

Call to Worship Romans 8:31-37

So what are we going to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

He didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Won't he also freely give us all things with him?

Who will bring a charge against God's elect people? It is God who acquits them.

Who is going to convict them? It is Christ Jesus who died, even more, who was raised, and who also is at God's right side. It is Christ Jesus who also pleads our case for us.

Who will separate us from Christ's love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

In all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. So we have come, to praise our God.

The Word

Psalm 124

A pilgrimage song. Of David.

If the LORD hadn't been for us— let Israel now repeat!—

**if the LORD hadn't been for us, when those people attacked us
then they would have swallowed us up whole with their rage burning against us!**

Then the waters would have drowned us; the torrent would have come over our necks;
then the raging waters would have come over our necks!

Bless the LORD

because he didn't hand us over like food for our enemies' teeth!

We escaped like a bird from the hunters' trap; the trap was broken so we escaped!

Our help is in the name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.

Living the Word

The journey to Jerusalem for Passover and Easter continues. It is a walk of many miles for those who would make the trip. Most of the steps are uphill and not easy. Those who journey are of all sizes and shapes, all ages and speeds. All are Jewish, a few are Christ followers. They all go to be at the Religious Temple to remember and to celebrate God's story of how the Creator of all people, saved his people from slavery with the help of Moses and Aaron.

That happened centuries before David wrote the Psalms, some of which, including Psalm 124, were especially used at this time every year as they moved as a people up the hills to Jerusalem. Centuries after David made the journey and sang the Psalms, Jesus was born into a Jewish family and he, also grew up making the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover.

His final trip was with the disciples, who knew this trip wasn't going to be the same as former years, for Jesus had been telling them that he had to suffer and die on this trip. Even so, they must go to the city. Large

groups of families traveled together, shared meals and songs, stopping as needed and so all could get there by the appointed time.

Several weeks ago we prepared to go with them, on this trip. Last week we began the journey with prayer and trust. This week we move forward up the hills, pausing to look back at where we have been, and who that makes us now and for the future.

"If the LORD hadn't been for us— let Israel now repeat!— if the LORD hadn't been for us." David writes this to remind us to look back at where we have been – where we have come from. Then he says 'don't just look at where I've been - but look for yourself, see who brought you out safely and repeat that thought until you don't forget.'

We need the Lord. Even before we realize it God is already working for our good; saving us from ourselves and others. Picking us up when we fall and holding us up when it seems we can't continue. I have often heard people in crisis say "How can anyone get through this stuff without a faith in God?"

We need to remember that we need the Lord. The Holy Spirit sends us reminders often. When you pay attention, the Spirit is working with you as you go. I always start my week by reading the scripture for the next sermon, and so I did last Monday.

When I got home from work, I had China on my heart as the beginning spot of the Corona Virus. I went to check the latest updates that report their virus numbers going down. This quote then came before me: "Always remember where you are going and never forget where you've been." (Confucius).

He was an influential Chinese philosopher, teacher and political figure known for his popular aphorisms and for his models of social interaction. It was forward thinking, while acknowledging the past... That was pretty close to what I had been rolling around in my head all day from Psalm 124. Some of the Holy Spirit reminders we receive, are much more obvious than others.

My dad was the fourth child, the second son in his family, his baptism name was Charles, but the family all called him 'Sonny.' When I asked him about his childhood memories, one of the things that really stood out for him was at age 4, when he had Scarlet Fever. He almost died and his memories weren't good ones.

He especially remembered that he was in the second story window overlooking the one-acre front lawn where all of the neighbor kids regularly gathered for sports and games. He could watch them having fun, but he wasn't allowed to go out and join them. Then he said – "I did get well. I don't remember that part as much, but here I am..."

He didn't mention it, yet I knew his family and his church, and I know they were prayers and praying hard for him to get well at that time. I can just imagine all of his aunties sitting with his mother in the dining room downstairs, praying, asking Jesus to heal 'little Sonny' upstairs.

We need to remind each other that we need the Lord. How often have you started a conversation with family or friends around a table that began with "remember the time?" In David's age, and in Jesus' age the stories were told, not so much read. It was called the oral tradition and the scriptures, the Psalms, the histories were repeated word-for-word, so nothing would be lost.

When the scriptures and stories began to be printed on a printing press in multiple copies, it made them more mobile. In 1620, the English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon indeed wrote that this invention "changed the whole face and state of the world".

Since the printing press we have become lazy about memorization. We try to just say the words enough times to remember them. Before the press, they were told over and over, within the stories of their lives with God until everyone just knew them. Today, it is even worse: we have so much information coming at us, that we spend more time deciding what is worth reading and less and less even reading the whole message.

When we, the body of Christ, witness at the baptism of babies, who have to depend on us to teach them God's stories, we then make a covenant with those children that we will mentor them and nurture them in the Christian faith and life. Remember their names: even if they are not present here now, they are still a part of our family in some way. Pray for them, ask about them, pause to remember their names...

Verses 3-5 basically says – 'without the Lord in our life situations, we wouldn't have made it.' God is there, if we acknowledge it or not. But isn't it fascinating when you can actually identify God working in your life journeys? The Holy Spirit travels your journeys with you, looking for opportunities to bless you. Sadly, we miss a lot of what is happening for our benefit because we are often focused in another direction.

Verse 6-8 Praise God – There is joy in knowing that we never face the hills and mountains of life alone. We can be thankful even in the steps through muck and mire, because the Spirit is still there, especially there, and we are kept from drowning.

The author of this Psalm was no stranger to conflict and trauma. Yet, even at a young age he faced conflict and trauma, head on, literally! Still a boy, he faced Goliath with a slingshot and a few smooth stones. It may have been the confidence of his youth combined with a good skill with the weapon, but most of us first knew this future king through his bravery in the Goliath story.

David wrestled with even more powerful enemies, living under King Saul's jealousy, separated from his close relationship with Saul's son, Jonathan, who was like a brother, he had to flee to be safe. The mental anguish of knowing love turned sour, is a mental battle for those who experience it. No skilled shot with his sling could fix this. Still, David became King after Saul, and later made his own kingly errors. Yes, David had lots of life journeys to look back at as he wrote his Psalms.

When we are caught in tricky mental games of life, times of broken love, or betrayal, the best place to begin to heal is by looking back and saying "*If the Lord hadn't been for us...*" and then look up and onward as we keep marching within the crowd of all who support us as we go.

That is what Jesus and the disciples did. When Jesus was on his last journey with His disciples up that hill to Jerusalem, singing this psalm with them, he must have been getting very quiet about now. Knowing that this psalm was written also for him, a vision was beginning to appear before him stronger and stronger.

He could see himself being surrounded by those ferocious enemies who wanted to swallow him up quick, for even now the soldiers began to gather and the rulers were even now assembling themselves against Him. The false witnesses were already now being prepared, and already He was beginning to feel the humiliation and torture to come as his enemies there jeered at Him and beat Him.

How important it must have been for Jesus, sitting there resting from the walk, to repeat this psalm ending with : "*We escaped like a bird from the hunters' trap; the trap was broken so we escaped! Our help is in the name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.*"

As the journey continued, on the hot dusty road stepping up and up, it would be easy to get tired of the walk, tired of life's battles, hot and dusty and tired. So they repeated the songs to find the power and encouragement that was in the words, and remembering not only their own battles that they had overcome, but the battles of Moses and David and all who had walked this same path to Jerusalem.

They stopped to catch their breath, looked back down the road that they had come and in looking back saw that not all of their travels had been easy ones. Not all of their wounds had healed. For the disciples, apprehensive of what was ahead, they looked back, yet, having seen miracles of lives changed and given the challenge personally to have the courage to 'go and do likewise.' They could remember and face the road ahead. Jesus had taught them to trust, to have faith, to keep moving forward through it all. They could then take another step and praise God for the past and whatever was to come.

Travelers on a journey – we all are. We walk the same path. Often in life there are dusty hot hills that seem to push us backward rather than forward and we have to look back at how we have survived thus far and how we can make the summit, stopping to catch our breath and then continuing to move through it all.

For us, today we need to look back and remember our journeys, but to look back even farther and be aware that the Scriptures are an ancient gift from God. When people take a journey, they might also take a walking stick, especially if they are going uphill. As we prepare and go on our journeys, the Word of God can be something solid for us to hold on to as well, if the journey is uphill or just looks like smooth sailing... Psalm 124 is a good one to take.

That must be quite a scene coming down over Mt. Olivet, looking toward the city of Jerusalem. High hills all around the city, and then a valley – the valley of Kidron – and then another hill, Mt Zion, in which the city of Jerusalem sits. When that wall was around Jerusalem, there was no way anyone could get in unless they were invited.

Psalm 125 is another good one to carry with you. Also a pilgrim's psalm, it begins and ends with these words: "*The people who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion: never shaken, lasting forever. Mountains surround Jerusalem. That's how the LORD surrounds his people from now until forever from now! Peace be on Israel!*"

Even when we have already packed for one journey, often the next journey requires repacking as we pause to remember what we really needed on the last trip. "Faith in God – Don't leave home without it..."