

The distress of the human condition (Ps 123) is followed by the certainty of the Lord's deliverance. The psalmist guides the sojourner in a thanksgiving psalm of praise. He graphically describes a litany of pilgrim dangers from ravenous beasts ready to swallow them alive, to a raging torrent threatening to sweep them away, and finally to a clever fowler's snare poised to trap unsuspecting victims. The psalmist wants us to pay attention. We are in danger from human attackers who are as threatening as wild animals, raging torrents, and hunting traps. We need the Lord on our side if we expect to make it.

Psalm 124 is an antidote to the naive optimism that refuses to see the real dangers facing the people of God. We should not be surprised by evil and its threat to swallow us up, sweep us away and stop us in our tracks. Doctors treat cancer. Police officers deal with crime. And Christians confront evil in its vast complexity and painful intensity. We have been briefed. The dimensions of evil are defined and understood. Evil is parasitic. It plays off the good. It is a pathogen, robbing health from life. Evil is a malignancy. It is the insanity of a sane mind. Evil is the love of hate and the hate of love.¹ But we have not only been warned, we have been comforted. Christ has conquered evil. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart!" Jesus said. "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The Lord Is For Us

*If the Lord had not been on our side –
let Israel say –
if the Lord had not been on our side
when people attacked us,
they would have swallowed us alive
when their anger flared against us;
the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,
the raging waters
would have swept us away.*

Psalm 124:1-5

To claim that the Lord is on our side may seem presumptuous at first blush. There are instances of spiritual arrogance throughout Israel's history. For example, the prophet Isaiah reported, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). Yet in this case it is not a question of arrogance but of gratitude. The language is reminiscent of Joshua's surprise encounter with a man near Jericho. The stranger confronted Joshua with his sword drawn and ready to do battle. "Are you for us or for our enemies?" Joshua asked (Joshua 5:13). "Neither," the man replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." At this, Joshua "fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, 'What message does my Lord have for his servant?'" The commander of the

¹ Webster, Follow the Lamb, 135.

Lord's army replied, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy'" (Joshua 5:14-15). The experience recalls Moses and the burning bush. In the conversation that followed the Lord gave Joshua the specific strategy for taking Jericho. Joshua realized that it was not a matter of the Lord being on his side as if it was his battle, but of Joshua and Israel being on the Lord's side. For the battle belongs to the Lord (1 Sam 17:47). Far from implying presumption, the psalmist acknowledges with deep gratitude Israel's total dependence upon the Lord. He credits their very survival to the saving deliverance of the Lord. Clearly the psalmist's claim of divine support did not imply that Israel had a waver from suffering and danger. The battle is the Lord's and the Lord is on their side. They are in the thick of it and the Lord will deliver them from destruction, but not from danger. Courageous dependence is the order of the day – everyday.

"Oh, let Israel say!" has the ring of an joyous exclamation – the shared conviction of the people of God as they press forward in confidence on a journey filled with unknown challenges. The psalmist calls us to join our voice, our will, our faith, with his in a corporate confession of faith.² The apostle Paul's conviction corresponds to Psalm 124 when he asks, "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" The apostle points to the ultimate proof of God's deliverance, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" With Christ Jesus himself at the right hand of God interceding for us, what have we to fear? Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" No one can condemn us because of Christ and nothing can separate us from Christ. But the apostle clearly states that all those in Christ will face a barrage of threatening realities: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and death. As he says, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom 8:36; see Ps 44:22). However, this stark reality is met with undaunted courage. "For I am convinced," declared Paul that not "anything in all creation, will be able to separate us form the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

Blessed be the Lord

*Praise be to the Lord,
who has not let us be torn by their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird
from the fowler's snare;
the snare has been broken,
and we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
Psalm 124:6-8*

² Motyer, *Journey: Psalms for Pilgrim People*, 59. Motyer's summary of what it means for the people of God to say, "Oh let Israel say!" is worth quoting: "They are 'Israel', those whom the Lord adopted as his firstborn son (Exodus 4:22), the people of the blood of the Lamb (Exodus 12:12,13), the Lord's pilgrims (Exodus 12:11). They are our forebears in grace, and we who are 'Israel' in Christ (Galatians 3:29; 6:16) inherit and rest on the Israel promises of God. Those who are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:4-8) are given the guarantee of being eternally safeguarded. It was for us he gave his only Son, and with him he freely gives all things (Romans 8:32), including the unailing presence of the unchanging Jesus (Hebrews 13:5-6,8)."

The reason given for blessing the Lord has nothing to do with religious ritual and tradition and everything to do with deliverance from death. Salvation is described in graphic life and death terms. The Lord has kept us from being torn apart by predators or snared in a trap. We have escaped the clutches of our enemies because of the Lord's deliverance. The motivation for praise lies in the extremity of the crisis and in the severity of the escape. Only those who know that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23) can enter into this praise. Only those who know that they are as good as dead in their trespasses and sins, but because of God's great love they are made alive in Christ (Eph 2:1,4-5) can truly hear the imperative, "Blessed be the Lord!" If we think cancer is insidious, sin is all the more. If we think AIDS is awful, sin is worse. Until we realize in our heart of hearts that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8) we will never really appreciate the compelling nature of blessing the Lord.

The substance behind the invocation to bless the Lord lies in a singular truth: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Ps 124:8). In the first deliverance psalm, the psalmist makes a similar statement (Ps 121:2). The only addition in Psalm 124 is the reference to the "name." The name of the Lord God stands for his character and actions. Far from being a nameless, impersonal force, the God of creation chose to be known by his covenant relationship with specific individuals. His name, "I am who I am," being synonymous with righteousness, majesty, power, wisdom, and deliverance. Nothing more needs to be said. His name alone is all the credential that is needed and then some. Who better to be our deliverer than our creator. But wait there is more: "You shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33). There is a striking parallel between the name of the Lord God in the Old Testament and the name of Jesus in the New Testament. Our Creator is also our Redeemer. "Salvation is found in no one else," declared the apostle Peter, "for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The imperative to bless the Lord is dearly welcomed by all those who have been delivered from sin and death. The sojourner makes her way to Zion with the deep assurance that the Lord is on her side.