

Where does your help come from?

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[0 : 00] We are going to turn now to the Bible, as we always do, and to read together this morning. And we're going to read in Psalm 121. This is a great favorite psalm of many, certainly a favorite psalm in our family, one that we would have often have read as parting from one another.

And it's a great psalm of encouragement for the people of the Lord. Psalm 121, which begins a song of ascents. 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. 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.

[1 : 14] The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in. From this time forth and forevermore. Amen. May God bless to us his word.

Well, do you open your Bibles with me to Psalm 121 that we read together earlier. Now, although our sophisticated modern world often thinks that it's we who have put God in the dock and we who have left him speechless, cowering from our questioning, what we've been seeing, I think, in recent weeks is that, in fact, it's God who puts us human beings in the dock and is holding us with his powerful questioning.

Jesus himself left his accusers ultimately speechless. And we've seen, haven't we, that from the very beginning of the Bible, it's God's word that puts mankind on the spot.

And indeed, it's very uncomfortable at times. We don't like it when we're put on the spot like that. We don't like having our power, our authority, our autonomy questioned.

And at the moment, the whole world of humanity is being left very exposed by this pandemic, which has left nearly every nation on earth reeling without answers and feeling very exposed indeed.

[2 : 49] Well, the psalm that we read together this morning begins by posing another very real question. In this very troubled world, where does your help come from?

You see from the title of the psalm, it's called a song of ascents. And in fact, it's the second of a group of 15 psalms that bear that title, Psalm 120 right through to 134.

And literally, that word ascents means steps or stairs. And we can't be entirely sure, but it seems very likely that this is a collection of psalms that formed a kind of hymn book of pilgrim praise used by traveling Israelites on the way up to Jerusalem for the annual feasts.

You might remember in 1 Samuel chapter 1, we're told about how Hannah and Elkanah went up every year to the tabernacle of the Lord to worship. And then again, in the beginning of Luke's gospel, remember, Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem to the feast with the 12-year-old Jesus, along with that whole pilgrim band.

And remember, they lost Jesus. They thought he was somewhere in the group, but in fact, he was still behind in the temple. So you can imagine these groups of travelers going up to Jerusalem and singing as they go along, or maybe as they stopped to camp for the evening and had times of prayer and praise together.

[4 : 19] And certainly, as you read these psalms, and I encourage you to do that, you'll sense the focus on Jerusalem, on Zion, on traveling towards the city of God.

And I'm sure that it's a favorite psalm of many of us here listening today. As I said, it's one of our psalms that was a big thing in our extended family, particularly my mother's family, often read at a time of parting, a time of journeying.

And it's natural, isn't it, at a time of parting, to feel certain anxieties, certain fears, a sense, perhaps more than ever, of our need for help.

And I think that's true of many of us, whatever our beliefs might be, especially if that parting is a significant parting of loved ones. Maybe a child going off to camp for the very first time.

Maybe an older teenager leaving home to go to university for the first time, or perhaps going off in a gap year away from home. Or maybe a loved one emigrating and going far away to live.

[5 : 24] Or perhaps just at the moment, that feeling of separation that we have from so many people. But often it's a time of parting, it's a time of journeying, that sort of brings home to us the bigness of the world out there, and the smallness of our little world by comparison.

The size and the scope of the threats, perhaps, that this world holds. And our sense of weakness and vulnerability. Our lack of power to control and to protect and to overcome these things.

We have a sense of our helplessness often when somebody we love is far away. And these times can often bring into a very sharp focus the reality that we can otherwise often hide from.

That deep down, actually, we know that the whole of life is really quite a hazardous journey. It's full of uncertainties and hazards and dangers and often real fears.

And the truth is, we all need help on our journey, on our pilgrimage through this mortal coil. But where does your help come from?

[6 : 36] Well, here we have a psalm of pilgrimage that gives us an honest appraisal of life in this world, all its hazards and all its threats, and a very clear answer as to where real help can be found.

And I'd like to look at it with you this morning together. This psalm teaches us, I think, three very clear things, and then leaves us with a clear question.

It tells us, first of all, life is full of hills. But second, it tells us there's a God who made even the hills. And thirdly, it tells us that this God has a name.

And then, of course, that raises a great question for each one of us. And we'll come back to that later on. And so, three Ps and a Q, if you like. Let's take the first P. The psalmist addresses a real problem.

That life is full of hills. And so, we're all looking for help. Verse 1, I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

[7 : 39] Now, right away, we might need to rethink what might be a sort of instinctive understanding of these lines. Perhaps those of us who are native Scots, in particular, tend to have a sort of instinctive love for the hills.

We love the hills, don't we? I know that I love flying into Glasgow Airport and looking out of the window and looking up at the Lomond Hills and seeing their beauty. Or maybe if you're coming in the other way and you're looking all the way up, sometimes the coast of Scotland, to see the hills as far away as even the Cairngorms and the Glencoe Hills and so on.

Does your heart good, doesn't it, to see the hills? Perhaps there's something particularly about a Scot who loves that. I remember when I lived in the south, in London, just sensing how flat everything was.

And it was so lovely to come back home and to see the hills of bonnie Scotland. So, I suspect that like you, for a long time, I thought of this verse as expressing a kind of longing for the hills.

And in fact, one of the versions of this metrical psalm rather reinforces that. Unto the hills around me I lift up my longing eyes.

[8 : 48] And I'm sure many of you have sung that many times. But in fact, I have to tell you, that is a misunderstanding of this verse. It's not at all a wistful longing that the psalmist is expressing.

Rather, what he's expressing is fear and foreboding. Because for him, the hills represent a real problem. It's not the wistful looking down from an airplane at the lovely hills of Scotland and the sun on them.

No, no, it's much more like maybe a hill walker up in the Cairngorms with many miles still to go and looking up to the hills and seeing very dark storm clouds coming right over them full of foreboding, what they might bring.

Remember what this psalm says. It's a psalm of ascents. It's about pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem. They're walking upwards through what is in fact a barren wilderness of hills.

And those hills represented real danger. Those hills were the source of many concerns and many fears. Think of the story that Jesus told about the Good Samaritan.

[9 : 56] That was set on the same rocky road from Jerusalem to Jericho. And that's the very place that he was attacked by bandits who no doubt came down from the hills. The hills were not the pilgrim's friend but his potential enemy.

A real problem. And of course, in many ways, you see, the journey of pilgrims to Jerusalem was an acted parable of the whole of life journeying on towards the city of God and his presence and his joy.

And the pilgrim songs that they sang on their way understood that very clearly. And so for them, just as for us, life was full of hills, full of many fears, many dangers on the way, much foreboding.

I lift up my eyes as I go along the path of life and what do I see? Hills everywhere. Problems. This is a sound full of realism about the problems of life.

God's people are not immune from hills. Christian believers face all the same struggles, the same fears and concerns and potential hazards as everyone else.

[11 : 09] That's what verse 1 is telling us. Of course, some so-called Christian groups want to deny that, want to claim that life can be free completely from all hills.

That real faith means health and wealth and prosperity. No hills at all to fear in this life. No viruses to fear, perhaps. No, no, no. The Bible is much more realistic.

The Bible faces up to the problems of life squarely. Life is full of hills. And the saints in the Old Testament, like this psalmist, knew that fine well.

It's expressed in many of the other psalms, many other parts of the Bible as well. And it's quite plain here. Of course, the psalmist is speaking figuratively about much, much more than just a mere physical journey to Jerusalem.

He is speaking about the whole of life. Verse 8 makes that absolutely plain. He's talking about the whole future, isn't he? He's talking forever, actually. And life, for the believer, just as for everyone else, is full of hills.

[12 : 12] It's full of potential threats and harm and danger and fears. And we're all in the same boat as human beings. And a world pandemic certainly makes us aware of that, doesn't it?

And so, as verse 1 says, we're all looking for help. But where does my help come from? Where does your help come from? Well, for the average person today, I suppose that answer is, well, in many places.

Often it's self-help. People look to their career. They look to their earnings, to their savings for security. Or I suppose they might look to their health, their fitness program, or to their meditation, their yoga, the latest diet, whatever it might be.

Other people look to escapism, don't they? To hide from the threats of life. That's often what drives people into drugs, into alcohol, and so on.

Or into some other consuming passion that just fills your life to block out all of these dark things. Or, of course, it can be in religion.

[13 : 26] Don't think that we're living in a post-religious age. No, no, no. There are more man-made religions around us now than ever before to attract all kinds of followers. Yes, there are conventional religions, but there are more and more and more unconventional ones too.

But for the Christian, for the believer in the God of Scripture, we know that help comes only from one place. And that's the radical difference.

Both the Christian believer and every unbeliever faith the same hills, the same struggles, the same problems in life. But only the true believer has the answer that the psalmist has.

Because he faces these real problems, secondly, with a real power. He knows that there's a God who made even the hills and that he is the only possible source of help in this life.

And that's what the whole of the rest of the psalm is about. The creator God, verse 2, the maker of heaven and earth. The God who made the hills, who made the cosmos and therefore is sovereign even over the hills, over all the fears and the dangers and the toils and the snares, everything that might confront us in life, whether visible or invisible, like a tiny virus.

[14 : 48] The believer's answer to all of these issues and problems in life is absolutely clear. My help comes from this God.

People are looking for help everywhere in this world. But who or what power in this world can actually give us the help that we need?

Who can control, who can change the world on the vast scale that we really need? The answer, of course, is only a God who is the supreme creator, who made it all and holds the whole thing in his

hands.

I remember once watching a documentary on television about the architect who oversaw the building of what was then the largest skyscraper in Dubai. I think perhaps at the time it was the biggest building in the world.

And I remember being very struck. This was years after the building had been built. But he said this. He said, I'll be involved in this for the rest of my life. There'll be things that only I will be able to help with.

[15 : 57] Why? Well, because he designed it. He planned it. He built it. He was the creator of this great building. You see, all the philosophies, all the religions, all the ideas, all the idols, ourselves, and our ideas, all of these things that we think might bring us help, they are within this world.

They're bound up in this world. They are created things. They're all part of the same thing that the hills are part of. The issues, the problems that we face, they're on the same level as these things. Nothing inside this world can be the ultimate help for the problems of this world. Only the God who made the hills and therefore who controls even the most mountainous issues of life, only he can help.

But this God, says the psalmist, the creator of all earth and heaven, this God is the helper of the Christian believer. And notice in the psalm, he's very clear, isn't he?

There's nothing vague about this promised help. To have this God as your helper means three clear things. First of all, it means verses 3 and 4, ceaseless guidance through all the path of life.

[17 : 27] 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. beginning of verse 3 there could be read as a question.

Will he really let your foot slip? And the answer is absolutely decisive. Your foot will not slip because you, and it's a singular you there, you personally have the tireless attention of the God who made and controls the entire cosmos.

He's always watching, he's always listening, he's always caring for you. He doesn't sleep, he doesn't even slumber, he's never even half asleep, so that he might sort of answer your cry and then forget immediately because he's fallen asleep again.

That's what I do, I can slumber but not sleep. Very often in the morning my wife will come in and talk to me and ask me to do something or whatever and I'll say yes that's fine I'll do it and then later on in the day she'll wonder why I haven't done it and I've got no recollection at all of ever having spoken because I've been slumbering, I'm half asleep but this God neither sleeps nor slumbers, he does all that he promises and he promises, do you see, ceaseless guidance for the feet of those who are his, he will not let your foot slip.

What does that mean? Well it means that your own natural weakness and folly will not derail you if this God is your God. the pilgrims on the path of course will often put a foot in the wrong place, often they'll take a foolish risk perhaps so they'll get weary and they'll look down and they'll stumble and so also it is in life.

[19 : 15] Believers like us are often foolish. We grow weary and often we are in danger of slipping very badly indeed but he will not let your foot slip. He will not let you fall to ultimate harm.

And that's such a liberating thing to know. Liberates us from fear. There are Christians who fear terribly that they'll take a wrong turning in life, that they'll make some sort of mistake in a decision that will then lead to disaster in the rest of their life because they've got themselves somehow out of God's will and can't recover.

No, he will not let your foot slip like that. It's impossible. Of course that's not an excuse for a moment for disobedience to God's word.

Of course not, not ever. But if you are trusting God, if you're walking in obedience, faithfully seeking to live life in accordance with his will, he will not let your foot slip.

That liberates you from fear. And it liberates you for great fruitfulness, for confident faith, for venturesome faith. Knowing that we have God's ceaseless guidance, it means that we're not paralyzed, we're not waiting constantly for some special intervention of God, some special guidance, some feeling of assurance that you need before you can ever act on or make any decision in life.

[20 : 43] No, we know that he is constantly watching over us. He is guiding all of our paths. And we can be in that place of assurance all the time, therefore.

Of course, we must walk. God's not going to do our walking for us. But God will keep our steps secure. The very hairs on your head are numbered, says Jesus. And that's a great, great liberation. That's what happened in the 16th century church after the Reformation when there was a renewed discovery of the scriptures and of the great sovereignty of God.

It caused believers all over Europe to venture out in great faith, to launch out trusting God, trusting that God was their strength and their stay. As they took the good news of Jesus Christ all over the continent, planted churches, made great missionary efforts.

You see, if this God is your help, you can be confident of ceaseless guidance in all the paths of life. But more than that, look at verses 5 and 6.

[21 : 52] This God also promises to be a sure protection in all the trials of life. 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 natural scourges of life, the things that we must face, they will never overcome you if this is your God.

We have a constant protection from the God who created the whole natural world. Now again, notice that the psalmist does not promise immunity from all of these things.

He doesn't think, does he, that the sun's heat is going to be banished. He's not saying here Christians can spend all day in the sun and you don't have to wear sun cream. He's not saying either, is he, that darkness won't bring fears to people just as they will to the rest.

But he knows that there is a sure protection amid all of these trials for God's people. And that's the Bible's constant refrain. Isaiah chapter 43, God says, I have redeemed you, you're mine, fear not.

[23 : 04] When you walk through the waters, I will be with you. Rivers will not overwhelm you, fires will not engulf you. They'll be there, but they won't engulf you. Or Peter says in 1 Peter 1, we are shielded by God's power until Christ's coming amid all kinds of trials and yet rejoicing in the knowledge of God's safekeeping.

In all these things, says Paul, we are more than conquerors. Because this God watches over you. He is your keeper.

He is your sure protection in all the trials of life. Notice verse 5. He is right there at your right hand. He is nearer to you than those threatening hills are.

And when the heat is on, he is your shade and your shelter. When things are dark and fears are abounding, he is there. The one who made the whole world is there with you. And what a difference that makes.

when the natural scourges of life bear down on us, as they do, as they will do. I remember some years back speaking to Margaret Hare, who many of you will remember, a member of our fellowship, just after she had been diagnosed with cancer and facing the treatment.

[24 : 25] And she was wonderfully at peace. And I remember her quoting these words to me. She said, I'm not fearful, the Lord is my keeper. I remember many years back, a friend in Christian ministry telling me about somebody in their congregation.

I think he was an elder in their church who'd been suffering from blood cancer. And the treatment was removing bone marrow, as they do, and then giving aggressive chemotherapy.

And then a rescue, you re-infuse the patient's own bone marrow that's been kept safe out of their body in a freezer while all the cancer cells are dealt with by the chemotherapy.

Except that when it came time to re-introduce his own bone marrow, they discovered a disaster.

The freezer that had been keeping this man's marrow somehow had become faulty, and it was all ruined, and there was nothing left to put back into his body.

And that spelt for him the certainty of imminent death. And yet this pastor friend said to me that this man's response was not anger, it was not rage, it was not lawsuits against the hospital, but it was witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 41] I'm a Christian, he said. I trust my Lord Jesus Christ as sovereign, and so I have his peace. The Lord is your keeper, your shade on your right hand.

I don't know what you may be facing now in your life right at the moment. Maybe the scorching sun of illness, maybe the sorrow of family worries, maybe the deadly fears of the night when your mind ruminates on all the kind of looming uncertainties that are around us, and certainly there are many of those around us at the moment, aren't there, in this COVID academic.

Might be the financial fears for your future and for your family as a result of all of the fallout of this. But friends, whatever it is, if this God is your God, you have the promise of a sure protection in all these trials.

The Lord is your shade. He will be at your right hand. He will be right there beside you in the midst of whatever it is. A sure protection in all the trials of life.

And verses 7 and 8 tell us not only that, but you also have a certain promise of unending life. The Lord will keep you from all evil.

[27 : 08] He will keep your life. The Lord will keep you going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. Even death itself cannot harm you ultimately.

If this God is your God. Your life now already is in the hands of the eternal God. Now and forever. I'll keep your life from this time forth and forevermore.

well as you get older that extraordinary promise becomes more and more important, doesn't it? Because ill health creeps up on us.

Thoughts of death, perhaps the thoughts of the process of dying can be a great mountain of fear, can't it, for some of us? Maybe for all of us. For some, that great enemy will stalk them prematurely with a sudden illness in the family.

Or worse, perhaps, even violence. For some might even be murder. We live in a world of terrorism, don't we? Where these things are a real and present threat.

[28 : 20] Now we're living through this world of COVID, where that threat seems to be coming very close and uncertain. But for all of us, one way or another, we will in the end faith this great evil, death.

The Bible calls death our last enemy. And our mortality does cast an ever greater shadow over our lives as that life goes on.

It is an inescapable thing. We try and hide from that reality all the time. eventually it will face us. And as Christian believers, we are not immune to that, are we?

To dust, we also shall return. But you see, if this God is our God, even death, the last enemy, the ultimate evil, shall not overwhelm us.

The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life forevermore. We're not immune from the physical evils and the things to do with death so that we would experience them.

[29 : 31] No, but we are armed against them so that we will certainly overcome them. That's the message. Psalm 23, I shall not fear the valley of the shadow of death because the Lord is with me even there.

here's real resurrection, hope, and certainty right at the heart of the Old Testament faith. The believer's life with this God shall never cease.

It goes on forevermore. And though many things may afflict us, will afflict us, we have God's certain promise.

Nothing of ultimate harm can befall us. What a wonderful promise. And we need it, don't we?

Because as Jesus tells us in Luke chapter 21, remember, if we follow him, you'll be betrayed by parents, by brothers, by relatives, and friends.

They'll put some of you, he says, to death. all men will hate you on account of me. That's great realism from Jesus. But, he says, not a hair of your head will perish.

[30 : 48] By standing firm, you will win true life. What a great assurance. Luke chapter 21, verse 16. The Lord will watch over, he will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

What a wonderful assurance that all of this rests on God and not on me. A lot of Christians live life with fear, don't they?

Will I, will I endure? Will I really be saved? The answer of this psalm is, trust him and yes, he will keep you now and he will keep you always.

What about my sins, you might say? I keep mucking it up so badly. The Lord will keep you from all evil. Not even your sins can stop his promise.

That's why I love 1 John 3, verse 20. Maybe my favorite verse in the whole Bible. When your heart condemns you, God is greater even than your heart and he knows everything.

[32 : 00] you have a certain promise of unending eternal life if this God is your God. He's the God of all grace.

Let me read to you some words from my father's Bible notes on 1 Peter 5. The God of all grace. The one great and glorious reality in a believer's experience is this.

The God of all grace has called him, having predestined him before all worlds to share his eternal glory. When a man has faith in Christ for salvation, it means that out of the mystery of eternity there has come a loving and mighty hand that lays hold upon his life, claiming it for an eternity of joy and blessedness, glorious beyond all understanding and almost beyond belief.

Now set that over against your trial, whatever it may be, however severe it may become, wherever it may touch you, there is no possible combination of adverse circumstances in our experience in which this glorious truth will not make all the difference.

If this God is your God, a loving and mighty hand has laid hold upon you both now and forevermore, so this psalm tells us life is full of hills and we all need help.

[33 : 32] There is a real problem but there's a God who made the hills. There is real power, the only hope of real help. But the third thing you see is this, the psalmist points us not just to a great power but thirdly to a real person.

This God has a name and so we can find him and find his help. He's not just talking is he vaguely about God, G-O-D, a sort of unknown being, a distant unknowable creator.

Now this God has a personal name. Look at verse 2. My help comes from the Lord. Again in verse 5, the Lord. Verse 7, the Lord. Verse 8, the Lord. The Lord, when you see it in capitals like that, Yahweh, Jehovah.

It's the name of the covenant God of Israel. that he and he alone is the God, the maker of all things. He's the only God. He's the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

He's the God of Israel. He's the God of Moses. He's the God of David and the psalmists. And he's the God who reveals himself. That's the only way that he can be known. He's the only God, the creator.

[34 : 43] He's the only helper and savior. He says through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 45, Thus says the Lord, he who created the heavens, he is God.

He who fashioned and made the earth. I am the Lord. There is no other. A righteous God and savior. There is none but me. There's no Allah.

There's no Buddha. There's no Krishna. There's no other gods. No, alone, this God is the true God. God. The God who reveals more and more and more of himself all down the ages speaking through the prophets and the law and the psalmists until as we've seen in Hebrews chapter 1 in these last days he has revealed himself fully and ultimately in his son Jesus Christ who is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature through whom he created all things.

the one in whom as Paul says in Colossians 1 the fullness of God dwells in bodily form. Not the false God of the Jehovah's witnesses or Mormons or others who like them explicitly deny the divinity of Jesus Christ.

There's no help to be found there. But this God has a name and so he can be known. And his whole purpose in creation is that he will be known as the one who gives ceaseless guidance to all who love him.

[36 : 17] The one who gives sure protection to all to find refuge in him. And the one who promises unending eternal life to all who trust his promises.

But he only has one name. He alone is God. There is no other. And he's made himself fully known only through his son God incarnate the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so friends that means doesn't it? He can only be known one way. By the name of Jesus Christ the risen Savior and Lord. It's the risen Jesus we celebrate at Easter whom God has highly exalted and bestowed upon him says Paul alone the name that is above every other name the name of God himself.

That's why the apostle Peter declares in Acts chapter 4 salvation is found in no one else. There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

All human beings have a real problem. Life is full of hills full of dangers full of snares and we all need help.

[37 : 30] But there's a real power. There's a God who made the hills. He is the only source of help. And this power is a real person. This God has a name so we can know him so we can find all the help he offers.

Three Ps and a Q. This psalm surely leaves us with a question doesn't it? Is this God your God?

Where does your help come from? I hope he is your God because if he is not then it means friends that none of this is yours or can be yours.

No ceaseless guidance in all the paths of your life just anxiety fears hesitations. No sure protection through all the trials of life only despair only sadness only bitterness.

And no certain promise for unending life only uncertainty only foreboding and yes only the ultimate chill of death itself.

[38 : 40] If this God may be known to our world forever in the Lord Jesus Christ if he is not your God then none of these things the psalm promises are yours because they can't be found anywhere else.

There is no other name under heaven to bring ultimate help real salvation except through Jesus Christ our Lord the Son of God.

Where does your help come from? Is it in the name of this God through our Lord Jesus Christ? Friends it can be can be for everyone who is listening here this morning as he's the one who says come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden among all the foreboding hills in this life's journey come to me he says and I will give you rest and the one who comes to me I will in no wise ever cast out.

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.

Let's pray. Lord our God help of the helpless savior of the lost grant that that our song may be today and always that our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth for we ask it in his glorious name the name of Jesus Christ our Lord Amen