

“My Help Comes from the Lord”

Acts 23

Ps. 121:1 | lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from?

² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

This psalm is the first of the ascent psalms when the Israelites travelled to Jerusalem to worship God at the temple, celebrating Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles at the very least but any time they would be travelling to the temple.

You look up to the hills because you are climbing steadily (even today, a steady drive) and the reason you need help is their dangers lurking in the hills; mostly bandits. That’s the background of the parable of the Good Samaritan; a man travels home from Jerusalem to Jericho after celebrating one of the Feasts and he’s beaten and left for dead.

But you also look up because you’re looking up to God for help, who is the maker of heaven and earth; earth includes He can see what’s behind the hills where danger may lurk. But if God is the maker of all that we see and even more than we can’t, that means everything we see and can’t see is at God’s disposal to help us. And if we look at our life we can attest to God’s using the most amazing things to help us, protect us and direct us to where He wants to use us.

We see this illustrated very powerfully in Acts 23. Paul returned to Jerusalem back in Acts 21, led by the Spirit but also warned by the Spirit that he will be arrested. In Acts 22 we see immature Jewish believers struggling to accept Gentiles as believers, accuse Paul falsely of selling out his Jewish roots. Which Jewish legalistic unsaved people jump all over him and try to beat Paul to death.

This is where we left Paul a few weeks ago, still under Roman arrest. So how does God help us when we’re in trouble? What do we learn from Paul’s experience? That since God is the maker and orchestrator of everyone and everything on earth and heaven ...

God Can Use Political Power to Help Us **(22:30; 23:10, 17-35)**

God moves kingdoms and rulers around the world on His giant chessboard so that His people can accomplish His purposes in His time and way. Back in Daniel, God gave Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon a dream of a statue that represented successive world powers that would come after his downfall. Babylon, Medes and Persians, Greece and Rome. What’s fascinating about every political entity and ruler is each one can have different philosophies of running it’s country and treating its subjects.

Paul lived at the time of the height of the Roman Empire (predicted by God to be in power). Rome believed in order, structure and a strong anti-rebellion policy. In the sovereign plan of God Jesus also lived during this time. And one of Rome’s most powerful anti-rebellion tools was crucifixion. Jesus and all other victims of crucifixion would have been nailed to a cross at a public entrance point just outside the city. If Westport was under Roman rule at that time, you would see crosses as you come down Foley Mountain, or across from Rideau Vista public school, or just coming down the hill past Tackaberry’s quarry.

However, before someone was crucified there were numerous trials, appeals, etc. Rome believed in a proper process and their process did not include crucifying Roman citizens. Jerusalem and Israel was under Roman rule. The Jews needed permission from Rome to carry out a death sentence. God used this process to have Jesus crucified as much as He used it to help Paul at this time.

The Jews wanted to kill Paul. Paul was in trouble and needed God's help. God uses the Roman political system to protect Paul. He places a sympathetic and yet tough commander to oversee Paul's arrest and protection. Paul addressed the Sanhedrin because Rome ordered this to happen. We read in 22:30

*The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and **ordered** the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.*

God allows in His sovereignty to use the Roman political machine to protect Paul. The commander has control here. He orders the Jewish Sanhedrin to come together to listen to Paul. God uses Rome to keep the Jews from killing Paul. And then there's this great uproar (we'll come back to this) in the meeting and the commander has to take Paul under protection again

¹⁰ *The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He **ordered** the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

This incident provokes a number of Jews to take an oath not to eat anything until they kill Paul! A solemn oath, ironically probably swearing by God to carry out his will. But even here they have to rely on Rome to carry out their threat:

¹⁵ *Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."*

Their whole plan lies on fooling the commander but God foils that too. And when the commander finds out about the plot he arranges for more protection for Paul. In v. 23 we read

²³ *Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. ²⁴ Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."*

²⁵ *He wrote a letter as follows: ²⁶ Claudius Lysias, to His Excellency, Governor Felix:*

God uses this Roman commander who enlists 470 armed Roman soldiers to escort Paul right from Jerusalem to Caesarea (65 miles away). God protects Paul through the governmental powers of his day. And God can still use our governments to protect us sometimes. Governments or leaders in positions of power who are Christian, or sympathetic and compassionate or who use the Law for everyone's good, not for their own. God created government so it shouldn't surprise us that when used properly it protects the lives of innocent people from harm. When government works in our favour, thank God for it.

How else do we see Paul helped here through God's sovereign control? Sometimes God helps us ...

[By Using our Unsaved Past to Help Us](#)

(23:1-9)

The Roman commander orders the Sanhedrin to convene and hear Paul out. As Paul gives a defense of his ministry to Gentiles he begins with *“My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.”*

Right away the High Priest who has already judged Paul as being unlawful, orders him to be struck. For which Paul replies sharply,

God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!”

For which Paul is rebuked and appears to apologize that he didn't realize the High Priest would disobey the Law by striking him. Paul is probably alluding to Deut. 25:1 which says

When men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. ² If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves

The High Priest already made his decision without hearing Paul out. Notice what Paul does next. He uses his testimony of being a Pharisee to divide the council. What he says is true – he's basically being tried for believing Jesus rose from the dead – but those who are Sadducees get really upset because they don't believe in any resurrection. So a big argument breaks out and some of the Pharisees side with Paul.

It's not the first time Paul used his past to help him out at strategic moments. He got out of a flogging because he was a Roman citizen. He caused this unfair trial to be broken up by using his Pharisaic background. Paul was not ashamed of his unsaved past. He saw the grace and mercy of God and used it for his advantage with the goal of furthering the gospel.

Sometimes we can be embarrassed by our unsaved past. Even that was under God's sovereign control. He can reuse it to advance His purposes when He so chooses. Our unsaved past is often an opportunity to connect with people who are like us when we were unsaved or, who are saved and struggle with sins we struggled with. God doesn't waste anything. It may even help us out at a strategic moment.

What else can God help us with how He helped Paul?

God Ordains 'Coincidences' to Help Us Out **(23:12-22)**

How does God foil the murderous plot of these Jews? He arranges for Paul's nephew to be in Jerusalem who just happens to overhear this secret plan to kill Paul. Like when have we ever come across a family member of Paul's in the Bible? Pretty well nowhere. And do we ever hear about this nephew again? Did we even know Paul had a sister? This is not a coincidence. God orchestrated him to be there, to be in the right place to hear this plot, for Paul to be able to have visitors even while under arrest, for the commander to be sympathetic to Paul and his nephew and take seriously this threat.

How often hasn't God done something like that in your life? Arranged for someone to be in the right place at the right time to help us out? For a friend or family member to show up at the right time and then to learn later that they normally wouldn't have been there then but something happened to bring them at that time?

It's mind boggling and sometimes gives you goose bumps when you realize how God controls the movements and words of people to accomplish His plan to help us when we need it. Amen!

But let's get back to this plot. Let's read it again:

¹² The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ More than forty men were involved in this plot. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

The chief priests and the elders agreed to kill Paul! What does this remind us of? The same people who plotted to kill Jesus. This is evil. Who is ultimately behind this plan? Satan. Yet what can God do? God can help us even when the enemy has his eyes set on us and ...

God Can 'Trick' the *Enemy* to Help Us **(23:27-35)**

What do I mean God tricked the enemy to help Paul? God turns Satan's plan to kill Paul so He could have Paul's nephew there to over hear it, report it to the commander who then orders 470 armed soldiers to escort Paul immediately overnight to get him to Caesarea and away from Jerusalem. God isn't done with Paul yet and Satan's anger towards God and his servants is one of his blind spots. Didn't God already use Satan's plan to kill Jesus as His plan to save the world? Absolutely.

God can take Satan's plan to harm us and humiliate us so that we can use these hurts as a testimony to point others to Jesus. Peter would write in 1 Pet. 3:14

¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." ¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷ It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

And earlier in his letter Peter wrote in 2:11-12

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

God takes our willingness to endure suffering as an opportunity to share Jesus because the world doesn't understand forgiveness and non-retaliation. Love, kindness and forgiveness in the face of hurts gives us opportunities to share Christ to a world who doesn't understand true selfless love, kindness and forgiveness.

And in the midst of all this how does God help Paul the same way He helps us and strengthens us?

God Uses His Presence and His Word to Comfort Us **(23:14)**

Just after Paul is almost killed by an angry Jewish mob and just before he learns of a plot to kill him, the Lord [Jesus?] appears to Paul and speaks words to reassure him God has a plan.

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

God assures Paul that he will not die here. That his ministry is not finished. That he will get to Rome yet to witness as well. God uses this plot to move Paul towards Rome. This is God's plan for Paul. It included his suffering in Jerusalem but temporary suffering is not the end.

When we are struggling with the circumstances of life or trials and wonder where God is, where does our help come from? Our help comes from the Lord, we remind ourselves through His Word and His Word which reminds us that He is in control and is with us always.

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Heb. 13:6 So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

And we pray to God when we need help and He ultimately comes to our aid often in ways we didn't expect.

People of influence who don't necessarily know God who can speak into our situation

Our past experiences or connections (even when we weren't saved)

Someone who comes 'coincidentally' [not!] at just the right time with what we need.

He can even turn the enemy's plan to hurt us to advance His own plan in our life. And how did **we** learn all this? We went to His Word to get our help from the Lord. And we found comfort in His promises and presence. Amen

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