



God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

January 11, 2015 *God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?*

Scripture:

The helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan... O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed. – *Psalm 10:14, 27-28*

In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears... He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters. – *Psalm 18:6, 16*

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. – *Psalm 121:1-2*

The half-truth: life and faith take effort

MONDAY 1.12.15 Philippians 2:12-14

The half-truth of “God helps those who help themselves” is that our willingness to put forth effort is a key part of almost any growth or progress in our lives. It is, however, quite wrong to suggest that God only acts in response to our effort. In fact, even as he urged the Philippian Christians to “carry out your own salvation,” Paul reminded them that “God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes” (verse 13).

- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “The word he uses for [carry out] is *katergazesthai*, which always has the idea of bringing to completion. It is as if Paul says: ‘Don’t stop halfway; go on until the work of salvation is fully wrought out in you.’” In what parts of your life can you sense that the work of salvation may still be somewhat incomplete? How can you seriously open yourself to God’s power to complete that work in your life?
- Barclay noted that verse 13 twice used the Greek verb *energein* to talk about what God does for us, before we ever do anything for God. (You recognize the root of our word “energy.”) Do you find it a challenge to believe that God has given you the spiritual energy to accept salvation and live out God’s purposes? In what ways have you sensed God drawing you to a new way of life, and energizing you for that life?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for seeking to save me before I ever knew I needed saving. Keep energizing me as I give my best effort to live into the worthwhile way of life you offer me. Amen.

God cares for those who cannot help themselves

TUESDAY 1.13.15 Psalm 68:4-6, Psalm 82:1-4

To an orphan or a widow in Israel’s patriarchal world, it would have been nonsense to say, “God helps those who help themselves.” With no legal or social status, and no influential male relative to take their side, widows or orphans in that society simply had no way to “help

themselves.” Yet again and again, in the psalms and in many of Israel’s laws, it was clear that God cared passionately about helping those who could not help themselves.

- Israel’s defining story was the Exodus, told in the first part of the book of Exodus and recalled every year at Passover. God delivered Israel from being held by the most powerful king on earth in helpless, hopeless slavery. When have you found help and freedom from a situation in which you felt helpless? In what ways can God’s help in the past become a basis for hope as you face future situations that feel hopeless?
- God most often acts through people. In what parts of life do the words of Psalm 82 speak most clearly to your heart: “Give justice to the lowly and the orphan; maintain the right of the poor and the destitute! Rescue the lowly and the needy. Deliver them from the power of the wicked”? For whom can you be God’s instrument to help those who cannot help themselves?

Prayer: Lord God, I trust you to be my help and my strength, even when all else fails me. Grow me into a person who can extend your help and strength to others who may desperately need them. Amen.

God helps, even when we’ve blown it

WEDNESDAY 1.14.15 Daniel 9:15-19

When the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem, they hauled Daniel, along with thousands of his fellow Israelites, off to exile in Babylon. The Israelites knew they had no military or political power, and Daniel added the confession that they had blown it spiritually. There was simply no way for Israel to help themselves. But Daniel boldly asked God for help, “not because of any righteous acts of ours but because of your great compassion.”

- Too many times, we think we need to base our requests for God’s help on some level of “deserving” on our own part, based on effort or spiritual purity. Have you ever gone to God for help with no claim of deserving God’s help other than your deep need (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16, which grounds our confidence not in our own goodness, but in the qualities of Jesus, our High Priest)?
- Daniel echoed the tone of passages like Psalm 18:6, 16. He asked God to help, not based on Daniel’s effort or success, but instead based on his need. In what ways is this different from the tone our culture teaches us to take in job interviews or loan applications? How easy or hard do you find it to trust that Isaiah was right when he quoted God as saying, “My plans aren’t your plans, nor are your ways my ways” (Isaiah 55:8)?

Prayer: Lord God, down deep I know that often the times I need your help the most are the times I deserve it least. Grow in me the confidence to seek you and your help at all times, not just when I think I deserve it. Amen.

On our own, we cannot help ourselves please God

THURSDAY 1.15.15 Romans 8:5-11

The apostle Paul used a Greek word for “flesh” in these verses. The *Common English Bible* chose the word “selfishness” to convey what he meant by that. The *CEB Study Bible* noted that Paul was talking about “the core of the human who opposes God’s Spirit (as in Rom. 7:5, 14).” Left to our natural impulses, he said, our hearts are hostile to God. We need God’s Spirit to do in us what we can’t do for ourselves.

- Scholar N. T. Wright offered a colorful image to help us grasp Paul's thinking: "Human beings in their natural state, faced with God's law, are about as much use as a gas lamp plugged into the electric supply." Paul earlier lamented, "I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do" (Romans 7:19). Have you ever found yourself wondering, "Why did I do that?" What is there in you that pushes back against what God wants from you?
- This reading once again speaks to the mysterious spiritual "chemistry" between God's part and our part in spiritual growth. The Spirit needs to control our mind—and that happens, in part, because of what we choose to focus our mind on. What is your mind set on? What helps you keep your mind set on what the Spirit desires?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, I need you. Come, sweet Spirit, I pray; come in your strength and your power, come in your own gentle way. Amen.

"We are God's accomplishment"

FRIDAY 1.16.15 Ephesians 2:4-10

When Paul preached the good news in Ephesus, many people's priorities and ways of life changed profoundly (cf. Acts 19:18-22). Paul believed it was important that they understand that this was not something they had accomplished on their own initiative or strength. They were God's accomplishment (Greek *poema*), living out the kind of life God desired them to live.

- Today's reading said salvation "is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of." Of course, none of those first-generation Christians went to Sunday School or learned from Christian parents! In what ways does Ephesians' language capture your life experience? Do you ever think that, in your case, God just took what was already a pretty good life and "bumped it up a notch"?
- To what extent have God's priorities become, not just an occasional exercise that you do when there's a special church activity, but woven into "the way that we live our lives"? How open are you to letting God continue to shape the way you live the "secular" parts of your life—driving, shopping, business activities, playing and watching sports, and the like?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to be your accomplishment, to be an example of what your spiritual craftsmanship can do in a human being. Please keep shaping and guiding me in all I do today. Amen.

"What do you have that you didn't receive?"

SATURDAY 1.17.15 1 Corinthians 4:4-7

After founding the church in Corinth, Paul received reports (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:11-12) that the Christians there were dividing into factions, claiming superiority to one another based on which preacher/teacher they preferred. They seemed to think their walk with God was about their superior discernment or taste, rather than about receiving God's gift of grace. That was why Paul asked them, pointedly, "What do you have that you didn't receive?" He wanted to underscore the point that, especially (but not exclusively) in the realm of salvation, God helps us more than we ever help ourselves.

- Scholar N. T. Wright summed up Paul's message to the Corinthians: "The most obvious argument against boasting of the kind that's been going on is that every gift, talent and skill

we possess is a gift from God. You might as well boast about having brown eyes or being left-handed.” Are there any good things in your life that you are tempted to see as your own doing, something God is fortunate to receive from you? What helps you to remember that, ultimately, you have nothing that you didn’t receive from God?

Prayer: O God, you are the source of the very life into which I awakened this morning. Keep me grateful for your gifts, and humble in heart as I seek to use them in your service. Amen.

Family Activity: God uses his people to help and care for one another. As a family, share ideas about how you can work with God to bring comfort and care to others. Discuss each person’s unique gifts and abilities. How can those be used to comfort others? Use construction paper to create the symbol of a heart. On it, write or draw the gifts of each person. Also write or draw about how they can be used to comfort people who are sad, lonely or in need. Pray together, asking God to help guide you to use your ideas and gifts. Thank God for giving them to you. Display your family’s “heart” as a reminder to help and comfort others this year. Also, remember to receive comfort from others when you need it!