

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship
Placerita Baptist Church
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Psalm 124 — An Amazing Escape

1.0 Introducing Psalm 124

- As the second psalm in the second set of three psalms of the Psalms of Ascents, Psalm 124 attributes the pilgrim's peace of mind in a hostile world to God's help in much the same way as Psalm 121.
✓ *Troubled travelers turn to God for a tranquil trust.*
- A number of translations begin verses 1 and 2 with "If" (KJV, NKJV, ASV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, ESV, HCSB, JPS, NET). That translation reminded James Boice of Rudyard Kipling's poem "If."

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you, . . .
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies, . . .

The poem's well-known conclusion reads,

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Psalm 124, however, would conclude as follows:

If you look to the Lord in every minute,
Filling each second with what He has done.
He will bless your life and everything that's in it,
And—what is more—you'll be the Lord's, my son! [WDB]

- Since Psalm 124's heading indicates that David was the author, it is best to identify the setting of the psalm as a time when the Philistines had attacked Israel and God had miraculously delivered them (see 2 Sam 5:17–21).

2.0 Reading Psalm 124 (NAU)

124:1 A Song of Ascents, of David.

“Had it not been the LORD who was on our side,”

Let Israel now say,

124:2 “Had it not been the LORD who was on our side
When men rose up against us,

124:3 **Then** they would have swallowed us alive,
When their anger was kindled against us;

124:4 **Then** the waters would have engulfed us,
The stream would have swept over our soul;

124:5 **Then** the raging waters would have swept over our soul.”

124:6 Blessed be the LORD,
Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.

124:7 Our soul has escaped as a bird

out of the snare of the trapper;
The snare is broken

A

B
B'

and we have escaped.

A'

124:8 Our help is in the name of the LORD,
Who made heaven and earth.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 124

3.1 Outline

- I. The Peril of Deadly Danger (vv. 1–5)
- II. The Praise for Divine Deliverance (vv. 6–8)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “Had it not been the LORD”
 - David’s description of the deadly perils Israel had faced with a contrary-to-fact conditional sentence: “If the LORD had not been on our side, . . . Then they would have swallowed us alive.”
 - In Genesis 31:42 Jacob used much the same kind of statement in speaking to Laban about how God had blessed him while he stayed with Laban.
- **v. 1** “Let Israel now say”
 - The psalmist calls on all believers in Israel to verbalize their witness concerning the Lord’s help. Cp. Psalm 129:1.
 - “The witness is vivid and contagious. One person announces the theme, everyone joins in. God’s help is not a private experience; it is a corporate reality—not an exception that occurs among isolated strangers, but the norm among the people of God.” — Eugene H.

Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 69.

- v. 2 “When men rose up against us”
 - “Isaac Watts, whose England was not so secure that it could forget the Gunpowder Plot to blow up Parliament a hundred years earlier, entitled his version of this psalm ‘A Song for the Fifth of November!’” — Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 73–150*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 229.
- v. 3 “they would have swallowed us alive”
 - The imagery of a wild animal devouring someone depicts an imminent and terrifying danger.
 - See Proverbs 1:11–12.
 - Cp. 1 Peter 5:8.
- v. 4 “the waters would have engulfed us”
 - Flash floods were a common occurrence during the rainy seasons in ancient Palestine.
 - The imagery depicts a sudden, life-threatening, catastrophic flood of water. Cp. Psalms 42:7; 69:1–2, 15.
 - The Philistines themselves were swept away by the Lord who broke through them “like the breakthrough of waters” (2 Sam 5:20).
 - “Sometimes are troubles are like that. It is not so much a question of being submerged by troubles — buried by them, as we might say. It is more like being hit by a truck, which crushes us by its great weight, leaving us mangled by the roadside while it disappears on down the highway.” — James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 3:1098.
- v. 6 “Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth”
 - Compare this to the situation of Daniel in the lions’ den (Dan 6:16–22).
 - Cp. Psalms 22:21; 35:15–17; 58:6.
- v. 7 “escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper”
 - The words of verse 7 and a picture of a bird flying free from a fowler’s net appear on an old Huguenot seal.
 - Cp. Psalms 91:3; 140:5; 141:9; Ecclesiastes 9:12.
 - See 1 Peter 4:19.
- v. 7 “we have escaped”
 - Note the chiasmatic arrangement of this verse.
 - The declaration is emphatic: “**WE** have escaped.”
- v. 8 “Our help is in the name of the LORD”
 - Cp. Psalm 121:2.



- French Protestants used to commence their services with this verse. John Calvin seems to have begun this practice in Strassburg and Geneva. He “chose it because he understood that this declaration said the truth about the congregation gathered for worship as well as any one sentence could.” — James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 397.
- Three significant truths based on this declaration:
 - ✓ “Our” — the help we receive from God is personal. It our very own, not someone else’s. It always fits our circumstances.
 - ✓ “help” — we are helpless in so many situations and must depend upon the Lord. God provides all that we might ever need.
 - ✓ “the LORD” — our sufficiency is in God alone (2 Cor 3:5–6). The arm of flesh will fail us—no matter whose arm it might be. God alone is dependable and able to accomplish all that we might need. See Romans 8:31.
- v. 8 “Who made heaven and earth”
 - See Psalms 121:2 and 134:3 and cp. 115:15.
 - As the Creator, God is eminently qualified to intervene in the affairs of men and the processes of nature to deliver His people.

4.0 Singing Psalm 124

“If God Had Not Been on Our Side”

(Tune: “The Doxology”)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 If God had not been on our side
And had not come to aid us,
The foes with all their power and pride
Would surely have dismayed us;
For we, His flock, would have to fear
The threat of men both far and near,
Who rise in might against us.
If God had not been on our side.</p> | <p>2 Their furious wrath, did God permit,
Would surely have consumed us
And as a deep and yawning pit
With life and limb entombed us.
Like men o’er whom dark waters roll,
Their wrath would have engulfed our soul
And, like a flood, o’er-whelmed us.
If God had not been on our side.</p> |
| <p>3 Blest be the Lord, who foiled their threat,
That they could not devour us;
Our souls, like birds, escaped their net,
They could not overpower us.
The snare is broken — we are free!
Our help is ever, Lord, in Thee,
Who madest earth and Heaven.
If God had not been on our side.</p> | |



— Words: Martin Luther, 1524

5.0 **Praying Psalm 124**

- Thank You, Father, for being with us in all our trials. [v. 1]
- Lord, help me keep my head above the “raging waters” of life. [v. 5]
- How I praise You that I have been set free from! [v. 7]
- O God, You have made heaven and earth, yet you care for me. [v. 8]

6.0 **Applying Psalm 124**



- God’s help in a time of need is personal and timely.
- The Creator of heaven and earth cares for His people.
- God alone accomplished our salvation and freedom from our sin.

We speak our words of praise in a world that is hellish; we sing our songs of victory in a world where things get messy; we live our joy among people who neither understand nor encourage us. But the content of our lives is God, not man. We are not scavenging in the dark alleys of the world, poking in its garbage cans for a bare subsistence. We are traveling in the light, toward God who is rich in mercy and strong to save. It is Christ, not culture, that defines our lives. It is the help we experience, not the hazards we risk, that shape our days.

— Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 69.