

## **IF the Lord Had Not Been on Our Side**

We're headed toward Psalm 124. So, if you would turn there, I'll be reading mostly out of the NIV. Although there's one little phrase that the NLT uses that I will share when we get there.

And as we begin, I'd like for you to think about a really important moment. Just pick one in your life where God really showed up. I mean, you were utterly dependent upon Him, and he really came through. He really came through. It was all or nothing, and His acts and His deeds were on display.

It might have been in a public way, or it might have been in a private way. But I want you to think of that one moment.

And what I'd like for you to do is hang on to that example for a few minutes and we'll come back around to it at the end. Okay?

“Psalm 124. A Song of Ascent of David.

“If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel say, if the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us, they would have swallowed us alive. When their anger flared against us, the flood would have engulfed us. The torrent would have swept over us.

“The raging waters would have swept us away. Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare.

“The snare has been broken and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

This is the word of the Lord.

That little phrase I mentioned earlier about the NLT? It says, “What IF the Lord had not been on our side?” I like the way that the NLT renders that.

Psalm 124 makes some pretty bold claims. It asks the reader or the singer to imagine what life would have been like if God hadn't acted— what our life would be like if God hadn't really shown up.

And that got me thinking this week about something called “proving a negative.” Have you ever heard that phrase before?

When people use that phrase, they usually mean something like this: You can't prove negatives with certainty based merely on having no evidence. For example, having no proof of unicorns doesn't prove for sure that they aren't real. It just means that you can't find evidence that they are real.

That's kind of what the phrase “proving a negative.”

And thinking about unicorns quite naturally led me to think about teapots. You see how that follows (I'm just kidding).

There was an English philosopher whose name was Bertrand Russell who once talked about a teapot, and he talked about a teapot in reference to religion. This analogy has been since called "Russell's Teapot." This fellow was a self-described atheist, and so therefore, you can hear the condescension in what I'm about to read of his. And this business about the teapot is where he is writing about religion and, essentially, against religion.

Here's Bertrand Russell:

"Many religious people speak as though it were the business of skeptics to disprove accepted Christian teachings rather than of the Christians to prove them. This is, of course, a mistake.

"If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion, provided I were careful enough to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that since my assertion cannot be disproved and that it is an intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt me, I should rightly be thought of as talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of the teapot were affirmed by some ancient book and taught as the sacred truth every Sunday and instilled into the minds of children at school, then any hesitation to believe in the teapot would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age like our own or of the Inquisition in an earlier time."

What's he saying? In other words, Russell is saying that if you're going to make bold claims, if somebody's going to lay out some bold claims, then it's up to them to prove it. And he uses his teapot analogy to say, simply, that's the way it is with God. Russell is saying that God might as well be a teapot circling out there somewhere, because it hasn't been proved, and it's up to you to try.

Now, I don't want to get into the notion of "proving" our faith or "proving" the Bible. Christianity has been hijacked and hogtied again and again and again over the years by entering into a never-ending circular argument, trying desperately to put all the pieces back together that the critics have torn apart. And they use the same tools that the critics use to tear it apart to try to put it back together again.

We don't have to prove the Bible. We have to believe it. We have to tell its story, and we have to live its principles. That's our job.

And yet, again, here is Psalm 124 making some pretty bold claims. What IF the Lord had not been on our side?

In some ways, this psalm's direction is the opposite to that famous John Lennon tune back in the day called "Imagine."

Do you remember that song? John Lennon imagined a world without God or heaven and thought that it would be a better place. Here are the lyrics:

“Imagine there's no heaven it's easy if you try no hell below us above, only sky.

“Imagine all the people living for today. Imagine there's no countries it isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too.

“Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say I am a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one.”

From a Christian perspective, this is sheer narcissistic, utter demonic madness. And to be perfectly frank about it, it's not hard to imagine these things at all because that's the way that most people live these days. That's the story that they're telling: “I'm going to live my life as if there is no heaven or hell. Countries? What do we need them for? Nothing to live or die for. Let's just live in peace.”

I mentioned last week that really the only thing that truly unifies is the Story of God and our worship of Him. Psalm 124, on the other hand, imagines what would happen without God and it's a picture of complete devastation. But, as Bertrand Russell says, if there are going to be bold claims made, then the burden of proof is on the one making the claims.

And you know what? The psalmist David does that. He does, he provides some proof.

Sometimes if you want to see the road ahead clearly, you've got to turn around 180 degrees and see where you've come from.

I'm going to say that again: Sometimes if you really want some good direction about where to go or what to do, or who to trust in, or how in the world you're going to keep on going, you must turn around and look 180 degrees behind you and see who has brought you thus far. Worried about the future? Turn around. Turn around. Look behind you.

There are three main things I'd like to point out about this psalm:

One we must affirm, strongly affirm the difference God has made in our lives. You need to affirm it.

God has made a big difference in my life. Tell the world exactly what would have happened to you if God had not been with you. Now, David uses a couple of real-world examples.

At least he seems to allude to it. Look at verse two and following: “If the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us, they would have swallowed us alive. When their anger flared against us, the flood would have engulfed us. The torrent waters would have swept over us. The raging waters would have swept us away.”

What in the world does that sound like? Well, it sounds like the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, doesn't it?

Whenever Israel was worried about what to do, where to go, who to trust, all they needed to do is turn 180 degrees around: "God did this thing for us. Our enemies were about to attack. They were that close. And the waters opened up for us, but then closed over and actually ended up engulfing our enemies, sweeping over them. That's what would have happened to us if the Lord had not been on our side."

And here's something really interesting I want you to notice. It was a wow moment for me this week. The little phrase "had been on our side" is important. Now, does that mean that God joined your cause? No. Does that mean that God kind of weighed things out and thought you were doing the best job and thought he'd jump on Team Chris? Does that mean that God thought your side of the conflict or the argument or your political position was the best one and threw in his lot with you? That's not what it means.

The little phrase "had been on our side" in the original Hebrew catch. This had been on our side is the past tense of a more familiar word: "Emmanuel." God with us. God with us.

And that changes everything. Why? Well, Who in the world, in all the world, in all of creation, does that sound like? Emmanuel. God with us. That's Jesus.

Jesus, God Himself, took on flesh. God has made a huge difference in my life, and you know how He's done it? Principally, and I can strongly assert this and tell you all the places where He's shown up, the most magnificent place that God has ever shown up was in the Incarnation, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. Yes, God Himself became flesh and tabernacled among us.

Jesus showed up just when we needed Him the most. "If the Lord had not been on our side." Can you imagine? Can you imagine if Jesus did not take on flesh, if God was not enfleshed, if the Lord had not been on our side?

That's number one: Affirm strongly that God has made a big difference in your life.

Number two: Praise God strongly for his protection. Praise Him for his deliverance. Praise God for the time that when you are in danger, when you are trapped, He provides a way out.

God shows up. Look at verse six: "Praise be to the Lord who has not let us be torn by their teeth." We have escaped. Like a bird from the fowler's snare has been broken. We've escaped.

David moves from water to wild animals: Oh, listen. If the Lord had not been on our side, we'd have been swept over. And what's more, we would have been gnashed by animals' teeth. We were trapped. Our leg was caught in one of those horrible bear traps.

“If the Lord had not been on our side.” Listen: God protects His people. And you can find verses like that all over the Bible. Here's a couple to write down: Isaiah 43:2: “When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned.”

Or, if you go back to an earlier Psalm of Ascent 121: “The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life. He will watch over your coming and your going, both now and forevermore.”

Here's another one for you. 1 Corinthians 10:13: “God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up against it.”

Declare strongly that God has given you protection and deliverance. Praise Him for it. When we're in danger, when we're trapped, He shows up. And that's praiseworthy.

Point number three: Publicly testify how God has helped you. How has He done it? In what specific place and time has God helped you? You don't need to be thinking about a teapot. We've got something far better right here. Tell it. Give a testimony. Testify.

Psalm 124 wraps up with a testimony. Look at verse eight and following: The psalm, moves from affirmation to praise to testimony. And look what it says: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Testify. My help is from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 115:1 says this: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory because of your love and faithfulness.” Testify. Tell somebody. Tell it publicly. Why should you do that? Because it puts the credit where the credit is due. It says, not to us, O Lord, but to Your name be the glory. I didn't do this.

Imagine that. There's nothing to live or die for, John Lennon says. What a rotten world that would be. Let me tell you about why I live for the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me tell you about why I would willingly give up my life for Him. This is where He helped me, and I'm going to tell it publicly.

Another reason we ought to do that? Because it encourages other believers.

Listen, today is a day where believers need to be bold. We need to tell people what God has done for us-- and it encourages others, don't you think? Surely we can do that in worship when we gather here on Sundays. This is a safe place. Tell other people. Open up your mouth and tell somebody what God has done for you. Do you ever feel a tad embarrassed or a little shy when you come on Sunday mornings about speaking a testimony in worship?

It's great practice. This is where we practice God's story anyway, right? And it's encouraging to other people in the room. How many people here, show of hands, how many people have been encouraged when somebody else in the room gives a testimony about God's grace and goodness? Okay, well, that's some pretty good evidence right there.

And then listen, mercy: We must give the testimony to others out there in the world for how God has helped you. We've got to do that.

You don't have to be "Susie Sunday School." You don't have to be "Billy Bible Study." You don't have to knock people over the head with the family Bible. That's such a turnoff.

But you can winsomely and lovingly and publicly share what God has done for you. You can ask God, did you know this? You can ask God to give you the chance to do that. You can ask God to give you the opportunity to tell the story about how He has helped you.

It happened to me this week: I met a man who, when we first started the conversation, was kind of quiet, he looked kind of sad. And then I noticed some tears and I happened to have a little package of Kleenex. And he told me how he had just lost his very best friend. And he poured out his heart.

And I didn't know quite what to say, but I whispered a prayer. Oh God, if you want me to, I'd love to tell him about what you have done in my life. And you know what the fellow does? He says, "I don't know where I can turn for some encouragement."

And I said, "I've got an idea." And I wasn't Billy Bible Study. It was this simple. I said, "Let me tell you something. Let me tell you something. There is a God."

You realize how countercultural it is to say that there really is a God and He loves you? And my God bends low into fragile hearts. Let me tell you about the time that I was in grief and how He helped me.

Listen, beloved, I don't put myself up as a paragon of Christian testimony giving, but you can do it too. Ask God for that chance. Psalm 124 says, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."

You could just memorize that little snippet and how encouraging that would be to somebody who really needs to hear that final thought. I want to remind you that Psalm 124 is a Psalm of Ascent. There are 15 Psalms of Ascent.

Many of them are anonymous. Four of them are attributed to David himself and this is one of them.

Now, you remember as we were talking last week about Psalms of Ascent, that the specific context is, and this is what most Bible scholars believe, that these Psalms of Ascent would be the ones sung on the ascent going up to Jerusalem. And remember that wherever you are in the country of Israel, going to Jerusalem usually means going up. It's uphill.

And even when you get to Jerusalem, you have to go up to the Temple Mount. So, these are psalms that the worshipers would be singing on their way to Jerusalem when they're going up, at least three times a year, for those festivals when at least all able-bodied men were required to go.

You can also use the word “steps.”

It's been called a Psalm of Steps, but we're talking about some particular steps. You might not know this, but one tradition says that these 15 Psalms of Ascent correspond to 15 steps at the Temple that go from the Women's Court up to the Court of the Israelites. So, maybe these psalms would have been done in a special way that had to do with the actual architectural presence of these 15 steps. We're not sure.

But either way, I want you to think carefully for a moment about the fact that this psalm, the one we've just read and thought about, is associated very closely with worship. “If the Lord had not been on our side, all our enemies would have swallowed us alive. Praise be to the Lord who has not let us be torn by their teeth. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” That's a Psalm of Ascent. That's a psalm associated with worship.

With that in mind, I asked you a few minutes ago to think about that time—it's the one you're thinking about right now—that time where God really showed up and really came through. I mean, you were utterly dependent upon Him. Do you have it in mind?

Hang on to that.

Now, so much of worship is about remembering. It's about recalling.

It's about recalling and reminding and rehearsing. It's also the opposite of that too. It's about “foreminding.” It's about anticipating what will come.

But if you take a look at Scripture about worship and Scripture where worship is taking place, there's a lot of it that has to do with remembering. Here's Psalm 124 reminding us that remembering God's saving acts and deeds, rehearsing them, telling them, celebrating them, reliving them, declaring them, all of that is tied up in worship.

Sometimes in order to see more clearly where you're going, you need to turn around and look back 180 degrees and remember, if the Lord had not been on our side, then what would have happened in that very situation you're thinking about right now? Oh, thanks be to God. “If the Lord if the Lord had not been on our side, thanks be to God.” He was.

He was. He was on your side. And He is. And He is on your side. And He will be to come. And we will worship Him because of it.

I'm going to read it again. Join me in reading along.

“If the Lord had not been on our side let Israel say if the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us, they would have swallowed us alive.

“When their anger flared against us, the flood would have engulfed us. The torrent would have swept over us. The raging waters would have swept us away.

“Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the fowler snare. The snare has been broken and we have escaped and testify.

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Thanks be to God. Let's pray.

O God, who is with us, Emmanuel, I thank you for that time, that very place where You showed up. I can barely imagine what it would have been like if You hadn't.

You have made a great difference in my life. In our lives, You alone are praiseworthy for Your protection and deliverance, and Your saving acts and deeds will be our public testimony. And we will worship You. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.