

August 14/15, 2004

## The Thrill of Faith

### Psalm 124

Pastor Andy MacFarlane

#### North Church Plant Update

As many of you know, we're about 13 months out from launching North Pointe Community Church. As we go to that launch, I want to let you know about a couple of things. First, we're going to be meeting on the evening of Sunday, September 12, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at North Star High School for an evening of prayer and praise. We're going to North Star because that's where we plan to launch the church—that's where we will open our doors September 2005. There are no delusions about this church plant: if God doesn't come through we're going to fall flat. So we want to take time to ask His favor—His blessing. Perhaps you are thinking about going to the north church. Perhaps you're not. If you're not, you can still pray with us, so we would invite you out for that Sunday evening, 6-8. We'll probably spend an hour or so praying and then visit over some light refreshments.

The second thing: Starting Sunday, September 19, during the 9:30 hour we will meet in room D-103 for what we call a SuperGroup. Obviously we're not going to have our building to start and it may be years before we do. So, more than ever, small groups will be a critical part, a critical leg, of our ministry. We want to start building those small groups right now. What we'll do in a SuperGroup is meet together around round tables and discuss the book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Out of those discussions we want to build our community—get to know one another—and then launch small groups in and around north Lincoln. So if you're thinking about being a part of the north church, or if you've committed to doing that, I invite you to join us Sunday, 9:30, starting Sept. 19 in D-103. We *do* need you to register for that SuperGroup.

Let me just say a word about the book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, written by Eugene Petersen. It applies each of the psalms in the Song of Ascents, which are Psalms 120-134. I read that book twenty years ago and it still profoundly impacts my life today. In fact, I'm going to preach on two psalms from the Song of Ascents—this weekend Psalm 124 and next weekend Psalm 126. Much of what you will hear will reflect the impact of Petersen's thoughts on my life. In our SuperGroup we will take time to discuss the other psalms in the Song of Ascents and apply them to our lives. So two things to remember as they relate to the north church: Evening of Prayer and Praise, Sunday, September 12, 6 to 8 out at North Star High School, and the SuperGroup during the 9:30 hour starting Sunday, September 19. If you have more questions, look in the foyer for our handy dandy nifty banner which we just had made for us. I'll be at the booth after the services and I'd love to talk with you more about North Pointe Community Church.

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#### Psalm 124

*A Song of Ascents, of David.*

**“Had it not been the LORD who was on our side,”  
Let Israel now say,  
“Had it not been the LORD who was on our side  
When men rose up against us,  
Then they would have swallowed us alive,  
When their anger was kindled against us;  
Then the waters would have engulfed us,  
The stream would have swept over our soul;  
Then the raging waters would have swept over our soul.”  
Blessed be the LORD,**

**Who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.  
Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper;  
The snare is broken and we have escaped.  
Our help is in the name of the LORD,  
Who made heaven and earth. (\*NASB)**

Not long ago I was doing some reading about the growing popularity of extreme sports. These are sports like in-line skating, freestyle biking, freestyle skateboarding, bungee cord jumping, parachute jumping...and the list goes on. They continue to grow in popularity at an astounding rate. They are becoming so popular that ESPN has fashioned an alternative Olympics of these sports called the "X Games." In fact, the X Games were on ABC last weekend. The common denominator of all extreme sports is the thrill-seeking experience that results in an adrenaline rush. Now, some of us don't want to risk life and limb to get our adrenaline rush or thrill. Well, there are other ways to get that—like risking large sums of money. Poker is growing in popularity in our country. Fifty million Americans play poker, and industry experts estimate that 100,000 people play on-line poker each night during peak hours. Last fall, the World Poker Tournament drew an average of 1.3 million viewers each Wednesday night. I've got to be honest, I read these articles and I wonder, *Why would anybody watch poker on T.V.?* I thought and I thought about that, and my theory is that there must be people who can't stand risking their own money, so they live that thrill, that adventure, vicariously by watching someone else do it. Whether it's extreme sports or poker, these things tell us we live in a culture that is desperate for, longing for, adventure. And we're constantly looking for new ways to meet that need—developing new sports and new interests to experience an adrenaline rush.

The question I have for us is: Does God have anything to say to our adventure-seeking culture? We're going to look at Psalm 124 and try to answer the question: Is there any adventure in following God?

Psalm 124 roughly breaks into two sections. In the first part, verses 1-5, it talks about what would have happened if God had not intervened in the life of Israel. In the second part, verses 6-8, the psalmist tells us what happened because God *did* intervene.

Having given that overview, let's dive in. Verses 1 and 2 start with almost a liturgical-like element. It says:

**Had it not been the LORD who was on our side, let Israel now say, "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side..."** (vs. 1-2a, \*NASB)

We get the idea: "Boy, if God hadn't been with us, we would have been in trouble." Twice the nation is called to repeat, "Had it not been the LORD who was on our side." So what was the trouble? We get the idea in the second part of verse 2:

**...when men rose up against us.**

They were facing some kind of human opposition. The opening remarks tell us this is a psalm of David. And really, this psalm could describe any number of events or scenes from David's life in which his back was to the wall. Or it could have been any number of events or scenes from the life of Israel. We live in a world system that is opposed to God, so it should be no surprise that there are folks who want to destroy God's people, because they want to destroy any trace or thought of God.

How bad was the opposition? We get an idea in verses 3 through 5, when the author uses two metaphors to describe the desperateness of the situation. Verse 3:

**Then they would have swallowed us alive, when their anger was kindled against us;**

This human opposition is likened to a beast that could swallow the nation of Israel in one gulp. Now, I must tell you, I've never faced a beast that formidable. But not long ago, I was at the Omaha zoo with our two small sons. We were down in the cat's den where they have lions and tigers, and right in the center was a glassed-in area. There was a huge tiger that was just pacing from wall to wall of his cage. And when he paced down to our end (I would guess we were about 6-8 feet from him) I got a pretty good look at the tiger. I would guess he was 500-700 pounds. His head looked about as big as my torso; his paws about as big as my head. As he was pacing around, the thought struck me, *What would I do if that glass gave way? It would be a terrifying experience. I couldn't outrun him. I'm nowhere near a match for his strength. What would I do to protect my sons?* There would be *nothing* I could do.

Well, this is what Israel was facing: a beast ready to swallow her up. There is another picture and we catch it in verses 4 and 5:

**Then the waters would have engulfed us, the stream would have swept over our soul;  
then the raging waters would have swept over our soul.**

This human opposition is described as waters that engulf a person, that not only is their life going to be taken, but their very *soul* is going to be washed away in these raging waters. Perhaps the folks in Florida after Hurricane Charley could speak more about this metaphor than we could here in Nebraska.

I've personally never been caught in raging waters, but several years ago I went to see the movie *The Perfect Storm*. It is the story of a tiny fishing boat caught in the storm of a century. Three weather fronts come together to cause a storm that happens only once every 100 years. A group of these skilled fishermen, in their comparatively tiny fishing boat, fight gallantly to maneuver their boat against the huge swells of 60-80 feet, and it's a horrific experience. Although they put forth a valiant effort against the raging waters, they are no match; and their boat capsizes. They drown and they are never heard from; their bodies never recovered.

This is what Israel is facing. It's formidable. It's daunting. It's overwhelming. These two pictures—one of an awesome creature, the other of raging waters—illustrate for us that Israel is about to be crushed, to be annihilated. But then *God* steps in.

Back when I was in the fifth grade we used to play dodge ball in physical education. I don't know if dodge ball is still played, but the idea was you played with old volleyballs and you tried to get the other people out, either by hitting them with a thrown ball or by catching a ball they throw at you. The last player left is the winner of the game. Dodge ball can be played individually or occasionally we would play in teams. And every once in awhile the teacher would say, "All right, I want all of the guys down on this end; all of the girls down at that end." Now, back when I was in the fifth grade, there was still a good deal of animosity between the boys and the girls. So it dawned on us, *This is going to be dodge ball: boys against the girls*. The guys were so excited! This was going to be the chance to take out our frustrations. And we'd begin to strut, rubbing our hands with glee, talking about how we were going to pound them.

Now, down on the other end, the girls were not so happy. They were kind of dismayed, disheartened by what was about to happen. But then our P.E. teacher changed the dynamics with one simple statement. He said, "I'm going to play with the girls." All of a sudden everything changed. Now it was the girls who were excited and laughing and the boys were downcast. There's one piece of information I didn't give you. Mr. Pluhart was 6 feet 3...and he looked 9 feet 3 to a bunch of fifth-grade boys. So the girls thoroughly enjoyed the game, because what happened is their champion got out there and pounded us and picked us off one by one...boom, boom, boom, out we went. And they won.

Folks, this is what Israel was looking at. The opposition was overwhelming and they were dismayed. They were cowering in a corner, intimidated by the enemy. Their enemies were rubbing their hands with delight at the coming slaughter. And then their champion, God, the Creator of heaven and earth, showed up and said, “I am going to play on the side of Israel.” And they just stood back and watched the champion fight the battle.

So I think there’s a great change here as we move into verse 6, where it tells us what happened when God showed up. This is an excited tone!

**Blessed be the LORD...** (vs. 6a)

It is an affirmation, “God is working *for us!*” It’s a revisit to what might have happened if He hadn’t gotten in:

**...who has not given us to be torn by their teeth.** (vs. 6b)

We’ve got a picture of slowly being chewed up. He says God did not allow Israel to get chewed up in the teeth of some wild animal.

In verse 7 he says:

**Our soul has escaped as a bird out of the snare of the trapper; the snare is broken and we have escaped.**

Notice that two times you see the word “snare” and two times you see the word “escaped.” Israel was hooked—they were had—and they were just waiting for the final blow. Then they escaped...because *God* stepped in and set them free.

Verse 8, then, is a reaffirmation that Israel’s source of help is the name of the Lord—the strong name of God who made heaven and earth.

I don’t think this is a recording of just facts (“Oh, by the way, here’s what God did...”) I think this is from a people who were very excited, very overcome with emotion. This psalm was written and read by Israel with great feeling, with great passion and great excitement. They were so beat, so destroyed...and then God showed up! That’s a rush—seeing things change so dramatically. This psalm is a celebration of God’s working. I don’t think the people grew tired of reliving these memories over and over again.

This spring I read a biography about Harry Truman. One of the amazing parts of the book was the description of the 1948 presidential election. For months leading up to the election, it was a foregone conclusion that the challenger, Republican Thomas Dewey, was going to win the election. No one gave Truman a chance. The only person who gave Truman a chance was, I suppose, Truman himself. He kept pushing on with his whistle-stop campaign, where he went around the country on this train and gave his speech. As you know, Truman won that election. And I don’t know if there’s one picture that captures the magnitude of the upset any more than the picture of Truman, on the night of the election, beaming with a smile that covers his face, holding up a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* from that day with the headline: “Dewey Defeats Truman.” It was such a foregone conclusion that the *Tribune* had already printed the headline, “Dewey Defeats Truman.” The only trouble was...Truman won. Imagine if you were part of the Truman family or the Truman campaign. Would you ever tire of talking about the 1948 election? I think you’d look back and rejoice and laugh, “We were so beat. We were so had. No one gave us a chance. But then Harry came through...and we won!” I would think you would have that picture of Truman holding the *Chicago Tribune* announcing his defeat on your desk or your wall. And every time you looked at that you’d just smile and your heart would pound as

you thought, *At a time that we were so had, we pulled it off; Harry came through!* I think this is that picture for the nation Israel: *We were so beat; we were so had. But then God came through.*

We started by asking the question: Is there any adventure? Any adventure at all in following God? Oh, I'd say emphatically, "Yeah! No doubt!" Again and again and again, God's people for His purposes are always pushed to the brink. They're always on the edge. But then God comes through. And there's no rush, no thrill, no adventure like it. Extreme sports can't match it. Poker can't match it. I'd say that there is no greater adventure than seeing God deliver in overwhelming circumstances. *There is no greater adventure than seeing God deliver in overwhelming circumstances.*

J.B. Philips says one of the great values of the Psalms is that they put words to the deep feelings of our heart, that we would have trouble expressing any other way. *The Psalms put words to the deep feelings of our heart that we would have trouble expressing any other way.*

With that in mind, I want to encourage you to use Psalm 124 as a model to express your thanksgiving to God. Maybe there's a time where God has worked in your life and delivered in overwhelming circumstances. I'm asking you to use Psalm 124 as a model to express thanksgiving of how God has come through for you when you otherwise didn't have a chance. For a moment I'd like you to go back and think through your life. Is there a time where there were some circumstances and you were just overwhelmed? A time where you were had and you were on the brink? And think about the example from my fifth grade P.E. class—when the champion steps up and knocks out the enemy. Is there a time where God stepped in and overcame difficult, daunting circumstances? What was the opposition? What were the elements that you were facing?

For me, one of those experiences was my 15 years with Campus Crusade for Christ. Man, it was the ride of a life—a thrill! I did things I'm convinced without God's strength I never could have done. I raised my financial support, and I didn't have a solid church home because I became a Christian in college. So that was amazing. I went overseas and had never left the shores of the United States, or at least North America. I got to lead the restart of a campus ministry that eventually ended up flourishing. I saw God provide so that I (we) could get a seminary education debt-free. I was even able to go back overseas and minister in a second language. It was a ride! When we left staff in 1999, I said to my wife Hope, "Hope, I want to live the next 15 years like we've lived the last 15 years." But I've got to tell you, when God started moving in my heart to join the staff of Campus Crusade in 1984, there were some real obstacles, and they were internal. There were some real fears that I didn't know if I could overcome.

One fear was the uncertainty. I had gone to college to secure my livelihood, and asking people to support me on a monthly basis didn't seem very secure. Secondly, I kind of lived for the approval of people and I knew this decision to go on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ would not play well with my family, and particularly with my dad. He didn't like it at all. But I've got to tell you something: my champion, my God, met me at my point of need. In those 15 years He overwhelmingly provided my financial needs. And in those 15 years he replaced the family that didn't approve of what I was doing with a whole new family—from other Campus Crusade staff and students in the ministry and even donors—who loved me, accepted me, and became great friends and even soul mates in certain cases. God met me at my point of need and gave me the ride of my life!

I've tried to express that, using Psalm 124 as a model to express my thanksgiving. Allow me to share it with you, with the hope it might stimulate thoughts in your life.

If God had not been for me—from the bottom of my heart I tell you—if God hadn't been for me, when circumstances said get a real job, I would have given in. Driven by my aversion to uncertainty, swept away by my need for acceptance, drowned in my search for affirmation, I

would have lost my nerve in the rage of these unmet needs. O bless the Lord! He did not leave me to myself, helpless like a baby slowly suffocating in his crib. I have been disentangled from between the bars of uncertainty and need for approval. I'm out of my crib able to run and play. No longer am I gasping for air; my breathing is free and easy. God has been my help. The very God who created heaven and earth.

I encourage you to take some time this week and reflect on when God has delivered in your life. Use Psalm 124 as a model to structure thanksgiving to God for His working in your life. Please know that I don't have a literary bone in my body. One of the things that helped me in structuring my psalm was reading a copy of Eugene Petersen's idiomatic translation of Psalm 124 in *The Message*. If you think that might help you, I'd encourage you to do it. Whether you use his translation or not, I encourage you to invest the time. It was a way to express the feelings of my heart that I don't know I could have expressed any other way, and I'm sure it will do the same for you.

One response to this psalm is joy and thanksgiving. But I think for others this psalm can serve as somewhat of a crossroads. Perhaps you are facing some overwhelming circumstances and it doesn't seem like God is at work. In fact, you get up each day—day after day, week after week, month after month—and you look those circumstances square on and you look for God. You look and you look and you look, but you just don't see it. And you hear a message like this and you get kind of angry. You get cynical. I've got to be honest, when I'm in that situation where it doesn't seem like God is working and I can't find God anywhere, I respond with anger and cynicism. And that is one way we can respond. Or this psalm can serve as a motivation to keep believing God, to keep looking for God in the hard circumstances—that we might experience the thrill of His deliverance.

About a year ago, our youngest son fell in love with Nemo. So every time we would go to the indoor playland at 27<sup>th</sup> and A, he immediately went to find this little plastic book about Nemo. This book has about 5 pages, and on each page you have to find Nemo—which is hidden on the page. As you turn the pages it gets progressively harder. He is always excited to find Nemo on this page and on that page. He keeps turning—"There's Nemo!" and "There's Nemo!"—until he gets to the last page, where it's hard to find Nemo because he's pretty well hidden. At first he gets kind of quiet. Then he begins to stir and I can tell he's beginning to lose interest. So I'll say to him at that point, "Drew, where's Nemo?" And he'll say to me in a sad little voice, "I don't know." And I'll say, "Drew, Daddy sees Nemo on the page. Let's keep looking." Then I'll guide him a little bit here... "Is he here? No. Is he there? No, better look again." Then all of a sudden he will find Nemo and he's so excited he's found Nemo after having to look so hard. "Nemo! Look, Daddy, it's Nemo!"

Some of you, if I asked you today in the midst of your hard circumstances, "Where is God?"—like my son, you'd answer, "I don't know." But I want to tell you, like I do with my son, I believe God is speaking through Psalm 124. And He's saying to you, "Let's keep looking. I'm there. I'm at work. And when you find Me it's going to be such a thrill. When you experience My deliverance you'll celebrate with joy."

So we have a choice to make—each one of us. We can respond to this psalm with anger and cynicism or with faith and trust. I beg you to respond with faith and trust. Will you read this psalm, Psalm 124, this week with the prayer, "God, strengthen my resolve to keep looking for You. God, strengthen my faith that I might find You in the circumstances that I haven't found You so far." Will you do that...with the prayer that God will strengthen your faith? I'm suggesting that we meditate on this psalm and use it as a model to express thanksgiving to God. I'm asking you to meditate on this psalm daily that God might move you to faith and trust.

Third and finally, I want to say that if you and I are going to someday write a psalm about God's deliverance—about how God came through—we have to start now by being out of control. We have

to start now by being in a place of complete dependence on God. If we hope one day to write a psalm like Psalm 124, celebrating God's deliverance and provision, we first have to be in a place where our human resources and abilities are grossly inadequate for the challenge before us. And that's hard for us as Americans. We like to be in control and we like to be independent. God wants us to be out of control and dependent on *Him*. If we're ever going to write a psalm like we've just read, we have to start by being out of control, in a place of complete dependence on God.

I want to ask you: What faith steps are you taking that are moving you toward a point of complete dependence on God? What faith steps are you taking that are taking you *out* of control? What are you involved with? What are you doing in life that if God doesn't come through, you're going to fall flat on your face? It's a great thrill, and I hope you catch it in what the psalmist has to say. There is no greater joy or thrill in life than to see God come through.

If you are looking for a place to be out of control and to be in dependence, I want to ask if you'd consider joining us in the vision of this church. Bryan Clark, our senior pastor, laid it out for us. Before I get into the specifics, let me tell you we're in a place of dependence. We are believing God to do a lot of things, and we are way overmatched. God has got to come through big-time for us or we're going to fall flat on our face.

Probably my favorite part of the whole vision is that we are going to plant a church in north Lincoln. I am thrilled with the people who have joined to be a part of this plant, and there are a lot of other people who are considering it. I consider it a privilege to walk with these people. But I've got to tell you, we're under no delusions. God has got to come through on this or we're going to fail; we're going to fall flat on our face. I want to invite you to join us. It's going to be an adventure—I can tell you that! It's a faith venture and we'd love to have you come be a part. Come see what God wants to do in north Lincoln.

Maybe God isn't calling you to be a part of North Pointe. Then, how about joining with the effort we are partnering with to plant a church downtown? It's equally as formidable. We're going together with other churches to see God plant a church right in the center of Lincoln. Evan and Teyanna Brown are going to lead that plant, and they're up to their eyeballs in challenges, also. They need people to join with them and they'd love to talk with you about that. It is another faith venture in which to see God do a mighty work!

As long as we're on the idea of planting churches, we hope to plant about 300 churches in India, and we want to take responsibility for about 100 of those. That's a huge goal! There's a lot of opposition in India. We need people who will own that radically in prayer and in giving and even in going. Maybe if God has put that in your heart you can talk to Jeff Petersen, our Missions Pastor.

We want to build a sanctuary that will increase our capacity 3 or 4 times what we are now. And if that happens and we get that many people, we're going to need a lot of new LifeGroups. We think we need 100 just in the next calendar year. Would God have you answer that call by being a LifeGroup leader?

There are a lot of stories to be written—two churches launched, 300 churches planted in India, a new sanctuary built that we could reach more people, hundreds of LifeGroups started to see lives changed. One day we are going to write our own version of Psalm 124. And we're going to start by talking about what would have happened if God hadn't come through here and there and there and there. We are going to relive those moments, "Man, if God hadn't come through, we were history. We would have been had; we would have been finished." And then the second part, we're going to throw our heads back and laugh that God *did* come through. We'll talk about the changed lives, the people's marriages that came back together, kids who were reunited with their parents, and the list goes on and on. We're going to celebrate! We're going to laugh and rejoice...because our champion came through

for us. Don't miss it! There is no greater thrill. Please don't let this be Berean's vision. Would you make it your vision? I'll tell you what: let's make it *our* vision and we'll walk it together to see what our champion does at our point of need.

Last month I went to Worlds of Fun in Kansas City with our Young Singles Group. Now fortunately for me, I took our 5 year-old son with me, which meant I spent the day in Camp Snoopy on the kids' rides! However, right behind Camp Snoopy was this big monstrosity of a roller coaster. And it was on cue...every 5 to 7 minutes you'd hear click, click, click, click as this thing went up... and then all these people screaming as it went down the 40-50 drop, as if they were plunging to their death. As I watched that thing over and over, I wondered why anybody would go on such an intimidating ride in the first place. I figured most people don't take their initial ride on the roller coaster because they studied the physics or engineering or they checked the maintenance record of the roller coaster. I don't think that has anything to do with it. I think most people find the courage to ride that roller coaster because of other people's safe experience. I think the roller coaster's safety record gives people the courage to ride it for the first time.

Typically after that first ride, people just want to go get back in line to ride it again. We weren't there on a busy day, but I've heard that on some days people wait up to an hour to ride that roller coaster, 2-3 minutes riding it, then go get back in line. Why? What's the draw? I think it is because the roller coaster offers the best of both worlds. You would get a real adventure on that roller coaster. It will take your breath away. The thrill, the adrenalin rush, is there. But you get to do it in the security and safety of the proven record of the roller coaster. You get the rush. You get the adventure. But you know there's a measure of control.

Friends, Psalm 124 is giving us other people's experience with God. We're getting God's safety record from Psalm 124. Do you know what He's telling us? "I've got the safe ride." And like the roller coaster, God offers the best of both worlds. If you will put your hand in His and follow Him by faith, He will give you the adventure. He will give you the ride of your life. He will take your breath away, I promise you. But you can do it in the safety and security of knowing that He's in complete control.

So one more time I want to ask the initial question: Is there any adventure in following God? Oh yes, no doubt! We don't need extreme sports. We don't need poker. Because there's no greater adventure than seeing God deliver in overwhelming circumstances. *There is no greater adventure than seeing God deliver in overwhelming circumstances.*

\*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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