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A Look at the Darkness in the Light of God's Grace

Psalm 124

Many are familiar with the expression, "The Banality of Evil." It comes from Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

The word “banal” means common, ordinary, or trivial. Accordingly, the “Banality of Evil” speaks of how so often in the world we can become so accustomed to evil that we no longer view it as strange or even a threat.

How we need to hear this! For though we live in a dark land, that doesn’t stop us from becoming incredibly comfortable in this darkness...

Romans 13:11a, “And this *do*, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep...”

15 Words of Exhortation for Christian Pilgrims

1. **Psalm 120:** We must ensure that the burdens of this life drive us to Christ.
2. **Psalm 121:** In our burdens, we must know that God will never abandon or forsake us.
3. **Psalm 122:** In Christ our identity is that of a worshipper who exalts in the character of God.
4. **Psalm 123:** The love/mercy of God is that which buoys us in life!

In this regard, Psalm 124 was placed in the Songs of Ascents to wake us up and so face reality, specifically that this world is NOT our home and therefore we must NOT get too comfortable here.¹ To press this upon us, David chose a moment of serious darkness and looked at it from six different angles.² Notice the context.

The Context, vv. 1-3a.

Psalm 124:1-3a, “‘Had it not been the Lord who was on our side,’ let Israel now say, ‘Had it not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us. Then they would have swallowed us alive...’”

As this is a Psalm of David, the only historical event which matches the context of this Psalm — of men both “rising up” in opposition against David as well as seeking to “swallow God’s people alive” — is when the Philistines attacked Israel right after David was installed as King.

2 Samuel 5:17-18, “When the Philistines heard that they had anointed David king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to seek out David; and when David heard *of it*, he went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines came and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim.”

David/God thwarted this attack which led to yet another attempt on the part of the Philistines at crushing Israel.

2 Samuel 5:22, “Now the Philistines came up once again and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim.”

You have to understand both of these attacks were serious. David became king on the

heals of a “civil war” in which the followers of Saul battled against David and those who supported him for two years. And just when David thought that peace had been restored, the strong Pentarchy of the Philistines (the combined armies of the five Philistine Lords) attacked Israel with the sole purpose of destroying David and so God’s people. Commenting on this, Joyce Baldwin wrote:

The valley of Rephaim is within sight of Jerusalem, among the precipitous hills to the south-west of the city... the Philistines were attacking at the point where David’s kingdom was arguably at its weakest, for this was an area which the Israelites had not been able to hold, and David had not yet had time to build up his defences. Furthermore, this northern border of Judah was adjacent to Benjamin, the tribe from which Saul came, and from the enemy point of view it made good sense to exploit any uncooperative elements in David’s newly extended kingdom. (Baldwin, 2008, p. 217)

Now while God eventually brought about victory, that did NOT mean that going through this was an easy thing for David and the people of God. Look at the text again.

Psalm 124:2-3a, “Had it not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us; THEN they would have swallowed us alive...”

That is, “swallowed us whole.” This speaks of limited or no struggle in which an animal doesn’t even have to chew in order to consume its prey. That’s how weak and vulnerable God’s people were at this time, and David knew it! In this regard, this Psalm is reminiscent of the words of our last Psalm.

Psalm 123:4a, “Our SOUL is greatly filled with the scoffing of those who are at ease...”-

Recall, to have one’s “soul greatly filled” speaks of a burden that rattles a person to their core! That was David in Psalm 124; that was Israel!

Yet how long would it be before God’s people forgot the trials and difficulties that were suffered in establishing the Kingdom of Israel? The cost? The danger of allying oneself with the worldly kingdoms surrounding Israel? Knowing the tendency of our heart, David knew it would NOT take long. And so, with this Psalm David set out to describe the true nature of the threat this world poses to the child of God.

[The True Nature of the Threat this World Poses to the Child of God, vv. 3-8.](#)

[It is as a Man-Eating Beast, v. 3.](#)

Had it not been for the Lord, this world:

Psalm 124:3a, “Then they would have swallowed us alive...”

The picture here is a beast so large that it doesn't need to chew to consume its prey.³ What animal would come to mind in this regard? The only animal which God's people at this time would have been familiar with is a lion. They really don't chew their food. After ripping off the flesh they swallow it whole. In this regard, imagine living in a land where lions roamed freely — how dangerous to be alone in the open for any length of time.

That is how we must think of the world in which we live. In fact, what ultimately is in mind here is the threat Satan and his unholy angels pose to the lone-ranger Christian.

1 Peter 5:8, “Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

That is an apt description of the world in which we live. At any place or time, we are but a moment away from being “swallowed alive”! Now, if that doesn't sober you, consider the next word picture — that of a water surge.

It is as a Water Surge, v. 4a.

Psalm 124:4a, “Then the waters would have engulfed us...”

The picture here is of quickly rising flood waters. This past year, Hurricane Ian hit Naples, FL where Janet's parents have a second-floor condo close to the beach. At first, they could see rising water in a distance. Yet in short order the first floor of their condo was inundated with an eight-foot-high water surge! Imagine living in one of the ground units, watching the water rise. Talk about scary, you'd drop everything and head to the upper floors.

Once again, that ought to be our response to the world in which we live. It is NOT a friend of grace. Darkness is such that it can rise upon us quickly, engulfing us!⁴ If we are NOT careful, we will drown in its banality! And yet, God gives us another image, that of a flash flood.

It is as a Flash Flood, v. 4b.

Psalm 123:4b, “...the stream would have swept over our soul.”

In college I took a geology class which included a study of water in the form of glaciers, lakes, and rivers. I recall the professor describing the danger of walking up a dry riverbed in the mountains. She warned against it, as a massive storm in the next valley

unseen by the hiker could produce a fifteen-foot-high wall of water whose speed would be so great that it could overcome the hiker before he could get out of the riverbed. James Boice wrote put it this way:

Sometimes our 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... (Boice, 2005, p. 1098)

And so, the image is of the pilgrim being overcome by a wall of crushing water. We must see that this is darkness of the world in which we live. This Psalm pictures our Christian life as a walk up a dry riverbed with a massive wall of water bearing down on us! Beware! It will feel like you got hit by a truck! Now if that was not enough, David compares the struggles of this life to one facing a tsunami.

It is as a Tsunami, v. 5.

Psalm 124:5, "Then the raging waters would have swept over our soul."

This brings the previous water images to a crescendo. Do you remember the tsunami that hit Japan 12 years ago? I still have videos of the massive wall of water that hit the coast and literally bulldozed everything in its path- cars, houses, and even concrete buildings! It is so sad to see the people who looked like dots running in vain away from the massive, raging water!

What would you do if you learned one day while eating dinner that a massive tsunami was headed your way? That's the point of the Psalm before us. We must understand: the burdens of this present world are approaching each one of us. They are about to crash upon us like a massive tsunami. Is your soul ready? Recall the words of Samuel Rutherford:

Look for crosses, and while it is fair weather mend the sails of the ship.
(Rutherford, 1997, pp. 92, Letter XXX)

Have you mended your sails? Are you ready to endure the coming affliction intent on trusting God in and through it all? Yet David is NOT finished, we are dealing with a carnivore with sharp teeth.

It is as a Carnivore with Sharp Teeth, v. 6b.

Psalm 123:6b, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us to be torn by their teeth."-

With this we are back to the image of a lion. But now, the victim is almost consumed

such that the lion is left to gnaw on a bone in order to consume the final remains. This is what King Darius expected to see after sending Daniel into the lion's den in Daniel 6. What a graphic picture: an animal grinding away on a carcass!

Yet we must understand that that is what this fallen world wants to do to us at any moment. Though the mantra is "peace and safety" (1 Thessalonians 5:3) such that we might be tempted to be lulled to sleep, let us not forget the final thought of Psalm 120, "I am *for* peace, but when I speak, they are for war." Finally, David compares the burdens of life to a bird caught in a snare.

It is as a Snare, v. 7.

Psalm 124:7a, "Our soul has escaped as a bird⁵ out of the snare⁶ of the trapper;⁷ the snare is broken and we have escaped."

Though this is praising God for His deliverance, don't miss the metaphor. David pictures the Christian's life as a bird caught in a net. That which sticks out with this allusion is the subtlety of the trap. The bird doesn't see it. As it flies close to the ground between the trees or tall grass, one moment they are free and the next they are caught!

How many Christians live here? As long as their felt needs are met, they are happy in the world. Yet, like the birds pictured in this verse, their carefree life is taken away in a moment when trial comes. And again, let us NOT be mistaken, trials are coming! So, lest we become ensnared with worry, grief, and even anger and bitterness, let the words of Psalm 124 sober us such that we prepare for the day of trouble.

What is the point and so the focus of this Psalm? This world is NOT our home — that is David's point! As much as we might think or even live to the contrary, because we are children of God, we always are in hostile territory in a world which seeks to devour us! Accordingly, let us heed the many warnings.

1 John 3:13, "Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you."

Recall the exhortation that Peter gave:

1 Peter 4:12a, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you... as though some strange thing were happening to you."

Solomon gave this warning over 2,800 years ago,

Ecclesiastes 5:8, "If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight..."

From this you must see that the objective of this Psalm is to give the child of God.

A Wake-Up Call, vv. 1, 2.

Psalm 124:1-2a, “‘Had it not been the Lord who was on our side,’ let Israel now say, ‘Had it not been the Lord who was on our side...’”

As you know, David wrote this and all his Psalms for use in the worship of God.⁸ We see it clearly here. Our Psalm was written to be utilized by a worship leader (known as a Cantor) and a congregation of God’s people. The Cantor would have begun with the first statement, “Had it not been the Lord who was on our side”. David then envisioned that the congregation would then “thunder out”⁹ the words of this Psalm, “...had it not been the Lord who was on our side when men rose up against us; then they would have swallowed us alive...” (vv. 2-3a). That meant that the six images which David used to describe life in this fallen world would have been proclaimed NOT by the Cantor BUT by the congregation by which they would warn themselves six times NOT to view this world as their home!

Didactically this was a wise move on David’s part. We can hear a warning over and over such that the sound of the warning disappears. But if we are forced to repeat the warning over and over, there is a much greater chance that we will face up to it! That is what is going on here.

- Repeat after me, six times: “This world is a treacherous place which at all times is seeking to consume us.”
- If we will repeat this every day, multiple times a day — in other words, if we learn this Psalm such that we sing it from our hearts — maybe in time we’ll accept it and so live in this world as God intends...

James 4:4b, “...do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?”

1 John 2:15a, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world...”

Romans 12:2a, “And do not be conformed to this world...”

That is the focus of Psalm 124. Now, while the message no doubt is shocking and sobering, we must NOT allow it to fill us with fear or regret. For David was careful to record this message such that it might lead us to praise.

The Call to Worship, v. 6a.

Psalm 124:6a, “Blessed be the Lord...”

This is a call to praise the Lord. The word is בָּרַךְ (baruk) which is one of

many words in the Bible calling the child of God to worship. Yet, that which makes this word distinct is that it is the opposite of the word for “vanity,” “emptiness” or “lightness” (לָלַל [qalal]).

The idea is that we are to do far more than simply proclaim God’s praise with our mouths; RATHER, we consider His character, attributes, and promises and then live in light of them as we face the burdens of life. When we do that, we will be worshipping the Lord NOT ONLY on Sunday, BUT all the weeklong.

Recall, this is where the English word “worship” came from the Anglo-Saxon root of “worship” is “worth-ship” which speaks of a life lived in light of the greatness and glory of God!¹⁰

And so, against the bleak setting of this Psalm — where David wants us to understand that at any moment we might be caught, captured, or killed by this world- we are called to equip ourselves by gazing upon and so appreciating at all times the character of our God!

When we do that, the result will be praise in the midst of the trial — which is one of the Main Themes of this Psalm: “If it had not been for THE HELP OF THE LORD, then we most certainly would perish!”¹¹

This brings us to the final stanza and the basis of the call to worship. Notice it is twofold, the immediate reason.

The Immediate Reason, vv. 6b, 7.

Psalm 124:6, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.”¹²-

Again, the imagery here is vivid and violent, of an animal chewing on a carcass. Yet God won’t allow this to happen when it comes to His children. That is NOT to say that we will be immune to physical attack or pain. Christ Himself said these things:

John 16:33b, “...in the world you have tribulation...”

Matthew 10:28a, “And do not fear those who kill the body...”

Yet it is to say that with every Burden set against us, God will deliver us! It is as David wrote in Psalm 34.

Psalm 34:19, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all.”

It is as Christ said in Matthew 10.

Matthew 10:28b, "And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul..."

So yes, the world might attack and destroy our bodies; BUT God will always protect our souls.

Psalms 124:7, "Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper; the snare is broken and we have escaped."

Truly, while we will encounter trial, tribulation, and difficulty in this world as Christians, yet we have the assurance that our life in Christ will be unharmed. For nothing "...shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39)!

In the immediate realm, we live our lives unto the praise and glory of our God because that which is of any value is protected and secure in Christ! Yet there is another, more profound reason for our worship.

[The Ultimate Reason, vv. 1a 2a, & 8.](#)

Psalms 124:1-2a, "'Had¹³ it not been the Lord who was on our side,' let Israel now say, 'Had it not been the Lord who was on our side...'"

The language here reflects the fact that there are two opposing sides in this world AND God has chosen our side to love, care for, and protect! Incredible!

John 15:16a, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you..."

Ephesians 1:4b, "...He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world..."

Christ said:

John 18:9b, "...of those whom Thou hast given Me [this implies a choice on the part of God the Father] I lost not one."

Do you understand? Though currently we are aliens and strangers in this world such that we expect to be harshly treated, attacked, and persecuted, nevertheless God in Christ is on our side such that we know...

Romans 8:28b, "...all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."

I hope you see how special this makes us! In explaining this D. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote:

Take a child who has many toys, all of which he likes. Yes, but there is one particular favorite, the toy that is always with him. The child is fond of them all, but that one is something special... That is the idea- that the great Lord of the universe has a special object of interest and affection- His own people, those whom He has taken and, as Paul puts it in writing to the Galatians, separated out of this evil world and put into a special category and compartment. That is the whole message of the Bible- God preparing for Himself a people who are going to be His joy throughout eternity. (Lloyd-Jones, 1988)

And because of this, David closed out this Psalm with these words:

Psalm 124:8, "Our help is in the name [character] of the Lord,¹⁴ who made heaven and earth."^{15,16}

We have another Merism here, God made the "the heavens AND the earth" by speaking a word. Accordingly, when it comes to helping His children, we know that God will bring His creation power to bear upon our individual lives!

That being said, what is the nature of the "help" God provides? The word is עֶזֶר (*ezer*) which speaks of military assistance!¹⁷ In other words, the picture here is of a Divine Warrior whose strength and power — that which God used to create the world — are now directed to our help, protection, and care!

So truly, let us lay aside all ignorance and delusion and so NOT be surprised by suffering. This world is NOT our home. It is poised to destroy the man or woman who would seek to serve the Lord.

Yet, let us profess this truth gazing NOT at the waves, BUT upon our Lord and Savior who has overcome the world! If I were to summarize the teaching and use of this Psalm in our lives, I would use the words with which Habakkuk closed his prophecy after hearing of the certain trials that were coming upon God's people:

Habakkuk 3:16-19a, "I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise *who* will invade us. [Yet how ought we to respond? Psalm 124 would say, "In faith, trust, and hope!"- which is exactly how Habakkuk responded...] Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, *though* the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. [How so?...] The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*, and makes me walk on my high places."

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End Note(s)

¹ “We are like Peter, who would have fallen away and been lost if Jesus had not interceded for him. Jesus told Peter, ‘Simon, Simon, Satan has desired to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers’ (Luke 22:31–32). It is hard to miss seeing that in these words Jesus does not call Peter by the name he gave him: Peter, meaning ‘stone.’ He uses his former name to call attention to his weakness. Peter thought he was strong enough to stand by Jesus no matter what might happen, but when the time of testing came he denied Jesus three times. Peter would have fallen away completely as a result of his failure and humiliation were it not for Jesus’ prayers for him. But Jesus did pray, and later he also came to Peter to recommission him for service.” (Boice, 2005, p. 1099)

² “Historians have pointed to a powerful moment when a group of saints sang Psalm 124. In 1582 a Scottish minister named John Durie was imprisoned for preaching the gospel. When he was later released from prison, a few hundred of his congregants met him at the gates of the prison and began walking up the street in Edinburgh. That group of people began singing Psalm 124. Soon, about two thousand people joined in the song. One of his persecutors witnessed this moment and said he was more alarmed by that sight and song than anything he had ever witnessed in Scotland (in Ligon Duncan, ‘Our Help’). This song has given strength to saints for years. It should give us strength as well. It’s our story. The Lord has delivered us from our greatest imprisonment, and he also delivers through other smaller trials on this earth. Marvel at what he has done. Let the marvel lead you to praise.” (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 204)

³ “The first is of some monster large enough to need only one gulp at its prey (alive is, of course,

the meaning of 'quick' in the familiar AV, PBV)." (Kidner, 2014, pp. 472-473)

⁴ James Boice wrote, "The flood is a frequent figure in the Old Testament for sudden life-threatening dangers (see Pss. 32:6; 66:12; 69:1-2; 144:7; Isa. 8:7-8; 28:17; 43:2; Lam. 3:54), and with good reason. In the dry, rugged mountains of central Palestine the cracks and gullies of the hills are all connected so that any rain falling on the hard-baked soil quickly runs off and collects into wadis, where it can rise to dangerous heights in just a few minutes." (Boice, 2005, p. 1097)

⁵ "A bird caught in a snare is another common metaphor for danger in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. In the famous Taylor Prism inscription, the seventh-century Assyrian king Sennacherib boasted of King Hezekiah, 'He himself I shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city.'" (Nancy L. deClaissse-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 908)

⁶ "Rowland E. Prothero records in his valuable volume *The Psalms in Human Life* that there is an old seal, still in existence, that was 'once the property of a Huguenot refugee, which bears as its device a net below, and above, a bird soaring upwards.' It has as its text the words of verse 7, 'My soul is escaped even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler.' This Huguenot refugee, who came in time to America, knew that he had been delivered from the snare of his fierce enemies by God alone." (Boice, 2005, p. 1099)

⁷ "Most vividly of all, the last metaphor presents the ordeal as one that had been already far advanced, with the enemy's grip a present fact, his army already in a dominating position (cf. 2 Samuel 5:18)." (Kidner, 2014, p. 473)

⁸ "Psalm 124 has a strong poetic and repetitive quality, suggesting that it was meant to be recited liturgically in a worship setting. The opening words of the first two verses, *if not*, followed by the opening words of the next three verses, *then*, act as strong repetitive devices. The use of vivid images, repeated in successive verses- water, devouring sea monsters, and fowler's traps- adds to the psalm what Clifford characterizes as 'swiftness and drama.'" (Nancy L. deClaissse-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 472)

⁹ (Kidner, 2014, p. 472)

¹⁰ "C. S. Lewis said, 'The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight in God which made David dance' (*Reflections*, 23). Yes! Deliverance should make us dance with joy! Allow this psalm to feed your delight in the Redeemer." (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 204)

¹¹ "David begins by acknowledging the people's absolute need for the Lord's deliverance in redemptive history. He doesn't want the people to misinterpret the events. The victory wasn't owing to the people's strength and strategy but to the Lord's salvation. The people couldn't save themselves... Clearly the psalmist knows that apart from the Lord's gracious activity, the people would have been destroyed. The Lord protected them from all sorts of dangers and enemies." (J. Josh Smith, 2022, pp. 203-204)

¹² "'Blessed is the Lord who has not given us as food for their tongues (*lāšôn*).' *Tongue* in v. 6 echoes the individual lament of the pilgrim in Psalm 120, who is on the way to Jerusalem and is traveling through a foreign and hostile land and cries out to the Lord to deliver *from the lip of falsehood, from the deceitful tongue (lāšôn)*" (120:2)." (Nancy L. deClaissse-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 908)

¹³ "Verses 1 and 2 both begin with *if not (lûlê)*, forming the protasis of vv. 1-5. *Lûlê*, however, is only used in Hebrew to express an unreal condition. The psalm-singers are confident that the Lord is on their side." (Nancy L. deClaissse-Walford (Author), 2014, p. 907)

¹⁴ "David's example, in looking to the Maker, not to things made, seems to have inspired a later pilgrim (121:2); but the mention of the name may be an echo of his own Psalm 20:7, where this invisible aid is shown to be more real and more potent than the most advanced equipment of the day. It is the lesson of the whole psalm." (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, TOTC, p. 473)

¹⁵ "Job Orton (1717-1783) reported in the late eighteenth century that the French Protestants always used this verse to begin their public worship." (Boice, 2005, p. 1100)

¹⁶ "It has been said that Calvin used this verse to open the worship services in Geneva (Duncan, 'Our Help'). Like Calvin, we can see its simple, timeless relevance to the people of God." (J. Josh Smith, 2022, p. 205)

¹⁷ "The matter of military assistance is seen in the familiar eschatological passage of Isa 63:5. God in his wrath and vindication against the nations has no human assistance. He looked about for human aid but finding none, he consummated the day of vengeance himself. There was no human instrument as God had used on other occasions. While some have seen the redemptive

work of Christ in this passage, it is not likely. A more likely counterpart in the New Testament is the defeat of the beast in Rev 19:11 where again the military character is clearly seen in Christ's work of judgment." (R. Laird Harris, 1999, pp. 660-661)