

Hope in Troubled Times

From Where Does My Help Come?

Psalm 121:1-8

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Scripture

Our various governmental agencies have directed that there be no meetings of ten or more people at the present time. This is because of the worldwide Corona Virus pandemic.

Like many churches, we wrestled with our response to the directive. Our Session decided that as a matter of prudence we should cancel worship services, until further notice. There are two reason for doing so.

Our first reason for obeying our government's directive is because our government is acting in the best interests of its entire citizenry. Christians are not the only ones being singled out in this directive. No group of any kind of more than ten people are to meet together.

The second reason for obeying our government's directive is because this pandemic is worldwide. In the past three days, I have spoken to family members on three different continents (in Africa, Europe, and South America), and at the present time their restrictions are even more severe than ours. This is a worldwide pandemic that countries all around the world are taking extremely seriously.

Now, we recognize that God commands his people to worship him every Lord's Day. The Fourth Commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). And in the New Testament, the writer to the Hebrews says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25, *NIV84*). Sometimes, however, we are providentially hindered

from gathering together in person as the covenant people of God to worship our Triune Redeemer. Such providential hindrances include personal illness and weather-related closures due to snowstorms, hurricanes, flooding, fires, and so on that occur on the Lord's Day. This pandemic is a providential hindrance that is so unusual that it seems wise to honor the government's directive so as to stop as quickly as possible the virus from spreading. It is not a sin, therefore, not to meet together for corporate worship because of this extremely unusual providential hindrance. On the other hand, it is a sin not to meet together with God's people for corporate worship when we are able to attend a corporate worship service.

I want to note that what we are doing via audio and (perhaps) video is not, properly speaking, a worship service. A worship service can only take place when God's people meet together with one another and with their Triune God in one location. Video and audio feeds may be helpful in terms of instruction and edification, but it is not corporate, covenantal worship. Indeed, Dr. Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, recently said something like this, "Not gathering together on the Lord's Day to be with one another and to worship our Triune God should make us yearn longingly to get back to it as soon as possible."

I would like to make one further comment about this unusual situation in which we find ourselves. It is my intention to deliver a meditation suitable for the occasion. It is entirely fitting and appropriate to address the congregation in relation to the particular providence in which its members find themselves. Therefore, I am suspending my sermon series on "The Life of David." Until we are able to resume our regular, gathered, corporate, covenantal worship services I plan to deliver a series of meditations titled, "Hope in Troubled Times." These

are not sermons, as a sermon is, according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, "a religious discourse delivered *in public* usually by a clergyman as *a part of a worship service*."¹

So, as I thought about how to approach this unusual season in which we find ourselves, I thought and prayed about what to bring to you. We need hope in troubled times. With that in mind, I decided to begin with Psalm 121. I want to answer the Psalmist's question in verse 1b, "From where does my help come?" When you and I face trouble, where does your help and my help come from?

Let's read Psalm 121:1-8:

A Song of Ascents.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

² My help comes from the Lord,

who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;

he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ Behold, he who keeps Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵ The Lord is your keeper;

the Lord is your shade on your right hand.

⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,

nor the moon by night.

⁷ The Lord will keep you from all evil;

he will keep your life.

⁸ The Lord will keep

your going out and your coming in

from this time forth and forevermore.

(Psalm 121:1-8)

¹ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

Introduction

There are times in our lives when we face an uncertain future. Perhaps we have graduated from college, and don't have a job. Or, we have been laid off from work. Or, we have received a terrible diagnosis from our doctor. Or, we have been in an accident that has caused injuries to us or others. Or, we have aging parents whose health is failing with virtually no savings or retirement. Or, we have children who are making destructive choices. Or, we face a worldwide pandemic that we are told will get worse before it gets better.

In times like these, how do we deal with the uncertainties of life? From where does our help come?

The good news for us is that there is an answer to that question. We are not the first people to wrestle with the uncertainties of life.

Psalm 121 is one of fifteen psalms (Psalms 120 to 134) that are each known as "A Song of Ascents." Most likely, these psalms were sung by pilgrims as they travelled to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts. This was their "playlist" of songs that they would sing together as they travelled the dangerous roads to Jerusalem. These songs reminded them of our great God.

Lesson

Psalm 121:1-8 shows us how God helps his people.

Let's use the following outline:

1. God Assures Us of His Help (121:1-2)
2. God Assures Us of His Vigilance (121:3-4)
3. God Assures Us of His Watchcare (121:5-6)
4. God Assures Us of His Protection (121:7-8)

I. God Assures Us of His Help (121:1-2)

First, God assures us of his help.

The city of Jerusalem was located on a hill. And the temple—which at that time is where God uniquely met with his covenant people—was located on the highest point, on Mount Zion. As the pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem, they could see the city way off in the distance, with the temple rising up above it all. So they sang, **“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?”** (121:1). And the beautiful, affirming response was, **“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth”** (121:2).

This response affirms that God is the Creator of **heaven and earth**. He has created every galaxy, every planet, every star, and even earth itself. He created the hills and the valleys. He created the animals, the birds, the fish, and the humans. He created every molecule and atom, and even every virus. There is *nothing* that God did not create.

The point of this affirmation is that God assures us of his help. As we travel through life, as we encounter trials and terrors, as we face an uncertain future, we can say with great and certain confidence, **“My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”** I love the way commentator Derek Kidner puts it. He says, “The thought of this verse leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to its Maker. Here is living help: primary, personal, wise, immeasurable.”²

My dear brother and sister, God assures us who are his blood-bought children of his help. And God helps us because he loves us, as Paul so beautifully stated in Romans 8:31-32,

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 467.

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” And then he concludes in Romans 8:37-39, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So, let us remind ourselves that God assures us of his help.

II. God Assures Us of His Vigilance (121:3-4)

Second, God assures us of his vigilance.

The road to Jerusalem was not a superhighway. It was no autobahn. No. The road was rugged and treacherous. One could easily slip and fall, or twist an ankle and be in great pain. As the pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem, their song now switched from the first person to the second person. That is, they were singing to one another and encouraging one another with these words, **“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”** (121:3-4).

God is always vigilant. The word “vigilant” means to “to keep watch, stay awake.”³ God does not sleep. He never takes a catnap. He doesn’t get so busy watching over his entire creation that his eyelids get heavy.

³ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

Someone once asked the Greek general Alexander the Great how he could sleep so soundly when he was surrounded by so much personal danger. He replied that Parmenio, his faithful guard, was watching.⁴

My dear brother and sister, God is watching over you! Because he **will neither slumber nor sleep**, you may sleep peacefully.

But that is so often not our experience, is it? We lie awake at night, or we wake up long before our alarm goes off fretting about our uncertain future. We worry about how we may stumble or fall. We wonder what will befall us to trip us up.

Oh, let us remind ourselves of these words, **“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”** (121:3-4).

So, God assures us of his help and of his vigilance.

III. God Assures Us of His Watchcare (121:5-6)

Third, God assures us of his watchcare.

My former senior pastor, Lee Eclov, said, “*Watchcare* is a word the church invented, so far as I can tell. It was made for this passage.”⁵ The travelers encouraged one another with these words, **“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 sun in Israel was brutally hot in the daytime. The moon’s light was thought by some in ancient times to cause a

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1077.

⁵ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2019/may/where-does-my-help-come-from.html>.

disordered mind. (The Latin word for “moon” is *luna*, from which we get the English word *lunatic*.) However, James Montgomery Boice writes, “What the psalmist really means, though in figurative language, is that nothing either of the day or night can harm us if God is keeping guard. God is our covering against every calamity. He is our shade against the visible perils of the day as well as the hidden perils of the night.”⁶

We frequently face perils. As Boice says, there are “visible perils” and there are “hidden perils.” Visible perils are those that we can see or anticipate, such as a decreasing or no income, or age-related health issues, and so on. Hidden perils are those that we cannot see or anticipate, such as a virus.

In all of these perils, however, God assures us of his watchcare. Let us remind ourselves of the psalmist’s words, **“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.”**

So, God assures us of his help, of his vigilance, and of his watchcare.

IV. God Assures Us of His Protection (121:7-8)

And fourth, God assures us of his protection.

The pilgrim’s traveling to Jerusalem encouraged one another of God’s ever-widening promises. Not only will God protect them on their journey from stumbling, he will protect them in the whole of their existence. They sang to one another, **“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”** (121:7-8).

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary*, 1078.

The Hebrew word for **“keep,” “keeps,”** or **“keeper”** occurs six times in this psalm. Listen to the following phrases:

1. **“he who *keeps* you will not slumber”** (121:3b)
2. **“he who *keeps* Israel will neither slumber nor sleep”** (121:4)
3. **“The Lord is your *keeper*”** (121:5a)
4. **“The Lord will *keep* you from all evil”** (121:7a)
5. **“he will *keep* your life”** (121:7b)
6. **“The Lord will *keep* your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore”** (121:8)

The doxology at the end of Jude’s letter captures the climax of Psalm 121, when he writes, “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24–25). Jude is not saying that believers will not fall into trouble or difficulty. Indeed, we often do fall. What he is saying, however, is that in spite of our stumbling in this fallen world, for those who know Jesus savingly, we can be assured that we will be brought safely to glory.

So, God assures us of his help, of his vigilance, of his watchcare, and of his protection.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of God’s help in Psalm 121:1-8, let us put our hope in God in troubled times.

The point of Psalm 121 is not that Christians will not have problems as we travel through life, but rather that God will

help us as we go through them.

Eugene Peterson wrote a book on the “Songs of Ascent” that he called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. As we face an uncertain future, what should we as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ think? Peterson writes:

The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord; nor a fantasy trip to a heavenly city where we can compare blue ribbons and gold medals with others who have made it to the winners’ circle....The Christian life is going to God. In going to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God; and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil, he will keep our life.⁷

So, my dear brothers and sisters, let us put our hope in God in these troubled times. Amen.

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 40–41.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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