If the LORD Had Not Been on Our Side

PSALM 124 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

The scariest thing in this psalm is a sentence they never had to finish, because if God hadn't shown up, none of them would have been around to sing about it.

Opening Lines

Read the first line out loud and then just stop. "If the LORD had not been on our side..." Let the sentence hang unfinished in the air for a full three seconds before you say: notice they never actually tell us what would have happened first. They make us live in the pause.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to look back and name the specific flood that would have swept them under if God hadn't stepped in. If nobody in the room can name their own torn net, the lesson didn't land.
- If you're short on time, cut: The Red Sea and creation cross-references. They're rich, but the beating heart is the unfinished 'if' sentence and each person's own escape story.
- Where the moment lives: In the moment someone says out loud, 'I wouldn't have made it through that,' and then finishes the sentence with what God did. That's the psalm happening live.
- Your prep: Come with your own drowning-and-rescue story already written down, not improvised. You cannot ask the room to name theirs if you're still fishing for yours.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Use the classroom opening (0-5): read verse 1, let the unfinished sentence hang, ask why David makes us wait. Read the whole psalm aloud (5-9). Teach the word lulei with the raised-hand-and-drop image (9-18). Historical context — the crowd singing on the road, call-and-response (18-24). Questions 1, 2, and 4 with the whole room, hands raised (24-40). Land it with the commitment sentence and the big idea (40-45). Transformation lives in the hand-drop moment and question 4 when someone names a specific rescue. Cut the Red Sea and creation cross-references first if you're behind.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Use the small-group opening (0-6): everyone silently recalls a 'that could have gone worse' moment before you read. Read the psalm together, trading verses (6-12). Teach

lulei with the hand image (12-20). Work questions 1 through 4 slowly, real silence after each (20-48) — this is the heart of the hour, don't rush it. Question 5 only if the room is ready (48-53). Commitments out loud around the circle (53-58). Spontaneous closing prayer over their actual named rescues (58-60). Transformation lives in questions 3 and 4. Cut question 1's discussion to a single answer if time is tight.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Use the coffee opening (0-5): the bird-slipping-the-net image, ask when they felt that. Read the psalm off your phone or the handout (5-9). Skip the formal word study — just say what lulei means in one line (9-11). Trade real answers to questions 3 and 4 — you go first with your own written story (11-24). Big idea said plainly (24-26). One-sentence commitment each, and agree to text each other in three days (26-30). Transformation lives in you going first with a raw, unpolished rescue story. Cut nothing; just talk slower if you have extra time.

The Follow-Up Text

Here's a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach, and this week we drill it deliberately: the follow-up text. Remember week 4, where you had people name real commitments instead of nodding at a summary? This is what keeps those commitments from evaporating by Tuesday. This week, level one is simple. Before you close tonight, tell the room plainly: 'In two or three days, I'm going to text a few of you and ask how it went.' Then actually do it. Pick two or three people, and send one short message that names the exact thing they said out loud — not 'how's your walk going' but 'did you call your friend and tell them they're not getting swept away?' The psalm opens with 'let Israel now declare.' Testimony that stays private tends to die. A single follow-up text is you playing the Levite three days later, calling for the line to be sung back.

Why This Passage Matters

Most people carry a private list of catastrophes that almost happened and then didn't — and they've never once said thank you out loud for any of them. That's the ache this psalm reaches into. Psalm 124 isn't abstract theology about God's protection. It's a whole crowd on a road up to Jerusalem, shouting back and forth about the disaster that never came, measuring the size of the mercy by the size of the danger. The bird knows how strong the net was precisely because it felt the net give way. Your room is full of people who slipped away from something — a diagnosis, a marriage on the edge, a night they don't talk about — and have quietly filed it under 'got lucky' or 'toughed it out.' This psalm hands them different words. It says the reason you're still here is that Someone stood between you and the grave, and the right response to that is not relief, it's worship. You get to be the one who helps them stop and finish the sentence they never finished. That's a privilege. You're handing people language for the rescue they've been too busy or too scared to name.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of this, do the central exercise yourself. Sit down with paper this week and write the hardest month of your past year at the top. Underneath, write the honest ending: if God had not been on my side, then _____. Finish that sentence with what would have actually happened. Then, beside it, write the one specific way you were kept — the person who showed up, the call that came, the morning you got out of bed. Read it back. If it doesn't move you, you're not being honest enough yet. You cannot lead a room into the pause after 'if the LORD had not been on our side' if you've never sat in that pause yourself.

Bring Your Own Story

- A time you were in genuine over-your-head trouble and only realized afterward how close it came — your own 'the net is torn' moment.
- A moment you caught yourself calling a rescue 'luck' or 'good timing' instead of naming God in it.
- Someone who stood between you and disaster — a person who was God's help with a face on it.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real): Polished — 'God has always faithfully sustained me through every trial.' Real — 'I found out about the layoff on a Thursday, and I lay on the kitchen floor doing math that didn't work. Someone I barely knew handed me a check that Sunday. I called it a coincidence for about a year.'
- Guardrail: tell it half-finished and still a little raw, not sanded down into a testimony with a bow on it.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Read verse 1 and stop dead: 'If the LORD had not been on our side…' Let it hang. Then say: David makes us wait. He won't tell us what would have happened until verse 3. Why do you think he leaves us in that pause? Take a guess before we read on."

An unfinished sentence creates tension the room needs to resolve — start with the gap, not the answer.

SMALL GROUP: "Before we open it, everybody think of one time you look back on now and think, 'that could have gone so much worse.' Don't share it yet. Just get it in your head. Now let's read a psalm about exactly that."

Personal recall before text study — get their own near-misses in the room before David's.

COFFEE: "There's a psalm that describes rescue as a bird slipping out of a hunter's net — you feel the net give way and then you're just gone, free. When's a time you felt that? Like you got out of something you had no business getting out of?"

A single vivid image lowers the stakes and invites one honest story, not a lesson.

Teaching the Word

The word to teach is the little Hebrew word that opens verse 1: lulei — 'if not,' 'had it not been.' It's not a normal 'if.' It's the word for the disaster that was fully loaded and never fired. It assumes the danger was real and imminent, and then names the one thing that changed the ending. Here's the physical image: cup your hand and hold it flat, palm down, right over the table. Then say, 'This is the wave, hanging.' Hold it there while you read verses 4 and 5 — the floods, the torrent, the raging waters — hand trembling just above the surface, about to fall. Then, on 'Blessed be the LORD,' pull your hand away and let it drop empty at your side. The wave never landed. That's lulei. The whole psalm lives in the space between the raised hand and the water that never came. Then read the line the whole thing drives toward — 'Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth' — and say nothing. Let it sit.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think David starts with 'if the LORD had not' instead of just saying 'the LORD saved us'?

Coaching note: You're after the insight that you measure a mercy by the size of the danger. Don't hand it to them; let someone stumble toward it. Affirm the half-answers.

If it stalls: Which sentence hits harder: 'God helped me,' or 'if God hadn't shown up I'd have been finished'? Why?

2. This was sung by a whole crowd shouting the lines back and forth. What does saying it out loud together do that reading it alone doesn't?

Coaching note: Draw out that testimony is meant to be public. Watch for the quiet people here — this is where an introvert may actually have the best answer.

If it stalls: Have you ever said something out loud to a group and only then realized you believed it? What was it?

3. David reaches for drowning, being swallowed alive, a trap snapping shut. What image would you reach for to describe the worst thing you've come through?

Coaching note: This is where it gets personal. Give real silence. If the first answer is vague, gently ask 'what did it actually feel like?' Don't rush to comfort.

If it stalls: If you had to pick just one word for the hardest stretch you've been through — flood, trap, fire, pit — which one, and why that one?

4. Can you name a specific way you were kept through something — a person, a phone call, a bill covered, a morning you got up when you didn't want to?

Coaching note: Push for one specific thing, not 'God's always been faithful.' Specificity is the whole game. If someone goes general, ask 'name one.'

If it stalls: Think back to a hard week this past year. Who showed up? Just say the name.

5. The psalm ends by giving credit away entirely: 'Our help is in the name of the LORD.' Where in your life have you been quietly taking credit for a rescue that wasn't yours?

Coaching note: This is the deepest cut. Don't fill the silence. Some people need to sit in this one without answering out loud, and that's fine.

If it stalls: Is there something you usually call 'good luck' or 'good timing' that maybe deserves a better name?

Questions You May Hear

"Who was actually singing this? Was it David alone?"

It carries David's name, but it's a song of ascents — sung by whole crowds climbing to Jerusalem for the feasts. A Levite likely cried out 'if the LORD had not been on our side,' then called 'let Israel now declare,' and the crowd sang the line back.

"Is 'the floods' and 'raging waters' pointing to a specific event, like the Red Sea?"

It's not naming one event, but Israel's memory reaches straight back to the Red Sea, where the waters that should have destroyed them drowned their enemies instead. It's the whole history of near-disaster compressed into one image.

"What's the 'snare of the fowler' — where does that picture come from?"

A fowler is a bird-trapper, and the image comes straight out of Psalm 91, where God 'will deliver you from the snare of the fowler.' It pictures God's people as helpless prey that only the LORD can free.

"Why call God 'the Maker of heaven and earth' at the end of a rescue song?"

It's the hinge the whole psalm turns on. The same power that made the sea is the power that held the waters back — the God who created everything is the God who bends down to tear open a trap and save one small nation.

For Experienced Leaders

- When you drop your hand on 'Blessed be the LORD,' resist the urge to narrate it. The gesture does the work. If you explain it, you kill it.
- Somebody will try to turn question 4 into a theology debate about whether hard things are 'from God' or 'allowed by God.' If it's alive and pulling deeper into the psalm, ride it; if two people are relitigating providence while the room glazes over, say kindly, 'Let's you and I finish that after — I want to hear from folks who haven't named their rescue yet.'
- Do not let anyone off the hook with 'God's always been faithful.' It's true and it's a dodge. Warmly ask, 'Name one specific time.' The specificity is where worship actually happens.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around and have each person finish one sentence out loud: 'This week I'm going to tell _____ about the time God _____.' Make them name the person and the

story, not just say they'll 'be more grateful.'

Close by praying out loud over the exact rescues people just named — the specific bill, the specific person, the specific morning. Don't reach for a written prayer; take their own words and hand them back to God one by one. That's you playing the Levite one more time before they leave.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 3 and someone is honestly naming their flood, stay there. Do not drag them to question 5 for the sake of finishing. The honest 'that could have gone so much worse' is worth more than a completed outline.

Midweek follow-up: In two or three days, text two or three people the exact thing they committed to: 'Did you tell your sister about that year yet?' Then ask how it landed.

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Handout

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During the lesson:

- Finish the sentence the way it feels honest: If the LORD had not been on my side, then _____
- One word for the hardest stretch you've come through (flood, trap, fire, pit, or your own word): _____
- One specific way you were kept — a name, a phone call, a bill, a morning you got up: _____
- Something you usually call 'luck' or 'timing' that maybe deserves a better name: _____
- The person I'm going to tell my 'the net is torn' story to this week: _____

Take-home actions:

- Take five minutes alone this week. Write the hardest week or month of the past year, and beside it one specific way you were kept. Read it back and thank God out loud for each one.
- Think of one friend in the thick of an attack right now. Send them one sentence today: 'You are not going to be swept away, and I'm not going anywhere.' Then ask when you can bring a meal.
- In your next real conversation today, say the plain truth this psalm ends on — 'Our help is in the name of the LORD' — about one specific thing God did for you, not in general.

Psalm 124 · Songs of Ascent, Lesson 5 · The net is torn, and we have slipped away.