

Psalm Sundays

Text
Psalm 124

Topic
The psalmist invites us to remember
that the LORD is on our side

Title
"I AM is On My Side... Yes He Is"

Suppose Abraham Lincoln had been a vampire hunter...

It's the premise of a novel made into the 2012 movie appropriately titled, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. Instead of Honest Abe, we'd call him Horrific Abe... Or Abe the Axe... Abraham VanHelsing...

It is an example of a genre in literature and film called Alternate History, or AH. It consists of stories in which one or more historical events occur differently. These stories usually ask *What if?* at crucial points in history that present outcomes other than those in the historical record.

Three of the most popular AH categories are:

- 👤 Suppose the South had won the Civil War.

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- 👤 Suppose the Axis powers had won World War II.
- 👤 Suppose JFK had not been assassinated.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and William R. Forstchen have written a novel, *1945*, in which the US defeated Japan but not Germany in World War II, resulting in a Cold War with Germany rather than the Soviet Union.

Most long-running TV shows feature an AH episode. You fans of Star Trek will remember the *Next Generation* episode in which Picard was *not* stabbed in the heart as a cadet.

The change led to him becoming an unimpressive crew member rather than one of the great captains of the Enterprise.

Hulu has optioned the rights to Curtis Sittenfeld's Alternative History book "Rodham," which takes place in a world in which Hillary Rodham never married Bill Clinton.

It's a Wonderful Life is AH - Suppose George Bailey had never been born.

Psalm 124 is definitely *not* Alternate History; **but it does ask us to "suppose."**

In the opening verses, we read, "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side," Let Israel now say - "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side..."

Another translation, the NIV, puts it this way: "Suppose the LORD had not been on our side.

Suppose the LORD had not been on our side when our enemies attacked us.

Suppose he had not been on our side when their anger blazed out against us."

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Israel's national history is full with events in which they would have been eradicated but for the LORD being "on [their] side."

While they were subjects of the Persian empire, wicked Haman proposed a day upon which all the Jews would be murdered. The Book of Esther records the miraculous "on our side" of the LORD to protect and preserve His chosen ones. Esther, a Jew, had become Queen at just the right moment in history to be used to save the Jews.

Jesus "on our side" is something we, too, enjoy, along with the protection and preservation it affords.

- 👤 Jesus sweetly promises believers, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).
- 👤 The apostle Paul wonderfully exclaimed, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

We'll explore this as we work through the verses.

I'll organize my comments around two points: **#1 Jesus Is On Your Side In Your Troubles**, and **#2 Jesus Is On Your Side To Triumph Over Your Troubles**.

#1 - Jesus Is On Your Side In Your Troubles (v1-2)

What was your elementary field trip anthem, sung on every bus ride? Mine was *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*.

Psalms 120-134, the Songs of Ascent, were sung by the pilgrims ascending the hill to Jerusalem on their way to the Temple to celebrate the annual feasts.

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Psa 124:1 A Song of Ascents. Of David. "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side," Let Israel now say -

This psalm is responsive. The song leader begins it, soliciting a response.

Have you ever tried to elicit a response from an audience, only to have them remain silent? That didn't happen in Israel when it was time to sing Psalm 124.

When we worship by singing in a service, the worship team is soliciting a response. Most of you respond by singing. If you don't sing, I'm not going to rebuke you. For all I or anyone else knows, you're praying; or you're reflecting on the words; or you're reading your Bible.

I'd only ask this: If someone *were* to ask you, "What was your response to the worship of the Lord in song?," *what would you answer?*

Worshipping in song seems to be an important activity in Heaven. That makes it important now.

Psa 124:2 "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side..."

Wouldn't it be more biblical to say that *we* are on the LORD's side? When Joshua was contemplating the attack on Jericho, "a Man stood opposite him with His sword drawn in His hand. And Joshua went to Him and said to Him, "Are You for us or for our adversaries?" So He said, "No, but *as* Commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped..." (Joshua 5:13-14).

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We definitely want to have Joshua's humility and be on the Lord's side. Simultaneously, the Lord wants us to understand that He is, indeed, on our side.

Jesus is on your side in your troubles. Isn't that a basic, elementary principle? Doesn't every believer already know that? Enough milk of God's Word; serve up the meat.

A theologian I follow on [twitter](#) said, "Pastors and teachers, when it comes to the basics of Christian faith and Christian living, if we don't continually 'state the obvious,' *one day it will no longer be obvious.*"

It does seem that we regularly forget this elementary principle in our daily walk with the Lord.

The very first church service I attended after being born-again was a Sunday morning at (then) Calvary Chapel of Riverside. The guest speaker was Pastor Romaine from CC Costa Mesa. I remember this one quote: "So you're a Christian? *Then where do you get off losing your joy over a dead battery!*"

It may not sound all that deep and profound, but it was to me. It was the first time I understood that God's Omnipresence meant more than that He was everywhere. It meant He was always with **me**, by **my** side, *on my* side. It is practical theology.

God is Omnipotent... Omniscient... and Omnipresent. He wants me to know it, but He also wants me to experience it firsthand.

He wanted His people, Israel, to experience His Omni-ness. So, for example, in the Esther-episode, the LORD could have intervened another way, not involving Esther or Mordecai. The way that the LORD did intervene expresses

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Him so much more than a raw power event. And, for their part, Esther and Mordecai experience God up close and personal.

Think of Esther. A beautiful Jewish girl, she volunteered to be a candidate to become the Queen of Persia. To be chosen, she and Mordecai knew she would have sex with the King. Now that's wrong; it wasn't God's plan to pimp her out.

God used her bad decision to bring Esther to a more spiritual decision. Once the decree was issued to kill Jews, Esther was in the perfect position to save them. Would she?

She did... And now we marvel at the Omni's of God as He intervened for His people.

Esther and Mordecai tell us that we are going to be right in the thick of things; on the front lines. Your 'Persia' may be your home... Or your employment. It might be your church. It's wherever you live, so to speak. You must have skin in the game in order to experience and express the Living God.

#2 - Jesus Is On Your Side To Triumph Over Your Troubles (v3-8)

David, who scholars credit with writing this psalm, suggested an Alternate History. He asked the Israelites to look back upon their national history and "suppose" God had *not* been on their side.

Psa 124:2 "If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, When men rose up against us,

Psa 124:3 Then they would have swallowed us alive, When their wrath was kindled against us;

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David will employ several metaphors in these remaining verses to describe the severity of various situations that Israel had faced in her national past. Looking back, if God had not been on their side, *the nation would not exist*.

“When men rose up against us” could apply to any number of troubles. At one point in their history, Jerusalem was surrounded by an Assyrian army that “rose up against [them]” and “would have swallowed [them] alive.” But “when their wrath was kindled against” Israel, God sent a single angel into their encampment. That angel killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. One & done.

I can almost hear the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem in their over-night encampments, or in homes that offered them hospitality, regaling one another with these stories. “What about that time the LORD was on Gideon’s side? Or that time He was on Elijah’s side, and fire came out of Heaven?”

Flip through the Old Testament with an eye for “on our side” stories, and you’ll find plenty.

Psa 124:4 Then the waters would have overwhelmed us, The stream would have gone over our soul;

Psa 124:5 Then the swollen waters Would have gone over our soul."

We’ve seen footage of the devastation from floods and tsunamis. Many times in her history it seemed as though the Jews would be overwhelmed by a spiritual tsunami.

Moses and several million Jews had their backs against the impassable Red Sea. The mighty Egyptian army was on their heels, and had them trapped. It would be the end of the nation before it ever really began.

You know the story. God was on their side.

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Another time, a Canaanite force featuring 900 heavy military chariots came to destroy Israel. It suddenly rained upon them, swelling and overflowing the Kishon River, sweeping the chariots away.

Psa 124:6 Blessed *be* the LORD, Who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

It's dumb to speculate on how we want to die, but we do it anyway. I can tell you one way I do *not* want to die. Duuuunnnn duun... duuunnnnnnnnn dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dunnnnnnnnnnn dunnnn.

Psa 124:7 Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; The snare is broken, and we have escaped.

Listening to the stories being told, someone -perhaps a child - might wonder about times in Isra's past in which the Jews were defeated, and he'd captive. Was God on their side then?

David acknowledged that often Israel was caught, like a bird in the snare. This refers to the many episodes in Israel's national history in which the LORD found it necessary to discipline the nation. It only came after much warning, urging repentance.

The prophet Jeremiah urged Israel to repent and to surrender to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. They abused him, and refused. Into captivity they went. But there was a promise from the LORD that they would be delivered after approximately seventy years. It seemed as though they were "ensnared," but the "snare [was] broken" by the LORD, when the time was right, and they "escaped.

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There is a long extra-biblical history of God being on Israel's side. A Jewish website posted an article titled, *17 Miraculous Israeli Military Victories*. It covers Israel's modern history, from the late 1940's through the present.

On January 16, 1996, then President of Israel, Ezer Weizmann, gave a speech to both Houses of Parliament of Germany. He gave this speech in Hebrew to the Germans, fifty years after the Holocaust, and in it he appealed to Israel's history. He said:

It was fate that delivered me and my contemporaries into this great era when the Jews returned to re-establish their homeland... I am no longer a wandering Jew who migrates from country to country, from exile to exile. But all Jews in every generation must regard themselves as if they had been there in previous generations, places and events. Therefore, I am still a wandering Jew but not along the far flung paths of the world. Now I migrate through the expanses of time from generation to generation down the paths of memory... I was a slave in Egypt. I received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Together with Joshua and Elijah I crossed the Jordan River. I entered Jerusalem with David and was exiled with Zedekiah. And I did not forget it by the rivers of Babylon. When the Lord returned the captives of Zion I dreamed among the builders of its ramparts. I fought the Romans and was banished from Spain.

I was bound to the stake in Mainz. I studied Torah in Yemen and lost my family in Kishinev. I was incinerated in Treblinka, rebelled in Warsaw, and emigrated to the Land of Israel, the country from where I have been exiled and where I have been born and from which I come and to which I return.

The very survival of the Jewish people through recorded time is nothing short of miraculous.

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It is the 'before-our-very-eyes' fulfillment of Bible prophecy. The very fact that Jews exist as a nation today stands in testimony to the existence of God Who acts providentially. By any historical measure, the Jewish people should have disappeared long ago.

Over 300 years ago King Louis XIV of France asked Blaise Pascal, the great French philosopher, to give him proof of the supernatural. Pascal answered: "Why, the Jews, your Majesty - **the Jews.**"

Psa 124:8 Our help *is* in the name of the LORD, Who made heaven and earth. This is certainly a nod to the LORD's power as Creator. It is also a reminder that Creation is going somewhere. There is a plan being implemented throughout human history. **His-story** is progressively unfolding. It's a plan to offer salvation to mankind by sending a Savior through the nation of Israel to them, and through them to the whole world.

The literal history in the Bible testifies to God's providence in forwarding the plan. The apostle Paul wrote,

Gal 4:4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

Gal 4:5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

Gal 4:6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

The plan is yet unfolding. We have it in good detail in our New Testament, especially in the Revelation.

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Psalm 124 is for and about Israel - not us. However, to the extent that it describes God, in a covenant relationship with believers, it is for every believer everywhere, anytime.

The New Testament is full of stories in which we see the Lord "on our side." Geno is teaching insightfully through the Book of Acts on Wednesday nights. If you were there last week, he covered the story of Paul and Silas beaten and confined to the dungeon in Philippi.

If you weren't there, you should listen to it on our site! <https://vimeo.com/447630635>

I can't go into the depth he did, but luckily most of you are familiar with the story. The two missionaries were wrongfully arrested, beaten severely with rods, locked deep in the prison dungeon - in stocks.

As they sang, at midnight a 'focused' earthquake unlocked their chains, and opened wide the prison doors. Thinking all his prisoners had escaped, the jailer was about to commit suicide, as would be expected by Rome to maintain his honor. Paul urged him not to, seeing as all the prisoners inexplicably stayed in their cells. As the morning progressed, the jailer and his family heard the Gospel, and were saved.

In the morning, when the order was given for their release and banishment, Paul dropped a political nuke by informing the authorities that he and Silas might be Jews, **but they were Roman citizens.** What the magistrates had done to them was criminal.

When I say that Jesus is on our side, triumphing in our troubles - **this is the kind of triumphing I mean.**

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In Philippi, Paul could have immediately appealed to his Roman citizenship. He could have thereby avoided a terrible beating and the subsequent incarceration.

The Lord somehow communicated to Paul to remain silent. I doubt Jesus told him anything more than that. As Paul and Silas simply obeyed the Lord's leading, the story unfolded, and the Gospel permeated the prison.

Not just the prison. Think of how that story must have spread throughout the region.

It has inspired multiplied millions throughout history. It is encouraging us today.

Paul exercised his right to be wronged for the sake of the Gospel. You will be asked to exercise that right, instead of your rights, on occasion. It probably won't involve being beaten with rods nearly to death... But it will require trust and sacrifice.

It is precisely in times like that we can feel that Jesus is NOT "on our side." He is - *always* - every bit as much as He was on the side of the believers whose stories are recorded in the Bible, and in Christian history.

I shudder to suppose my Alternate History had the Lord not saved me. If you're a believer, you can relate.

If you're not a believer... God has a glorious Alternate History for you:

- 🧠 He saves you by grace, through faith, apart from any works you can perform.
- 🧠 He has good works for you to discover as you walk with Him.

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💡 Most of all, you will have a glorious entrance into Heaven, rather than be conscripted to Hell.

Have you received Jesus?

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