

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 a psalm, one of the most famous psalms, and it's all about asking for help. So have a look at verse one. 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. I'm really grateful that Andre actually read that out. He's right to do that.

They were a collection of hearty anthems that God's people would sing as they journey to Jerusalem. You'll remember that Jerusalem is the centre of God's relationship with his people because that's where the temple was.

[1 : 27] And so Israel would sing these Songs of Ascent as they journeyed or ascended up to Jerusalem. And it would remind them of God's best characteristics to keep them on the journey.

So kind of like the Richmond Football Club theme song, We're From Tiger Land, it reminds them of the best things about their club to keep them going when they're in the depths of the football season.

I was asked to try and work in something about the grand final into the sermon, and that's all I'm going to do. A guy at the 1030 said, why don't you get a neck tattoo like Dustin Martin?

I don't think so. But it's really interesting because the Holy Spirit has put these Songs of Ascent near the end of the book of Psalms because they're actually there and actually songs for the great journey, the final journey that all Christians make out of exile into the new Jerusalem.

And as you read through the Songs of Ascent, what you get is a sort of melodic line, and it tracks their journey, which starts over the page in Psalm 120.

[2 : 43] Have a look over the page, 120 verse 5. It says, Woe to me that I dwell in Meshach, that I live among the tents of Kedar or Kedar.

That's the foreign land. And the Songs of Ascent track their journey from the foreign land, there in 120, right through to 134, into the very house of the Lord.

They are songs for the journey. Our second reading from Revelation 3, it promises that at the end of time, God's people won't ever have to leave Jerusalem ever again.

That if they endure on the great journey, he will make them a permanent fixture of his house, a pillar. So they can always be with him. 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. They sang these words to remind them of God's best characteristics, to keep them going on the journey.

[3 : 47] We too sing the very same words to keep us going. They're on a journey to the earthly Jerusalem. We're on the great journey to the heavenly Jerusalem.

That second reading from Revelation, it describes our destination as the new Jerusalem. God's city coming out of heaven. That is where our journey ends.

And so my aim this morning is the same aim as the original psalmist. And that is to give us total confidence that the Lord will keep us to the very 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 very end of our journey. There are some points I've put on the handout there which tell you where I'm going.

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

[4 : 46] How are you doing? But given this song of a sense, this, I guess, context that puts all our lives on this journey, the better question might be to ask, how is your Christian journey going?

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.

The Bible is honest about life on the road. But the good news is that if we keep walking, God will keep us to the end.

Successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival. Verse 1, I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? See, as the psalmist looks to the mountains, he doesn't think, wow, how beautiful the Dandenongs look this time of year.

Or, wow, those peaks are going to be great exercise for these tired old legs. They don't even look, I mean, that looks fantastic there. I think that's Switzerland. But if I told you, right, I'd like you to scale that on foot, you might think, well, can I just stay on these nice green valleys instead?

[6 : 04] And if you've been travelling for ages in the desert on foot, 40 degrees every day, mountains are actually a real problem. They've ruined your journey. Many are falling rocks, dangerous parts to scale, no clear way through, no telling how long this mountain range will go for.

Verse 3 talks about our foot slipping. You see, if your foot slips in the car park, that's really inconvenient. But when you're scaling a mountain, your foot slipping is deadly dangerous.

There's lots about the mountains that tempt God's people into turning back on the journey. Suddenly arriving at Jerusalem is not so certain.

Rest with the Lord is now in doubt. And while their road had actual, literal mountains in it, our road has sort of mountains as well.

And a mountain in this psalm is something that tests our faith, that makes us want to turn back on the journey.

[7 : 12] It's not necessarily something that tests our comfort and our happiness. I put that on your handout. A mountain tests our faith, not necessarily something that tests our comfort and our happiness.

So consider Mount Suffering. On Mount Suffering, you will find sickness and loss and heartbreak and death. And all of us have faced suffering before.

Tests our faith. Why did you allow that to happen? Lord, what possible good could come out of that situation? When God's people lift their eyes to Mount Suffering, they ask, where does my help come from?

What about Mount Persecution? Will your traditional views of marriage leave you excluded from polite society in Australia? Or, I don't know if you know this, but here at Holy Trinity Doncaster, we are privileged to have a small community of Persian Christians.

I was chatting to a couple of them, and they tell me how every day their family and friends back home in Iran face violence and death. Persecution tests our faith.

[8 : 29] Why did you let that happen, Lord? Why didn't you stop those bruises? 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 the Lord to welcome me. Or maybe it is, I love my sin too much.

I'd love to get secretly lost in its desires. Then walk that difficult Christian journey. Sin is more fun, so it seems.

It's definitely an easier path. When lifting our eyes to Mount Sin, God's people ask, where does my help come from? And it's very easy to convince you that sin and persecution and suffering are mountains that test our faith.

That's not very difficult. But here's the thing. You see, good things can be mountains too. Good things can test our faith.

[9 : 35] Because they confuse us into thinking we've already arrived in Jerusalem rather than we're still on the road. So there is Mount Happiness and Mount Prosperity.

They are good things. But they can confuse us. A prosperous life, a great relationship, financial success, they can make us think as if we've arrived in the Emerald City rather than we're on the dusty road.

They can confuse us into thinking life on the road ain't so bad. Imagine how crazy it would be if one of the Israelites, as they're all walking up the desert road, imagine how crazy it would have been if one of them said, hey listen everyone, you go on ahead to the city.

This dusty mountainous road, it's not so bad actually. I quite like it here. I might set up my own city here. That would be crazy. They would all say, what are you doing? Come on, come with us.

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

[10 : 55] And so I don't know which mountain you're facing at the moment. Maybe it's a work situation. Your faith gets tested. Tricky family situations, probably all of us.

Your faith gets tested. Your public Christian witness. Your faith gets tested. Maybe it's the daily ongoing battle of temptation to sin.

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

I don't know if you've ever been to Woolies or to Coles or to maybe Bunnings. And you've been in a customer service situation where you realise the person helping you is utterly useless.

Wouldn't happen at Woolies where I work, but maybe at Coles. There you go. And you realise the person you're speaking to is not authorised to make any decisions. And they have to get the manager.

[11 : 59] You see, not everyone who says, can I help you, is able to help you. But the good news of the Christian life is there is no useless sales assistant, no middle manager.

You are straight through to the boss. Verse 2. My help comes from the Lord. In capitals, that is Yahweh. That's his name. He's the maker of heaven and earth.

The maker of heaven and earth. That is an expression in the Bible. It means totality. It means everything. It's a mark of God's sovereign power.

It means everything that could come up against us is something that he controls. So the actual mountains in Israel's journey, he spoke and they rose up in obedience.

I don't know what impresses you about creation. The stars, the oceans, the trees, the animals. A good David Attenborough documentary will do that for you. I've had to learn all about dinosaurs because my three-year-old son is obsessed with them.

[13 : 05] If you ask him, he will happily tell you all his favourite ones. Very impressive creatures, dinosaurs. How much more impressive is the Lord who spoke all of these things into existence?

Perhaps he can help me when I'm on the journey. And again, the promise of this psalm is successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival.

Your soul will be kept until the end because you have a helper. And there's one word which describes Yahweh's help here.

It's repeated throughout this song. The word is keeper or keeping. And it's a bit tricky in this version. But let me read through some of the verses to show you.

So have a look at the halfway through verse 3. He who watches over or keeps you will not slumber. Verse 4. He who watches over or keeps Israel.

[14 : 05] 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 is this keeping or bodyguarding imagery.

And the psalmist puts that there just so we can be totally confident that the Lord will guarantee successful arrival. And so let me ask you, if you were shopping 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?

So for me, I'm not in danger, I don't think, but big muscles, six foot six, good with a gun, reflexes like a jungle cat.

That's what I look for in a bodyguard. Here in verse 3, it says, he who watches over you will not slumber. Again in verse 4. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

[15 : 11] Yahweh is an insomniac in the very best possible sense. You know, when you're watching the movies and it's always when that robbery is committed that the hapless guard falls asleep at the desk, isn't it?

Verse 3 says, your foot won't slip off the road because the Lord was too busy sleeping.

And this is really interesting. Because small gods or fake gods or 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 put more cash in the plate.

You might need to bribe them. Lord, sort this out for me and I promise you my financial giving and church attendance will be on the up. As Christians, we don't need to do that.

[16 : 17] That is superstitious paganism. We don't need to negotiate deals for God's keeping. He's our father. What about the instinct to pray more loudly with more flowing words, more money in the pot, more lit candles?

Jesus warns. He says, don't think you'll be heard for your many words. Don't be anxious. Your heavenly father knows what you need. What do we need?

We need to get to the end of this journey. And actually, that is all we really need to say about that. Yeah, this psalm is telling our heads something.

But actually, the song has more to it, doesn't it? Because the Holy Spirit is trying to warm our hearts. It's poetry. It's a song.

And so what I'd like you to do as we finish, I'd like you to turn up the ears of your heart. And listen to the ways the Holy Spirit really drives this home. I'm going to read it out with sort of poetic emphasis.

[17 : 27] So verse 5. Verse 5. 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. The bodyguarding of the Lord, it's a full service keeping.

Verse 5 says, he is the shade at your right hand. That is where your weapon is kept. That is where your strength is found, your right hand.

The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. It is 24-7 keeping. Desert sun won't burn you in the day, nor desert night freeze you to death. The Lord will keep you from all harm.

The word there is also evil. And I think it's deliberately vague. So you can insert any evil or harm that is facing you at the moment. God's answer is he will keep your life.

[18 : 34] Verse 8. The Lord will keep your coming and going. Are you coming home where your faith gets tested? The Lord will keep you. Are you going out where your faith is tested?

The Lord will keep you. How long is this protection from the Lord? Verse 8. Both now and forevermore. And so it is the burning of the day, the freezing of the night, things at home, things outside, evil things, harmful things, things now and in the future.

And I don't know who, when, what or why of those things on that list will test your faith. But you can be sure the Lord has it all under control. None of the nasty shocks and disappointments are too much for him.

Any of the disappointments of the Christian life are inside the sphere of things he controls. If he can speak a massive universe into existence, then maybe he's powerful enough to keep little old me and little old you on the journey.

And I hope that your confidence in the Lord doesn't come from the fact that these are nice words, but actually that these are true words. So personally for me, about 11 years ago, I moved to London.

[19 : 55] It would be really, it would have been really easy for my foot to slip off the journey, away from following Jesus. No parents, no family, no one knew me over there.

I was earning really good money. I could have easily drifted away, but the Lord kept me. He miraculously, through the weirdest of circumstances, put me in a terrific church.

And he surrounded me with people who took the journey seriously. And that's just me. That's how I know this psalm is true. And I'm sure for all of you, you will have stories to tell about how you know these words are true.

About how the Lord has kept you through certain things in your life. Maybe you can't prove them empirically or with physical evidence, but you know, when you look back with the perspective of time, that that was the Lord keeping you on the journey.

Why not over lunch, encourage one another with stories about how the Lord has kept you on the journey? Why not share your testimony of his keeping of you? There are lots of things that make us feel like, help me.

[21 : 06] This is a precious little song for the journey. This psalm is very personal. All of the yous, all that pronoun you, in this psalm are singular.

And so big changes in your life. He will not let Olive's foot be moved. Painful stuff that makes you wonder if he even sees or cares.

He who keeps Anne's foot will neither sleep nor slumber. Uncertain about what marriage laws will look like in Australia? He will keep Andre's life.

Maybe you're worried about where you're going to get the strength to keep going in the long journey of the Christian life. The destination seems so far off. He will keep Barry'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 helper.

[22 : 16] And he is the Lord and he will keep us to the end. And just as we finish, out there, they say, look, don't focus on the problems.

Focus on the solution. It's too negative to focus on the problems. Be more positive. Focus on the solution. But the Christian religion is not one where we blindly think that life on the road is A-OK.

And here the psalmist is not looking at God, but is actually looking at the mountains. And so as we finish, here's a little exercise as we journey into a new week.

What you should do is stare your mountains in the face. Look at your anxieties head on until you say, help me, which may not take too long.

And then ask yourself, where does my help come from? And then sing or read or preach Psalm 121. Sing this gem to yourself and remind yourself that you have a helper.

[23 : 20] And he is the Lord. And he made heaven and earth and he will keep you. And that's what we're going to do now as we finish. So we'll have a moment of quiet reflection. We'll close our eyes.

And then I will ask of us, verse 1. And if we could all respond with verses 2 to 8. So I'll read verse 1. And if we could all read verses 2 to 8.

I think it's on the board. There it is. A moment of quiet first. Let's think about the mountains that test our faith. 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 : 16] 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.