

## **“Does God Only Help Those Who Help Themselves?”**

### **Psalm 121**

*Series: Half-Truths Week 2*

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At a Catholic school a class of children agreed to give up chocolate for Lent. Their teacher Sister Cecilia wanted to stress the importance of fasting and self-denial. So she devised a test to help them resist. In the school cafeteria line, she placed a large basket of chocolate bars and a sign which read “God will help you.” Coming down the line each child first looked longingly at the chocolate but, after reading the sign, stayed strong with God’s help and passed by. Finally Billy came along, looked at the chocolate, then at the sign, and proceeded to dump the whole basket of bars on his tray. At the end of the line, Sister Cecilia was waiting for him with a grimace. “William,” she intoned, “why did you take the chocolate bars?” “God told me to,” the boy replied. “What?” replied the nun. “Didn’t you read the sign?” “Yes. That’s how God spoke to me. The sign reminded me of that Bible verse: ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ So I did.

I think Billy needs some more Bible lessons. In fact when it comes to this famous cliché all of America could use some Bible teaching. On the Tonight Show Jay Leno used to go “jaywalking.” His questions revealed how dumb Americans can be. Once he asked random people to name one of the Ten Commandments. The most frequent response was “God helps those who help themselves.” That matches what Christian survey expert George Barna found:

To the statement "The Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves"; 75% of Americans agree or strongly agree. Of "born-again" Christians 68% agreed, and 81% of non "born-again" Christians agreed with the statement.<sup>1</sup>

I assure you, this verse appears nowhere in the Bible. The earliest versions of it come from Greek mythology in which a wagon falls into a ravine. When its driver prays to Hercules for help, the strong man replies, “Push it out yourself.” Closer to our time, Benjamin Franklin stole, or maybe helped himself, to the familiar wording: “God helps those who help themselves” and put it in his *Poor Richard’s Almanack* of 1736. This “Do-It-Yourself” message made sense to the Deists like Franklin that we talked about last week. Deists believed God made the world, wound it up and let it go. So don’t sit and wait for Him. You have to help yourself. It’s been a bedrock American belief ever since. Call it the Gospel according to Home Depot: “You can do it, we can help.”

There is some validity to this cliché. Yet Adam Hamilton says it’s not even a half truth. He calls it a “one third truth” because there is one sense which agrees with the Bible, but two other ways it goes against Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna and Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point: How Coming Cultural Shifts will Change Your Life*. Regal Books, 2001, p90.

In some places Scripture does teach **God Helps Us When We Help Ourselves**. Some feel they are super spiritual when they do nothing, sit back and simply “wait on the Lord.” They might draw this conclusion from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Matthew 6:25-26)

Some believe Jesus is saying we should pray and wait for God to provide. It’s true, God does provide for the birds but he doesn’t throw the worms in the nest. Birds work very hard. In this passage Jesus wants us to avoid worry not work.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of this truth. Many of these believers were so convinced Jesus would return soon they stopped working and simply waited for him to arrive. Paul tells them,

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

God does help us put food on the table, find a job and fix up our houses. He often does it through the strength, intelligence, funds and people He gives us. It is necessary to pray, work and not worry. That part of this cliché is true.

On the other hand, there are two senses in which this cliché actually contradicts the Bible. In many passage of Scripture it says, **God Helps Others Through Our Helping Hands**. This cliché is often quoted as a reason for not helping the poor. It’s a simplistic solution to the chronic problems of poverty, unemployment, homeless and hunger. “Quit complaining, stop expecting someone else to pay your way, and get to work.” I hear this occasionally when some question why we host Code Blue or the Dinner Ministry. “Aren’t we encouraging people to remain homeless by feeding and sheltering them?” Some question mission trips. “Shouldn’t the people down there do their own work?” I know there is a danger in creating dependency. It is equally dangerous for us to help others on missions or mission trips in order to make ourselves feel good. It’s true that sometimes our helping can actually hurt.

Yet I argue that God calls us to provide a basic level of support to those who are exposed to the raw elements and the ravages of hunger. The Apostle James taught this:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

He is following in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah who said,

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

It is probably this passage Jesus had in mind when He taught that when we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the ill clad and visit the sick and imprisoned we are actually serving Him (Matthew 25:31-46). Clearly, God helps those who cannot help themselves. He does it by working through you and me.

Through your helping hands God is blessing the children of Trenton, the homeless and hungry of Bucks County, those who need a Habitat house in both areas, prisoners and those in recovery in the Greater Philadelphia area. God is helping villages in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, Appalachia and South Carolina through your helping hands. There is a village in far off Mozambique, Africa that can now draw fresh, clean water from the heart of the earth because of the offering you gave to the Promise of Christmas last year.

You are doing great work but don't stop. God wants to help more people through our helping hands. Has God laid a new project on your heart for the Church Has Left the Building this fall? Is God calling you, even at this time, to step forward and help with Vacation Bible School or to be on our ministry team for Sunday School this fall? Is God calling you to help out with the Prison Ministry or Recovery Ministry? Is God calling you to go on short term or long term mission? Is God calling you to revive churches like Parkland and Anchor or start a new church? Be the hands of Jesus to help those who can't help themselves.

The other way this cliché contradicts Scripture is the bedrock truth that **God Helps Us Because We Are Helpless**. I don't think this is stated more clearly in Scripture than in Romans:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

Paul lays out the unvarnished truth: we are powerless and helpless to save ourselves. We were actually enemies of God. Yet His love for us was so great, He sent Christ to die for us and save us from the quicksand of sin into which we were sinking. There's a word for that: Grace. It means receiving the help you desperately need but don't deserve.

Since May we've heard three powerful testimonies from Woodside members of how Jesus met them when them in the pit of their powerlessness and set them free. Sara Hiller shared how she wandered away from God only to find the Lord was waiting to lead her back to Him. He stayed close beside her as she faced the dreadful powerlessness of cancer. Tim McCafferty found himself slipping deeper into alcoholism and anxiety. Yet

God reached down, lifted him out and set his feet on the solid Rock of Jesus Christ. Jennifer Hunter endured abuse, addiction, anger, emptiness and pain. When she had nothing, she turned to Jesus and found that Jesus loved her and filled her with peace. Each one of them was powerless in a different way. All of them found the loving, gracious, helping hand of Jesus who raised them from death to life. All of them received God's grace through the help of friends and growth group members.

When you need help, Psalm 121 tells you **God is Always Greater than Your Problems.**

I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. (Psalm 121: 1-2)

On the road of life you will occasionally lift up your eyes and see a huge hill ahead - too high for you to climb and too long to go around. The author of Psalm 121 lifts up his eyes and sees a mountain too great to scale on his own strength. Yet he trusts in the God who is greater than his problems, the God who made the hills and valleys, the Maker of heaven and earth. When you are faced with an insurmountable problem, a challenge beyond your power, turn to the God who is greater. Lift up your eyes and look at Him and your overwhelming problem will shrink back to its normal size. Lift up your eyes and look not at the problem before you but at the God who is greater than your problem.

Second, **God is Always with You in Your Problems.**

The Lord watches over you— the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. (Psalm 121:5-6)

When the summer sun beats down you search for the shade. With lots of sun and few trees in the Holy Land, shade is a precious commodity. Finding a tree is a blessed relief in a long dry journey. But God is more than a shade tree. He is as close and constant as your shadow. Eugene Peterson, the pastor who wrote *The Message Bible* writes:

My two sons are both rock climbers. They meticulously plot their route and then, as they climb, put in what they call "protection"—pitons hammered into small crevices in the rock face, with attached ropes that will arrest a quick descent to death. Rock climbers who fail to put in protection have short climbing careers.

Our pitons or "protection" come as we remember and hold on to those times when we have experienced God's faithfulness in our lives. Every answered prayer, every victory, every storm that has been calmed by his presence is a piton which keeps us from falling, losing hope, or worse yet, losing our faith. Every piton in our life is an example of God's faithfulness to us.... As we ascend in the kingdom of God, we also realize that each experience, each victory is only a piton—a

stepping stone toward our ultimate goal of finishing the race and receiving the crown of glory.<sup>2</sup>

God's protection is always close at hand, as close as your shadow. Reach out to Him.

Finally, **God is Always Guiding You Through Your Problems.**

He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121:3-4, 7-8)

The road of life can get pretty slippery. Temptations take you off the path and lead you the opposite way. But your Heavenly Father is able to keep you from falling. The best way to stay on His path is to follow His Word. This week at VBS the children will learn to let God's Word guide them. Unfortunately, many people allow other distractions and activities to get in the way of reading God's Word. Here at Woodside we are committed to helping children, youth and adults read and follow God's Word through Sunday School, Adventure Club, Junior and Senior High groups and 60 Growth Groups. Reading and following God's Word will help you stay close to your Heavenly Father and keep you from slipping off the path.

Worship songwriter Brian Doerksen has a son named Isaiah who suffers from fragile X syndrome, a genetic condition which results in physical, intellectual, emotional, and behavioral limitations. When he and his wife first received medical confirmation of Isaiah's condition Brian considered turning away from worship ministry altogether.

After receiving the test results, I stumbled around our property weeping, confused, heartbroken. At one point I lifted my voice to heaven and handed in my resignation: "God, I am through being a worship leader and songwriter ..."

When I was able to be quiet enough to hear, I sensed God holding out his hand and inviting me: "Will you trust me?" Will you go even with your broken heart—for who will relate to my people who are heartbroken if not those like you who are acquainted with disappointment?"

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor, Rediscovering the Call* (Eerdmans, 2000), p.12

I used to think people were most blessed by our great victories. But now I know differently: People are just longing to hear [others] speak of how they have walked through the deepest valleys. The world lifts up the victorious and the successful, but God lifts up the brokenhearted.<sup>3</sup>

It was out of this pain that Brian Doerksen wrote a song based on Psalm 121,

I lift my eyes up to the mountains, where does my help come from?

My help comes from You, Maker of heaven, Creator of the Earth

Oh how I need You Lord, You are my only hope, You're my only prayer

So I will wait for you to come and rescue me. Come and give me life.

God is offering you all the help you'll ever need.

Reach out and help yourself.

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Doerksen Make Love, Make War (David C. Cook, 2009).