

It Could Have Been Worse

A Sermon on Psalm 124

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Theme:	God will not allow his people to be consumed. We can live confidently in the knowledge that God is our great Defender.
Subject:	Persecution, deliverance from enemies, confidence in God.
Doing:	Praising God for his protection and deliverance from overwhelming enemies and odds, inspiring confidence in God's people as a result.

I. INTRODUCTION

It was raining pretty hard as my friend Tim and I drove along the six lane expressway into the heart of New Orleans. We were on our way to hear a jazz musician, trumpet player Maynard Ferguson, perform at the Hilton Hotel. We were running a little late and, because it was a Friday and the traffic was steady, Tim, who was driving, was getting a bit frustrated. So, he decided to speed up, even though the conditions were pretty poor.

As we came over the top of a rise in the expressway and started down the other side, we hit a patch of water and oil, and started to skid and spin out of control down the center of the highway. After about three or four revolutions, we came to a halt in the center lane, on the down side of the hill — facing the wrong way! We were horrified. It was the worst possible situation. In the lanes on either side of us, cars zipped past, and I can remember staring up the center lane at the hill, just waiting for some 18-wheeler to come barreling over the hill.

But nothing came. We sat there waiting for a break in traffic, and still nothing came. My heart was pounding, we were both frightened. Finally, after what seemed an eternity there was an opening on our left and Tim quickly whipped the car around and we continued on our way, shaken up pretty badly, but alive and well. We didn't say much after that. Both of us were still trying to figure out how we had gotten out of that one alive.

That incident would have to be one of the most frightening experiences of my life. I'm sure many of you could say that you too have been in situations where you were in great

danger and then, at the last minute, when it looked like it was all pretty inevitable, something happened and a disaster was averted.

That sort of situation, and those sorts of feelings, are similar to the feelings and situation captured in this Psalm as the writer remembers the ways in which God had provided for his people. He had rescued them from certain disaster, time and time again. That experience — God’s people endangered and God’s people delivered — will be the focus for our time this morning.

II. BACKGROUND

We’ve been working our way through the psalms of ascents — Israel’s road songs during the annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem. We looked at Psalm 123 and saw that it was one which might have been sung at any point in the journey, and which expressed the situation of God’s people as they endured the ridicule and contempt of those around them. It was a sort of verbal persecution which they had to put up with as people ran them down and mocked them for their peculiar faith.

This week we look at Psalm 124 which has a similar theme, but with the significant difference that in this psalm the people of God are not dealing with mere ridicule and contempt, but are actually remembering the times when God’s people, including themselves, had been in actual danger, surrounded on every side by their enemies. You see, it is very likely that as they made their way to Jerusalem, and endured the jeers and stares from passers-by, they were reminded of the general hostility that seemed to be the lot of God’s people and, with it, the continued acts of deliverance that God performed in the midst of that hostility. So, their experience during the journey reminded them of the experience of God’s people in general. Thus, they sang.

III. FIRST MOVE

With a series of images, the psalmist is depicting the experience of being in very real danger, under attack, and trapped by one’s enemies. As we have seen, his intent is not only to communicate the mere fact of being in danger, but also the feelings of terror that went along with the experience.

- A. The psalmist admits from the very beginning that it is only because of the Lord’s intervention that the people of God have been spared from the evil intentions of others. “If the Lord had not been on our side,” then all sorts of bad things would have happened:

1. They would have been swallowed alive (so to speak). In this image you get a picture of an angry crowd closing in around God's people, swallowing them up, as it were.
2. They would have been swept away, like the person caught in a raging flood whose feet are knocked out from beneath her, being swept along, helplessly, desperately grasping for things, trying to find something to cling to, feeling the strong currents begin to pull her under.
3. They would have been torn to bits by the cruel teeth of some ferocious beast.
4. They would have been snared by a trap, as if a rope had tightened around their ankle, preventing their escape.

All these things and more would have happened, had it not been for the Lord's intervention.

- B. Yet, alongside the images of being attacked, surrounded, and caught in a flood, and snared in a trap is an image of release. The psalmist speaks about the people of God being caught like a bird in a fowler's snare, and then being released as the trap breaks and the bird finds its freedom once more. Israel escaped in the same way, as the Lord delivered her from the snares and traps which had been set for her over the years.
- C. Certainly this was something which had been demonstrated repeatedly in the history of Israel — delivered from the hands of Pharaoh, delivered from a number of different nations by the various judges, David himself (to whom this psalm is attributed) had seen that deliverance a number of times as he was pursued by Saul. Even after Israel's great sin and the resultant exile, they were eventually delivered and brought back to the land in circumstances which were nothing short of amazing.

Certainly God's people in the Old Testament had repeatedly found themselves in great, great danger. And yet, just as truly, they had also found themselves to be guarded and protected by a God who was more than faithful. Many had tried to wipe them off the face of the earth, but all these enemies had failed.

IV. SECOND MOVE

When we look ahead into the New Testament era, we find that the reality of God's people being endangered and therefore in need of deliverance and protection has not diminished in any way. In fact, Jesus himself spoke about these very things to his own disciples:

- A. *Luke 21:10-18*: Clearly, it is Jesus' own expectation that his disciples and the church he left behind were going to be a suffering church, a church that would be opposed, whose people would be imprisoned and persecuted, whose people would be hated, possibly by some of their own flesh and blood.
- B. And yet, just as in Psalm 124, we can see within these same verses the realities of God's presence, protection and intervention on behalf of his people:
 - 1. *Luke 21:12b-15*: They will be captured and surrounded by their enemies, and yet there, right in the midst of them, they will experience the provision of God as he gives them the words to say, words that cannot be resisted or contradicted.
 - 2. *Luke 21:16-19*: Even more pointed are these words later in the chapter. They will be betrayed and persecuted by their own friends and family. Some will be put to death. They are told, "All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life." Amazing! Some will be put to death, and yet not a hair of their head will perish. How can Jesus say these things?
 - 3. Well, you have to remember that the providence and deliverance of God, indeed all of his actions, are made from a perspective that is much greater than our own. Our perspective is limited by what we know (which isn't much), by what we can see (which isn't very far), and by our experience of life on this side of the grave (which is not all that wonderful). The fact that Jesus is operating from an eternal perspective means that Jesus can say to his disciples, on the one hand, that some of them will be put to death by the enemies of God, and on the other hand, that not a hair of their head will perish and that by standing firm they will gain life. To lose one's life is not the end of the story, from Jesus' perspective — to lose one's soul *is*.
 - 4. Another important thing to keep in mind here is that God is dealing with his people not merely individualistically, but corporately, as a

body, as a nation, as a people. If you look back at Psalm 124 for a moment, you will see that reflected clearly. The language used is not “I, me, mine,” but “us, we, our” — this is a nation speaking of the deliverance it has received as a nation. This is important because it is talking about the general experience of the people of God as a whole, not merely the isolated experiences of individuals. Sure, many individuals would have experienced God’s deliverance (like David), but also many would have suffered and would not have personally escaped hardship and loss and suffering. Still, the overall result for the people of God is that, as time has gone on, they have not been defeated, but have triumphed. They have not been weakened, but strengthened. Their message has not been silenced, but rather promoted, further and further, and further again.

Jesus words, which reflect so well the themes of Psalm 124, are driven by both an eternal perspective and a corporate perspective on the people of God.

- C. So, the remembrance of danger and deliverance in the Old Testament is now echoed in the words of Jesus as he speaks of danger, hardship, and yet also of God’s provision, protection and deliverance. And as you read the Acts of the Apostles, it is interesting to see how these realities are demonstrated in the unfolding story of the early church.

Very early on, you see someone like Stephen, in Acts 6 and 7, who is used by God in a great way, but who doesn’t last very long before he gets knocked out of the picture. And yet, while Stephen’s life was not spared, God clearly used his death to effect the spread and scattering of many Christians throughout Judea and Samaria. Also, it’s very likely that Stephen’s death and Saul’s participation in it played a role in the conversion of Saul not too long afterward to the Christian faith.

When you look at the Apostle Paul, you see that his personal experience was not like Stephen’s. Many were the times that he was in great danger and was delivered by God over and over again. They were not successful in silencing Paul, at least not for a long time.

Yet, the reality is that both these individuals, as well as others, protected, guarded and delivered the church as a whole, even in the face of many who would have loved to see it fall. It is instructive to see the way in which God has, through the years, woven differing individual experiences into the one

common reality of a church that has continued to grow and expand and spread across the face of the earth.

V. THIRD MOVE

If you have spent any time at all reading about the early history of the church, particularly the first three hundred years, then you know of the very many and great persecutions that were launched against the people of God.

- A. In A.D. 64 there was a great fire in Rome — 10 of 14 sections of the city were burned to the ground. The people blamed Nero, who was rumored to have lost his mind. Nero couldn't shake the rumours and so, seizing upon the fact that the Christian sections of town were among the few that did not get burned, he laid the blame for the city's tragedy on the Christians, and thus started a persecution. Tacitus, a historian of the day, wrote,

“Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people. Some were dressed in furs, to be killed by dogs. Others were crucified. Still others were set on fire early in the night, so that they might illumine it.”

- B. In A.D. 80 emperor Domitian, out of respect for the Roman Religion, persecuted the Christians, instituting strict laws against them and the Jews since neither would worship the Roman gods, etc. For this reason the Christians were declared to be atheists — because they would not worship these other gods. During this period of persecution, the Revelation of John was written.
- C. In A.D. 111 Pliny the Younger from Bithynia (northern shores of modern Turkey) required that the Christians: 1) pray to the Roman gods; 2) burn incense before the image of the emperor; and 3) curse Christ. If they did this, he let them go. If they did not, he killed them. Not surprisingly, many people were killed.
- D. In A.D. 155 Polycarp, an early and influential Christian, was arrested. Gonzalez¹ writes of Polycarp,

¹Gonzalez largely quotes and paraphrases *The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna Concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp* (ANF, v. 1, pp 39ff.).

“The proconsul who presided at his trial tried to persuade him, urging him to think about his advanced age and worship the emperor. When Polycarp refused, the judge ordered him to cry: ‘Out with the atheists!’ To this Polycarp responded by pointing to the crowds of Roman spectators around him and saying, ‘Yes, out with the atheists!’ Again the judge insisted, promising that if he would swear by the emperor and curse Christ he would be free to go. But Polycarp replied, ‘For eighty six years, I have served him, and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?’

“Thus the dialogue went on. When the judge threatened him with burning him alive, Polycarp simply answered that the fire the judge could light would last only a moment, whereas the eternal fire would never go out.”

- E. That’s how it was. The assaults on God’s people were relentless and ruthless. It was like standing at the sea shore and being battered by wave after wave. The people of God too were battered as wave after wave of persecution washed over them.
- F. Yet, as the enemies of God realized far too late, all their savagery against God’s people backfired on them in at least two ways. First of all, the average people — as they watched the abused and humiliated Christians, and saw how they did not respond with violence or retribution but seemed to go almost calmly and with anticipation to their deaths — many of the people watching all of this were quite moved by what they saw, and became Christians themselves. In fact, for every one person that was killed, perhaps two or three more might pledge their allegiance to Christ as a result.

Secondly, it backfired because the harder the Christians were pursued, the more they spread and infiltrated other areas. It was like the person who discovers a fire in the bush and tries to beat it out with a branch. In the process, he scatters embers and coals everywhere so that after a while there is no longer just the one fire, but twenty fires, with more popping up all around. Such was the effect of the persecutions on the early church. The harder they pursued it, the bigger it became.

- G. Clearly, the experience of Psalm 124 was mirrored in the early centuries of the church where they were surrounded by angry men and women, attacked on

every side, swept along by a flood of persecution and hatred as wave after wave of violence was visited upon them. You wouldn't have thought that anyone could have survived such intense hatred. You wouldn't have imagined that anything could be left after three hundred years of such persistent, systematic assault. But God's Word is true. And the church that emerged on the other side of those three hundred dark years was stronger, deeper, more pervasive, and had become absolutely indestructible. You wouldn't have thought it could survive, but it did. In fact, it did more than survive — it thrived.

Certainly, many individuals lost their lives, as Jesus said would happen to his church. Yet, they did not lose their inheritance, nor did they perish. And certainly, part of the reward for their faithfulness must come in the knowledge that God has worked even through their personal tragedy to defend, promote and establish the church as a whole, to deliver his people as a whole from the hunter's snare.

VI FOURTH MOVE

These realities do not remain far removed from us, locked away in the early days of the church. Even in our own lifetimes we have seen the way in which God's people continue to be endangered by almost certain destruction, and then delivered by God.

- A. Probably one of the most prominent examples is China. For years and years, Christians around the world prayed and prayed for the country of China, that God would move and work in that barren place, and that a true revival would break out in the small and struggling Christian church there. Then, after years and years of prayers to that effect, the result was that a man named Mao Tse Tung came to power and immediately, as one of his first actions, booted all the Christians out of the country. There's an answered prayer for you!
- B. Now, to the uninformed observer, it would appear that God had abandoned his people, that he had ignored their prayers. But nothing could be further from the truth. To the eye of faith which understands something about God's faithfulness to his people, there was more going on than meets the eye.

Mao's efforts to eradicate the true faith were a dismal failure. Before Mao Tse Tung, it was estimated that the number of Christians in China was about three to four million, among a huge mass of humanity. After Mao, it was estimated that there were about 40 million Christians in China. Along with the pilgrims

of the Old Testament, along with the disciples and apostles, and along with the brothers and sisters in those first three centuries of the church, alongside all of them stand the Chinese Christians for whom the song of Psalm 124 is once again a contemporary song. They too can sing, “If the Lord had not been on our side . . .” They too can sing, “Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth.” They too can sing, “Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

- C. God will not allow his people to be consumed. You need to be confident in the knowledge that God is your great Defender — with the greatest example of that being the cross of Christ — and that there is nothing that arrives on your doorstep which has not first passed through his hands.

When you are tempted to think that the situation of the church in the world is getting desperate, that hope is fading, that the world is winning, then you also need to remember that God has a track record of faithfulness that stretches for thousands of years, as far as the eye can see. The testimony of Scripture and the affirmation of history is that God is able to preserve and protect and guide and grow his church, no matter what, no matter where.

There will be hardship. There will continue to be suffering. Individual Christians will, from time to time, pay the ultimate price for their allegiance to Christ. You may pay that price some day. Or your children may. But you will be guarded, even in that. You will not perish. You will not be overwhelmed, and the church will not be overwhelmed. God’s church will always stand.

We cannot lose. We cannot fail. We are the people of God.