

WHAT IF GOD WAS NOT ON OUR SIDE?

Today's Text: Ps. 124

Extracts:

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side;” let Israel now say- “If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive, when their wrath was kindled against us.” ... Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth [Ps. 124: 1-3, 8]

*The Caribbean is a chain of islands, which stretches from Trinidad (and its sister-island, Tobago) in the south to Bermuda on the northeast coast of the United States of America. The region is a haven for tourists from Europe and America, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Caribbean is also susceptible to violent hurricanes from April to October of each year. During this period, any of the lovely islands of the region can be at the mercy of violent storms, which originate from the Atlantic Ocean and gather destructive speed as they approach land. In the last few weeks alone, three vicious hurricanes have struck. The one that is on right now is called Hurricane **Ivan**.*

*As **Ivan** approached the island of Jamaica (with a population of 2.6 million), there was panic. The hurricane had earlier devastated Grenada to the south of Jamaica, with 26 people dead and 97% of homes destroyed. Given the forecast for Jamaica, the government of Trinidad & Tobago sent a plane to evacuate its citizens from the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. The Jamaicans remembered Hurricane **Gilbert** (1988), which killed dozens of people and inflicted massive damages. They knew that their preparations for safety were inadequate, especially as **Ivan** (Category 5) was predicted going to be more vicious than **Gilbert** (Category 3). The residents went on their knees to God in prayers and asked for a miracle. Then, on the night of Friday, 10 September 2004, when **Ivan** reached Jamaica, it “unexpectedly spared the island from a direct hit” and the country “was saved the full brunt of **Ivan**’s fury by an unexpected wobble and lurch to the east.”¹*

*Was Jamaica just lucky or the hand of God was in the matter? When we are delivered from impending and unavoidable disaster, are we simply lucky or God was on our side? That is the subject that we shall examine in today’s lesson. We shall use **Psalm 124** as our guide.*

¹ “Jamaica spared direct hit by Ivan,” NBC News and news service, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5927015/print/1/displaymode/1098/

1. Luck or God?

When we hear that somebody has obtained what we believe s(he) does not deserve, we make such comments as “s(he) is just a lucky fellow!” When we read that one person survived a plane crash, we dismiss it as a miracle and say that it is a chance occurrence. However, to what extent can we continue to rely on luck or chance? What is chance? What is luck?

When scientists perform experiments, they want to be sure that the outcomes are reliable, that their findings are not due to mere chance only. In order to bring this about, they select their research sample from a pool of subjects in such a way that each of the subjects in the target population has *an equal chance* of being represented in the sample. For example, if the subjects were the 2.6 million people of Jamaica, the chances of picking a Jamaican are one in 2.6 million! In other words, we can say that the chances of a Jamaican being hit by Hurricane *Ivan* would be one in almost 3 million! If that were so, how then do we explain the RJR Radio report of 11 September 2004 that a 10-year- old girl and a woman were killed by trees that crashed into their homes as *Ivan* brushed through the Jamaican coastlands and that the third fatality that drowned was also a woman?² The truth is that the ground is never level for all of us!

Our chances in life are influenced by a number of factors, some of which are as follows:

a) *Birth or location*

Our family or place of birth or our geographical location can influence our chances in life. For example, the child of a rich parent is more likely to go to college than that of a pauper, even if they are equally brilliant. A black person is more likely to suffer from sickle cell anaemia because it is a genetically related disease. Plane crashes are for those who have the means to fly. One-way road signs do not affect a pedestrian! The hurricanes do not hate the Caribbean people but we just happen to be along their paths.

b) *Social status*

The position that we occupy in society or in the world can also influence our chances. For example, in a kingdom of one king and 99 subservient subjects, the only opinion that counts is that of the king! When kidnappers are looking for victims, poor people do not appeal to them! Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda are not against *all* Christians or *all* Westerners but Americans and their interests all over the world.

c) *Your Christian faith*

² “Jamaica spared direct hit by Ivan,” *Op. cit.* Deaths rose to 11 by 11 Sept. 2004, mainly by drowning.

About the only religious group that every other religious group resents are the Christians. If you analyse the matter closely, you will find that Jesus Christ is the issue, the difference between Christianity and the rest. That is why Jesus told His disciples, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil” [Jn 7: 7]. Therefore, if Islam considers non-adherents of that religion as infidels, why are Islamic fundamentalists not attacking the Buddhists in populous China, a closer neighbour to Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, all populous Islamic states instead of attacking Christians and burning churches in less populated Northern Nigeria?

The other issue to address is what we tend to call *luck*. When somebody wins a large sum of money in a state lottery, s(he) is said to be lucky. That means that it is an *undeserved favour*. The fact is that “he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished,” and “a man with an evil eye hastens after riches” [Prov. 28: 20, 22]. So, if people who do not know or fear God can also receive such undeserved favours, such as lottery winnings, does that not justify many unbelievers’ position that such favours have to do with luck, not God?

There are many reasons for that paradox. First, God is infinitely kind in that “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” [Matt. 5: 45]. Second, God is patient and “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” [2 Pet. 3: 9]. Therefore, luck and chance both come from God. They have nothing to do with our own goodness or effort and they are both undeserved favours. That is why the word of God says, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill; *but time and chance happen to them all*” [Eccl. 9: 11]. When God grants us the privilege, it is simply to “establish His covenant” with us for His purposes, the same reason for which He granted wealth to the children of Israel [Deut. 8: 17-18].

So, when we find ourselves in such situations as Jamaica from Hurricane *Ivan* or Trinidad & Tobago which has always been spared the ravages of hurricanes, we should like the children of Israel raise up our hands to God in praise and say, “What if God was not on our side?”

2. We are always in the eye of the storms of life!

You cannot set a trap for a bird that is watching you [Prov. 1: 17]. If we had the privilege to know in advance the wiles of our enemies, we might be able to plan our strategies to cope with them. Unfortunately, we do not have that luxury. In most cases, the enemies see us but we can hardly see them. The kidnapper or rapist stalks the unsuspecting victim. The terrorist is looking for loopholes in a target country’s tight security network. The hurricane or earthquake or drought

cannot be stopped when it chooses to strike. HIV/AIDS can only be slowed; it cannot as yet be cured. Unhappy marriages, childlessness, ill health and many more are storms of life facing some of us at this moment. We have worked extremely hard but the results are not encouraging.

In Psalm **124**, David has penned down our feelings. Here was a man who had seen suffering, war and hardship. Yet, out of it all, God delivered him. Now, he has penned this psalm to remind us why we should not take God's goodness, graces and mercies *for granted*. Let us examine the storms of life from which God had delivered him and his people:

a) *Rebellion and war*

David wrote, "When men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive when their wrath was kindled against us" [**vv. 2, 3**]. For the better part of 17 years, from his anointing as a teenager by prophet Samuel to when he was crowned king over Judah at the age of 30, David lived in the wilderness for his safety. After he became king over all of Israel, his favourite son, Absalom, staged rebellion against him that led to David's going into exile. Of course, the Philistines were always there as recurrent enemies. In the midst of all that, God granted David victory and peace. Was David just lucky?

In many homes right now, families are at war, threatened by domestic violence, childlessness, separation or divorce or fighting over estates. Businesses are distressed on account of unfavourable government policies that are politically motivated. Caribbean countries ravaged by *Ivan* are wondering how to get out of the damage and destruction and restore normal life. In similar circumstances, David and Israel said, "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth" [**v. 8**].

There was famine in Israel during the reign of king Ahab on account of military invasion by Syrian forces, to the extent that women began to feed on their children [**2 Kgs 6: 25-29**]. The king and his economic advisers were helpless. They turned to prophet Elisha who assured them that, according to the word of God, abundance was going to return within the next 24 hours [**2 Kgs 7: 1**]! How did it come to pass? God caused four hungry lepers to go in the direction of the Syrian forces. As their eight weak legs ruffled the dry leaves, "the Lord caused the army of the Syrians to hear the noise of chariots and the noise of a great army; so they said to one another, 'Look, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians to attack us.'" They fled for their lives, leaving behind food and supplies! By the time the report reached Israel and people flocked to the Syrian camp to loot their supplies, everybody became a business person and inflation dropped significantly

overnight as the Lord had promised [2 Kgs 7: 3-16]. Would you call that mere luck or chance? No, God was on their side.

b) *Floods of problems and difficulties*

The Psalmist wrote that if God had not been on their side, “then the waters would have overwhelmed us; the stream would have gone over our soul; then the swollen waters would have gone over our soul” [Ps. 124: 4-5]. How many times have you found yourself in a similar situation? As you are trying to pay off some bills and debts, more arrive! When you moved from one neighbourhood to another, you thought that your security problems were over. Now, you are facing a new and more dangerous type! When you were in school, you thought that you were suffering. Now that you have got the diploma, you are finding it difficult to get a job!

Take heart. God has promised that He will deliver the righteous out of all his/her afflictions [Ps. 34: 19]. We may pass through fire but He says that we shall not be burnt. We may pass through floods but He promises that we shall not be drowned [Is. 43: 1-2].

The early Christian church faced persecution. Herod killed James, one of the 12 apostles, and put Peter in jail. The Christians hid behind closed doors for fear of the government of the day but prayed fervently to God for deliverance. On the eve of Peter’s execution, an angel of God miraculously showed up in his prison cell and set Peter free! Soon after, as Herod tried to array himself and behave like a god, “an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. *But the word of God grew and multiplied*” [Acts 12: 1-25]!

c) *A caged prey!*

David writes, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped” [Ps. 124: 6-7].

Are you doing a mcjob, that is, a dead-end job without any prospects? Have you reached the bar of your salary scale and no matter how hard you work, there is no more pay raise? Are you trapped in a business deal, marriage relationship or church project in which you are stressing but out of which you cannot leave? Have you worked yourself into a situation where you can no longer apologize without losing face? Are you caught between an abortion and your religious values? What is it that gives you that feeling that you are a caged prey? Well, only the Lord can take you out alive from there!

Daniel was next in rank to king Darius and that infuriated his fellow two other governors and the other high-ranking state officials. They plotted his downfall by instigating the king to make a law that anybody that prayed to any other god or man but the king himself should be cast into the lion's den. Daniel found himself in a dilemma. He had been loyal to the king but his loyalty to God was not negotiable. He chose the latter and faced the consequences. He continued to pray to God and did it openly. The king knew of it and reluctantly ordered Daniel to be fed to the lions. Miraculously, Daniel was unhurt because "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, *because I was found innocent before Him...and done no wrong before (the king).*" Thereafter, the king ordered the conspirators and their families to be fed to the lions while he made a new decree for the whole kingdom to worship Daniel's God "for He is the living God" [Dan. 6: 1-28]. Do you now accept that God not mere luck was on Daniel's side?

3. Lessons and Conclusions

Here are important lessons to learn from today's study:

- i. There is nothing like chance or luck. Better stated, *luck is what God has allowed*. Satan cannot touch us unless God allows it, as the story of Job confirms. Evil people cannot perform their magic unless God allows them to succeed. For example, God wanted to harden Pharaoh's heart. So, when Moses threw his stick and it became a snake, God also allowed the magicians' sticks to become snakes! When Moses turned the waters of the Nile into blood, the magicians matched his feat [Ex. 7: 8-22]. When Moses brought forth frogs, the magicians matched it [Ex. 8: 6-7]. On each of those occasions, Pharaoh believed that it was the power of his gods that performed his magicians' feat. His heart became hardened. However, when Moses put the plague of lice on men and beasts, the magicians could not do so, in spite of their enchantments! They turned to Pharaoh and said, "This is the finger of God" [vv. 16-19]. *Without God, we have no luck!*
- ii. God will not be patient with sinners forever. He has delivered us from dangerous circumstances to give us the chance to repent and come to know Him. If we persist in sin, He will withdraw His hand and allow Satan to take charge! Is that the kind of luck you would prefer?

Since our first parents were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, God determined to reconcile and restore us to our privileged place with Him. While we were yet sinners, He sent His only begotten Son to die for our sins. Now, by Christ Jesus, we have access to the Father. For that, we say like David, "our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth." Now, we are in safe hands.

God is in deed on the believers' side. Is He on yours?