

August 16, 2020

“The LORD Is Our Help”
Psalm 121

FCF: We don't get a pass. What we make of that.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) On this journey, we will meet difficulties.
(magnet) We must look to the LORD for our help.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Do these sound familiar - aching loneliness, fits of anger, storms of doubt, accidents that land us in the ER, arguments that weaken bonds, viruses that crash computers? Any of which we may have experienced last week. Any of which we may experience this week. And then there are others - the loss of a job, the call from the doctor, the drift of a child, the end of a marriage. Yet we are told that God loves us. Clearly, we don't get a pass. So what do we make of this?

Perhaps we should get back to basics and find out what He told us about such questions.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Psalm 121](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Advisories are worth our attention. Weather advisories are issued by the NWS when Doppler radar indicates a storm nearby that threatens life and property. Travel advisories are issued by governments to let their citizens know about safety concerns that may affect travel in a certain country or region. Advisories are worth our attention. They are good and wise to heed.

Psalm 121 is a travel advisory. It is the second in the “Songs of Ascent” - this collection of psalms sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem and its temple for the great feasts. Last week we looked at Psalm 120. As these pilgrims set out on their journey, they needed to know who they were as exiles and what that meant. This was important. But what should they expect on the way? That would have been a pressing issue, not only for them but for us. For these Songs of Ascent are a picture of the Christian life. Which means that, as we come to Psalm 121, whether we are a follower of Jesus or taking time to weigh His claims, we need to understand that such a life comes with its difficulties. But it also comes with the assurance of the Lord's help. Both are true. On this journey, we will meet difficulties. We must look to the LORD for our help. On this journey, we will meet difficulties. We must look to the LORD for our help.

What would it mean to look to the LORD for help? To get at that we need to know three things. First, the source of help. Second, the promise of help. And, third, the depth of help.

I. THE SOURCE OF HELP

First, our source of help ([READ Psalm 121:1-2](#)). Where are we to look? To the hills.

A) The Hills - Unlikely Meanings

But what does that mean? Let's start with what it doesn't mean to clear it off the table.

1. Not as part of nature

These hills are more than simply a part of nature. This is not nature mysticism, a worship of the hills. Nor are these merely symbols of grandeur, a focus of inspiration or a thought for the day.

2. Not as ordinary hills

They are hills. But not ordinary hills. This is more than a place of refuge one looks to in hope. Or havens for robbers one looks to in dread. These are hills on a map but not just any hills.

B) The Hills - Likely Meaning

So what are they? Think again of the context. Where are these pilgrims going?

1. The hills of Jerusalem

These are the hills around Jerusalem, a city built in hill country. You have to ascend to go there.

2. The temple in Jerusalem

More than just the city, this is about the temple, the place of the LORD's presence amidst His people. Our help is the LORD, the all-powerful Creator God, the ever-faithful covenant God.

He is the source of our help. He is our one sure source of help. And no other.

Illustration:

Looking to another will always disappoint. Think of how many stories are told with this theme. The shortcut that appeared to be a good idea that proves to be a trap. The seemingly kindly stranger with the novel advice that proves to be a threat. It's a constant theme. Each place we see it is an echo, a reverberation of this deeper theme. The LORD alone is our help.

Application:

(**READ Psalm 121:2**) This needs to be engraved upon our hearts. The LORD's promises are unbreakable. We need to hold to that as we ask "Is He just too busy running the cosmos to bother with me? Has He finally had enough of my foolishness?" His promises are unbreakable.

And His power is incomparable. We need to know that when we begin to wonder if this anxiety or obstacle is too great. Or if this new circumstance is just too much for Him to handle.

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II. THE PROMISE OF HELP

He is our source of help. Which brings us to the next point, the promise of help (**READ Psalm 121:3-6**). What has been promised to His people? His help. But what does that mean?

A) The Way It Comes

Let's look at the way it comes, the images used. How is this help described?

1. Not to be moved

Your foot will not be moved. Such places were filled with rocky and treacherous terrain. The foot slipping was an image for slipping off the path and down into a ravine, falling into danger.

2. Not to be struck

You will not be struck by the sun. In the Middle East, there is a danger of dehydration because of the heat. Nor will you be struck by the moon. In the ancient world, to be moonstruck was to be set by seizures. The idea being that God's care prevails over all known and unknown threats.

B) The Way We Can Know

But how can we know this? What about the LORD assures us of such care?

1. Emphasis of care

Note the emphasis. Six times in vv.3-8, we see references to the LORD “keeping” us. Meaning He watches over, guards, and protects us. The repetition is intentional so as to press the point.

2. Assurance of care

And, in case we missed it, we’re told that, unlike the pagan gods, the LORD never slumbers. He never needs nor never takes a break. We and our surroundings always have His attention. He is always vigilant. And He is always close, like our shadow - “the shade at your right hand.” This is the extent of His keeping us along the way. He is both ever watching and ever with us.

This is the promise of His help - both the way it comes and how we can be sure.

Application:

This is the promise of the LORD’s help and His presence. How can this be? Think back to Jesus’ words to His disciples regarding His departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit. What did He say? The mode of His presence was changing. But not the reality. And that’s still true.

He is with us. He is with you and me. As His disciples, we are no more alone now than they were then. So we can cry out and know that we are heard. As you look back, where have you known Him as your Keeper? How have you experienced His peace and strength? Praise and thank Him for that. And where do you need to know Him as your Keeper? How are you feeling unsettled - agitated, fearful, anxious, bored, or apathetic? Cry out to Him. He is near.

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III. THE DEPTH OF HELP

Which brings us to the third point, the depth of help (**READ Psalm 121:7-8**). Through it all, what can we know? What can we claim, cling to, and count on? What is our hope?

A) Not a Life of Ease

Clearly, we are not being promised a life of ease. And we see this all through the Bible.

1. Immediate context

Think of the immediate context. Look back at what is mentioned. We have slippery surfaces, loose footing, the heat of the day, the threat of night, the length of a journey, a distant destination. And the need for assurance, the need to be ever mindful of this One who is indeed our Keeper.

2. Broader context

And this fits with the broader context of the Scriptures. Consider the record. The apostles were all martyred except one. John was exiled. Jesus Himself is called the Author and Finisher of our Faith, the Suffering Servant, the Man of Sorrows. And we are to follow in our Master’s steps.

B) But Kept from Evil

We are not promised a life of ease. We are promised that we will be kept from evil.

1. The meaning of the world

The word in v.7 translated as “evil” has the sense of wickedness, trouble, or disaster. It refers to something broken, spoiled, and made worthless. It’s what you find in the darkest of valleys.

2. The rich implications

We are promised that the LORD will keep and guard us from this. Tied to that, we also read He will keep our life, our very soul, to the very end. In v.8, we see this covers the beginning all the way through to the end, at all times and places. This is not a cushioned journey but a protected one. This is not a guarantee that we will not suffer or a promise that we will not sin or be sinned against. We will surely experience evil. But it will never ultimately have its way with us.

This is the depth of the LORD’s help, the promise He has made to His own.

Illustration:

I am reminded of a line from C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters* ([READ quote](#)):

Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

Application:

There are worse things than suffering and affliction. True evil would be to let our hearts be crippled by such things. It would be for us to steadfastly protest to God, “You allowed this to happen. And you didn’t give me what I wanted.” It is to stay there and allow that to become our posture towards Him. There are far worse things than suffering and affliction. To allow our hearts to be hardened instead of seeing the invitation to turn to the Lord, lean into Him, learn from Him, and let Him work through the hardship so as to make us wiser, deeper, more joyful.

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CONCLUSION:

Here’s a PSA. Romantic comedies can be hazardous to marriage. “How?” you ask. “Aren’t they said to be the perfect way for a couple to spend an evening?” Well, they may well be the perfect way to create unrealistic expectations, a warped view of the work involved in a healthy relationship. Which means such movies may set us up to fail. In fact, research has found that fans of such films as *You’ve Got Mail*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *While You Were Sleeping* often struggle to effectively communicate with their partners because they assume that, if you are truly meant to be with someone, they should already know what you need. It should all just work without any work. It would seem that a steady diet of such fare can leave you ill-prepared.

The author of Psalm 121 would not have us to make such mistakes in our relationship with the Lord. Our expectations need to be made straight as we set out on this path. Our hearts need to be protected from poor assumptions, flawed expectations, great disappointment, and sad disillusionment. And so we have this song for the road, this bracing realism and deep assurance.

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