

What If?

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Bible Verse: Psalm 124
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Well, we've come to a most interesting Psalm this evening as we continue studying through them, having started in Psalm 1, we're now up to Psalm 124 and I invite you to turn there with me. It's an exercise in considering and answering the question: what if? And if you're taking notes, that's the title of tonight's message, "What If?" And it answers the question what would have happened if the Lord had not been with us as the psalmist from Israel was writing, and he's considering the implications of how the Lord had saved and protected them and what it would have meant for them in their national life if he had not done that.

So we're going to read the Psalm to begin with. It's a Psalm of David, the inscription tells us, that will become important a little bit later on. But beginning in verse 1, it says this,

1 "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side," Let Israel now say, 2 "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side When men rose up against us, 3 Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their anger was kindled against us; 4 Then the waters would have engulfed us, The stream would have swept over our soul; 5 Then the raging waters would have swept over our soul." 6 Blessed be the LORD, Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth. 7 Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper; The snare is broken and we have escaped. 8 Our help is in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.

Last time when we met to consider Psalm 123, I made a repetitive point about the nature of our protection under the hand of God and how we're to view all of life and view the nature of God and his faithfulness to us, and there's to be this prevailing sense settled deep in our hearts that frames everything that we view through the nature and the ups and downs of life. As Christians, as believers, we're the only ones who can say this, "The Lord is with us and the Lord is for us." And that's shown supremely by the very nature of our salvation. Here we were dead in trespasses and sins, dominated by the devil and subject to the devil's will, we were of our father the devil, Jesus said, and we were under the wrath of God. So we were in a miserably hopeless position at that time. There was nothing that we could have done to save ourselves. Dead men can't do anything. They cannot perform their own resurrection, and Ephesians 2 teaches us that, "But God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us, made us alive together

with Christ, by grace we have been saved." And the thought behind that for us to understand is that the Lord planned our salvation in Christ. The Lord executed it, in other words, he made it happen. At the cross, Christ did everything that was necessary to accomplish our redemption, the Holy Spirit in time applied that to our hearts during the course of our lives, and the great sweep of the plan of salvation and the fact that the Lord did all of these things for us when we were dead in trespasses and sins, we were dominated by the devil, we were under the wrath of God, what that tells us is that in a most basic simple level if you are in Christ, the Lord is with you and the Lord is for you otherwise he never would have done any of those things. And the fact that he is with you and the fact that he is for you changes the whole way that you look at life and the way that you consider everything that has happened to you.

Now here in Psalm 124, you get a sense of that same theme taking place. This is a Psalm of praise for a national deliverance that occurred in the nation of Israel. It fits with the deliverance from the Red Sea or at the Red Sea, I should say, where God delivered them from the Egyptian army, but it's not necessarily tied to that occasion. The fact that it is said to be a Psalm of David points to a later time, but the way that this Psalm approaches praise is rather unique in that it considers, you might say, it considers an alternate reality and it says what would have happened if the Lord was not with us? If the Lord was not for us? What would have happened to us if God had not done and been to us who he is and what he does? So it's expressing its praise in a unique hypothetical and it's approaching it from a negative sense, you might say, in terms of we're praising God because this did not happen and instead other things did.

So the psalmist is considering what would have happened if the Lord had not helped them in their distress. They were spared from that awful result, they were spared from extermination at the hands of their enemies. They were spared from that because the Lord was with them. He did help them. He was for them. It's as if he was on the top of a very high mountain and I don't really like heights but I've done this a time or two in different places and you know what it's like, you go up to the edge and you look down and there's just this sense that takes your breath away at the danger that is right there in front of you and what would happen if you happened to slip or someone fell into you and, you know, the thought is horrific to contemplate. It scares me as I think about it, standing at the edge of different mountains and things like that. I don't like that too much and you just say what would happen if we can gone over the side there? Well, in a sense, that's what the psalmist is doing here, he's saying, "We were at the edge of a cliff and what would have happened if we had gone over?" And so he's considering it from that perspective, but the negative framing of the Psalm is designed to teach a positive lesson. He's teaching the fact that the Lord is with us and the Lord is for us.

So Psalm 124 does this, it looks back into the past in order to find faith for the present and the future. It looks back to what God did in the past and realizes and recognizes why God did that, and then from that position of the past, he looks forward with faith to the future. So once again we find the Psalms cultivating in our hearts peace of mind. We find the Psalms giving us practical help that has a spiritual impact in our hearts. And as we go through psalm 124, we're going to find a poetic repetition of phrases that deepens the

impact of the Psalm. It kind of breaks down into two stanzas. We're going to treat it in two sections here tonight and, first of all, we're going to look at the first section which describes protection from the enemies. Protection from the enemies.

So the Psalmist opens and let's read the first two verses together and you'll immediately see the contrary to fact nature of his statement. Verses 1 and 2 he says,

1 "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side," Let Israel now say, 2
"Had it not been the LORD who was on our side When men rose up
against us, 3 Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their anger
was kindled against us;

And so you can immediately see he's contemplating what would have happened if the Lord had not been our God, and he's calling the nation to verbalize this. There in the middle, you see it saying, "Let Israel now say," and so sandwiched around that phrase is the point of praise that he's calling them to articulate, "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side."

And this is very similar in structure to Psalm 129, if you'll turn over there for just a moment; we'll kind of peek ahead to something that I expect for us to study in November. Psalm 129, the same structure present in the Psalms and I really like finding and showing you these types of parallels in the Psalms. Verse 1 it says, "'Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up,' Let Israel now say," and it's repeated verbatim, "Many times they have persecuted me from my youth up; Yet they have not prevailed against me." And so this is designed to elicit a positive response where the people of faith, the people of God, the people of God respond and say, "Yes, that is true and we adopt what the psalmist is saying as our own expression of faith."

So the repetition of, "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side," that repetition provides emphasis for the opening theme, and these are known as contrary to fact statements and the reasoning goes like this. These are very common in the Greek language of the New Testament. The reasoning goes like this: if the Lord had not been with us, but he was, we would have been swallowed alive, but we weren't. And so there's this contrary to fact expression of a positive fact. If the Lord had not been with us, we would have been lost, but he was with us and therefore we weren't lost, and the Lord is still with us and therefore he will sustain us in the future as well. That's the spirit of the Psalm. Because the Lord was with his people, they did not perish.

So what we need to do at this point, you and I here in the 21st century, we need to just step back and realize what Scripture is calling us to a conscious meditation of our thought and faith. We, as the people of God, are to be aware of his presence. We are to factor that reality into everything that we think about the nature of life. The Lord is with us. Those of you that interact with me on texts, in texts when especially when you're going through difficult times, I will often text to you Psalm 23:4, "I fear no evil, for You are with me." And that is to have a framing impact on the way that we view all of life. This is to be one of the essential ingredients of a Christian worldview is that we view life from a

perspective of trust and confidence and hope, there's a sense of certainty as we go through an uncertain world that says the Lord is with me. And that has a practical impact and speaking to people of a generally conservative bent in this time of our nation's history, this is to have a defining impact in the way that we view the things of the world, the politics that are around us when leaders are in place that we think are corrupt and these kinds of matters, we are never to view them in isolation as though that was the defining nature of reality. Our perception of that reality, we are to bring into that our perception of that reality whatever else is happening, the Lord is with us. The Lord is with me. The Lord is for me. The Lord is for us. The Lord is for his people. And as a result of that, we don't view things with the same sense of anxious foreboding that those who do not know Christ view them. We're not meant to be tossed about with that kind of whiplash as we're viewing the world around us. There should be an underlying sense of stability in our lives as we watch events come and go and we watch people rise in power and pass away from power, as we watch all of this, there should be an underlying stability in our hearts that is framed and reinforced constantly by the recognition the Lord is with me, the Lord is with us, and he's not only with us, he's for us.

So here in Psalm 124, the psalmist is looking back and he is explaining how a past national deliverance took place, and from that position of examining the past, he looks forward to the future and has confidence in the Lord's protection going forward. Now I'm going to bring my conclusion up to more of the start of things here and to just address those of you that are in Christ and those of you that maybe aren't Christians, you can kind of listen in and see the spiritual emptiness that you have that you're missing by not knowing Christ. Here's the way that you need to think about it. There you were dead in your trespasses and sins and the Lord saved you, and the Holy Spirit came to indwell you. The book of Ephesians says he's the seal of our inheritance. He's a down-payment. He's the earnest of our inheritance, meaning that God has placed the Spirit within us as a promise to us that he is going to keep us all the way until the end. And we're to think about that and we are to reason deeply and we are to preach to ourselves and say, "If Christ did that for me back then, then there's no other conclusion except that He's going to keep me all the way to the end. He saved me to keep me. He didn't save me to just cast me out on my own efforts to see if I could make it to the end or not. If He had done that, none of us would be saved." If Christ withdrew his saving preserving Spirit from us, we would fall instantly and we would be immediately lost. None of us can keep ourselves. That's such bad theology to think that, you know, Christ saved us and then, you know, set us loose to see if we could keep our own salvation. Let me tell you, he can't. And the way that we think about that is to say, "Well, no, if He was this gracious to me at the moment of my salvation, then that means that He intends to be gracious to me through all of life. And it doesn't matter ultimately what happens in world politics. It doesn't ultimately matter what happens to me in my physical conditions or in the circumstances of life, or whether my job prospers or fails. Ultimately, ultimately those things are so secondary to the defining reality that the Lord is with me and the Lord is for me." And that's how you're to view all of life, and then with the benefit of this Psalm, we look at it from the, you know, from the contrary to fact position, "What would happen to me if the Lord hadn't done that? Where would I be?"

There's a song that a man back at Grace Church in California used to sing. I loved his rendition of it. "Were it not for grace, I can tell you where I'd be, wandering down some pointless road to nowhere with my salvation up to me. And I know how that would go, the trials I would face, forever running but losing the race, were it not for grace." This is what would have happened to me if the Lord had not been gracious to me, and the recognition of these things bring us to a point of gratitude and confidence and quiet serenity and this is what Psalm 124 is communicating to us.

The history of the people of God shows the redemptive purpose and power of God. He has the power to keep his people. If you read anything introductory at all about early church history in the first three centuries of church history, you'll see that the Roman emperors of the time, you know, they did their best to try to stamp out the church. They killed Christians. They persecuted them. They took their Scriptures and tried to burn them and to just do everything that they could to exterminate them, and you had the full force of the Roman Empire, the greatest nation in the history of the world up to that point, the full force of the Roman Empire coming to bear against the persecuted people of God. Well, now look at the result of that from the perspective of 1,700-1,800 years later. Most of you could not name those 10 Roman emperors at all, but here the church of God is a worldwide reality, a worldwide force showing that the Lord is for his people and even though he brought them through testing as through a testing of great fire, he brought his people out safe on the other side and his church is vibrant today. Oh, it's beset by false teachers and beset by shallow faith among so many of the professing church but God kept his people in the 2,000 years since the time of Christ. Well, this is what he does. The church is alive and those emperors are dead and buried and who knows where their bones are.

So what you and I have to do, we've got to take a very large perspective on the nature of life and view it from a perspective of something that transcends our 70 or 80 years here on earth. We need to have it informed by the greatness of the purposes of God as proven in the past and what was proven in the past is our blueprint for what he is going to do in the future. He's going to keep his people. He's going to sustain his people. It could be no other way. You know, the stars will fall out of the heavens before God abandons his people. That's how certain his care for us is.

So what the psalmist is doing here in Psalm 124 is, he's opening up in these first two verses and calling the people of God to remember what God had done for them in the past, and to interpret it from the perspective that the Lord is with them. Now he recognizes the sad reality of the difficulties that God brought his people through, and the church of Jesus Christ has gone through many hard times. If you do any reading in Fox's Book of Martyrs, for example, you just see how horrific and how sadistic the infliction of pain by those in authority were upon those humble believers in Christ, our brothers and sisters in Christ, the awful way that they were tortured and killed for their faith. Well, Psalm 124 looks back and has in mind the recognition, you see it there at the end of verse 2, "When men rose up against us." He's looking back and remembering those times when the enemies of God rose up against his people.

So what you find as it goes on in verses 3 through 5 is he uses some metaphors to explain what would have happened if God had not been with his people. The outcome would have been different, in other words. In verse 3 he says, "If the Lord had not been with us, then this is the consequence of what it would have been."

3 Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their anger was
kindled against us; 4 Then the waters would have engulfed us, The stream
would have swept over our soul; 5 Then the raging waters would have
swept over our soul.

Now commentators differ over the historical events that are described here. There's not enough detail to know for certain. As I mentioned earlier, some people see the crossing of the Red Sea as being the occasion of this Psalm with the emphasis on waters, giving them reason to say that. Others think that maybe this occurs much later in the history of Israel when they returned from Babylon after the captivity, and they had been set free from the captivity and that's a possibility. You know, this is not something that we need to argue about, but I think that there's something helpful in the inscription as it says it's a Psalm of David. And let's go back to 2 Samuel 5 for just an illustration of the principle even if it's not the exact historical occasion of the Psalm.

2 Samuel 5 beginning in verse 17. In this instance the Philistines were seeking to fight against David and the people and in reading the extended narrative, it says beginning there in verse 17, "When the Philistines heard that they had anointed David king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to seek out David; and when David heard of it, he went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines came and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. Then David inquired of the LORD, saying, '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.' So David came to Baal-perazim and defeated them there; and he said, 'The LORD has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters.' Therefore he named that place Baal-perazim. They abandoned their idols there, so David and his men carried them away." Verse 22, "Now the Philistines came up once again and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. When David inquired of the LORD, He said, 'You shall not go directly up; circle around behind them and come at them in front of the balsam trees. It shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then you shall act promptly, for then the LORD will have gone out before you to strike the army of the Philistines.' Then David did so, just as the LORD had commanded him, and struck down the Philistines from Geba as far as Gezer." And so here in this instance, David is facing the Philistines who are seeking to wage war against his people. The Lord was with him. The Lord was for him and he conquered that great army, he defeated them and sent them to flight and now here in Psalm 124, we're contemplating what happens, what would have happened to the people of God if God had not been with them in battles such as those?

So he says in verse 3 in Psalm 124, he says, "They would have swallowed us alive. We did not have the strength on our own to defeat them. We were not able to overcome them in our own strength and power. And so if the Lord had not been with us, they would have

swallowed us alive." And the picture here is like a predator animal swallowing its prey. It has the prey in its mouth and it would have swallowed them and the victim would be gone. "We would have been lost. We would have been conquered and utterly defeated." David is saying, "Except for God, our enemies would have eaten us alive." That's the picture of it and if you think about this in a New Testament sense, and again cultivating a New Testament perspective on these kinds of imagery, look back at 1 Peter in the New Testament, 1 Peter 5 with me. 1 Peter 5:8, and actually we'll start in verse 6. 1 Peter 5:6, Peter had just said God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble, and he draws out an application for what we are to do with that reality. Verse 6, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." He cares for you, in other words, he is with you and he is for you. Then look at what it says about the presence of the enemy right in the midst of that promise of the Lord's care. Verse 8, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." So you see Satan pictured here as a predatory animal looking to devour you, looking to devour the people of God in his hatred and animosity toward us and ultimately against Christ himself.

So David's occasion for this Psalm was an act of physical deliverance. There was physical deliverance in time and space and earth history. We have a spiritual deliverance in Christ and the way that you and I should think about that in relationship to the verse in 1 Peter 5:8 is like this: if it were not for the Lord being gracious to the humble, if it were not for the Lord being the one who is the protector of his people, then Satan himself would have killed us. Satan would have devoured us except for the fact that Christ is on our side. And it cultivates in us a sense of dependence, a sense of gratitude, a recognition of the spiritual realities that are actually in place, that unless Christ had saved us, unless Christ continues to keep us, we would be devoured by the enemy of our souls. But he can't devour us because the Lord is with us and the Lord is for us.

So we come up again to the cliff and we look over and we peer over it and we see the vast chasm that lies before us and how the yearning job's of Satan would love nothing more than to swallow us up and we realize that he is restrained by the Lord and unable to do that because the Lord is with us and the Lord is for us. Now going back to Psalm 124, he gives another, he gives a second picture of the safety that we have in the Lord and what would have happened if the Lord was not guarding them from their enemies. In Psalm 124:4 and 5 he says,

4 Then the waters would have engulfed us, The stream would have swept over our soul; 5 Then the raging waters would have swept over our soul.

And there's something about the topography, the lay of the land in Israel that is helpful here. The nature of the geography in Israel makes flash floods common when there are heavy rains as the water rushes down ravines and things like that that are otherwise dry. Flash floods are common and so the builders know to build their house away from the ravines, to build them on rock, that the houses that aren't well-built will fall. So they do that so that the flood will not harm them. Well, here in Psalm 124, he's picturing what

would have happened and he's using a picture that would have been familiar to the readers at the time and said, "If the Lord had not been on our side, it would have been like we were standing in the middle of the ravine with our backs to the onrushing water, and the water would have just come and taken us away and carried us away and no one would have ever heard from us again." So sudden and so devastating would the flood have been that that would have been the outcome. His point is that that didn't happen and the reason that it didn't happen is because the Lord is on our side. Our enemies did not triumph over us because the Lord is on our side. We were not destroyed in battle because the Lord was on our side. We have not been swallowed up by Satan because the Lord is on our side. But if he hadn't been, contrary to fact statement, if he hadn't been, our armies would have been defeated, we would have been swallowed up by Satan.

So God had restrained the hostile forces to keep them from being fatal to his people and so the psalmist steps back, he remembers that history and he interprets it, he interprets it in a spiritual way and he says, "The outcome of that shows that God is with us to protect us. The outcome of that shows that God is with us to keep us. Our enemies never had a chance to defeat us because the Lord was with us." So he's interpreting it and he's looking back and he's giving thanks to God for what has happened. Now my Christian friend, isn't it true that you can look back in things that threatened you in times past, people that threatened you, circumstances that threatened you, and yet here you are safe and secure in our auditorium here tonight, and you can look back and the way that you are to look back on that is to say, "Do you know what? That deliverance from that hostile person who really wanted to ruin me, you know, he's not even in my life anymore and here I am firm and secure in the Lord." Or you look back and you look back at your love for sin and how you were entrapped in sin, maybe sinful relationships for years and you struggled to get out of them, and yet here you are, the Lord's delivered you from that, the Lord has put you in a place where you're walking in holiness. Well, you're to look back on those things and say, "This is a mark of the work of the Lord in my life. This is a mark of the Lord's protection in my life." Some of you have come out from abusive religious systems, from abusive spiritual leaders, the Lord has brought you out from that, brought you out from wicked friends who were corrupting your morals. You just multiply it by whatever the personal circumstances are that you look back on and a Psalm like this teaches us to look back and say, "The Lord was with me. The Lord helped me. The Lord was good to me." And you give honor to him, you praise him, you glorify his name because of the deliverance that he's given to you in the past. He's protected you from your enemies.

But there's more to the Psalm than just that. This is not, as is usually the case with the writers of Scripture, it's not reciting history just for the sake of history, and it's not even simply reciting history for the sake of causing us to praise God for what happened in the past. It's more than that. It is designed to change our perspective as we look to the future, and we see this with our second section here this evening which we could call the praise for deliverance. We see the protection from enemies in the first five verses but now he shifts to an expression of praise in the final three verses, verses 6 through 8. There is a praise for deliverance and so there's this word of praise that provides a transition. It's a transition that looks at the past deliverance, praises God for it, and then expresses confidence as he looks forward to an uncertain future.

Look at verse 6. Remember, he's just acknowledged the hand of God in the deliverance from their enemies and now he's praising God. Verse 6,

6 Blessed be the LORD, Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.

God's rescue, he says, was like being in the jaws of a predator animal, it's like being in the jaws of a lion and someone comes and delivers from that death grip in the jaws of the enemy. And he pictures it like that. "We were in their jaws and God came and did not allow us to be torn by their teeth. He intervened at just the right time in order to give us the deliverance that we needed." And it's as if he's saying it like this, quoting another writer, he said, "If the Lord had not been on our side, our enemies would have ground us into little pieces, swallowed us up and spit out the bones." It's very vivid imagery that we can all relate to.

Then he gives a final image in verse 7, a different image of deliverance as he pictures a bird flying away from a trap. Verse 7,

7 Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper; The snare is broken and we have escaped.

Our enemies set a trap for us but we escaped from it and the trap is broken. It no longer holds a threat to us. So he's used all of this picturesque language, a picture of escaping from a snare emphasizing a sense of triumph. The danger was real but the deliverance came from our God. The trap would have snared them, instead the bird flies free. And what does that teach us about the nature of God toward his people? Well, he's with us and he's for us but there's something even more substantive that we can take it beyond that, we can take that another step further. Beloved, it is the nature of God to rescue his people from trouble. This is what he does. He delights in protecting his people. He delights in caring for them and that means that if you're in Christ, he delights in caring for you. He delights in protecting you and bringing ultimate deliverance to you.

Now look and understand this, this Psalm and nothing in the Scripture is a promise that we'll never be in the midst of danger. That's not the promise. The promise is not that we would walk through untouched completely by the evils of this world or challenged by our enemies or threatened by them, or in real genuine risk of harm. That's not the promise. The promise is that God's hand is on us to protect us and to keep us and to deliver us from those things, to deliver us from the ills of our soul in a way that ensures our ultimate arrival in the final destination of heaven.

And let me just say a word to those of you that battle besetting sins, that find yourself confessing the same kinds of sins over and over again perhaps sometimes even to the point of questioning whether you're actually a Christian or not. How could I be a Christian if I keep stumbling in these same ways over and over again? You get fatigued of confessing the same sin, right? Some of you know what that's like and probably if we were all honest, you know, and perceptive about our spiritual reality, we would see that

not only do we stumble in many ways, we stumble often in the same place again and again and it's humbling to recognize that. Well, beloved, let me give you a word of encouragement here. You know, perfection is not what happens to us in this life. We are glorified and perfected in heaven when we're in the presence of the Lord. In the meantime, we're struggling and battling against our flesh and that's a very real battle. It's encouraging for us to know and to understand that the Lord foresaw, the Lord foreknew the struggles that you would have and he saved you anyway. You know, the Lord saved you and delivered you at some point in the past of your earthly life, the Lord saved you knowing full well the struggles with sin that would remain. And if the Lord had not been on your side, you would be utterly swept away in those sins, you would be utterly given over to your depravity. But that's not the case. You resist these sins. You confess them. You're broken over them when sin breaks into your life again, and sometimes it's the brokenness that is a better indication of the reality of your salvation than perpetual victory would be. I know that sounds somewhat counterintuitive but God gives us over for a time into the seasons of our weakness in order to humble us, in order to teach us dependence upon him, and to show us how much we needed to be saved. So even your ongoing struggles with sin have a sanctifying purpose. They teach you to rely on Christ more and to rely on self less, and as a result of that, they have a purpose that God works out and he causes even our remaining sin to work together for good and to his glory because it produces in us a greater hatred for sin and a greater longing for the deliverance.

If you want a biblical example of what I was saying about the brokenness being a sign of the reality of belonging to him, what did Peter do on the night that he denied the Lord three times? You remember the sad story, right? Jesus had told him, "Peter, before this night is over, you're going to deny Me three times. Before a cock crows, you're going to deny Me three times." Peter said, "No way, Lord." He said, "Even if I have to die with You, I'll never deny You." Well, circumstances changed pretty quickly. Servant girl comes up and says, "I think you were with Him." "No, I wasn't." "I think you were." "No, I wasn't!" "I think you were." And with curses it says in Scripture, he denied knowing Christ just hours after he said he wouldn't fail. And what happened? The cock crowed, Peter remembered what the Lord had said and what did he do? What did he do? He went out and he wept bitterly.

And what did the Lord do after his resurrection? Look at John 21. The Lord came and restored him. John 21:15 through 17. There's an obvious opportunity here for Peter to repudiate his three denials with three opportunities to affirm his love for Christ. I love this passage, I've preached on it often. I've preached on it here. John 21:15, "So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend My lambs.' He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Shepherd My sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?'" And the obvious parallel between his prior denials and now the affirmations all culminates in this emotional action in his heart as he's grieved as he's coming to grips with the reality of

what the Lord is doing as he restores him. And Peter does not boast now in his own strength. He doesn't boast in his own love for the Lord. He appeals to divine omniscience. He appeals to what the Lord knows in and of himself and he says, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Lord, I appeal to what you know to be true, not to what the evidence is in my outward life. "Lord, You know that I love You." And Jesus accepted that profession and he said to him, "Peter, go tend My sheep." Then you read in the opening 12 chapters of the book of Acts after the Holy Spirit had filled him, you read in the two letters of the New Testament that came from Peter's hand and you see the outworking of the reality. Peter loved him, all right, even though he had a colossal moment of failure.

What do we see in that? Earlier prior to the denials, Jesus said, "Peter, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." The Lord was with him. The Lord was for him. The Lord had gone ahead of him even in his prayers to the Father saying, "Father, don't let Peter's faith fail utterly and completely." And in the same way he's gone before us and look back at John 17. You need to see this as well. The Lord prayed for us, he prayed for Christians today while he was here on earth. As he's praying for the Lord to sanctify believers in the truth, verse 17, he says in verse 19, "For their sakes I sanctify Myself," I said myself apart. He sets himself apart for the cross, "that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." And look at this in verse 20, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone," in other words, the ones who were with him on earth at the time, "but for those also who believe in Me through their word." Do you know what? That's you and me. That's everyone who has ever believed in Christ since the apostolic age. We have believed in Christ because of the apostolic word. Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ, and someone, somewhere, sometime brought the word of God to us, opened a Bible to us, took us to apostolic writings and through the work of the Holy Spirit in your dead heart brought you to new life in Christ and you believed in Christ through the word that the apostles had left behind. So Jesus is saying, "Father, I'm not only praying for My contemporaries on earth now, I'm praying for everyone looking forward that would ever believe in their word."

Now listen, if Christ saved you, if the Spirit indwells you, if Christ prayed for you then and prays for you now at the right hand of God, isn't it obvious, could there be any other conclusion except to say the Lord must be on my side? The Lord must be on my side to keep me and his faithfulness is an expression of his own character and his loyalty to his covenant promises, his loyalty to the saving work of Christ and his faithfulness is not withdrawn simply because you stumble like Peter did. And I want to encourage those of you that are broken over sin in your life as a Christian, to understand that the Lord is still with you. The Lord is still keeping you. He did not abandon Peter though Peter denied him with curses. It's just not in the Lord's nature to ever let any of us go. He is gracious. He forgives us. He cleanses us. The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. I've gone up and down, left to right, forward and back, doing everything I know how to do in the power of my weak and feeble mind and tongue to try to show you from so many different perspectives that if you are in Christ, the Lord is with you and the Lord is for you and you're to draw assurance and confidence from that as you do. If you are in Christ, the Lord has not only delivered you from physical danger, he has delivered you

from sin, death and hell. If you are in Christ, he is keeping you to make sure that you arrive into heaven in the end. That's wonderful.

The counter reality to that is that if Christ had not done that for us, if Christ had not helped us, we would have all perished. We'd all be miserably lost. But Christ has helped us. Christ is on our side and therefore we will praise him and we will trust him as we look forward to an uncertain future. That's the goal. That's where this comes out. We look at the past, we see that God is with us, we praise him for that and then it shapes the way that we look to the future. We look to the future with a new sense of confidence, hope and serenity because we understand the God who was with us in the past is with us now and is with us in the future and the outcome will always be the same. God will display his faithfulness to his people in the end. It could be no other way.

So with that, you go back to Psalm 124 a final time. It's kind of a summary statement there at the end in verse 8. He says,

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

Our help comes from our covenant-keeping God and he is sovereign. He made heaven, he made earth, therefore he rules over everything that occurs anywhere under the heavens and on the earth. He reigns over it all. And our help comes from the one who is sovereign over all of that. There is no enemy that can successfully raise up against God and prevail in the end. He is sovereign over it all and that's the one who helps us. That's the one who keeps us. So there's this closing statement of confidence that is rooted in the good sovereignty of God in his faithfulness to his people.

There's an unmistakable echo from Psalm 121 if you just want to slide your eyes across the page or back one page to Psalm 121. Psalm 124 closes on the theme that opened Psalm 121 as both of these Psalms speak about the protection of God for his people. In Psalm 121 it opened up, "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; From where shall my help come? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth." It's a recurring theme throughout these Psalms of Ascent. God is with his people to deliver them and keep them.

So Psalm 124 teaches us a fundamental truth: God delivers us in our times of distress. We may feel the distress but ultimately he will save us. So as we get ready to walk out the doors here at the end of another Tuesday evening together, dwell on this question in light of everything that we've said here, dwell on the opening theme of Psalm 124, "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side, When men rose up against us, they would have swallowed us alive." Dwell on this question as you go out. It will engender gratitude in your heart for Christ. What if he had not saved you? What if he had not been gracious to you? Where would you be? What would your future be? What would death hold for you? How long would hell be for you if Christ had not saved you as he did? What would the answer be in your life and in your heart were it not for grace? On a pointless road to nowhere with your salvation up to you, unable to accomplish it and on a road that would take you over the cliff into a horrifying abyss. Where would you be? What if Christ had

not been gracious to you? My friend, as the answer to that question sets on your mind, let praise and gratitude rise from your lips.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, how grateful we are that the "what if" question is merely a teaching device in this Psalm for the redeemed. Oh, what if You had not saved us? What if You had not intervened as we had set our path and set our hearts on false religion and on a life of sin and rebellion against You? What gutter would we be lying in, O God? Where would our grave be now if You had not been gracious to us? What position in eternal judgment would we be filling in the domain of punishment? What if? Oh, what if Christ had not saved us, Lord? In one sense, the answer is too awful to contemplate but as we contemplate it and realize that You did intervene, You did deliver us from the bonds, the chains of sin, You did deliver us from false teaching from abuse of spiritual leaders, You did deliver us from our own sin and deadness of heart, our own hostility to You, Your Spirit gave us life, opened our hearts to believe the truth that was set before us from the writings of the apostles of Jesus Christ. It would have been bad, Father, if You had not saved us but for those of us in Christ, Father, praise God You did and the horrors of "what if" give way to our praise for what is. We are in the family of God. Our sins are fully forgiven. You have clothed us in the righteousness of Christ. Your Spirit dwells within our very being. You are keeping us for an eternal inheritance far beyond comparison to any earthly trials that we may go through. So Father, as those things sink deeply into our minds, our praise does rise from our lips. We honor You as the great and saving God that You are. We honor You for the work and person of our great Lord Jesus Christ. We give You glory and we honor You, Father, by saying that we will look forward to the future with a sense of confidence because we trust You to keep being that saving keeping God that You have proven yourself to be to us over and over and over again. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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