psalm 121 began.

Psalm 121 began the question,
“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?”

When I look up and see the mountains surrounding Jerusalem,
I remember that my help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 123 continued the theme,
lifting up my eyes to “you who are enthroned in the heavens.”

We are forgetful!
We forget that the maker of heaven and earth,

the one who is enthroned in the heavens,
is our *helper*.

And as we saw before, the idea of the “helper” in Hebrew
is of someone who does something for you
that you could not possibly do for yourself.

Eve is a *help* to Adam,
not because she’s good at working and protecting the garden
but because she is able to bear children!

Likewise, our *help* is in the name of the LORD,
because the LORD is able to do something that we cannot do for ourselves!

He alone is able to rescue us from the fowler’s snare –
to deliver us from the raging torrent.

So how do we sing Psalm 124?
How can we say “the LORD is on my side?”

Hebrews 13 tells us.
Hebrews 13 follows immediately after Hebrews 12!
Hebrews 12 has talked about how we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem,
and how we have come to the sacrifice of Jesus.

It concludes with a warning that we not refuse God,
“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,
and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,
for our God is a consuming fire.” (12:28-29)

Then he says:
“Let brotherly love continue.
Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.
Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them,
and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.
Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled,
for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.
Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have,
for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’
So [in other words, if this is what characterizes us – if this is our agenda and focus in life]
we can confidently say,
‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”

The quotation is from Psalm 118:6.
But the idea is exactly the same as Psalm 124.

The kingdom of God is characterized by the worship described in Hebrews 12,
by brotherly love –
hospitality to strangers –
care for those who are imprisoned or mistreated for the sake of the gospel.

The kingdom of God is characterized by marital fidelity – the undefiled marriage bed –
if God is on your side, your life will be remarkably free from the love of money,
not because you have lots of it,
but because you are content with what you have.

On the other hand,
if you do not show hospitality to strangers (strangers, mind you!),
and if you do not care for those who suffer for the gospel's sake,
then do not expect God to rescue you when you are in need!
If you are sexually immoral, and you ignore the purity of the marriage bed,
then God is not on your side, and man may do all sorts of things to you!
If you love money – if your life is characterized by a grasping acquisitiveness –
then don't be surprised when trouble finds you.

Jesus calls you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him.
If your life is characterized by the cross,
then your life will also be characterized by the resurrection!

Your life will be conformed to the pattern of suffering and glory that Jesus established.

If your life is not characterized by the cross –
then your suffering will prove to be meaningless and vain.

The world, the flesh, and the devil – or to use the language of Psalm 124, “man” –
seeks to sweep you away – to ensnare you in their net.

Psalm 124 provides the antidote –
It is not “try harder”!

It is “our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”