

Help! The Prayer that Works

Psalm 121

Sundays in Lent: God Answers Life's Questions

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

About a month ago, as I was going through the mail to pay my bills, I opened a payment due from our doctor's office. There were items listed for the examination and tests, adding up to so many dollars, with payments listed in the other column. At the bottom of the form was a box with bold letters saying, "You pay this." There was even an arrow to the box to keep me oriented. In the box was a digit, a decimal point, and another two digits as follows: zero, point zero one. My balance due was one penny.

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I rejoiced at the amount. But then, of course, I became troubled at the thought of paying such a bill. How do I pay a penny, without spending more than a penny? A stamp? No. With gas prices being what they are, a drive to the office was out of the question. I even considered not paying it at all. If I didn't I knew they would postmark another statement to me saying my payment was overdue, and then "You pay this" would be in red.

So I resolved to stop by the office and pay the bill in person while I was running an errand near the doctor's office. And boy what fun it was to hand over that penny to the clerk at the desk. Perhaps they will frame it.

My friends, where do we turn to for help? Life is so often stranger than fiction, and while sometimes our troubles are miniscule, too often our troubles are so much more costly than a penny. When our troubles are big we turn to prayer, but so often we wonder what to pray. That is what I want to talk about this morning. The Bible has an answer for that question in Psalm 121.

Let us pray:

Lord, you know what is on our hearts and minds, yet we often struggle to find the words to share our needs with you through prayer. We worry too much about phrasing everything just right before you, for fear you are counting our every wrong and our balance will end up in the red. Help us now, in this time to focus on your word, to be freed by your grace to live generous lives for you and for one another. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Imagine you are on a journey on foot through the desert hills of Judah, on your way to Jerusalem. There are hard-packed, sandy hills all around you. The air is so dry you must take water every few minutes for your thirst. You cover your head to protect yourself from sunstroke and keep the dust from your mouth, nose, and eyes.

And if that isn't difficult enough, your every step is placed on an incline up. There is a reason they call it Mount Zion. Jerusalem is an elevated city. That is why they call this a psalm of ascent. These are words from and for pilgrims on a journey to that holy place.

Can you recognize the images now in that Psalm? Verse 1, "I lift up my eyes to the hills." Can you picture those hills that surround the holy city? Verse 3, "He will not let your foot be moved," reminds you the Lord directs your steps over crevices and rocks so you will not twist or stumble.

As you camp along the trail at night, afraid that wild animals or thieves will attack when you are vulnerable, rest assured, says verse 4, "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." He is keeping watch outside your tent. When you resume your journey in the morning you need not fear the heat, verse 6, "the sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." Just as the wings of the seraphim provide shade in the Temple, so God's wing will shade you in the wilderness.

When you read that last phrase in the psalm, verse 8, “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” not only can you picture pilgrims coming and going from Jerusalem, but perhaps you can also imagine how such words held meaning for people who had gone out by force to exile in Babylon, and had come in again to Jerusalem guided by God’s liberating hand. The Lord is your keeper in every circumstance. Lately I’ve been thinking a lot about our journey as Jesus’ followers, and how God accompanies us on that journey.

Today our first graders are celebrating their faith milestone of memorizing the Lord’s Prayer. One of my own children participated in that milestone last year, and I remember how we worked with her every evening to memorize those words. Helping her memorize the Lord’s Prayer caused me to reflect on my own journey with God, and what prayer comes down to for me. I can honestly say, while prayer has meant and continues to mean many different things in my life, and has taken many different forms, the overwhelming majority of my prayers come down to one word: help. It turns out that’s biblical.

In fact I think the most honest moments I’ve had with God have been when I was in the greatest need, and when I knew for a fact the only way I would physically, spiritually or emotionally survive was by God’s help. Sometimes through troubles I’ve made for myself, and sometimes through troubles I’ve been handed, but always the need to turn to God for help.

I remember distinctly a moment years ago when I, as a young driver, attempted to pass a truck on a two-lane highway in northern Michigan, and suddenly another semi appeared out of a dip in the road fifty yards directly ahead of me, and I knew in that moment I was dead. I remember screaming at the top of my lungs in that moment, “God, help me!” and, by God’s grace and some risky swerves by all vehicles involved, I found a narrow path between the two opposing trucks in the middle of the road. I then proceeded to pull over and shake for ten minutes, and my prayer turned from “help, help, help” to “thank you, thank you, thank you.” ¹

Each of us has moments or periods in our lives when we survive only by God’s help. Perhaps you’ve had periods when you’ve cared for someone else with great needs, a young child with an extended illness or a parent who no longer recognizes you. And you woke up every morning without strength in reserve to do what you needed to do, and exhausted by your isolation from others. All you could say was, “Help, Lord.” Then somehow you got up out of bed to face that day with a strength that was not your own. I know many of you know that experience.

Or perhaps you recall moments in your family life when you were sure forgiveness would never be offered or received, but over the course of time, God provided the moments for just the right words to be shared. Your prayer, “Help, Lord, I’ve really messed this up,” was answered when you put aside your pride. Perhaps that is the prayer God is prompting you to say today, so you might be healed of that family divide.

Turning to God for help makes us ready to follow his Son. When we do turn to God for help, he doesn’t just bail us out, he relishes in making full use of our talents, intelligence, and imaginations to see us through. When we offer ourselves up, God somehow makes use of what we have to offer. One of the things I love most about Washington, D.C. is all the bright, imaginative, and interesting people here, from every walk of life. We’re chock full of folks who have a plan for the world. It is part of what makes this a fun place to live and work. We are also the kind of folk who do not readily take to losing face.

Thanks be to God, his grace extends to us all. The Apostle Paul says we all fall short of the glory of God, but we’ve also all been granted grace through Jesus, and thereby been freed to proclaim the gospel without shame. What we proclaim is not our own success, but God’s. We need not have a spotless record to give God the glory. In fact that’s just the point.

But perhaps you’re like me. You want the folks around you who find themselves in trouble to take heart, not get down on themselves, to feel loved and accepted by God. But deep down within, if you’re really honest with yourself, you secretly hope that God will never let you fall in such a way that it sets you back by any worldly measure of success.

You rejoice in God's help and grace for others, but aren't really ready to receive it yourself. You have an arrangement with God; you are not going to stumble. You are not going to fall. I'll tell you, my friends, if I'm really honest with myself, I'm afraid I live with that kind of pride most days. I am one of those who want to save face with God and with those around me. Sometimes we find our selves in trouble because of something we've done, and sometimes trouble just comes our way. But either way, we need God to see us through.

Years ago when I was in seminary I served as a chaplain intern in a psychiatric hospital. During that time I was taking a class in how to listen to people talk through their troubles through parrot listening. You know the move. The patient says, "I'm really frustrated," and you reflect back their expression to make them feel acknowledged, "I can tell you're really frustrated today." I'll never forget the first time I tried that with a psychiatric patient. After about twenty minutes of my parroting his feelings he finally looked at me in exasperation and said, "Doug, why are you repeating everything I say?"

What that moment taught me is that in caring for people in trouble it is not enough to acknowledge feelings. In Christian ministry folks want to know you're with them, and that you share their need for God's help. Not getting wrapped up in other people's troubles, just being willing to acknowledge your own need for God. It's not just a little help on difficult days. I'm talking complete reliance all the time.

"I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord." When we proclaim our need for God, we proclaim the Gospel. Whether it is a penny or a pound of trouble, remember where to turn.

God loves us not because we're in trouble, and not because we've fallen, but especially when we're in trouble and especially when we've fallen.

God's greatest desire is to lift you up. How he lifts you up, and the path he sets you to is completely up to God. Tell him the path your desire, but trust he will set you on the path that leads you closer to him.

He cares about your ascent, and he knows you're heading his way. He knows you want your life to have purpose and meaning, and knows you want all your efforts to amount to something good. His word is true. He may just surprise you, when you say the prayer that works.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Author Anne Lamott calls these the two best prayers she knows. Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Random House, 1999.