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HELP FOR THE HELPLESS – PSALM 121

David Hillson

INTRODUCTION – PSALM 121 IN CONTEXT

The book of Psalms has several mini-series of psalms that go together as a set, including Psalms 120-134. Each of these has the heading “A Song of Ascents” [Hebrew shiyr ha-ma:aloth], which forms part of the original Hebrew script, not a later addition or commentary. So the title must be important for us to understand these psalms – what does it mean?

Root “alah” = to go up or to ascend, journey to a higher place, gradually rising by degrees

- Used literally for going upstairs
- For religious Jews had another special meaning, reserved for “going up to Jerusalem” (e.g. Jeremiah 31:6). [Similar word used today for Jews returning to Israel – making aliyah.]
- “Go up to Jerusalem” because:
 - capital city (“go up to London”)
 - physical position, built on a hill, all roads go up as they approach a city gate
 - where God lives, go up to meet him

Particular time when all Jews “go up to Jerusalem” – at three annual festivals (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles). “Songs of Ascents” were to be sung during pilgrimages along the way. Can see a definite progression in the series:

- Psalm 120 – cry out in distress from exile
- Psalm 134 – celebrating in temple (night service before start of festival)

Useful key to understand these 15 psalms – structure. Arranged as five chapters each containing three psalms. Each chapter covers:

1. where we are now
2. God’s intervention
3. our destination and goal

| “CHAPTER” | THEME | Where we are now | God’s intervention | Our destination & goal |
|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Chapter 1 | Dealing with distress | Psalm 120 | Psalm 121 | Psalm 122 |
| Chapter 2 | Mercy and justice | Psalm 123 | Psalm 124 | Psalm 125 |
| Chapter 3 | Home sweet home | Psalm 126 | Psalm 127 | Psalm 128 |
| Chapter 4 | Handling hostility | Psalm 129 | Psalm 130 | Psalm 131 |
| Chapter 5 | Being blessed | Psalm 132 | Psalm 133 | Psalm 134 |

Why should we read these pilgrim psalms, how are they relevant to us today?

We too are pilgrims, travellers from a place of exile going to the house of God, on a journey, not there yet. These psalms are to encourage and challenge us on our journey, and have much to teach us.

This week we’ll take one psalm from the first chapter, and next week we’ll look at one from the last chapter, looking at the beginning and end of the journey. We’re going to pick the middle psalm from each chapter, focusing on God’s intervention, to see how he can help us on the way. This week Psalm 121, next week Psalm 133.

PSALM 121 – PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

Verse 1 is the problem, verses 2-8 give the solution. Verse 1 recaps Psalm 120, to put Psalm 121 into context.

Interesting to see the balance in this psalm – seven times more emphasis on the solution than on the problem! We tend to focus on our problems, but God wants us to focus on him as the solution.

So what is the problem?

Verse 1 “I lift up my eyes to the hills; where does my help come from?”

- “lift up my eyes” = Hebrew idiom, means concentrate on, focus, filling my vision. [Examples include Gen 13:14-15, God told Abraham “Lift up your eyes and look at the land which I will give you”; Deut 4:19 “Don’t lift up your eyes to heaven and worship the sun, moon or stars”; Josh 5:13 “Joshua lifted up his eyes and saw the commander of the Lord’s army”...]
- “the hills” = high places, things which appear intimidating, dominating, barriers, blocking our path, causing shadows, places for enemies to hide. The literal pilgrims would have seen hills ahead as they planned their journey to Jerusalem. We also face “hills” on our journey, both emotional and spiritual.
- Problem comes from focusing on the hills, letting our mind dwell on them, allowing them to fill our vision, can’t see anything else.

- Result = sense of being helpless and hopeless “Where does my help come from?” Out of control, out of my depth, I’m too small compared to the issues facing me, can’t do anything about them, no-one to help me.

And the solution?

Verse 2 “My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth”

- God is here to help us
- He is MUCH BIGGER than “hills”, he made “heaven and earth” (unseen & seen; spiritual & physical; everlasting & temporal)
- We need a “God’s-eye view” (military term), his perspective, his context for our problems

How will he help us? Verses 3-8 (in summary):

- Common phrase “He will watch over you (NIV)”, or “He will keep you (RSV)” – five times. Hebrew shamar = guard, protect, pay attention to, keep safe – because of *ownership* and sense of *value*.
- Verse 3-4, he never tires, Hebrew “Hine lo-yanoom ve lo-yashen shomer israel” = “Behold he who keeps Israel neither *slumbers* [Hebrew noom means “drop off due to boredom or idleness”] nor *sleeps* [Hebrew yashen means “exhausted due to old age”]”
- Verse 6, he offers 24-hour protection (deodorant?!)
- Verse 7, he will protect us from “all harm”, Hebrew = “every kind of evil” = generic word “rai”, covers physical harm, poison, spiritual danger, moral wickedness, unhappiness, malice etc. He offers comprehensive cover (insurance?!)
- Verse 8, he never fails, he’ll protect us today and always [Hebrew olam literally “to the vanishing point”, as far as the eye can see]

PSALM 121 SUMMARY

The problem is that we focus on the things that stand in our way as we make our Christian journey through life, we let them fill our minds, and that produces a sense of being helpless and hopeless.

The solution is that God will help us:

- He is much bigger than our problems and the things that oppose us “Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world”. “Do not fear, I have overcome the world.”
- He watches over us, and will never get tired or past it. “No-one can pluck you from my Father’s hand.”
- His protection is constant (day & night), comprehensive (from all evil), current (now) and continual (for evermore)

CONCLUSION

Each one of us faces difficulties in life, even Christians. It's very easy for us to focus on those and feel helpless. We each need to involve God, to get his perspective on our problems, and we should expect him to watch over and protect us.

Finally, this psalm is part of the mini-series of "pilgrim psalms", sung by people on their way to meet with God. Some of you may not yet have started that journey, or may just have taken the first steps. As you look ahead you may be discouraged or worried by "hills", things that threaten to make your journey hard and difficult. Being a Christian is not an easy road, there are lots of obstacles and obstructions, and challenges along the way. You could easily be put off, and maybe give up the journey, or not even start.

But this psalm has a message for you. Whatever difficulties you face, "your help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth". Let him help you overcome the obstacles, get started on the journey, and keep going!