EYE OF THE TIGER
Psalm 124

Every time I pass through Greenville, Texas, I keep threatening to stop and see the Audie Murphy Museum. Murphy, America’s most decorated soldier of World War II, later became an actor. He was in a ton of B-westerns, but his most famous movie is probably *To Hell and Back*, the story of his early life and war experiences. I watched that again last weekend. And it is aptly named—*To Hell and Back*. Though a 60s war movie lacks the blood and gore reality of a *Saving Private Ryan*, *To Hell and Back* is a great title for any war film because that’s what war is. Murphy didn’t just give hell to the Nazis, but he lived a lot of hell himself. The war took quite a toll on Murphy’s soul. In his day it was called “shell shock” and “combat fatigue.” In our day it’s called post-traumatic stress disorder. And Murphy suffered from it big-time: insomnia, nightmares, headaches, vomiting, and enough paranoia that for a time he slept with a pistol under his pillow. We often glorify war, but General Sherman was right, “War is hell.” It brings hell on the earth. In inflicts hell on people and property. And as the poet says,

Whence cometh war? We know the truth too well.
Out of the mouth of hell!

But there are different kinds of wars. Did you know that you are in a war right now? This one is not fought with bombs and bullets. It’s a spiritual battle. It, too, comes right out of the mouth of hell. And it’s every subtle and vicious trick the devil and his minions can pull to defeat, discourage, and destroy God’s kingdom, God’s church, and God’s people.

And yet most of us are clueless to this battle. We’ve been lulled to sleep in a culture that has allowed us freedom to worship as we please. We’ve been anesthetized by living in a land where following Christ costs us little. We’ve been so acculturated that we’ve got good and evil all mixed up. And since we
don’t hear bombs going off or bullets whizzing by, we walk merrily along, picking daisies in a mine field, blind to the danger that’s around us. We should wake up, you know.

In his commentary on Revelation, Grant Osborne has written:

Spiritual warfare is all too often neglected in the life of the average Christian. It seems as if we are all trying to be Swiss and remain neutral in this war. To be neutral is to lose, however, for Satan is real, and his hatred toward all who are made in the image of God dare not be ignored.

We’re engaged in battle. We need a fight song. The Psalms provide us one. As we continue our Summer Songs series I invite you to open your Bible to Psalm 124. Each Sunday we’re unpacking a psalm, connecting it to a popular song from our culture, and learning how to sing the Christ-life in our day. And if we’re going to sing the Christ-life, we better have a fight song.

- **Colleges** have them: “On your toes, Razorbacks, to the finish / Carry on with all your might / For it’s A-R-K-A-N-S-A-S for Arkansas / Fight! Fight! Fight!”

- The **Armed Services** have them: “From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.” “Off we go, into the wild blue yonder.” “Anchors aweigh, my boys, anchors aweigh.”

- And even the **hymnbook** has them: “Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb?” “Be strong in the Lord, and be not discouraged / Your mighty defender is always the same.” “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war / With the cross of Jesus going on before.”
Lots of fight songs. But when I was looking for a fight song from the popular music of our culture, I couldn’t resist this one: **let the music begin ...**

That’s *Eye of the Tiger*. It was written at the request of Sylvester Stallone to be the theme song for *Rocky III*. The band Survivor sang it. It was a number one hit for them in 1982. And by the time you combine vinyl sells with digital downloads the song has sold more than 9 million copies making it one of the best-selling singles of all time. I’ve used it many times when leading fitness boot camps. There’s something stirring about it. It just makes you want to beat your chest and get your inner-Rocky on. Bring on Apollo Creed or Clubber Lang or Ivan Drago, and they’re going down. *Eye of the Tiger*. Good fight song for sure.

But there’s an even better one in Psalm 124. This one was composed for God’s people, and in the superscription it’s tied to David, one of the great warriors of history. Hear the word of the Lord ... *(read the text)*.

I

Okay, I’ll admit it: it just doesn’t grab you like *Eye of the Tiger*. We don’t hear guitar riffs or feel drum beats. And on the surface it even sounds a little arrogant.

*If the Lord had not been on our side—let Israel say* [or in other words, let everybody join the chorus]—*if the Lord had not been on our side ...*

Just seems kind of arrogant to claim that God is on our side, doesn’t it? That’s what slaveholders claimed before the Civil War. That’s what the Klan and other bigots and racists claim today: “God is on our side.” That’s what men said who tried to suppress a woman’s right to vote. And maybe you remember that scene in the D-Day film, *The Longest Day*, when a frustrated Nazi general says under his breath, “Sometimes I wonder whose side God is on”—implying,
of course, he assumed God was on their side. And even today, Muslim extremists claim their terrorism acts are jihad—holy war—because God is on their side. And so do those angry, bitter people from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, who protest at military funerals and display hateful signs—they hate homosexual people most of all. Those folks are convinced God is on their side. So the very first stanza of the song is bit off-putting to sensible minds. We've all known too many crusaders through the years who have co-opted God to support causes or tactics that even a cursory reading of the Bible would tell you are about as far from God’s word and God’s heart as they can be.

If the Lord had not been on our side—if the Lord had not been on our side ...

And David’s not winking or blushing when he sings it. Can we just scratch that verse and start over?

II

No, we can’t scratch that verse—that verse is our only hope. Notice that the verse doesn’t declare that God is on the side of our pet causes; it says God is on the side of His people. That’s our only hope. The spiritual battle in which we’re engaged is a God-sized battle. We can’t hope to be victorious if we’re left to our own devices. We need God on our side or we’re sunk before we start.

Listen to the size of the battles David describes:

“When men attacked us, when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive.” This may well image the great sea monster all Jews were afraid of. Talk about messing with Sasquatch. You won’t have a chance.
You might as well take a pocket-knife to a gun fight. "They would have swallowed us alive." This is a God-sized battle.

"The flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away." Think Japanese tsunami from a couple of years ago. Or think of the pictures you may have seen this week of some of those flash floods in the Midwest sweeping away cars and trucks and houses. One minute you can wade in the water; the next minute it engulfs you, sweeps you away, and drowns you. Floodwaters can boil up quickly and you are absolutely helpless against them. This is a God-sized battle.

And David is singing with all his heart that our only hope in winning such battles is God on our side.

Of course, David had a little experience with this, you know. A young David looked around the battlefield and spoke up, "Why won’t one of Israel’s soldiers stand up to this giant brute of a Philistine named Goliath?" Not one of them would. They were petrified of the beast. But David volunteered. Goliath laughed so loud his belly shook. And he taunted David: "You send a boy to fight a man? You send a puppy to tangle with a lion. Come on up here, little fellow, and I’ll eat you for dinner." And you remember David’s line? "You come at me with sword and spear but I come at you in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. The battle is the Lord’s, not mine, and he will give you into my hand.” Then the whirling sound and quick whip of a sling, and the stone David launched hit that big bruiser right between his eyes. His legs wobbled, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he crumpled to the ground—dead as a post. David might have slung that stone, but God planted it in the forehead of Goliath. David didn’t need the eye of the tiger because he had the power of God. "If the Lord had not been on our side ..." let’s just say it would have gotten ugly for David in a hurry.
And this wasn’t the only time God fought Israel’s battles. God did this all along. Joseph’s brothers sold Joseph into slavery. He ended up in an Egyptian jail. But because God gave him the capacity to interpret Pharaoh’s dream, Joseph went from the jail house to the White House as Pharaoh’s chief-of-staff. Joseph’s wisdom saved the world and Israel from famine and destruction. “If the Lord had not been on our side …” Joseph would have rotted and died in some Egyptian dungeon and Israel would have starved to extinction in Canaan.

And what about 400 years later, when all those Israelites were on the freedom train from Egypt to the Promised Land and Pharaoh’s army chased them down? God split a sea to save His people, and used that same sea to drown Pharaoh’s army. “If the Lord had not been on our side …” one can only imagine the carnage.

And what about Joshua and the Israelites who brought down the towering walls of Jericho with a trumpet blast and a shout? “If the Lord had not been on our side …” those walls would have remained secure, Israel would have been sitting ducks, and the conquest would have been stopped in its tracks.

And what about those 300 soldiers and Gideon who took on the mighty Midianites and whipped them without ever throwing a spear or shooting an arrow? They snuck up on those over-confident Midianites in the middle of the night, broke some jars and shouted, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon,” and those Midianites were in such shock and dismay they slaughtered one another. “If the Lord had not been on our side …” well, 300 widows would have been getting death notices the next day.

And what about that time Sennacherib and his Assyrian bullies set up siege against Jerusalem? Like locusts, they swept through the region leaving
destruction in their path. But Jerusalem was the prize. So they surrounded the city, sent messengers to mock Jerusalem’s king and Jerusalem’s God. They told the folks to come out with their hands up because they had about as much a chance of making it out alive as a june bug in a chicken coop. And they were right about that. But King Hezekiah took the situation to the Lord. The Lord heard Hezekiah’s prayer, and in the night the Lord sent death into the Assyrian camp and killed about 180,000 of them. That big-mouth Sennacherib hurried home with his tail between his legs and shortly thereafter was murdered by his own sons while he was worshiping his god Nisroch. Some help that Nisroch! “If the Lord had not been on our side ...” well, there would have been Israeliite heads and body parts strewn from Jerusalem to Assyria.

Israel learned that when God fights their battles, somehow they “have escaped like a bird out of a fowler’s snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped” because their “help is in the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” They knew this. It was ingrained in their history.

And they also knew that when God wasn’t on their side, they were easy pickings. They got a little full of themselves after Jericho. They decided to go take Ai, but there was sin in the camp, and Ai routed Israel. And of course, there was the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon because Israel had turned their backs on God, chased idols, corrupted worship, and treated the poor with contempt. When God took himself off the team, Jerusalem looked like a Boy’s Club team against the St. Louis Cardinals.

“If the Lord had not been on our side ....” Hey, that was Israel’s only hope.

III

And it’s our only hope too. Our battles may not be with sword and spear, but they are spiritual battles. That’s why Paul wrote to the Ephesians
that if we’re going to take our “stand against the devil’s schemes,” we’re going to have to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” The battle is beyond our capabilities because “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (6:12). We see battle wounds everywhere in our sin-sick, self-centered, devil-dominated world. We see sin on the throne and right on the gallows. We see scars in persons and families and churches and cultures.

We face a ruthless enemy. Paul identifies him as the devil. The word devil means slanderer. And he has other biblical aliases by which he’s known: Satan which means adversary, and Apollyon which means destroyer. Slanderer, adversary, destroyer—and this is our enemy.

Worse yet, he is not alone. The devil is the commanding general of other forces. Paul identifies them as the rulers, the authorities, and the powers of this dark world. They certainly can manifest their evil power in ways we can see, but behind the things we can see is the enemy we can’t always see so clearly—an enemy that is the unseen force behind corrupt and unjust systems and the unseen adversary who wrecks as much havoc and mayhem as he can and who whispers temptations to our hearts and minds. The enemy is powerful, evil, and cunning. He’s a schemer and a plotter, a cheat and fraud. He knows how to tempt us in appealing ways and exploit our weaknesses. He can roar like a lion, be as subtle as a serpent, and appear as an angel of light. He may wear his own uniform; he may wear our uniform. He is a deceptive and cunning enemy.

This is our enemy. This is the general of the army that wages war against God and His people.
IV

So we better fight the battle in the Lord’s power rather than our own. Remember our song? “If the Lord had not been on our side ....” We are weak. We are wishy-washy. We are too easily tempted, swayed, and duped. Just when we think we stand, we fall. That’s why we don’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell if we try to fight this battle on our own. In this battle, Satan is not impressed when you flex your muscles; he is impressed when God flexes His. “Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.” This is the same power that spoke the world into existence; the same power that sent plagues on the Egyptians and split the Red Sea. This is the same power that healed a leper, calmed a raging sea, and turned a couple of fish and a few biscuits into enough food to feed thousands. This is the power by which Jesus endured the cross and the power that raised Him from the dead. Our psalm-song declares that “our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” If God can do that, God can do anything.

“Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.” You can’t fight this battle alone. The enemy is stronger than you, but he is not stronger than God. The enemy laughs at your strength, but he trembles at the power of the Lord. Find your strength not in your muscles or your will-power, your cunning or your smarts; find your strength in the Lord. Rely on His power. If you don’t, you are beaten already.

And dress for success. Paul writes, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” If you want to dress for success in this battle, you’ll put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and gospel shoes that give you sure footing for the fight. You’ll also take up the shield of faith so the devil’s darts can’t take you down. You’ll put on the helmet of salvation. And you’ll take in hand the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. Add all prayer to this ensemble and you’ll be dressed
for success in the battle. The armor protects us from the devil’s onslaught. And the sword of God’s word and all prayer help us advance and take ground from the enemy. You try to battle the enemy in your khakis, polo shirt, and sandals, the enemy will get the best of you most every time—even if you wearing your Jack Bauer or Superman skivvies. Forget that stuff. You need the armor of God. You try to battle the enemy with your own knowledge and your own clever arguments and you will choke on your own words. You don’t need your words, you need God’s word. Read it. Learn it. Know it. Share it. Fight the battle in God’s armor and with God’s word and prayer. That’s the only hope we’ve got.

“If the Lord had not been on our side ....”

And the Lord is on the side of His people. There’s nothing in this psalm or in Ephesians 6 that indicates we can automatically assume that God is on the side of all our pet causes. But God is on the side of His people—on your side and my side. He does fight the battle for us. We show up in prayer and love and ministry and God fights the battle against the devil and his schemes.

• This is why we prayer-walk our city and our schools and our mission points and why that matters.

• This is why through our mission efforts we’ve seen missionaries encouraged, people reached, and churches planted in some of the hard places in our world where the devil sits on the throne.

• This is why we try to help the poor and why so many of us sponsor children from around the world so we can contend against injustice and oppression.
• This is why we apply Christian thinking and moral persuasion in the public square, making a case for things that are consistent with God’s word and God’s will and God’s ways.

• This is why we share Jesus and teach the Bible in places in our world where it costs to be a Christian and right here in Hot Springs where some Christians are oblivious and apathetic to the battle.

The Lord is on our side. That doesn’t mean there won’t be casualties on our side or that the battle won’t cost us a great deal to fight. It doesn’t mean the battle is easy. It does mean that God has won already and will continue mopping up actions until Jesus comes again. God won the battle at the cross of Jesus where Jesus bore our sins and endured our hell and finished the work it took to save us. And just when death and the devil thought they’d put an end to Jesus, He rose from the dead. In the cross and resurrection Jesus won for us a battle we could never win for ourselves. In the cross and resurrection, took the sting out of death, the swagger out of the devil, and snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat. And when we meet Jesus at the cross, trusting that what He did there He did for us, we are given life that lasts forever, and we join the Lord’s team, the winning team.

We join the team that, in spite of earthly setbacks at the hand of the enemy, will one day enjoy eternal life in the City of God, while the devil and his ilk tread water forever in the lake of fire. We will one day live in the land where there will be no more sin, no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more Satan, no more evil, and no more battle. We can lay God’s armor down at the gate and put on more comfortable clothes fit for eternity. That’s your future when you belong to God. We’ll live in the land where believers from every nation, tribe, and tongue will gather around the throne and lift high the arms of Jesus, declaring in praise and thanksgiving what has been true since the foundation of the world: Jesus Christ is the forever Champion of the Universe!
“If the Lord had not been on our side ...” it would be a far different story. But we praise Him that He is on our side and will be forever.

V

Bill Hybels writes about the time he shared a conference stage with the quadriplegic Joni Eareckson Tada. She did a Q&A session following one of her talks, and someone in the audience asked her how she kept going—how she kept leading and serving and creating—despite her obvious physical challenges. And this is how she answered,

This the only time in history when I get to fight for God. This is the only part of my eternal story when I am actually in the battle. Once I die, I'll be in celebration mode ... in a whole different set of circumstances. But this is my limited window of opportunity, and I'm going to fight the good fight for all I'm worth.

We’re also in the battle, so let’s fight the good fight too—speaking the truth in love, advancing the gospel, caring for the poor and oppressed, sharing the grace of Jesus, trusting in the Lord to carry the day. Bring the eye of the tiger if you want, but you’ve got something far better than that: the Lord is on your side.

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