



Psalm 124 - Thanksgiving for Israel's Deliverance

A Song of Ascents. Of David.

Introduction

This is a thanksgiving hymn for the community, particularly for an occasion in which God's people have been under threat but have been delivered. It is conceivable that David wrote this psalm in response to some deliverance such as those in 2 Samuel 5:17-25, but the words are quite general, applicable in a wide variety of settings; God's people have known many occasions on which this psalm provides just the right hymn.

The implication of the psalm being now a Song of Ascents, the fifth in the series, seems to be that the faithful would sing it in connection with their pilgrimage to Jerusalem; the deliverance of the whole people allows them to continue journeying there. For more on the Song of Ascents psalms, refer to the introduction to Psalm 120.

Despite the attribution to David, several commentators connect this psalm with exiles returning from Babylon.

In the year 1582, this psalm was sung on a remarkable occasion in Edinburgh. An imprisoned minister, John Durie, had been set free, and was met and welcomed on entering the town by two hundred of his friends. The number increased until he found himself in the midst of a company of two thousand, who began to sing, as they moved up the long High Street, 'Now Israel may say,' etc. They sang in four parts with deep solemnity, all joining in the well-known tune and psalm. They were much moved themselves, and so were all who heard; and one of the chief persecutors is said to have been more alarmed at this sight and song than at anything he had seen in Scotland.

Psalm 124:1-5 - Had the Lord Not Helped Us.

The first section describes a situation in which people, apparently Gentiles, rose up against the people of Israel; these would have swallowed them up alive (v.3) or swept them away like a flood (v.4). And these aggressors would have succeeded if it had not been the Lord who was on their side to rescue them: <<***If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence***>> (Psalm 94:17).

- 1 If it had not been the Lord who was on our side
– let Israel now say –
- 2 if it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
- 3 then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
- 4 then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
- 5 then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

Psalm 124:1-5

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side. Twice in the first two verses of Psalm 124, David called Israel to recognise that their help was in God alone. It was not just that Yahweh was present, but that he actively worked on behalf of his people. Martin Luther commented, “This repetition is not in vain. For whilst we are in danger, our fear is without measure; but when it is once past, we imagine it to have been less than it was indeed. And this is the delusion of Satan, to diminish and obscure the grace of God.”

Let Israel now say. David thought it necessary that all God’s covenant people recognise this. It was not enough for he or a few others to do this; it was the duty of all Israel to know and to say that God was their absolutely essential help: <<***Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need***>> (Hebrews 4:16).

When our enemies attacked us. There were many times in David’s reign and before when this was true, but perhaps the most likely time was when the Philistines threatened to overwhelm Israel at the start of David’s reign; refer to 2 Samuel 5:17-25. When men opposed the people of God, God stepped in to help.

Derek Kidner added, “As a psalm of David, this gives us a rare insight into the early peril of his kingdom, particularly from the Philistines, who had thought to see the last of Israel when they shattered the kingdom of Saul. 2 Samuel 5:17ff. shows how serious the threat was, and how little confidence David placed in his own power to survive it.”

Then they would have swallowed us up alive. Carrying the thought from the emphatic repetition in the first two verses, if God had not helped Israel they would have been destroyed by their enemies. Yahweh was not one of many possible solutions to their problem; he and he alone was their saviour: <<***Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen***>> (Jude 24-25).

On ‘their anger was kindled against us’ Spurgeon commented, “Anger is never more fiery than when the people of God are its objects. Sparks become flames, and the furnace is heated seven times hotter when God’s elect are to be thrust into the blaze.”

Then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us. David poetically described their potential ruin. The danger was like being swallowed alive by a giant beast, or like being drowned when waters overwhelmed: <<***They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me***>> (Psalm 88:17). The idea here is of a rushing river, not the rising flood. In the poetic picture, they were in danger of being swept away by the torrent: <<***For the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of perdition assailed me***>> (2 Samuel 22:5).

Then over us would have gone the raging waters. David again used repetition to emphasise the idea that the danger was not only political or economic; it had to do with the very soul, with life at the deepest levels. From these great dangers, God was their deliverer: <<***The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer***>> (2 Samuel 22:2).

David poetically described many of the troubles that face the soul:

- Sometimes troubles swallow and devour a person.
- Sometimes troubles overwhelm a person like a flood.
- Sometimes troubles sweep a person away like a torrent.

Psalm 124:6-7 - We Have Had a Narrow Escape.

The second section stresses that the outcome could have been different, indeed it should have been: <<***we have escaped like a bird from the snare of the***>>

fowlers>>, i.e. surprisingly. Therefore the psalm gives credit where it belongs:
Blessed be the Lord!

⁶ Blessed be the Lord,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.

⁷ We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.

Psalm 124:6-7

Blessed be the Lord. As in other places in the psalms, the thought is not bestowing a blessing upon Yahweh, but on thanking, praising, and announcing him as blessed. It is a powerful expression of thanks and praise.

Who has not given us as prey to their teeth. David again described their danger poetically – first as a being delivered from a beast with grinding teeth, then as deliverance from a trap or snare set for birds: <<*My eyes are ever towards the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net*>> (Psalm 25:15). With God’s help, the people of God were safe from destruction and loss of liberty. Derek Kidner observed, “This is not quite the same figure as that of verse 3. In these jaws we feel the slower agonies of defeat, like the tearing and grinding of the prey.”

Spurgeon commented, “Fowlers have many methods of taking small birds, and Satan, has many methods of entrapping souls. Some are decoyed by evil companions, others are enticed by the love of dainties; hunger drives many into the trap, and fright impels numbers to fly into the net.” And again, “As the bird could not get out of the snare, so the soul cannot escape from temptation; but God can bring it out, and he works the rescue. Hear this, you that are slaves to drunkenness: God can deliver you. You that have fallen into licentiousness hear it, – God can deliver you. Whatever the sin that has birdlimed you, that gracious hand which once was nailed to the cross can set you free.”

Here are two more poetic pictures of that which may trouble the soul:

- Sometimes troubles grind a person to powder.
- Sometimes troubles capture a person in a trap or snare.

Psalm 124:8 - Our Help.

The psalm closes with its basic point, namely, that help is in the name of the Lord, i.e. his personal presence: <<***When you cross over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is allotting to you, and when he gives you rest from your enemies all around so that you live in safety, then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the Lord***>> (Deuteronomy 12:10-11), who made heaven and earth; refer also to the comment made on Psalm 121:2.

Biblical authors certainly affirm the importance of human diligence; but such diligence makes no lasting difference unless it is a tool in the Lord's hand: <<***Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain***>> (Psalm 127:1). David was a wily and sturdy warrior, and he had valiant fighters in his service described in 2 Samuel 23:8-39, as was proper; at the same time, it was the Lord who worked each great victory through them: <<***But he took his stand in the middle of the plot, defended it, and killed the Philistines; and the Lord brought about a great victory***>> (2 Samuel 23:12).

⁸ Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 124:8

Our help is in the name of the Lord. There is a sense of defiance in this declaration. The nations find their supposed help in their supposed deities; God's people confidently find their help in the name of the Lord.

Who made heaven and earth. It was not a vain confidence. The same God who created heaven and earth was mighty to help his people. Spurgeon concluded, "When we worship the Creator let us increase our trust in our Comforter. Did he create all that we see, and can he not preserve us from evils which we cannot see?"