

*Psalm 146:3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortal men, who cannot save.
4 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.
5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God,
6 the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
the LORD, who remains faithful forever.
7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free,
8 the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over the alien
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Loved by the LORD,

As a young child, I can remember my baby sister coming home from the hospital. She was crying—and she cried and she cried. “Doesn’t she ever stop crying?” was the first thing I ever said about my sister. Wouldn’t you have loved me as a brother? My Mom said something like, “She just needs something. Maybe she wants to eat, maybe a diaper change. She’s just letting us know.”

One of life’s most basic skills is to know where to find help. And we learn it early. Eventually we learn that we can do more than just cry about stuff. We learn where to find help. We learn to go to teachers, to advisors, to parents and friends. Or maybe when you need help you just pull yourself up by the bootstraps and trust your own initiative.

HOPE IN THE LORD

I. Hope in the Loving and Mighty Lord

Our reading began with these words: **“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground.”** (3-4).

Yes, in our moment of trouble we have people around us who can help. We should turn to them. But the key is **“do not put your trust... in mortal man.”** Every single person we turn to for help is mortal. Human institutions are only as good as the mortal humans who created them and the mortal humans who staff them. You know what mortal means, right? It’s related to the word mortuary, the place they keep the dead bodies. Someone said this about trusting mortal man: “He who makes man his god, must be expecting his god to die every day.”ⁱ

But if mortal man should not be trusted, and if we ourselves know that we will not survive long, where do we turn? Verses 5 and 6 turn our heads in the direction of help, **“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever.”**

Our help is the God of Jacob. The Jacob of the Bible was the ancestor of all the Israelites. So when it says, **“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob”** he is pointing to the God of Israel. As the God of his people he cares for them. He loves them.

“Blessed is he whose hope is in...the Maker of heaven and earth.” When you hope in God, you hope in One unbelievably wise and powerful. From the beginning, people have looked with fascination on the millions of stars. Now with the marvels of science we know there are billions of planets out there too! We can look through the microscope and be astounded at human biology—how a blood cell has to come into contact with every single cell of the body to give it oxygen, or it will die! Then go to micro-biology and take a look inside human cells to see dozens of processes going on in every single one of our trillions of cells.

When your hope is in the LORD, no longer are you putting your trust in mortal men, but on one who created all that stuff! He is immeasurably wise, powerful and loving.

All of that is wrapped up in his special Old Testament name. If you look in the NIV Bible, when it comes to the word LORD, they do something special. They put it in all capitals. That’s because it is a special name. It probably sounded something like “Yah-way.” But we don’t really know for sure because the Hebrews held the name in such honor, felt it so holy, that they did not pronounce the name out loud. They substituted another word—and it all gets pretty complicated from there. But the point is that this name that the NIV puts in all caps is God’s special name of faithful love.

It was the name God called himself in Exodus chapter 3. In that chapter, when God sent Moses back to Egypt, the LORD said, “Tell the Israelites that my name is ‘I AM WHO I AM.’” We might say, in a non-blasphemous way, “I am who I am.” By that we mean that if I happen to be a Minnesota Vikings fan, I am not going to change. Or if you suggest that I change some habit, I might say, “I am who I am” which means that I might realize that I should change a habit, but I’ve tried and I just can’t change.

But we do change. Several years ago, a man reflected upon this after his father was laid to rest. He spoke of the last days with his dad. The arms which once tossed him into the air, were so weak they had trouble lifting a fork. The man whose wisdom he had sought throughout life, could no longer remember his name. He still loved his father as much as ever, but he had changed, and then he passed away. This is why we must hope in the LORD.

Whenever you see that name in capitals, “the LORD,” God is saying, “I don’t change, I haven’t changed. I won’t change. Not ever.” Imagine having someone like that by your side. Someone who loves you completely, someone who is even more powerful and smarter than you thought your parents were when you were four years old – and someone who can never grow weaker or older or lose their mind. Sure, people promise that. But people change. Life moves on. We pass away. Our God does not. He is the Rock, our Mighty Fortress, our Hope in times of trouble.

II. Hope for the Downcast

Speaking of trouble, did you notice the sort of people God helps? ***“[The LORD] upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow.”*** (7-9).

The LORD has a special concern for the lowly. Is that really the God we have? The God who has a special place in his heart for the poor and powerless, the afflicted and depressed? Don’t we want a God of the successful, a God of the achievers?

What about that Bible passage: “God helps him who helps himself.” Now there is a Bible passage successful can appreciate. Problem is, it’s not in the Bible. It sounds good. It *contains* the truth that we should use the abilities and resources God has given us. But there is also something very objectionable in that phrase. “God helps him who helps himself” is full of self-trust, a lack of God-trust. That phrase is also seems to put helping oneself above serving God and neighbor first.

I take it out on that phrase because our reading, when it tells us to look for signs of the LORD’s faithfulness, does not tell us to look at the wise and rich of the world, but to look at the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the bowed down, the homeless, the fatherless, the widows.

The story is told of a bishop long, long ago in the time of the Roman Empire. He was given three days to gather up all the church's wealth and to hand it all over to the Roman government. So he gathered up all the church's wealth—and gave it away to the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering. At the end of the three days, when he appeared before the Roman prefect, he said he had no treasure. The treasure of the Church, he said, consisted in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering.

We may chuckle at his cleverness, but I don't think he was trying to be clever. If he was trying to be clever, he failed because he was immediately executed—and I imagine that he expected it to end that way. He spoke a truth, the truth of Psalm 146. Yes, all who trust in Jesus as their Savior, however humble they may be, are the treasure of God's eyes—whether they are oppressed, hungry, in prison, blind, bowed down, fatherless or bereaved.

But why does it have to be that way? Why has God chosen these ways? It's embarrassing to have the old clothes, the old cell phone, the rusted car. Why does God's kingdom on earth need to include, predominated by that which is not oohed and aahed at by the world? Why does God esteem the one who is humble and contrite and trembles at his word? (Isaiah 66:2).

It is because we are incorrigibly proud. Martin Luther once wrote, "Many a person thinks that he has God and everything in abundance when he has money and possessions... On the other hand, he who has no money doubts and is despondent... For very few people can be found who are of good cheer and who neither mourn nor complain if they lack [Riches]."ⁱⁱ

When we examine our lives, we see that truth in operation. In success we think we need no help, least of all God's. Our time devoted to God shrinks. At those times of success it is easy to take the credit and simply forget God. It is like having just eaten Thanksgiving dinner, "Why would I ask for more. I am already stuffed. I'm good God, I'll let you know when I need more."

On the other hand, when we are in need, we look for help. And one of the ways we do that is in prayer. I know that I pray more when I feel I need God's help, than when I am happy and satisfied. Could it just be that God knows that the only way to get the attention of most of us is by taking something away, by placing a roadblock in our life?

It may be humiliating to admit such things, but our God is not too proud to help. To all who repent and come to him, God does not refuse to be found. God does not do the "I told you so" thing. Whenever anyone turns to him in the name of Jesus, God's smile welcomes us and encourages us not just to speak a prayer in a time of trouble, but to daily draw near to him listening to his Word and praying.

And so, when we see God's favor upon the lowly in these verses, may we remember that the difficulties in life can themselves be a sign of God's favor. It was not for the righteous that Christ came into the world. It was not the successful self-assured Pharisee who went home justified, but the tax collector bowed so low that he could not look to heaven.

Here at the end, we must look at the very last words, if only briefly. At the end of the reading, after all the uplifting reasons we can and should place our trust in God, it ends with these words: "***But he frustrates the ways of the wicked.***" I kind of like the Hebrew. It says, "*He twists the path of the wicked.*" For the wicked, the LORD takes their path and he turns it. It does not go where they think. God doesn't do this because he is some kind of cosmic joker. God twists their paths—for the same reason he does ours sometimes – that the wicked might turn to him. The LORD himself says in Ezekiel 18:23, "*Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?... Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?*" Indeed, may it be so. May God use every difficulty in this world of sorrows to draw more people closer to him. And let us also use those times of trouble in the lives of the ungodly, to lead them to their God. You may be the one that God has planned to show them their path back the Lord Jesus, their Savior. Amen.

ⁱ Lange, J. P., Schaff, et al. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Psalms*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

ⁱⁱ Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, p.359, ¶5ff.