



October 20, 2013
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The Climb of Your Life: The Perils Psalm 124

Any of you ever felt like this? Trapped by the circumstances of your life? By a failed relationship? By an enemy that wanted to destroy you? Trapped, snared, in pain, unable to set yourself free?

We are in a journey through the Psalms of Ascent, a collection of 15 psalms that were sung by pilgrims as they made their way from exile back "up" to Jerusalem. We are calling this pilgrimage the "climb of your life. And one of the facts of mountain climbing is this: there are perils along the way... hidden perils that strike you before you are even aware of the danger. There are over 200 bodies frozen on Mt. Everest, a gruesome reminder to every other climber of the perils that await them.

The Psalms of Ascent are about a journey forward and upward! We long to move from where we are to a higher place don't we? We long to reach up toward the destiny for which we were created. But sometimes—in the journey forward and upward—we need to stop and look back. When we climbed Rainier, every time we began to feel like we would never make it, all we had to do was turn around and see how far we had come. This psalm is a backward glance, a look over the shoulder, a moment to pause and turn and remember where we have come from, how we got here... and Who got us here.

One of the things I love about scripture is it is so honest! It portrays life, warts and all. When we read this psalm, we hear of a Jewish people that has taken a beating in life. They have enemies that want to destroy them. Like a sea monster, their enemies want to swallow them alive. Like a flash flood, they lash out at them without warning... suddenly swept along by a torrent that threatens to engulf them! Or like this trap... they feel trapped.

This writer is no Pollyanna. He doesn't pretend that mean people don't exist... that God's people get a free pass. He doesn't pretend we will never face the monster or the flood or the traps in life. But what he does promise is this: when God's people face their enemy, in the end, they will prevail. In the end, you will prevail!

This is no hypothetical for me. I am in the midst of situation right now where an enemy wants to harm me. And there have been moments in this struggle where I was so overwhelmed with fear and depression and discouragement that I didn't

know how I would get through it. Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt like this? How do we face these moments... these enemies... these traps?

Like the psalmist did. You look back. When you are afraid of what lies ahead, of the perils in your path... when you find yourself too frightened to move forward... you look backward and remember God's faithfulness in other perilous times.

Notice how the psalm begins: "If the Lord had not been on our side..." What do you think about that claim? "If the Lord had not been on our side..." Are you a little uncomfortable with the idea that God is on our side? When a football team prays for victory before a game, isn't that their assumption... that God is on their side? And what if the other team is praying the same thing? How does God decide which team he is going to help win? God must be very frustrated during football season.

One of the greatest speeches ever given was Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural. It is engraved on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial, and two years ago, Cooper and I just sat on the cold marble floor and read that speech together. In that address, Lincoln spoke of the ongoing Civil War that was rending the nation. This is what he said about each side of that awful war: *"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other."*

Does it make you nervous to claim that "God is on our side?" Yet that is the claim of this psalmist. Not once, but twice. He is so excited, he repeats himself: "If the Lord had not been on our side... let Israel say... if the Lord had not been on our side..." I love that! He's like a black preacher calling for response! "If the Lord had not been on our side...Come on now, can I get a witness! Who will agree with me! Everyone together... 'If the Lord had not been on our side...'" ...

So what? What would have happened if the Lord had not been on our side? "Calamity!" he says. "Our enemies would have destroyed us—swallowed us alive, swept us away like a flood, torn chunks out of our hides with their teeth. It would have been horrible if the Lord was not on our side.

But, He was! He was on our side; He is on our side. He is our champion. He is protector. He is our defender. He is our redeemer. That doesn't mean that God is in our pocket or that God is in our debt or at our beck and call... or that God is even in agreement with us. God won't be co-opted into our party or our cause.

But God is for us. God is with us... His people, His Church. You... me... us! God is on our side. Isn't that wonderful news? And this isn't the only place we find it. Psalm 118:6: "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The LORD is with me; he is my helper." Or how about Romans 8:31: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Notice the dramatic way the writer poses this as a question: "If the Lord had not been on our side..." "Can you imagine? (he writes) As you look back over your life, can you just imagine what it would have been like if the Lord had not been on our side?" How many of you can point to a time when you are sure God preserved you? That if he had not been there, the results would have been catastrophic? I can! I should have died in an ice skating accident ten years ago. The doctors described my condition as "grave." I was in a coma, tied to a bed in the ICU with a machine breathing for me. Two days later, I was home. I don't know why He did, but when I look back ten years ago, I know that God delivered me!

How about our move into the EPC? Knowing what we know now, watching the struggles of so many churches who also long for freedom, when we look back over our process, how can we help but notice how God was with us! Aren't you grateful for that?

And every single one of you has a story like this in your own life, don't you? Where you look back and say, "Oh my, I didn't realize it at the time, but look how faithful God was to me then." And that's just the times we are aware of! We have no idea how many other times God was at work, protecting us from unseen perils. Isn't that true? In II Kings we read the story of how a king sent troops to capture the prophet Elisha.

¹⁵When the servant got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

¹⁶"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

¹⁷And Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes so he may see." Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

We have no idea the times God has surrounded us with his angelic host mounted on chariots of fire! No idea. But just imagine... if it were not so where would we be!

And what does it mean that God is "on our side" through the perilous times? Sometimes it means that the floods will pass us by, that enemies won't lay a finger on us, that they won't be able to sink their teeth into us, that we will be spared. Sometimes that's what it means for God to be on our side.

But what about those of us who weren't delivered? Who didn't get what they prayed for? Who did find themselves trapped by the enemy of sickness, or the enemy of death, or the enemies in this world, or the Enemy of our soul? Does that mean God wasn't on our side after all... or worse, that we weren't on God's side? Not at all! Sometimes God shows up like in verse 7: "We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped."

Sometimes we are trapped, wounded, cornered. Sometimes God allows us to endure the attack, so that we can experience his deliverance. Did you notice the passive voice in the verse? "The snare has been broken." Who broke that snare... the bird? No, God broke the snare! After the bird was trapped, God broke the snare. Sometimes God demonstrates He is on our side by reaching down when we are trapped and setting us free.

So why doesn't he keep us out of the trap in the first place? I don't know. Perhaps it's because we learn something deeper about God's love for us when we are trapped and helpless and have nowhere else to turn for deliverance. When every striving, every struggling of our own only tightens the jaws only cinches the noose around our neck... we learn that the best thing to do is to rest and wait and trust that God will do what only God can do. Set us free! The more we struggle in our snare, the more we scar ourselves. If we rest and wait we are reminded, yet again, that God is on our side.

When I decided to preach this psalm, I knew whom I wanted to invite to share his story with us. Tim Bailey is a son-in-law of this church. He is married to Ane and Hank Weber's daughter, Whitney. Two years ago, Tim set out on a hike from which he almost did not return. Would you please welcome him?

[*Interview questions*]

Tim, we've heard snippets of your story. How did you end up in the mountains all by yourself and what happened?

You were going out to meet with God. But that meeting didn't quite turn out the way you expected it too? What did you learn from that?

You told me you went out looking for a breakthrough, but you weren't looking to be broken. And yet, that's what happened, both physically and spiritually. Some might say, "See, God wasn't on your side, otherwise, you wouldn't have taken the fall in the first place." How would you respond to that?

The psalm speaks about being trapped like a bird in a snare. You must have felt that way. What did God teach you about what to do when you are trapped?

The opening to this psalm is, "If the Lord had not been on our side." How would you finish this psalm if you had written it up on that mountain? Here's what you sent to me earlier... something like this, maybe? *If it had not been the Lord by my side, the park rangers would have found my body in the creek and I would have died in bitterness of heart. My Enemy would have swallowed me and I would have been utterly swept away by the raging waters. My soul has escaped as a bird out of the hand of the fowler. My help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.*

[*End of interview*]

Someone once said that the greatest indicator of future performance is past performance. This psalm reminds us of God's past performance. I alluded to a situation in which I am presently embroiled. It has caused me to lose sleep; I wake up early many mornings, in a battle. You have no idea what a gift this psalm has been to me. Just those first few words: "If the Lord had not been on our side... if the Lord had not been on our side..."

Here's the good news: He was! And He is! And he evermore will be! The Lord is on our side! And we can be even more sure of that than the psalmist. Because when we look back over our shoulder, we see Jesus in our rearview mirror! Immanuel! What does that mean again? "God with us!" The very name of God's Son reminds us that God is on our side! When we look to the cross, we see God reaching down to pry open the snare of sin and death and set us free. The cross of Christ is the ultimate declaration of God: "I am on your side!" So "if God is for us, who can be against us?" Answer: Nobody! Hallelujah!

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Why does the Psalmist repeat himself at the beginning? Why is this affirmation worthy repeating?
 2. What do you think about the idea of God "being on our side?" How can that be abused? How can you find it incredibly comforting?
 3. Do you have an "if God had not been with me" moment? Could you share it? What snare did God free you from?