

Psalm 121

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

- ** 1** *I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?*
- 2** *My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*
- 3** *He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;*
- 4** *indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*
- ** 5** *The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;*
- 6** *the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.*
- 7** *The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;*
- 8** *the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.*

****** Have you ever heard the term, 'Protestant work ethic' (or the *Puritan work ethic*)? Its a phrase coined in 1904 as a theological description of a life that emphasizes hard work, simple living, and prosperity as a sign of a person's salvation through the Christian faith. In a way, it was actually a description of what happened pretty typically in the lives of many people who took the Apostle Paul at his word when he wrote in Colossians (3:17): "*Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all for the glory of God.*"

So, as Capitalism took root in the Western World, there was this group of people who kind of stood out from the crowd - Protestant Christians - who found that they were bound by their faith to work hard in their jobs, to give an honest day's work for an honest day's wage, who took pride in the quality of their performance (because they knew they were doing it for God), people who weren't tied to the bondage of material things (as they were living for the Kingdom of God). The result, paradoxically, was that many of these people became *very successful* from the world's perspective. Those values and that lifestyle enabled them to achieve much, and they accumulated a lot of 'stuff'.

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** And somehow then, over time, the Protestant work ethic evolved into a belief that material things (wealth) is a sign of God's blessing in a person's life. In other words, people forgot about the 'simple living' part, the 'honest effort' part, the "do everything for God's glory", and so forth, and began to teach and believe that it was simply *faith* that brought about these material blessings. So, Christian faith eventually - for many - became seen as a means to personal comfort, wealth, and all that kind of thing. Faith, for them, was all about *this* world, and all about *self*.

That, obviously, was a huge change from the Gospel message of Jesus Christ; a change in many ways. When faith becomes connected to 'stuff', the role of Kingdom concepts like 'sacrifice', 'service', humility, and so forth, begins to fade away. So, in a word, much of the Church - many Christians - became *just like the rest of the world* in their goals, methods, and in their desires. It was hard to tell the difference between people of faith and everybody else.

What I'd like to suggest to you today, that this progression (where people buying into the current culture and call it 'faith') is actually nothing new. It's pretty obvious that this pull to be 'like everybody around us' has been a constant struggle for people of faith ever since God called Abraham to pack up his belongings and move to a new place, where God was going to build a new people - a people after his own heart.

** Psalm 121, today's scripture reading, is a good example of that, even though we may not 'get' it at first glance. I think most people, like I did for so long, read the first line of Psalm 121 and assume that it is another one of the 'nature Psalms' -

** *"I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?"*

That sounds a lot like Psalm 8 (*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth...* and that Psalm goes on to think about the 'stars' and 'the heavens' which God has put into place. So, the writer is looking to the heavens to remind himself of our place as humans in Creation.)

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Psalm 121:1 could also remind us of the beginning of Psalm 19, "*the heavens are telling the glory of God*", and, in a way, they are alike. But not exactly as you might think.

To get the point of the first verse of this Psalm (which is its heart, I think), we need to talk a little bit about the culture of the day in which it was written. I mentioned Abraham traveling from his old homeland into the Promised land. It was through Abraham that God was going to grow this new nation - a nation built on the newly revealed truth that there is just *one God*.

Up until this point, *everywhere* in the world, people not only worshipped many gods, but the gods they worshipped were all believed to be *local* deities. They were limited in 'their range' we might say, and had little or no power outside their 'territory'. They were connected with geographical areas, and nations. (That's one reason, by the way, that God told Abraham to move!) These local gods were also limited in their power, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, because they were tied to this world, they were part of the universe, and didn't stand above (outside) it, as did Jehovah God. So Abraham began the process of teaching a very new and strangely different way of understanding God to the people of the world. A Transcendent God. Totally different from everybody's understanding of what and who God was.

It was believed that these local deities were tied to the 'success' of the people of the day - meaning, you had to 'keep them happy' if you wanted to have children, rain, crops, or protection from your enemies. That was all up to the local gods. So, they required sacrifices (sometimes humans) and other rituals in order to get their attention and favor.

A number of these Canaanite gods (i.e., the local gods of the indigenous people of the Promised Land) are actually named in the Old Testament.

** You've heard of **Baal**—lord of earth and rain (prerequisites for successful harvest in a dry land).

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** **Ashtoreth**—goddess of fertility. Canaanite farmers visited her shrines to mate with cult prostitutes to guarantee crop fertility.

** **Dagon**—principal god of the Philistines. *Dagon* means grain in Hebrew and Ugaritic and is associated with wheat harvest. In 1 Chronicles 10: 8-10, when the Philistines found King Saul's dead body on Mount Gilboa, they "fastened his head in the house of Dagon." When the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, they put it in the temple of Dagon, where the idol fell, losing his head and hands on the step leading up to where the Ark was displayed.

** **Molech** —Ammonite god to whom children were sacrificed. For that reason Molech has the distinction of being named by God himself as 'detestable'.

These are just a few of the local deities 'around' in the time of the OT. (That's just four of 26 major Canaanite gods and goddesses!) Now, in addition to this, mentioned *117 times* in the OT, are something called the *high places*. The High Places were centers for Canaanite idol worship that the Jews were constantly commanded to tear down, because they were enticements for the people to slip back into the world out of which God had called them. But instead, of tearing them down, they left them up, and these places became centers of idolatry that subtly seduced God's people year after year—they just couldn't stay away!

** Ok, take *that* as the context of Psalm 121, and let's revisit that first verse...

I lift my eyes to the mountains, where does my help come from?

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As the Psalm writer writes these words, he's probably thinking of what he saw *every night* as he lifted his eyes to the hills surrounding Jerusalem, or wherever he happened to be, as he wrote these words... the sun goes down, and he saw what everybody saw - the fires of the Canaanite altars burning in *the high places*. He sees the lure of another completely different way of life.

And, in that context, he asks himself this critically important question:

*where does **my** help come from?*

You see the framing of this question? These altars are symbols of the way of the world in the day of this Psalm. And they are clearly saying to the people, "*Your* help comes from trusting the local gods." "Your help comes with however successful your attempts to please or appease these gods are" - "your help comes from your ability to manipulate the system and live in the power of *this world*." Because that's all there is!

** And this Psalm writer rejects that.

MY help comes from The Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth

My help isn't from this world, it is found in the ONE who made everything, who made the mountains and the hills, and who made me.

What about today? Are followers of Christ still tempted by high places? Do we find ourselves having to choose between "God's way" and "the world's way"? Let's ask it a different way: when we're looking for guidance, or wisdom, or a 'way out' of a tough circumstance, where is the *first* place you look for help? Where do you turn?

Because when those tough decisions pop up, we always have a choice - we can listen to the wisdom of the world, or we can listen to God. Sometimes, they are actually saying the same thing, which makes it pretty easy for us! But a lot of the time - maybe most -

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what God has to say is totally different than what the world is teaching us. And we have to choose.

Let me share a couple examples of ways we can easily look to the world for 'help' instead of God...

**** Relationship Conflicts...**

When we have a conflict in a relationship - a friend, a sibling, parents, boy/girl friend, a marriage, a neighbor, what do we do? Say someone tells a lie about you, overlooks you, or hurts you in some way...

World Says, "revenge... you get them back. You need to get even"... so, the 'gods of this world' teach us to be angry, to demand entitlements, to avoid someone that we don't like, even to hate them.

God says, "Here's a better way - this is a way to live in peace, and a way that keeps trouble from escalating. "Turn the other cheek", "forgive", "pray for your enemies." (Just as an aside - we've talked about this a number of times, so let me remind you, this doesn't mean be the world's doormat. It doesn't mean we give up on *justice*, often a wrong needs to be made right. But we do give up revenge - we leave that to God. And we try to live what Paul writes: "As much as it depends on you, live at peace with *everyone*.")

Where does *your* help come from? Who do you listen to when it comes to relationships?

**** Financial Security...**

The World has a lot to say about this! And it says, "Get as much as you can as soon as you can", keep everything you earn ("hoard"), key words from the 'gods of this world' in regard to economics are words like: collect, (be) driven, accumulate, 'bigger barns', status, wealth as a goal in itself.

But God says, "hold your possessions loosely". The key words from God's perspective - the perspective of the Creator, the perspective of LIFE: are words like give, share, don't build treasure on earth. Trust me and I'll take care of your needs!

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"Freely you have received... freely give." They're very different ways of living. Whose voice do you hear?

Where does *your* help come from? Who do you listen to when it comes to financial security?

** Enemies...

You can define this however you want. People, nations, groups of people that are not only different from us, but who hate us, for whatever reason. How do we respond? The world says the appropriate response is "Fear", and the key words are words like: anger, hatred, worry, war, fight."

What what does God say?, Love your enemies... bless those who persecute you. Jesus says "don't be afraid of those people who can only hurt us physically", Be more concerned about the One to whom we will give an account of ourselves and our lives one day: seek God and God only."

Where does *your* help come from? Who do you listen to when it comes to your enemies?

** And then there's **Death...**

We're all going to die. Where's our help in death? The world says, "deny", "Bo-tox", surgery, fear, anger... resent those who are younger, and healthier than you, be jealous of those who have it easier than you in the short time we're here. But above all, "live for today". That's all there is!

God says, (God has lots to say about this!) Like: "The sting of death is gone!", or, "trust in me - in my Father's house are many rooms and I'm going to prepare one of them for you!" This life is not all there is! Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble, but don't be afraid, I have overcome the world!"

Where does *your* help come from? Who do you listen to when it comes to recognizing that death is part of this life?

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** Following God means we have to have constant course adjustments. How do we keep our right perspective? How can we be sure that we are always listening to God for our help, and not some 'local' deity who is really a 'nothing'?

Did you notice in the beginning of this Psalm, there's a heading? These headings describe the kind of song or poetry a Psalm is, or sometimes they will say something about the circumstance of the writing of the Psalm, or who wrote it. They're not part of the original text, but they come from very ancient traditions, and most scholars consider them reliable. In this case the ascription says this:

** *A Psalm of Ascents*

Now, we read that, and it means nothing to us. But here's what that means: the Jewish people in Bible days worshipped God in the Temple. "THE" Temple, there was only one, and it was found in Jerusalem. Now, obviously, that was a long trip many people, so they didn't go very often.

But when they did go, they prepared themselves. Jerusalem - and the Temple - was built on a hill, a high hill. So, no matter what direction you approached it from, you always went 'up' to Jerusalem (which is why they always say that in the Bible!)

And there were certain prayers that were meant to be prayed on the climb up the hill to the Temple. They were the "Psalms of Ascent". They're ascending (going up) both in their hearts and with their bodies. And they prayed. So, this Psalm, we could say, is a "I'm Going To Church, and I want to be ready to Meet God" prayer.

And it starts out with a question, and an answer: Where does *my* help come from? My help comes from the name of The Lord.

The Lord is the only one who is always on the job... doesn't rest, doesn't forget me, doesn't change... ever. The Lord is the only place where real, lasting help can be found as we do our best to live a good life in this world.

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Let's do the same as this ancient prayer writer... and keep examining ourselves as we come to worship, as we prepare to meet our God. So that we too, can say: My help is in The Lord!