

From where does your help come? * Psalm 121
September 6, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

A few times in the last few weeks, I've caught myself staring off into the distance, wondering what lay ahead for us in light of COVID-19. It's been pretty stable for us the last little while – all calm on the Western front – but now we're facing the biggest unknown that we've seen in a long time: we're sending our children and teachers and support staff back into school and waiting to see what will happen. That's a big change and it's hard to say what lies ahead.

The fact that our children are involved adds to the emotional weight – they are utterly precious to us and we'd never want to see anything happen to them - and if anyone's going to forget to do social distancing – it's them. I suspect that, like me, you've been running through all the possible scenarios and wondering how we'll possibly make it through.

And I think that's what the psalmist is doing in Psalm 121. The psalmist is anticipating a journey – that's what makes it a 'psalm of ascents' – and thinking about all the potential dangers on the way and thinking 'how am I going to get through this? Who's going to help me through?' The answer to that is laid out in this psalm.

We're on a journey too, and this next leg of journey is full of unknowns but this psalm shouts loud and clear: 'we have reason for hope! We have reason for confidence!' And I hope that reading this together will give you confidence and courage in the days ahead. Let's look at the psalm together, psalm 121. (I'm going to use the ESV translation, like the song).

Listen to the psalmist –

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

Scholars differ why he's looking up at the hills – he might just be daydreaming, like I've said, or maybe he's looking up with trepidation at the hills, knowing that there are bandits waiting to rob him behind every third rock and maybe he's looking at the mountains as a symbol of strength. The hills around Jerusalem did after all provide Jerusalem with some built in security (See Psalm 125:1-2). I suspect that they're all at play. The psalmist is looking at the majestic mountains, thinking about the possible dangers that lay ahead, reflecting on the incredible immovability of those mountains and he ultimately says –

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

As big as those mountains are, my God made them. As dangerous as those bandits are, my God rules over them. My help comes from YHWH he says who spoke the world into being with a single word. You don't get more powerful than that. And HE is my helper. He'll be with me on this journey.

We're on a journey right now aren't we? Where does your help come from? We've got medical officials and wise advisors; we've got friends and family and support networks and those are all good, we need those. But the psalmist invites us to lift our eyes a little higher and recognize that we've got an even greater help on our side. Our help comes from the LORD who made heaven and earth.

And from here, the psalmist lays out what a reliable help YHWH is – he says ultimately – “The LORD is our helper, by day and by night, in good times and bad, both now and forever.” That’s the psalm in a nutshell - “The LORD is our helper, by day and by night, in good times and bad, both now and forever.”

Look at verse 3 –

3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

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

During the day and at night, the LORD is your helper. He doesn’t sleep; He doesn’t doze off. 24/7 He is on the job, watching over you so that you can stand firm on any ground. That’s the implication of that word – ‘keep.’ Six times the psalmist says – the LORD will ‘keep you’ – verse 3, 4, 5, 2x in 7, verse 8 – He will protect you, watch over you, stand guard over you, preserve you. There is never a time when God is not standing guard – by day and by night, YHWH is your helper.

And look at verse 7 -

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

In good times and bad, the LORD is your helper. It goes without saying that when things are good, God is there, but what about when things go wrong? Even then, the psalmist says, especially then, God is with you.

Now this verse is why I tend toward the ESV translation – because the NIV gives you the impression that God will never let you come to any harm. The NIV (and others) says ‘The LORD will keep you from all harm’ and that’s a possible translation, but given the rest of Scripture and given our experience, we know that’s just not true. The psalm immediately before this one talks about being in distress, Jesus warns us to anticipate hardships; the psalmist here is saying - we may experience harm but evil will never overcome us. The LORD will keep us from all evil.

I think Eugene Peterson is right when he says – “The promise of the psalm – and both Hebrews and Christians have always read it this way – is not that we shall never stub our toes but that no injury, no illness, no accident, no distress will have evil power over us, that is, will be able to separate us from God’s purposes in us... At no time is there the faintest suggestion that the life of faith exempts us from difficulties. What it promises is preservation from all evil in them” (Peterson, 36).

Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Not COVID or famine or danger or sword; in all things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. That’s Romans 8:35 and on. “38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” I mean, Jesus came to great harm – He died on the Cross to bring us back for God – but evil did not overtake Him. He in fact triumphed over evil! He will keep you from all evil.

The LORD is your helper in good times and in bad...

And look at verse 8 -

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

The LORD is your helper both now and forever. Getting on the bus, going to school, coming home, making lunch, going out and coming in – in all the mundane activities of life – God is there, to help and keep you. Whatever it is that you are doing, God is with you in it.

And His care is not limited to this life. The psalmist looks into eternity and says ‘even there, the LORD will guide you.’ The way the LORD keeps you now, He’ll do for all of eternity – with the bonus that all evil will be gone. Accidents won’t happen, COVID’s won’t come knocking, evil people will not threaten us. Instead, we will enjoy the eternal life that Jesus secured for us, dwelling forever in perfect bodies with our perfect Father.

The LORD is your helper, by day and by night, in good times and bad, both now and forever. That’s a truth that I want you to keep in your heart this coming week. The LORD is your helper, by day and by night, in good times and bad, both now and forever.

I’m using these extremes – day and night, good and bad, now and forever because the psalmist does – and the psalmist uses these extremes to say ‘the sun won’t harm you; nor will the moon’ and nothin’ in between.’ ‘He will keep your going out and your coming in and everything that happens in the middle.’ There is no time when God is NOT helping you, protecting you from evil, keeping you eternally safe.

You can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the never-slumbering, always-watching, life-preserving God is with you, to help and protect you, in every moment.

And I hope that that gives you peace. I hope that that gives you strength. And courage and confidence. The never-slumbering, always-watching, life-preserving God is with you on the school bus, in the classroom, in the staff room, at the grocery store, in the workplace, in the hospital – your help comes from the LORD, the maker of Heaven and Earth. You are standing on a firm foundation.

I want to give Eugene Peterson the closing word here because he puts it so perfectly -

... each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or accidents we experience, the Lord will guard us from every evil, he guards our very life. (Peterson, A long obedience in the same direction, 39).

The LORD is your helper, by day and at night, in good times and bad, both now and forever.

BENEDICTION

24 " ' "The LORD bless you and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." ' (Numbers 6:24-26).

