

“Except for the LORD”
An Exposition of Psalm 124

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“The trap broke and we escaped”
Ps 124:7 (JPS)¹

Some of us have been trapped by refractory circumstances at one time or another. Just when we think we most need our freedom, in God’s providence we have been able to say, “The trap broke, and I escaped.”

That’s where we are in today’s text, Psalm 124, where the first words, “Except for the LORD,” give us God, the One who is there, the God of redemption and provision. The psalm also introduces us to the world where we live, a world where there are sides, and itemized threats, and yet, a world where God cares for us faithfully. These are the realities that will occupy us as we open ourselves to the Spirit and the Word.

¹ This paper is an exposition of Psalm 124, so you should have the text of that psalm open as you read because the exposition more or less follows the movement of ideas within the psalm, namely: (1) Sides: who are they? (2) Anger: whose and why? (3) Two images: torrent-talk and trap-talk (4) The trap broke (5) Jesus: the trap broke (6) Paul: God is for us.

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1. The Sides

First, the text implies that our world has sides. “Except for the LORD,” it says, “who was on our side.”² What or who are on those sides?

The English translation, “the LORD was on our side,” goes clear back to the 1500s³ and has maintained itself right down into the NRSV, but the Hebrew simply says, The LORD was “for us”—*lanú*. We start there: to whom does “us” refer?

The psalm is addressed to those identified as “us.” “Let Israel now say,” it says. That’s us. We are Israel, the church. We are Jacob, the redeemed who gather in loving loyalty around God’s self-disclosure, around the unveiling of himself at Sinai, around the revelation that comes down from above to guide and shape the people of the covenant. We are those who say, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Exod 19:8; 24:3; JPS). And we are also those who gather around the crucified and risen Christ, that is, Jesus of Nazareth, God-with-us fully God, and God-among-us in full humanity.

And the other party? The text says, God is “for us,” but it also says, “men rose up against us” and “their wrath was kindled against us” (KJV). This seems to be a binary text. Who are these enemies? What is the occasion of their anger?

Now, the Hebrew word conventionally translated “enemies” appears frequently in the Psalms. It’s there in Psalm 3:1, “O LORD, how many are my foes!”—almost the first words of the Psalter—and about a third of the Psalter refers to enemies; it would be no surprise if the 124th were still talking about them.

But the Hebrew here does not say “enemies,” it does not even say “these people” (as does the CEB). It says, *’ādām*, which is the OT’s best word for “a human being” and for “all people, humanity.”

² All translations are from the ESV unless otherwise indicated.

³ My reference is to Miles Coverdale and his 1535 translation.

It is a word almost identical to the word for “ground”: Gen 2:5, 7 says that there was no *'ādām* to work the *'ādāmā*, so, the Lord God formed *'ādām* from the dirt of the *'ādāmā*. Earlier translations from the PBV through the RSV and NIV just translate it, “men rose up against us.”

How should we understand these words, just here? I understand *'ādām* to denote human beings⁴ in their linkage with earth. Instead of following the light of the covenant, they only live within natural revelation, a flattened and earthbound dimension. Instead of receiving the gift of truth from beyond themselves, they limit their truth to what they can gather on their own. Instead of trusting in the God of Jacob, maker of heaven and earth, they trust in the son of *'ādām* in whom there is no salvation; they die and return to the *'ādāmā* and their plans perish.⁵

So, what I would really like to do is translate it this way:

Except for the LORD who was *for us*
when Adam rose up *against us*

Not Adam, the first human being, but Adam as the epitome of humanity who turns away from God, and from the things and people of God. I think of the glib sophistication of 1 Cor 1, the worldly wisdom that Paul sets aside by calling it foolishness. This is a way of living and thinking that is based on what is earthly and human, what is visible, what is of the natural order, existing entirely on its own level, without illumination from outside the material world, without the light of revelation. “Adam” means the world, the ordinary, human way of thinking.

2. Anger: At What?

⁴ The term is the subject of the plural verb “swallowed us” (*belā'annā*).

⁵ Ps 146:3–4.

So, Adam is angry at Jacob? We feel that hostility in ways large and small. In his book, *A Confession*, Leo Tolstoy writes about his own crisis of faith. He refers to two brothers on a hunting trip who were bedding down for the night. The younger, aged 26, knelt to pray as he had always done. When he had finished and was getting ready to lie down, his older brother said, “So you still do that.” Neither of the brothers ever spoke of it again, but Tolstoy says that the younger man never prayed again, never attended church again.⁶ We note how little it takes to dislodge an unexamined faith, but I am also interested in the existence of civilized hostility to Christian faith and practice.

We also see it on the widest scale, already in Scripture. God’s enemies “concoct crafty plans” against his very “own people.” Those enemies say,

Come on, let’s wipe them out as a nation!
Let the name Israel be remembered no more!
Ps 83:3–4 (CEB)

And, we live in a world where people are still saying these words!

3. Anger: Why?

And why is the world—or people within our world—still hostile towards God’s people? This psalm does not try to answer that question; it just cites the anger as a fact. I’ll give a few suggestions.

(a) Certainly, God’s people have sometimes behaved badly, even rudely, and we should not be surprised if that calls forth an unfriendly response.

⁶ Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), ch 1.

(b) And then, it's not unusual for resentment to form against excellence, whether it's physical, intellectual, or moral. An anecdote from the ancient world tells us that on the day that the Athenians were voting whether to expel Aristides the Just from their city, an unlettered man gave his ballot to someone in the marketplace and asked him to write on it the name Aristides. He did not know that he made his request of Aristides himself, who asked him, "What bad thing did he ever do to you?" The man replied, "Nothing. I don't even know him. But I'm tired of hearing everywhere, 'the Just, the Just.'"⁷

(By the way, Aristides was not a Jew, but he proved the annoying epithet correct by writing his own name on the unlettered man's ballot.)

The way of discipline and obedience easily provokes resentment. Jesus put it this way: the darkness hates the light (John 3:19–21). We remember how Chesterton says, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."⁸

(c) Scripture puts it even more strongly: there is evil in our world so deep and pervasive as to warrant the identification of an evil being who seeks everywhere that people should turn away from God into pursuit of prideful ways. The New Testament names him the *diabolos*, that is, the devil. Indeed, 1 John 3:8 notes, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (cf. Rev 20:10).

(d) But when you add to moral excellence the belief in God's unique calling, you raise further the provocation.

This is part of our faith. God called Abraham and his descendants to be part of a long plan and a large design. They are distinct among earth's peoples from that moment on, not just in self-

⁷ Alston Hurd Chase and Henry Phillips, Jr., *A New Introduction to Greek*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 79.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (London: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1910), 48.

understanding, but also in receiving the knowledge of God and his plan, and in writing down that story and those truths.

He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his rules
Ps 147:19–20

We make the same confession about Jesus Christ: in this man, God uniquely unveiled himself, living and teaching among us, and finally dying and rising. There was never such a man and we receive his gifts from him alone.

Herein lies the scandal of particularity with its outrage towards a plan that claims to be unique, which gives rise to disdain and resentment towards the plan—and therefore towards the people who live that life and tell that story. Christians do not hold that God *has done nothing* in the religious traditions of the world, but that in election, in Scripture, and in the Incarnation, he *has gone farther*.

This brings us to a second major point, and back to the text.

4. Psalm 124: Two Images

The psalm tells us that God is present with us, even *for us*—a presence that guards and sustains. It tells us this through two distinct figures expressing threat: catastrophic waters from which we are spared and the trap from which we are not spared. The one figure is massive, superhuman, and random; the other is specific, focused, and designed. The one is a tsunami, the other a sniper. The one sweeps away armies, the other snares a single bird.

Now, this is not a long psalm, but most of it expresses astonishment at something that did not happen. The main verbs of Ps 124:3–6 speak only of conditions contrary to fact (borrowing the language of classical grammar), “they would have swallowed us up alive.” They wanted to, they would have, but they didn’t.

At the heart of this first description are three parallel statements:

the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone the raging waters.

That is, we expect the floods to sweep people away together with property, to rise above the place where life and breath can continue, and to come in with irresistible force.

In recent years, we have seen all of this on the television news. Floods sweep cars away; I have even seen a school bus tumbled about by water, and houses lifted and borne away by endless rainfall. The psalm depicts massive and irresistible force. The rollers that engulf are indifferent to their effect, the waters that seethe are beyond control, the rivers that bury are impervious to appeal. These images come from the massive world of brute nature. This is torrent-talk.

I cannot linger long over these figures, which deserve individual exposition. The description here is fearsome and it gives reality to the cliché, “of biblical proportions.”

Trap-Talk

And then, these three lines are framed by two others that come from a different sphere of human life, namely, eating food. “Except for the LORD”—the psalm declares—

they would have swallowed us up alive (124:3)
The LORD . . . has not given us as prey to their teeth (124:6)

This figure elucidates the threat expressed by the floods in two ways. First, that threat is not just brute force, it is personal. The figure of chewing and eating brings human beings into the picture. And second, the threat is fatal. You might imagine someone cast up alive on the shore by a fluke of the floods, but no one survives having been chewed and swallowed up. This is trap-talk.

Torrent-talk tells us that God’s people can be mortally threatened by catastrophes that might even wipe them out, that other people are somehow present in those threats, but then it goes beyond this to tell us that *God does not allow these disasters totally to take place*. All of this *would have happened* to Israel, “except for the Lord.”

Trap-talk tells us that specific individuals and groups within the people of God can be targeted. This may be fatal as has often happened within the church over the centuries and such believers rejoice to be worthy to suffer for Christ as did Jesus’s earliest followers according to Acts 5:42—“rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (similarly, Matt 5:12; 1 Pet 4:13–14).

The great truth here is that God is committed to the church. He has a stake in it and is committed to seeing it flourish; he protects it. And there are occasions that fit this description—for one, he brings the Hebrews out of Egypt. Without that break, there could have been no formation of a people for God’s own possession—to escape from Pharaoh is that break. Yet, Israel gets no farther than the Red Sea and Pharaoh’s chariots are behind them. The threat is absolute, they are about to be swallowed alive, the seething waters will soon pass over them. All that hope, from Abraham to Moses, will come to nothing.

Except for the Lord.

And so, as Psalm 66:6 puts it, “they passed through the river on foot,” down that long passage, with the sea standing up on both

sides, the fish gazing through the walls like tourists at an aquarium (as in a cartoon I once saw). With their passage complete and Israel secure, the waters return and it is Pharaoh's soldiers who begin to wash up on the shore. Without God's intervention there, the whole plan for a people of his own would fail or must take another form.

The church is not just one more human institution. I suppose the conventions of sociology apply to it and it has trouble not taking on the character of the larger society in which it arises and finds its life. But it is also a divine institution: it has arisen through God's call and as a social organism it is formed in the image of the Holy Trinity. At the exodus, it might have been destroyed in a single cataclysm.

Except for the Lord.

The church has long since—indeed, already within Scripture—become too scattered to be destroyed in a single action such as this, but God will protect the plan and ensure that the church survives. He will keep it from obliteration in critical circumstances.

5. The Trap

Israel's rescue at the Red Sea and similar episodes (e.g., the destruction of Sennacherib's army in 701 BC in 2 Kgs 18:13–19:37) involve God's people as a whole or in great numbers and torrent-talk is suitable for threats to the church on a grand scale.

But the psalm moves on from torrent-talk to trap-talk. We can also be targeted. In that case, the trap is the better figure for our world. As Christians, we live *a life of continuing exposure* to those who do not know or do not choose the ways of revelation; we may even be at risk from them. In fact, Psalm 124:7 speaks twice of the trap, introducing us as much to the continuing history of tenuous interaction with the world as to a history of deliverance.

Trap-talk is about us as specific people within God’s plan and call and the trap is any action that harms us or impedes us from living out the life to which we’re called.

I know that Psalm 124 tells us that we have escaped a trap, but the texts all around it are not optimistic. Psalm 123:3–4, for example, in the last words before our own psalm evokes our fear of derisive language:

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those
 who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.”

And Ps 129:1–2, which has the same rhetorical pattern as Ps 124, says:

Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth –
let Israel now say –
Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth,
yet they have not prevailed against me.

From this, we see that the Psalter knows more than any individual psalm.

Not only this, but Paul’s famous passage in Romans 8:35–39 contains not one but two lists of obstacles in our lives as Christians. He mentions seven items, which include things like tribulation, distress, nakedness, peril, and sword. Then, he nails it down with the proof text, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long, we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered” (Rom 8:36). And then, he lists ten items, which include things like death, life, height, depth, and ends with “nor anything else in all creation” (Rom 8:38–39). Who can forget that ominous list of obstacles *over which God’s love is greater?*

Paul denies that any of these can truly stop us, but *he does make those lists!* God’s determination to maintain the church does not guarantee a life without hardship for believers. It may seem too obvious even to say, but the text says it very clearly: (a) if the torrents don’t arrive—the church is safe; (b) but the trap is there and God’s people are vulnerable. We live between safety and threat.

This fact is deep in Scripture, already in the Old Testament. Worldly kings of both Israel and Judah persecuted the faithful, and the entanglement of religious and political currents brought even prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah into mortal threat. Christian tradition speaks of Isaiah’s martyrdom under the Judean king, Manasseh, and from Scripture itself we know that during most of the last eleven years of Judah’s existence, Jeremiah was in prison. King Zedekiah once called him in for counsel and at the end of the discussion Jeremiah pleaded, “do not send me back to the house of Jonathan the secretary, lest I die there” (Jer 37:20).⁹

Judaism has lived out this faithfulness now for many centuries. As Shylock says in Shakespeare’s play, “The Merchant of Venice,” “Sufferance is the badge of all our race.” That word, sufferance, is not a synonym of “suffering,” but means rather, putting up with suffering. This derives from deep commitments of faithfulness to the God of Abraham.

Our text puts us on notice that God calls us, as Israel, to this kind of faithfulness, centered on Scripture and on the person of Christ. I repeat my definition of the trap: any action that harms God’s people or impedes us from living out the life to which we are called. We must ask God to strengthen us to live this life.

The church world in which I grew up even sang about it:

Are there no foes for me to face?

⁹ Cf. Jer 37:4, 16–21; 38:14–28. See also, “Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 143–76.

Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace
to help me on to God?

This is a hymn of Isaac Watts sung to the vigorous classical tune, “Arlington.” Our ancestors’ hymns often possess an extravagant rhetorical force now strange to the repetitiousness of modern praise-and-worship. We learned those words and we sang them.

Sure, I must fight if I would reign.
Increase my courage, Lord.
I’ll bear the toil, endure the pain,
supported by thy word.

6. The Trap Broke

The good news is the miracle of release, which the psalm states as an absolute fact. “We have escaped as a bird from the fowler’s trap.” This is where I started and I affirm that such marvelous deliverance does still happen to God’s people. I believe it even when I cannot lead you through the philosophical thickets of causation and coincidence that spring up; and I believe it even when it does not happen exactly when or how we want. Release from threat is part of the hope that sustains us throughout the days and nights of faith and testing.

It is now nearly a generation since the Berlin Wall came down and the Cold War ended. That event brought an end to a period that started with the Russian revolution of 1917, during which Christians in the Soviet Union were subject to great oppression. They were among the millions killed or sent to forced labor camps by Lenin and Stalin. The Russian Orthodox Church was a particular target and it is thought that tens of thousands, both clerical and lay were killed. But other groups were also vulnerable and German Lutheran

congregations in Russia came under severe distress. Many wished to leave Russia but permission was hard to get and the suffering was severe. They were in a hostile culture under oppressive circumstances at the mercy of petty bureaucrats, helpless no matter how much they struggled.

One December, a group of about 1,500 of these Russian Lutherans had been camping in the open on the outskirts of Moscow, waiting for permission to leave and go to South America. It finally came and their first stop was Berlin. They were quarantined for a time in unused military quarters where Otto Dibelius, bishop of the church, went to greet them.

Only the drill hall where they were gathered was large enough for them all. It was cold and misty, Dibelius says in his autobiography:

Everything was grey on grey. The women with their heads swathed in shawls, the boys in their big fur caps and thick woolen scarves, the older men with their beards. All of them serious, their faces marked by years of want. A mute, grey mass.¹⁰

These people had no pastors but lay people of various occupations conducted worship on Sundays. One of them came forward to open the service with words of scripture. He said,

We are like a bird escaped from the fowler's trap;
the trap broke and we escaped.

A choir sang and Bishop Dibelius preached. During the service he said, "their faces came alive. Joy came into their eyes. The grey

¹⁰ Otto Dibelius, *In the Service of the Lord: The Autobiography of Bishop Otto Dibelius* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 49–50.

mass turned into living people . . . open, natural, unspoiled, borne up by a firm, unquestioning faith.”¹¹

They had been in the trap for a long time and knew that even now they would still be back in Russia—*except for the LORD*.

7. Continuing Threat

Sometimes life remains threatening for us and it may seem that the psalm is naive in affirming a miracle of deliverance. But what the psalm may not know, the psalter does. Look only at the opening lines of Psalm 129:1–2 (NRSV):

‘Often have they attacked me from my youth’
–let Israel now say–
‘often have they attacked me from my youth,
yet they have not prevailed against me.’

The identical pattern of “let Israel now say” and the repetition of the assertion brings the two psalms together so that they can inform one another. We know that the suffering may continue but that does not stop us from looking to God for support and even relief. Remember this, what the psalm does not know, the psalter does.

But the psalm does not promise this to everyone—not right now. It just says that everyone should testify using the words of this psalm: “let Israel now say” (Ps 129:1). In the delay, like the Russian Lutherans, we continue to hope for a miracle while we find ways to live the covenant life in spite of the difficulties. Scripture has a long perspective: it looks ahead and knows that we can wait. The divine plan is secure in God’s mind and in the working of his providence.

¹¹ Otto Dibelius, *In the Service of the Lord: The Autobiography of Bishop Otto Dibelius* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 49–50.

In such confidence, John Calvin adopted the last words of this psalm as the standing call to worship in the Protestant liturgy that he worked out in Strasbourg, namely,

Our help is in the name of the LORD
who made heaven in earth.

So, with the trap, the question is not, will it happen?—it has happened, for Scripture calls death itself a trap (Ps 18:5). It is the last trap to be sprung and the question is, how and when will God release me? This begins to give the psalm a long look, even into the life to come.

8. Jesus

In his incarnation, God's Son suffered in the trap as the gospels plainly say. His critics lie in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say (Luke 11:54). The Pharisees and Herodians came to trap him in his talk (Mark 12:13). He even has his own history of close calls. When he read Scripture and spoke in the synagogue of Nazareth, the whole crowd became angry; they rose up¹² and drove him out of town, dragging him to throw him over a cliff. Luke 4:29–30 says only, “But passing through their midst, he went away.” The trap broke and he escaped. Several times in John's gospel the crowd became angry at Jesus; once they sought to stone him with calls for his arrest, but he always got away.¹³

But in the end, Jesus too went down the way of death. Grey upon grey. Black upon black.

The hours pass into days and the disciples begin talking in the pluperfect tense—“We had hoped.” This was a favorite saying of my

¹² One notes the verb of threat here (*ἀνίστημι*) as in Psalm 124:2 (*ἐπανίστημι*).

¹³ John 7:30, 44; 8:20, 59; 10:31, 39.

undergraduate teacher, Dr. Walter Johnson. But on the morning of the third day when the two Marys come to the tomb, a young man in a white robe says to them: “He has risen; he is not here. See the place there they laid him.” The trap broke and he escaped. It’s white upon white.

9. Paul

And then, when Paul comes to write the final encouraging words of Rom 8, he starts by evoking Psalm 124. He says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31). With just those words, he almost undoes the binary force of Psalm 124; so great is the power and the glory of God’s continuing plan.

He uses those words—“for us”—three times before he even stops to take a breath:

If God is *for us*, who can be against us? (8:31)

[God] gave him up *for us all* (8:32)

Christ Jesus . . . is at the right hand of God,
who indeed is interceding *for us* (8:34)

The whole story spills out: God gave up his only Son *for us*, who is at God’s right hand interceding *for us*; nothing in all creation can separate us from that love of God, delivered to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So then, the Psalm shows us that “God [is] for us” in holding back the breakers that would obliterate the church and in sustaining those who walk the covenant ways in places where traps lie hidden. The apostle shows us that “God [is] for us” in giving up his only Son, whose resurrection is the guarantee of our release. The “rising up against us” of Ps 124 and of every threat that follows gives way to the rising up of the Savior who brings us with him into the realm of light

and freedom. He is now at God's right hand interceding for us and from His love nothing in all creation can separate us.

We draw hope from these words even as we wait for the trap to break. We entrust ourselves to the Creator knowing that his plans are longer than time and wider than space. From this God we receive help: strength to confess him as Creator, to trust in the divine timing, and to demonstrate patience in waiting.

And the wider hope is also in God. The opening words of the psalm are, "Except for the Lord." God is the One who is there, the God of redemption and provision, whose presence we know and who sustains us. The closing words are, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth," giving us the God of creation who guards his church and sustains his people.

Thanks be to God for his Word!