

Psalm 124
Bearing Witness to God's Help
a series on discipleship

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Have you ever felt disappointed by God? Have you ever expressed anger at God for something that happened to you or someone that is close to you? Have you ever blamed God for a tragic experience you've faced? I know many people, as I know you do too, who have experienced some terrible tragedy or crises, blamed God, and left the church completely. When life doesn't unfold the way we want, how quick we are to conclude that God is against us, that God has abandoned us, that God no longer loves us. How quick we are to conclude that when tragedy and evil come upon us, it means God isn't actually real. Or if God is real, then he certainly isn't a God who is good, loving, merciful, or compassionate.

We are God's people. We are people who, by God's mercy and grace, are becoming the redeemed people ready for life in God's Kingdom. It's therefore not uncommon for us to be confronted by family, friends, peers, colleagues, and neighbours who ask us to explain where God was in a horrific event. In the face of tragedy and crisis, it's not uncommon for the world to demand to know why a good God let it happen and why a good God didn't stop it from happening. Where was God during the tornado in Ottawa? Where was God this summer during the long un-ending season of forest fires in BC? Where was God when my aged parents suddenly got Alzheimer's and forgot their identity? Where was God when I had a miscarriage? Where was God when I had a divorce? Where was God when my brother was murdered? Faced with such questions, we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, feel the need to defend God. We feel it is our duty to explain God's love and mercy and care in such desperate circumstances.

What is the calling of the disciple and pilgrim of Jesus Christ? What are the ‘job responsibilities’ of the Christian? Well, there are many things Jesus tells us to do, many things he teaches us to believe and say and practice. He shows us how to live as Kingdom of God people through the virtues of humility, chastity, truth-telling. He teaches us how to pray. He does signs and wonders so that we may believe in Him. But he never tells us to defend His divinity or Sonship, he never tells us that we must explain why tragedy strikes. Instead, Jesus tells us to be his witnesses in the world. We are to bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ through our actions: through the way we treat others, through our worship, through our speech, through the church. We are not primarily here to defend and explain God to others but to witness to who God is.

We see this posture of witness throughout Psalm 124. It isn’t a defense of God. It isn’t an explanation of how God helps. It isn’t an argument for God’s existence. It is a witness of who God is. It is a testimony of God’s help. After all, the declaration begins in Psalm 124 *“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side”* then the Psalmist invites the whole of Israel to witness *“Let Israel now say – if it had not been the Lord who was on our side”*. The Psalmist ends with this great declaration: *“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth”*.

That being said, there are important occasions and reasons wherein apologetics – which is the defense of religious doctrine using systematic reasoning and dialogue – are needed and acceptable. We see the Apostle Paul often engaged in apologetics with the Jews and the Gentiles. It is also important for us to listen to the complaints and concerns of others about the existence of God and discern wisely how to respond to such queries. It is important work for the Christian to listen to the life experiences of those who blame God for various life circumstances.

In fact, other times, we ourselves are engaged in a battle of reason, thought, logic and emotion as we try and figure out what we believe. No where is such rigorous examination of beliefs felt most keenly than during our adolescent years or during an experience of great pain and suffering.

The well known theologian, scholar, and professor C.S. Lewis is one example of someone who wrestled deeply with his faith. As a child, he was raised to believe and love the Triune God and subsequently developed a child-like Christian faith. But in his adolescent and young adult years he altogether abandoned his childhood faith and became a vocal and convinced atheist. One of the main reasons for his turning away from God and denying the existence of God was the tragic and untimely death of his mother when he was a young boy. That traumatic experience, combined with his perceptive observations of cruelty, wickedness, suffering, pain, frailty, and tragedy in the world convinced him that a good and loving God does not exist. After all, as many argue and as C.S. Lewis concluded as a teenager and young adult, if God is a good God then God would not allow so much evil and pain and suffering in the world. So he turned away from God, passionately arguing his atheistic beliefs. In reality, C.S. Lewis was angry and hurt at the very God he wanted to deny existed. A scholar by training and skilled in debate, logic, critical thinking, he began to rigorously defend his atheistic belief. Yet in that process, he eventually convinced himself that God does exist and Jesus Christ really is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord, the King. For so long, C.S. Lewis denied God's existence due to that perennial problem: the problem of evil. The problem of pain. The problem of suffering. Is this not a barrier to so many to believe in the God of love, mercy, forgiveness, hope?

In as much as we engage in apologetics and we listen to the complaints and concerns of others, we must also not completely discount the bold declaration of Psalm 124. As we weigh the arguments for/against God; as we weigh the complaints of personal experience of tragedy and loss which concludes a good and loving God does not exist, we must also consider Psalm 124. We must also listen to the voice of the Psalmist who declares with such striking confidence, assurance, and boldness that God is on our side. Even though we individually and personally experience trouble, even though we observe trouble all around us in Whitehorse and in the world, we must also carefully listen to the voice of the Psalmist who proclaims that God is indeed our help. Psalm 124 is both a witness to who God is and a help for us to understand the relationship between God and evil.

Let's listen together to the words of the Psalmist. As we read this, we will consider the fifth skill of discipleship: the skill that bears witness to God's help for us. The Psalm is bookended by a simple declaration "God is for us", "God is on our side", "God will help us". It begins with one person declaring God is for us. Then the entire people of God join in with the declaration that God is on our side. It is a reminder to us that God's help to us isn't a private and personal experience only. The private and personal experience of receiving God's help becomes a corporate reality. It becomes part of the shared community's experience. It is a reminder to us that our personal and private experiences of God's help are to be shared in the community, so that the whole people of God declare that indeed God is our help. After all, we as a church are called to witness to the world – we must boldly declare that God is on our side. After all, God's help to us is the norm, it is to be expected among the people of God.

The Psalmist opens and closes the Psalm with that bold declaration that God is on our side; that God is for us; that God helps us. Then in verses 2-6, we read the backdrop or background for such a declaration. We read in verses 2-6 why the Psalmist can say with certainty that God is on our side. Now, this backdrop isn't what you might expect it to be. The Psalmist doesn't begin to describe these wonderful, positive, joyous experiences. The Psalmist doesn't go into detail about the many gifts from God.

No, the Psalmist describes with vivid and poetic imagery the troubles and problems encountered. In order to tell us about God's help to us, we hear about the various dangers of life: of being swallowed up alive, of being swept away, of being submerged, of being torn apart, of being trapped in a net. The first image is that of being swallowed up alive which is a metaphor related to the action of a great sea monster or dragon threatening to consume. Then we read about a flood sweeping over us; the image is of a flash flood, an unexpected surge of water that can threaten to take us away. The third image is of raging waters and we imagine someone who is hopelessly struggling in turbulent waters, we imagine someone who is drowning. In verse six we read the fourth image. It's a picture of predator and prey; of the beast about to devour its victim.

The Psalmist intentionally uses these vivid images of harm, evil, and destruction and yet can still declare at the end that God is our help. The Psalmist has known great struggle and difficulty yet still declares that God is our help. This is the fifth skill of discipleship: bearing witness to God's help to us in the face of evil.

The Psalmist's portrayal of the various struggles that were overcome: a dragon or monster; turbulent and raging waters, being prey or victim to a cruel beast are not images we really relate to. But there are countless dangers that the Christian disciple faces in one's life. I don't speak of dangers which threaten our physical life, but I speak of the dangers which threaten to cause us to turn our eyes away from God Almighty and deny his love for us and deny his existence.

The New Testament outlines three important gifts of grace that God gives to us as disciples: faith, hope, and love. Galatians 5:5-6 reads *"but by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* Or 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:5-8 *"We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet."* Or perhaps the most well-known passage that integrates faith, hope, and love: 1 Corinthians 13:13 *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."*

You see every day, faith, hope, and love are vulnerable to danger and threat. Every day, our faith in God is tried. Every day, our hope in God is tried. Every day, our love for God and for one another is tried.

We live in a world where every statement, belief, idea, and thought is measured, evaluated, tested, assessed, criticized, analyzed, quantified, and qualified. Everything undergoes a rigorous scientific and psychological examination. In the face of such arduous cross-examination for our

beliefs, we Christian disciples still insist that God is holy, eternal, and sovereign. We insist on making decisions about how to live based on our belief that God is at the centre, holding all things together. We still insist on believing that the one which no eye has seen and no ear has heard and whose being no one can know is the One who created us, loves us, and is redeeming us. In our world, in this age, every day our faith is tried as we choose to obey the One who is above all and in all.

We live in a world where we don't know what will happen ten years from now, one year from now, one month from now, or even what will happen tomorrow. We live in a world that can change dramatically and drastically – from births and deaths to earthquakes and tornadoes to drug overdoses and miraculous healings. Yet we as Christian disciples insist on reminding each other that God continues to work out all things for the good of those who love Him. We as disciples of Jesus Christ insist on declaring that He who began a good work will bring it to completion. We as disciples of the Living God insist on believing that God will accomplish his will – healing and forgiveness and restoration and new creation. So every day we insist on having hope. We hope that God is working. We hope that, like the Psalmist's cry in Psalm 121, there truly is nothing that will separate us from God's love and care for us. It is a risk for the Christian disciple to have hope in a world that shifts and moves so fluidly and quickly.

We live in a world where someone is more likely to ask “how does this help me” rather than “how can I help others”. We live in a world where people are more inclined to respond to their own needs and wants, their own desires and perceptions. We live in a world dominated by selfies and self-propaganda, a world dominated by the pursuit of self and success. Yet we as Christian

disciples insist on making ourselves vulnerable to the frustrations and joys that come when we selflessly love another. We as Christian disciples insist on showing love to another even when we are betrayed, disappointed, and hurt. We as Christian disciples insist that loving another is better than pursuing my self interests. It is a risk for the Christian disciple to love in a world that emphasizes self over the other.

To be a Christian in this world is hard. It comes with dangers and threats. Each day we wake up and insist on following the ways of faith, hope, and love that Jesus taught us. And each day we do that, we come face to face with the monsters of the sea, the raging and turbulent waters, and the predator pouncing on its victim. We come face to face with all that threatens to take away our faith, hope, and love.

In these circumstances where faith, hope, and love seem to be tried every day; where faith, hope, and love seem to be contrary to the ways of the world, it can be easy for the Christian to withdraw and recede into themselves. When the Christian looks at the world and sees the ways the monsters attack, the floods rage, and the predator devours, it is easy for the Christian to conclude that all is lost and there is no more hope for God has abandoned us. It is easy for the Christian disciple to become weary and exhausted. After all, it is not hard to conclude that the unrighteous flourish while the righteous suffer. It is easy to conclude, as C.S. Lewis once did, that God does not exist because there is just too much pain and suffering and trouble.

But look at what the Psalmist says. The Psalmist declares that in the face of such dangers and threats, God is on our side. God is for us. God is with us. God helps us. The Christian disciple

does not express doom and gloom, not fear or fatigue, not angst or disappointment. The Christian disciple, in the face of such dangers which threaten our faith, hope, and love, praises God saying *“The Lord is on our side. Blessed be the Lord. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth”*.

In this Psalm, we hear the faith skill which digs deep in an experience of trouble to find the presence of the God who is on our side. For God is always revealed in the intimacy of pain, in the details of trouble, in the specifics of our personal stories. Faith, hope, and love always grow and develop in the experiences of the monster, the raging sea, and the predator.

Why does this happen? Why, in the face of such evil and terror and horror, do we find God? Well, evil is like wildfire. We all know that a wildfire devours and destroys absolutely everything in its path unless it comes up against a greater and stronger power like water or a retardant. Evil consumes everything unless there is a greater and stronger power that can stop it, that can overcome it, that can prevent its total destruction. And so, were it not for the all-powerful good God, evil would have destroyed all of humanity by now. Evil would have destroyed much of what God created and loves were it not for the existence and power of God. Evil wields its power when the sovereign God chooses not to intervene. And at some ordained time known only to God our Father in Heaven, God will for once and for all completely terminate all the forces of evil in the world. But until then, God is our help, who continues to prevent evil from destroying everything. We find God in the experiences of evil and terror and horror stopping it from consuming everyone and everything.

I'm reminded of a photo that Pastor Greg gave me when he retired. The photo still sits in the same place in the study we shared for three years. Pastor Greg told me several years ago, when I first moved to Whitehorse, that if you dig deep enough you will always find gold. In other words, if you look hard enough, if you peel back the complaints, the concerns, the hurts, there you will always find that God is on our side. God is with us. God is our help.

The same God who created the heavens and the earth, the same God who created order out of chaos, beauty out of darkness, life out of nothing, is the same God who helps us in our personal and corporate lives. He helps us by not allowing the evil to consume all of us. And it is the skill of the disciple to boldly witness to his help.

The Christian disciple boldly declares God's help in a world that is broken and suffering. The Christian disciple sing songs of God's victorious help in the spaces that are downright messy and complicated. The Christian disciple chooses to be joyful in a world that does not understand the source of our joy. You see, the Psalmist recognized that it is not the monster or the sea or the predator which defines our lives. It is not the ways of the world or the culture which defines us. What defines us is the help we experience, not the trouble. The Christian disciple is shaped not by the evil we face but by the help of the Lord, the help from the One who made the heavens and the earth.