



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 124

Metropolitan Youssef



Introduction

- This Psalm is titled *A Song of Ascents. Of David*
- It is the fifth of the Psalms of Ascents
- And it is the second Psalm of Ascent attributed to David
- Some believe David wrote this Psalm upon occasion of some great deliverance which God did for him and his people from some very threatening danger
- In this Psalm David is recounting the way God rescued Israel from danger
- When they were sure to be overcome, God delivered them
- When they could not save themselves, God saved them



Introduction

- And some believe David wrote this Psalm by a prophetic spirit, concerning the enemies of the Jews, upon their return to their own land, from the Babylonian captivity; who envied them, and rose up against them, but the Lord delivered them
- Despite the attribution to David, several commentators connect this Psalm with exiles returning from Babylon
- And some to Nehemiah as a thanksgiving for the deliverance recorded in Nehemiah 4:7-23
- Others consider it a thanksgiving of the Jews for their escape from the general massacre intended by Haman, prime minister of Ahasuerus, king of Persia, (Esther 16)



Introduction

- And others apply it to the times of Antiochus, when the Jewish were threatened; but the Lord appeared for them, in raising up the Maccabees
- It may be applied to any time of distress the church and people of God have been in, and He has wrought them salvation
- Psalm 122:4 mentions that the pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem to give thanks
- Here we see David leading Israel in giving thanks to God for past help and expressing confidence in His continuing help
- David gives all the glory to God, and takes none to himself



Introduction

- Psalm 123 was all about looking to the Lord for mercy
- In some ways Psalm 124 serves as an answer to Psalm 123
- Psalm 123 was a cry for mercy; Psalm 124 describes God's merciful deliverance
- Psalm 124 is all about depending on God
- Psalm 124 imagines what would happen without God, and it is a picture of complete devastation
- The Psalm declares that our only true and lasting help comes from the Lord



Introduction

- Psalm 124 teaches us that we can only depend on God
- And in teaching us to depend on God, the Psalm encourages us to do three things in particular
- Affirm the difference God makes in our life
- Praise God for His protection and deliverance in our life
- Tell others how God has helped us
- St. Augustine says, “You already well know, dearest brethren, that a ‘Song of Degrees,’ is a song of our ascent: and that this ascent is not effected by the feet of the body, but by the affections of the heart.”



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5
- Praise to the Lord Who Helps 124:6-8

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- Twice in the first two verses of this Psalm, David called Israel to recognize that their help was in God alone
- It was not just that God was present, but that He actively worked on behalf of His people *on our side*
- Here the psalmist encourages all of Israel to affirm the difference that God makes
- The key word in these verse is the word *if*
- The *if's* focus on what might have happened if not for God
- As we read in Romans, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" (Romans 8:31)

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- The deliverance was of such a kind that it could have been accomplished by Him only
- *Let Israel now say*, David thought it necessary that *all* God's covenant people recognize 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
- Such things often occur in life, when the intervention in our behalf is so remarkable that we can ascribe it to no one else but God

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- In verse 2 he repeats the same thought to confirm it, and to excite the attention of the Israelites to it
- Also, to observe that it was not once only, but again and again, many times the Lord appeared to be on their side
- *When men rose up against us*, They are mighty and numerous men, who are united against the people of God, and *rose up against* them in an hostile manner; being full of enmity toward them
- But when *men* opposed the people of God, God stepped in to help
- Satan works against God's people through *men* of this world who do not love righteousness, or God

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- St. John Chrysostom says, “What would our enemy the devil have done if the Lord had not been among us? Listen to what Christ says to Simon: ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail.’ (Luke 22:31-32). The wild beast, after all, is evil and violent, and unless contained constantly, would have overturned and demolished everything”
- Continuing the thought from the fervent repetition in the first two verses (if God had not helped Israel), David tells of what have happened: *Then they would have swallowed us alive*
- They would have been destroyed by their enemies

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- Using vivid imagery David describes what would have happened if not for the Lord's intervention
- He describes an enemy who was bigger and stronger and who would have surely defeated Israel – if not for the Lord
- God was not one of many possible solutions to their problem; He and He alone was their savior
- *swallowed us alive*, The idea is derived from persons swallowed up in an earthquake, or by the opening of the earth, as in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Numbers 16:32-33
- The allusion here might be hungry violent beasts swallow their victim

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- The people of God are comparable to sheep and lambs, and such like innocent creatures: and the wicked to lions, tigers, wolves, bears, and such like beasts that devour living creatures
- Wrath is often represented in the Holy Scriptures as burning or heated as that which consumes all before it
- Their wrath was kindled as fire ready to consume them
- David described their potential ruin
- The danger was like being *swallowed* alive by a giant beast, or like being drowned when waters *overwhelmed*
- A sudden change of metaphor from the earthquake to the flood

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- The metaphor of water as a destructive force is common in the Old Testament (Psalm 18:16,42:7,69:1-2,15; Isaiah 8:7-8; Lamentations 3:54)
- According to St. Augustine by water he means ungodly nations
- The figures in verse 4 seem to be the steadily rising flood, and the hastily rushing stream
- Who can stand against two such mighty powers?
- Everything is destroyed by these unbeatable forces, either by being immersed or swept away
- The floods of ungodly men are very destructive and terrible

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- People can be comparable to waters for their multitude, strength, force, hastiness and speed; which bear down all before them, and against which no one can stand
- They are just like the waters of the flood, overflow and destroy all they pass over
- *Then the swollen waters Would have gone over our soul*, David again used repetition to emphasize the idea that the danger had to do with the very soul, with life at the deepest levels
- The waters would have completely swept *over our soul*
- From these great dangers, God was their deliverer

Gratitude for God's Help 124:1-5



- Had not God been with them, their cruel enemies would have destroyed them and dashed over them as *the swollen waters Would have gone over our soul*
- St. John Chrysostom says, “Do you see the extent of God’s assistance, how in such difficulties He did not allow them to be drowned? This is the reason, you see, He allows the problems to increase, not so as to drown them but to make them more upright and provide a greater demonstration of His power.”



Praise to the Lord Who Helps

124:6-8

- Here the Psalm moves from what might have happened to what actually did happen
- God not only delivers His people from potential dangers – that’s what verses 1-5 were all about
- He also delivers them from present dangers – and that is what is mentioned in verses 6-7
- Twice David speaks of escaping; twice he mentions the snare
- *Blessed be the Lord*, As in other places in the Holy Book of Psalms, the thought is not bestowing a blessing upon the *Lord*, but on thanking, praising, and announcing Him as *blessed*



Praise to the Lord Who Helps 124:6-8

- It is a powerful expression of thanks and praise
- They are not devoured, thanks to the involvement of the merciful and gracious Lord, to whom therefore praise and blessing are due
- *prey to their teeth*, The image is that of destruction by wild beasts; a form of destruction not less fearful than that which comes from overflowing waters
- The psalmist says God did not let that happen to them
- The Lord is heartily praised for not permitting His servants to be devoured when they were between the *teeth* of the violent ones
- It implies that none can harm us till the Lord permits



Praise to the Lord Who Helps

124:6-8

- The Holy Bible is full of God's promises to protect His people, *"The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore."* (Psalm 121:7-8)
- God promises: *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you."* (Isaiah 43:2)



Praise to the Lord Who Helps 124:6-8

- He has escaped the raging waters of the flood, he has escaped the *teeth* of the wild animal, and finally he has escaped the trapper's snare
- The psalmist was actually trapped in the snare at one point
- It is not that he avoided the snare
- He was trapped, and then he escaped from it
- The people of God are like little birds, being harmless and innocent
- Here the comparison is because the bird's weakness and how easily is enticed into the snare



Praise to the Lord Who Helps 124:6-8

- *Fowlers* have many methods of taking small birds, and Satan has many methods of deceiving souls
- But how did their souls escape?
- Not, however, of their own strength or of their own cleverness
- But by God's providence, *The snare is broken and we have escaped*
- St. Augustine says, "If the enemy sometimes appear as a roaring lion to terrify the believers; In other times he sets hidden snares to catch them; counting them like a bird that falls into a snare, with no possibility to escape. But strangely enough, the snare is broken, and the bird escapes unharmed; which could never be realized except by the divine salvation."



Praise to the Lord Who Helps 124:6-8

- St. Jerome says, “What is this snare which is broken? According to the apostle Paul: ‘The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly’ (Romans 16: 20); ‘That you may come to your senses, and escape the snare of the devil’ (2 Timothy 2: 26). Now you see that the devil is the ‘fowler’, who longs to catch a multitude of souls for perdition. He is the master of many snares, and deceptions of every kind ... When we are in a state of grace, our souls will be secure, But once we play with sin, our souls will be disturbed, and will become like a boat struck by mighty waves.”



Praise to the Lord Who Helps

124:6-8

- *Our help is in the name of the Lord, It is a comfort to all*
- If God made all of this, *heaven and earth*, then this great God most clearly is able to help
- The psalmist is testifying that the Lord is the One who helped them when they were in trouble
- This verse connects back to the opening verses of Psalm 121 where we read, *“I will lift up my eyes to the hills— From whence comes my help? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth.”*
- The Psalm declares that our only true and lasting help comes from the Lord



Praise to the Lord Who Helps

124:6-8

- While most of the Psalm seems to point us back to what God has done in the past, verse 8 reminds us that God's past work is a reminder of His care for us now and in the future
- The God who has rescued us in the past is our help today
- And as the One who made all things and all people – we can know that He is able to help
- The confession that God is the creator of all things in *heaven and earth*, offers us hope because God's wisdom encompasses time and eternity, God's power surpasses all human power
- He is our source and maker and is therefore above all earthly powers; God alone is worthy of our trust and confidence



Praise to the Lord Who Helps 124:6-8

- St. Augustine says, “Be sure that the snare will be broken; ... I wish we are not enslaved to the present life which will, eventually, be no more; so that, when the snare is broken we may rejoice and say: ‘The snare is broken, and we escaped’. And lest you assume that this was realized by your own strength, Remember by whom you were saved; For if you are proud, you will fall into the snare. ... Say: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”



Praise to the Lord Who Helps

124:6-8

- St. John Chrysostom comments on *Who made heaven and earth* and says, “Do you see the kind of leader we have? The kind of King? The creator of all this? the one who produced so many bodies by His word, such a mass, such magnitude? Do not lose heart, be bold; there is nothing to prevent your trophy standing in its magnificence. Aware of this, then, dearly beloved, let us be alert, let us keep striving, let us not sleep; rather, let us polish our armor, strengthen our determination, and fight the good fight steadfastly so that, achieving a glorious victory, we may with great glory enjoy the kingdom of heaven.”



Discussion

- How many Ascent Psalms do we find in the Holy Book of Psalms?
- What is the sentiment of this Psalm?
- In what ways are the Israelites dependent upon God? What contrast does the psalmist make in verse 2? What real situations might the psalmist be recalling?
- In your own words, what is the psalmist trying to emphasize in verses 1-5?

Discussion



- How does Satan resemble a lion stalking its prey? How can you maintain vigilance against him?
- How does Romans 12:3 affirm Psalm 124?
- How can we be reassured by this Psalm when facing present struggles and future fears?