

Help!

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Date: 03 August 2025

Preacher: David Court

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to God's Word this evening. As Corrie intimated, we're looking at Psalm 121.! So let's hear and read together in God's Word. Psalm 121, a song of ascents.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. Amen. Let's pray together. Let's pray.

God, our Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is trustworthy and true. We pray that as we open it this evening that You would be pleased in Your mercy and grace to speak to us from it, to speak into our lives and into our hearts and into our situations. Lord, give us ears to hear what Your Spirit would have to teach us. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1 : 44] Amen. I think I read just the other day, it's 60 years ago, so within my lifetime certainly, that the Beatles first sang, help, I need somebody. Help, not just anybody. Help, you know I need someone. Help. Help me if you can.

I'm feeling down. I'm feeling down. I do appreciate You being around. Help me get my feet back on the ground. Won't you please help me? Just be glad I didn't try to sing that. As human beings, we all at times find ourselves standing in need of help. And that's true whether we consider ourselves people of Christian faith or not. All of us, whoever we are, need help and assistance as we lead our lives.

None of us really stand alone. We're not independent creatures. And the truth is, we're all looking for help somewhere. We're all leaning on something or someone. And when push comes to shove in this sense, we are all people of faith. The big question is, where is our faith resting? Where are we looking for ultimate help and security in this life? And that really is where this psalm begins, doesn't it?

I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? Psalm 121 is a psalm predicated on our deep-seated need for help, for protection, and for safety. And I think, in this sense, it's a psalm that is perennially relevant to us. It's a portion of Scripture that has been dear to the hearts of many down through the centuries. And you may have noticed as we read the psalm that around six times the Hebrew word for keep, protect, is used. Here is the God who provides help in the form of safety and security for His people. Here is the God who keeps, protects, and cares for His own. The psalm, as you may recall, is one of the songs of ascent. That's Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134.

They were believed to be sung by pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem for the great feasts of the Jewish religious calendar. And they are, in this sense, a collection of songs for the road, songs for the journey of life. And that is certainly true, I think, of Psalm 121. It's a psalm all about trusting in God's providential care. And this is what the psalm underlines for us. In this troubled, uncertain world, uncertain world, He tells us, the psalmist tells us, that there is one upon whom we can rely. There's one who really cares. There's one who can provide us with absolute security.

[4 : 56] And I think that's very important, that we are reminded of that great truth. How we need, as the Lord's people, to hear that message again and again and again. Because the challenges and the difficulties of this earthly pilgrimage can very often drown out the sweet sound of God's care and love for us. And it's vital that we take time to listen to what the psalmist tells us here and allow it to seep, as it were, into our spiritual pores and prepare us for whatever lies ahead. Let's look more closely at what the psalmist tells us here about God's providential care and help. And I want you to notice there's kind of four stanzas. We'll notice four things, four elements of God's care for His people that are presented to us here in a kind of poetic form. And the first, I think, is certainty.

Certainty. Certainty. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. So, the psalm opens with a kind of question and answer, rather like a catechism. The psalmist looks to the hills. He asks this question, where does my help come from? Now, it may be that he saw the hills perhaps as a potential source of unknown danger. They're an intimidating place. The haunt perhaps of thieves or robbers, wild animals.

He may be fearful and anxious about what lies there, lurking in the shadows. The sight of the hills makes them unsure, makes them uncertain. Or it may be that the hills represent the place of other gods and deities. We know that the surrounding pagan nations and peoples often worshipped on those hills. Altars were established there. Idols were set up there. And historically, Israel frequently succumbed to that temptation to join their neighbors in worshipping these idols. She was tempted to look for help from these other gods. And time and time again in the Old Testament, Israel was challenged as to where her help and strength really lay. Was her confidence in the Lord, or was it in alliances with Egypt? Was she looking to God, or was she looking to Baal? Were they looking to the Lord who was true, or idols that were false? And you'll notice here the psalmist gives this certain, certainly not a hesitant answer. He declares loudly, my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. And he confesses his faith in the Lord. He renounces all other help except Yahweh Himself. My help is none other than the maker of heaven and earth. The Lord is well able to handle all my worries and fears. How can that be?

It's because of who He is. It's because He is the maker of heaven and earth. And perhaps we should pause and think about that just for a moment. We live in a wonderful world in many senses, a world of beauty and grandeur, a vast universe of wonders, all of it brought into being by the loving God.

The world, the universe is the very theater of His glory. And we are to survey the mountains and the seas and the stars and the vastness of this universe and declare how great is our God, how glorious is the One who brought all of this into being. Elsewhere, the psalmist, Psalm 90, the opening verses, puts it like this, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

[9 : 13] He is the God who has always been there. He's not part of the creation. He was before all things. All that was and is and is to come arises from Him. Yahweh is very different to the gods of ancient paganism. He pre-exists everything. He is the One who is from everlasting to everlasting.

And there are times, aren't there, when we can feel far from God. We can feel that we're out of His reach. Maybe we've sunk too low or we've wandered too far. We've got ourselves into some mess.

The problems of this life can often threaten to overwhelm us, overpower us even. Perhaps we feel our sin and guilt is just too much to be forgiven. We can think that we are beyond help and assistance.

But friends, what the psalmist tells us here is, no, that is not the case. There is One who is able to help. Yahweh, the Maker of heaven and earth, Almighty God. He spoke the very universe into being. Is His arm so shortened that it cannot reach out to save and rescue? Is there anything He cannot do?

It is no empty thing to call upon the Maker of heaven and earth and to know Him as your help and strength. I quoted this hymn before. We used to sing it when I was in children's church, Sunday school.

[10 : 47] God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea, who gave the light its birth, He cares for me. Knowing that will take you through some tough times. As human beings, we all need an anchor for our souls.

We need security and stability. We need the assurance of the psalmist that we are held securely by the One who is the Maker of heaven and earth. We see here, I think, first, the certainty of God's care.

It's a sure thing. Then secondly, reliability. He will not, verse 3, let your foot be moved.

He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Most English translations, like the ESV that we use, give the sense of verse 3 as being declarative, kind of statement of fact. It's not actually the only way that verse can be read. There is an alternative reading. And it would maybe put it like this. It would say, may he not let your foot be moved. May he who keeps you not slumber. In other words, it's an expression of desire, even a prayer.

May this be so. May this be true for you. I like that. And the verse that then follows provides the answer, really, to that prayer.

[12 : 25] Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The keeper of Israel never falls asleep. He never gets drowsy. The word translated there, behold, look, it's a very common Old Testament word.

And it conveys the idea, mild, dramatic surprise. Suggests some degree of astonishment. There's a good example of this in Genesis 29, where we read that account of how Jacob received Leah instead of Rachel for his wife. It said there in Genesis 29, 21, Jacob said to Laban, give me my wife that I may go into her, for my time is completed. Laban gathered together all the people of the place, made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah, not Rachel, and brought her to Jacob, and he went into her. And in the morning it says, behold, it was Leah.

And in the morning, behold, it was Leah. It's the same word used here. A word is meant to convey this reaction of surprise. If we were to couch it in modern idiom, perhaps we might say something like, no way. No way. It was Leah, not Rachel. And that may be the sense here. May he not let your foot be moved. May he who keeps you not slumber. No way. He who keeps Israel will never fall asleep. Don't be ridiculous. Yahweh never sleeps. Don't get the idea that the Lord could ever doze off.

This was a big deal in the ancient Near East. The pagan deities of that age were always having to get there. Forty winks. They had to go to the toilet to relieve themselves. They had to get a rest. They needed their beauty sleep. You think of Elijah's words in 1 Kings 18 to the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. And at noon, Elijah mocked them, saying, cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he's relieving himself, or he's on a journey, or perhaps he's asleep and must be awakened.

And I think this is what the psalmist is doing here. He's openly challenging that kind of pagan theology. The God of the Bible never, ever falls asleep. Now, of course, we may not be influenced by that particular pagan view today, but there are other ways in which we can be tempted to think less of God than we ought. We're all apt, I think, to think that God is only interested in what we might call the big issues of life, the big matters of life. You know, there's a crisis in Ukraine, problems in the Middle East. There's international terrorism, and God has a... You know, He's got a pretty full diary. These great events of profound significance to millions of people are taking up place, and we find it relatively easy to understand that God will be concerned about these things. But my little life, my health, my relationships, my problems, my difficulties, my loss, surely God cannot really be interested in these kinds of things.

[15 : 49] Some years ago, there was an illustration in the Herald newspaper. Graham Spears, the sports writer for the Herald, wrote an article. This will tell you how long ago it was. The article was entitled, What Kind of Miraculous Patch-Up Job Could God Do on a Cruciate Ligament Injury. And the article was about the then ranger's center back, a guy called Marvin Andrews, and he had sustained cruciate ligament damage. And Marvin Andrews is a Pentecostal Christian.

He believed he didn't need surgery because God would heal him, and he refused all medical intervention. It caused a big stir. And Spears, whose... I think his father was a Baptist minister, so what he wrote. He often wrote this strange mix-match of sporting things and sometimes a smattering of Christian theology or attempted Christian theology. And he wrote this article dealing with various arguments for the existence of God, but he ended up with these words, and I wrote them down. Well, he said, if there is a God, then surely He has more important things to consider than the cruciate ligament of a ranger's center half. Now, you may not be a ranger's fan, so I'm not going to go down that road. But that is often the way that we think about God. But when we think that way, we're not thinking biblically, because the greatness of God is that He is faithful in both small and great things. He's the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps. He's the God whose care extends over all of life. We think He's, you know, a bit like an under-pressure chief executive, struggling to keep on top of everything that is going on. That's not what the Scriptures teach.

The Westminster Confession puts it like this. Chapter 5, section 1, God, the Creator of all things, upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures, actions, and things from the greatest even to the least by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge and the free immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. Since God is the Creator of all things, since He governs all things, He's not aloof, He's not disengaged, He's actively involved in the world that He's made, directing, great and small, according to His sovereign plan and purpose. He cares about the small and even apparently insignificant matters of our lives. There is nothing too small to bring to this

God in prayer. God is not unconcerned with the events of your life. He's not surprised or taken off guard when you're suffering. The God who made the galaxies knows the hairs on your head. He knows the fears of your heart. He knows the events of your life. He knows the details of your future. And our lives matter to Him. His interest doesn't wax or wane. Here is the reliability, you see, of God's care. God, the divine insomniac. The certainty, the reliability. Thirdly here, the intimacy. Verses 5 and 6. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun will not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

The great Creator of the world, the Maker of heaven and earth, the keeper and guardian of His people, Israel, is your keeper also. And these verses, I think, convey a sense of closeness and intimacy.

[19 : 59] This God is up close and personal. He's not distant again. That imagery of a shade on your right hand is one of closeness, isn't it? You have to be close to provide that level of specific protection.

And notice, it is not that God provides a shade. Rather, it is that the Lord is Himself His people's shade and protection. He's the one who stands between His people and whatever threatens to overwhelm them.

The sun and moon are mentioned, I think, not merely as a kind of poetic parallel, but as a Hebrew idiom that communicates completeness. Opposites named to include everything in between, whether it be the dangers of the day, scorching heat, potential sunstroke, terrors of the night.

God's care doesn't waver. And the sun and moon, of course, may represent physical dangers, or it may be that the sun and moon are to be viewed as harmful, unseen powers, pagan deities.

And the psalmist is saying that no malign power or unseen evil force can ultimately harm you when you belong to this God. It was something that we see in the ministry of the early church in the New Testament. One of the great appeals of the gospel, wasn't it? Jesus, you're reading about it in Ephesians recently. Jesus, Lord, over all the forces of this dark world, supreme over magic and the occult, all demonic powers subject to Jesus Christ. He has triumphed over them. He disarmed the rulers and authorities, Paul tells the Colossians, and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Him.

[21 : 52] Through the cross, all the dark powers of this world have been routed and defeated. Those spiritual authorities of evil have been disarmed. They've been held up to shame and ridicule. Jesus Christ is able to break those chains that so often bind and constrict the lives of men and women. He sets people free.

He provides deliverance from the many dark and sinister powers of this present age. And so, there's hope in this Jesus. Hope for all struggling against the grip of addiction. Because when Jesus comes into a person's life, He doesn't do so as a temporary resident. He comes in to stay for good. He comes to bring freedom and new life.

He comes in and He promises never to leave. And surely the point is this, if we are believers, then nothing can penetrate my life without it being filtered through the shade of the Lord's purpose and presence. In Jesus, God is up close and personal.

He is ever the shade on our right hand. He is always close to us. He will never leave us or abandon us. Remember His words in John 10, My sheep hear my voice, and I know them. They follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.

Neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand.

[23 : 44] So, we have certainty, and we have reliability, and we have intimacy. And then finally here, we've also got what I'll call totality in verses 7 and 8. The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. The emphasis here on Yahweh keeping His people, I think, from disaster and harm.

He will do this in all circumstances and for all time. He will keep us as we go out and come in. His care is from this time forth and forevermore. His care is forever. Whatever the future holds, this warranty never runs out. Whatever your situation, Yahweh will keep you. The Lord will be with you.

And yet, we might say, does this not promise a little too much? Is the psalmist really saying to us that nothing bad will ever happen? I don't think for a moment that's what he's saying. Rather, we've been told here that no illness or distress or trouble or affliction, even death, will have power over us or be able to separate us from God's purposes.

Whatever befalls us in this life, cancer, Alzheimer's, bereavement, loss, sin, moral failure, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, mental distress, none of those things can pry us from the glue of God's love.

The psalmist is not promising here to us immunity. He's promising us security. And there's a huge difference. Yes, we would all love to have immunity, a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card, but that is never promised to us as God's people. If you think of Paul writing his last letter before he was executed, he speaks there in 2 Timothy 4 of being rescued from a difficult situation.

[26 : 03] I think he had to defend himself before the authorities. And this is what he says, But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. So even in the face of Paul's suffering, imminent execution and death, the promise of Psalm 121 verse 7 remains true. The Lord will keep you from all evil.

He will keep your life. I think it was George Whitefield who said, the 18th century evangelist, he said, we are immortal until we have finished our work. We're immortal until we have finished our work. And here the promise is that Yahweh will keep his people from every evil work, because there's this relentlessness about God's care. He never gives up. He never fails to keep his promises. His love and care for his people never end. Pursue us all the days of our lives, even into eternity itself. Wherever we go, the Lord will be with us. He will keep us.

It doesn't matter where our pilgrimage might take us. God's help and keeping care will not leave us or abandon us because the shepherd never abandons his sheep. And yes, like the psalmist, we live in an anxious, even insecure world, trouble, distress, world where bad things happen. Wickedness and evil often appear to triumph. But in this world, we have a God who cares for us. And his care is certain, and his care is reliable, and his care is intimate, and his care is total. Dangers and threats may abound, but this God will keep his people. And if we're one of his people, he will bring us safely home. He won't somber or sleep. He that began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it.

If you think of what's known as the Aaronic Blessing, Numbers 6, 24 and 26, on the most special day of the Jewish calendar, the great day of atonement, the people would watch as the high priest went into the most holy place, holy of holies, offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people. And people would wait outside to see if the priest's sacrifice was acceptable. And if it was, then the priest would come out from behind the great curtain, his life spared. And the people would rejoice and celebrate. And as he came out, the high priest would raise his hands, and he would pronounce that famous benediction on the people, the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

[29 : 21] The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. And friends, that's how we come to know God's help and care. We know it through the one who is our great high priest, Jesus Christ, who has passed through the curtain of death and returned risen and victorious. Our crucified and risen Savior who blesses us with God's keeping grace and love, sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, brings us peace with God, ministers forgiveness and pardon to us, keeps us and protects us from the evil one. We sing the words, don't we? Behold Him there, the risen Lamb, my perfect spotless righteousness, the great unchangeable I am, the King of glory and of grace, one with Himself I cannot die. My soul is purchased by His blood. My life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ my Savior and my God.

So, won't you please help me is a request best addressed to Jesus Christ. For what a blessing it is to know Him is to know Him as our helper and Savior, to know this God who has promised to keep His people, to know this God who is an incurable insomniac, to know this God who will love us and care for us now and always. But of course, it all hinges upon how we answer the question at the beginning of the psalm.

Where does my help come from? Can you say with the psalmist this evening, my help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth? Is His confession of faith yours tonight?

Let's pray together. Lord, grant us Your mercy and grace and the help of Your Holy Spirit, that we may trust You, that we may renew our commitment to You, and that we may experience and know for ourselves Your help and protection and security. Help us to rest in You always, as we pray these things. In Jesus' name, amen.