

Psalm 124 (PM)

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[0 : 00] It's so wonderful to see you all out there. Let me just add my welcome to Willie's, and it's been a wonderful day to be together as God's church.

And just the feeling of standing in the front and then hearing everybody's voices behind me, it's wonderful to be with you. It's so encouraging. So, we've gathered as God's people for worship tonight.

And we have the Psalm of Ascent to set the tone for us. And you probably have heard by now, these Psalms of Ascent were road-tripping psalms.

So, these are like a pilgrim's playlist that they're going to set on their radio to set the mood on their way up to Jerusalem to gather and worship in God's holy temple. And so, they are the perfect psalms for summer.

This summer in particular. This Sunday in particular, as we gather and worship as God's holy temple, the church. The Lord has given us Psalm 124 today.

[1 : 05] And I think it's just really providential. This psalm speaks with a very striking voice to us. It's got some really unique things about it. First of all, it's a corporate testimony.

And so, most testimony psalms that we read in the Bible, they're the story of how God rescued me personally. But this psalm speaks of God rescuing us.

God not just saving a person, but a people. And this wideness leads into a really great broadness as well.

So, I think it's like the perfect pair of walking shoes. God's people can just slip this psalm on for any difficult journey that they face. As they're on their way up to worship in God's temple together, from generation to generation, this psalm fits any trouble that we face, helping us to trust in God's care as we face trouble.

Now, the mechanism of how this psalm actually calls forth our trust is really interesting. And so, maybe you notice right at the beginning of that psalm, this is not how most psalms start.

[2 : 10] It invokes our corporate imagination with that little word, if. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

Let Israel say with me, if it had not been the Lord who was on our side. So, right from the start this evening, we're invited into the hypothetical.

This is a thought experiment that we're joining the psalmist in. And not once, but twice, the psalmist calls God's people to wonder, what if? What if God wasn't Yahweh?

What if our Lord was another God? Anyone less faithful? Anyone less powerful? And imagine the consequences. Or what if Yahweh hadn't been on our side?

What if he wasn't fighting for us? What if instead we were all alone? Or what if we even found ourselves to be fighting against the Lord? We would have been done for.

[3 : 09] That's the setup. That's the hook for Psalm 124. And the first half of the psalm follows this question all the way to its end. And so, verses 1 to 5, they lead down this trail of what if? And it goes down.

It certainly goes down. All the way down to a certain disaster. And once we've seen that trajectory, we get to verse 6 to 8. And that takes us all the way back up. Back to our firm foundation. Who is the Lord.

Our helper. The maker of heaven and earth. So, let's look at the first part of that. And we'll engage our imagination together. Verse 2. 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.

So, some psalms describe a very specific situation of trouble, injustice, slander, or betrayal. Not this psalm. This psalm is very broad. The enemies are simply called people.

Not even Gentiles. Just people. And the occasion is just when these people rose up against us. And so, what we have here is not a particular rescue that's being described.

[4 : 18] This is actually a rescue template. It's a pattern for understanding God's people in the world. And it's a song to sing whatever trouble strikes God's people.

If not for the Lord, then disaster. That's the template. So, it's not a story. This psalm is not a story. It's the story of God's people in the world. It's the story of scripture is Psalm 124 played on repeat over and over. Over and over the grave, yawning to swallow us, with the Lord coming to rescue us. Just think of little Israel. Israel, the unlikely hero, the underdog, always squashed between these larger, more powerful nations, inhabiting this land that is just literally a highway for the world's armies to go back and forth on.

Every square inch of their existence is low-lying land that's been reclaimed from the sea. And all they have to protect them is their Lord God, Yahweh, as this buffer around them.

[5 : 23] The waves and the tempest are beating against them. His purpose, his people, his plan, just beating against it. Because God's people are an aberration from the natural course of a fallen world.

Naturally speaking, God's people should not exist. Without their Lord, they cannot exist. But God's redemptive purpose and plan reaches down into this hostile world.

And by an act of divine creation, calls forth a people where life is impossible. There are no people of God without God.

So, just imagine if he were not on our side. Then, verse 4, the flood would have swept us away. The torrent would have gone over us. Then, over us would have gone the raging waters. Whenever I drive through the Massey Tunnel, I imagine it catastrophically failing right when I'm in the middle.

[6 : 25] Right? The deepest part. Yes? Anyone else? No? Okay. That's good. You can cycle-analyze that fear later and, you know, tell me what's going on there. But this is the image of God's people without their Lord.

They're just covered and crushed. There's no escape. They're stranded. They're suffocating. The raging waters are engulfing them. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

There goes Israel. There goes the church. There goes the church. So, why this psalm? Why would we sing this psalm when we're on the ascent to worship in the temple in Jerusalem?

And I think one reason is that we so quickly forget how dependent we are on God. So, this is how God warns his people in Deuteronomy.

You may remember this from about a year ago. God says, You have too many people for me to deliver Midian into their hands.

[7 : 52] Lest Israel glorify themselves over me, saying, My own hand has saved me. So, in the good times, we take our lives and our success for granted.

And the dependence that we had in those times of trouble transmutes into pride into what we have made of ourselves. My own hand has saved me. This is a place of great spiritual danger.

Because then we've actually come to believe, we've come to actually choose for ourselves what the psalm has imagined as a worst case scenario. That God's people are trying to exist without their God.

And the tsunami that inevitably follows. This is a good warning for us right now. The economy is chugging along.

The sun is shining. The vaccine is flowing. And those desperate prayers of 2020 are easily forgotten. There's a bright day ahead of us, it seems. Psalm 124 calls us to remember the reality of God's people.

[8 : 57] That we are utterly dependent on our Lord. His word. His power. His promise. It's all gift. It's all grace. We have nothing else to protect us.

And whatever assault has just dissipated against Christ's breakers is just a prelude for the next one. Without the Lord on our side, we will be swallowed alive.

But, but what if the Lord is on our side? If he is on our side, then we can turn our eyes away from warning from this disaster that looms.

And we can set them on his certain rescue. Psalm 124 invites us to reckon with our fragility in order to see God's strength.

And once we have seen it, we can place our trust in his rescue rather than in our best efforts or the strength of our hand. So, we're now at the bottom of the trough in this psalm.

[9 : 59] And we're going to begin the ascent. And we're going to look at the rescue in the second half of our psalm. So, verse 5. Blessed be the Lord. So, we've now left what if and we've entered what is in the psalm.

After imagining where we stand without God, now we turn to recognize the rescue that we have in him. And these three short verses laid out very quickly and they progress. As they go along. And so, it starts out with a near miss.

And then it becomes an escape. And then it's revealed as a rescue. So, line by line in the end of this psalm, the trouble grows worse and the rescue gets better. Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

So, I imagine this like a slow motion nature documentary. So, you know when the lioness is like coming, you know, chasing the antelope and takes that swipe and then just barely misses and the antelope gets away.

That's what's kind of being described here. So, the enemy's jaws have just snapped. They've closed empty right to the side of us. Just missed us. We think that was close.

[11 : 12] And then verse 7 says, We escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler. And so, now we're actually imagining something different. We're imagining a bird and its foot is actually in the snare.

And it's thrashing about a little. And finally, it kind of slips away and it flies free. And we think that was lucky that the bird got away. But then, we see that's not actually the case at all.

It says, the snare is broken. So, in other words, the bird doesn't slip free from the trap. The cord is cut by the Lord, our helper.

And so, the truth of things is finally revealed here. What could have been a near miss or just a lucky escape is actually a rescue. What at first seems like good fortune is actually revealed to be God's hand.

Now, I have to say that a trapped bird is not a power image. This is not, you know, the spirit animal you would want.

[12 : 18] You don't want to be a trapped bird. What could be more helpless than a trapped bird? Once they're snared, they don't have fingers. They can't untie the knots. They have no teeth to chew, protect themselves.

They don't have wings anymore to bear themselves away. And so, once they're bound and tethered, they are powerless in their most defining trait, which is effortless flight.

And we, the church, are the bird. And ten years ago, we walked out of St. John's Shaughnessy, and we came to this building.

And nobody knew if there would still be a church when all was said and done. But God rescued us. And when COVID-19 began, we went into lockdown, and we looked at each other, and we said, what's going to be left by the end of this?

Who's going to be left? There's not going to be a church left by the end of this. But God has rescued us. Here we are. Those are just two stories from ten years, from one little church in western Canada.

[13 : 29] Imagine the testimonies we could tell as God's church, his worldwide people. Disaster after disaster, close call after close call, but God has rescued us, and his gospel grows across the world.

I don't know about you, but I feel that it's easy for COVID to already feel like a blip on the radar, to already feel like it's in the rearview mirror.

And so my eyes have slid off of this deliverance that I've just experienced, and are now fixating on the waves that are on the horizon. And so, we can look at the laws that are being passed.

We can look at the trajectory of our culture, the shape of our schools, our courts, our leaders. We count the unmarked graves of indigenous children who died under the care of people who were claiming to serve Christ.

Church buildings burn from arson. Our province burns from wildfires. One wave breaks, only to give way to the next. It is tempting to live in anxiety and fear and despair.

[14 : 32] But, if Psalm 124 is the story of God's people, can we take this template and put it on to those things that we're feeling right now?

If we can do that, then our story of certain destruction becomes a story of certain rescue. Last summer, we took our kids rock climbing for the first time.

And the first kid climbed 20 meters up, and I lowered her safely back down. And the second kid climbed 20 meters up, and I lowered him safely back down.

And the third kid climbed 20 meters up, and she would not come down. Because in order to be lowered down, you have to let go of the rock and hold on to the rope and trust it.

And she did not trust the rope. And so I was down at the bottom saying, I've got you. It's fine. Don't be scared. You won't fall. And she said, no.

[15 : 37] In fact, she said, can't you see I'm terrified? I didn't even know she knew that word.

And she said it with the visceral emotion of terror, which broke my heart as a parent. And there was nothing to be done.

But there was a rock climbing guy that was on the wall next to us that was leading a group. And he said, I'm going to help. He climbed up. He went up on his own rope next to her, and he put his arms around her.

And she let go. And we lowered her safely back down. And sometimes I think that that's our posture in Christ's church, that we're just white-knuckling it on the side of the cliff.

And we think that if our fingers slip, all is lost. Psalm 124, though, is our guide, if we can heed its voice.

[16 : 38] And it says, look at the rope. I've caught you. Don't look at your fear. Look to Christ. Don't look to your own ability or the trial that looms. These are different words just for the same gospel truth that we know, that we don't save ourselves.

We don't evade the jaws of the enemy. We don't slip out of the trap. We don't find our way out of these challenges that we're facing. We're rescued. We don't do it ourselves.

Our rescue comes from the Lord as we trust in him. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. So, we don't hope in our name.

We hope in his name. We don't hope in our power. We hope in his power. We may feel that we are barely hanging on. But it is his strong arm that is holding us fast. We may see no possible way forward.

We may not see a future at all. But the Lord has broken the snare. So, I think there is just one application for us really from Psalm 124.

[17 : 41] And that's to remember our utter hopelessness without Christ. And our complete safety in Christ. If the Lord was not on our side, the waves would have swallowed us whole.

But in Christ, God has shown us once for all that he is on our side. Nothing can threaten his rescue. Romans 8 puts it like this. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Amen. Amen. Right. Amen. Amen. God has shown us that he is utterly for us. St. John's. By the life, death, and resurrection of his son.

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? Our help comes from God who justifies us.

He is the maker of heaven and earth. He has made a way for us, and there is nobody left to condemn us. He has seated his son Jesus at the right hand to rule and intercede for us.

[18 : 42] The rock that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. So we know that however it looks and however it seems, neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Amen. Will you please...