

Littlebourne July 5th 2022

Psalm 124

Intro

I understand that you have been journeying with the Israelites on Pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival, as you have studied the Psalms of Ascent together, and that, with Psalm 123, they have arrived in the Temple and are seeking God's help.

Singing, proclaiming, shouting God's truth is an amazingly upbuilding and uplifting activity – especially with other people.

When we were first back in our building for morning service after the lockdowns, we were not allowed to sing indoors, so after the service we went out into the garden and carpark behind the building and sang God's praises out there. We attracted a bit of attention from passers-by, but not as much as some of us would have liked. One day, it rained so we moved to the front of the building, under the porch, and we've sung there ever since. I thought that people would lose their enthusiasm for this activity once we could sing indoors without masks but, no, there continues to be great enthusiasm and joy, as we sing out God's praises, with our backs to the building and our faces to the city and passing shoppers.

So, I love the thought of the crowds converging on Jerusalem singing God's praises – what a cacophony there must have been as groups converged. Wonderful!

Psalm 124 V. 1-2

(NIV) *If the Lord had not been on our side–*

let Israel say –

if the Lord had not been on our side

In the late sixties/ early seventies, when I was a new Christian, there was a trend for doing shouts:

One way – Jesus!

Gimme a J, gimme an E, gimme an S, gimme a U, gimme an S, What've we got ? Jesus!

I like to think that this was the same sort of thing – the guy at the front shouted, 'If the Lord had not been on our side' and the crowd all bellowed 'If the Lord had not been on our side'

The rendering in the Complete Jewish Bible seems to support this idea: *Adonai is YHWH, the Name God revealed to Moses; it is usually translated The LORD.*

If Adonai hadn't been for us –

Let Israel repeat it –

If Adonai hadn't been for us

But, of course, this isn't a complete sentence - perhaps they went on to say or sing the rest of it together - the Jewish Bible again:

If Adonai hadn't been for us

When people rose to attack us

And then the Psalmist uses three metaphors to describe the trouble Israel would have been in if the Lord hadn't been on their side:

V 3 The image of being swallowed them up by a wild beast

V4, 5 The image of being overwhelmed, engulfed, swept away by a terrible deluge of water. Do you remember footage of the tsunami in Japan as the water moved inland sweeping everything away before it?

V7 The image of being caught in a fowler's net like a helpless wild bird destined for the pot.

These images really have the same meaning:

Enemies wanted to destroy Israel and to wipe her from the face of the earth. Some nations and groups still want to do that.

Whose side is God on?

In times of battle and war, people are inclined to think that God is on *their* side. Putin claims that God is on his side. We have good cause to think that his behaviour and lies suggest that it is unlikely that God *is* on his side. But is God on NATO'S side in this conflict? Or Ukraine's? Or ours? Why would He be? I cannot speak for Ukraine, but you have to wonder if any of the NATO nations have honoured or even acknowledged God.

Before the Battle of Jericho, Joshua looked up and saw an armed man with a drawn sword. Joshua asked, 'Are you on our side or on the side of our enemies?' The man, who was in fact an appearance of God Himself probably a Christophany – a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus Christ, replies, 'No'. It was the wrong question. The man reveals Himself to be the Commander of Adonai's army who has come at this time. Joshua worships and the man receives that worship – therefore not an angel, but God Himself. Angels don't receive worship.

What about Israel, though? Was it true that God was on their side? What we learn from the encounter before Jericho is that it wasn't that God was on Joshua's side, but that Joshua needed to be on God's. It wasn't Joshua and Israel who won the battle – there wasn't a battle – God gave the victory. His victory; His glory.

God chose Israel for a purpose and had made them a people and given them a land. His purpose was that they would bring the knowledge of the One True God to all the nations of the Earth.

Did He choose Israel because it was bigger, better, more morally righteous than other nations?

No! He chose them and put His name on them because He chose to do that – perhaps *because* they were small and weak and morally imperfect, and he could reveal His character through His dealings with them. Although their history was one of repeated backsliding and idolatry, God revealed Himself to be merciful, loving and faithful. Yes, they suffered the consequences of their sin, and He sometimes had to discipline them, but He remained, and still remains, faithful to His covenant with them.

Isa. 43 v 1, 2

Here is another wonderful promise to Israel which came through the prophet Isaiah, later than David wrote his Psalm: Isa. 43. 1, 2

But now thus says the LORD (the covenant name of God)

He who created you, O Jacob,

He who formed you , O Israel:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by your name, you are mine

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.

For I am the LORD your God.

These are tremendously strengthening promises which I have often taken for myself in times of difficulty. I'm sure that it is OK for us to do that, even though they were and are for Israel, because we, the gentile redeemed are grafted into God's chosen people and His promises are for us, too.

Application to us:

Going back to David's metaphors. The nation of Israel faced and still faces actual threat from people wanting to wipe them out. We don't, but we do have times when we feel in danger of being wiped out.

1. Being torn limb from limb and devoured by a wild beast

Physical attack is mercifully rare, but verbal bullying or psychological manipulation can make us feel as if we've been savaged and leave us feeling worthless.

2. Being overwhelmed by a tidal wave.

The pressures of life can overwhelm us. In the seventies, a friend of mine worked for Perkins Engines in Peterborough. He worked in sales and, because of the recession, there were redundancies. He worked with three others in his office and one by one, the dreaded envelope arrived on a desk and the colleague cleared his desk and left. And that person's workload fell to the others. Eventually, only Ray was left, doing the work of four! Again, we are in a time of redundancies and dwindling workforce, so that those who remain have more and more work falling to them and it is simply impossible to keep up with it. It can feel like a tsunami.

3. Being caught in a trap. We can look at this in two ways:
 - a) When we get stuck in a sin-confess-sin cycle. What the Bible calls a besetting sin – one which easily entangles us. We truly repent, and try to avoid it, but then we fall into it again. And so the repent-sin-repent cycle starts all over again and can make us feel quite hopeless. The danger is that we give up fighting it, give in and justify it to ourselves in some way. There is a way out: Prayer ministry will help, but it needs more. Jesus said, 'If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' (John 8 v 31) The key is to ask the Lord to reveal the lie that is causing you to fall into sin and then find in the word of God the corresponding truth. Then renew your mind by daily affirming the truth of God's word and choosing to believe it rather than the lies of the evil one.
 - b) Another trap might be that our circumstances can be such that we can't see any way out of the problems.

What to do?

What Israel did was to remind themselves of how God had helped them in the past. It's an old chorus and it sounds trite, but it really can help to 'count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will astound you what the Lord has done!' When we're in the thick of it, we cannot always remember that things were ever better, or that they could ever improve; actually naming God's blessings to us and thanking Him, helps: thank you for clean water to drink, thank you for air to breath, thank you for the rain, thank you for loving me, even though it doesn't feel like it right now.

Then, we could move on to scripture: Thank you that when I pass through these waters, they will not overwhelm me. Thank you that You are working all things together for my good – even this. Thank You that You are with me in this fire. Thank You that You are the Lord my God and You have redeemed me; I am Yours.

If we have acknowledged Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we are in a covenant relationship with God. When two people were in covenant, they were obliged to come to the aid of the other. God doesn't need our aid, happily, - what could we do for the God Who created Heavens and Earth? But He will come to ours. He is our Helper i.e. one who rushes to help.

Trials

Sometimes, though the deliverance doesn't come as we would like it to. It is the case that people are murdered for their belief in the Lord Jesus. It is also true that Christians die 'too soon' from accident or illness. However, our times are in His hands and when we leave this life, we start eternal life in glory with Him; we shall not be sorry!

Then there are trials which God uses for our good.

Imagine you are a soggy lump of clay. The potter picks you up and slams you down onto his wheel. Ouch! That was bad, but then the wheel starts to turn and you are whirled round and round faster and faster. Whoa! Stop! Then his fingers and thumbs start to dig in, pushing and pulling and shaping you as he wants. Oh no, you've gone all out of shape, so he thumps you down, picks you up, whacks you back onto the wheel and it all starts again. Eventually, you are the intended shape –Whew! But what's this? He picks you up, dips you in glaze and puts you in the fierce kiln. At last, you emerge, beautiful and useful for His purpose.

Someone wrote a book called 'Don't Waste Your Sorrows'. I owned a copy, but I don't think I ever read it. The title was enough. Troubles and sorrows are part of life, don't waste them, let God use them to do His work in you and through you. Remember, He is in there with you.

Conclusion

V8 Our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

Why 'in His name'? The name Adonai/ YHWH – the name He revealed to Moses; the Name of God that was on Moses' lips and the Israelites, as they escaped slavery in Egypt and journeyed to the land God gave them.

The LORD – the God who makes a covenant with His people and keeps it. The LORD who hears their cry and comes to their aid; the Lord who defeats their enemies.

And this LORD is our Lord, if we have accepted His salvation and His Lordship in our lives.

