

HELP OF THE HELPLESS

Though I always enjoyed them, in recent years the hymns of my childhood have become so precious and meaningful to me. Perhaps it is because I now have more time to think about the words; more likely, my experiences have brought me closer to the circumstances of the authors: that is, I understand better what the poets were trying to say. I can feel their solid faith and I know that pain and suffering must have been behind it. They were able to rise above the earthly and soar into the heavenly realms like eagles, finding friendship with Christ to be a reward far exceeding their trials. How I yearn to be able to express in writing the sentiments that we share! Meanwhile, I thank God that their literary work was preserved for us through song.

Often I listen to instrumental renditions of hymns as I lie in bed awaiting sleep. Usually I know the words to at least the first verse, and perhaps more. Through this means, the hymn “Abide With Me,” written by Henry F. Lyte (1793-1847), has returned to my consciousness. Here is the first verse, the one I knew by heart:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

There were times when I wondered why the author was asking the Lord to stay with him when of course, he would. Now I see the situation Mr. Lyte may have been facing: he was older now and the end of his life was approaching, perhaps more rapidly than he had expected. People were trying to help, but they could not make him comfortable. He was feeling helpless, but he knew that God could help a person in such a state. Rather than wondering if God would abide with him, I can see Mr. Lyte expressing a willingness to remain in close contact with the Lord, something like this: “Lord, you have been with me all my life. I need you now more than ever. I need your comfort, your help and above all, I need to feel your presence with me.” (I realize that Mr. Lyte may not have been writing about himself, but surely his thinking was similar to the above when he penned his lines.) I think our Lord would be glad to have us reaffirm our faith in our difficulties, don’t you?

What really caught my attention in this verse was the phrase “Help of the helpless.” It sounded to me like a wonderful name for God (on the order of Good Shepherd; Living Water; Bread of Life). If it were a name, the main words would be capitalized: Help of the Helpless. People in the Bible coined new names for God; I’m sure we may, too. As I become more helpless physically, more dependent on others for aid, I am expecting that the Help of the Helpless will be my primary caregiver and constant companion, for I also want my Lord to abide with me. In addition, I certainly appreciate all the other helpers God has given me at this point of my life – friends old and new, hired and volunteer – including my husband, Leo. Thank you!

And now I want to explore the thought of helplessness in the Bible and see where it will take me ...

Helplessness is not necessarily a part of old age; people in their 90s can be quite self-sufficient. Here in Drum Hill Senior Living Community many – but not all – residents have aides, either full- or part-time, including me. Yes, abilities vary at the end of life, but at the beginning there is full equality: all babies are totally helpless, totally dependent on others to keep them alive and well. Several Bible stories involving babies and young children show their vulnerability.

In the first chapter of Exodus is the story of the children of Israel living as slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh

was worried that if war broke out, the Israelites might join the enemy in fighting against Egypt. Besides working them ruthlessly, the king of Egypt thought of a plan that would eventually reduce their numbers drastically: he told the Hebrew midwives to kill all the Israelite baby boys that they helped to deliver. The midwives refused to obey that order and, when questioned by Pharaoh, said: *"Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."* Pharaoh then gave a new order to the Israelites: *"Every boy that is born you must throw into the river."*

This was the situation when Moses was born to Jochebed and her husband, Amram. Disregarding the order, Jochebed hid her son for three months. At that time, she put the baby into a waterproof basket and placed it near the edge of the Nile. What a helpless condition to be in! But the Help of the Helpless was there to give this story a happy ending.

Pharaoh's daughter and her maids found the basket and realized immediately that this was a Hebrew baby. Big sister Miriam, who had been watching, offered to get a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for the princess. Of course she brought her mother to the scene. Jochebed was paid to nurse her own son, who lived with his family until he was weaned. The helpless baby grew up to be, in his old age, the one God used to deliver his people out of their slavery.

2 Samuel 4:4 records a traumatic incident involving a young child: *Jonathan son of Saul had a son who was lame in both feet. He was five years old when the news about [the deaths of King] Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell and became crippled. His name was Mephibosheth.* I imagine his broken leg bones were not properly set, but at least his life was spared.

Years later David, who succeeded Saul as king, wondered if there were anyone left from the house of Jonathan, his best friend; if so, he wanted to honor that person for Jonathan's sake. A former servant in Saul's household told David, *"There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet"* (2 Samuel 7:3). David located Mephibosheth, by then the father of a young son named Mica, and had him move to Jerusalem. All of his grandfather Saul's property was restored to Mephibosheth, and from then on, he ate daily at David's table. It didn't matter to the king that Mephibosheth was crippled!

Ahaziah, king of Judah, was dead. His wicked mother, Athaliah, saw an opportunity to become queen of the country; all she had to do was kill her own grandchildren, heirs to the throne! 2 Kings 11 picks up the story: *But Jehosheba, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the royal princes who were about to be murdered. She put him and his nurse in a bedroom to hide him from Athaliah, so he was not killed. He remained hidden with his nurse at the temple of the Lord for six years while Athaliah ruled the land (verses 2,3).* When Joash was seven years old, his instructors brought him out of hiding and crowned him king. Athaliah was shocked! And before the day was over, she was dead. Joash was a good king who reigned in Jerusalem for forty years.

Obviously, the Help of the Helpless allows people to work for him in protecting the helpless, a fine calling indeed. The family of Moses and the princess and her maids fall into this category, along with Mephibosheth's nurse. Joash's Aunt Jehosheba, his nurse, the priest and all others who knew of his existence were helping the helpless. Which begs a question: Where was the Help of the Helpless when other baby boys were being thrown into the Nile River and when the brothers of Mephibosheth and Joash were being killed? Since God is God and I am human, and since God's ways and

thoughts are so much higher than mine, I give to God the “right” to remain silent; God does not owe us explanations. All I can give you is my line of reasoning when confronted with situations such as these.

First, I think about what I know of God. It is not God’s will for people or governments to kill the helpless. Couldn’t God have prevented the murders? Of course! God can do anything. Here we get into the question of our freewill and God’s sovereignty, a subject much too big for me. Some people use their freewill to do marvelous deeds and some use theirs to go to unspeakable depths of depravity. Perhaps we will understand it better in eternity and perhaps not; that’s up to God. I do know that God was there when these evil deeds happened and that God cared for the victims and their loved ones. Then, as well as now, God’s supply of comfort was there to help the grieving. And it is my belief that all these young ones who died were received by God into Heaven, where they are to this day. I would not say “God took them,” which sounds cruel to me, but that “God received them,” a comforting thought. Without this line of thinking, I would be overcome with sorrow much of the time.

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A favorite story of mine concerning helplessness is found in 2 Chronicles 20. Jehoshaphat, a godly man, was king of Judah at the time. Some men came to the king with alarming news: a vast army was rapidly approaching to fight against Judah. Jehoshaphat’s first thought was to inquire of the Lord; his second was to proclaim a fast in Judah. People from all over Judah came to Jerusalem to seek help from the Lord. Jehoshaphat stood up in front of the courtyard of the temple and prayed a public prayer on behalf of all the people. First he mentioned God’s role in the history of their nation and their reason for confidence in turning to God for help:

– *O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you. O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? They have lived in it and have built in it a sanctuary for your Name, saying, “If calamity comes upon us, whether the sword of judgment, or plague or famine, we will stand in your presence before this temple that bears your Name and will cry out to you in our distress, and you will hear us and save us.”*

Then he talked about their current situation, their total helplessness to do anything on their own, and the hope that God would help them:

– *But now here are men from Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, whose territory you would not allow Israel to invade when they came from Egypt, so they turned away from them and did not destroy them. See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance. O our God, will you not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.*

It is interesting to see hope coming out of helplessness. Perhaps we need to exhaust our own resources before we can “Be still and know that God is God.” And God certainly did help the helpless in Jehoshaphat’s time! They did not have to fight at all, just show up to gather the spoils from the armies who had already destroyed each other!

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2 Kings 6:8-23 recounts a fascinating story of God’s coming to the aid of Israel, especially to the aid of his prophet Elisha. I will let the writer of 2 Kings tell the story and I will comment.

Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place." Elisha, the man of God, sent word to the king of Israel, "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by Elisha. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places.

I love the drama of the repeated action: the king of Aram and his officers decide on a place hide out, awaiting the Israelites. God hears the plans and tells Elisha, who in turn tells the king of Israel. The king finds Elisha's information to be correct and avoids the area. This was more than frustrating for the king of Aram. He was enraged, for he finally figured out what was happening: there was a traitor in his camp!

He summoned his officers and demanded of them, "Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of Israel?" "None of us, my lord the king," said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom." "Go, find out where he is," the king ordered, "so I can send men and capture him." The report came back: "He is in Dothan." Then he sent horses and chariots and a strong force there. They went by night and surrounded the city.

The king of Aram was willing to believe his officers and turned his rage on Elisha. I wonder if he considered at all that this latest plan of his was also doomed to failure? Obviously not, for he still had not factored God into the picture. I am always amused when I think of the size of the force sent to capture one man of God! And yet the odds were one hundred percent in favor of Elisha! Of course Elisha knew all about this plan, too, and was calm and full of hope. There was someone who was worried, however ...

When Elisha's servant got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. "Don't be afraid," Elisha answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Here Elisha, full of hope, became a helper to one feeling so helpless. Elisha's spiritual eyes were wide open! He knew those horses and chariots of fire were there and that they were real. He'd seen one of each close up when Elijah was removed from his presence and taken to heaven in a whirlwind. Now that the servant had calmed down after seeing the vision of God's army, the Aramean soldiers still had to be dealt with. There is humor as well as instruction in how Elisha handled the matter.

As the enemy came down toward him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, "Strike these people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness, as Elisha had asked. Elisha told them, "This is not the road and this is not the city. Follow me and I will lead you to the man you are looking for." And he led them to Samaria. After they had entered the city, Elisha said, "Lord, open the eyes of these men so they can see." Then the Lord opened their eyes and they looked, and there they were, inside Samaria.

I picture the Arameans wide-eyed, both from shock and from terror, as they found they were inside the walls of Israel's capital city! Surely they were engaged in a losing battle with a Force more powerful than any they knew. "Oh, no! Here comes their king!" Now they really were helpless!

When the king of Israel saw them, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them?" "Do not kill them," he answered. "Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their

master.” So he prepared a great feast for them, and after they had finished eating and drinking, he sent them away, and they returned to their master.

What do you think of this twist in the story? Isn't that the way Jesus taught us to treat our enemies? Hear his words from Matthew 5:44,45: *“But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to shine on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”* And Paul said in Romans 12:20,21: *“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* The last line of Elisha's story tells how effective his treatment was: *So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory.*

God's army still exists. In addition, there are innumerable angels and other invisible beings in the space around us. They interact with us, whether we realize it or not. *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14)?* Lord, open our eyes that we may see, and not feel so helpless when the enemy approaches. Amen.

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Here are some of my favorite verses about God as Help of the Helpless:

– *Psalm 46:1-3: God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble.* Having made this wonderful expression of faith, the Psalmists mention the effect of their faith: *Therefore we will not fear, though ...* and then they list some catastrophic things that would not cause them to be afraid. Listen: *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.* The sons of Korah (writers of this Psalm) would never be intimidated by natural disasters because of their understanding of God. Good for them!

What about us? In my Bible classes I used to give an assignment based on these verses: Write a list of things that might frighten us today and see if we can be as confident in God as the sons of Korah were. Example: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though our health gives way and the stock market crashes, though our friends desert us and our houses burn down.” It's plain to see the connection between how we think of God and how much we worry about earthly things, isn't it? Try writing a Psalm like this of your own; it is a good exercise in faith.

– *Psalm 121:1,2: 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.* If we could grasp the truth that our Helper is the One who created the universe, who designed people, who knows all about our situation (including its purpose), how confident, how restful we would be!

– *Isaiah 41:10: Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* I find it interesting that God describes his hand as righteous. It is easy to meditate on God's large, powerful, protective or gentle hands. Now add thoughts of God's hands as righteous – as perfect, good, pure and holy: that's seeing God from a different angle. God's hands have never harmed anyone; they have never done anything wrong.

New insight comes to me now concerning Luke 23:46, where Jesus said, *“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”* I can hear Jesus saying, “Father, everything you do has always been right and good, including what has happened here on the cross. All I have is yours and all you have is mine. Here is my spirit. I am coming to you.” And I picture Father and Son embracing. Such thoughts melt

my heart. God the Righteous is Help of the Helpless! What a picture!

– *Isaiah 41:13: I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.* I like the story in Luke 8 about raising the young daughter of Jairus back to life. Luke says: *He took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up.* Imagine waking up and finding Jesus holding your hand! God still holds our hands today and offers us help.

I started this essay with the first verse of "Abide With Me" and I want to conclude with the other four verses. They contain so much faith, so much trust! How wonderful if we could all live our lives, age and approach death with these words in our hearts and mouths! In my hymnal, this song ends with "Amen." I looked again and found that this is indeed a prayer, one that I endorse:

Swift to its close ebb's out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Note: See my essay "Take Up Your Cross: Identifying With Jesus" for another hymn by Henry F. Lyte.