

# Psalm 124

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[ 0 : 00 ] Wow, well it is wonderful to be here with you and to see you all here. And I have to say it's getting a little bit rowdy in here for a bunch of Anglicans. Maybe we just need to take it down a little bit.

It's, it's, it's, this is wonderful. I'm going to try to make it through this sermon. I don't usually cry during sermons, but I might. I'm filled with joy to be here. And, and for those of you that are online, we're really glad you're with us as well.

And we're here. We've gathered as God's people for worship this morning. And the Psalms of Ascent are here to set the tone for us. And these Psalms are road tripping Psalms.

You know that after the last few weeks, these are like a pilgrim's playlist. They set the mood on the way up to Jerusalem. And that's where God's people would gather and worship in God's holy temple.

And so they're the perfect songs for us this summer. And this Sunday in particular, as we regather as God's holy temple, the church. And I feel that the Lord in his providence has given us Psalm 124 today.

[ 1 : 07 ] And it speaks with a very striking voice, a very striking sound. And I think it's been given to us by God for this day. It's what we would call a corporate testimony.

That's what Psalm 124 is. Most testimony Psalms tell the story of how God rescued me, a personal rescue. This Psalm speaks of God rescuing us, his people, together.

God not just saving a person, but a people. And the wideness lends it a wonderful broadness as well. This Psalm, I think, is like the perfect pair of walking shoes for the pilgrim.

So God's people can slip it on for any difficult journey that they might face. And from generation to generation, this Psalm fits. It helps us to trust in God's care in times of trouble.

Now, the mechanism for how this Psalm calls forth our trust is very interesting. And it works by actually invoking our corporate imagination.

[ 2 : 08 ] So you have to bring your imagination this morning. And you probably noticed that word, if, in the beginning of the Psalm. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side.

Let Israel say it with me. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side. Right from the start, it invites us into the hypothetical. It's this thought experiment that the Psalm kind of launches into. Not once, but twice. The psalmist asks. It calls God's people to wonder along with him. What if? What if our God wasn't Yahweh, but another?

Anyone less faithful? Anyone less powerful? Imagine the consequences. What if Yahweh hadn't been on our side? What if he hadn't been fighting for us?

What if instead we were alone? Or found ourselves even fighting against him? We would have been done for. That's the setup. That's the hook for this Psalm.

[ 3 : 08 ] And the first half of the Psalm is going to follow that question all the way to its end. And verses 1 to 5 are going to lead us down that trail of what if? All the way to certain disaster. Which is the answer to that question.

And then once we've seen that, verses 6 to 8 walk us back up to our firm foundation, which is the Lord, our helper, the maker of heaven and earth.

So let's look at that first part together and we'll engage our imaginations. 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.

Some Psalms describe a very specific situation of trouble like injustice or 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 : 15 ] We have a rescue template. This is a pattern for understanding the way of God's people in the world. This is a song for us to sing whenever trouble strikes.

If not for the Lord, then disaster. That's the template. It's not a story. It's the story of God's people in the world.

The story of Scripture is Psalm 124 played on repeat. The grave yawning to swallow us with the Lord coming to rescue us.

Think of little Israel. How unlikely a nation. The underdog squished between all of these larger, more powerful nations. Inhabiting this land that's just a highway for the world's armies to travel back and forth on.

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

[ 5 : 15 ] He's the only one that's keeping them there intact. The waves and the tempest are beating against him, beating against his purpose and his people, because they know that God's people are an aberration from the natural course of the fallen world.

Naturally speaking, God's people should not exist. And without their Lord, they cannot exist. 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 then, if he were not on our side. Then, verse 4, the flood would have swept us away.

The torrent would have gone over us, and over us would have gone the raging waters. Whenever I drive through the Massey Tunnel, I imagine it catastrophically failing while I'm in the middle.

Well, you can psychoanalyze that later. This is the image of God's people without their Lord.

They're covered and they're crushed with no escape.

[ 6 : 27 ] They're stranded and they're suffocating. The raging waters engulf them. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, there goes Israel. There goes the church.

So, why might this psalm be sung on the ascent up to Jerusalem? And I think one reason is that we so quickly forget that we are this dependent on our God.

This is how God warns his people in Deuteronomy. Take care, lest you forget the Lord your God.

Lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses, then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Beware, lest you say in your heart, My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.

This is what the Lord says in Judges. Then the Lord said to Gideon, You have too many people for me to deliver Midian into their hands, lest Israel glorify themselves over me, saying, My own hand has saved me.

In the good times, we take our lives and our success for granted. And the dependence that we had in times of trouble transmutes to pride in what we have made of ourselves.

[ 7 : 49 ] My own hand has saved me. This is a place of great spiritual danger. Because we have come to believe, we have come to choose, the thing that the psalm has imagined as a worst case scenario.

We have come to live as if we are a people that don't need God. And the tsunami follows afterwards. I think it is a good warning for us right now. Right now the economy booms, the sun shines, the vaccine flows, and those desperate prayers of 2020 are easily forgotten.

There's a bright day that's dawning. We're moving on, right? But Psalm 124 calls us to remember the reality of God's people. 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 ourselves other than him. And whatever assault has just dissipated, we've watched it just dissipate against Christ's breakers, but it's just a prelude for the next.

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 that warning, from that disaster that looms, and we can set them on his certain rescue.

[ 9 : 19 ] Psalm 124 invites us to reckon with our fragility in order to see God's strength. Once we have seen it, we can place our trust in his rescue rather than in our best efforts.

So, we've just gotten to the bottom of the trough in this psalm. So, let's begin our ascent back up to the end. We'll look at the rescue that happens in the second half of the psalm. Verse 5 says, Blessed be the Lord.

So, we've now left what if, and we've entered what is. After imagining where we stand without him, we turn to recognize the rescue that we have in him. And these three short verses at the end of the psalm lay it out.

They actually progress as we go along. So, it starts off as this kind of near miss, and then it becomes an escape, and then it's revealed as a rescue. Line by line, the trouble grows worse in these last three verses, and the rescue gets better.

So, it starts off, Blessed be the Lord who has not given us his prey to their teeth. So, I imagine here like a slow motion nature documentary.

[10:31] So, you can imagine that shot where the lioness kind of swipes at the antelope and then just barely misses, and the antelope gets away. And so, this is like the enemy's jaws have kind of closed just right next to us.

It's a, whew, we think. That was a close one. And then verse 7 says, We escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler. And then we kind of imagine this bird, and the bird has its foot in a snare, and it's thrashing about.

So, actually, the bird was almost caught, but then finally it slips its foot out of the trap, and it flies free. Phew, we think that was lucky. But then we see, actually, that the snare is broken.

That's what the psalm says. The snare is broken. And we come to see that the bird doesn't slip free from the trap. The cord has been cut by the Lord, our helper.

The truth of things becomes more clear as we go through. We might have wanted to think it was just a near miss or a lucky escape, but in fact, it's a rescue. What seems at first like good fortune is revealed to be God's hand.

[11:47] I want you to notice, I just think about that image of a trapped bird. That is not a power image. Could anything be more helpless than a snared bird?

Once snared, they have no fingers to free themselves. They have no teeth to protect themselves. They have no wings to bear themselves away. Bound and tethered, they are powerless in their most defining trait, which is effortless flight.

And we, the church, are the bird. 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 all went into lockdown, and we all looked at each other and said, what's going to be left of us by the end of this?

But God rescued us. Look around. Those are just two stories from ten years, and just this little church in Western Canada.

[12:55] 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.

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

And so our eyes slide off of that deliverance, the one that we've just been given, and they'll fixate on the next wave that's on the horizon that's bearing down on us. And so we look around.

We look at the laws that are being passed in our country, the trajectory, where things are going. We look at the shape of our schools and our courts and our leaders. We count the unmarked graves of indigenous children who died under the care of those claiming to serve Christ.

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

[14:04] But if Psalm 124 is the story of God's people, can we fit that template onto those things that we might be feeling right now?

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

They came to hear the story about themselves this morning. 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 you have to trust the rope. [15:08] And she did not trust the rope. I said, let go. I've got you. You won't fall. And she said, no. She said, can't you see that I'm terrified?

And she said it with that visceral sense of emotion that just kills you as a parent. And so this went on for a while.

And there was a rock climbing guide that was leading a group on the wall next to us. And he said, I'm going to help you. He climbed up on his own rope and he got up next to her.

And when he put his arms around her, she finally let go. She was lowered back safely down to the ground. Sometimes our posture in Christ's church is white-knuckling it on the side of that cliff as if once our fingers tire out or slip, all is lost.

Psalm 124 is our guide. We'll hear its voice. And this psalm says, look at the rope instead of your fear. Look to Christ, not in your own ability or the trial that looms over your head.

[16:27] These are different words for the same gospel truth that we don't save ourselves. We don't evade the jaws. We don't escape the trap. We don't find our way out. We don't just brilliantly face the challenges that are in front of us.

Our rescue comes from the Lord as we trust in him always and forever. As the psalm puts it, our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

We don't hope in our name but in his name. We don't hope in our power but in his power. We may feel that we are barely hanging on but it is his strong arm that holds us fast.

We may see no way out, no way forward but the Lord has broken the snare. And so, I think there's just one application for us this morning from this psalm and that's to remember our utter hopelessness without Christ and our complete safety in him.

If the Lord was not on our side, the waves would have swallowed us whole. But in Christ, God has shown once and for all that he is on our side.

[17:37] Nothing can threaten his rescue. Romans 8, our second reading put it like this. If God is for us, who can be against us?

God has shown 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 the God who justifies. He is the maker of heaven and earth. He has made a way for us so who can condemn us? He has seated his son Jesus at his right hand to rule and intercede for us.

The rock that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And so, we know that however it looks, whatever 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. Amen.