

“With the Lord on our Side”

OT: Psalm 124

NT: James 5:13-20

When you get married, you want the right person by your side, right?

When you are cooking for your family and guests, it would be great to have Bobby Flay or Brooke Williamson in the kitchen with you, right?

If you are going to have a medical procedure done or get physical therapy, it helps to have a good doctor on your side, right? If you were going to court for any reason, it helps to have a good lawyer to represent you.

If you were going to play football, Tom Brady would be a good choice for quarterback. It wouldn't hurt to have Steph Curry shooting free throws for your team or Garrett Cole pitching in the World Series. Katie Ledecky is a great choice to swim the final leg of a relay or Simone Biles to do a floor routine.

Cory Whittier is a top choice to lead worship with, among other things, and Kathleen, Catherine, Alex, and Marcia are great to have in the trenches of everyday ministry and church leadership.

Having others by your side is reassuring and essential for life's greatest things. Not only is it good for us to know we have someone there for us, working with us, and walking alongside us, but it is also good for us to know we have a purpose in being there for others, working with others, and walking alongside others.

Having one another in life is great for life is incomplete without others being on our side. However, even with every human being on the earth on your side, life is still incomplete. There are just some things in life beyond the scope, reason, and skill level of human beings. Therefore, the most important person to have by your side, that is capable of being all for all, each of us individually as well as communally, is God.

Have you ever given much thought to life without God verses life with God?

Our two passages today, the first from Psalm 124 and the second from James 5, paint a clear depiction for us.

Life without God is dark; very dark!

These passages tell us about “all kinds of trouble”
“divisions caused by sin and sickness” ... “illness and wrongdoing”
“separation from community” ... “danger” ... “perishing and death”
“disaster and peril” ... “calamity” ... “adversity” ... “overwhelming terror”
“destruction”

They display arrangements of “certain death”- premeditated attack of angry enemies, being swallowed alive, violent sweeping action of the flood, the act of drowning, savagery of a predatory animal, captured in a hunter’s trap.

They tell us life without God is like being “trapped and snared”- References to traps occur often in the OT. Snares can refer to physical or spiritual modes of entanglement. The snare imagery reflects the community’s culture- a culture in which people are trapped and entangled in webs of lies and deceit.

These passages tell us about “becoming victims” ... “being caught”
“powerlessness and dread” ... “panic” ... “trauma”
“wicked and fallen” ... “loss” ... “addiction and disease” ... “problem”
“disposed of and forgotten” ... “wondering aimlessly”

As I mentioned, life without God is dark, very dark.

The apostle Paul would add to the images painted by the psalmist and James with a dark canvas of his own. He says, “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Galatians 5:19-21)

A Far Side comic passed along to me a couple weeks ago shows the image of hell. Satan is present and it looks like those in hell are welcoming the new recruits. There is one person walking away from the reception table with a cup of coffee and the line reads, “They thought of everything. Even the coffee is cold.”

A life without God is dark, very dark!!!

The Good News for us is that darkness is not the only way. The psalmist declared, "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side." Concluding the psalm is the declaration "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Say those two with me, **"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side" and "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."**

The key difference, life-altering and life-giving difference, to a life of darkness and a life of light is the Lord. God makes all the difference in a world filled with darkness, made up of all the things we just listed and claim we do not desire, and a world (life) filled with light and whole list of other things.

These passages declare that a life with God is a life with "greatness and goodness" "protection and care" ... "victory and deliverance"

A life with God on our side means we have an "active presence"- an active and steadfast presence that comes to our aid ... "active power"- God is all-powerful ... "active love"- God is unmerited and unconditional with love ... "active grace"- God is vigilant in showing grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's saving grace remains at work in the world, undergirding the fabric of human life, supporting the powerless in times of trouble, and surprising the faithful with unexpected blessings.

These passages declare that a life with God is a life with "salvation" "creation" ... "sustenance" ... "favor" ... "life" ... "strength" "help"- the help comes from none other than the Creator of the cosmos "a partner"- implied in the psalmist's praise of God is a portrait of God as warrior God, the commander in chief of the hosts of armies- God is willing to fight for us "blessedness" ... "peace- well being" ... "rescue" ... "liberation and freedom" "remembered" ... "cared for" ... "released" ... "triumph"- over enemies and attacks "exoneration"- from suffering ... "ways to cope" ... "healing" "forward momentum and progression" ... "confidence" ... "redemption" "singing" ... "prayer"

A life with God on our side means we have "a place to lean, a person to lean on, a place to turn"- We derive this from the emphasis of prayer in James' letter. James advises prayer from all sorts and conditions. Whether one is suffering or cheerful, sick or sinful, prayer is open, and God is listening. Prayer includes A.C.T.S. (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication). James' call to prayer is not only a call to individuals to lay their lives and circumstances before God in prayer but an expressly communal

obligation to intercede for one another. We are to pray for ourselves and pray for others.

A life with God on our side means we can “confess and repent”- In the case of the sinful, James recommends confession- not to the ceiling but to another member of the community, whose own confession will follow in due course. *(Some have asked why we pray a corporate prayer of confession during worship instead of just praying for our own sins. Because it is not just about us. Our actions impact others in the community and others actions impact us, whether we were the one committing the sin or not.)* In the case of the sick, James recommends an audible call for the elders of the church. Flowers and soup are good medicine, but they are not enough. The person whose weakness has caused her to be cut off from the community needs the representatives of that community to come to her where she lies and cover her with prayer. She, in fact, is the one responsible for calling them to come. We are not to assume or act like others don't have trouble too. Our courage to share will be an invitation of relationship and connection to others who share.

The prayers of the community shape the congregation and allow the people to become more nearly the body of Christ. “One group of Indonesian members, who work in health care, bathes a woman's body and freshens her with sweet-swalling perfume. A group of church members led by clergy hold an impromptu healing service in the waiting room. The woman, unconscious through most of these visits, suddenly awakens, recovers, and is able to go home. While not all prayers of the community have such immediate and visible answers, those forty or more who came at one time or another to this bedside are reminded once again that prayer changes lives and has saving potential.” Remember what the psalmist said, “If it had not been the Lord that was on our side.”

Without God, prayer doesn't work. But prayers of faith in God and with God reveals that “the prayer of the righteous person works with great power.”

These passages declare that a life with God is a life with “vulnerability and compassion” “wisdom” ... “purpose” ... “communion and relationship”

The Apostle Paul would add to this list as well. He says, “²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:22-24)

As many of you know, I am an “I’ll take both” kind of guy. Sometimes it works to bring two things together- like peanut butter and chocolate. Sometimes it doesn’t- like a life without God and a life with God. We cannot take some of a life without God and some of a life with God and have it our way. Choosing a life with God, and having the Lord on our side is the only way to get good results and have a life filled with promise and purpose.

“Having the Lord “on our side” is no guarantee that things will go our way when troubles arise. Neither are suffering, defeat, and death signs that we have fallen out of God’s favor. It would be absurd to conclude, for example, that those who died 20 years ago this year in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon or in the fury of a hurricane did so because God was against them. In fact, it is more in the character of God to side with history’s victims. Through Christ’s death on the cross, Jesus went down with history’s losers once and for all. Through Christ’s resurrection, we are shown that God wants to be on everyone’s side, winners and losers, sinners and saints.”

A life without God is very different than a life with God!!! I don’t know about you, but I think the evidence is clear; the choice is clear. Especially since a life without God means drinking cold coffee 😊