

# My help is from the LORD

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Ps. 90: 1 – 3, 8

Ps. 1: 1

Ps. 121: 1 – 4

Ps. 91: 1 – 5

Ps. 146: 1 – 3

Scripture reading: Psalm 121

Text: Psalm 121

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

We started this church service with the confession:

“Our help is in the Name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

The exact formulation of these opening words is found in Ps. 124: 8. David confesses in that psalm:

“If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, let Israel now say, if it had not been the LORD who was on our side when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive...”

And then David concludes that psalm with the confession:

“Our help is in the Name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

Now, in the context of that psalm this confession of God's covenant people was their response to His deliverance. They acknowledged that only the LORD – the LORD God Almighty, He who made heaven and earth – He only was able to help and deliver them. And so this confession, that the LORD is our help, is found there in Psalms 124 within the context of deliverance from fierce and mighty enemies.

But when we now turn to our text here in Psalm 121, where the psalm starts with the same confession, we do not read about such a mighty enemy and such a close escape as in Ps. 124. This time we find the same confession in a different context. Here our text deals with the normal course of our daily life. Here the confession, that our help is from the LORD who made heaven and earth, is now applied to every aspect of our life. It is a confession that embraces and captures our whole life – a life under the protection of God Almighty.

All the promises that follow in the rest of this psalm flow from the one covenant promise that the LORD our God will be with us.

The relevance of this covenant promise is now applied to the normal course of our daily life. He will not allow your foot to stumble. The LORD is constantly guarding and protecting us – day and night. He preserves your going out and your coming in.

That expression, “your going out and your coming in” is a common expression in the Hebrew to include all your endeavours from start to finish. In all your business and in all your doings the LORD will be with you to help and to guard and to preserve you.

We are not only dependant on the LORD when we are attacked by vicious enemies, but every moment of our life in all circumstances we are to live assured of His nearness and almighty, all-sufficient protection. Therefore, in all situations in life, whether peaceful or troublesome, our life should be characterised by this confession:

“My help is from the LORD who made heaven and earth”.

This morning I will proclaim the gospel to you with these words of Psalm 121; and our theme will be that...

## Our help is from the LORD

We will note...

1. That the LORD is our only help
2. That His help is unfailing
3. That His help is all-inclusive

In the first place we note that...

## The LORD is our only help

The psalm starts with a question:

“I will lift up my eyes to the hills – from whence comes my help?”

The hills or mountains are a natural place for refuge. David, when he fled for Saul, fled to the mountains. David also refers to that historical event when he says in Ps. 11: 1:

“In the LORD I put my trust; how can you say to my soul: ‘Flee as a bird to your mountain?’”

Also in other parts of Scripture we read that the mountains were a place of refuge for God’s children, especially in times of war or persecution. Our Lord Jesus, for example, said to His disciples:

“...when you see the ‘abomination of desolation’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place...then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”  
(Mt. 24: 16)

To flee to the mountains would simply mean: to go and seek refuge.

Now, when the psalmist says that he lifts up his eyes to the mountains, or to the hills – as our translation says – the meaning is simply that he is looking for refuge and safety.

But immediately he adds that he will not seek his refuge or safety in the mountains, but in the LORD Himself.

It is the same as saying: I will not trust in any refuge but the LORD alone. He who made heaven and earth – He **alone** is my help.

The LORD – in our translation “LORD” with four capital letters – is a translation of the Hebrew word *Jahve*.

It is worthwhile to note that this Name, *LORD*, or *Jahve*, is the only Name in this psalm that is used for God. And we know how the LORD Himself has revealed the meaning of this Name, Jahve, that we may know Him by this Name as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who remains faithful to His covenant throughout all generations – our unchanging faithful covenant God – Ex. 3: 14, 15.

That is the name used for God in this psalm, and all the promises of this psalm flows from that covenant which Jahve has made with His people Israel.

As with the rest of Scripture we have to understand also this psalm in the context of God's covenant with His people. He has promised to be our God. That is the starting point and foundation on which the rest of the psalm simply elaborates.

Now, when we read this psalm in the light of the rest of Scripture, it also becomes clear that this trust in the LORD, that He is our help, is a trust that excludes all others. If anyone trusts in the LORD, then he trusts in the LORD **alone**. Or to say it the other way round: If someone does not trust in the LORD alone, then he does not trust in the LORD at all.

The trust in the LORD is a trust that excludes all others. It excludes the mountains. It also excludes kings and princes. It excludes any trust in man.

And thus we read in many parts of Scripture that we should not put our trust in man or in any other creature.

“Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help... Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth...” – Ps. 146: 3, 5.

It is a refrain throughout all of Scripture: do not trust in any man or creature, but trust in God alone. Happy is the man who puts his trust in the LORD.

“...Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD...Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, and whose hope is the LORD” – Jer. 17: 5, 7.

It is put so strongly that anyone who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength is cursed. Because: if anyone puts his trust and hope in man, then his heart has already departed from the LORD.

Dear congregation, by nature we put our trust in all kinds of idols. In LD 34 we confess that...

“...Idolatry is having or inventing something in which to put our trust instead of, or in addition to, the only true God who has revealed Himself in His Word.”

By nature our sinful flesh seeks and invents all kinds of things to put our trust in – “**in addition to**” the LORD.

It may even happen in the church if we would start to trust in our numbers, our prosperity, our manpower, our wisdom, or whatever. It happens when man becomes very important, and God less important; when we forget that He is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth and that we are in ourselves nothing but dust. We easily imagine that we **do** have some strength and ability in ourselves, that we are able to deal with the situations of life in our own wisdom. But again and again Scripture calls us back to the LORD who is our only help.

And so, also here in Psalm 121, the meaning is not that the LORD is **one** source of help in the midst of other sources, or even the best help, but our **only** help. He, the Almighty, who made heaven and earth, He alone is our help.

If He is for us, nothing can be against us; if He would withdraw His help, no creature would be able to help us. Everything depends on Him alone.

Yes, apart from the LORD all our trust is idolatry.

Dear congregation, in order to confirm us in this undivided trust in the LORD, the psalm now also continues by proclaiming to us how the LORD will remain with us to keep and preserve us unfailingly.

We note that in the second place, that...

## **His help is unfailing**

“He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” (verse 3, 4)

Our translation says:

“He will not allow your foot to be moved...”

We may also translate the Hebrew text:

“He will not allow your foot to stumble...” Or: “to slip”.

The meaning is that the LORD will keep you from falling.

We get the same for example in Ps. 17: 5 where David prays to the LORD:

“Uphold my steps in Your paths, that my footsteps may not slip.”

The stumbling or slipping of our footsteps is an image which is often used in Scripture for departing from the LORD’S ways, or to fall into sin.

When the LORD keeps our foot from stumbling or slipping, He keeps us from “*falling*” in the spiritual and moral sense of the word.

Think for example also of Ps. 94 where we read:

“Unless the LORD had been my help, my soul would soon have settled in silence.

If I say, ‘My foot slips,’ Your mercy, O LORD, will hold me up” – Ps. 94: 17, 18

Or think of 1 Sam. 2: 9:

“He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness.”

This expression, to keep our foot from stumbling, often means: to keep us from falling into sin and destruction which ends in darkness and death.

How then does the LORD keep your foot from stumbling?

Well, think of the perseverance of the saints. The fifth chapter of the Canons of Dort deals with this doctrine that the LORD will preserve His saints from falling utterly – from falling away from Him. In **that** sense He will keep our foot from stumbling; and He will do so unflinchingly.

That does not mean that God’s children will never stumble. Often we do stumble because of our own sin and stubbornness, or because of our own carelessness when we forget to watch and pray. But, by the grace of God, we will never utterly fall. The LORD will not allow that. He will, with unflinching care and power, keep our feet from destruction.

Let us look at a practical example of how this promise finds its fulfilment.

You will remember that David once sent his men to the rich man, Nabal, to ask for some provisions, and that Nabal gave them a hard answer and sent David’s men away. That happened after David and his men had done Nabal a big favour by protecting his huge flock in the wilderness for quite some time. And now Nabal repaid them evil for the good that

they have done to him. As a result David was so upset, so furious, that he told his men to take their swords and follow him. They were on their way to kill Nabal and all the men in his house. But then Nabal's wife, Abigail, heard what happened and she intervened with wisdom. She came with a present and humbled herself before David and told him that it is the LORD Himself who has now kept David back from a gross sin, that he might not become guilty of bloodshed if he avenges himself on his enemies and helps him with his own hand. And then David spoke these words to her:

“Blessed is the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! And blessed is your advice, and blessed are you, because you have kept me this day from coming to bloodshed and from avenging myself with my own hand.” – 1 Sam. 25: 32, 33

David, in his fury, was on the point of committing mass-murder; a bloodbath in which he would wipe out a man with his whole household. If he did that, the consequences for himself and for *his* house would have been utterly destructive. What would then have become of David and the kingship that has been promised to him? Would the LORD not have rejected him as He rejected Saul? But the LORD kept David's foot from stumbling. He sent Abigail with words of wisdom to prevent David's fall.

David acknowledges this and bless the LORD for His mercy.

There we see a classical example of what it means that the LORD will not allow our foot to stumble. He keeps us from falling into temptation, and from falling away from Him. He keeps our feet on the path of righteousness for His Name sake.

That is the meaning when we read: “He will not allow your foot to be moved”, or “to slip”. He preserves the course of our life; often also in spite of ourselves and our own foolishness.

Yes, He guards our every step on the way. And He does this every moment. He who guards us never slumbers. We do not have to be afraid that something will happen to us while our Keeper is asleep. “...He who keeps you will not slumber” – verse 3.

You will remember how the prophet Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal. All day long they were crying to Baal, saying: "O Baal, hear us!" And then, at noon, Elijah started to mock them, and said:

"Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened." – 1 Kings 18: 27

Maybe Baal is a bit absentminded, caught up in deep thought, or maybe he is asleep! Cry a bit louder; maybe you will manage to wake him up!

But, of course, Baal was nothing but a dumb image without sight or hearing.

And then, in contrast to the idol of man's own imagination, we see how the living God responded there on Mount Carmel.

He who made heaven and earth does not sleep or slumber. He guards your every step. You don't have to be afraid that for one moment you will miss His attention or His protection.

"Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." – verse 4

Note the word *Israel*: "...He who keeps **Israel**..."

David, or whoever the psalmist might have been, knows himself to be part of God's covenant people: Israel. In fact, he claims these promises as his own **because** he is one of Israel.

All the promises of God's covenant apply also to each individual within the covenant. God has given these promises to His covenant people Israel, His church in the Old Testament; and whatever God has promised to His church, each believer may claim for himself.

The psalmist is not inventing special promises for himself, but simply believes the revealed promises of God which He made with His people Israel.

We already mentioned that the Name “LORD” – Jahve, who remains faithful to His covenant – is the only Name for God that is used this psalm. The whole psalm, just as the rest of Scripture, has to be understood within the context of God’s covenant with His people.

And we are part of God’s covenant people. Everyone who is in Christ Jesus has become an heir of the same promises made to Abraham. We all share in the same covenant and therefore receive the same promises.

God’s care as our covenant God extends to His whole church. And if you want to be assured that God will be **your** Keeper, you have to take your starting point in the covenant which God made with **all** His people.

In order to assure us that God has a special care for each one of us in particular, the psalmist points us to the promise which God made to the whole people of Israel, and declares God to be the Guardian of His Church. And from this promise that extends to the whole church, which we all possess in common, each of us may draw personal comfort. These promises of God which He made to His covenant people also apply to me, because I am part of His people.

And from this one covenant, which is in Christ “Yes” and “Amen”, each of us may draw, as from a fountain, streams of blessings as we apply all the covenant promises to our own life.

And that is what the psalmist is doing. After making the statement in verse 4 that the LORD keeps Israel, he also confirms this promise to each individual:

“The LORD is **your** keeper...” – verse 5.

The Keeper of His Church is also the keeper of each individual member. And in this way the psalm continues:

“The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.” – verse 5.

Our translation says that He is “your shade at your right hand”, but the same Hebrew word which is here translated as “*shade*” may also be translated “*shadow*”.

When we consider that the text does not speak of a shade over or above us, but a shade **next to us**, we should rather translate the Hebrew word with “shadow”.

He does not say here that the LORD is a shade above or over you to protect you from the heat of the sun, but that He is your shadow at your right hand.

What does that mean?

He is speaking here about the closeness of the LORD. The LORD’s presence follows you as closely as your own shadow.

When a small child for the first time discovers his own shadow, and realises that the shadow follows him, it sometimes causes some amusement. The child may try to run away for his own shadow, or to beat his own shadow on the tricycle, but his shadow will keep up all the way. Or the child may stand still, watching his shadow, and then suddenly jump to the side to see if the shadow is quick enough to follow his movement. Or he may try to outsmart his shadow by unexpected movements, but: the shadow never stays behind.

Yes, children sometimes do this, but finally they give up, seeing that it is impossible to get away from your own shadow!

And it is this closeness of your shadow which is now used as an image to illustrate the closeness of the LORD! He remains with you all the way – unfailingly!

Once we understand this image, it provides great comfort. **The LORD, our Keeper, never leaves us; He always remains right next to us at our side, ready to help.**

These images speak of the unfailing help and care of our covenant God. He keeps you every step on the way. He who guards you never slumbers or sleeps. Your Keeper remains at your right hand – unfailingly. He remains at your side like your own shadow.

But how easily do we forget! How easily do we start to doubt this promise! When our faith is put to the test we often fail to cling to these promises, and think that maybe the LORD has forgotten us.

How comforting then to hear the words of the LORD re-assuring us that He will always remain at our right hand, carefully keeping watch, always ready to help and deliver!

Dear congregation, these promises embraces our whole life and includes every aspect of our life from beginning to end. We note that in the last place, that...

## **The LORD's help is all-inclusive**

“The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.”

That means that He will protect you day and night. In the day there will be protection from the heat; at night you will be protected from the cold.

It reminds us of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night which the LORD provided for Israel in their journey through the desert. In the daytime it provided shade to protect His people against the burning sun; at night the pillar of fire provided light and protection. And so, in the cloud by day and in the fire by night, the LORD went before them, and with them, for their guidance and protection day and night.

His protection will shield **all** evil from you. Verse 7:

“The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul.”

That does not mean that we will not experience any hardship in this life. On the contrary, we may expect much affliction and many trials; but: in the midst of all the adversity and hardships and persecutions that God's children will experience in this world, the LORD will preserve us from all evil. He will allow only that which serves our salvation, and will turn all our adversities to our benefit. Yes, in the midst of all your troubles He shall preserve your soul.

“The LORD shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.” – verse 8

As we mentioned already the expression “your going out and your coming in” includes all your endeavours from start to finish. Your “going out” refers to the start of your journey, and your “coming in” refers to your return after the completion of your journey. It refers to the start and also to the completion of all your doings. When the LORD promises to preserve “your going out and your coming in”, He promises to preserve you on all our ways from start to finish.

His protection and help is all-inclusive: day and night protection from **all** evil on **all** your ways **from start to finish!**

Yes, even forevermore – verse 8.

The promise will last, not only a lifetime, but for all eternity. All these promises will find their everlasting fulfilment in glory where God will be with us as our God forevermore.

Yes, His promises are true, now and forever.

Brothers and sisters, it is only the LORD, our faithful covenant God, the Almighty who made heaven and earth, who is able to make this promise and to keep this promise. Let us put our trust in Him, who through His Son Jesus Christ, has become our God and Father.

Through Christ we became heirs of the same promises, from this time forth and forever!

Amen.