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Psalm 121

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HELP! I NEED SOMEBODY

My wife and I were recently marveling at the carefree trust of our 14-month-old son as he snuggles on the couch with us while we read Winnie the Pooh; or when he runs to me, after discovering where I am hiding, and throws himself with abandon into my arms, totally expecting to be caught. Protection and being out of harm's way is an expectation he delights in. This is how we all begin life.

I, too, grew up unquestionably loved and shielded from most dangers and anxieties. At age 15 I came to faith in Christ and found myself surrounded by supportive friends and family. High school and college life was exciting and limitless, especially as a Christian. Everything seemed to be falling into place. I knew God was to credit for all the blessing, but then I hadn't had to think about what to do with the subtleties of life's rough edges.

The last 12 years have given me plenty to think about, however. No traveler's advisory was brought to my attention after college to prepare me for the years ahead. The road has been unpredictable, seemingly impassable at times, exciting, and confusing. Often I've been in over my head. I took some time to reflect and record some of these recent passages: parents separating, reuniting, re-separating, and divorcing; relocating; starting friendships over; changing careers three times; building up a business and then losing it all; my father discovering cancer in the kidneys and having successful surgery; the death of my father from recurring cancer three years later; getting married; best friends experiencing the pain of divorce; becoming a father; dealing with lawyers, accountants and banks in the context of a lawsuit.

I share these things not for their shock or to seek sympathy, because I'm well aware I don't travel this road alone. We all could share stories like this, or will some day. Christians are no different. All our problems aren't solved when we name the name of Christ as our Lord. Life itself is a pilgrimage from birth to death in which we encounter unexpected detours, comfort and hardship, joy and sorrow, weakness and strength. We try our best to protect ourselves from too much hurt or uncertainty, but inevitably we become vulnerable and exposed to hardship. Life teaches us sooner or later that we can't handle it. We rarely can prepare for the detours and hazards. If we're breathing, we cry for help.

Our text this morning, Psalm 121, cries out with honesty and answers emphatically and extensively. Psalms 120-134, the Songs of Ascents as they are called, probably made up a small songbook carried by the traveling pilgrim who came from the outlying lands to Jerusalem to worship with other believers in a scene not unlike our meeting here this morning. These songs honestly express many moods. They confront various issues encountered along the journey of life as the believer interfaces with a hostile world outside and nagging doubts inside.

So the honest traveler faces the need for assistance and begins looking around for traveler's aid. We scan the horizon for help. This is what the psalmist does, in verse 1:

**I lift my eyes to the mountains;
Where does my help come from? (Ps 121:1 NASB)**

Does help come from the mountains? Growing up in Colorado, to me they stood for stability and awesome grandeur. I feel most at peace and at home when I'm in them or on top of one. Anywhere in Denver, all you need to do to get your bearings is to lift your eyes to them. To me they symbolized God's creativity and immensity and were a source of refuge. Today, roads go over, around, and through them, with six-lane, lighted superhighways for the traveler. In *The Sound of Music*, the von Trapp family's way of escape from the Nazis was climbing over the Alps, directed by the kind nun who quoted the first verse of this psalm as the answer to their fears. Their help came from the mountains. And in scripture, other psalms refer to the mountains as a refuge for David (Ps 11:1) and a sign of stability and care surrounding Jerusalem (Ps 125:1-2). So, it seems, the mountains, symbolizing the majesty of God, could be the source of our help.

There is, however, a more compelling meaning for this symbol. A Hebrew during the time this psalm was written, scanning the hills as he traveled to worship, would see something different. He would see a source of fear, insecurity, and temptation instead of refuge and majesty. Loose stones, poor roads (trails, really), and darkness made travel dangerous. Robbers lurked, looking to plunder, providing a source of unseen danger. And worship of idols and false gods was rampant in the hills. Shrines were set up, male and female prostitutes provided, and rituals performed inviting the traveler to relieve his burdens and anxieties, to make him feel good, promising protection and guidance. The pilgrim facing this would be forced to cry, "Help! I can't find it here! Where will I find help?"

Fill in the blank for you. What threats and dangers do your eyes survey when you look around? I lift my eyes to the _____. The evening news? my health? my job security? the economy? my marriage or relationship?

The fact that life requires a need for help is obvious, and the source we look to can make all the difference in the world. Many times we resist help through pride, desiring to always appear in control. Other times we look for the quick fix: the pagan gods of escapism, materialism and pleasure woo us to their shrines.

Recently my wife and I were in San Francisco, parking for the ferry ride to Tiburon, when we were approached by a disheveled man in need of help. According to his story, his car was stolen with all his possessions, wallet and everything, while he was visiting the city himself for the weekend. Traveler's aid would give him so much money, but he still needed 14 dollars and change for the bus fare home. I decided to ask a few questions. He told me correctly where the bus terminal was located and the exact time of departure of his bus. He also told me he felt directed supernaturally to us. After discussing the merits of his story with my wife, I gave him money, due to his obvious need, whether his story checked out or not. We parted ways, we to the ferry, and he to the bus terminal. I must admit I

called Greyhound when I got home that night to check out his story. His bus didn't exist. So it turned out, all this traveler needed was a quick fix. It was easy to be angry at him, at life, and myself. But how often have I opted for band aids to help me through a bout of loneliness, confusion or fear? Am I more sophisticated or clandestine in seeking for help than the man in this story? When we're confronted with fear and anxiety in our pilgrimage of life, do we settle for a temporary fix, the solutions the world has to offer?

No, help doesn't come from the mountains.

The psalmist emphatically states the correct source in verse 2:

**My help comes from the Lord,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

Whether the mountains symbolize majesty of God's creation or the threats to our security in life, we are exhorted to look beyond them, to their Maker. Derek Kidner states "this verse leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to its maker. Here is living help: primary, personal, wise and immeasurable." Yahweh alone, who is often our last resort, should in fact be our first resort.

Notice the forceful answer is also a personal profession. "My help..." The choices for temporary help are numerous. Intellectual assent that God is the source for help, since the Bible tells me so, is of no use unless we own it for ourselves.

Verses 2-4 give at least three of God's characteristics which qualify him as our source of help above all others. The first is that the Lord is immensely powerful. The poet selects the descriptive title for God, "maker of heaven and earth," which is a way of saying the universe as a whole. God's power and resourcefulness is immeasurable to apply to our particular circumstance. What a wonderful connection to remember: the irritation of our personal fear and the capacity of God, the Creator. Take your mountain of fear and look at it through the wide-angle lens of the big picture. God, who brought order from chaos, something from nothing, light out of darkness, can serve as your help now.

How can we grasp this? In our frantic society, sometimes it helps just to pause. Plan pauses on your daytimer. Reflect and read on God's work in creation and in your life. Next week I will lead seven Junior High students and two adult leaders on a week-long stay in a cabin in Colorado which has no television or phone. One of my prayers is that as we hike, talk, fish, mountain bike, etc, that a sense of the wonder and the largeness of God will envelop us. Hopefully by the end of the week, imagination will have replaced electronics and awe will have slowed our anxious urban pulses down. Too often if we can't reach out and touch the solution with ease and immediacy, we don't take the time and we cast off God because he is inadequate for us. We must let something larger than ourselves come into view. Our gaze must expand to recognize a great, creative God at the end of our cry.

Secondly, God is intensely personal. Five times in this psalm, God's personal, intimate name, Yahweh, the I AM, our Lord, is used. Our Creator is also our helper. Juxtaposed with the title Maker of Heaven and Earth, it reminds us of how the Lord revealed himself to mankind in Genesis 1-2. He is both Creator of the universe and the one who made men and women in his image and walked with them in the garden because he desires intimate relationship with us, the crown of his creation, above all else. He qualifies as our source of help, above other gods, because he has revealed himself in history and pursues a relationship with us.

The Lord is powerful and personal.

He is also constantly attentive. Verses 3-4:

**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.**

Our son Dylan received his official entrance into boyhood a few weeks ago when he got his first stitches. His foot slipped and he hit the coffee table just right. My wife and I feel like we should be given the official pink slip out of parenthood; we failed as watchful protectors. Other parents assure us that it's only the start, that we should get used to it. We heard about every scar and broken bone that anyone's ever had! Someone even said his scar will make him sexier when he's older! (That didn't help.) It's amazing to us how uncaring it seems families treat their third or fourth children! They no longer hover over them. Perhaps they know that things still happen when they do. These things happen, they say. You do your best, and then you surround your children with love and care when accidents happen.

It hasn't even crossed our son's mind not to trust our protection after that fall. He's immediately back at falling into our arms, fully expecting to be caught. Why? He knows his parents offer unquestionable care and love, *especially* when he hurts. We will do whatever it takes to preserve him. God's watchfulness over our lives is constant. But we know that that doesn't mean he protects us from *every* painful circumstance. There was certainly treacherous footing in Israel for the one traveling to God. The poetic imagery of this verse is not to be taken literally. It must be taken in parallel with the idea of the next verse—that God is ever watchful over the affairs of our lives. Our foot will never slip outside of his control or sight-path, but we may experience unexpected setbacks. The verb "to slip" means to shake or tremble. When it is used to refer to nations outside of trust in Yahweh, the result is that they will crumble. But used of God's people, protected by God's loyal love, when their foot shakes, because it rests upon a solid foundation, the soul is renewed. Psalm 94:17-19 says, "If the Lord had not been my help, My soul would soon have dwelt in silence; If I should say 'My foot has slipped', Thy loyal love O Lord, will hold me up. When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Thy consolations delight my soul." When our foot slips, it's important for us to recognize that it wasn't beyond God's control or care.

God does not take coffee breaks as our helper and protector. He doesn't go "off duty" where we need to rouse him with repetitive religious activity or odd rituals to get his attention again. Other Canaanite religious practices of the day, such as Baal worship, enlisted priests whose job was to awaken their gods when someone needed attention. Sometimes this didn't work. Elijah in 1 Kings 18:27 mocked Baal's lack of attention by asking if he was on a trip or just gone to sleep. Still other beliefs of the day looked to elements of nature, created things, for power and protection, particularly the sun and moon.

This ancient superstition doesn't exist today, you say. But amazingly, it does. The current course offerings at a local YWCA include the following: "The moon and its influence in your daily life." "By the end of this workshop, you will have an understanding of the moon's phases and their influence on your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Each of the four lunar phases represent a certain quality or kind of energy that influences your daily life. By learning to watch

the moon you can gain a deeper understanding of the moon's energies. The instructor will help you to utilize the tool of Humanistic Astrology to make the most of the moon's influence." There is another course listed: "Past Life Regression." "Have you lived before? Is there something from a previous life which is unfinished and causing you problems in this life? Discover safely and easily what your past lives held, and help your present and future potential."

We need not speculate about God or turn to useless remedies for help and protection from the world which turn out to be impotent, impersonal and lifeless. That's like, as someone has said, rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Meaningful help comes from our Creator who is always awake, not creation. We need help from our Creator who is powerful, personal, and constantly attentive.

In the remaining verses of the psalm we learn the wider and wider spheres of protection that our personal God provides, beginning with influences we see and encounter daily. Verses 5-6:

**The LORD is your keeper;
The LORD is the shade on your right hand.
The sun will not smite you by day,
Nor the moon by night.**

First, we must understand this word "to keep." The Hebrew word *shamar* appears six times in the psalm, and as such is the key trait about God that we must grasp. It is translated to protect, to keep, and to guard. It means "to exercise great care over." When applied to us it means to keep God's promises or laws. When applied to the Lord it refers to him carefully keeping his covenant and faithfulness to us, exercising great care.

"The Lord is your keeper." There is also a shift of emphasis here to the individual believer, instead of all Israel. We are to shift our emphasis in reading it to apply it personally: the Lord is *my* keeper, the shade on *my* right hand.

The Hebrew traveler would encounter the need for shade daily as protection from exposure to the sun. In fact, shade can be a lifesaver in the Middle East. It provides refreshment and the means to carry on. Once hiking above timberline in Colorado on a 14,000-ft peak, I began feeling faint on the way down. My companions informed me I was experiencing sunstroke. I had not worn the shade of a hat, and the cumulative effect of exposure had put me at risk. A little shade, rest and water revived me. Are you experiencing sunstroke from the cumulative effect of the world's attitudes and values which will cause you to faint? Exposed as we are daily to the elements around us that beat on us from the world, we're in need of the refreshment and closeness of the Lord. He is our source of refreshment. Turn to him in your daily affairs for refreshment.

The right hand symbolized the position of honor and authority. A reliable protector would be found there, very close. What an honor, that the same Lord who sits at the right hand of God, ruling in the heavenlies, stands at the ready, close to us! (The sun by day and the moon by night is a way of saying around the clock.)

God also exercises care for us in the unseen realm, over evil. Verse 7:

**The LORD will protect you from all evil.
He will protect your soul.**

We must understand this verse in light of other revelation, however. Scripture clearly teaches that evil is a given in this life. There are unseen forces at work to destroy, confuse and twist that which God has created. Satan has been given limited power. We do not have

the resources on our own to anticipate or protect ourselves from the strategy of evil, but we can align ourselves with one greater, the Lord our keeper. We cannot understand how all this works or coexists, but we can know that no evil can touch our soul. We are to pray as Jesus prayed that the Father deliver us from evil. The Lord prays for us as well. In the upper room, Jesus prayed that the Father not take the disciples out of the world, but would keep them from the evil one. David prayed in Psalm 23 that when he walked through the valley of the shadow of death he would not fear evil. Why? For God was with him. Evil is expected, but not to be feared, because we have alongside us one who is greater.

God promises here to guard our souls, our life for which he paid a steep price. It is eternal life with him. Evil cannot touch that or get inside you to harm your soul. This is God's primary protection, above investments, careers and that which we have been loaned in this life. It is not that he doesn't give and protect these as well (he does), but here the psalm is assuring us that evil can't overwhelm the life of God in us.

Finally, the widest circle of protection is given in verse 8:

**The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in
From this time forth and forever.**

All of our activity, our goings and comings, is under God's protection. Again, this is a Hebrew way of saying everywhere we go. There is no activity of ours that is outside of God's domain and his promise to be standing at our right hand.

The promise of the Creator being our personal helper, attentive to the instability of our next step, is for all time, starting now and lasting forever.

Life is not without calamities, accidents and painful losses. In the last few weeks our church family has encountered confounding illnesses and death. We are in a season where the mountains of danger stare at us and prompt a deeply felt cry for help. In light of the promises of this psalm, which speaks of feet not slipping, the Lord being watchful to protect us and guarding from all evil, it might sound like eloquently-stated foolishness, a nice bedtime story for the Christian who doesn't live in the real world. How can the Lord be my keeper when unexpected losses are all around me? Meanwhile, we'll all go about our business of paying homage to the disappointing idols which beckon us from all sides.

Or else the Psalm means something different, something deeper. I think it does. God knows we live in a hazardous world. He is the ultimate realist. We clearly need help from the dangers which we are sure to experience in this life. The Lord attentively and carefully preserves our soul through them with eternity in view. He is our personal Lord, Creator, and helper through it all. Eugene Peterson puts it this way, "the promise of the psalm... 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"—or thwart the purposes of God. The words of the apostle Paul from chapter 8 of the book of Romans should be read alongside this psalm:

In face of all this, what is there left to say? If God is for us, who can be against us? He that did not hesitate to spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all—can we not trust such a God to give us, with Him, everything else that we can need?

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, pain or persecution? Can lack of clothes and food, danger to life

and limb, and threat of force of arms? Indeed some of us know the truth of that ancient text:

For Thy sake we are killed all the day long;
We were accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

No, in all these things we win an overwhelming victory through Him Who has proved his love for us. I have become absolutely convinced that neither Death nor Life, neither messenger of heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 8:31-32, 35-39)

At Art David's memorial service last week, people shared from every sphere of life that he touched. Their testimony was consistent: they remembered his steadiness, his fatherliness, and his tireless desire to serve the Lord without using a lot of words. And when Art lost the capacity to be a helper, to serve physically, he became vocal and expressive of his love of the Lord and his desire to be with him. Cancer could not thwart the protection of God on his soul. He turned to the Lord, creator of heaven and earth, the constantly vigilant refreshment to his soul. The eyes of faith understand that the Lord was Art's keeper of his soul and primary source of help forever.

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