

Where Does Our Help Come From?

Psalm 121

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Do you need help? When do you need help? What kind of help do you need? Where do you go for help?

Sometimes we don't want to admit that we need help. Little children will say, "I want to do it myself." Most of us grow out of that by the time we're 90.

When Eric graduated from high school, the commencement speaker told the graduates that people need to be "helpable." He didn't just say it once, either. We kind of laugh about that. But *helpable* is a pretty good word. Are you able to be helped? Are you willing to be helped?

Why do we need help? Why should we be helpable? There are some things we just can't do by ourselves. There are some problems, situations, issues that are too big for us.

We live in a troubled time in our country. We need help if love and peace and reason and righteousness are going to prevail over hate and conflict and fear and evil.

In our own lives, sometimes holding relationships together or dealing with some people is too much for us. We need help.

We face temptations that seem more than we can handle. We may have persistent sins that we can't overcome. We need help.

Sickness, disease, pain—our own or that of someone we care about—can be more than we can deal with. We need help.

Where do we go for help? Maybe we get on the internet and look for answers. Maybe we go to family members or friends. There's an entire industry devoted to *self-help*. Maybe we turn there. And we can get some help in all those places. We're supposed to help each other. But there's a greater source of help that we need.

In Psalm 121, the songwriter begins, "I lift up my eyes—I look up—to the hills—or mountains. Where does my help come from?" Some of us remember that in the King James Version: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." That makes it sound like our help

comes from the hills. But it's better to understand this line as a question: "I look up to the hills. Where does my help come from?"

Psalm 121 is the second in a series of fifteen psalms (120-134) that are called "Songs of Ascents." The psalms in this collection were likely sung by travelers on the way to Jerusalem for one of the three annual festivals. Jerusalem's elevation is higher than most of the land around it, so you ascend or go up to Jerusalem. And, in the Bible, you always "go up" to Jerusalem because it's the City of God where the Temple is. So these are songs for those who would ascend to Jerusalem as they journeyed there from many places. These are songs for the road.

But they're not just songs for ancient travelers to Jerusalem. They're songs for all of us as we travel through life, as we walk with the Lord. Some time back I mentioned a book with the title *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene Peterson. I said I'd always liked that title but I'd never read the book. Since then, I got the book and started reading it. Peterson bases it on these fifteen psalms. He uses the psalms to talk about the Christian journey. There are some sections of the book that are worth quoting at length. Here's one:

Christians will recognize how appropriately these psalms may be sung between the times: between the time we leave the world's environment and arrive at the Spirit's assembly; between the time we leave sin and arrive at holiness; between the time we leave home on Sunday morning and arrive in church with the company of God's people; between the time we leave the works of the law and arrive at justification by faith. They are songs of transition, brief hymns that provide courage, support and inner direction for getting us to where God is leading us in Jesus Christ.

For those who choose to live no longer as tourists but as pilgrims, the Songs of Ascents combine all the cheerfulness of a travel song with the practicality of a guidebook and map. (20, 22)

We're pilgrims. Not early American settlers with big hats and bonnets. But travelers, sojourners, people on the move, walking with the Lord, following him.

So Psalm 121 is describing a journey. When it says, "I look up to the hills," it could be anticipating difficulty and danger in climbing the hills and knowing there might be bandits and predators hiding there. If I'm facing that, where does my help come from? An expression of trust in God follows. "My help comes from the LORD."

It could be that the hills include Mount Zion. In that case, they're a symbol not of danger but of divine help. Again, that leads to the affirmation, "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth."

Another song of ascents, Psalm 123, also opens with "I lift up my eyes." There it's a prayer, "I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven."

As Jesus was speaking of dangerous times to come, he told his disciples, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). Help is on the way! Are we ready to receive it? Are we willing to trust the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, to be our help, our keeper and guardian?

A woman shared what to her was an overwhelming problem. She was done in, tired out, and uptight in meeting her family's needs. Someone asked, "Why not let God help you?"

She replied, "Do you mean I have a choice?"

And the answer was, "Yes! You have a decision to make: Are you going to manage this problem on your own or cry out to God for help?"

The woman realized that she might be blocking God's efforts to help her. She'd tried everything and everybody else. She asked, "How do I let God help me?"

Her pastor tried to share what he'd learned over the years about how to surrender our needs to the Lord more quickly. Why do we wait so long to look to God? He also shared what he'd learned about letting God help (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Falling into Greatness* 187-88). We need to be *helpable*!

And we need to choose to allow God to help us. Help is on its way from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. Will we receive it?

Sometimes we may not recognize God's help. We're like the man in the old story who was caught in a flood and stranded on the roof of his house. A boat came by and people offered to pick him up. He said, "No, the Lord will save me." Another boat came by and the people tried to help him. "No, the Lord will save me." A helicopter hovered over him and rescuers called down for him to take hold of the rope ladder. "No, the Lord will save me." The flood waters rose and the man drowned. When he saw the Lord, he said, "I thought you were going to help me." God said, "I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more did you want?"

Or we may reject God's help. There's another old story about the man who walked too close to the edge of a cliff. He tumbled and fell. On the way down, he was able to grab a branch and hold on for dear life. He was too far down to climb back up and there was still a drop of five hundred feet below him. He called out for help. "Is anyone up there?" A voice came from above, "This is the Lord. Trust me. Just let go." And in a little bit, the man called out, "Is there anyone else up there?"

Let's recognize and trust the help God gives. Frederick Buechner has a character in one of his novels pray, "Help me whatever way thou canst, dear Christ and Lord" (*Godric; Listening to Your Life*, <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2017/7/3/remember-me-not-for-the-ill-ive-done?rq=dear%20Christ>). What are some of the ways the Lord helps us?

God knows better than we do what kind of help we need. And he knows much better how to help us. It may be through direct, miraculous intervention like healing, deliverance, provision. Or, he may give us strength to endure what we're going through. God is much smarter than we are and has greater resources than we know.

The psalm opens with this affirmation of trust and the emphasis on "my help." The rest of the psalm answers with promises that the LORD will keep or watch over us. Six times the idea of keep or guard or watch over is mentioned. "The theme, a declaration of trust that 'my help comes from the LORD,' is thus developed by a series of assurances that 'the LORD is your

keeper” (James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation Commentary*). That line, “the LORD is your keeper” or “the LORD watches over you” is the exact center of the psalm. The promises and assurance radiate from that reality.

The potential dangers mentioned in the psalm are all threats travelers might face. The ancient Jews would have walked this whole trip. For your foot to slip, maybe on a loose rock, could cause a fall and injury. In that region of the world, a lot of the country is desert. Traveling in the open, sunstroke was a danger. In the ancient world, the moon’s light was sometimes seen as dangerous as well. “Moonstroke” was thought to be a threat. That idea came into English by way of Latin in the words *lunacy* and *lunatic*.

The psalm promises that the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth will keep you so these things won’t happen to you. He won’t let your foot slip. He will shade you so that the sun and moon won’t strike you. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

Does that mean if we follow God’s way, if we’re followers of Jesus, we’ll never sprain our ankle, never get sunstroke, never have any emotional problems? We know plenty of instances of believers having these and many other troubles. The promise of the psalm isn’t that we’ll never stub our toes but that no injury, no illness, no accident, no distress will have evil power over us. None of that will be able to separate us from God’s purpose in us. All the water in the ocean can’t sink a ship unless it gets inside. All the trouble in the world can’t harm us unless it gets inside us. Nothing that happens to us, none of the trouble we encounter has any power to get between us and God or dilute his grace in us or divert God’s will from us (Peterson 42, 43).

There’s a great song from some years ago called *Be Ye Glad*. It talks about confusion and remorse, spiritual captivity. But it also celebrates salvation, redemption and release. Then the last verse says,

So be like lights on the rim of the water,
giving hope in a storm sea of night.
Be a refuge amidst the slaughter,
for these fugitives in their flight.

For you are timeless and part of a puzzle.
You are winsome and young as a lad.
And there is no disease or no struggle,
that can pull you from God, Be Ye Glad.

http://www.michaelkellyblanchard.com/writings/lyrics_glad.htm;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIGljDEUYPI>

God can keep us, guard us, watch over us all the time, day and night. The LORD who watches over us will not slumber. He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. God never tires. God never dozes off. God is able to care for all his people and for each of his people.

We might wonder if the psalm writer had in mind the difference between the LORD God and other so-called gods. The Canaanite god Baal was thought to sleep in the winter and had to be reawakened so that crops would grow. When the prophet Elijah had a showdown with the prophets of Baal, he taunted them: "Maybe Baal is napping and you need to wake him up!" (1 Kings 18:27). But the LORD doesn't slumber or sleep. We can trust him to care for us all the time. And so we can rest, knowing that God is awake and alert.

In a previous generation, Bishop Quayle was a popular writer and speaker. He told about one night working late, trying to get everything done, worried that it might not get done. At some point he sensed God saying to him, "Quayle, there's no need for both of us to stay up all night. I'm going to stay up anyway. You go to bed and get a good sleep" (Ogilvie 191).

I remember Jim Buskirk saying, "Sometimes, the most spiritual thing a tired person can do is rest." If you can't sleep sometime, don't feel guilty. It may be something medical or there may be a good reason to be awake and thinking or praying. But, generally, we don't have to stay up worrying. We can trust the Lord to stay awake and watch over us through the night as he does through the day.

God is concerned about all of our lives, about every aspect of our life. Remember what Jesus said: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your

head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6-7). I'm not saying God micro-manages or manipulates us. But God never leaves us and God is always working for our good and keeping evil from ruling us. Psalm 121 shares an important idea with the blessing the LORD gave Israel's priests to speak over the people: "the LORD bless you and *keep you*" (Numbers 6:22-27).

Peterson points out that the Christian life is going to God. In that journey, Christians walk the same ground that everyone else walks on. We breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same news. We're citizens of the same governments, we pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline. We fear the same dangers, feel the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

The difference is that every step we take, every breath we breathe, we know God is with us, watching over us, preserving us, ruling us. Whatever doubts we endure or accidents we go through, the Lord will keep us from every evil, he guards our very life.

Once we get this psalm in our hearts it will be impossible for us to gloomily suppose that being a Christian is an unending battle against ominous forces that at any moment may break through and overpower us. Faith is not a precarious affair of chance escape from satanic assaults. It is the solid, massive, secure experience of God, who keeps all evil from getting inside us, who guards our life, who guards us when we leave and when we return, who guards us now, who guards us always. (45-45)

Let's be helpable and let the Lord help us in all the ways he can.