

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “God is on Our Side” (Psalm 124)**

**September 27, 2009**

I love road trips. I love getting in my truck or van with a cup of coffee, some chocolate, and CD’s with music for the road, knowing that I have a long drive in front of me—a great combination. Choosing CD’s for the drive is one of the best parts about getting ready for a road trip--some U2, Springsteen, Elton John, some Brian Regan for laughs and Mozart for culture--yes, an eclectic mix ☺. For me, no road trip is complete without the proper tunes. One of my favorite movies, *Elizabethtown* (2005 film with Orlando Bloom and Kirsten Dunst) climaxes with a classic road trip sequence, complete with a moving soundtrack.

Songs for the road are nothing new. Today I’m preaching from an ancient song for the road, Psalm 124. Psalm 124 is one of the “Psalms of Ascents” or “Gradual Psalms,” “one of the fifteen psalms (Psalms 120 through 134) that were recited or sung by Jews while walking to Jerusalem for one of the major annual feasts. Each year Jews would ascend the roads to Jerusalem in the early spring for the Feast of Passover, the early summer for the Feast of Pentecost, and the autumn for the Feast of Tabernacles. Psalms 120 through 134 were their songs for the road.

Psalm 124 is a beautiful song that reminds us of something we often forget: God is on our side.

God is on our side.

Psalm 124 begins by reminding us twice that God is on our side: “If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel now say; if the Lord had not been on our side...”

As you know, it’s easier to believe God is on our side when things are going well in our lives, when we’re feeling blessed by God. But it doesn’t stop there, because the good news is that God is on our side when things are not going well. God is on our side *especially* when things are not going well. As I heard preached once, “God’s office is located at the end of your rope.”

The greatest difficulties in our lives can often be attributed to either people or circumstances.

Psalm 124 mentions both:

“If the Lord had not been on our side, let Israel now say; If the Lord had not been on our side, when enemies rose up against us; Then would they have swallowed us up alive in their fierce anger toward us; Then would the waters have overwhelmed us and the torrent gone over us; Then would the raging waters have gone right over us.”

Sometimes people in our lives rise up like enemies, including ourselves, as there are times when we are our own worst enemy. And there are other times when we are overwhelmed by circumstances that simply happen. As Psalm 124 demonstrates, there are times in our lives when

we feel swallowed up by other people, or by our own mistakes, times in our lives when we feel like we're drowning—drowning in sorrow or sickness or despair or debt or any number of things. At times we find ourselves overwhelmed, in situations that are bigger than us, situations in which only God can help.

Psalm 124 meets us in that place and reminds us that when we are dealing with difficulties brought about by people or ourselves or circumstances, God is on our side.

Eugene Petersen, best known for his translation of the Bible entitled *The Message*, wrote a book on the Gradual Psalms (Psalms 120 through 134) entitled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which includes a helpful chapter on Psalm 124. Listen to what he says about Psalm 124:

“Good poetry survives not when it is pretty or beautiful or nice but when it is true: accurate and honest. The psalms are great poetry and have lasted not because they appeal to our fantasies and our wishes but because they are confirmed in the intensities of honest and hazardous living. Psalm 124 is not a selected witness, inserted like a commercial into our lives to testify that life goes better with God; it is not part of a media blitz to convince us that God is superior to all the other gods on the market. It is not a press release. It is an honest prayer” (p. 75).

Psalm 124 is an honest prayer, and reminds us that no matter how difficult our lives become, God is on our side.

Christians, like everyone else, often deal with suffering. It's always been that way. The early church was no stranger to suffering. Paul's Letter to the Romans was written to Christians who were undergoing persecution at the hand of the Romans, for at that time Christianity was not recognized or tolerated in the Roman Empire. When Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans the Roman Emperor was Nero, who ruled from 54-68 A.D. The notorious Nero killed his mother, killed his wife, killed his stepfather, and killed his unborn child to keep his power—and he didn't stop there. After the great fire of Rome in July of 64, Nero fixed the blame on Christians and set about on a massive persecution, killing many Christians in the process. The famous Roman historian, Tacitus describes the deaths of Christian under Nero:

“Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired” (Tacitus, *Annals* XV, 44).

And yet, as Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans, in spite of their suffering, God was still on the side of the Christians. Listen to what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome suffering persecution under Nero:

“If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:31b-32, 35, 37-39).

In fact, Paul was himself eventually beheaded—and he has seen that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ, because God is on our side.

It is when things are hardest in our lives that we need to know God is standing by us, that God is on our side. Often our lives are not so much a long obedience in the same direction, but a long *disobedience* in the same direction. And yet that doesn't stop the love of God. God still stands by our side.

In 1961 Ben E. King wrote the classic song, *Stand By Me*, for the doo wop group, The Drifters, but The Drifters passed on it and so Ben recorded it himself. It's beautiful and powerful song (on my iPod too). You may know these lyrics by heart:

When the night has come  
And the land is dark  
And the moon is the only light we'll see  
No I won't be afraid, no I won't be afraid  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

If the sky that we look upon  
Should tumble and fall  
And the mountains should crumble to the sea  
I won't cry, I won't cry, no I won't shed a tear  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

*Stand By Me* expresses the longing that we all have to not be alone, especially when times are hard, the longing that we all have for someone to stand by us, to be on our side.

If we fast-forward about thirty-three years after *Stand By Me* was released, we hear another song along these lines, the 1994 hit by The Pretenders, *I'll Stand By You* (also covered by Carrie Underwood a couple years ago—and yes, also on my iPod ☺). This song answers the longing expressed in Ben E. King's *Stand By Me*, as Chrissie Hynde sings:

When the night falls on you, you don't know what to do  
Nothing you confess could make me love you less  
I'll stand by you

The gospel is in this song, because God in Jesus Christ has shown all of us that He stands by us, that nothing we confess could make Him love us less.

In Psalm 124 we see that not only is God on our side, ultimately He will deliver us from all the hard times in our lives, those caused by people, including ourselves, and those caused by circumstances that we didn't see coming. Psalm 124:6 says: "Blessed be the Lord! He has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth."

Indeed, God "has not given us over to be a prey," because God the Son, Jesus Christ, was "given over" for us. Each year Jesus walked the roads up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts, and surely recited or sang the Psalms of Ascents, including Psalm 124, as he did so. In Luke two we read of the twelve-year old Jesus walking to Jerusalem with his family for Passover. A little over twenty years later Jesus walked these same roads with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. It's likely that again He recited or sang these Psalms, including Psalm 124, as He did so.

And after the Last Supper, Jesus willingly gave Himself over in our place. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, Jesus "gave himself for our sins to set us free;" and as Paul wrote to Titus, Jesus "gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity" (2:14).

This summer my wife and I rented the film, *Taken*, in which Liam Neeson stars as a retired CIA operative who rescues his teenage daughter who has been abducted in Paris and kept to be sold on the black market as a bride for the highest bidder. One of the most moving parts of the film is when Liam Neeson is on cell phone with his daughter, who is hiding under the bed trying to elude the kidnappers in the apartment. He tells her she will be taken, and asks her to leave her cell phone on so he can hear it happen and try to gain some clues. Neeson listens from across the Atlantic as his daughter is abducted by the kidnappers, who find her under the bed—it's a heartbreaking scene. Fortunately, of course, he rescues her in the end.

God "has not given us over to be a prey," because Jesus Christ gave Himself over in our place—and God the Father watched and listened as Jesus Christ was given over on our behalf, taken by the Roman authorities—mocked, beaten, humiliated, and nailed to a cross. And because Jesus was given over in our place, as Psalm 124 reminds us not once but twice, "we have escaped:" "*We have escaped* like a bird from the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken and *we have escaped.*"

Jesus gave himself over to death on the cross because God is on our side, and because God is on our side even death is not the end of the story. Psalm 124 tells us, "If the Lord had not been on

our side... (our enemies) “would... have swallowed us up alive.” But God is on our side, and as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, even death, the last and greatest enemy is swallowed up in victory:

“Death has been *swallowed up* in victory... thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54b and 57).

Finally, Psalm 124 ends by reminding us once again that God is on our side: “Our help is in the Name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.”

The One who created us, “the maker of heaven and earth,” is on our side. God is more powerful than our enemies, whether other people or when we ourselves are our own worst enemies. And God is on our side.

God is more powerful than the biggest difficulties in our lives, and in His time He will deliver us.

We will not be given over because Jesus was given over in our place. God is on our side.

God will stand by us.

Nothing we confess will make Him love us less.

Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God, because God is on our side.

So perhaps on your next road trip you’ll remember Psalm 124, an ancient song that reminds us that God is on our side.

Let us pray...