

With God on Our Side

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Preacher: Bob Akroyd

[0 : 00] Let's turn back together to that passage in the Old Testament, Psalm 124. And I'll begin by quoting that last verse of the psalm that would commence the services in Geneva.

Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. As I begin, I'd like to just make a few observations about this psalm.

The first I'd like to notice is that the Christian life is an uphill journey. Now, you'll see in this section of the psalms, from Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134, each of the psalms in that section is entitled, A Song of Ascent.

Now, these would be pilgrim psalms. The people of God would sing as they journeyed to Jerusalem. And literally, that journey would be an uphill journey.

Now, if I'm being honest with you, the Christian life is not an easy life. There are challenges, there are difficulties, there are disappointments. If you're not yet a Christian, I'm not going to tell you that if you were to become a Christian, that life becomes simple and straightforward.

[1 : 22] That the hassles of life disappear and the rest of your life is just a life of happiness, joy, and wonderful mountaintop experiences. That's not being true to the Bible.

It's not being true to life or to experience. And sometimes it feels like an uphill journey. If you were to come to my office in Edinburgh, my office is on the third floor, but my classroom is on the fifth floor.

And normally at nine o'clock when my class begins, I'm sometimes cutting it very fine. So if for any reason the elevator is out of action, and I have to quickly scale five flights, by the time I get to the top, I have very little breath left.

Because it's tiring. And for somebody now who's approaching or past middle age, you feel that as you run up five flights of stairs. Now, the people of God are journeying up.

And they are journeying to Jerusalem. The journey is long and the journey is arduous. But they want to be in Jerusalem. Why?

[2 : 32] Because it's celebration time. It's festival time. These songs would have been sung at the big feasts. Maybe Passover, Tabernacles, Pentecost.

So if the Christian journey is an uphill journey, the Christian journey is also a journey that is best shared. This is a journey that you benefit from taking with other people.

Because of the trials, because of the troubles, because of the hardships, you need help and encouragement. So not only is this a song of ascent, we have a very clear hint that this is a song that's to be sung together.

At the very beginning of Psalm 124, we're told, 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, and this is familiar to island life, is you have the cantor, the presenter, who's giving out a line.

You have the voice of one. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side. Let Israel now say, he's saying to the crowd, to the congregation, to the large group of people who are journeying together, join your voices together.

[3 : 54] And the voice of one becomes the voice of many. And what you find is, even though the journey is long and arduous, as you're singing together, as you're walking together, it becomes that much less of a burden.

Why? Because you're not alone. You have others alongside of you, you have those in front of you, and those coming up behind you. And you'll know, if you are a Christian, you'll know this, and if you're not yet a Christian, you'll come to appreciate this.

When you come to faith, you realize that, well, of course we need God, we need Jesus, we need the Holy Spirit, but we need each other. We need encouragement.

We get tired. We get discouraged. We find the going difficult. And if we're honest, sometimes we think it'd be much easier to give up, to turn back, and to go home.

But you see, the Christian fellowship and the Christian family is there to come alongside, to give that word of encouragement when you're tired, or to give that word of motivation to help us along the way.

[5 : 00] And when you've received that kind of encouragement, you can then, in turn, encourage other people. So you have this scene, and during these big festivals, the city of Jerusalem, the population would swell to a million, some historians suggest even two million, which is huge by ancient standards.

So a large number of people are taking this journey, and they're coming from all different directions, and they're coming together, and they're singing the same song, and they're journeying in the same direction.

Why? Because they want to be together, they want to celebrate, they want to rejoice, and they want to be in the presence of God, but in the presence of God's people.

So never underestimate what we are tonight, that we are not a group of individuals, we are a congregation, we are a people. Never underestimate the power of fellowship.

Never underestimate the importance of Christian friendship and fellowship, because you never know what your Christian friend might be going through. You might have an idea. You never know the discouragements, or you might never know the disappointments.

[6 : 15] So that word of comfort, or that word of encouragement, that word of friendship, that word of care or compassion, is so valuable, and is so important. So the one voice sings, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, and he encourages the congregation, let Israel now say, and the thunder of thousands upon thousands of voices comes back, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

So this is a journey that is uphill, it's arduous, it's long, but this is a journey that is best taken in company. Now as we look at this passage, I'd like to notice the negative first, the problems first. And sometimes we only see the problems, and sometimes the problems are obvious. The problems are obvious in the society in which we live, the problems are obvious within our own communities, the problems might be obvious in our own families, in our own close relationships.

Sometimes we see the problems in our own churches. But when we look at Psalm 124, the psalmist does not hesitate to be honest. And that's what you find in the Bible.

The Bible gives you an honest presentation of what life is really like. It's not sugar-coated, it's not rose-tinted glasses, but it's real life presented in all of its variety and in all of its challenges.

[7 : 44] So as we look at Psalm 124, I'd like us to notice that the enemies, our enemies, are many and varied. We have at least four images that are brought before our eyes.

And because it's poetry, David, the psalmist, the poet, uses word pictures to capture the events, to capture the situation.

Because simply he describes in verse 2, when people rose up against us. So we know that David is talking about conflict. He doesn't tell us which people.

He doesn't tell us where they rose up. He doesn't tell us the cause of the conflict. He doesn't give us any detail. So we can't pinpoint and say, well, this is the Philistines, or this is...

So we can't pinpoint an event in the life of David, but this general presentation shows to us that there are conflicts, and we will come up against those who wish to do us harm, those who wish to destroy us.

[8 : 52] We're told in John chapter 10 and verse 10, we're told that there is a thief who came to steal, kill, and destroy. But Jesus went on to say, but I, Jesus says, I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly.

So as we look at these images, the first image we have in verse 3, then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us.

So the first word picture that David gives us is of a creature, a large creature, so big that it could swallow you whole.

Again, this is not a literal picture of a sea creature, for example, but David is saying that the opponents are so big or so powerful that they could, as it were, just swallow you in one go.

So, if you were to look on the internet, there's a shark, a great white shark, by the name of Mary Lee, or Mary Lee. Now, Mary Lee has been tagged, and you can track where Mary Lee is.

[10:01] Now, you might think, well, that's interesting. Well, my sister makes a point of making sure that Mary Lee is well out of the scene whenever she goes to the ocean, because she doesn't want to go to the beach and find that Mary Lee is just a few yards off the shore because Mary Lee is a 16-foot great white shark.

And a 16-foot great white shark has a mouth big enough to swallow even somebody my size in one or two gulps. That's the idea of a big enemy, a big creature that is so big that it can just swallow you in one.

The next image, in verse 4, David gives us of a flood or a torrent, raging waters. So, he moves from kind of the sea creature, and he moves to the strength of the sea itself or the strength of the water. Ken, you're in an island community. You don't need to be reminded that the seas can be unpredictable and strong. You would be well advised not to ignore the strength of the sea or the power of the tides.

And the scene here, again, is of the individual or the people of God who are facing a flood, who are facing a torrent, and who are facing raging waters that are so strong, so powerful, that they could just sweep them straight off their feet and sweep them into oblivion.

[11:31] So, you see the pattern. The creature is so big it could swallow. The water is so strong they could rush you away. The third picture is alluded to in verse 6.

It's not so much the size of the creature, but in verse 6 we're told as a prey to their teeth. David is giving us this word picture of a creature or an animal or a beast that's teeth were so sharp it could just grind you to pieces.

You're up against it. Because if the creature doesn't swallow you, the waters will rush you away.

And if the waters don't rush you away, then you have this other animal that will tear you to bits with its teeth.

And the fourth and final picture here is of a snare. And what's worse with this final picture is not just that you're in danger of being ensnared. You already are ensnared.

You've been trapped. You've been caught. So, it's a picture of utter helplessness. Because when the snare is sprung, there's nothing left.

[12:40] So, the bird that's caught in a snare, the next place that bird will find itself is in a pot for dinner or for lunch. And when we're caught, we can't set ourselves free.

So, here's four pictures that remind us that we are in danger. That there are trials and troubles. That there are enemies and opponents that could overwhelm us and overcome us.

And each of these, individually, is more powerful than we are. But collectively, are far more powerful than we could ever hope to be.

But David is not giving us a counsel of despair. He's not telling us to give up or to give in. He's not telling us just to throw in the towel. But what is he telling us?

He's telling us that in the midst of these real and pressing enemies, in the midst of these real and pressing dangers, the Lord is there. And he's there at the beginning, and he's there at the end, and he's there in the middle.

[13:45] Because when you look at the poems of the Old Testament, particularly, there's three ways to emphasize. Either you emphasize something at the beginning of a poem, you emphasize something at the end of a poem, or you emphasize something in the middle of a poem.

David does all three. At the beginning of this poem, of this song, he says, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side. In the middle, right in verse 6, blessed be the Lord who has not given us as a prey to their teeth.

And then finally, the statement that we began with, the end, our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

It doesn't matter about the creature so big it can gulp you in one. It doesn't matter when the torrent is about to sweep you away. Nor does it matter when the teeth are so sharp that they could grind you to pieces.

Nor the snare that has been sprung in your trap. Why? Because the Lord himself is more powerful by far than enemy, than any enemy, than any opposition, than anyone who could seek to do you harm or to do you in.

[15:02] And he's there at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. So if you're not yet a Christian, I can testify to you that the Christian life is not easy.

But I would not want to trade the Christian life for any other life. Because at various points I can see so very clearly. And very often those are the most difficult points of my own experience where you see the Lord's hand most clearly.

You experience the Lord's help most personally. You recognize the Lord's deliverance most obviously. Why? Because you realize you can't.

You can't fix this problem. You can't get out of this situation. You can't undo this trap. You need God and God himself is faithful.

Because the word that's used by David is the word that reminds us of God's personal name. There are many names and many titles that are used of God in the Old and the New Testament.

[16:03] But when you see this Lord in block capital letters, that's the personal name that God gave when Moses said, tell me your name. The people of God will want to know who sent me so I need to know your name.

And God revealed his name. The name that means I am that I am. It also means I was that I was or I will be that I will be. It means that God has no beginning.

He has no middle. He has no end. He always is. He always was. He always will be. He doesn't change. He doesn't grow tired. He doesn't grow weak. He doesn't expend energy and become more tired.

His energy is infinite. His power is infinite. And this personal name reminds us that he is a personal God. He can be known personally and he knows personally.

God is not abstract. God is not an idea or a concept. But he is personal. He is a personal God who acts in the lives of people and in the lives of his people individually and collectively.

[17:13] So this personal name is also the name by which he makes covenant. You see, our God makes covenant or he makes agreements.

He makes commitments. He makes promises. Again, he enters into personal relationships. And those relationships are governed by certain promises on his part that he will do certain things.

And our God is faithful. He keeps his word. He's reliable. He's dependable. So not only does he know what we're going through, but he's there in the midst of it.

He's there protecting us. He's there preserving us. He's there keeping us from this utter devastation that is described here. And sometimes we might only see this as we look back.

Sometimes we might not be aware of the Lord's help. We might not be aware of the Lord's hand. We might not be aware of the Lord's blessing at the time. But we look back and we can testify he was there the whole time.

[18:19] He gave me wisdom. He gave me strength. He gave me courage. He gave me comfort. So while the enemies may be many and the enemies may be varied, the Lord is there beginning, middle, and end.

He knows us personally and we can know him personally. We can rely upon him. We can call upon him. We can acknowledge him. We can trust him.

We are not left to our own devices. We are not left to our own wisdom. We are not left to our own strength because if we were, we would be utterly, utterly devastated.

We could not cope. We could not exist. We need him at the beginning of our lives. We need him at the end of our lives. And we need him every step of the way.

So the life of faith is a life of reliance. It's a life of trust. It begins with trust but it continues with trust. You continue to trust God today.

[19:21] You may have been walking the Christian path for many years but you need him today as much as you ever did. And you must rely upon him and trust him today as you did that first day when you came into a new relationship with him.

And if you're not yet a Christian, you might be going through trials and troubles that are many and varied. but he's there able and willing to help. He's not far.

He's not uninterested. He cares about you even in the midst of these trials even if the trials themselves are your own making. It doesn't matter what you've done or what you haven't done because David is telling us or encouraging us to sing this song and to recognize what God has done.

What God is doing and how we can be strong even in the midst of our own weakness even in the midst of these trials and tribulations. So how do we respond?

Well first of all we want to acknowledge him. We want to recognize him as Lord. As one who is in charge. As one who is in control. As one who has all power.

[20 : 29] As the one who is doing great and wonderful things. So we give him the credit. We give him the praise. We give him the glory. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

We would have been lost. Without his help. We would have been overwhelmed. We would have been destroyed. We then give him praise. Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as a prey to their teeth.

We praise him. We thank him. And we acknowledge him personally. Our help is in the name of the Lord. David doesn't say my help.

Nor does he say your help. But he says our help as the people of God is found in only one place. And is found in only one God.

No other God can help. No other person can help. But the Lord himself. And the measure of his help is the measure of his power. And what is the measure of his power?

[21 : 31] The measure of his power is this. That the Lord made heaven and earth. Everything that we see. Everything that we encounter. Is made by him.

So that means that he has all power. That he has all authority. That he is not bound by anything. He is not overwhelmed by anything. He is not limited by anything.

Why? Because he's created everything himself. And he is able to work all things together for your good. For your benefit. For your blessing. The trial and the trouble may be real.

May be pressing. May be hard. And you might not understand why or how or how this has happened. But you can testify that the Lord is there. He's hearing your prayers.

He's helping you day by day. He knows. He cares. And he's able to come alongside of you.

Whatever it is that you might be encountering individually. And whatever we might encounter as the people of God.

[22 : 34] But as we reflect upon this passage. I'm reminded of the words of Abraham Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln was the American president during the Civil War. And at many different junctures people asked him.

Mr. President. Is God on our side? And he often responded in this way. He said, My concern is not whether God is on our side.

My greatest concern is to be on God's side. For God is always right. How can you or I know whether we are on God's side?

How can we know whether these promises are for us? Because you might say to me, this is a song written by David. It's a song written primarily to a people, the nation of Israel, 3,000 years ago.

Very different setting. Very different culture. Very different time period. And very much in the middle of conflict. National conflict. One nation opposing another nation.

[23 : 39] But how can we take this song, this psalm, to ourselves? How do we know that God is on our side? How do we know that we are on his side?

Well, the language that we have in Psalm 124 is brought before us in Romans chapter 8. That's why we read that passage together. Romans 8 verse 31, for example.

What then shall we say to these things? The Apostle Paul has been unpacking what it is that we believe as Christians. unpacking the gospel in its fullness and in its majesty.

And he's saying, what can we say in response to these great truths? The great truths concerning Jesus. The great truths concerning his death. The great truths concerning our justification by faith in him.

What can we say in response to all of this? If God is for us, who can be against us? The same language that we see in Psalm 124.

[24 : 45] The same themes. God for us. Well, the Apostle Paul unpacks it for us to tell us how we can know that God is on our side, that God is for 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?

The longer I live and the more I've, the longer I've been a Christian, I realize this. It's not so much what you know, but who you know.

Now, knowledge is important. Knowing things is important. Knowing information is important. But the Bible tells us that knowing him is all important.

You see, you could know all of theology. You could know the beginning, the middle and end of any systematic theology book. You could understand all the major doctrines.

[25 : 45] But what Paul is saying is that if God is for us, we need to know him who is at the right hand of God himself. Not so much what we know, but who we know.

So do you know this Jesus? Do you know this Jesus who was given up for us all? Do you know this Jesus through whom God alone can justify us, make us right in his sight?

Because if you know this Jesus, then you know the one who is literally at the right hand of God. He is God's right hand man. All power and all authority.

Just give you a very small illustration of this. Not just what you know, but who you know. So yesterday, we were visiting friends and we were talking about our holidays that Heather and I, we had been to America, we had been to the state of Maine, and Maine is known for its seafood, particularly its lobster.

And the couple that we were visiting, well she said to me, well my brother's a lobster fisherman. Do you like lobster? I said, well I do like lobster. So she said, let me just make a, so she made a phone call and she said, well if you go down to Leverborough, there's a bag full of lobsters for you.

[27 : 01] So you see, you can't do that in Edinburgh. You can't go to the pier in Musselboro, you can't go to New Haven and say, here I am, Bob Aykroyd, I like lobster.

That wouldn't work. It's hard enough to find lobster in Edinburgh, but you just show up at the pier, nobody's going to give you a bag full of lobsters. But if you know the fishermen, or if you know the family, they'll say, well hey, I've got a guy here from America, he likes lobsters, could you give him some lobsters?

Small illustration. But if you know Jesus Christ who is all powerful, who is God's only begotten son, who is at the right hand of the Father in heaven, who lived, who died, who rose again, who ascended on high, if you know him, then you know that you are on God's side.

If you know him, you know that all that God has will be yours. All power, all majesty, all honor, all glory belong to the Son. So if you know him, then you need not fear the trouble, then you need not fear the trial, then you need not fear the opposition, then there is nothing that can separate you from God.

Why? Because the love of Jesus Christ is so strong. The gospel of Jesus Christ is so powerful that not only can Jesus save you, but Jesus can sustain you.

[28 : 17] Not only can Jesus take you from the dominion of darkness and bring you into the kingdom of his beloved Son, but he can keep you in that kingdom. So you see the argument that Paul is making.

If God is for us, who can be against us? How do we know if God is for us? It's all about Jesus. It's all about the death of Jesus. It's all about the life of Jesus. And it's all about the ascension and heavenly session of Jesus.

Because we read in verse 34, who is to condemn? Now in life there will be many people who will attempt to condemn you. Many people who will put you down. Many people who would seek to bring you low.

But there is none who condemn. Why? Because Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. So you see, at the end of the day, it's not so much the strength of your prayers, the frequency of your prayers, the length of your prayers. But what I can say to you is this, that if your faith is in Jesus Christ, he is praying for you.

[29 : 28] And his prayers are powerful. And his prayers are persistent. And his prayers never fail. You see, he promises not to let you go.

And he keeps his promise. He promises that nothing will take you out of his hand. And he keeps his promise. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Tribulation?

That won't work. What about distress? No, that can't do it. Persecution? Famine? Nakedness? Dangerous sword? None of these great enemies or great oppositions can take us out of the love of Jesus.

So it's not so much what you know, as important as that is, but who you know. Do you know this Jesus who was crucified, who died? Do you know this Jesus who rose from the dead?

Do you know this Jesus who ascended on high and at this very moment is at the Father's right hand? Because if you don't know him, you can. You can know him personally.

[30 : 28] And you can know for sure that you are now on God's side. And that all of God's power and all of God's strength and all of God's love is at your disposal.

That he will look after you, that he will protect you, and that he will preserve you. You respond to his Son. And when you respond to his Son, the Father will honor the Son and will honor those who trust in the Son.

He will protect you. He will keep you. Whatever opponents or opposition seeks to destroy you, he will overcome. Nothing will be able.

Nothing in creation, not height or depth, not powers, not things to come, not things in the present, not angels or rulers, neither death nor life. those great lists in verses 38 and 39, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

This is a promise that you can take to heart personally. But this is a promise that we as a people can take to heart. God will not lose us. God will not let us go.

[31 : 38] God will not leave us to our own devices. He promises to be with us. He loves us. He saves it and He shows it. He shows it in the salvation of His people.

But He shows it in the sustaining grace of His people. And that we can testify that He's rescued us and that He's protected us, that He's preserved us, and one day He will take us to be with Him. Why? Because that is His promise. That is His commitment. So as we read these great songs of the Old Testament, as we read these great testimonies of God's deliverance in the past, as we read these great statements of faith in the New Testament, connecting our faith, connecting our experience with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, we realize that our hope and we realize that our help and we realize that our strength is not from here, but from there.

You see, there's a great contrast between the Christian faith and other world religions. Most other world religions and world philosophies will tell us that the major problems of life are outside of ourselves, whereas the solutions to those problems are inside of ourselves.

if we search, if we seek, we can figure out or we can find those solutions to life's problems within ourselves, whereas Christianity focuses the exact opposite.

[33 : 17] Christianity says to us that the major problems of life are within ourselves, within our hearts, within our minds, within our lives, and the solution to those problems are outside of ourselves.

We can't fix our own problems, we can't overcome our own enemies, we can't put right what is already put wrong, but God can, and God has, and God will.

We trust Him, we believe in Him, and that's the power of the gospel, to change, to transform, to renew, and to grab hold of you and me and not let us go.

The precious promises are for you and for me, for us. God keeps His word 100% of the time that He saves and He keeps.

We have a powerful Savior in Jesus. We have a powerful Savior who can keep us through the trials and tribulations of life. Whether you feel as if you're going to be swallowed up or swept away or just ground to bits, whether you feel as if you've already been ensnared, God comes along and rescues, and God is worthy then of our praise, of our thanks.

[34 : 39] We recognize that He and He alone is the solution to our problems, that He and He alone is the one who can protect us in the midst of all of these various enemies and various opponents, and we praise Him, we acknowledge Him, we honor Him, we glorify Him through His Son, Jesus.

As Abraham Lincoln said, my concern is not whether God is on our side, my greatest concern is to be on God's side. Are you on His side tonight?

Can you acknowledge Him as your God? Can you acknowledge Him as your Lord? Can you acknowledge Him personally? Can you acknowledge His Son as your Savior?

Because if that is the case, then you join with the people of God. And these great promises for we and for us become yours as well.

So may God bless His Word to each of our hearts. Let us bow our heads and pray.