Psalm 124

"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

1.   Background

This is a Davidic psalm. It does not tell us in what circumstances it was written, but commentators speculate that it was composed early in David's reign when David was challenged several times by the Philistines. Calvin: "David represents as in a mirror the uncertain and changeable condition of the Church, just such as it had been from the beginning, to teach the faithful that its stability had not been owing to its own intrinsic strength, but that it had been preserved by the wonderful grace of God; and to habituate them to call upon God in the midst of dangers."

Perhaps the compilers of the Songs of Ascents have used the psalm because it is appropriate to the experience of the people who returned from Babylonian exile. At the time of the exile it looked as though "mankind" (the Babylonian empire) had "risen up against" the Jewish people, "swallowing them alive" by taking them into exile. But against all the odds, after 70 years God had brought his people back to their homeland – it was as though a little bird had been released from a snare laid by a fowler! The returnees rejoiced: the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth, truly was their help.

"Here in one beautiful psalm of praise are brought together the LORD's ever-repeated gifts of salvation and renewal. The people, never immune from suffering, celebrate the redeeming power of God in their past history and are sustained thereby. A New Testament parallel may be found in 1 Pet 1:3-9. An almighty saviour is the saviour still! This is the glad testimony of the psalm, sung by those who know themselves to be survivors and credit their survival to God's grace" (Allen).

2.   Structure

The psalm makes effective use of repetition of the first words in successive lines, i.e. "Had not… had not…" (vv. 1-2), "Then… then… then…" (vv. 3-5), "Our… our…" (vv. 7-8). The verse that stands out as different is the central verse (v. 6) which declares, "Bless the LORD…"

A[1] (vv. 1-2)   *The LORD – if he had not been our help…*

   B[1] (vv. 3-5)   *…those who rose up against us would have swallowed us alive.*

A[2] (v. 6)   *Bless the LORD who hasn't abandoned us!*

   B[2] (v. 7)   *We have escaped from our those who rose up against us…*

A[3] (v. 6)   *…because the LORD is our help*

3.   Notes

Verses 1-2   "Had it not been the LORD who was for us…"

Notice that from the very start this is a corporate song of praise. There is a cantor who addresses the congregation, but all the first person pronouns are plural (we,

us, our). "We overhear the cantor declaiming his opening line, then bringing the congregation in to thunder it out again in verse 2 (…'– let Israel repeat it –'…)" (Kidner).

"It makes the psalm…all the more accessible to the Christian as a vehicle of his own praise – that of a captive released, whose own struggles would merely have entangled him the more. But primarily the praise is corporate, blessing God for the survival of His people…under the most formidable attacks and most pitiless bondage" (Kidner).

"The first complete line begins with Yahweh and ends with human beings… Dire as it was, the threat inevitably dwindled away" (Allen).

"Our attention and curiosity are aroused by the incomplete nature of the first line, and then of the second, and the hearer listens closely to discover the outcome" (Goldingay).

"Men" (literally "adam") means mankind – the impression is given that everyone outside of the community rose up again us!

"Such is the description of Israel's problem. But the psalm actually begins with a conjunction that 'provides the hearers with basic security' because it 'shifts the entire series of ten cola…into the counterfactual mode'" (Goldingay).

Verses 3-5   "Then they would have swallowed us alive…"

"They would have swallowed… burning anger… flooding torrent" – the pictures are of earth movements (fissures and sinkholes into which people fall), forest fires (which reduce everything to ashes), and flash floods (the word "stream" is too weak; this is really a torrent which comes with sudden onslaught). God's people "are acutely conscious that but for the grace of God they have no existence… Surveying their history, they acknowledge that they owe their corporate life to divine preservation from death's ravening jaws…and drowning waters" (Allen).

"Swollen waters" (v. 5) uses a term which is related to a word that means "insolent man" or "human assertiveness". The psalm will not let us forget that it is <u>men</u>, not natural forces, that rose up against us.

Verses 6-8   "Bless the LORD who has not given us a prey to their teeth…"

"The mention of *the name* may be an echo of [David's] own Psalm 20:7 ['Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God'], 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" (Kidner).

"Like the deliverance of Hezekiah, this was not a purely 'natural' event. The psalm moves to language with strong supernatural implications in speaking of help and of the LORD's name and sets the deliverance in the broadest of theological contexts in v. 8b (cf. 121:2). Once again the LORD's work of deliverance is one with the LORD's work as creator" (Goldingay).

Remember: "the LORD who made heaven and earth" is God with absolute being, authority, wisdom and goodness – One who is able to give absolute help.