

The moment we say no to the world and yes to God, all our problems are solved, all our questions are answered, all our troubles are over. Nothing can disturb the tranquility of the soul at peace with God. Nothing can interfere with the blessed assurance that all is well between me and my Savior. Nothing and no one can upset the enjoyable relationship that has been established by faith in Jesus Christ. We Christians are people who don't have accidents, who don't have arguments with our spouses, who aren't misunderstood by our peers, whose children do not disobey us.

Do you believe that? If you do, you're sadly wrong. To be told we are wrong is sometimes embarrassing, even humiliating. We want to run and hide our heads in shame. But there are times when finding out we are wrong is a huge relief. No longer do we have to keep trying to do something that isn't working.

Eugene Peterson writes, “A few years ago I was in my backyard with my lawnmower tipped on its side. I was trying to get the blade off so I could sharpen it. I had my biggest wrench attached to the nut but couldn't budge it. I got a four-foot length of pipe and slipped it over the wrench handle to give me leverage, and I leaned on that—still unsuccessfully. Next I took a large rock and banged on the pipe. By this time I was beginning to get emotionally involved with my lawnmower. Then my neighbor walked over and said that he had a lawn-mower like mine once and that, if he remembered correctly, the threads on the bolt went the other way. I reversed my exertions and, sure enough, the nut turned easily. I was glad to find out I was wrong. I was saved from frustration and failure. I would never have gotten the job done, no matter how hard I tried, doing it my way” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 38).

Psalm 121 is a quiet voice gently and kindly telling us that we are, perhaps, wrong in the way we are going about the Christian life, and then, very simply, showing us the right way. As such it is the necessary sequel to Psalm 120, which gets us started on the Christian way. It put a name to the confused and bewildering feelings of alienation and distrust that made us dissatisfied and restless in a way of life that ignores or rejects God, and prodded us toward the act of **repentance** that renounces the “devil and all his works” and affirms the way of faith in Jesus Christ.

But no sooner have we plunged, expectantly and enthusiastically, into the river of Christian faith than we get our noses full of water and come up coughing and choking. No sooner do we confidently stride out onto the road of faith than we trip...and fall to the hard surface, bruising our knees and elbows. For many, the first great surprise of the Christian life is in the form of troubles we meet. Somehow it is not what we had supposed: we had expected something quite different; we had our minds set on Eden or on the New Jerusalem. We are rudely awakened to something very different, and we look around for help, scanning the horizon for someone who will give us aid: *“I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there?”*

Psalm 121 is the neighbor coming over and telling us that we are doing it the wrong way, looking in the wrong place for help. Psalm 121 is addressed to those of us who, as John Calvin says, “disregarding God, gaze to a distance all around them, and make long and devious circuits in quest of remedies to their troubles” (*Commentary on the Psalms*, 5:33).

In his book Peterson says, “Three possibilities for harm to travelers are referred to in the psalm. A person traveling on foot can at any moment step on a loose stone and sprain their ankle. A person traveling on

foot under protracted exposure to a hot sun, can become faint with sunstroke. And a person traveling for a long distance on foot, under the pressures of fatigue and anxiety, can become emotionally ill, which was described by ancient writers as “moonstroke” (what we call *lunacy*). We can update the list of dangers. Provisions for law and order can break down with ease: a crazed person with a handgun or piece of explosive can turn the computerized travel plans of three hundred air passengers into instant anarchy. Disease can break through our pharmaceutical defenses and invade our bodies with crippling pain and death. An accident—in a car, from a stepladder, on an athletic field—can without warning interrupt our carefully laid plans. We take precautions by learning safety rules, fastening our seatbelts and taking out insurance policies. But we **cannot** guarantee our security” (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 39).

In biblical times, travel by foot was not only difficult, but dangerous. There were few paths and lots of hiding places for wild animals and would-be robbers. Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan? (Luke 10) Getting from one place to another was risky business. In this sense, we might imagine the psalmist leaving Jericho for Jerusalem and looking up at the long and treacherous climb ahead of him and wondering, “How in the world am I going to get home safely? Where does my help come from?”

Whichever view you prefer, it leads to the same question: Where does your help come from? In case you haven’t heard, the stock market took a dive last week on coronavirus fears. It’s anybody’s guess how long it will take to recover. We do know that people on society’s bottom rung will feel the greatest pinch. And we’ve all heard how the candidates for public office promise that the government will do miracles for us no matter what we need, if only we vote for them. Don’t count on it. If “Washington” is your answer to the question, “From where does my help come?” you’ve picked the wrong answer. And that’s just on the economic front.

We’ve rarely seen the devastation of a tornado in Allegheny County, but the folks in Nashville recently learned about the destruction they cause first hand. How many of us really believe, “You’re in good hands with Allstate”? If a drunk driver crosses the median into your lane of traffic, the best any insurance company can do is to help pick up the pieces. A good insurance policy is important to have when disaster strikes, but it won’t keep disaster from striking. And what about all the potentially harmful bacteria floating around? Here’s a report from just one study I read: “The oceans are teeming with ten to a hundred times more types of bacteria than previously believed, many of them unknown...US, Dutch and Spanish scientists said they found more than 20,000 different types of microbes in a single liter of water.” (planetark.com)

Modern medicine can only do so much. But, for the moment, let’s say you’re able to stay safe and healthy. Where does your help come from:

- When a relationship begins to disintegrate and fail?
- When your teenage son or daughter starts running with the wrong crowd?
- When your work becomes more of a drudgery than you can stand?
- When someone you love dies suddenly?
- When you suffer a crisis of faith and find it hard to pray?

- When you wonder to yourself: Does God really care one way or the other?

Issues like these are all too common. The big question is: When your life seems to be coming apart at the seams, where does your help come from? The psalm writer answers with a clear and certain voice: “*My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth! (exclamation point)*”

Listen, if you don’t hear anything else in the sermon this morning, hear this: If your help comes from anything or anyone other than the Lord our God, you’re apt to be disappointed. Family, friends, business associates—even your pastor—are likely to let you down sometime. Only God is ultimately steadfast and dependable. Only God can decree something by his **providence!** This is why the psalm writer is able to say in vv. 3, 4 & 5, “*He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps. The LORD himself watches over you! The LORD stands beside you as your protective shade.*”

As this person of faith looks around at the hills for help, what is he, what is she, going to see? Some magnificent scenery, for one thing. Is there anything more inspiring than a ridge of mountains silhouetted against the sky? But the writer of this psalm rejects a worship of nature, a religion of stars and flowers, a religion that makes the best of what it finds on the earth; instead it looks to the Lord who made heaven and earth. As Eugene Peterson puts it, “The only serious mistake we can make when illness comes, when anxiety threatens, when conflict disturbs our relationships with others is to conclude that God has gotten bored looking after us and has shifted his attention to a more exciting Christian...or let us fend for ourselves for a while...or can’t take time for us” (p. 43).

Nobody knows this better than Tony Dungy. Tony Dungy has a long-standing reputation for being a man of impeccable integrity and strong character. When the Indianapolis Colts were nearing the end of the 2005 season, they were 13-0 after beating Jacksonville. Dungy’s phone rang at 1:45 a.m. The nurse on the other end of the line informed him that his son, Jamie, had taken his own life. He says in his book, *Quiet Strength*, “The next several days were all a fog.” (p. 248) They flew to Tampa, where Jamie was enrolled in college and began making plans for his funeral. Dungy said, “Lauren and I weren’t sure how we’d get through this, but we recognized that we were going to have to cling to God’s strength and love if we were going to have a chance.” (p. 248)

After Jamie’s Homecoming Celebration, as they called it, Dungy faced a difficult decision: Should he go back to Indianapolis to finish the season, or should he take time to grieve? He took off one week then went back. He said, “(The Colts) didn’t need me, but I needed them” (p. 257). He went on to say, “God doesn’t promise that once we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior we’ll be protected from harm and pain and stress. But He does promise that He’ll be there to lean on during those times” (p. 257).

He goes on to say, “Over the years, [when] my players faced tragedies...I had always said that trusting in the Lord was the answer. Now, facing my own tragedy, I knew I needed to accept the truth that God’s love and power were sufficient” (p. 261).

I can appreciate the strength of this man’s character and the depth of his faith. If he were here to answer the question raised by Psalm 121 I’m confident he would say, “You want to know where my help comes from? I’ll tell you: My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” May the same thing be said of us. Amen.