

# THE SALTSHAKER

A PUBLICATION OF COVENANT REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## Help in a Hurricane

By Rev. Sean McCann

*Pastor Sean's sermon on Psalm 121, given at the church service following Helene without power and water.*

of darkness around me and I wonder, "Is there any help?" "Where is my help?"

I imagine in the last 48 hours you have asked the same question as the psalmist, "From where does my help come?" Maybe you've asked, "Is my help going to come from Duke Power?" Maybe you've asked, "Is my help going to come from a Spectrum truck showing up down the road? Is my help going to come from a neighbor with a chainsaw? Is my help going to come from the city or the state, from FEMA, from the National Guard?" We are all wondering, "From where does our help come?"

The opening question is answered in the remainder of the psalm. Verses two to eight describes our help; the help that is ours in the Lord. We see briefly in the text the source of our help, the symbols of our help, and the security of our help.

The first part of the answer is the **source** of our help (v2). It is ever so simple, so easy, you cannot miss it. "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." The Lord is the source of the help that comes for us. Here we see both his covenant name and his creative power.

We are not alone in history in wondering this. The psalmist both wonders it, and offers an answer. And that is what I want us to think about and focus on together. Where, or rather, from whom, does our help come? "Our help comes from the Lord." My brief encouragement for you this morning is this: **be at peace, for the maker of the world is your keeper**. If you look at the psalm, it begins with a question (v1) and the rest is the answer (v2-8). The question (v1): "where does my help come?"; and the answer (v2), "my help comes from the Lord." And then the rest of the psalm takes us through and describes who the Lord is for us, what he does for us. So, let us look at the question, and then the answer.

My help comes from *the LORD*. That is *Yahweh*. That is his covenant name for Israel. Our help comes from someone who knows us. Our help comes from a Lord who has given us his name, who has told us what to call him. I heard a podcast interview a couple of days ago – it feels like a couple of weeks ago now - with a minister who was part of the founding of the PCA. He was referring to other founders by their first names. These giants of our church history, who I would call Reverend Dr. so-and-so, to him are just Bob and Joey and Ligon. With personal names comes access, and here we see the access that is ours in the name of the Lord.

You know this question well: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" Now, why would someone lift up their eyes to the hills? Maybe you have seen this verse embroidered in a house with a nice view of the hills and the mountains. You see the might and majesty of the hills around you, and it makes you think of the might and the majesty of God. That is one possible explanation. Another is the more realistic possibility that the hills are home to the enemies. And if you must travel through the hills, you face a daunting and dangerous task. You wonder as you go, "Where is my help going to come from?" I am surrounded by these scary hills, and they are more of a discouragement than encouragement. I look at the strength

In the second part of the verse, we see him *who made heaven and earth*. We see his creative power. Only God reigns sovereign over every part of nature. The intricacies of earth and the planets and the stars throughout the heavens are his; he is their maker. Sometimes, something breaks and the regular repairman cannot fix it; the only person you can call is the one who made it. Well, God has made this world, and he alone can fix it. He is the ultimate source of power. He is the ultimate source of help. He is the only one who can change and fix everything around us. We lift up our eyes to the hills. We are discouraged, "where does our help come?" Here we see the source of our help:

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have gone to our *church members* in need. Each Sunday, and during the week, members have taken cases and jugs of water for themselves and their neighbors. Next, the supplies have gone to our *neighbors* who live near the church. The apartments across the street, UNCA students (before campus closed), and the neighbors in this community have made up a steady flow to our church doors for their daily needs. Many of them have become dependent on the water supply and have pleaded with us to keep it coming – which our deacons will gladly do until we are no longer able. During that first week we saw daily car lines and supply distribution to not only our immediate neighbors, but to those who heard on the radio and could reach us in a vehicle. Many of those folks filled up cars to take to other spots for distribution *within Asheville*: the Oakley fire department, the Highland Christian Church at the Grant Community Center, the Asheville Buncombe County Christian Ministry locations at the Costello House and Transformation Village, Hillcrest Apartments, the Weaverville Community Center, the Burnsville fire department, etc. And finally, we had a group of young men that we began to affectionally refer to as the Cajun Navy (named after the Katrina boat rescuers) running supplies to needy locations *outside of Asheville*. On their own initiative these guys assembled a fleet of cars and trucks, showed up at our church to fill their tanks and load up on as many supplies as they could carry, and headed out of the county to distribute in the less populated regions. When I asked one of them how far they were going, he simply replied, "we go until the road ends." What a joy for our church to be a passive conduit of such blessings! To offer so little but

to witness God do so much. Indeed, I have come to love the gates of Zion, and I hope you do as well.

### More Gates Than One

Just as Jerusalem had many gates, so too does the church in these WNC mountains. Our church is not unique; I have witnessed other wonderful churches doing amazing ministry. I have heard of Redeemer Anglican welcoming Anglican Relief in West Asheville, of Grace Baptist down the street giving out supplies, of City Church feeding hundreds downtown. Grace Point is staging supplies and sharpening chainsaws, Grace and Peace worshipped with Fairview Christian Fellowship after their pastor's home was destroyed, Trinity and Grace Community have been collecting and distributing supplies, Arden Presbyterian is hosting the MNA Disaster Response effort. The list goes on. And not to mention the churches and Christians from around the country who have poured in supplies, donations, and volunteers – so much that local ministries have had to start turning help away because we have too much!

Sometimes in my low moments I wonder if the church is doing anything. I wonder if our lampstands are even noticeable, if our presence is even felt. But a tragedy like this strangely renews my hope and strengthens my confidence that the Lord is still at work. And he works as he always does, through the weak and foolish! I will never look at our humble church doors the same way again, and maybe I will never look at our humble sister churches the same way again either. He is building his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

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our help is from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Next, we see the **symbols** of our help (v3-6). Here we see two metaphors that describe the God who helps us. He is described six times with the word keep, keeps, or keeper. If verse two focuses on the God who *makes* us, then verses three to eight focus on the God who *keeps* us. “Keep” means to watch over or to guard. It is what we refer to in the Aaronic benediction: “The Lord will bless you and *keep* you.”

The first symbol of keeping is that of a **watchman**: “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.” This describes the vital work of a watchman. Watchmen are vital in dangerous situations. When people are in peril, who cares for them, who watches while they sleep? It is the watchman. Do you know God is your watchman? He will not let your foot be moved or slip or fall.

He is your watchman, but he is also the one who keeps Israel. His care is both deeply personal for each individual, and ranges over the entire nation. As a pastor of this church it is comforting to know that though there are people that I cannot get in touch with right now, that God is watching over them. He is watching over me. He is watching over every single one of you. There are thirty of you in this room, but he is also watching over the other 130 of us that we cannot talk to. He is there watching over every one of them.

And the beautiful description of the watchman is that he never sleeps. I didn't sleep much the other night. That is because I was worried, not because I was really watching over anyone. I was watching the trees sway and shake. But God never sleeps for different reasons. In fact, he never even slumbers. In English, “slumber” connotes deep sleep, but here it means drowsy or falling asleep. So not only does God not sleep; he does not even get drowsy and have to jerk himself awake to avoid falling asleep. He is the perfect watchman. He is always watching over us.

It is one thing to watch; it is another thing to actually protect. And that is the second symbol of our help. We see in verses five and six this second symbol is of **shade**. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. He is the protective cover that is over us. He is the protective cover at your right hand, which means he is near. He is close by. How many of us can testify that God has been for us a protective cover the last few days?

What does he protect us from? v6: “The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.” The first part is easy; the second part is kind of hard. You can imagine travelers in the ancient Near East journeying to Jerusalem worrying about the power of the burning sun. How it can drain and destroy your travels and your voyage. And yet, the Lord is the shade at your right hand. He is always with you.

Usually, you must move to find the shade, but this shade goes with you. It is always with God's people. God is the protective power from the very real threat of the sun.

The second part is confusing, “nor the moon by night?” I mean, is anybody really afraid that the moon is going to strike us at night? Are we afraid of moonbeams that are going to somehow attack us? Now, this could be just a poetic description of dangers by day and dangers by night. That is a possibility. But another compelling possibility is that the fear of the moon is an example of an irrational fear. And sometimes we have irrational fears. And sometimes we are afraid of something as silly as getting sunburned by the moon. This idea is even in our English language. It is not politically correct to describe someone as a lunatic, but the word comes from the root word for moon. Maybe you heard of “sundowner syndrome”: as the sun goes down and the moon comes out the individual with this syndrome starts acting kind of irrational. So, there is a real possibility the psalmist is describing real threats (the sun by day) and imagined threats (the moon by night).

And God protects you from all of them. Hasn't your mind run wild once or twice in the last couple of days to some irrational places? (Or maybe I'm the only one that has gone that far). God is protecting us from the here-and-now present dangers, and from the unknown future that is to come. He is watching over us, and he is our shade. It is the simplest descriptor of a God who protects his people always. He is always there. He is always at our right hand. He is the shade that always follows us. He is the one that never sleeps. He never gets tired nor even approaches sleep. He is our watchman and our shade. So where does our help come from? It comes from the Lord: his name and power. He is the source of our help, and these are the symbols of our help: watchmen and a shade.

Finally, verses seven and eight show us the **security** of our help. How secure are we under the watch care and shade of God? We see three contrasts in these final two verses. The first contrast is in v7: “the Lord would keep you from all evil, he will keep your life.” See the opposites? Life is good; evil is bad. He will keep you from all evil and he will keep your life. This is sort of a culmination of all that has been said before. He will keep you from the threatened evil of both the sun and the moon. He will keep your life. In verse two he keeps your foot; in verse five he keeps your hand; and now in verse seven he keeps your whole life. You can see this intensification or this broadening out that God keeps everything and all of who we are.

Verse eight has a second contrast: “the Lord will keep your going out and your coming in.” So, whether you are on your way traveling somewhere, or you are coming home from your journey, he is keeping you in both directions. Or, we might simplify and say he is keeping you everywhere. The final contrast is at the end of the

Psalm: from this time (“now”) and forevermore. He is going to keep you today, and he is going to keep you tomorrow. He is going to keep you next week, and he is going to keep you next month. God is there in every situation (first contrast), every place (second contrast), and every time (final contrast). That is the security of our help. He is everywhere.

God is with us, our watchman and our shade everywhere we go. As Christians, how do we know that God will help us? The simple and beautiful way we know is because he has already done so in Jesus Christ. He has already done all this for us in Jesus Christ. Where is the source of our help? Jesus Christ, who is from heaven above, who comes from heaven to seek his church and to save his bride. What is the symbol of our help? He is the watchman who never sleeps. He is the shade protector over us. He compares himself to a mother hen that gathers her children underneath her wings. He is the one who covers us by his own shed blood and his outstretched arms. And the security of our help? In Jesus is life everlasting and life eternal.

How do we know that God is going to keep us in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane? We know because he has already done so - and more - in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have the source of our help from heaven, the symbol of our help - our watchman and our shade - and we have our security. Any situation, any place, any time, he is with us. Psalm 121: be at peace, for your maker has kept you up to this point and he will keep you always.

Let us pray. Our father and our God, we are in need of this reminder. It is so simple. We know every word of this psalm and we know it is true. We testify to it with our lips; Lord, help us believe it in our hearts as we leave this place. As we pause momentarily for thanksgiving and for worship, and as we return to an uncertain world and an uncertain future, help us to carry this truth with us. Will your protective care be the ballast to our souls, the anchor to our hearts? Grant us faith, secure faith that rests in who you are for us. That wherever we go, whether we go out or we come in, you are the shade at our right hand and you are the watchman who never sleeps. Encourage us. Warm our hearts with this truth. Send us forth in this place with hope and encouragement in a despairing world. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

## The Gates of Zion

By Rev. Sean McCann

I've always hated the entrance to our church building. Our front door is on the side, and our side door is in the front. The side/main door that everyone uses sits under an old, bent awning jutting out from a plain-looking metal building. (From some angles you would hardly know we are even a church if not for the sign.) But this week, our humble little entrance has become, in my eyes, the beautiful gates of Zion.

Psalm 87 sings of the glory of God's mountain dwelling place (the Temple), and the beauty of the City of God (Jerusalem). In Verse 2 we sing “the Lord loves the gates of Zion.” Out of those gates proceeded the heralds of God's law and gospel, and into those gates streamed his elect of every nation. The ebb and flow of spiritual life through the gates of Jerusalem continues today in the sowing and harvesting ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ. Week-by-week I stand at our humble doors to welcome in weary pilgrims to worship and to send out renewed salt and light into the world. But these past two weeks I have witnessed a different parade of grace, and I want to bear witness so that you too might see meager church doors as the beloved gates of Zion.

### Flowing In

After the Friday hurricane hit, supplies began to trickle in as soon as Saturday under the tireless efforts of Jim and Madeline Curtis and their home church, *Huntersville ARP*. Jim brought back a few carloads that we slowly gave out during and after our little worship service on Sunday, September 29. That little trickle soon became a tidal wave when the *Joe Gibbs Racing Team* (another Curtis connection) arrived Tuesday afternoon with a two-level, race team semi-truck full of supplies. It took dozens of members and neighbors working together over ninety minutes to unload all the donated supplies. But that was just the beginning. The next day began a continuous stream of trucks

unloading supplies. First was an *F3* group from Waxhaw, NC (*F3* is an organization that plants, grows and serves small workout groups for men for the invigoration of male community leadership). They unloaded a whole moving truck of water, then another one of food. Next came a truck of ice from the *International Brotherhood of Teamsters*. Their original drop-off location had fallen through, and when they heard what we were doing they headed our way. They unloaded two pallets of bags of ice, which we quickly gave out to grateful neighbors. The final load of the day was a member's friend from *Wilmington* who brought his own moving truck full of supplies. By rough estimate, our volunteers unloaded at least twenty-five pallets of water, and that same amount in other various supplies. Amid all this, Evan Linton brought daily truckloads of water from his well in Burnsville to fill jugs, buckets, tubs, whatever containers our neighbors could find and carry. Since that first week the volume of supplies may have decreased, but the flow has not. More has come in from Huntersville ARP, *F3* connections, friends from outside churches, family members, neighbors, etc. People keep thanking me, and I keep telling folks that all we did was open the doors and the Lord has filled our church to the brim! I simply have the joy of bearing witness to what God has done through so many.

### Flowing Out

With every arriving truckload I kept thinking, “What are going to do with all of this stuff?” Well, the Lord had a plan even when we did not. First and foremost, the supplies

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