

Help for the Journey

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. Thanks so much to Jane for reading and thanks for joining us here this morning. It's great to have you here. I'd like you to meet my son, RJ. He's on the screen. There he is. I mean, most of you know him anyway. He's my daughter in the background. Since we've all been apart in lockdown, RJ turned six years old and he'd been planning his birthday party for a whole year. The day after he turned five, he began planning his sixth birthday and in the week leading up to his party, we had to cancel due to COVID restrictions. He started prep this year, but he hasn't been to school since I think it's probably March that he's been to school properly. But despite all that, during a time like this, he's been the best help in our house. He plays with his sister, as was on that photo. He looks after his baby brother. He even sets the table at dinner time. On Monday, RJ even does an hour of weeding in the church grounds here as an activity, which dad's organized. We're always really proud of him, but even more so now during a time like this for the way he helps his mum and his dad around the house. But with the bigger issues of lockdown, in fact, the bigger issues of life, RJ has a heart to help, but he's clearly limited. And so during a time like this, where do people turn to for help? There's lots of help out there. Lots of it is good and useful, but during a time like this, where do people turn? That was the question we put to you just in that short break a moment ago. Here's some suggestions. What about government?

Is government the place people should go to? Big government? Scott Morrison, Daniel Andrews. How do you rate their ability to help? Do you think with the right balance of laws and enforcement and planning, they're able to get us out of this mess? Maybe you're cynical of governments and cynical of people. Maybe you believe in individual responsibility, you know, being self-made, self-sufficient. And maybe if you put your mind to it, you are the best person to help you out of a time like this. Speaking of self-help, the latest book on the subject is called this, Happiness and Other Ridiculous Aspirations. It's by the Australian burn survivor, Churia Pitt. She says, and I quote, happiness is an outlook, not an outcome. Happiness is a journey and not a destination.

Part of being happy is accepting that we're not going to be happy. Actually, just this morning, I received a text from a relative overseas and they told me that I should be like a river.

They said rivers always flow in one direction. They never flow in reverse. So they said, you need to forget the past and focus on the future and be positive. I have no idea what she was talking about. And so I don't know what you make of all that self-help. You see, during a time like this, not everyone who offers help can, and not all help on offer is good. The proof will always be in the pudding. Nice words, good intentions, they have a place. But at the end of the day, can they actually help us in a mess like this? You see, at the moment, lots of people in our church alone, lots of people are bruised and battered. Financial hardships, job keeper and unemployment are trying to work from home, trying to school from home. That's been a struggle.

And then there's loneliness and mental health. And of course, not properly being together in church for ages. All of these things have a knock-on effect to our spiritual well-being, our ability to walk with the Lord and to keep trusting in Him. Even the most capable people in our church are now feeling exhausted. Help me, is the cry. And so a couple of weeks ago, when we finished 1 Peter, rather than ploughing right through to our new series, we thought it good to pause for a moment, a little while, in the Psalms. You see, the Psalms give us a vocabulary for our emotion. During a time like this, we don't always know how to complain and grumble and cry out to God. Well, the Psalms give us the words. They articulate our despair. What they do is they bring our circumstances, our emotions, together with the big truths about God. Psalm 121, a classic Psalm. It's a classic example.

[4 : 55] It's part of the Songs of Ascent, which Jane read to us earlier. The Songs of Ascent, they're a collection of hearty anthems about God that Israel would sing as they journeyed up to Jerusalem, to the temple where God was living. This Psalm is specifically about the help Israel needed to make it to Jerusalem.

But you see, the Spirit has assembled them for our benefit too, because they're actually songs for the Christian journey. So Israel were God's people on a journey to Jerusalem. We're God's people on the great journey to the heavenly Jerusalem. The second reading, which Andrew brought to us from Revelation 3, it promises that if we stay on the road, God will make us a permanent pillar in his house.

That way, we never have to leave him again. But for all people, Christian or not, for all people, whatever journey in life they're on, eventually they'll come to a moment in time where they say, help me. And so the question is, during a time like that, during a time like this, where will people turn? So verse one, it's on your screens now. I lift my eyes to the hills from where does my help come?

Well, my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. It might be that the hills around Jerusalem are about God's creative power, but I think the mood here isn't that the hills are alive with the sound of music, but actually, help me seems to be the tone. You see, if you're making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the hills and mountains around her are trouble. Falling rocks, dangerous parts to scale, no clear paths through. This psalm talks about our foot being moved in verse three, which would be inconvenient in the streets, but real trouble on a mountain. There's lots of hills and mountains on the Christian journey, like the coronavirus. It tempts us to turn back, to stop journeying altogether.

The good news of this psalm is that we have a helper. Verse one, my help comes from the Lord. Sorry, verse two, my help comes from the Lord. Literally, the Lord is Yahweh. It's the name of God in the Old Testament. It's how he chose to make himself known. We know him. We know his personal name and he knows us. You see, government departments, Centrelink, Medicare, they know details about us, but they don't know us. But Yahweh doesn't need a file to know what we're like.

[7 : 54] We have a personal relationship together. We know each other by name. Verse two, and he made the heavens and the earth. That means the hills and the mountains. They're just something he made. The coronavirus, natural disasters, the sun and the moon. None of them have independent existence.

Our jobs, our income, our mental health at this time, all of them are in the sphere of his control because he made the heaven and the earth. And there's a word that describes all of Yahweh's help.

It keeps getting repeated. It's on your screen now. You can see it in the verses. The word is keep or a keeper. That's the language. The language is kind of like a keeper at the zoo who protects the animals, keeps them fed and safe. But it's also like bodyguard imagery. I don't know if you've ever been in the market for a bodyguard. I don't know why you would be. But if you were shopping for a bodyguard, what qualities would you look for? Maybe, you know, six foot six and big muscles and, you know, good with a gun and reflexes like a cat. Or what about a bodyguard, verse two, who made heaven and earth? Would that do it for you? Would that make you more confident on the journey?

You see, that's what gives the keeper language all its clout, that the Lord made heaven and earth. He will keep us on the journey. Nothing we face is outside his control. He made it all.

Verse three, look at your screens. 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. You see, if you call myself or Andrew for help, we will come running anytime you need us. Except, of course, on a Monday. That's our day off. But apart from that, Tuesday to Sunday, call us anytime. Well, apart from after 10 o'clock, because, you know, I need my beauty sleep and, you know, all of this is no accident. But it's not as though the maker of everything has a bedtime. The Lord is an insomniac in the best sense of the word. There's no sleeping in when you're sustaining the heavens and the earth. And out there in the marketplace of help, the marketplace of spiritual advice, small gods, fake gods, local gods, wooden gods, they might be asleep. They might be slumbering. They might need you to wake them up with louder prayers and more impressive chants. You might need to channel their cosmic energy with candles and crystals and rituals and the right lunar phase. Religious gurus, life coaches, they might be too busy or too fickle unless, of course, you pay them more cash. But we know the Lord. His name is Yahweh.

[11:06] He made heaven and earth and he knows us. He sent his son to die for us. We don't need name badges to be remembered or to bargain for his help or to negotiate any blessings. We don't need to try and catch him during office hours. During a time like this, who will you turn to for help?

The yous in this psalm, one of the things I love about this psalm is that the yous are all singular. And that means if you're someone who trusts in the Lord, you can insert your own name into the psalm just to really drive it home. These verses are supposed to be spoken by us to us. So we can speak them to one another. If we were together in church, we could really amp this up and drive this into our hearts by looking at each other and speaking this to each other. But I'm going to do that now.

Look on the screen. The Lord is Vijay's keeper. The Lord is your shade too 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. Can anyone else out there in the marketplace of help? Can anyone else make claims like this? Let's hear it. Come on.

Who else can say these things? Verse six, it talks about the sun and the moon. There's lots of superstition and lots of worship about sun and moon, but these great lights, they only do what their maker commands them to. Verse seven talks about keeping us from all evil. I think that's deliberately vague so that whatever attack we're facing, whether it's spiritual forces, wicked governments, even evil people trying to throw you off your Christian journey.

[13:17] The Lord will keep your life is the promise. Verse eight talks about you're going out and you're coming in. Are we going out? It's a bit nerve wracking at the moment, isn't it? Not everyone practices face masks and good social distancing. The Lord will keep you. Are you coming in? I hope we're not staying in too much longer. Lockdown is really testing our faith even at home. The promise is the Lord will keep you. During the coronavirus and long after, verse eight says, from this time forth and forevermore, the Lord will keep you. They are fantastic claims during a time like this.

The question is, how realistic are they? Because they seem fantastic, but how realistic are they? We are realists. We deal in reality. Are these claims too good to be true? Because the thing is your foot being moved in verse three, the sun striking you by day, they don't seem as bad as losing your job due to downsizing. They don't seem as bad as losing your life. Remember Jan and Graham Nicholson, James?

We were praying for him in this church. Was the Lord asleep for a few months while James was in ICU with COVID when he nearly died? The danger is we read this psalm and think, oh, it's a really nice idea. You know, the Lord is your keeper. But how realistic is all this? Well, the Bible is very honest about life on the road. This psalm isn't offering protection from the virus, but rather the help we need to get through the journey to the great city. This psalm is promising successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. Successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. Please don't buy any gospel or accept any help that promises you a trouble-free journey. The Bible is honest about life on the road. The confidence here is that God will keep us to the great city. Your life, verse 7, it literally means your soul.

Your soul is going to be kept safe. That is the promise. Successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. And if all that feels as though God only will kick in in the future, we only need to remember the past, remember history. Verse 4 says, he who keeps Israel. Does Yahweh have a track record of intervening in real life to help Israel when they cried out for deliverance? Yes, of course he does. In your own life, does Yahweh have a track record with you of intervening in real life to help you as you look back at situations past? We're being saved for a city, but we mustn't believe that God only kicks in in the future. But rather, he is walking with us now. And sure, during a time like this, we haven't even met together for seven months. Sure, God can feel far away. But if the Lord can make the heavens and the earth, then maybe he's powerful enough to help me too. Maybe I can trust him as I walk on the journey. And in the marketplace of help, that is an infinitely better claim than anything that's on offer out there. See, who else promises to keep us like this for as long as this to the great city?

Government? Large organisations? Bureaucracies? Do they even know you? How do you rate their ability to handle a crisis? Independence? Going it on your own, you know, inner strength and all that. How is that going after seven months and possibly eight months of lockdown?

[17:34] Self-help gurus. They just say, surround yourself with positive energy, positive thinking. Don't focus on the problem, focus on the solution and all that sort of stuff. But our psalmist is staring the problems right in the eyes. He's staring at the hills. He lifts his eyes not to God, but to his problems. And I think he invites us to do the same, to stare our problems, our obstacles in the face until we cry out, help me, which might not take too long during a time like this. And then ask yourself the question, verse one, where does your help come from? And then preach to yourself the answer.

My help, BJ's help, your help, comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. And then call out to him. Practice your relationship. Maybe conversation has dried up lately, just with fatigue and all these things. Maybe routines have gone out the door as you're trying to balance school and work at home.

Can I encourage you to get back into the habit of a daily and regular talking to the Lord? Use the words of this psalm. Use the words of other psalms. They're where emotion and truths about God meet together perfectly. Let me encourage you into the habit of practicing a relationship with your maker who always surrounds you. Far from home, during a time like this, it feels like that, doesn't it? Far from him? Never. Let's say together Psalm 121. I will ask you the question of verse one and we'll all respond reading the rest of the psalm. Do, if you're feeling bold, do insert your own name into all the you's and that way you can drive this home. And so let's have a moment of quiet where we think about some of the struggles that we're going through at the moment. Let's have a moment of quiet.

And so on your song of ascents, I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? Well, 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. Let's pray together. Let's talk to the Lord. Lord Yahweh, we give you great praise and thanks for your word. Thank you for these precious psalms. And thank you that you will keep us, that you are our helper. You'll keep us till we get to the great city. Thank you that you are honest about life on the road. Please would return to no one else for help during the journey. And for all the things that are causing us grief, causing us to cry out, please help us. Please would none of these things affect our faith, our trust in you, our confidence that you will take us home. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.