

Where does our help come from?

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[0 : 00] And let me ask you to start. How good are you at asking for help? How good are you at reading instructions? Barry's shaking his head. Here's one really. How good are you at asking for directions on a journey?

Now, I could have put the cat amongst the pigeons and said, how good is your partner at doing that? But I won't do that. You can argue about that over lunch. But all that is by way of saying the average adult is not very good at asking for help. We're too proud. We don't want to owe the favour in return. We believe in being self-made, self-sufficient, doing it ourselves. We're not that good at asking for help.

Well, here is, I think, one of the most famous psalms. It's one of my favourites. And it's all about asking for help. Verse 1. I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? This psalm is part of the Songs of Ascent. You can see that in the little heading at the top of the psalm. They were a collection of hearty anthems that God's people would sing as they journeyed to Jerusalem. You'll remember that Jerusalem is the centre of God's relationship with his people because that's where the temple was.

And so Israel would sing these songs as they journeyed up to or ascended to Jerusalem. And these songs would remind them of God's best characteristics to keep them going on the journey.

[1 : 36] And so it's kind of like the Richmond Football Club theme song. We're from Tigerland. And it keeps them going. It reminds them of the club's best characteristics to keep them going through the depths of the footy season.

I was asked by Paul Chessom to work in a grand final reference into the talk. So there it is. Just so you know, he wanted me to get a neck tattoo like Dustin Martin.

But no, if you want to know who Paul is, he's the irresponsible gentleman right over there. So the Songs of Ascent. And what is really interesting about them is the Spirit has assembled them right near the end of the book of Psalms because they're actually songs for the grace journey.

That is the great journey that all Christians make out of exile to the heavenly Jerusalem. And as you read through the Songs of Ascent, what you get is a sort of melodic line.

That is, you track the journey of Israel from over the page Psalm 120. So turn over the previous page, Psalm 120, verse 5.

[2 : 45] Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar. Those are foreign lands. And you can track the journey right through to Psalm 134, the last of the Songs of Ascent, right into the very house of the Lord.

They are songs for the journey. Our second reading from Revelation, it promises that in the end, that God's people won't ever have to leave Jerusalem. That if they endure this great journey, he will make them a permanent part of his house.

He'll make them a pillar. So they never have to leave the Lord. And there are loads more parallels between them and us. So they were God's people living in a foreign land.

We are God's people living in a foreign land. Our series in Daniel taught us that. Just as they sang these words to remind them of God's characteristics, to keep them going, we sing the same words to keep us going.

They're on a journey to the earthly Jerusalem. We're on the great journey to the new Jerusalem.

That second reading from Revelation, it describes our final destination as the new Jerusalem.

[3 : 57] God's city coming out of heaven. That is where our journey ends. And so my aim this morning, just as it is the aim of the original psalmist, is to give us total confidence that the Lord will keep us to the end of the journey.

I'll say that again. My aim is to give us total confidence that the Lord will keep us to the end of the journey. Now, you should have a handout like this, which has got some points, which should tell you where I'm going.

And if you keep your Bibles open, that would really help me as well. We're at point one. Every day when we talk to people, we always ask, how are you going?

How are you doing? But actually, given the traveling context of this psalm and the way it puts a journeying perspective on our life, it might be more appropriate to ask, how is life on the Christian journey going?

And this psalm, it promises successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. All Christians know the bruises of life on the journey, losing jobs, heartbreak, suffering, violence, even death.

[5 : 14] The Bible is honest about life on the road. But the good news is, is that if we keep walking, we will be kept to the end.

Successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. Verse one, I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from?

And the psalmist looks to the mountains and doesn't think, wow, how great the Dandenongs look this time of year. Or they don't think, wow, these peaks are going to be really good exercise for these tired old legs.

But rather, verse one, God's people say, help me. You see, when you've been traveling through the desert on foot, 40 degrees every single day, mountains actually ruin your journey.

Falling rocks, dangerous parts to scale, no clear way through, no telling how long this mountain range goes on for. Verse three talks about our foot slipping. You see, if your foot slips over in the car park, that's really inconvenient.

[6 : 21] But when you're scaling a mountain, your foot slipping is deadly dangerous. There is lots about the mountains that make God's people want to turn back on the journey.

Suddenly, arriving at Jerusalem is not so certain. A full rest with the Lord is in doubt. And while their road had actual, literal mountains in it, we sort of have mountains ourselves.

Now, I've put this on your handout. A mountain, in the context of this psalm, is something that tests our faith, not necessarily something that tests our comfort and happiness.

So think about Mount Suffering. On Mount Suffering, you will find sickness and heartbreak and loss and death.

We all know about suffering. It tests our faith. Lord, why did you allow that to happen? What possible good could come out of that?

[7 : 31] When lifting our eyes to Mount Suffering, God's people ask, where does my help come from? What about Mount Persecution? Will your traditional view of marriage leave you excluded from polite society?

I don't know if you know this. There is a small community of Persian Christians here at HTD. And it's fantastic. But I was speaking to a few of them, and they say that every day their relatives back home in Iran face violence and even death.

Persecution tests our faith. Why did you allow that to happen, Lord? Why did you allow those bruises on the road? When lifting our eyes to Mount Persecution, God's people ask, where does my help come from?

What about Mount Sin? I'm too rubbish to keep going. I'm too sinful for God to welcome me. Maybe you'd rather get secretly lost in your sinful desires than face that hard Christian journey.

It tests our faith. Sin is easier. It seems more fun. When lifting their eyes to Mount Sin, God's people ask, where does my help come from?

[8 : 57] And it's very easy to convince all of you that sin and suffering and persecution test our faith. That's not really, I guess, that difficult. But here's the thing about mountains. They can be good things too.

A mountain can be a good thing because they can test our faith. They confuse us into thinking we've already arrived in Jerusalem rather than we're on the dusty road.

Think about Mount Happiness and Mount Prosperity. They are good things. But a prosperous life, a great relationship, financial success, they can, in some circumstances, make us less inclined to keep going on with the journey.

They confuse us into thinking we've already arrived in the Emerald City rather than we're on the dusty road. Actually, Lord, this earth is not too bad.

Life on the road is okay. If I need your help, I'll just ask for it. Imagine how crazy it would have been if one of the Israelites, while the whole tribe is travelling through the desert, one of the Israelites stops on the road and says, hey, listen everyone, you go on ahead.

[10:11] This dusty mountainous road is actually quite good. It suits me quite well. I'll set up my own city here. That would have been ludicrous. They all would have said, what are you doing? Come on. We've got to push on.

Remember Daniel and his friends? As successful as they were in Babylon, they just wanted to go home. They knew that everywhere was just another place on the journey and not the final resting place.

And so I don't know which mountain you're facing. Maybe it's a difficult work situation that tests your faith. Tricky family situations, that's probably all of us, that tests your faith.

What is your public Christian witness going to look like that tests your faith? Or maybe it's just the regular daily battle against a temptation to sin.

It tests our faith. Help me is how I feel. God's people ask, where does my help come from? And the answer is our second point.

[11:22] I wonder if you've ever been to Coles or Woolies or Bunnings and you've ever been met with a customer service situation where you realise the person you're speaking to is absolutely useless and has no idea how to help you or they're not authorised.

That wouldn't happen at Woolies where I work, by the way. That happens only at Coles. Well, Box Hill anyway. And you say, can I speak to your manager? But you see, not everyone who says, can I help you, is able to help you.

But the good news for the Christian is that there's no useless sales assistant, no middle manager to deal with. You're straight through to the boss.

Verse 2, my help comes from the Lord. That's Yahweh in capital letters. That's his name. He is the maker of heaven and earth. The maker of heaven and earth, that's an expression.

It means everything or totality. It's a mark of his sovereign power. It means that everything that could come against us is something that he controls.

[12:31] Think of the actual mountains that were in Israel's journey. God spoke and they rose up in obedience.

I wonder what impresses you about creation. Is it the stars? Is it the oceans? Is it the trees? Is it the animals? A good David Attenborough documentary will do that for you.

My son, he's three years old. He's obsessed with dinosaurs, which means I've had to learn all about them. And if you see him, do ask him what his favourite dinosaur is. He'll be happy to tell you. Very impressive creatures, dinosaurs.

But how much more impressive is the Lord who spoke all of these things into existence? Perhaps he can help me out when my faith is tested too.

And again, the promise of this psalm is successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. Your soul will make it to the end of the journey because you have a helper.

[13:36] And when you read this song, there's one word which is repeated which describes the help of the Lord. And it is keeper. So it's a bit tricky in this version, but I'm going to read it and I'll paraphrase it.

So verse 3, second half of verse 3. He who watches over or keeps you will not slumber or sleep.

Verse 4. Indeed, he who watches over or keeps Israel.

Verse 5. The Lord watches over or keeps you. Twice in verse 7. The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over or keep your life.

Finally, in verse 8. The Lord will watch over or keep your coming and going. Six times in five verses, the psalmist repeats this keeping or bodyguarding imagery.

And it is so we can be totally confident that the Lord will guarantee successful arrival. And so, let me ask you, why don't you turn to the person next to you just for 10 seconds.

[14:41] What qualities would you look for in a bodyguard? So over to you for 10 seconds while I get a drink of water. What qualities would you look for in a bodyguard? Well, can I just bring you back to a close?

I wonder what you said. I thought about it this week and here's what I came up with. So, big muscles, six foot six, good with a gun. Anyone say that? Reflexes like a cat.

I've just described myself there. No. I'm sorry. Well, this psalm says in verse 3, he who watches over you will not slumber.

Verse 4, indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Yahweh is an insomniac in the very best possible sense.

You know, when you're watching a movie, it's always, the heist or the robbery always happens when the hapless guard falls asleep at the desk. Verse 3 says, your foot won't slip off the road because the Lord was too busy sleeping.

[15 : 45] He repeats it for emphasis in verse 4. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. And this is really important because small gods, fake gods, local gods or wooden gods, they might be asleep.

They might need you to wake them up. They might be too busy. They might need you to attract their attention. They might be too fickle.

They need you to bribe them. Lord, sort this problem out for me and I promise my church attendance will go up and my financial giving will go up as well. As Christians, we don't need to do that.

That is superstitious paganism. We don't need to negotiate deals for God's keeping. What about the instinct to pray more loudly or with more flowing sort of poetic language?

More money in the pot? More lit candles perhaps? Jesus warns. He says, don't think you'll be heard for your many words. Do not be anxious.

[16 : 55] Your heavenly Father knows what you need. What do we need? We need to get to the end of this journey. And really, that is all we need to say about this.

Yeah, this psalm tells our heads something. But actually, there's more lines to the song because the Holy Spirit is trying to warm our hearts.

This is poetry. This is a song. And so what I'd like you to do as we finish, I'd like you to turn up the ears to your heart and listen to the way the Holy Spirit just drives this home.

I'm going to read the rest of the psalm with a bit of emphasis. So verse 5, verse 5, verse 5 tells us, both now and forevermore.

The bodyguarding of the Lord, it is full service keeping. Verse 5 tells us, he is the shade at your right hand. That is where your weapon goes. That is where your power is kept.

[18 : 15] The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. It's 24-7 bodyguarding. Desert sun won't burn you in the day, nor desert night frees you to death.

Verse 7, the Lord will keep you from all harm. The word is also evil. I think it's deliberately vague so that you can insert any sort of harm or evil on thought you are facing and God's answer is, he will keep your life.

Verse 8, the Lord will keep your coming and going. Are you coming home where your faith is tested? The Lord will keep you. Are you going out where your faith is tested?

The Lord will keep you. How long does this keeping last? Both now and forevermore. It is to the very end of our journey.

And so it is burning things of the day, freezing things of night, things at home, things outside, things harmful, things evil, both now and forevermore.

[19 : 21] I don't know who or what or where on that list is likely to test your faith and make you turn back on the journey. But you can be sure that the Lord has it under control.

None of the nasty shocks and disappointments are too much for him. Any battle of the Christian life is inside his sphere of control.

If he can speak a massive universe into being, then perhaps he can help little old me and little old you on the journey.

And I hope your confidence doesn't come from the fact that these are nice words. But actually, because they are true words.

And so speaking personally, about 11 years ago, I moved to London and it would have been really easy for my foot to slip off the road, for my foot to slip away from following Jesus.

[20 : 22] No parents, no family. No one knew me over there. I was earning good money. Really easy in a new city to let myself go.

But thank the Lord that he kept me. In the most random and weirdest of circumstances, he put me in a really good church. He surrounded me with other people who took the journey seriously.

Now that's just me. That's how I know these words are true. And I'm sure for all of you, you will have stories in your life about how the Lord has kept you on the journey.

Maybe you can't prove it empirically. Maybe there's no physical evidence. But you know from your own journey with the perspective of time that it was the Lord who was keeping you on the path. Why not over lunch rather than talk about the football? Why not share your story with someone over lunch about how the Lord has kept you on the journey? There are lots of things that make us feel like, help me.

[21 : 32] Well, here is a precious little song for the journey. This psalm is very personal. All the yous, the pronoun you, are all in the singular.

So big changes in your life. He will not let Josh's foot be moved. Painful stuff going on that makes you wonder if he sees or cares.

He who keeps Sue will neither slumber nor sleep. Uncertain about what marriage laws will look like in Australia. The Lord is Andrew's keeper.

Maybe you're worried about where you're going to get the daily strength to keep going in the battle with sin and temptation. The Lord, the road is so long, the destination seems so far away.

He will keep Rachel's life. This psalm is one of the reasons why it is great to be a Christian.

Because when life on the journey gets too testing, we have a keeper and he is the Lord.

[22 : 42] He made heaven and earth and he will help us. And just as we finish, out there, they say, look, don't focus on the problem, focus on the solution.

Don't look at the problem that's too negative, focus on the solution. But Christianity is not a religion with its head in the clouds. It's very realistic about life on the journey.

And this psalmist is not looking at God, but rather he's staring his mountains in the face. And so here's an exercise for us as we journey into a new week.

Stare your mountains in the face. Look at your anxieties head on until you cry out, help me. That might not take too long.

And then ask yourself, where does my help come from? And then remind yourself, sing to yourself, preach to yourself the words of Psalm 121.

[23 : 45] You have a helper. He is the Lord. And he made heaven and earth. And we're going to do that now. So let's have a moment of quiet reflection.

Maybe close our eyes. Let's think about the mountains that make us want to turn back. And then I will ask us verse 1. And if we can all read verses 2 to 8.

And I think it's on the overhead. So I'll read verse 1. If everyone could read from verse 2 to 8 onwards. Let's have a moment of quiet first to think about those mountains.

A song of ascents. I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip. He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

[24 : 45] The Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm.

He will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Amen. Amen. Amen.