

PSALM 124 – A SONG FOR TIMES OF CHANGE

Within the world of music, there's one category which transcends all the normal rules of preference and style.

I'm talking, of course, about Christmas music.

Whatever we listen to throughout the year, at Christmastime British people tend to spend a month with the same ten-or-so songs on repeat. Cheesy and out of date they may be, but it's all part of the celebration to sing them together.

Take Chris Rea's *Driving Home for Christmas*. Sure, you can sing it in May. But when you're actually on your way home for Christmas, turn up the volume and something just feels right.

If you're not familiar with Christmas music, perhaps you can think of songs you've grown up singing every year.

Within the songbook of Psalms, a selection are called 'songs of ascent.' These songs were sung annually by Israel as they made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate special festivals. A bit like our Christmas music, these journeying songs would have become part of the celebration itself.

Psalms 124 is one of these. Year by year, the people returned to Jerusalem. Year by year, they returned to these lyrics. David's song served as an annual reminder, comfort along the familiar road. They helped Israel pause and see things afresh.

It's easy for us to go through life, year by year, with the sense that we are making it through mostly by ourselves. It's easy to assume it's due to our hard work, or our grit. Sometimes we look to our friends or our own intelligence to the reason we've got through.

But David asks us to recognise the ultimate reason we've made it through another year: the LORD is on our side. He's asking us to reflect on the dangers that might

have simply knocked us out. Without the LORD, says David, we'd have been swept away.

Imagine the scene as they met afresh in Jerusalem at the start of the year. Each of them as they lift their voice recognising together that they stand there only because of the living God's faithfulness.

It's particularly poignant that we sing this song as we approach the end of an academic year.

What's got you through? Netflix? A sense of humour? Family? Medication?

No doubt, these things and many others have kept us going, and this psalm doesn't cheapen them. We may even learn to see them as part of God's provision for us. Yet David's claim remains: if the LORD had not been on our side, we would have been sucked under.

It might not feel like the LORD is on your side. You might find David's song hard to sing. But David's conviction is based on the fact that his song can be sung in a second, deeper sense. For one of the annual festivals Israel assembled to celebrate was the *Passover*.

The Passover festival was key to Israel's national identity. It remembered how the LORD brought His people out of slavery in Egypt and into their own land. The climax of the original Passover came as the vast Egyptian army closed in to attack Israel. But because the LORD was on the side of his people, he supernaturally parted the waters of the Red Sea, making a path for his people to escape before finally destroying their enemies.

Though future generations only knew these events as distant history, participating in the annual Passover festival taught them that to be an Israelite meant belonging to a people who'd been set free by God's great power.

Now David deliberately employs Passover lyrics, making his song especially fitting to sing at Passover-time.

The 'people attacked us', their 'anger flared against us', sings David. And if the LORD had not been on our side:

the flood would have engulfed us,
the torrent would have swept over us,
the raging waters would have swept us away.

Generations later, Israel are called to identify with their ancestors as those set free by the LORD's mighty hand. They sing: their story is *our* story. We too are only here because of the LORD's provision for us.

And, indeed, David's invitation to join the travelling chorus doesn't end with future generations of Israelites. David invites us to make this our song too, and to know that the LORD is on our side.

The Bible's broader picture is that we too were slaves – in our case, not to unjust human regimes but to a cruel force over our hearts. For wherever we draw the line between good and evil, kind and nasty, clean and dirty, each of us has a track record of choosing badly. By ourselves, to use the psalm's words, none of us can stop rejecting the law of God, or stop choosing the path of the wicked.

Slavery then becomes a fitting metaphor because this is a situation we can't simply walk out of. We can't fix it. No matter how we try, we can't escape choosing paths of disobedience. By ourselves, we're hopeless, wedded to a path of death and judgement.

Yet, because the LORD is on our side, we can be free.

Centuries after David, Jesus also employed the language and imagery of Passover. On the night Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples, he explained that his body would be broken and his blood poured out – and that this would set his people free.

As Jesus died as our Passover sacrifice, he bought us from slavery and invites us into a whole new future.

Jesus' death proves beyond doubt that the LORD is on our side.

As we approach the end of an academic year, it's natural to reflect on the time that's passed. In that spirit, David dares each of us to ask: "What if the LORD God hadn't been on your side?"

Perhaps you'd simply have been engulfed by your troubles. That you're here to fight another day is an indicator of the help the LORD has given you. And to David, this is also a sign of the LORD who loves to provide for his people – not just in our circumstances, but out of slavery and into freedom.

So as we sing this psalm afresh this year, let's direct one another's hearts to the God of unfailing help.