

## ***What If the Lord Had Not Been on Our Side?***

Psalm 124

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

November 24, 2013

Psalm 124 suggests a spiritual discipline that is almost the opposite of counting your blessings. Instead of thinking about the good things that happened to him, he thinks about the bad things that *didn't* happen. It's kind of a *via negativa* toward thanksgiving, a way of backing into gratitude. Here's the method: Walk to the edge of that cliff you did not fall off of. Look down into the abyss and let a wave of nausea and tightening pass over you. Then step back and think, "Thank God I didn't fall!"

We don't really have any trouble using our imaginations to think about things that did not happen. We have no trouble thinking about *good* things that might have happened but didn't. Disappointment is the enemy of thanksgiving; what might have been is the enemy of what is. We can look back over our lives and reflect on how different things might have been if we had just gone to that school, gotten that job, married that girl, if we could have just stayed focused, if we hadn't been so cautious, if he had not died.

But Psalm 124 models using our imaginations to think about the disasters that might have happened to us if God had not been on our side. Most likely the psalm-writer was thinking about a national disaster that was averted, but there is no reason we can't sing this song about our personal lives as well. I bet there is something in your experience that connects with each of the three images he uses to describe what might have happened: Being swallowed alive, being swept away by a flood, and escaping a trap.

The NRSV says "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side," but I'm going with all the other translations that begin "If the Lord had not been on our side," or "If the Lord had not been for us." There is a presupposition there, of course, that in fact the Lord/God/Yahweh is *for* us rather than against us. That is the burden of the apostle Paul's message in the passage we read from Romans 8, and he sees that it applies not just to Israel but to all people who have been called to follow Christ. "If God is for us, who is against us?" (v. 31). How do we know God is for us? Because he did not withhold his only Son, but gave him up for all of us. Do you think that God is out to bring charges against you? No, God is the one who has declared us free of all charges. Do you think Jesus is going to condemn us in judgment? No, he is the one who is interceding for us with his Father right now, making sure that we are *not* condemned.

This is in some ways the fundamental question the gospel addresses: Is God out to get us, or is God on our side? So many people imagine God as a policeman or a judge. Some even think that I as his representative must be a kind of judge; you see it in the way they apologize to me for their language and crude jokes. Some people don't come to church because they assume that God, knowing everything they have done, will condemn them—so they stay as far away from God as possible until they can't avoid him when they die. But Paul and Jesus and the psalmist all say that God is *for* us. He has demonstrated that love by taking human guilt and anger onto his own body on the cross.

So we know that in fact the Lord *has been* on our side. But the psalmist wants us to think about what our life would have been like if the Lord had *not* been on our side. I can tell you this, he says: if I hadn't had God on my side when those people turned against me, their anger would have just eaten me up. Some of you know exactly what he's talking about. I like the way *The Message* renders it: "If God hadn't been for us when everyone went against us, we would have been swallowed alive by their violent anger." When someone comes at you with anger, sometimes it seems that they are all mouth—this giant mouth full of loud sound, now incomprehensible, about to eat you. Have you ever been in that situation—maybe as a child—in which an adult is yelling at you and you close your eyes and cover your ears, and you have the feeling of being a small animal about to be eaten by a larger one.

Why is it that the other person's anger did not in fact destroy us? It is because the Lord was on our side. In the third chapter of Lamentations, the saddest book of the Bible, the poet is looking around a desolate scene where a city had once been and thinking about how God has become his enemy. But then a thought comes into his mind which gives him hope: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail" (3:22 NIV). The only reason we haven't been burned up like our houses, the only reason we are still here is because God loves us, because he still has pity on us. There is so much anger and outrage in the world—why is it that every building has not collapsed like the twin towers? Why is it that every president has not been assassinated? Why is it that none of the thousands of nuclear weapons in the world has been used? It is only because of God's mercy that the human race survives at all.

The second image the songwriter uses to get us to think about what would have happened if the Lord had not been on our side is a flood. He has in mind those sudden floods that you have in desert country, where canyons fill with water without warning and campers are swept away. But the flood most on our minds today is Typhoon Haiyan, which swept away thousands of people and millions of homes. You've seen the wood just lying there as if the central Philippines were a giant lumber yard. I would never say to those poor people that God is not on their side—and I sometimes wish that God did not give so much freedom to the weather—but the psalmist here is using the sense of being carried away in flood waters to describe the life of a person who is helpless in the face of circumstances. Without God, life can just sweep you away.

Near the end of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the two pilgrims, Christian and Hopeful, are about to reach the glorious city which has been their destination, but they discover that there is a river separating them from the city. There is no way to reach the city but to cross the river. The two men in shining clothes that have been explaining this to them tell them that how deep the river is depends on how much you believe in the King of the city. We are near the end of the book, we know, but now the ending is in doubt. Listen to it:

They then addressed themselves to the Water; and entering, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend Hopeful, he said, I sink in deep Waters; the Billows go over my head, all his Waves go over me, Selah. Then said the other, Be of good cheer my Brother, I feel the bottom, and it is good. Then said Christian, Ah my friend, the sorrows of death have compassed me about, I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey. And with that a great darkness and horror fell upon Christian, so that he could not see before him. Also here in great measure lost his senses, so that he could neither remember, nor orderly talk of any of those sweet refreshments that he had met with in the way of his Pilgrimage.

For a while it seems that Christian will drown, and his friend struggles to keep his head above water, feeding him encouraging Bible verses. Christian goes into a daze, then finally cries out, "Oh, I see him again!" and says he was reminded of the verse from Isaiah (43:2), "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you." Then, Bunyan says, "they both took courage, and the Enemy was after that as still as a stone, until they were gone over.

I don't know that any of us has actually entered the river of death and returned, but most of us have had moments in our lives when the waters became suddenly deep and we lost our footing. Most of us have wondered if we would make it through this experience without dying ourselves or losing our minds. But the psalmist reminds us: You didn't die. You didn't lose your mind. And the reason is that God was with you and on your side.

There is a third image the songwriter chooses to describe the horror that might have been, and that is a trap. Once we were trapped, like a bird captured by fowlers in their nets. Back then, people didn't shoot birds; they set traps for them. The birds would trip a string or a stick, and the net would fall over them. We've been there, the psalmist says, but thanks to God the snare was broken and we escaped.

Do you know what it's like to feel trapped? Early in my ministry, I was given a new job in Birmingham, and once I moved and arrived in the new situation, I discovered that my boss's plan had been to fire the person he assigned me to work with. I was left with a group of angry students in a city I didn't know, and given the reins of a major building project. All of a sudden I developed a severe case of claustrophobia. Seriously: I couldn't get in an elevator, or sit in the back seat of a car. On some level, all of life felt like it was going to close in and trap me. Of course, the Lord got me through that without going crazy and eventually I escaped to New York.

In one of Maya Angelou's best known poems ["I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"], she compares the free bird with the caged bird. It ends this way:

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The psalmist's word for us is that if it were not for the Lord, we would be in that cage still, but Yahweh has always been in the setting-free business.

Martin Luther made an astute observation about Psalm 124:

*When we are in danger, our fear is without measure. But once the danger is past, we imagine it to have been less than it was. This is the delusion of Satan, to diminish and obscure the grace of God....We are taught [in this psalm] how to think of our past troubles and affliction, lest the sense and feeling of God's grace vanish from our minds.*

When we think back on past troubles, one alternative is to minimize them. Another is to blame them on God and ask "why me." But what the scripture is showing us is that the path to thanksgiving is to take those experiences seriously in all their darkness and fearfulness—and then to celebrate that we came out on the other side. We are here to sing about those times, and how the Lord set us free, how he kept our head above water, how he saved us from being swallowed alive.

When I look back, I see so many places where it would have been disastrous if I'd had my own way. Without the grace of Jesus surrounding me at every moment, I would have fallen into such destructive habits and relationships that I might never have recovered. There were brushes with death, brushes with despair, and times when if I had waited one more second to decide I would have thrown my ethics out the window. There were enemies who wanted to make sure that I would never serve a church again. There were traps set for me and traps I set for myself. But I discovered that nothing, nothing, nothing can separate me from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. I love the old gospel song written by blind Fanny Crosby: "All the way my Savior leads me—what have I to ask beside? Can I doubt his tender mercy, who through life has been my guide?" When she gets to heaven and looks back on her life, this will be her song: "This my song through endless ages: Jesus led me all the way."

When the psalmist thinks about what would have happened if Yahweh had not been on his side, he returns to the answer given in Psalm 121 to the question, "Where does my help come from?" "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."