

GOD WITH US

Rev. A. A. Brugge - Psalm 124

Sing: Psalter 400: 3, 4

Read: Psalm 124

Sing: Psalter 353: 1-2

Sing: Psalter 353: 3

Sing: Psalter 132: 5

Congregation, we wish to meditate together on Psalm 124. The theme of this psalm is: God with us.

Three thoughts unfold this theme:

1. Who He is;
2. What He did (verses 1-5);
3. What He does (verses 6-8).

1. Who He is

Like Psalms 120-123, Psalm 124 is a song of degrees, a pilgrim's song. Our feelings often dictate what and how we sing. That is why the one time we sing of struggles and another time we sing of victory. Yes indeed, we also sing songs of victory. And when we sing of victory we wish to mention the Fountain, the Source of that victory. God's children do not sing only because they are so happy to have been delivered from distress and death. No, they would much rather sing about the Lord, Who delivered them from that misery. Hence, our first thought: Who He is.

He is the LORD. That is His name. Does not Solomon call that Name a 'strong tower' (Proverbs 18:19)? How glorious and excellent is His Name, the I AM THAT I AM. He is faithful. Satan is the most unfaithful being. His servants are people, children of Adam like you and me. He causes them to be unfaithful, people who have fallen from God. In contrast, the Lord makes His people faithful

in observing His service, returning to Him Who saved Israel in an unexpected and unknown way. His service brings us closer to Him, Who is the eternal One; to the God Who has neither beginning nor end. It brings us to Him Who revealed Himself unto Israel.

This Psalm exalts the Lord as the Almighty God. Compared to Him I am so small, so insignificant. Yet, this high and lofty Lord looks down in mercy on sinners. The secret of Emmanuel (His name means ‘God with us’) is His electing love. His electing love from eternity gives birth as it were to that only Name through which *God with us* becomes reality: Christ. A virgin (i.e. Mary) shall bear a son, so we read in Isaiah 7: 14. She shall call His name Emmanuel: God with us.

But, in this Psalm the poet speaks about different matters. We hear him speak about being caught in snares, about being bound in iron and in chains. He gives an honest record of the situation and does not make it a non-issue by reasoning. He does not smile them away, in that way trying to minimize the troubles. No, amidst all the troubles he experiences he still sings, GOD WITH US! To make this rich confession, ‘*God with us*’ is only possible through God’s own Child, the Lord Jesus Christ. With other words, ‘God with us’ confesses the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost.

The psalmist knows by experience the comfort that God has been in the midst of His people. He testifies that the Lord is near. No, this is not merely a product of the imagination, a feeling or an emotion. It is a deep confession: God is with us, God is also with me, so near and so personal.

Beloved, when you read, “*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now may Israel say*”, who do you think is making this confession so publically and uprightly? After all, it would be rather easy to just outwardly repeat such a confession. But what kind of people make such confessions with an inward, burning, desire? Only a child of God who looks up to his God. Only a child of God can confess this from the heart. Such a one looks up to God with deep respect.

This now is to truly confess, to confess in wonder, in quiet adoration. Here you see a child of God blushing with shame as it were, and deeply humbling himself before God because of his sin. Yet, the “nevertheless” of faith enables him to make this confession.

Someone who does not know God does not make such a confession. At best, he might say, “Life is governed by chance.” Someone else may say, “My own insights are the reason why I am doing so well in life.” Yet another one says -- and it even sounds religious --, “The Lord blessed the means.” However, David, the poet of this Psalm, directs us in this song of degrees to another Fountain. The Lord rules everything; He governs the whole world. The world does not know of such confessions. The world says with Pharaoh, “Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?” And, congregation, this is the world in which we and our children live, study and work. Science blatantly says the same, “Why should I concern myself with God? I cannot imagine what He is like; I cannot see Him so...He does not exist.”

By the way, by nature you and I are no better. If you do not love the Lord, if you do not know Him, if you do not serve Him and fear Him, then you are still outside the Kingdom of God. If the Lord has not been the First one in your life, though you may be a faithful church attendant, a man or woman who holds on to the customs, then you cannot confess that He is your Everything in life. Perhaps you do confess it with your mind, but that will not save you.

Beloved, why is there sometimes so much bitterness and enmity in life? Perhaps you are even afraid to confess God’s Name in your station of life. Maybe you do not have the courage to confess His service openly, whereas He is so worthy to be confessed. In reality, you are ashamed of God’s precious Name when you don’t confess Him. But can we then let the world mock and ridicule His Name? Is science allowed to provoke His Name? O let us not be ashamed of Him! How great it would be if you would be able to confess in this God-less world that He is your all and that your heart goes out to this God because you have learned

to know Him personally. Ought we not all to cover our faces and humble ourselves before the Lord? You should not be ashamed of it when your heart burns with desire for Him!

“Yes, but”, you say, “I am a stranger to grace; I possess nothing. Then I cannot make such a confession, can I?” Yes, in itself that is true, but, nevertheless, must we then be ashamed of Him? The world is not ashamed of their idols, are they? They are not shy in sharing their love for sports and entertainment. What influence and enthusiasm they have! That is the spirit of “Let us eat and drink and be merry”. That is the life elixir of the world. And if we are not careful and do not pray against these temptations, we too yield to that spirit. And are at risk of breaking out in even worse sins, despite our upbringing.

Are you perhaps ashamed to use God’s Name, for example, during your lunch hour? Are you perhaps ashamed to fold your hands before your meal? Do you try to ignore it when you hear someone in a store using God’s name in vain, maybe without the person even being aware of it? The heart of the psalmist burns in love for the Lord. Does your heart burn of love for Him?

Amidst the struggles of his life, David makes this beautiful confession that the Lord is yet his Saviour Who cares for him in all his tribulations. Or is it no tribulation when this is a daily experience:

*With anguish as from piercing sword
Reproach of bitter foes I hear,
While day by day, with taunting word
Where is thy God, the scoffers sneer? (Psalter 114:9)*

Is it no tribulation when the inner voice says, “Is this difficult way really the way it has to be? Are such deep ways really necessary?” *“If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, now may Israel say.”* The poet clings to God and does not allow himself to be influenced by contrary voices. He is not desperate; he refuses to be swept along with the torrent of the nice and exciting things of this world.

Children, bow your knees and pray to the Lord when you feel tempted. Older ones, pray: Lead me not into temptation. Parents, do not shy away from saying “No” to your children when they want to relax the boundaries. You need not be ashamed for those normal, very practical, things in their daily upbringing. This poet is not ashamed either. Yes, he does relate of the deep sorrows of affliction. Yet, he is a blessed man. A blessed man who, in the midst of his deep complaints, still knows one thing: The Lord is in control! That is the secret of a life close to Emmanuel, God with us. No, the poet is not irrational in his view of life, he is totally of-this-earth, but his secret is: God with us!

Do God’s children always live according to this secret? Do they always have this faith in exercise? Can they always perceive things as they really are? Not at all. But this psalmist seeks a refuge Above; his eye is looking upwards. Do you also know of such looking upwards? God’s children do that as it were automatically, without prior reasoning.

When the Lord comes in your life, then you will learn to know Him as the Fountain against Whom you have sinned and from Whom you have fallen away in Paradise. But the Lord, the Triune God, will also teach you to expect it from Him alone. He brings you on your knees, praying that He will answer you. All your desires and love are directed to Him. No, you may not have a ready answer, nevertheless your heart burns full of love and full of affection towards Him only. He alone is the Fountain from which flow forth the words of eternal life for you. He alone is the Fountain of life, Who will revive that which is dead in your heart and soul, and bring it back to life again. Such salvation can only be obtained by the Lord. No, we must not go to the Lord with *our* “calculated” prayers, for that is not praying in faith. That is not trusting in the Lord. Trusting and believing is: Lord to Thee I fly!

Beloved, we are so receptive to what the world has to say, but may I ask you: Did God’s Spirit teach you Who the Lord is? Do you, by grace, know God and

yourself? Do you know this Emmanuel? Oh, I wish I could cause you to set your soul's affections on the Son of God! There is reconciliation only in Him, because He satisfied the demands of the Law. There is forgiveness with Him, even for the greatest of sinners. The Holy Spirit reveals Him in the hearts of His children.

When faith is in exercise, God's children may at times sing, although they might not be able to look beyond their difficult circumstances. Yet they pray to Him Who is enthroned on high and say, "*The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*" Then you may confess for this life, but especially for your soul's life:

*Tho' flesh and heart should faint and fail,
The Lord will ever be
The strength and portion of my heart,
My God eternally.*

O what a wonder when we are enabled to say: *my God!*

2. What He did

"*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, now may Israel say...*". And then follows an account of a variety of events that had taken place. The poet says for example in verse 2, "*When men rose up against us*". Let us look at verse 2 in a bit more depth.

You may perhaps know that the Hebrew word for 'man' is 'Adam'. The man Adam and all what belongs to him, everything that follows Satan, stands up in unity as one great force against the Lord and His Anointed. Whereas the Lord shows love and compassion toward His Zion, Adam's posterity is filled with intense resentment. Man rebels against Zion's God. But, the evil spirit which works in man to make him rebel against the Lord and His Anointed is fully responsible for his deeds. And man himself too.

Psalm 2 says that the people imagine a vain thing, and they take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed. For example, under disguise of science they question the Bible, they question creation. They collectively rebel

against the Lord and His Anointed, against the Lord and His people. Throughout the entire history of the church we see Satan's claws stretched out to destroy the church.

Satan always aims his attacks on those in whose heart the Lord has begun a good work. It shows his bitter enmity. In North-Korea Satan is successful by causing a bitter and brutal persecution, the persecutors not even shunning to execute believers. Satan and his helpers are filled with bitter enmity. In our country we do not suffer such persecution ..., yet. But be not mistaken. Here too Satan is driven by the same bitter enmity. Particularly those who fear the Lord are the subject of his attacks, also in our country.

People, fuelled by a bitter enmity, target God's people to deceive them and sometimes God's children even let themselves be swept along, in that way bringing much darkness to their soul. Yes, that is when Satan is happy. It shows his bitter enmity and his brute force. No, on the outside it may not look like bitter enmity and brute force, for it often appears in a beautiful disguise. But inside, there is bitter enmity against God and His Church.

Not only Satan opposes the Lord. Do you know what else opposes Him? The way we spend our time! Children, how do you use your time? Do you give of your time for the things of the Lord? Or do you waste your time on idle and useless things? I know that if you do not go along with the world people will mock you. Oh, how much we need to wear the whole armour of faith, which the Lord gives His children upon regeneration! Otherwise we all succumb to this bitter enmity. Do you know that Satan has only one goal? He wants to bring you and me in the bottomless pit, for ever separated from God.

"If it had not been the Lord... when men rose up against us". Sometimes such men only have to say one word and we cringe already. Yes, that also applies to people who have received grace. I think of the prophet Elijah. His biggest enemy was Queen Jezebel. What did she say? *"So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this*

time.” In other words, “By about this time tomorrow, Elijah will have had the same treatment as the prophets of Baal who have been killed.”

Elijah trembled with fear and fled. Under the juniper tree he languished. In such situations, it is the Lord alone Who can comfort Elijah, and all God’s children, by letting them hide under the shadow of the Almighty. Perhaps you understand Elijah very well. Maybe people point an accusing finger at you and say, “Is your God like that? A God Who makes your life so miserable; Who makes you to grieve, and causes you to suffer pain, sorrow and depression?”

Another enemy says sneeringly, “When you pray for your food, does that mean that it will taste better?” Oh, the hatred and bitterness! And even our own heart sometimes says, “Why should I still read the Bible? Will I really profit from it?” That is the cloak with which enmity covers itself. Perhaps there are people among us who recognise and experience this enmity and opposition.

Many people say, “The church may give some meaning to your life, but there are many other forms of making sense of life. The Muslim calls it Allah. The Buddhist calls it Buddha, and the Hindus have their many gods. Everyone believes in his own way.” “No”, says the poet, “There is but one God, the living God, the LORD, Jehovah! He is the God of Israel. When mighty waves rolled over me, He gave me strength and courage.”

Congregation, recall how we started this second point: Men rise up against the Lord and His Anointed. Think of Abraham who was tempted to lie. And think of David who yielded to the temptation to transgress against the seventh Commandment. Think also of Peter who lied by denying His Master. He lied to people, yes, but also to the Lord. Children of God, when people rise up against us we usually do not have a ready answer. Who can protect himself against all the attacks of Satan? What will happen if I will be dragged along, where will I end up? Beloved, that ends in deep darkness.

“If it had not been the Lord!” The Lord Himself cared for Abraham and that is why he escaped from the snares. The Lord Himself cared for His child David

also. He sent Nathan to relieve David from the snares and to bring him to an upright confession of guilt. Peter too could say, *“If it not had been the Lord”*. The Lord Himself sought for His lost sheep on the shore of the sea of Tiberias and there examined his heart. Abraham, David and Peter all could say, *“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side”*. If the Lord had not brought me back, I would have perished. I would have carried on in sin and would have been eternally lost. But in His electing love the Lord brought me back again at His feet. God is with me and will continue to be with me. His rod and His staff comfort me. I had wandered away, but He brought me back from my foolish ways. He brought me to repentance.

Do you know how the Lord does that? By eyes full of love. So Jesus’ eyes locked into Peter’s and that caused Peter’s soul to melt. Not by harsh words, but by love.

Let me ask again, do you know how the Lord does that? The Lord sends His servant Nathan to David, who confronts David with himself: *“Thou art the man!”* Is that not a message from the Lord Himself? Is that not to the honour of His Name? The Lord does not want David to carry on in his sinful ways. He does not want David’s life to end in eternal darkness. Through this convicting message David receives a broken heart and a contrite spirit. The fire of that sacrifice was lighted by the Lord Himself!

The poet of this Psalm speaks about snares, snares made by people. People came with friendly faces; they wore beautiful clothes, they spoke flattering words, and ... they rose up against us. There were many different snares. The enemies would have swallowed us up alive when their wrath was kindled against us. The waters would have overwhelmed us. Our soul would have been swept away with the torrent. The billows would have gone over our soul.

What kind of snares does David refer to? Well, the snare of going his own ways. Do you know which snare is the worst of all? The snare of pretended godliness, which is all about *“me”*, which has man in the centre. In reality, that is

nothing else than the wisdom of this world. That is the image of modern man. Yes, there is much emotion in such religion, that is true. And it is warm and cozy. But do you know what typifies true religion? True religion cannot just grasp salvation. No, reverently said, salvation is not something that you can turn on with the flick of a switch.

True religion focuses on the Lord. When men rise up against us, we are an easy prey. Why is that? Because we do not watch and pray that the Lord would not lead us into temptation. True religion does not give in “only here and there”, does not go along “just a little bit” and does not yield to the thought, “Let’s not be too difficult”. Do you know what true religion is? To live very close to the Lord! No, not only close to the Lord when you sit in church and when perhaps the Word of God makes impressions on your soul.

No, not only on Sunday, but also during the week when you are among your family, or when you are at the building site, in your office or at school or university. What a wonder it would be if you would live so close to the Lord, with a tender conscience. In contrast, when your conscience does not speak in accordance with God’s Word then increasingly your Christian profession and lifestyle will diverge. Such a life fails to make positive impressions on others. Do you know what true religion is? To live near the Lord. Your neighbours, your colleagues and your own family will be jealous of such a life.

Beloved, do you know what a snare is? A snare is a tool that Satan uses. The Lord alone can break such snares. Psalm 124 speaks of the God Who breaks snares. God with us! Are there times that you also can say, “God with me?”

*Thou art my shield and glory, Lord,
My Savior, O Most High.
The Lord from out His holy hill
Gives answer when I cry. (Psalter 5:2)*

Have there been times in your life that the Lord was close to you? Occasions perhaps which now are disputed in your soul or by Satan, but the memory of which can never be erased from your mind?

Is it the big question of your life, “But how is it that I am like this? Why is my heart so hard? Why does everything leave me so cold?” Who does not know of such struggles, you who fear the Lord? “How it is possible?”- that is your earnest question. Sure, you can never forget what He has done in your life. But now your heart seems to be as hard as a rock. Nothing is able to affect it in the slightest. Listen then in our third point to what He does. But let us first sing Psalter 353:3.

*Blest be the Lord Who made us not their prey;
As from the snare a bird escapeth free,
Their net is rent and so escaped are we;
Our only help is in Jehovah's Name,
Who made the earth and all the heav'nly frame.*

3. What He does

“*Blessed be the LORD*” (vs 6). What a sincere confession! A confession made at this present moment! “*Blessed be the LORD*”. Is this a giving thanks out of custom, because one is supposed to give thanks? Is this a prayer, because man must pray? No, the poet exults, “*Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth.*” Now we understand the meaning of the text in truth. The Lord gave deliverance, and our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers. Death stared us in the face, but... the snare broke and we escaped. Hence, verse 8 summarizes it as follows, “*Our help is in the name of the LORD, who has made the heaven and the earth.*”

Beloved, Israel has not been swallowed up. No, the country was still there, the pilgrims were still travelling and still sang these songs of degrees. That was not because they effected the deliverance by themselves; it was not by means of their military strategies and their insights; it was not because of their shrewdness and cleverness. No, it was only because of what the Lord had done!

What a confession this is! Here you have an example of what it means to look away from self! This is a confession regarding a received gift. The poet experientially knows that he has nothing of himself. But that which he has is freely given to him; he has received it from the Lord for time and eternity. The voice of God and His dealings prevented his destruction. And this God is still the same. When He said to the daughter of Jairus, “I say unto thee, Arise”, she arose. When He says to you, “Arise”, you will indeed arise from your comfortable bed of superficial living.

When the Lord says, “*I say unto thee, Arise!*”, you will immediately leave your sinful life and your loathsome transgressions and iniquities. When the Lord says, “*I say unto thee, Arise!*”, mercy is not distant any longer, the door in the valley of Achor is very close by.

God, as it were, points with His finger: here, here is the Door, the way to escape, the gate of the Lord through which the righteous shall enter. God’s children will end in God and God alone! That was so in the time of Psalm 124 and it is still so today. That is why we may say and sing, “*Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to day and forever*”. The same! In the midst of all tumults He stays the same.

Beloved, the world deceives and ruins your heart. Do you seek the world or do you flee from it? Arm yourself against it by going on your knees. Satan confuses and divides. And what an easy prey we are because we enjoy being flattered. But it will lead us to everlasting destruction. Those who are graven upon the palms of God’s hands, in the eternal decree, are sure and safe in Him Who is the same yesterday and today and forever. God has given His Son, the Mediator. Rest and peace for a troubled soul can only be found in Him. You can still get to know this God. Our help is not from science, and not from carnal reasoning, but our help is from the Lord alone.

His hand and His blessing is upon me. And that is the biggest wonder: He will ever be the Faithful One, He will never forsake the works of His own hands.

Are you able to break the power of sin in your life? No, but there is One Who can. Has He become your Help? There is but One Who can bring you back under the wings of His protection.

This poet lives in dependency on that great Name of God Who is holy and good for all His people. Can you relate to this poet? Is it your prayer, “Lord be Thou my helper too!”? Or have you already been privileged to know with assurance that He is your Helper? Do you know by experience:

*I love the Lord, for my request
And humble plea He makes His care;
In Him through life my faith shall rest,
For He both hears and answers prayer (Psalter 310:1)*

What is your help? Do you put your hope in a pious confession? In statements without a foundation?

Congregation, what is this help? This help is in the Name of the Lord. His Name is given above every name, so that every knee should bow for that Name and every tongue confess that He is Lord! That help is in the name of Jesus, the Saviour; that help is in the name of Christ, the Anointed, Who is able to save. He is the One qualified and appointed by God; He is the Redeemer Who came to deliver and save.

*How blessed, Lord, are they who know the joyful sound,
Who, when they hear Thy voice, in happiness abound!
With steadfast step they walk, their countenances beaming
With brightness of the light that from Thy face is streaming;
Exalted by Thy might from depths of desolation,
They praise fore'er Thy Name, Thy justice and salvation. (Psalter422:5)*

Our help is in the Name of the Lord. One more time I would like to ask you: Is He your Helper? Do you know that Name by experience? Have you tasted the sweetness of His consolation? Is He your Rock? Is He for you the Fairest among men? Leaning upon this Rock you will not fall. Then you may say: He is my

portion for ever. He is my all for time and eternity. He has loved me with an eternal love. That is why that love can never be broken. He has drawn me with cords of lovingkindness and mercy.

The Lord also preserves His work, day after day, according to His almighty power which God's children confess. Such an insignificantly small human being, such a weak person, such a guilty soul looks up to the Lord, Who has made the heaven and the earth. God's people know that His help will not fail. The help of the Lord Who has created heaven and earth is for them a place of refuge where their soul may hide and find comfort in times of sorrow. In Him they find refreshment, light in the darkness, and drink in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is and where they would have to perish forever. Do you know what God's children find in their Lord? No tongue on earth is capable of praising the beauty of this King according to how He is worthy to be praised. Nobody is able to proclaim the sweetness of His Name as He deserves. The God of all these pilgrims cares for them on their pilgrimage. And they all agree with David, *"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, ... then they had swallowed us up quick."*

But they also know of the cry of joy, *"Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snares of the fowlers: the snare was broken, and we are escaped!"* That is true liberty! No, then God's children are no longer ensnared by Satan, but they are delivered from sin, delivered from transgressions and iniquities. When they may embrace Him by faith, He removes all that which makes a separation.

Beloved, what a depth is in this Psalm 124. Can you join in and sing along in unison with the choir of the communion of the saints? Are you looking forward to this? This God is still at work! Daily He adds to the church such as should be saved. The most important question for us is: Is this also true for me?

Amen.

Closing Psalter 132: 5

*This mighty God forever lives
Our God and Saviour to abide,
And till our pilgrim days shall end
Will ever be our faithful guide.*