

A Song of Ascents.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;

He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper;

the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;

He will keep your life.

The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.

The Psalms of Ascent are the songs that God gave His Old Testament people to sing on their journeys to worship in the temple, and on their travel back to the Promised Land from exile. He has given these Psalms to us in Holy Scripture to teach us to sing as those on pilgrimage through this life. Last week we considered how the first song God teaches His people to sing on their journey is the song of affliction. As we journey through this life we cry out to Him in prayer and seek His counsel and instruction in His Word. We live as those who are dependent upon Him, just as children call upon their parents and hear their words. Because of this we are attacked by the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. They seek to keep us from calling upon God and hearing Him in His holy word. Today we hear God's reassurance, His promise of divine protection on the journey. This is what we take refuge in.

The psalmist has a need for help, assistance, and aid. Enemies lie about us. We are beset by many and varied sorrows. There are the dramatic events that dominate the news headlines, casting many into fearful frenzy. There are the sorrows of our lives that don't make the news, but affect us deeply. And there is the constant, day to day weariness of life. Not every meeting or interaction has a great blowup of tempers or controversy (God be praised for that!), but we do have regular interactions with those at home, work, even at church, that sap our patience, our strength, our sanity. It wears you down. You are tempted to flee. We see it all the time. Spouses separate because "it just doesn't work anymore." Frustration builds at work until there's the great, triumphant giving of two weeks' notice to make the boss feel sorry he asked too much of you too many times. There are those difficult relationships with people at church that leave your stomach feeling so sour, your mind filled with such hurt and frustration, that you increasingly absent yourself to avoid them until you're just plain done with the whole church thing.

Solutions are often sought in things that we deem fitting, that give us an "out," enabling us to save face, rather than simply confess our sins to one another, receive forgiveness, and live in believing humility. We'll pay the big bucks for therapists of high repute or flee to the lofty dopamine heights of binge-watching Netflix, but not think to lift up our eyes to Mount Calvary, to the house of the Lord. We'll so easily seek human solutions to problems of sin, fear, and shame.

Just consider all the recent concern over the coronavirus. It kills some, affects the lives of many more. How to address the fear? Travel bans, quarantines, handwashing, and buying so much sanitizer the stores run out! But aside from here in the church, do you hear any great calls for prayer, beckoning our nation to implore the Lord of heaven and earth to bring a merciful end to something that we, even in our time of great scientific advancement, are powerless to stop? In the era of our grandparents, and all the generations before, all the way back to Bible times, there would be frequent and public prayer for the forgiveness of our sins and deliverance from our justly deserved affliction, and then, efforts to

care for the sick. I don't know about you, but much of what it out there is pure concern for taking care of the self. Hence the hoarding of quantities of sanitation and food supplies, with little, no regard, for one's neighbor.

Your help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth, all things. He continues to keep watch; He does not slumber or sleep. His is the only lasting aid. This is not to say that He works apart from means, that we ought never seek the counsel and aid of doctors, friends, a good vacation and respite. God delivers and heals through stuff, through His gifts of people and godly leisure. But we so often have eyes only for the earthly. We often see our problems and seek desired solutions without any consideration of the spiritual aspect.

The prayer books of the church that I use when visiting the sick are powerful reminders, not just for the sick but for myself, that the first thing we need is the forgiveness of sins and faith. Many times, the prayers of the church for various times of need ask first for forgiveness and deliverance from the evil one, and then for the particular concern. Whatever our affliction or struggle at any given time, it is all to be a reminder for us all of our dire condition as sinners who live in a sinful world. And there is only one Helper who can come to our aid, not just for times of sickness, poverty, or fear, but at all times.

This Helper is Himself quite acquainted with the dire need for help and aid. You just heard how He went into the Garden of Gethsemane knowing what was to come. He knew that His closest friends and companions would all fall away from Him, one even willing to flee away into the night unclothed. Jesus knew that as the hour of the power of darkness fell, Peter, in the weakness of his worldly thinking, would seek the earthly solution of a sword and violence. You heard His repeated prayer to His Father, showing that wonderful mystery of His real fear as true Man, yet also His total submission to the Father's will as perfect Man for us. In that hour of exceeding sorrow, His eyes are directed only to His Father for strength. He bids His disciples pray likewise to the Father that they not enter temptation, for as it is with us, in time of attack, the danger of sin and unbelief is great, and our only help against such things is our Father in heaven.

Jesus rebukes Peter's earthly aid, reminding Him of the truth that this Psalm teaches. The Lord is the keeper of all His saints, not least of all His beloved Son, who could call upon His Father and have 12 legions of angels sent to deliver Him. But Jesus is willing to suffer not just the ire of men and stumble under the burden of the cross. He is willing to drink the cup set before Him, to bear divine wrath, to fulfill the Scriptures, and thus you see how it is that the promise of divine protection is given you.

Jesus lies prostrate in prayer in the moonlight, and abandoned by all earthly friends. He is hung up to be struck by the sun's rays, forsaken by His Father. Yet as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, **"In the days of His flesh, [Christ] offered prayers and pleas with loud cries and tears to the One who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence"** (Heb 5:7). Even in the agony of being forsaken, of not helped, but abandoned to suffering the burden of all human sin, He still cries out to His Father.

From this comes the promise not just in general of what the Lord does for all His people, but the promise given to you. Because of Christ's perfect obedience, His faithful trust in His Father, even in the midst of His suffering, help indeed comes from the hills. This is what Israel was already confessing in their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. As they journeyed up to Mount Zion, they sang of lifting their eyes to the hills, where the Lord dwelt in His temple, to atone for and forgive their sins. Their eyes were laid upon the sacrifices offered for them, foreshadowing the sacrificial Lamb of God. Their eyes were prepared to shift from gazing upon the temple of Mount Zion to look upon the hill of Golgotha, where true and final help was won.

Your eyes are called to where that help is given. How fitting it is that the name of our church is of the hill where that sweet divine aid was achieved: Mount Calvary. Here we gather in the place that help is given to God's people. You are then sent out as His baptized child, strengthened by what He has given, reminded that He Himself will bring you back here for more: **"The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."** Those words are used in our liturgy for Holy Baptism. That is where all these promises of God for you were given to you. As God was present in the temple for His people, so He is present here for you. As He kept and guarded His people not just while they were in the temple, but in their lives, so He keeps and guards you.