

If the LORD had not been on our side...

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
(from the Psalms: 124, 125)

Psalm 124

IF the LORD himself had not been on our side, now may Israel say; if the LORD himself had not been on our side, when men rose up against us;

2 They had swallowed us up alive; when they were so wrathfully displeased at us.

3 Yea, the waters had drowned us, and the stream had gone over our soul.

4 The deep waters of the proud ad gone even over our soul.

5 But praised be the LORD, who hath not given us over for a prey unto their teeth.

6 Our soul is escaped even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we are delivered.

7 Our help standeth in the Name of the LORD, who hath made heaven and earth.

Psalm 125.

THEY that put their trust in the LORD shall be even as the mount Sion, which may not be removed, but standeth fast for ever.

2 The hills stand about Jerusalem; even so standeth the LORD round about his people, from this time forth for evermore.

3 For the sceptre of the ungodly shall not abide upon the lot of the righteous; lest the righteous put their hand unto wickedness.

4 Do well, O LORD, unto those that are good and true of heart.

5 As for such as turn back unto their own wickedness, the LORD shall lead them forth with the evil doers; but peace shall be upon Israel.

Today's two psalms are full of descriptive metaphorical imagery. They describe the tenuous position of the righteous before the onslaught of the wicked. The power of ungodliness is pictured like a fearful flood, or a tidal wave of nightmarish proportions, one that --but for the intervention of God-- would surely have drowned the godly. The same text also pictures the righteous as mere prey for the teeth of the wicked, as a rabbit might feel as a wolf attacks. Yet another comparison is offered: that of a bird that barely escapes the clever snare of the bird-hunter. This is electrifying imagery, one that is bound to stir the emotions. What can be more harrowing than narrowly escaping disaster? How deeply such an experience impresses itself upon the memory of any who have gone through it in some form.

The second psalm offers a different comparison: the great, overarching, protective presence of God for His own, likened to the mountains of Israel that seem to stand like mute guardians around His covenant people. In such an image there is peace and security. Fear and terror seem to recede, and in their place is profound confidence in God's stated commitment to defend His adopted children.

This highly poetic imagery may appear to be mere hyperbole, a vast overstatement of the actual nature of things used simply for literary impact. But this is God's Word. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pe. 1:20, 21). For this reason, we have every right --even obligation-- to earnestly search for instructive meaning in these unusual words. "What", we must ask, "is there here that is intended for our personal edification and Christian advancement?" When we approach Scripture in this fashion, we regard it neither as a curiosity, nor entertainment, nor even as great literature, but that which has been supplied to us as a necessity, an essential element to our spiritual success:

Thy word is a lantern unto my feet, and a light unto my paths. (Ps. 119:105) I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food. (Job 23:12b)

When the ungodly pursue the righteous, their intention is to utterly destroy them. In today's theatre of conflict, we can view the battle against us in two planes: the spiritual, and the physical. The former reminds us of sobering words from Ephesians chapter 6:

10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Invisible, organized forces wage war against God's people. Because they are invisible, they can function like guerilla sharpshooters, picking their prey off without fear of reprisal. Not only are their actions directly against the saints, in that they hover all about us, opposing us, but they are indirect insofar as they also enlist the agency of human beings in their opposition. Against such a foe, our own camp appears very small and virtually hopeless.

And so it may actually be. Our own army, whatever is left of it after generations of secularizing, materialistic influence, seems largely AWOL. Sectarian division prevents our joining forces with those who should be our countrymen and fellow warriors. The tide of ungodliness is so effective that the issues at stake often seem utterly obscure and unclear. Effective argument against us provokes doubt and uncertainty: "Maybe I'm just *too* righteous. Perhaps my stance is unnecessarily rigid and unbending. Maybe I *am* intolerant and hidebound by my religious convictions." Every dispatch from the front lines brings, as it were, another apparent defeat to righteousness. Added to the assaults --whether invisible, as already noted, or clearly seen in the increased hostility of an entire society to God's Word and the Church-- are our own inner struggles and despair of spirit.

Do you see the floods and the waves? The snapping teeth of the predator? The sardonic grin of the bird-hunter as he closes in on his small, trembling prey? *IF the LORD himself had not been on our side, now may Israel say; if the LORD himself had not been on our side* (Ps. 124:1). Notice how this phrase is repeated twice, for emphasis. Our doom was assured, without the intervention of God. It is faith, and faith alone, that instructs us that *the LORD, who made heaven and earth*, is committed to our vindication and victory. We will not become a *prey*. We will *escape*, whether soon, or “just in the nick of time”, when the threats are at their worst. This is the literal, actual deliverance that God has promised to us. In faith we must hold on to these words, and cherish them as far truer than the awful evidence of the opposite that confronts our senses continually.

Furthermore, the providence of God, as pictured in Psalm 125, is monumental and substantial. Great, high mountains are awe-inspiring and breathtaking. If we could enlist them as allies, we would take much confidence in their strength, their mass, their huge, silent self-assurance as they defend us from harm. Scripture promises us that God surrounds the righteous with the same resolute protection. It is faith, and faith alone, that grants us grace to perceive that this promise is the actual state of affairs for us, rather than our apparent vulnerability and defenselessness.

These promises are not based upon our claims as American citizens, or our being just “nice people” --nicer than our enemies-- or something that we can claim as a right, because we deserve it. No, they are ours only because they have been graciously conferred upon us by the God that has taken us under His wing, through Jesus Christ. They are a Father’s gift to His children. This alone allows us to take possession of them, by right, because they have been given. Once again, faith is the key, and faith alone. It is our part to walk obediently with the Covenant, and its demands. We forfeit our right to these things by refusing to pay the price to retain them, the price of a life lived only and always for Christ.

Lord, open the eyes of our faith to the hills that stand about Jerusalem, to mount Sion, which may not be removed, but standeth fast forever. Grant us to be among those who are good and true of heart.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.