

**Ascend:
Turning “What If” into “What Now”**

Psalm 124

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Text Introduction: We are considering Psalm 120-134 this summer. This is a collection of Psalms each bearing the heading, “A Song of Ascents.” The songs of ascents are a compilation of Psalms in the larger book of Psalms.

To what does this heading refer? Most believe that these are songs that worshippers sang as they made their way to Jerusalem (being on a higher plain) for thrice annual special times of worship.¹ If this is so, then we learn a great deal about what was on their hearts as they approached worship and thus understand what should be upon our hearts as we prepare to worship or just give attention to the subject of worship. This thought will guide us in the weeks to come. As we have been learning, this is not so much as a practical guide to the “how to” of worship, but instead a theological mine for what prompts earnest worship.

We have also learned that this collection of Psalms seems to be sub-divided perhaps into triads. If that is so, then the Psalm before us today, Psalm 124, is the middle Psalm in the second set.

Our Psalm today is Psalm 124.

Text: If the LORD had not been on our side—
let Israel say—

²If the LORD had not been on our side
when men attacked us,

³then they would have swallowed us alive
in their burning anger against us.

⁴Then the waters would have engulfed us;
the torrent would have swept over us;

⁵the raging waters would have swept over us.

⁶Praise the LORD,
who has not let us be ripped apart by their teeth.

⁷We have escaped like a bird from the hunter’s net;
the net is torn, and we have escaped.

⁸Our help is in the name of Yahweh,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

Introduction:

¹ Other ideas include: Psalms that reflect entering the Promised Land the first time, re-entering after Exile, correlating to the climb up the steps to the Temple (one Psalm for 15 steps), and/or figurative for the journey back to God.

Leighton Ford, the brother-in-law of Billy Graham, tells a story about a plane trip. Ford settled into his seat and closed his eyes to get a little rest on his trip. The attendant approached him with a 95 year old woman. The attendant said, "Sir, would you mind looking after this dear woman? She's 95 years old. Make sure she doesn't need anything." Ford, now interrupted from his nap, thought to himself, "Well, I might as well make the best of it." He decided to engage the woman in conversation. He began, "Ninety-five years old, wow, you must have had a lot of wonderful experiences?" "Yep," she said. "And you must have met a lot of interesting people?" "Yep, she said," This went on for a few more questions and all he could get this woman to say is "Yep." He decided to change in tactics. He asked, "In 95 years, what's the most important thing you have ever learned?" She answered, "I guess the greatest thing I've ever learned is the Lord sure has been good to me." At this point, Ford, an evangelist, deciding to have a little fun with this woman said, "Surely, you don't believe in God. Surely you've learned something besides this." Ford, at this point says that the little old lady, who to this point had said so little, looked at him and lit into him. "Let me tell you, sir, what the Lord has done for me. He's the only reason I'm here today. He's the one who helped me raise my kids. He's the one who gave me these years." Ford began to laugh and explained to the woman that he had just said that to get a response. He explained that he was a traveling evangelist. "Actually," he said, "my brother-in-law is the famous Billy Graham. You ever heard of him? "Nope," the old lady said. "Oh, sure, you know him. He's been on television. "I must not have had the television on the nights he was on," she said.

Ford, of course, couldn't wait to call his brother-in-law and rub it in a little bit. They both had a good laugh. Graham ended the conversation this way. "You know, isn't it great, that not everybody knows us, but God knows everyone. He is a faithful God."

And to all of us, He is a faithful God. He is our help. Where would we be without the Lord? What if the Lord had not been on our side?

This Psalm is a corporate or national hymn of thanksgiving. This Psalm seems to go with Psalm 123 in that Psalm 123 is the request or plea for help and Psalm 124 is the thanksgiving that help has come.

Though a statement of the Lord being on Israel's side, it is the kind of statement that begs the question "What if the Lord had not been on Israel's side?" You might remember Martha, the sister of Lazarus, saying to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died." Psalm 124 turns that idea upside down and raises the question, "What if the Lord had not been with us?"

What if?

Israel's Testimony

The testimony comes in the form of what did not happen, then moves to what happened. The combined picture is that they have been saved from total destruction!

This is a devastating picture in verses 3-5. They would have been swallowed, drowned, and after drowning, more water would have been poured. The literary impact is one of total annihilation.

But what did happen? They were saved. They escaped. Why? Their salvation is only because of the Lord. God put Israel in situations to show them that He was their only deliverer. They were put in situations that would force them to trust only in Him.

Our Testimony

Each of our testimonies are different, but we have some things in common.

- God is for us!

Psalm 56:9b gives it to us simply, "This I know: God is for me." Again, in Psalm 118:6, the Psalmist declared, "The Lord is for me; I will not be afraid." Paul put it this way in Romans 8:31, "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"

- God fights for us!

In his farewell address to Israel, Joshua reminded Israel, "The Lord has driven out great and powerful nations before you, and no one has been able to stand against you to this day. One of you routed a thousand, because the Lord your God was fighting for you, as He promised." (Joshua 23:9-10)

- God is faithful!

We do have to deal with this issue of what happens when things don't turn out as we think they should. By faith, we must believe that God is always faithful.

Maybe we don't always see as we should see. In 2 Kings 6 we have a story about Elisha, the man of God, successor to Elijah. The King of Aram had been told that Elisha could tell the King of Israel all that the he, the King of Aram spoke. So, the King of Aram sent down to Dothan, where Elisha lived, an army with horses and chariots. They surrounded the city. Elisha's servant saw all of this and asked Elisha, "Oh, my master, what are we to do?"

Elisha said, "Don't be afraid, for those who are with us outnumber those who are with them."

Then Elisha prayed, "Lord, please open his eyes and let him see." So the Lord opened the servant's eyes. He looked and saw that the mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:8-17)

Sometimes, we need to pray, "Open our eyes, Lord."

What Now?

Ordinarily, I would say that it is not good to play the "what if" game? But in this case, playing "what if" is a good exercise because...

- "What if" leads us to keep singing to Him and about Him.

At the core of this Psalm is a plea from the lead worshipper to the gathered worshippers to keep singing. Verse 1 and verse 2 is the imploring of the song leader. It is as though he is saying, "Come on, sing with me now!" "Come on, you can do better." "You can sing louder."

- “What if” leads us to keep seeking Him.

When we allow ourselves to contemplate this question, “What if,” we should more than anything desire to trust Him more.

- “What if” leads us to keep serving Him.

We are to ask “Are we on the Lord’s side?” You probably know that story of Abraham Lincoln in the days of war. As the story goes, one of Abraham Lincoln’s general came to the President saying, “Let us pray that God be on our side.” Without hesitation, Lincoln quickly reprimanded his general, “General, we had better pray that we be on God’s side.”

All of this acknowledges that we really do believe that if “God had not been on our side” where would we be. When we praise Him, we are acknowledging that we did need Him. When we seek Him, we are acknowledging that we need Him. When we continue to serve Him, we are acknowledging that we really do need Him.

A lot of you know that my mother has been in the hospital. She suffered a stroke on Tuesday, June 7, at about 6 p.m. For one week, she lay in the bed, limited to zero use of her left side. She had not walked in a week. Last Wednesday morning, June 15, a new therapist walked in her room. I was there. He gave his name and then said, “Mrs. Horn, I understand you are not walking? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” She said she did. “Great,” he said. “I came to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit many years ago in Vietnam. I was a medic on a helicopter. I prayed for the Holy Spirit to make me fast so we could outrun the bullets firing at us. So, I believe in the Holy Spirit. And so, today, you, me, and the Holy Spirit are going to walk.”