

May I Help You?

03/08/20

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I lift up my eyes to the hills- from where will 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 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at 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 on and forevermore. (Psalm 121)

1. Trips to Jerusalem

Recently, we've learned how much travel plays a role in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Last week, an employee at a Beverly, Massachusetts school agreed to be self-quarantined after a trip abroad. She hasn't shown signs of coronavirus, but will still go through the 14 day waiting period. We aren't sure what the purpose of her travel abroad was, but we know that this trip was important enough to travel and go through the 14 days quarantine after returning home.

The Old Testament tells us that the Israelites traveled for three pilgrimage festivals every year: Passover, Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks), and Sukkot (the Festival of Booths). Deuteronomy 16:16 says, "**Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths.**" Three times a year, every Jewish man was supposed to make the journey to the Jerusalem temple to worship. We see the importance and the potential dangers when traveling in the Old Testament and in our current day.

2. The Traveler's Psalm

Psalm 121 is known as the traveler's psalm. When the festivals were over, the travelers would pray that God would keep them on their journey back home. Psalm 121:1 says, "**I lift up my eyes to the hills-from where will my help come?**" Why do you think the pilgrim lifted up his eyes to the hills? The image of *hills* likely carries a double meaning. The first is when the pilgrim contemplates his journey to Jerusalem, he would remember the hills and would be intimidated by the mountains because of the rigor of the treacherous walk and the dangers from robbers or wild animals. The pilgrim would look to the Lord for protection. When the pilgrim would get ready to

go back home, he would be able to begin his journey home with confidence. Through the festival, he would be reminded that the whole world lies in God's hands.

Second, the term "Hills" might be a figure of speech for the location of Jerusalem, situated on a hill in the southern mountain range of Israel where the Temple was located. Looking to the mountains, would be an image to mean searching for God's help. For those who lived at a distance from Jerusalem and those who traveled, looking toward the hills of Jerusalem would mean looking up toward God's home.

At the end of verse 1, the psalmist asks a question: "**from where will my help come?**" Without any hesitation, he answers, "**My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.**" He has a strong conviction that God is the creator and the only source of help. His answer is based on his personal experience and the affirmation of his faith in the creator God.

We notice that in verses 3-8 the person changes from "I" to "you." From this we gather that verses 3-8 are the words of someone, probably a priest, who is accompanying the pilgrim. In verse 3 through 8, the speaker confirms that the pilgrim would have God's protection because God watches over His people and the Lord would not slumber or sleep in caring for his people.

Why does the writer say, "**He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep**"? (verse 4) In 1 Kings 18, Elijah taunts the priests of Baal that Baal, the god of the priests, must be asleep or on a journey. The psalmist believes that the Lord will be alert all the time in protecting His people. The psalmist declares that "**the Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade at your right hand.**" Sunstroke is a constant danger in the Middle East, but the Lord protects His people from both the sun and the moon. Psalms 121 ends with the psalmist's renewed affirmation that the Lord will keep and watch over him from all harm at all times. Such an affirmation would encourage him not to fear and worry when he continues his life journey.

3. Is God Really the Keeper?

I am sure Psalm 121 may be a favorite passage in the Bible for many people. Psalm 121 says that God protects, shields, watches over, guards, and keeps us. The term "keep" is used five times in Psalm 121. The psalmist really wants to convey that God is the keeper and does everything for us like parents take care of their children.

Does God really take care of us? Have you experienced what God had done for you? I am sure you have. I have experienced God's care many times in my life.

However, sometimes we feel that God doesn't help or care for us. We pray for someone or for something, but we may feel like God does not listen to us or answer our prayers. When something does not happen we may complain or become frustrated.

Two weeks ago, I visited Alice Cooper and read Psalm 121 for her. Last Thursday morning, Alice passed away. We might think that God didn't help Alice because she passed away. But for those of us who knew Alice, we know that God truly loved Alice. And the Bible tells us that no matter what happens in our lives, God's love for us endures forever.

4. May I Help You?

Today's sermon title is "May I Help You?" Who do you think would ask this question? This question is what God asks us every day. We might not hear God say, "may I help you," but God looks for opportunities in every moment of every day to help his people. God's passion to help us is more than the most eager helper in the world. Why is this? It is because God is our creator and sent His people with His purpose. God has a specific plan for each one of us.

We all have different needs in life. Safety is a key need for those traveling these days. Physical protection from disease, injury, and natural disaster are needs of many people in our world today. Help from economic recession is a pressing need for many in our country.

What about our spiritual needs? There are many people who do not know or realize their deep spiritual need. Those who are in addictions need spiritual help. For all of us God is asking, "may I help you?"

5. Jesus and Nicodemus

Today's New Testament lesson, John 3:1-17, talks about the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Who is Nicodemus? Nicodemus is a Pharisee and leader of the Jews. He is well known in the society and respected by many people. Yet he has a deep spiritual need. One day, he visits Jesus at night. Nicodemus wants to know more about Jesus.

During their dialogue Jesus says to Nicodemus, "***no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above***" (John 3:3). The term "above" comes from the Greek *anōthen* which is also translated as "anew" and "again." Jesus uses a word that has different meanings to challenge Nicodemus to have a deeper understanding of God's work in the world. Jesus teaches him that he needs to be spiritually born to participate in the kingdom of God.

Jesus continues to teach him that as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must Jesus be lifted up to fulfill God's plan for him. Then Jesus says "**For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life**" (John 3:16). God sent Jesus to open the spiritual eyes of Nicodemus and us so that we can experience God's love through Jesus Christ.

6. Conclusion

Psalms 121 assures the pilgrims on the way to and from Jerusalem of God's constant protection. The psalmist offers assurances of God's help through God's presence and unconditional protection. The assurance concerning unfailing protection of the pilgrims would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and home easy and enjoyable. God's protection is needed not only for the pilgrims but also for everyone who is on the lifelong journey.

7. Application

Christine and I are looking forward to our new grandson this May. My son asked Christine to come and help him and his wife during the early months after our grandson's birth. When a baby is born, someone has to take care of the baby 24 hours a day. When the baby gets older, the baby needs someone again to take care of him or her. Throughout our lives, we need someone that cares for us.

In Genesis 2:18, God says, "**It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.**" God's creation was completed when God created a helper for man. God knew that we needed a helper and partner. We often feel independent, but in life, we are often in need of the help and support of others. God uses others to help us.

The coronavirus has impacted many people in the world, including in Korea, the country where I was born. In Asia, there is an old saying. "Crisis is an opportunity." Churches and Christians in Korea have purchased masks and donated them to help the community. In this, they helped others to share God's love by helping others.

Psalms 121 reminds us that the pilgrims had companions on their journey. They supported, encouraged, assured, protected, and reminded one another of God's protection on the journey. May we be reminded this morning that God is our helper and that we are sent into this world to be God's helpers to those around us. I pray that we all might ask, "May I help you?" as we serve as God's hands and feet in the world. Amen.