

RETURN TO JOY

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God's Deliverance Returns Me to Joy - Psalm 124

By Peter Eng

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God's Deliverance Returns Me to Joy (Psalm 124, NASB)

A Song of Ascents, of David.

¹ "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side,"
Let Israel now say,

² "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side
When men rose up against us,

³ Then they would have swallowed us alive,
When their anger was kindled against us;

⁴ Then the waters would have engulfed us,
The stream would have swept over our soul;

⁵ Then the raging waters would have swept over our soul."

⁶ Blessed be the LORD,

Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.

⁷ Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the
trapper;

The snare is broken and we have escaped.

⁸ Our help is in the name of the LORD,
Who made heaven and earth.

What if...?

Recently, I had a spill in a small boat on a choppy sea and hurt my foot. It has taken me some three weeks for me to recover enough to do a walk-run, and it still hurts a little. But I am thankful to God for the incident.

My wife and I were on a boat after a delightful little adventure with stingrays. She was feeling thirsty and I went to the cooler to get her some water. The deck was wet and slippery, and I was barefooted. I cannot say if it was a pitch or a roll, but a sudden motion caused me to lose my footing, and I slammed onto the deck. My foot hit something, and there was an abrasion on my knee. The blood from the knee was apparent, and some on the boat were concerned – nice of them. But the real injury was the foot, which was pretty banged-up even though only a slight swell was indicated.

In the days that followed, I was minded to grumble within me that my foot is taking forever to heal. But every time this automatic negative thought comes to my head, I remind myself that I am really grateful it happened to me and not to my wife. She being smaller, I might rightly assume that if she fell, it would have been worse. In addition, my wife is clearly a better caregiver than I would be if she were down. To top this off, I need to thank God that my spill was not worse.

This is but one small event among many in my life

that God has been merciful. But there have been many, and some quite dire indeed.

When God delivers us from a problem, we can choose to see it as God not protecting us. Instead, we ought to pause and ask, "What if the Lord did not protect me." The psalmist says, "*Had it not been the LORD who was on our side ... then they would have swallowed us alive ... then the waters would have engulfed us.*"

Many of us suffer some loss on account of events, as I did when I banged my foot. But far worse than the pain that comes from small spills like these, is the pain of being a victim in the schemes of others. There are times in our life when we are the victims, not of some unfortunate turn of events, but of the deliberate attack of others. Some may attack us out of malice. Some may do it out of greed. Some may even do it in the name of God. When we look back, or see how the LORD has sustained us, our hearts must well up with gratitude, and our hands must lift up to bless the LORD.

The psalmist encountered trials *when "men rose up against us."* It was the evil machinations of man that placed the psalmist and other believers in their predicament. This was a serious crisis. If their enemies succeeded, they would have "*swallowed us alive.*" There is no doubt that the enemies tried to destroy God's people. "*Had it not been the LORD who was on our side,*" we would be "*swallowed*" and "*engulfed*" by the evil doers.

The people of God faced many dire crises. Nebuchadnezzar captured the Jews in Jerusalem and exiled them to Babylon. Many things threatened to extinguish this remnant nation. The Jews faced many daily pressures to lose their identity and become like the Babylonians, and later, the Persians. Under the relatively benign Persians, Haman, a kingpin in the Persian court, attempted genocide against the Jewish people. But God's hidden secret agent, Esther, was God's means of delivering his people. Another dire

period was when Nehemiah and Ezra returned to Jerusalem to rebuild. There, they faced opposition from people who should have been their friends. We do not know when this psalm was written, but there are so many times in the history of the Jewish people that "*had it not been the LORD who was on our side*" the people would have perished.

When we survive the schemes of people who do us harm, we can look at the past event and be unhappy because we think God should have kept us from it, or we can see God's mercy in delivering us, and thus return to joy.

Our walk with God is one of joy. It may not be joy every moment, and certainly not in times of crisis. But when the worst is over, and our enemies fail to destroy us, what do we do?

The psalmist cries out "*Blessed be the LORD.*" He praises God and acknowledges that God has delivered him from grave danger. His danger was like a bird escaping from the fowler's snare.

When a fowler sets a snare for a bird, there is really no escape for the bird. If the snare is a noose to asphyxiate the bird, the bird will die in panic with the noose around its neck. If the noose is for the foot, the bird would not know how to untie it, tug in vain until all strength is gone.

There are times in our life when our best wisdom, and the best wisdom of our friends cannot deliver us from evil machinations. One bird is not able to save another from the snare. But "*the snare is broken and we have escaped.*" God makes a way for us when there is no way.

The help came from God. It does not mean God does not use means, but the means that God uses are unexpected. Who would think that God would use Esther, considered by some Jews to be a traitor of her Jewish identity when she married the king, to deliver the same people who hated her? Who would have thought that God would raise up a Persian king (Cyrus) to facilitate their return from

exile? I can testify that in my own life, when I was without my usual support, God sent me one person, then another, then another, to deliver me in times of trouble. I know they were from the LORD because they were truly unexpected.

What overwhelms us when we survive a crisis? We can remain shaking in fear as we come to grips with what just happened. This is a version of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Or we can return to the joy of the LORD.

"Our help is in the name of the LORD, / Who made heaven and earth."

The name of the LORD (YHWH) is simply the LORD himself. Jews sometimes use a roundabout way when they talk about God. They say "heaven" instead of God, they say "worship his majesty" instead of "worship God." We must not imagine for a moment that we are worshipping God's majesty rather than God himself. It is like when people address royalty as, "Your majesty." To give dignity to the court, it is also customary to address the judge as "your honor," "my lord," or "my lady." When help is in the name of the LORD, it is the LORD himself who helps, and not some magic incantation of a name. It is like in Genesis when we read that people called on the name of the LORD (YHWH). It simply means they called on God. This may have involved a special time of prayer and spiritual commune with God, calling on him in thanksgiving, dependency, or commitment.

The Word of God calls us to the right focus when we escape the snare. First we are to dwell on **what could have gone wrong**. The writer uses several images to convey this.

First, he uses the image of the kindling of a fire. Anger is "kindled against us." Being city raised, I had to learn how to build a fire when I wanted to light the wood stove in our family room. An American friend explained to me about the use of small twigs for kindling. That small fire in turn causes the logs to catch fire. The kindling is a small

but fierce starter fire to ignite a larger biomass. The psalmist recounts with horror how they watched an anger "kindled against us." Some people were deliberately building a fire to burn them alive. They were saying things that were half-truths or interpreting everything in the worst possible light.

There was at least one historic situation when this was true for the Jewish people. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem, the Samaritans, their half-brothers did not like it. So they sent a letter to Artaxerxes, the Persian overlord explaining the danger of the Jews rebuilding, and how this was once a great people, and they aspire to rebellion once the city and walls were rebuilt. There was truth in those assertions, but it was the perspective that was wrong. On receiving the letter and upon investigation, Artaxerxes ordered the Jews to stop (Ezra 4). The Samaritans chose to serve the interest of Artaxerxes in ensuring a weak Judah rather than the interest of their half-brothers. They wanted to dominate those who returned to rebuild Jerusalem and used the insecurity of a pagan king to do that job.

A bad report has a greater strength when there is truth in the report. In the case of the Samaritan opposition to the returning Jews, it was 100% true. And should there come a time when the Jews became strong again, would that not be a good thing? The Samaritans were close to the Jews and a strong Judah would not be in their interest. So they used the prospect of a strong Judah to stop their rebuilding. There was nothing untrue about the Samaritan report. It was their desire for a weak Judah that motivated it. They kindled a fire against their own brothers. Artaxerxes naturally gave a lot of weight to the Samaritans who were related to the Jews and gave such an evil report of them.

Artaxerxes then wrote to the Samaritans, *"So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me"* (Ezra 4:21). The Samaritans won. God's

people lost. *"Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (Ezra 4:24).*

Second, the psalmist uses the image of a predator. He pictures himself as a small prey about to be swallowed up by the predator. The predator was so much bigger, so much stronger. It would be like a big fish that gulps down a little fish whole and alive. *"They would have swallowed us alive."* As the prey, the psalmist, and others with him, was simply no match to the predator. It was a predator they could not fight against. It was a predator against which they had no hope of escape.

Third, he uses the image of drowning. They are like people in a small boat trying to survive gigantic waves. The danger they faced cannot be appealed to. It was a pitiless force to which any plea for mercy could be heard. It is one enormous wave after another, and all it takes is for one of them to land on their little boat and there will be nothing left but splinters.

The impossible odds did not burn them up, did not swallow them alive, and did not drown them.

God delivered. *"Blessed be the LORD, / Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth."*

Our gratitude to God is proportionate to the crisis from which he delivers us. If we have trouble learning gratitude, we need to learn from the psalmist. He goes through the extreme danger he faced so his heart is realigned to God. He demands that his heart listens to the story of danger and deliverance. He demands his heart to hear it again and again, so it will be lifted up in praise to God.

Of course, God is able to deliver. He *"made heaven and earth."* And he now experiences this truth in life.

Jesus healed ten lepers and only one came back to thank him. Gratitude does not come to us naturally. We know it is important to be grateful, but our sinful hearts have to be trained for it.

Every child who is born wails for food, for love, and for all good things. It takes years, even decades before parents will hear words of appreciation, and see deeds of gratitude from their children. We are those children. Gratitude is a wonderful virtue quite contrary to our natural selfish responses.

Gratitude returns us to joy.

Gratitude is better than medicine to address our post-traumatic anxieties. Gratitude for God's deliverance causes us to look at God's mercy, grace, and goodness. *"Blessed be the LORD!"* How good and how healing it is to bless the LORD!



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