

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Psalm 124:1-8

*"Deliverance"*

"If the LORD had not been on our side..." we would never have made it. That is the cry of relief, the word of praise, of the pilgrims who have reached the sanctuary of God. The Psalm was made part of the "The Songs of Ascent" to be used as a song of communal praise - you can hear the words of the cantor calling the gathered people of Israel to repeat after him: "Now let Israel say - If the LORD had not been on our side... when men attacked us, we would have been overwhelmed, we would have been swept away."

Perhaps the words fitted the experience of the pilgrims on the long and hazardous journey up to Jerusalem. Undoubtedly they reflect the experience of Israel as a nation throughout her history. Originally, this Psalm being one of the older ones, and attributed to David, the words probably reflected his experience as king over a small nation under constant attack from her neighbors - most likely, the commentators tell us, the fierce and frequent attacks of the Philistines in the early days of David's reign (e.g. 2 Sam 5).

1) *Blessed Be The LORD*

The words have, of course, resonated for Israel down through the ages - and still do

today for observant Jews. They have meant something for believers in every generation: for the Church of Jesus Christ as well as for Israel, and for individual believers as well as for the gathered church of God. "If the LORD had not been on our side..." we would never have made it to the place where we are today. So "Praise be to the LORD," or in more familiar Jewish terms, "Blessed be the LORD" - *Baruch Atah Adonai...*

As the Apostle Paul says, "It is by the grace of God that we are what we are" (1 Cor 15:10). It is only because he said "I will be your God, and you will be my people" (Ex 6:7, Jer 30 :22), and helped us at every point of our pilgrimages, that we are here today with the measure of health and wealth and strength and faith that we have. We have been delivered from many perils by the strong hand of God guiding us, protecting us, and - on more occasions than we know - freeing us from the traps we had wandered into.

David uses powerful metaphors for Israel's troubles from which the LORD graciously delivered them. When men attacked us, he says, it was like being inundated by a flood. Without the LORD " the floods would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept

us away." Picture, if you will, the flash floods that tear down the dry wadis of the Middle East after sudden rains; or the surge of a tsunami coming ashore, or the unstoppable power of the ocean when the levees are breached. It is frightening, it is overwhelming, nothing can stand in the way of the waters - except the LORD God, the Maker of heaven and earth!

If water doesn't scare you, perhaps a stronger metaphor is the image of a predator of such size and ferocity that it can swallow you in one gulp: "they would have swallowed us alive." Think *Jaws*, as the shark fisherman slides into the mouth of the Great White! Or maybe some smaller predator that tears victims with his teeth - a lion, perhaps? These are violent images, and they are heaped one upon another to make a point - that it is no small deliverance that the LORD has effected; that Israel, the Church, believers like you and me, have escaped from destruction "by the skin of our teeth;" that deliverance was what one commentator describes as "a close call" (Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ In The Psalms*).

But notice also the less violent metaphor, but one no less deadly. God's people were like "a bird in a fowler's snare" who have been given a way of escape. The snare has been broken, the trap released, the net torn open. Like a bird, we have been freed from a snare that we had fallen into. This is a more subtle attack on the people of God than violent men; this is a hidden trap that believers fall into. The image of the "snare" or trap is used often in the OT to describe the subtle effects of sin. It is evil at work against God's people, and no less dangerous than outward attack, but it is less obvious.

*Proverbs 29* describes a man who is "snared by his own sin," and gives examples of how that happens - corrupt rulers who make their people revolt, companions of

prostitutes who squander their wealth, bribe-takers who pull down the establishment they are defrauding, foolish speakers who stir up people's anger, people who listen to lies and so cannot govern properly. Actions have consequences, which are not always immediately obvious! Biblically, wisdom consists in discerning the hidden dangers and traps, in foreseeing the results of decisions, in dealing with the realities of the world and not with fantasies.

*Proverbs* tells us that lying is a snare, debt is a snare, adultery is a snare, idolatry is a snare. Biblically, a snare is a moral danger hidden beneath what looks attractive or appealing or harmless on the surface. You could, I am sure, multiply examples for me from modern life of things that look good, seem harmless; things that everyone does, that advertisers or the government urge you to do, but are in fact snares that can entangle your whole life, and even your very soul. *Proverbs'* examples of lying, adultery and debt are still perfect examples!

"Praise be to the LORD" who delivers us from the attacks of violent and unbelieving men, and from the snares of sin.

## 2) *Who Is Delivered?*

God's grace is shown in the way he has delivered and preserved his people, down through the ages of Israel's history, in times of great persecution and corruption for his Church, and in each of our lives if we are people of faith.

Israel was delivered from the pagan tribes of Abraham's day, the Egyptians who treated Israelites as slaves, the Canaanites who threatened the new arrivals in "the land of milk and honey." Israel was delivered from the Philistines, the Ammonites, the Moabites. She was delivered into the hand of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, but

rescued and returned to her land. She was protected by or from the Persians, the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans.

If you believe that there is continuity between the Israel of old and the modern state of Israel – that, as Paul says in Romans 11, “the gifts and call of God are irrevocable” – then you will suspect, as Jews today certainly would claim, that “if the LORD had not been on Israel’s side” she would never have made it this far. That does not, that cannot, translate into blanket approval of every action of the government of Israel; nor does it take account of the fact that the same promise of God’s help is rightly claimed by thousands of Palestinian and Lebanese *Christians*. As Abraham Lincoln said of the Civil War in this country, “both sides prayed to the same God.”

But here is the claim: God helps his people, he delivers them from the attacks of the unbelieving world and from the snares of sin. So the Church of Jesus Christ has held onto these words through the centuries. It is perhaps hard for us in the USA in 2006 to grasp how nearly overwhelmed the Church has felt in other places and times. But between 500 and 1000AD, when pagan Gothic tribes and the advance of Islam swept Europe into what were later called “The Dark Ages,” Christian faith was almost destroyed, except in a few secluded monasteries and far-away Celtic outposts. When in the 1500s the corruption of medieval Catholicism was at its peak, people like the Reformer John Calvin looked out with alarm at “the state of religion in the whole Christian world brought nearly to ruin.”

In post-revolutionary France in the late 1700s and 1800s, in China for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. under Communism, in England and Germany and Scandinavia today, the

condition of the Church of Jesus Christ has been dire. If the Church has escaped destruction, it has been “a close call.” We do well not to be complacent as American Christians, thinking it can’t happen here, because the forces of unbelief that have ravaged Europe are at work here too.

Even if we do not sense today a danger to the Church as a corporate body and community (though some Roman Catholics do), I suspect that as individualistic Protestants we are more likely to sense the dangers to us and to our families! You and I and our children and grandchildren are under attack from external forces of unbelief and godlessness, and are constantly seduced by temptations that seek to entangle us in sin like a net. If your beliefs are strong enough to affect all of your daily life, you know how often they come into conflict with the world around you. The ethics of workplaces, the priorities of educational systems, the values of peers, the direction of the nation – they can and they do all impact negatively on people who want their lives to center on faith and family.

Spending big, freely expressing ourselves sexually, admiring fame, telling people what they want to hear, are insidious temptations that our culture tells us are completely normal and even admirable. When terrorists destroyed the Twin Towers, our leaders said “Get into the city and shop, or they win! Don’t let the terrorists disrupt our way of life, because that’s what they hate and that’s what they’re attacking!” Really? They want to stop us shopping? Beware the snares that our culture lays out, invisibly, in our paths. Excessive debt, illicit sex, outrageous lies, disguised idolatry are as prevalent and dangerous today as when *Proverbs* was written. But the Word of the LORD is that God *delivers* his people from such things! “If the LORD had not been on our side...” But he was, and is, and the trap has been sprung, the snare is opened, the net cut, and we are

free! "We have escaped like a bird!" We do not have to act as though we are bound by the lies, the seductions, the threats. We are free from the net! Pray God we will remember it!

There is one more "layer" to peel from the words of Psalm 124. It has often been said that a spiritually profitable way to read the *Psalms* is as though they were the words of Jesus, "the true Israelite." Then *he* is the one who is threatened by vicious men; he who is almost overwhelmed and swept away, almost swallowed whole and alive. But "the LORD was on his side," and he was - finally - delivered. He was trapped in the snare of sin and death, but he was set free; the trap of the grave was opened, the snare Satan laid for him was broken, and he escaped; he is free!

And so his followers, who are united with him by faith, have ever since been delivered from far worse dangers than they knew: the dangers of death and hell. He who is now exalted as "the Lord" delivers his people from attacks by the world and the devil, he delivers and frees his people from the trap of sin. It was "a close call": his people were almost overwhelmed, tied in a snare that could drag them into hell, but Jesus the Lord delivers his people from these evils.

"If the LORD had not been on our side..." But he was, and is, and always will be! So we will not be inundated, we will not be entangled, to the point of destruction. We may be knocked over by a wave or two, or snared for a time, but the Lord is our deliverer, and we will be free! Jesus went through suffering and death to set us free. We may, like Jesus, like the pilgrims, like David, go through tough times - but we *will* make it to the sanctuary of God because "the LORD - YHWH, the Savior of Israel - is on our side."

Let us pray...