

## **Psalms for the Journey**

### **Our Help is in the Name of the Lord**

Psalm 124

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*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 (Ps. 124).*

I'm sure that you know how to complete this sentence: "Practice makes \_\_\_\_\_."

If you, like me, are enjoying the World Cup, you've probably marveled at the unique athleticism of the soccer players. Now, I know that other sports require equal skill. I'm not throwing shade on basketball, football, volleyball, or...pickleball. But there is something that stuns me when I see the ability of some players to move the ball almost like it's on string or the ability to kick a ball in the air with a horizontal scissor kick.

It's a stunning display of poise, coordination, and talent. They make it look easy. But it isn't. I was center forward in high school. And it doesn't just happen. It takes an incredible amount of practice.

The same is true with the Christmas Concert and really every Sunday morning. We have the most amazing Worship Arts and Production Teams who balance creativity and depth. I get a behind-the-scenes view every week, and I know the kind of energy required to lead us each week in worship and what it takes for the Christmas Concert this coming weekend.

It requires a lot of rehearsing.

Challenging things require practice. Important things require rehearsing.

The same is true when it comes to a person's spiritual life. There are particular truths that are important enough that they need to be repeated over and over. There are other truths that rehearsing them is required so that we match what we know with what we feel. And there are particular ideas that rehearsing brings them to the forefront of our mind.

For example: telling a friend how much you enjoy them, affirming how proud you are of your children, or telling your spouse “I love you.” Don’t be like the guy who told his wife that he already told her that he loved her, and if he stopped loving her, he’d tell her. Some things need to be rehearsed.

During Advent, we are looking at the Psalms of Ascent. They were an important part of the rehearsing of God’s goodness as the people of Israel traveled to Jerusalem for one of three annual festivals. These events were massive gathering in Jerusalem. They were part of the rhythm of life for the people of God. And these psalms were sung to both prepare their hearts and to memorialize the moment. They were an important part of the tradition of walking the incline up to the City of David.

Today we are looking at Psalm 124. It’s a wonderful song about how the Lord helps his people. So, let’s see if we can answer the question: “How do we embrace the Lord’s help?”

For some of you that may be an important question to ask right now. You know that you need the Lord’s help. Others of you, however, may need to listen and remember because there will be a time that you’ll need this text. Or there may be someone in your life that you’re going to encourage because you’ve listened carefully.

How do we embrace the Lord’s help?

### 1) Rehearsing our hope (vv. 1-2)

The message of the first two verses is simple and repeated. But don’t mistake the obvious message and its double emphasis for something that’s unimportant. Sometimes it’s the simple truths that are most helpful but also neglected.

Here’s the point in the words of the text: “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side...” The psalmist is celebrating the way in which the Lord has cared for his people. The psalm could have been written this way: “The Lord was on our side.” Other psalms take that approach. A few examples:

*The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is **on my side** as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me (Ps. 118:6-7).*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, **for you are with me**; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Ps. 23:4).*

*The **LORD is near** to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit (Ps. 34:18).*

These texts, like Psalm 124, highlight the spiritual importance of the closeness of the Lord when facing trouble. In Psalm 118 it’s those who hate him. In Psalm 23, it’s the valley of the shadow of death. In Psalm 34, it’s the weight of grief.

We’ll learn more about the specific cause behind Psalm 124 in the verses that follow. But I think it’s sufficient to understand at this point that the common thread for the Lord being at one’s side is something bad, frightening, and threatening. Some kind of trouble enters into the equation of life where the presence of the Lord is essential.

There's probably a better way to say this: trouble reminds us how much we need the Lord's help. Do you see where I'm going with this? Hardship merely reveals the extent of our need. Our problem is that we tend to forget our need for God's help until trouble comes.

In Psalm 124, here's the concept that we can take for granted: "The Lord is always helping us." That is what this psalm is affirming—actually, rehearsing. As they are making their way to the temple, this psalm is a reminder that they wouldn't have made it without the Lord's help. Their annual pilgrimage and this song were both good reminders of what they probably knew to be true. It was good for them to have a posture of reflection about all the ways the Lord has been by their side.

Eugene Peterson says, "{This psalm} does not argue God's help; it does not explain God's help; it is a testimony of God's help in the form of a song. The song is so vigorous, so confident, so bursting with what can only be called reality that it fundamentally changes our approach and our questions."<sup>1</sup>

Could I invite you to do the same thing? Can I get a witness? Somebody needs to testify. The month of December is filled with wonderful traditions, and they provide an opportunity to reflect. Maybe a few questions will help you:

- What challenges and hardships did you face in 2022 where you saw the Lord's help?
- What situation did you face where you wondered if the Lord had forgotten about you?
- What broken-heartedness have you faced that you've sensed the Lord's empowerment?
- What problems do you still face where you need to be reminded about God's ability to care for you?

I'd like to encourage you to thank the Lord right now. Use this psalm to reorient your heart and rehearse the hope you have in the Lord's help.

But don't do it only by yourself! Notice that this psalm was meant to be sung in community. The statement about God's help is repeated, but not before the psalmist invites the entire community to join him. He's encouraging others to rehearse our hope. And that's what our aim is even today. You might even think about it as a cheer.

"The Lord has helped us, that is true! The Lord has helped us! How about you?" We embrace the Lord's help by rehearsing our hope.

## **2) Acknowledging the pain (vv. 3-5)**

This psalm isn't naïve. It doesn't sugar-coat the danger or the pain that they faced. Psalm 124 reflects back on the challenging and dangerous situations that they faced. They are recounted as a way to offer praise from a different angle.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, [\*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society\*](#), Commemorative Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 66.

When you've just been delivered from something frightening or scary, there's a clarity about how much you needed the Lord's help. But when you return to calmer and safer experiences, it's easy to lose the urgency of that perspective. That loss can cause worship to be diminished. How many of you have found that some of your sweetest times of worship came when you were incredibly broken?

We don't want to live in the past, but it's good to acknowledge the difficulties of trials. Verses 3-5 highlight two dangers: 1) being attacked and 2) being overwhelmed. What's more, when we look at the second half of verse 2, we find that the pain has been caused by people. That heightens the intensity a bit. We're not talking about a natural disaster or an accident. The pain is related to people. The specific circumstances aren't listed. There could be numerous scenarios in mind where God's people were in trouble at the hands of others.

Notice how he describes the attack in verses 2b-3. Besides people rising up against them, there's a pretty graphic statement: "they would have swallowed us alive." It's a metaphor connected to a massive and vicious animal. And the statement about anger seems to indicate a level of irrationality connected with what happened.<sup>2</sup> Nebuchadnezzar is described as a monster swallowing God's people in Isaiah 51:34. They were attacked.

Furthermore, the psalmist describes the threat of being overwhelmed. In verse 4-5 take note of words like flood, torrent, and raging waters. What do these metaphors describe? Water often communicates chaos and disorder in the Old Testament. And these statements picture a flash flood and massive destruction. It pictures destruction that is overwhelming.

I was with a friend this week whose home was destroyed by a recent hurricane, and it's remarkable how much damage uncontrolled water can do. Other Scriptures often use the same kind of language. Here are a few examples from other passages:

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (Isa. 43:2).*

*Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me (Ps. 69:1-2).*

The Bible isn't the only place we find this kind of water destruction language. We express it too. We might say "I'm drowning right now." In the same way that you previously thought about God's deliverance, this also might be a good time to rehearse how hard things have been in your life. Acknowledging the pain and naming it is an important part the psalm's praise.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Estes, [Psalms 73–150](#), ed. E. Ray. Clendenen, vol. 13, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), 465.

This is one of the reasons we love the psalms. They are gutsy and honest about the struggles and the pains of life. The psalms are real. And in Psalm 124 we see the pain not celebrated but clearly acknowledged.

There's something about understanding deliverance when you fully understand what you were rescued from. This is true in regard to our salvation, isn't it? The more you understand and marvel at God's grace in your life, the more you recognize how much trouble you'd be in without his help. Spiritual maturity involves growing into more and more amazement at what you've been saved from. It's a lot like marriage. A good marriage grows in appreciation for one another. You see couples not get along. You see marriages fall apart. And that should create a greater appreciation for one another.

The Lord rescues people from things that seem completely overwhelming and impossible. This psalmist rehearses uses past troubles to bolster his faith. The psalm helps us to embrace the Lord's help by rehearsing our hope and acknowledging our pain. There's one more insight in this text.

### **3) Praising the name (vv. 6-8)**

The conclusion of the psalm seeks to reaffirm the opportunity to praise and bless the name of the Lord. This is the goal of Psalm 124. Imagine the people of God walking up the incline to the City of David as they rehearse all the ways the Lord has helped them.

"Blessed be the Lord" is a common way for God's people to express praise and adoration to God. But there's something interesting here. God is praised for what he doesn't do. He's blessed for not giving his people as prey to their enemies. It's another way of reiterating the praise of celebrating God's deliverance but with a particular emphasis on the danger that was involved. Psalm 124 worships the Lord in light of what could have happened.

Verse 7 continues this theme with a reference to a bird that is taken captive. The people of God describe themselves as a helpless bird caught in a cage or a net. The point is their helpless condition. And yet the imagery here is designed to be a platform for praise. They've been delivered from an impossible situation. They were attacked, overwhelmed, and stuck. And it was the Lord who rescued them.

There were many situations that Israel could point to in their history where this deliverance happened. But I think it's important to acknowledge that there was no greater deliverance from an impossible situation than our deliverance from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is how the book of Ephesians describes it:

*...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:12-13).*

Notice the call to remember! Paul is rehearsing something known but worthy of repetition. He's exulting in the grace of God by recounting the desperation of their condition. It's a common way of celebrating God's goodness.

Psalm 124 ends with the conclusion of the matter: Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth”” (v. 8a). What a statement! It’s a renewal of confidence that the Lord can be trusted. He’s the creator of the universe. He can handle your problems, fears, disappointments, and discouragements. He’s been faithful in the past, and he’ll be faithful again.

Help from the Lord’s name wasn’t a new concept for the people of God. They knew their God was the creator. They knew the stories of his deliverance. They knew the miracles and the many times God delivered them. But walking up to the temple, it’s spiritually helpful to rehearse what they knew to be true.

Hardship merely reveals the extent of our need. Our problem is that we tend to forget our need for God’s help until trouble comes.

I experienced something similar this week while flying in an airplane. This was the text I sent my family:

*About 20 minutes before we landed, the pilot came on and said that they discovered a small problem with the aircraft that may affect our landing. He tried to minimize it, but then said, "I just don't want you to be alarmed at all the emergency trucks as we are landing." Wait...what?! That explained why one of the flight attendants (about 30 minutes earlier) kept stooping down and looking out of both sides of the plane at the wings as she pretended to walk through the cabin doing something. She was super nervous. Then the steward came back about 10 minutes later to remind us that all bags need to be under our seat and nothing in the pockets so that "we can move freely upon exiting the plane" - aka in case we CRASH! Oh man...it was quiet on the plane. And it was a long 20 minutes waiting for the plane to touch down. I cinched my seat belt, recited every psalm I could remember, prayed a lot, etc. My blood pressure was through the roof. I thought, "Well, this might be it." The plane touched down just fine, and a few emergency vehicles did run us down, but it was all okay. Craziest flight situation I've ever experienced, and I've flown a lot over the years. Good night, everyone! Love you, Dad*

When I talked to my wife later that night and told her the story, she said, “Well, that explains why you texted ‘Landed safely.’ You never say that.” Exactly. And that’s my point. There are certain things that we take for granted—like the safe landing of a plane.

The Lord has helped us, that is true. The Lord has helped us. How about you?

You see, when it comes to our spiritual lives, there are some truths that need to be rehearsed over and over. Because our confidence and faith increase as we collectively celebrate what we already know to be true. We praise the name so that we can keep praising the name.

Our help is in the name of the Lord. Our help is in the name of the Lord.

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