

Introduction

Have you ever been in a situation where afterwards you have heard yourself say these words, “What if I had.....” or “What if this had happened.....”

I’ve never considered the ‘what if’ term very helpful, because you cannot do anything about the what ifs in life. You cannot turn the clock back. However in the context today, the question ‘What if’ is useful.

In this Psalm, Psalm 124 David reflects on some event which, had it not been for the Lord’s faithful deliverance, things would be in a really bad way. He is driving the people to consider what might have happened if the Lord had not intervened. He is driving them towards a worship of God full of hope which reflects on the past, the present and the future.

There is no indication and example of exactly what it was that drove David to this reflection. Last week we studied Psalm 123 which was all about looking to the Lord for mercy, and actually last week I considered whether to simply join 123 into 124 as one study, because Psalm 124 serves as an answer to Psalm 123.

**READ PSALM 124**

So Psalm 124 imagines what would happen to a world without God, and it’s a picture of complete devastation.

*Reflection/Discussion – Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that you escaped lightly from what would have otherwise been a complete disaster? Consider a situation in your life where you have been so dependent on God; that without his deliverance you would have been completely sunk.*

Let’s break this psalm down into a couple of elements

**Whose side are you leaning on? Whose side is God on?**

Immediately we are given in the opening verse this idea of the Lord being on the side of the Psalmist. ‘If the Lord had not been on OUR side’. Who is he talking about? Well it must be God’s chosen people, Israel.

We can therefore conclude that we are on God’s side? But what entitles us to be on God’s side?

This is quite a controversial point for God’s people to make. Because if as Christians we claim that God is on our side, then that equation means there are some that are not on his side. Today, to claim that we have God on our side is very bold, especially in a world that embraces religious pluralism. Religious pluralism is the idea that religious diversity is healthy for a society and that we all can co-exist with one another. And this was not a foreign

concept in David's time. Ancient Israel was acutely aware that it's faith of YAHWEH was not shared by its neighbours. And therefore consider for a second how David and other Godly leaders dealt with it. Did they live in acceptance of it? No, those that did not follow God were considered as enemies of the one true God. So clearly the writer here believes that there was a side that God was on and a side on which God was not on.

So therefore from that we must highlight that there is only one God, no others. Whilst it is highly controversial today, all others are imposters. We must acknowledge this if we have any chance of bringing hope to others, because frankly there are other interests even in our own town that are working to entice people away from God e.g. Harmony Hub. Groups like this are imposters to the Kingdom of God, and when we have people within our own church family who go online and Facebook-like this type of stuff we must recognise that we are in a battle. For example last week Harmony Hub said on their facebook page that the reason why the world is 'in chaos at the moment is because we have had 2 eclipses, 4 [Solar System] Retrogrades and a Summer Solstice. This creates extreme energy making people angry and anxious'. We should not be content if we know of people who are considered 'spiritual' if they are interested in this stuff or searching after other things.

This phrase being on our side, actually originates from a Hebrew word that is linked to the word Immanuel "God with us". So being on God's side is understanding our relational covenant YAHWEH God who desires to be with us, in the life and resurrection of Jesus. Anything other than that is against us and God.

So we need to be on God's side, our family needs to be on God's side – it must be our only focus. Joshua gathered the tribes together at Shechem in Joshua 24:14&15 saying to them, "Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. <sup>15</sup> But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Folks we have got to decide for ourselves if we are on God's side or not.

And so this Psalm reflects that for us, the people of God, we can see the difference that God makes in our lives, compared to who other people may choose to follow. If we didn't have him our lives would be a mess.

In the NIV David writes 'Let Israel say' and then the line is repeated. This is for emphasis. He wants to encourage all of Israel to repeat it as an affirmation of the truth and the hope they can declare. Eugene Peterson in the Message translated this line as follows "All together now, Israel, sign out! "In other words, let's all shout it out together, "If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been a mess, we would have been destroyed".

*Discussion – whilst it's a brave thing to do, I wonder would anyone like to reflect on their own life, and share what your life would be like if God wasn't there in it. Where would you be without God?*

## What threats would come your way if it wasn't for the Lord?

So we see from the writing that if the Lord had not been on their side, they would be swallowed alive, anger would flare against them, a flood would engulf them, the torrent would sweep over them, the waters would sweep them away.

David is honest and humbly acknowledged where things would be if God had not been on their side. Each of us needs to have that same element of humility. We can't boast ever how we have been strong and worked our way through the challenges of life, it is God. David declared in 1 Samuel 17:37 "The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine". That's not bravado, that's not cockiness, that's humility and the fear of the Lord.

Galatians 6:3 says "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself." (Galatians 6:3) If you think you can navigate life successfully without God, you are deceiving yourself. You might say, "Well, I've gotten along fine without God so far." But have you really? Who gave you your life? Who showers you with blessings everyday? Are you going to take the credit for all those things?

Just a little bit on the images of verses 3 – 5. It's about being swallowed up and being engulfed by a raging sea. This brings a sense of helplessness. You feel like the writer is a victim where there would be nothing possible to avoid the destruction that's coming his way if it wasn't for the Lord. This I think is important, because the attacks that come our way are not always instigated by someone else. They don't choose their prey. It comes and there's nothing that we can do about it, but the writer is making it clear that even when that may come, the Lord is still on our side.

We can all relate to something in our lives where we have felt the sense of being inundated by torrential floods of hardship or heartache – that sense of being completely disoriented, the sense of devastation. But can we see where the Lord in it has come to our aid, where God is very much on our side? Has he ever let you down?

The question therefore is this – what should our attitude and expectation be when we face such trials again? We should know, we should run to, and trust in the name of the Lord. When you are at the end of your rope, don't just cling on hoping that it will all get sorted, release your worries and your cares into God's hands, let go, lean on him for strength because he won't let you down.

I can remember in my young life when my mother and I left our family home, left my dad, to start again. We had nothing. We had no money. I can remember walking out of the house with very little. In fact when we arrived at our new Council house, we realised we had forgotten the Hoover. So I had to walk right back to our old house – some 2 miles, and then walk through Lisburn with it as we didn't have a car. It felt very tough to start literally all over again. But the one thing that mum had was her trust in God. It never wavered. Over the years we built a new home and God was on our side. Mum didn't just cling on hoping that it would all get sorted. She prayed every day and read God's Word to strengthen her, to reassure her that He was with her. I was looking today at her bible, because her final bible

reading for the day she died was open. And it was on Luke 12 where Jesus tells his disciples not to worry, to put their trust in God, and be completely concerned with the Kingdom.

### **Bless the Lord for what he has done.**

As we now move to verses 6 & 7 we find David acknowledging the blessing of God in his life. He says, "Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. <sup>7</sup>We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped".

He breaks into celebratory confession. It's now moving from the What if – what if God had not been on our side – to what actually did happen. God not only delivers you from potential dangers – that's what verses 1-5 were all about. He also delivers you from present dangers.

All of us have been delivered from dangers. We not be able to say that it was survival from a burning house or similar, but we need to give serious thought to all that God has delivered us from. We have been delivered from spiritual death, slavery to sin. And it's through Jesus that we have been saved. I wonder how often we have to be reminded of this before we respond in praise to God? The good news for all of us is that we have been released in many ways, but in particular we have been released from the destruction of sin. The Psalmist says that we have escaped, the snare has been broken.

The psalmist never indicates anywhere throughout the psalms that he avoids the snare. He was trapped, and then he escaped from it. For us we don't escape on our own without someone freeing us. Once you're trapped, you're trapped. We can apply this image to so many areas of your life. You can apply it to trials and temptations. 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 under it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) What does God do when you are tempted? He provides a way out. He breaks the snare, so you can escape it. You might think you are trapped in a sin and you will never escape it. It's not true. God breaks the snare so you can escape.

The good news of Psalm 124 is that what might have happened, didn't happen. You might have been trapped in sin for life. That didn't happen. You might have died without Christ, but that didn't happen for those who are in Christ. And the reason it didn't happen is because of God. God makes all the difference. God helps us against all the odds. And so we praise him.

In the structure of our services on Sundays, I really think we should make more time for praising the name of Jesus. As a guide to those who lead worship, consider songs that offer a response of praise to God for what he has done. In particular if we have come to God seeking his forgiveness, asking him to release us from the trap and bondage of our sins, then as we acknowledge his forgiveness this leads us naturally to praise and that's what the psalmist is doing here. He acknowledges what his life might have been like if it hadn't been for the Lord, and now that he recognises that the chains around him have been loosened, his words in verse 6 begin with "Praise be to the Lord".

Question – can you think of hymns or songs that declare that praise of thanksgiving as we recognise what God has done for us?

O for a thousand tongues to sing (He breaks the power of cancelled sin, new life the dead receive etc), There is a redeemer (Thank you O my Father for giving us your son), All hail the lamb, Bless the Lord O my soul 10,000 reasons, Love Divine all loves excelling.

Just one final comment to make regarding how God releases us from the snare. Sometimes things will happen in our lives or in people we know that we cannot completely explain, and we may wonder how has God helped us escape from the fowler's snare – in particular when it comes to the issue of suffering and death. I believe God provides release even when it does not happen exactly when or how we want it to. So for example I have been involved in situations where people have taken ill and died very quickly. And I would believe that there is a blessing in that, where the person has not had to suffer a long and painful death. God has released them from that.

Finally, we come to verse 8. "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth". The experience has strengthened and confirmed David's faith and he ends the psalm with a confident confession of faith.

The experience has strengthened and confirmed David's faith and he ends the psalm with a confident confession of faith. He comes back round to the recognition of the one true God: "If it had not been *the LORD*." He uses the name Yahweh here to emphasise that he is speaking of the only true God. "Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth." No other lord is in view. David is not ashamed to declare that there is only one God and that He is the one who created heaven and earth. This is an absolute declaration and therefore one that, at the same time, rejects all other claims to deity. David was no postmodern theologian.

And because of this declaration, we each have to decide as part of this pilgrimage that we have been on through the Psalms, whether we are ready to openly declare, above everything else, and irrespective of what society may think of us, or who is offended by us, that our help is in the name of the LORD. It connects us right back to where we began with Psalm 121 – "I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The Lord is the only to bring help, and if it wasn't for him there would be complete chaos.

So where does that leave us in our acknowledgement of our deep need for God each day? Well, a couple of things :

1. *Declare glory to the name of the Lord.* Have you escaped from trouble? Have you survived the flood? Don't take the credit for yourself, but give credit where credit is due. Give God the glory for what he has done – TO GOD BE THE GLORY GREAT THINGS HE HAS DONE.

In the New Testament we read how Jesus delivered a man who was possessed by many demons. The man was a wreck. He lived among the tombs and no one could bind him, not even with a chain. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he

would cry out and cut himself with stones. Jesus cast the demons out of his body and for the first time in a long time, the man was free and in his right mind. The man begged to go with Jesus, but Jesus didn't let him and told him: "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." (Mark 5:19) Jesus told the man to go home and testify, to tell others how God helped him, to give God the glory for rescuing him when he was helpless and trapped.

2. *Encourage others to depend upon God* - God can use your testimony to encourage others to recognize their need for God, to understand that they are completely dependent on God, that they cannot make it without him. Psalm 20:7 says: "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." Too many people trust in their own abilities when they need to be trusting in the Lord.

For these reasons to declare glory to the name of the LORD, and also to therefore encourage others to depend upon him, one of the things that George Colclough has been talking with me about is to have a regular slot for people sharing their testimonies, and so every month in particularly in Christ Church after the lockdown I am going to restructure our services so that we can have guests coming to tell their story of how they were rescued by Jesus – to be able to share the story that 'if it hadn't been for Jesus, my life would have been a mess, but because of Jesus my life looks like this.....'

## **Conclusion**

Reflection - So tonight, what difference has God made to your life? If it wasn't for him where would you be? Are you on God's side? If you know you are on the Lord's side, how should you address issues that come your way – who will you lean on? Acknowledge the Lord in praise for what he has done for you. Who are you going to tell?

Into this week ahead declare this Psalm - If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been swept away. If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have perished. If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been trapped. If the Lord had not been on our side, there would be no hope, no deliverance, no salvation. But our hope is in the Lord who made heaven and earth.