

God Is My Help
Text: Psalm 121:1-8
Series: The Psalms [#8]
Lyle L. Wahl
Date: June 13, 2010

Introduction

All of us need help. Yes, a child may insist “I can do it myself!”, but that doesn’t mean he or she does not need help. Some teens think they are too grown up to need help, while some adults think needing and asking for help is a sign of weakness.

All of us need help. I was reminded of that throughout this last week after the break-in and extensive damage done in parts of our building. The alarm monitoring company notified me, as well as the police and fire departments. A police officer and his dog made sure no one was in the building before the rest of us entered. The insurance agent, the underwriter’s representative, the claims adjuster, the cleanup crew, carpet cleaners and tradespeople, in addition to some of our own people all helped. Other churches have expressed their support. We needed and benefited from their help.

Psalm 121 is about help. The subject is set out in the opening verses in question and answer form. This brief psalm declares “*God is my help!*” This is God’s truth for us today. God is *our* Help. Being our Help is part of God’s unchanging character and forever love and grace to us who are His children.

The psalm is the second of a group of fifteen Psalms that share the title “A Psalm of Ascents.” While we don’t know the author or the circumstances behind this Psalm, we do know that People traveling to Jerusalem for the nation-wide annual festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles used these Psalms. For most of them travel to these *attendance-required* festivals was on foot, or a donkey. Many could spend over a month in travel to and then from these special times. I’m sure they talked about the weather, economy and politics. But they also anticipated and prepared for worship. One way they prepared for those special times of worship was singing these 15 *Psalms of Ascents*. To *ascend*, or *ascent*, means to go up. Jerusalem was the center of national and spiritual life. So, no matter what the elevation of their home town, they always went *up to* and *down from* Jerusalem.

The psalmist shows us his need for help as well as the source and nature of his help. What he needed and found, we need and can find. We begin with...

The Need For Help.

The writer expresses his need for help first with *an upward, panoramic look*. His opening words are “I will lift up my eyes to the mountains.” We don’t know the thoughts that prompted him to write this phrase. There are a number of suggestions.

- Mountains are a picture of strength, a place of refuge.
- They also are places of potential danger because thugs and thieves could hide there

and prey on travelers.

- Pagans built altars and shrines on the mountains.

And the list can go on. The simple fact is that we are not told, and we don't need that detail.

This opening phrase fits the travelers well. They were on their way, walking toward the hills where Jerusalem is. So they would first be looking for, and then gauging and guiding their travel by those hills. The opening verses of Psalm 125 talk about "the mountains [that] surround Jerusalem" (2a).

Most of the travelers would have mixed feelings as they sang. They had excited anticipation of seeing Jerusalem, the temple, being involved in that *wall to wall* mass of people worshiping God together. But there also would be the "*How long until we get there?*" feelings, along with weariness of the journey. Then seeing the mountains could inspire thoughts of God's majesty, care and provision. Psalm 123 opens,

"To You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until He is gracious to us." (1-2)

Whatever the mix of feelings, this Psalm would lead them to focus on God and, more important than the *panoramic look* at the mountains, the *panoramic look* up to God whose help they needed.

Then we see the need for help in an *inward, penetrating question*. Even when you are certain you've stated or written something clearly, someone else may see it quite differently than you intended. A building supply store placed a sign out front: "Cast iron sinks." A man going by noticed the sign, went in and talked with the manager. "I don't mean to be picky or rude," he said, "but I think everyone already knows that *cast iron sinks*."

Sometimes the placement of a comma, period, question mark or exclamation point can make a great deal of difference. The language of the Old Testament did not use all of these things. And so sometimes there are variations in rendering some phrases. We see this in verse 1. The KJV reads, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills [*comma*], from whence cometh my help [*period*]." Those translators thought the writer was, at least figuratively, looking to the mountains for his strength. Most of our newer English versions handle the the first phrase as a statement, "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains", and the second phrase as a question, "From where shall my help come?" The language and forms here indicate that the second phrase is a question, an *inward, penetrating question*. "I need help. Where can I, will I find it?"

So the question about the source of help was, and is. This word *help* is used frequently in the Old Testament, most often of military help, and so strength. Generally it describes giving assistance, providing what is needed.

“My help”—tired and strained, worn and wrung out, knocked and held down, fearful and frightened. “*Where is it? Where will I find it?*” “My help”—when there are new, exciting, promising opportunities and adventures ahead. “*Where is it? Where will I find it?*” “My help”—when *coming down to earth* after a very special, mountain top experience and getting back into the stream of day to day life. “*Where is it? Where will I find it?*” This is a real, *inward, penetrating question* which demonstrates the need for help. The answer comes quickly as the writer moves on to...

The Source Of Help.

He had no doubt or hesitation. He knew where he could find the help he needed. He could say, sing, shout “*God is my help!*” There is a good Hebrew word and name we all can know, Azriel. It means *my help is God* or, *God is my help*. Azriel! *God is my help!*

The psalmist gives us two pictures of God as his help. The first is that of *God as the Creator*. Verse 2, “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” We find this image and theme in other Psalms. King David looked at God’s great creation and was amazed at God’s care and help for him. In Psalm 8 he wrote,

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes through the paths of the seas.” (3-8)

All of creation is the work of God’s *fingers*. It is His is fine, precise and delicate work, not requiring great strength. That was the work of creation for God. He is the Almighty Creator—look to Him for help.

Others may look to military might, financial wealth, political power, intellectual insight or man-made philosophy and religion, but the Psalmist along with those generations of faith-filled travelers, and we today as the children of God, can and should look to God, the Almighty Creator, for the help we need. Look to Him in the difficult and troubling times, in the good and easy times, in all times. Look to God who created all that exists for your help.

The second picture of God as his help that the writer had in mind was of *God the Keeper*. This is a strong, yet beautiful and tender picture. The word for *keep or keeper* is used six times in the Psalm, although our English versions translate it with several different words. In the NASB: keeps, keeper, protect, and guard. The word in its basic sense has the idea of great care over someone or something; to give careful attention to, to take care of, guard, to keep, protect. Here it refers to God’s great care to give attention to, to guard, to keep and protect us who belong to Him.

Let's take a quick glance at these six occurrences. The first two are in verses 3 and 4.

“He will not allow your foot to slip; He who *keeps* you will not slumber. Behold, He who *keeps* Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

The third is in verse 5. “The LORD is your *keeper*; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.” The fourth and fifth uses of this word are in verse 7. “The LORD will *protect* you from all evil; He will *keep* your soul.” The last occurrence is in verse 8. “The LORD will *guard* your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.” Just as God is the Creator of all things, so also He is the Keeper of all His people.

“Azriel!” *God Is My Help! God the Creator! God the Keeper!* But what kind of help does God give us? We turn to that now,

The Nature Of Help.

First, God keeps you from slipping. Look at verse 3. “He [God] will not allow your foot to slip.” Our English versions have a bit of variety here: foot to *slip*, *be moved*, and *stumble*. This word can mean to literally or figuratively not be stable, and so to totter, shake, to slip, with the result of falling. We find the same word in Psalm 16:8, “I have set the LORD continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be *shaken*.” And again in the next Psalm, “My steps have held fast to Your [God's] paths. My feet have not *slipped*” (17:5).

“So,” you may say, “God will keep me from *slipping*. What does that really mean? In what ways? From what? In what?” One writer comments,

“When we are anchored in eternity, we can deal with time. When we are united to the One who moves all things, we ourselves cannot be moved.”¹

That sounds good! Even better, it's true. But what does it actually mean for me? Go back to verse 3. “He will not allow your foot to slip; He who *keeps* you will not slumber. Behold, He who *keeps* Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

And in verse 5. “The LORD is your *keeper*; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.” Here we are back to the picture of the heat of the sun that we noted last week in Psalm 19. God is our shade from the heat of life. This is for all times and circumstances. Verse 6 continues, “The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.” Psalm 91 opens, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”

Let's go to a few companion verses for perspective. Proverbs tells us that accepting and following the truth and wisdom of God will keep you from slipping or stumbling. For example, 3:23, “Then you will walk in your way securely and your foot will not *stumble*.” Or in 4:12, “When you walk, your steps will not be impeded; and if you run, you will not *stumble*.” Day to day, every day circumstances are in view.

When we learn, rely on and live by the truth and wisdom of God, we will not slip and stumble, we will not sin. This is simple and complex at the same time. This truth is straightforward, but our lives can have many twists and turns. This tells us that the idea of slipping into sin being *inevitable* is not true. When we believe that, we can treat sin too lightly — “*After all, it’s inevitable.*” And we can live with feelings of guilt and defeat— “*I’ll never get out of this. I’ll never be the kind of Christian, the kind of person I should be.*” Whenever we do slip, stumble, sin, one of the things it tells us is that we have not truly relied on God who is our Help.

This truth also means that in the end we will not slip or stumble out of the family of God. God will present us, as Jude 24 tells us, complete in Christ, *standing* before Him *blameless* with joy which we can’t even imagine.

Next God helps us by keeping us from all evil. Drop down to verse 7. “The LORD will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul.” If you don’t have at least one or two questions about this, you are probably $\frac{3}{4}$ asleep, thinking about dinner, or what you are going to do later today. “What does this mean, God ‘will protect [keep] you [me] from *all evil*?’”

Scripture interprets and fills out Scripture. When we have questions about one statement, we look to other statements in the Bible about the same subject. In this case, for example, Psalm 34:19, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.” Here we see that afflictions do touch us, but God delivers us from them all. Then Psalm 57:1-2,

“Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by. I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me.”

Again, Psalm 97:10. “Hate evil, you who love the LORD, who preserves the souls of His godly ones; He delivers them from the hand of the wicked.”

Keeping and delivering us from all evil then, does not mean that we won’t be touched and hurt by evil, but that we will be kept through and delivered out of evil. As we saw in Psalm 55, “Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (22).

You may be familiar with Romans 8. Verse 28 says “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” The next verses briefly describe God’s *calling* before time began to our being with Him in heaven. With this said, Paul moved on to frame our current day to day life in this perspective:

- No one can stand against us if God is for us, and He is.

- No one can bring a charge against us to disqualify or blemish us because God has justified us.
- No one, no thing can separate us from the love of God.

Touched, hurt by evil? *Yes*. But Satan's goal to destroy you? *No way! Never!* Because God *keeps* you from all evil. It cannot destroy you. God will protect us in and through all the bad things that happen.

In addition to keeping you from slipping, and from all evil, God who is your Help will keep you constantly and forever. There are several pictures of this here. The first is in verses 3-4. "He [God] will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." God is always, will always be on the job. God is your keeper in all of your situations and endeavors for all of your life. There is never a moment, never a situation in which God is not keeping, giving attention to, guarding and protecting His children, including you and me. There is an alternate reading, with verse 3 being a wish or prayer, followed by a confident answer: "May He not allow your foot to slip; may He who keeps you not slumber. *Look!* He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep!"

The second picture is in verses 5-6. "The LORD is your keeper; The LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night." In these verses, as I noted earlier, the figures show God's shielding, keeping care in all the extremes of your life. God will keep you constantly, forever. He never sleeps. He keeps you in all the dangerous extremes.

The last picture is in verse 8. "The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever." Your going out and coming in is not just the start and finish, but everything in between as well—all that you do, wherever you go. In Psalm 125:2 we read "As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people from this time forth and forever." Now and forever. Right now. No matter how much you feel alone. Even if you cannot sense, let alone see God's care. Right now He is guarding, keeping you. And forever. Not just to the end of your life on earth, not just until you see Christ in heaven, but beyond time, *forever! Yes! "Azriel!" God Is My Help!*

Conclusion.

Alexander Maclaren was a well known and great preacher who was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1826. When he was 15 he was sent out to work to earn his fees for college. His father walked him to work the first day. They went through a ravine in which, according to the tales of the local people, evil spirits lived who would try to invade anyone walking past. He realized that at the end of the work week he would have to walk back through that ravine, *alone*.

He worried about this all week. Late Saturday afternoon he headed home. When he got to the edge of the ravine he stopped and looked ... and he could not do it. He could not go

through the ravine alone. As he stood there silently not knowing what to do, he heard a voice break the silence, “Alex, it’s your Dad. I’ve come to walk through the ravine with you.”

Whatever *ravines* you face and have to go through, that’s what God says to you, “I, God the Creator, God your Keeper, am here to help you—to keep you from slipping, from all evil, to help you constantly and forever. I am here to take your hand and walk with you through the ravine.”

In our time of personal reflection with God and response to Him this morning, reflect on *your ravines* ...

- New and exciting times can be scary—new relationships, new work, new studies, new types of ministry.
- Then there are those deep, dark ravines—old, plaguing patterns and habits, feeling defeated and helpless; the stresses and strains of work, relationships; of loss, feeling alone.

In the ravines you face, as you spend this time with God, remember “Azriel!” “*God Is My Help!*” Reach out to God, take His hand. Know that His strong and loving arms are there to keep you, to take your hand and walk with you, to hold you and carry you through. Yes, God, your strong tower and might fortress, is your Help.

¹ Donald M. Williams. “Psalms 73-150. *The Preachers Commentary Series, Volume 14*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1989, p. 390.

© 2010 Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®,
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995
by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.