

James 3:1–12

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[0:00] Today's scripture reading comes from Psalm 124 and may be found on page 517 in the Blue Bibles provided for you.

At this time, kids from age 3 through grade 5 may be dismissed to Team Kids and Team Tots, and the rest of you may stand with me in honor of God's Word. Again, it's Psalm 124 on page 517.

A Song of Ascents of David 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 people rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us.

Then the flood would have swept us away. The torrent would have gone over us. Then over us would have gone the raging waters. Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

We have escaped like 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.

[1:16] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Good afternoon.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for this beautiful day. We thank you for the opportunity to come before you in song and in praise.

I pray that as we turn to your word, that the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart would be there only because they're from you, only because your spirit has put them there.

In Jesus name, amen. Today we continue our journey through the Psalms of Ascents. You have found yourself already in Psalm 124.

The Psalms of Ascents span the Psalms from Psalm 120 to 134. And they are songs of a traveling Israel, of Israel as they are approaching Jerusalem, as they are going towards the festival, as they are looking to celebrate their God.

[2:26] One of the things that I love most about song is the connection between song and memory. How in any moment, a song as we are singing, as we hear music somewhere, can trigger a memory in our mind immediately, flashes back and we're transported somewhere else.

Even last week, we were celebrating Oscar Leiva's 30th birthday. And we heard a spoof, you could call it, on the Righteous Brothers. You've lost that lovely feeling.

I think many of us remember it well. The next day, I was driving, trying to find something worthwhile on the radio, and I stumbled across the Righteous Brothers. And immediately, my mind was back, celebrating Oscar's 30th birthday party.

But that's what song can do. Song can trigger memory, and song can bring us back to another time and another place. And I think in our song today, Psalm 124, we are with Israel on their journey, and we are back with Israel in their memory as they are looking back on what God has done for them.

Our psalm, right from the beginning, we see it's of David, written by David, a man after God's own heart, former king of Israel. And even though it was written by David, we shouldn't struggle too hard or too long to necessarily place it in a specific context or moment of David's life.

[3:53] He may have written it in a specific context with specific events in mind, but the language of our psalm is rather universal. It speaks to God's people, past, present, and future.

The metaphors are universal. The language is universal. And the truth that we find at the end of it is universal. In fact, as we work through our psalm, we'll see that in verse 8, we really have a climax to our psalm.

It says, Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. And indeed, our help is in the name of the Lord, and our memory is often triggered towards that.

And it is the beauty of the song, it is the beauty of the poem that brings us back to memory of God and to the actions that God has done in our lives.

We've already mentioned that powerful connection between memory and song. And in verses 1 to 5, we see this really come to the forefront of Israel's singing and of Israel's remembrance.

[4:56] I can just imagine, as the pilgrims heading towards Jerusalem are singing, going through the small hymnal we have here in Psalms, and I'm sure many other songs, one or two of them, or perhaps a small group, singing out the beginning of our psalm.

Verse 1, If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, and as if they hadn't had enough people following after them, they call out, Let Israel now say. They're calling to the rest of the Israelites, they're calling to those journeying with them to join in on the song, to join in on the recognition that the Lord is indeed on their side.

This phrase, If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, starts verse 1, and it's repeated identically in verse 2. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

And it governs our first section of verses. We see three results of what would have been if the Lord had not been on Israel's side.

Beginning in verse 3. If the Lord had not been on their side, then we would have been swallowed up alive when their anger, when their enemy's anger was kindled against us.

[6:11] Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us, and then over us would have gone the raging waters. We have a picture, we have two pictures in our first section, two images that the psalmist used.

The first is that of Israel's angry enemies rising up against them, and the second is of a raging flood, or of a torrent of water. And actually, Israel's enemies have been with us throughout our journey as we have started in the songs of ascents.

Look back to Psalm 121, just across the page. His enemies, even here in 121, are surrounding him. Look at verse...

I'm sorry. Psalm 120. Too long, verse 6, too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.

I am for peace, but when they speak, they are for war. And again, we see God's enemies in Psalm 123, beginning in verse 3.

[7:20] The Israelites cry out, Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

But as we take steps into Psalm 124, we see kind of an evolution in the way that Israel's enemies are thinking.

We see their anger begin to come to the forefront. It's not simply scorn, and it's not simply proud, but we actually see them becoming angry. And indeed, this continues.

If you flip the page over to Psalm 129, we see the same thing brought up again. Again, in verse 5, May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward.

Indeed, the Lord's enemies have become angry with the Lord's people. But we have already seen in our Psalm 124 that the Lord is on the side of His people.

[8 : 24] It doesn't matter if His enemies are simply laughing. It doesn't matter if they have become angry because God's people have God. They have the Lord on their side.

Like the Lord, who has not changed, who has remained constant, we have seen that His enemies also have not changed very much at all. Even today, living in Chicago, we could leave these doors, walk down the streets of Hyde Park, and it probably wouldn't take long for us to find someone who upon sharing our faith, telling them what we believe, would find it laughable, who would deride us, or who would even say we're just superstitious.

Perhaps they would even become angry. And though we may not face it as often in our own context, there are followers of Jesus everywhere around the rest of the globe who suffer even facing death at the hands of angry and hateful enemies of the Lord.

But we can praise the Lord remembering that He remains steadfast. The Lord was on Israel's side, and He remains on the side of His people. The anger of God's people is no match for the power, for the help, and for the love of God.

Throughout Israel's history, they could look back and see many enemies to their God rising up against them. As they were journeying towards Jerusalem, this song, I'm sure, would trigger multiple memories in the minds of those traveling of times in which the Lord had been on their side.

[10 : 05] If we were to join the pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem after the exile, they would have had an immediate context in which their minds would have flashed back when they were living at the hand and in the opposition of another nation.

But now they found themselves on the other side of their life in exile. They were living out the promises that God told them concerning Jerusalem and Jeremiah. And He said, When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you.

I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. Perhaps they were flashing back to the life of even this very psalm's author, David, remembering how God had delivered and protected David and therefore his people throughout his life.

We move on, we see the imagery of the violent flood and the raging waters which form a very strong metaphor in our psalm. How many people when they were walking would perhaps flash back and remember the stories of how God had delivered their nation from slavery?

How He had delivered their ancestors from the hand of Pharaoh and when they had left with Egypt's army pursuing them had come up to the raging waters, had found themselves with the waters of the Red Sea in front of them and with Egypt's army chasing and pursuing angry behind them.

[11 : 29] If it not had been for the Lord, they would have become victim to either the army or to the literal waters that were standing in front of them.

But instead, the Lord provided them a dry path through the sea. It was their enemies who became victim to the torrent and to the raging waters. And we could continue.

There's no end to the list of events in Israel's past that show and evidence that the Lord was indeed on their side. But we too, like Israel, are called to remember our past, are called to remember when the Lord has been on our side.

We can look back at our own lives and our own experience and see times of trial, see times of tribulation, see times when it seems that the waters will be flooding over us and see the hand of the Lord guiding us through.

In fact, we're reminded of this very truth already in our service. Perhaps we've already forgotten what we read from Romans 8 to verse 31. Paul wrote it as a question.

[12:35] If God is for us, who can be against us? Indeed, the Lord remains on the side of his people to this day. The answer to Paul's question, of course, is not a simple nobody, for we have established the fact that enemies to the Lord remain and are fierce and are angry, but the truth remains that God is on the side of his people.

And his enemies will not ultimately be able to stand because of the help of the Lord. If the first part of Psalm 124 called Israel to remembrance of past events, then verses 6-7, in verses 6-7, they would have recognized that indeed it was the Lord who had orchestrated their escape, who has brought them safely through.

Beginning in verse 6, we read, that they have escaped the raging waters.

We run again into two more images in our second section. The first is one of predator and prey, verse 6, and the second is one of the bird hunter laying a snare.

Both are from the wildlife realm, and enemy, and, excuse me, and we have already seen Israel's enemies pictured as those becoming angry.

[14:27] And it's very similar to the first picture that we run into of predator and prey, of one stalking behind God's people, one that is hungry and looking for dinner. But the Lord, blessed be the Lord, it calls out before, has not allowed them to be overtaken.

He has not allowed them to be hunted down, and he has not allowed them to be handed over to their adversary. The second image, more passive than the stalking predator, is one of a bird that escapes the clutches of a snare that has been lain as a trap.

Verse 7, we have escaped like a bird from the snare of fowlers. It is not, however, that the people have escaped under their own power, or because anything that they have done.

Indeed, the snare has been broken. The birds, representing God's people, have escaped, but it was not what they did. The snare indeed is engineered to trap the bird, to outsmart the bird, and it was unlikely that they would escape from it on their own.

The end of verse 7 reads, the snare is broken. It could also read, the snare has been broken, putting the action somewhere else, on someone else acting upon the trap.

[15:41] Perhaps, being placed in an upward gaze to the Lord, it is the Lord who has broken the snare and allowed his people to go free.

With the God who works in such mighty ways, we would think that it would be easy for us to constantly call to memory, constantly recognize his hand in everything that we do, and all that we have seen in the past.

Yet we struggle, and even so, Israel struggled as well. If we were to look back to their standing on the edge of the promised land in Deuteronomy, when God had brought them through the wilderness, when God had taken them from fiery serpents, when God had fed them with manna, given them water from the rock, we would see Moses standing there before they crossed the Jordan and warning Israel.

He warns them, and this is what he says. He says, Beware, lest you say in your heart, my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. He continues, you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers as it is this day.

And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. But are we any different?

[17:08] How quickly do we not recognize the hand of God at work in our own lives? in the lives of people around us? How quickly do we rely on our own strength to get us through every day?

How often do we look back at our own past and fail to see everything that God has done with his mighty hand? A sunflower, as it buds, serves as a great example for us.

The sunflower, before it matures, will follow along the horizon the movements of the sun. Before it breaks forth, it turns its head and it follows the light that gives its life, that gives it the very life that it needs.

It should be the same with us. Our gaze should be so fixed on the one who gives us life, on the light of our life. Perhaps we don't even struggle to remember the things that the Lord has done.

Perhaps we can look back at events, but maybe it's not evidenced by the deeds of our hand. Maybe we don't live every day with our face cast upward to the Lord.

[18:19] And our recognition and our constant looking at the Lord should result in praise to him. At the beginning of our series, Pastor Helm laid out some rules for us as we read the Psalms.

One of these was pay attention to poetry. The Psalms have parallelism, they have metaphor, symbolism, all things that you get with good poetry and good song.

We have seen this idea of parallelism of similar ideas already in our passage when we looked at verses 3 to 5 and the repeated idea of the waters overcoming God's people.

Another component of poetry is metaphor. And this song we've noticed is full of metaphor. We've seen the imagery and the metaphor of God's enemies, of the raging waters, of the predator, and of the snare.

The snare is a very popular image in the wisdom literature of the Bible, throughout Psalms, throughout Proverbs, even in Ecclesiastes. If you turn back just a couple pages to Psalm 91, we will see another example of this snare used in the Psalms.

[19:28] the Psalm identifies the Lord as the refuge and as the fortress of his people.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust.

For he will deliver you from the snare of the Father and from the deadly pestilence. The image goes throughout the wisdom literature. A second metaphor that we see is that of the waters.

This metaphor extends through the whole of scriptures. We've looked at it momentarily with the Red Sea when God had brought his people to the Red Sea out of slavery.

But the metaphor of water often serves a dual purpose. It will show God's judgment as well as God's salvation. When Israel was running from their enemies, from the pursuing of Egypt's army, God opened the Red Sea before them and guided them safely to the other side.

[20:38] They had been saved at the hand of the Lord. But when the Egyptian army entered it, God shut the waters, they were drowned, and they were judged by the very waters in which Israel had been saved.

Another example is that of Noah, before the Israelites. Wickedness had grown so strong on the earth that God had chosen to judge it.

And again, he judges the world and the wickedness of it with water. He tells Noah he's going to flood the earth and commands him to build an ark. Those who refused to believe Noah, who refused to believe the message that God had given them, were judged by the waters that Noah and his family were brought to salvation through.

The metaphor continues even into the New Testament. Jesus entered into the waters of baptism before he began his earthly ministry, before he, though he was without sin, before he faced temptation in the desert.

And though we may not have a physical army chasing at our heels, though we may not have the Red Sea in front of us, we have a foe that is just as strong, and if not stronger.

[21 : 53] If you noticed, in the song we just sang a few minutes ago, Mighty Fortress is Our God, Martin Luther uses the same metaphor of the flood. He writes about God, our helper he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

And there he identifies our enemy. He identifies sin as the enemy of God's people. As Israel could remember what God had done and recognize him as the one who saved them, we too should look at Jesus, for Jesus is our help and has already conquered sin through his death.

The metaphors used to describe Israel's enemies could just as easily be applied to us in our battle with sin. Sin is oftentimes, like all of the metaphors we have seen throughout Psalm 124.

Sin can be a raging water. Sometimes we see it and we become disgusted by how obvious and how gross we find it. At other times, it becomes more subtle. It becomes like the stalking predator behind us, just waiting to jump out and to grab us.

And at other times, sin does nothing. Sin lays on the ground like the fowler's snare. And it just waits for us to wander and be snatched up into it.

[23 : 11] But we are not left without help in our battle against sin. Luther continues in his song, and he writes, Not only must Jesus win the battle, He has already won the battle.

He has already conquered our enemy on our behalf. It is through Jesus' death that we become free from sin. Romans 6 tells us, The one who has died has been set free from sin.

And this passage is not speaking only of Christ. Preceding this statement, Paul asks, Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Jesus has entered the waters. Jesus has conquered and fought our battle for us. Jesus has conquered sin. Through our identification with Christ, we will also win the battle against sin.

With the Lord's help, Israel passed through the waters, received salvation. Jesus entered the waters. And as his ministry ended on the cross, and when he came forth from the grave, he defeated sin.

[24 : 33] We too, as Roman tells us, must pass through the waters of baptism, which are so inextricably linked with our salvation and our battle against sin.

Because we have conquered sin, because Christ has conquered sin, we have been set free from it. We are no longer enslaved to sin, but we are free to live dedicated lives to the service of God.

It is when we remember that the Lord is on our side, when we recognize that it has been his work by giving his son, that we have been set free, that we can rest assured in the refuge of Jesus Christ.

This assurance was the final realization also of the Israelite traveling in Psalm 124. The end clarifies out again.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. It was not the doings of Israel that afforded them salvation. It was the help of the Lord.

[25:38] And so it remains the same for us. It is not through anything that we do that we receive our help, but it is because God has sent his son. So often we look for situations in which we can place the blame on other people, in which we can escape from guilt, looking to get out of things and say, there's nothing I can do.

That's completely out of my hands. But when it comes to our life in Christ, for some reason, we are constantly seeking ways to do something, to achieve our salvation on our own way. We can never fully let go of our worries, our problems, our enemies, and put them into the Lord's hand and rest in him.

But because Jesus has conquered sin, we are afforded salvation, and our praise must turn towards him. Not only must our praise turn towards him now, but we must rest in him, knowing that when the next wave of torrents come, our face can still remain fixed on the Lord.

And if the Lord is our help, he is also our refuge. If he has achieved salvation for us, we can take refuge in him. He is our help and has given us his spirit to guard us and to protect us until he takes us to be his own.

We are free from sin. We are free to call the Lord our Father. We are free to sing with the one who wrote Rock of Ages. Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.

[27:12] Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure. Save from wrath and make me pure. Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands.

Could my zeal no respite know? Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone. Thou must save, and thou alone. May the Lord's people continue to be a people of praise and of song.

May we remember that the Lord is on our side. And may we recognize the Lord alone is our help. May our help and our refuge from sin forever be our song.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for the truths of your word. We thank you for the knowledge of knowing that we can rest in you, that our power and our strength and our help are not at our own hands, but come from your hand and come from the sending of your Son to conquer sin.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen.