

Psalm 124 | “What If We Didn’t Have God?”  
*Preached on December 8, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

You can turn in your Bibles to Psalm 124 today. *[pause]*

We continue our study in the section of the Psalms called, “the songs of ascents”.

And they are all titled that way because the Israelites would sing these psalms as they ‘ascended’ to worship at the Temple. *[pause]*

So here we are in Psalm 124. *[pauseeee]*

We are in the midst of the holiday season with Thanksgiving just behind us, and Christmas just ahead.

And during the holiday season, most of us gather with our extended family. *[pauseeee]*

These can be special moments, can’t they? *[pause]*

Now they aren’t always, of course, but they *can be*.

And one thing that I noticed that families do when they gather is they recount precious memories. *[pause]*

These are the past things that happened as a family that everyone remembers.

And we usually begin these memories by saying, “Remember when *that* happened?...” *[pauseeee]*

A couple months ago, I did this with my family while I was visiting with them, and we remembered some fond memories of growing up and how me and my brothers did this or that. *[pause]*

These memories of past events are regularly brought up, and they bring laughter, cause smiles, and knit us closer together. *[pause]*

Well the psalm this morning is like one of those times in the life of Israel...

The psalm recounts the Lord’s past deliverance, and as Israel repeated it year-by-year, it would not only bring them together in unity, but cause them to praise and trust the Lord more. *[pauseeee]*

So when we read this psalm, it’s like we are sitting in on Israel’s family gathering as they recount some precious past events, but it’s more than that for us...

For by being fellow children of God, we know of what they talk about. *[pauseee]*

We have the same God, the same Father, the same Lord.

And our exact circumstances may differ, but our general experience is the same—truly, our help is in the name of the Lord. *[pauseeee]*

Isn't it such comfort to know that we serve this very same God and Lord?

He desires for us to call out for mercy, and He acts in power. *[pauseeee]*

David definitely experienced that pattern in his life, so no wonder this is a psalm of David. *[pause]*

He needed mercy to be delivered from his enemies, and God did, time and time again, as he was delivered from Saul's hand, and out of many other precarious situations. *[pauseeee]*

Israel as a whole did, too...

Just think of the Exodus—they called out for mercy and got deliverance. *[pauseeee]*

Israel was a recipient of God's past acts of deliverance, and we see that ever so clearly here in this psalm...

So let's READ it this morning. *[READ]*

*Looking at this psalm, we see some things come out, and one of them is that we see...*

### **I. What *could* have happened. (1–5)**

Have you ever stood in wonder at some of the things that *could* have happened in history? *[pause]*

Germany and Japan could have won World War 2—now that's crazy to think about...

Just think of what our world could have potentially looked like, if that happened. *[pauseeee]*

But what about in your personal life?

Have you ever thought, "What would have happened, if I didn't go to that school or move here or there?" *[pause]*

Or maybe it's an extreme situation, where you *almost* fell from a ladder or just *barely* missed getting into that car crash. *[pause]*

Those things *could have* happened, and we stand in shock and awe at how they could have happened to *us*. *[pauseeee]*

A man named Steve Scheibner talks about how he could have been the airline pilot of one of the planes that flew into the World Trade Center towers.<sup>1</sup> *[pause]*

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.westernjournal.com/watch-airline-pilot-shares-powerful-story-god-spared-9-11/>.

He was all lined up to fly American Airlines Flight 11 bound from Boston to Los Angeles on Sept. 11, 2001.

But what happened was that because he was a reserve pilot, then other pilots could bump him from the flight and take the flight instead, if they wanted to. *[pauseeee]*

That's what happened: another pilot took the flight, and he never got into that cockpit on September 11th. *[pauseeee]*

As Steve Scheibner recounts that infamous day, he considers what could have happened in his life...

He could have flown that plane, and he wouldn't be alive today. *[pause]*

That's a little like the Israelites here in this psalm—they recount what *could have* happened to them. *[pauseeeee]*

Notice verses 1–5, and look at the first word of every verse...

It goes “if...if...then...then...then.” *[pause]*

So if this wouldn't have happened, then this, this, and this would have occurred, and what (or who) is the linchpin of it all?...

The Lord! *[pauseeee]*

They say twice, “if it had not been the Lord who was on our side...” then death and destruction would have taken place. *[pauseeee]*

What they are doing is they are considering the possibilities of what would have taken place if God was not in the picture. *[pauseeeee]*

Have you ever considered what your life would look like without God in it? *[pause]*

Where would you be? *[pause]*

Most of us shudder when we think about it because He is our all, our everything, our life, and our hope...

We would be still in our sins, still in darkness, living solely for ourselves, and probably nowhere good. *[pauseeee]*

That mind exercise is what Israel does in this psalm—they think about life without God on their side, and it's not a pleasant picture. *[pause]*

They basically explain that they would have faced death and destruction without the Lord, and they use various imagery to make this point. *[pause]*

They speak of being swallowed alive, and being drowned and swept away by overflowing, raging waters. *[pause]*

These images represent death and destruction, and they are certainly not meaning these things in strictly literal ways. *[pauseeee]*

The image of swallowing someone alive points to Israel's enemies as eager and hungry for their blood...

*Their enemy wants to consume them and would relish it. [pause]*

It's their enemies' *anger* which actually leads to this desire.

*They would have swallowed Israel up "when their anger was kindled against [them]". [pause]*

In wrath, they were for the death and destruction of God's people. *[pauseeeee]*

*As the people of God, we can face the same type of animosity from others. [pause]*

There are some people who have anger towards us, but don't show it too often.

*But there are others, who in their anger, are viciously angry towards Christians. [pause]*

They will say some of the harshest, meanest things about Christians, and if they could, some of them would not want even one Christian on the face of the planet. *[pauseeee]*

*We must remember that this is nothing new, for Israel faced the same type of thing.*

And Jesus faced it, for He was even put to death by angry, evil men, and Jesus said that we would face it, too, because we follow Him.<sup>2</sup> *[pauseeeee]*

*Not only would Israel have been swallowed alive, but also swept away. [pause]*

In verses 4 and 5, the psalmist uses 3 different ways of speaking about what could have happened, each one using the image of water. *[pause]*

*He says, "then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters." [pauseeee]*

Not long ago, we sadly saw images of what the psalmist is talking about when we witnessed videos and pictures of the devastation that happened in some of the southern states when Hurricane Helene swept through. *[pause]*

*The water is so powerful that it can knock houses off of their foundations, bridges can be swept away, and certainly people are no match for its force. [pause]*

---

<sup>2</sup> A reference to John 15:18–21.

That's the picture of what Israel could have faced.

The enemy could have overwhelmed them like a raging torrent sweeping through. *[pauseeee]*

If it hadn't been for the Lord, Israel would have faced death and destruction, and they are so thankful for what DIDN'T happen. *[pause]*

The difference-maker was the Lord alone—He was on their side, and whose side the Lord is on is always the ultimate, winning side. *[pauseeee]*

Now our English translations say, "If it had not been the Lord who was *on our side*..."

But literally the Hebrew says, "If it had not been the Lord who was *for us*..." then this or that would have happened. *[pauseeee]*

The Lord must be for us, and that means being on our side, or else we would have no hope.

And that's why Paul can exclaim with confidence in Romans 8, "If God is *for us*, who can be against us?"<sup>3</sup> *[pauseeee]*

God being "for us" was the difference-maker for Israel, and it's the difference-maker for our lives and of our eternities. *[pause]*

As Paul mentions, it is because He is *for us* that now nothing can touch our standing with Him or separate us from His love in Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup> *[pauseeee]*

What a blessing it is to remember what *could have happened* in our lives!

It's dreadful to think about the possibilities, yet it's also joyous to think that we don't have to face the "what-if's" of what could have happened in our lives. *[pauseeee]*

Just think about this: what if we didn't have God for us against sin? *[pause]*

What if we didn't have God for us against death? *[pause]*

What about against Satan or the world? *[pause]*

Those are all scary thoughts, yet we don't have to entertain them.

Because for a Christian, the possibilities of death and condemnation are no longer possibilities in Christ, but impossibilities *because of Christ!* *[pause]*

Because God was for us in Christ, so now nothing can touch our eternal life in Him...

No charge can be brought against us, no one can condemn, and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not even tribulation, distress, or even physical death. *[pauseeee]*

---

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:31 (italics is mine).

<sup>4</sup> A reference to Romans 8:31–39.

*In joy, Israel told us that what could have happened didn't happen, and now in verses 6–7, they tell us...*

## **II. What happened instead. (6–7)**

Remember Steve Scheibner, the airline pilot, who almost flew one of the planes that went into the twin towers? *[pause]*

*When he tells his story, he doesn't only focus on what **could** have happened, but he also rejoices in what **happened**. *[pause]**

He feels relief and joy today because of what *did* happen that day, and what happened?...

*He could have died, yet he lives. *[pause]**

And we need to move on from the possibilities of the past, and lean into the realities of the present. *[pause]*

*Yes, for us who have trusted in Jesus, we **could have remained under condemnation and faced God's wrath for our sin...***

...But we don't stay there in our minds and remain in turmoil, for we think about what DID happen in Christ...

*We have been saved and given eternal life! *[pauseeee]**

That's what Israel does here: they don't only dwell upon the past "what if's", but they rejoice in the present "what did"—they did escape their enemy and live! *[pause]*

*Look at verses 6–7, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped!" *[pauseeee]**

Once again, we see some more imagery being utilized by David, as he speaks of a prey and a predator, and then of a bird and a snare. *[pauseeee]*

*So Israel's enemy was like a predator.*

And that's what the wicked are like: they are fierce, vicious, and on the attack. *[pause]*

*They are ready to pounce and take advantage of their catch.*

Their teeth are sharp, and ready to bite down on their prey, but what happened here?...

*The Lord did not allow it, but Israel was able to escape from its predator. *[pause]**

In fact, David even says that the Lord has not "given us" as prey to their teeth. *[pauseeee]*

David falls back on the amazing truth that God is in control, and so sees their escape of the enemy as God not giving them over to the enemy. *[pause]*

This is because only God can allow or permit the enemy to overtake. *[pause]*

We see this in Israel's history—Israel was only ever beaten by an enemy if and when God allowed it to happen. *[pause]*

In some cases, God is even said clearly to be the one who sent a nation to overtake Israel.<sup>5</sup>

So the enemy couldn't just capture the people of Israel, but Israel had to be given over to the enemy by God. *[pauseeee]*

What a comforting thought for us—everything is in the Lord's control, even the enemy! *[pause]*

They may seem to us a predator, but there's one above the predator, and that predator is like a pet on a leash to God.

So don't fear, but remember the Lord—He's the one in control. *[pauseeeee]*

What have you been fearing lately? *[pause]*

Has it been someone else? *[pause]*

What about the world around you and the chaos you see? *[pause]*

Has it been your money problems?

Has it been a relational issue that seems to be going badly—what is it in your life? *[pause]*

Sometimes what we fear feels like a predator, and we, the prey. *[pause]*

We feel chased down, always looking over our shoulder in terror, and like the worst is just around the corner. *[pause]*

It causes us to feel our weakness like a prey does.

Sometimes it causes us to be so fearful that we don't even know what to do, but to just sit in dread. *[pause]*

Well remember that you are not merely a prey at the mercy of a predator, rather, in Christ, you are a beloved child of God whose life is under the control of the Sovereign Lord. *[pauseeee]*

As we think about our predator, isn't condemnation and death one of them? *[pause]*

Yet even though we deserved being given over to condemnation and death forever, through Jesus' work of redemption, He has made it so that we have escaped the teeth of death. *[pauseeee]*

---

<sup>5</sup> See Habakkuk 1:6 & Jeremiah 27:6 for a couple examples.

Eternal death used to be our predator, for we are told that the wages of sin is death.

And so death is like a predator that chases down sinners and is ready to bite down, but what are we told?...

Although “the wages of sin is death...the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>6</sup> *[pause]*

It’s Jesus who was bitten by death instead, for He died in our place, and then He beat death by rising again victoriously from the grave.

And so now because of Him, we can look death right in the face and say, “Where is your sting?”<sup>7</sup> *[pause]*

“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ,”<sup>8</sup> for we have escaped the predator’s teeth. *[pauseeee]*

What Israel experienced was not only like escaping a predator’s teeth, but also, it was like a bird escaping a snare. *[pause]*

He says in verse 7, “We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped!” *[pause]*

It was common in that time to use a snare or a net to catch birds, and that’s what the psalmist is talking about.<sup>9</sup>

And to be a fowler, you have to be sneaky and crafty, and that’s what Israel’s enemies were like: sneaky and crafty, and intent on trapping them to kill them. *[pause]*

The psalmist talks as if they were caught in the snare.

And being caught in a snare would be a terrifying thing, for you are in mortal danger, stuck, and can’t get yourself out. *[pause]*

If you were stuck in a snare, you’d think it was all over and that hope was lost, for all it takes is for the trapper to come back to the trap.

Yet amidst being trapped, being in danger, being helpless, and unable to get out, something happened for Israel—they escaped. *[pauseeee]*

But *how* did they escape the trap? *[pause]*

---

<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:23.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:55.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:57.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 124:7.



They didn't break free themselves, the trap didn't just randomly break on its own because of some failing, and there was no luck or chance happening that broke them free...

No, God intervened! *[pauseeee]*

There's a reason why he started this little section back in verse 6 with saying, "Blessed be the Lord," and it was because it was the Lord that broke the snare! *[pauseeeee]*

God provides the way of escape! *[pause]*

The Bible tells us that we are all sinners, who deserve condemnation and eternal death, but God is the God of the escape...

He provided the way of escape out of condemnation and death through Jesus Christ! *[pause]*

Jesus came and died in our place so that our sins would be nailed to the cross and dealt with...

The result?

Forgiveness, no longer standing condemned in our sins, and recipients of eternal life. *[pause]*

We have escaped the snare of death that we couldn't get out of on our own through Jesus' work on our behalf.

And amazingly, lovingly, and graciously—God doesn't *only* provide the way of escape from condemnation and death—though that in itself is the most amazing news possible...

He also provides ways of escape even now for us as His people. *[pauseee]*

The world, the flesh, and the devil?

For each of them, God provides a way of escape. *[pause]*

Ephesians 6 talks about how we are in a spiritual battle, and what does it say?...

"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the *schemes of the devil*." *[pause]*

The world also tries to conform us into its mold, but what's the promise of God?..

It's possible to not be conformed to this world, and it's through being "transformed by the renewal of your mind".<sup>10</sup> *[pauseee]*

Maybe you say, "OK, but what about my flesh, that is, my sinful passions that rise up within me. They just seem too strong. Is there even a way of escape from those temptations?" *[pause]*

I'm glad you asked!

---

<sup>10</sup> Romans 12:2.

1 Corinthians 10:13, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide *the way of escape*, that you may be able to endure it.”  
*[pauseeee]*

God is the God of the escape. *[pause]*

The enemies’ snares are no good against us, for all we have to do is to look to the God of the escape, and He provides the way out. *[pauseeee]*

**In this psalm, David rejoices in what DID happen to Israel, and it causes us to think about what happened in our lives...**

Christ died for our sins, and now through simple faith in Him alone, we are alive and free.  
*[pauseeee]*

So now what? *[pause]*

*The psalmist showed us what could have happened, what did happen, and now we see our response...*

### **III. What we will do now. (8)**

Think back once more to the airline pilot, Steve Scheibner, who could have died on 9/11, but didn’t. *[pause]*

**In light of what could have happened, and yet what didn’t happen, what is Scheibner’s response to it? *[pause]***

He has responded with great thankfulness and praise to God.

**He gives glory to the Lord, and seeks to live for the glory of God. *[pause]***

How could he not when he thinks about what could have happened, and yet what happened instead?

**So also, when the psalmist thinks about what could have happened, and yet what happened instead, he can’t help but praise, trust, and give thanks to God! *[pauseeee]***

He praises God, for in verse 6, he says, “Blessed be the Lord”.

**But this praise is also seen in verse 8 where he says, “Our help is in the name of the Lord”. *[pause]***

He lifts up the Lord for all to see and marvel at, for His wondrous work of deliverance.  
*[pauseeee]*

**Have you ever experienced something so amazing that you couldn’t help but talk about it and ramble on about it with others? *[pause]***

It's like you can't keep it to yourself, but your mouth must open and talk about it. *[pauseeee]*

Right after I asked Kate to marry me, that's what it was like for us.

We couldn't keep it to ourselves, we just felt like telling everyone about it. *[pause]*

That's a little like David here, but about something and Someone way more important...

God being for Israel and showing off His power was something that David couldn't hold within him, he just had to speak forth God's praises.

He couldn't keep it in so much so that he memorialized it in this psalm. *[pauseeee]*

Pondering where you could have been without God, and yet where you are because of Christ, does that lead you to praise? *[pause]*

Do you praise God individually when you are alone? *[pause]*

Do you praise Him together with the church? *[pause]*

Do you talk about what He has done with people you meet? *[pauseeeee]*

There's this one song that speaks of this desire to praise God, for it goes...

“How can I keep from singing Your praise? *[pause]*

How can I ever say enough, How amazing is Your love. *[pause]*

How can I keep from shouting Your name? I know I am loved by the King, And it makes my heart want to sing.”<sup>11</sup> *[pauseeee]*

What Israel experienced with God on their side also led to *trust*. *[pause]*

By saying, “Our help is in the name of the Lord,” Israel was showing that by recounting His deeds, it reinvigorated them with trust.

It ushered them back to their true place of help. *[pauseeee]*

When we remember what God has done, it should renew our reliance upon Him.

It should cause us to think, “Yes, my help *is* in the Lord.” *[pause]*

He has come through, He will come through again! *[pause]*

We are reminded that we are weak, and we need His help.

---

<sup>11</sup> “How Can I Keep From Singing” by Chris Tomlin.

We are reminded that God is for us—He delivers, He saves, He provides the way of escape.  
[pauseeee]

Wicked mankind’s schemes *are* powerless against the all-powerful Lord. [pause]

*He is in control.* [pauseeeee]

Our help comes from the Lord, “who made heaven and earth”—now that makes a difference when you think about it, doesn’t it? [pause]

*If we trust in Jesus, the Creator is on our side, and who else is better, higher, or greater?*  
[pauseeee]

God’s work in our lives should lead to praise and trust, is that your response to God’s grace in your life? [pause]

*This psalm shows us that...*

**Without the Lord, we would have no hope.**

David makes that abundantly clear here when he says, “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side...” then this, then this, then that. [pause]

*He reveals that without the Lord, they would have no hope.* [pauseeee]

What David does here shows us that that mind exercise is a good thing to do regularly...

*It’s good to consider, ‘if it had not been for the Lord, where would I be?’* [pauseeee]

What would your life look like without the Lord’s intervention? [pause]

*One easy way to do this is to simply think about all that you have in Christ and because of Christ, and then think of all of that gone, and that’s your answer.* [pause]

Forgiveness—gone. Life—gone. Hope—gone...and the list could go on and on.

*So regularly consider, “If it had not been for the Lord...”* [pauseeee]

Think about what COULD HAVE happened in your life.

*Yet don’t dwell upon that statement forever without also thinking about what DID happen in your life...*

God showed up and provided the way of escape in Christ Jesus. [pauseeeee]

*It’s because of the Cross that what could have happened to us, didn’t happen, and won’t ever happen!* [pause]

Because of His death and resurrection, we don't get swallowed up by eternal death, but rather, it's "Death [that] is swallowed up in victory."<sup>12</sup> *[pause]*

We are NOT swept away by the deluge of our sins, but have been rescued by Christ, who reached out in grace with His nail-pierced hands. *[pause]*

Satan's teeth don't get to bite down on us, but we walk free now as beloved sheep.

**And that snare of guilt and condemnation that we were stuck in?**

Broken by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. *[pauseeee]*

**Without the Lord, we would have no hope.**

And by simply placing our faith in Jesus Christ, we don't ever have to worry about being separated from His love or not having His presence. *[pauseeeee]*

John Newton, who wrote "Amazing Grace", has this really great quote that goes:

"I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."  
*[pause]*

**Yes, we have failings, and we aren't always where we ought, want, or hope to be.**

But just look at what we used to be, and stand amazed that we are now what we are because of Christ.

---

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54.