

## A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*The Source of Our Help*

Psalm 124

September 29, 2024

In our reading from James this morning, prayer in every circumstance is prescribed because God is good and God hears our prayers. In the gospel reading, with some no-doubt hyperbole about what our response should be, there is power in the name of Jesus, and we are accountable to that power. And in Psalm 124, we remember where our help comes from. In every case, God is good; God helps us; God is with us.

Lord knows we need it.

Where do we go when we need help? Like really need help. We go to someone who can help in the just way we need help, right?

If you're audited by the IRS, you go to an accountant, not a plumber. If you pull your hamstring, you go to an athletic trainer, not a lawyer. If the house is on fire, you don't call the IT guy, though in literally every other case in life, the IT is probably your answer. If your marriage is having trouble, you talk with a pastor or counselor, not an electrician -- Unless your marriage is in trouble because the air conditioning is out, and it's August and you're not sleeping, so you're angry all the time, let's not underestimate the power of a good electrician or AC repair man.

Some of you are doctors in a wide variety of fields. Even if you're not the kind who can actually help people, as it's said, you still—in a very specific situation--might be just who is needed. If they come on the speaker on a plane and ask if there's a doctor on board--before you say, "I'm not that kind of doctor" ask 'what's the problem?' because who knows, it may just be that someone is having an existential crisis over the correct terminology for the dark ages vs late antiquity vs early middle ages. And look at you, born for this--right there in seat 33F—right there, for such a time as this. How do I know you're in 33F on this imaginary plane? Because there's no row 34.

Knowing where help comes from is smart, and in some cases, it's everything. The Psalmist asks this, "I lift my eyes to the hills"—I look at everything around me. And I ask, "Where does my help come from?" The answer comes immediately, "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." It's at the beginning of Psalm 121; it is echoed at the end of Psalm 124. *My help comes from the Lord*. This is faith born of both suffering and relief. The one who made everything I can see and even what I cannot see, the visible and invisible. When I need help, when I'm in trouble, when I'm trapped in a situation I don't know how to get out of; when I'm hurting or afraid; when I'm suffering, help comes from the Lord. That help can come through different helpers: a plumber or a social worker, a lawyer or doctor,

a counselor or an electrician. We tell children when there's trouble, look for the helpers. It is often through them that the Lord's help comes in a time of crisis.

Recently with some of you, I had the true delight of participating in the bell-ringing ritual at a cancer center when a patient completes chemotherapy. A most touching part—the part that touches your heart or you're just not human—is the army of nurses and specialists who assemble like the Avengers to bear witness around the bell. They have been God's hands; they are God's hands. Thanks be to God. They have been the helpers, and they point to The Helper. *Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.*

Say it out loud—If the Lord had not been on our side—let Israel now say—let everyone say it loud and together—if the Lord had not been on our side—with us, beside us, near us—for us—in our suffering and when we almost lost hope... You can imagine what the psalmist and his congregation had in mind:

When we were enslaved in Egypt, if the Lord had not been with us, we would have never escaped...

On the banks of the Red Sea with the army pressing down on us and the impossible sea in front of us, if the Lord had not been with us...

When we were dying in the wilderness, if the Lord had not been with us, we would have died...

When enemies attacked...

When bad kings and judges ruled over us...

In the drought and in the flood, in the fires of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego...

In the Exile, when we were trapped far away from our home...

In all of these life circumstances that we as a people have suffered and been seen through, if the Lord had not been with us, oh people of prayer, say it again and again--if the Lord had not been with us, we would have been destroyed-- all of us. We would have been swallowed up, eaten alive, lost in the flood, caught in the snare, reduced to nothing, lost all hope.

We have our own litanies of trials and deliverance. We also have our litanies of God's faithfulness in times of suffering.

Suffering comes into every life and every community, just live long enough. We may wish for life to be heavenly when everything is at peace and life is easy street. But here are always challenges in life on earth. No one knows this better than the psalmists. Emerging from life experiences is a grizzled faith, hard as stone, tough as nails, humble as a prayer. We were in serious trouble. God was with us. Blessed be the Lord.

Our help is in the Lord who made heaven and earth. Sky and ground, things unseen and things seen, idyllic life and ground-bound life. The Lord God made them all. The whole world is in his hands. These are our songs, and this is still our hope. We pray in thanksgiving for past help and in confidence in God's coming help when trouble comes

again. And it does come—in cancer cells and hurricane winds, and in lost jobs and in mental health anguish.

And yet—no . . .not and yet. And **so**--this is an amazing faith—and SO that God is for us and not against us, with us and has not abandoned us. This comprises the unique theological foundation of the faith of Israel and the church, the Old and New Testaments. God is good.

The idea of a deity who creates and rules over the creation was fairly common to ancient cultures from Egypt through Mesopotamia to the Greeks and Romans. But Israel's God, the Creator of all things is not angry with us, against us, and one whose wrath needs to be appeased. Israel's hard-won faith through all manner of suffering is that the Creator of all things is with us and for us and near us. That God is and was, for all time, Emmanuel—God with us. Moreover, all creation, the heaven, and the earth, and all that is in it, exists to bear witness to God with us. All creation exists to welcome the incarnation. In Colossians: "For in him were all created things...through him and unto him." And here in the psalm-prayer, we have a vision of Creator God who is for us and a vision of creation that bears witness to and manifests the compassionate presence of the Creator for his creation.

And now we see that God's character from in the beginning and all creation point our eyes, hearts, and hopes toward Bethlehem. Christ—the incarnate One—is the summit of creation and the firstborn among creation. God's help, "God's love," which underlies all existence, "is the cause of creation and is at the root of creation. It is its purpose. God wills that the creation he makes should also be infused with love. And in turn, it is only right and good that the highest object of creation's love should be God himself. Nothing could be a more fitting object of love than the God who lovingly created." (adapted from Phillippe Yates, "The Primacy of Christ in John Duns Scotus: An assessment")

Creation and incarnation are not separate, but part of one divine plan. The incarnation of Christ isn't just God's uh-oh backup plan to rescue humanity after the fall. Rather, the incarnation of Christ is the whole purpose of everything that exists from in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. "Christ is the masterpiece of love in the midst of a creation designed for love." Is it a wonder that at that dark moment Christ's crucifixion, the rocks split in half, the ground shook, and the thunder rolled? All creation groaned. And that at Christ's resurrection, the sun rose on the first dawn of new creation. It's a new creation whose promise is yet unfulfilled. In the biblical vision, there is a tree of life always bearing fruit by streams of living water that nourishes the city where God's praise is sung continually: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty who was, and is, and is to come.*

As long as that song is still before us, the words we've already sung this morning by God's grace we will go on humming: *O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be Thou our Guard while life shall last, and our eternal Home!*

Our help on this day—let all God’s people say and say it again and again-- is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth, whose incarnate Son entered and completed creation, whose resurrected life continues with us now in the Holy Spirit, and by whom if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation. Because the Creator God is still at work for us and within us, bringing life—life eternal, life abundant, life for all.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.

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