

THE LORD GOD HELPS ME

Isaiah 50:4–11

Key Verse: 50:7a

“But the Lord GOD helps me...”

Do you like to receive help? Or are you the kind of person who insists on doing everything by yourself? In life there may be times when it's good to receive help, and times when it's good to be independent. But in today's passage the servant of the Lord confesses humbly how he always receives help from God. How so? We learn much from these words of prophecy about Jesus our Lord. From his example we learn how we too can receive God's help. As we meditate on these verses, we want to see the kind of help God gives his servant. And we want to learn how we can serve God in our own lives today. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

In this song the servant is describing what God does for him. He repeats the phrase “the Lord GOD” four times (4a,5a,7a,9a). Each time, the original Hebrew words are “Adon YHWH.”¹ This rather unusual Hebrew name for God is rich in meaning. It emphasizes God's majesty and authority, but also his deep love and personal care.² Throughout the Old Testament, only special servants pray by calling God “Adon YHWH,” expressing their intimate knowledge of God and devotion to him.³ In this song, the servant speaks of God with this same name.

And look at the verbs that describe the Lord GOD: he “has given” (4); he “awakens” (4–2X); he “has opened” (5); he “helps” (7,9); he “vindicates” and is “near” (8). The word “helps” is in the present tense. In Part 1 of this book, Isaiah

¹ In the ESV Bible, we often find the Old Testament expression “the Lord God.” Though in English it always appears to be the same phrase, it actually is a translation of two contrasting Hebrew expressions: “YHWH Elohiym” and “Adon YHWH.” The much more common words “YHWH Elohiym” (used hundreds of times) are translated as “the LORD God” (notice “Lord” is in all caps). The less common “Adon YHWH,” it is translated as “the Lord GOD,” (notice “God” is in all caps). Isaiah uses “Adon YHWH” 29 times: 3:1,15; 7:7; 10:16,23–24,33; 19:4; 22:5,12,14–15; 25:8; 28:16,22; 30:15; 40:10; 48:16; 49:22; 50:4–5,7,9; 52:4; 56:8; 61:1,11; 65:13,15.

² E.g. Isa.25:8; 30:15; 40:10–11; 49:22; 56:8; 61:1,11.

³ See Abraham: Gen.15:2,8; Moses: Deut.3:24; 9:26; Joshua: Josh.7:7; Gideon: Judg.6:22; Samson: 16:28; David: 2Sam.7:18–20,28–29; Solomon: 1 Kings 8:53; David: Ps.69:6; 71:16; 109:21; Asaph: Ps.73:28; Jeremiah: Jer.1:6; 4:10; 14:13; 32:17,35; Ezekiel: Ezek.4:14; 9:8; 11:13; 20:49; Amos: Amos 7:2,5.

repeats that human help is useless.⁴ In Part 2, he shows that God is the true helper of his people.⁵ In the Psalms, David also referred to God as “my help” or “my helper.”⁶ In fact, David cried out to God for help often.⁷ God’s help is mentioned in other Psalms, too. The famous Psalm 46 begins: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (1). The famous Psalm 121 begins: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (1–2). This servant of the Lord experiences such help from God. In what ways?

First, “the tongue of those who are taught.” Read verse 4a. “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught...” This phrase “those who are taught” is repeated in verse 4b. In Hebrew, this phrase, “those who are taught,” is just one word: “disciples.” In 8:16 Isaiah says, “Bind up the testimony; seal the teaching among my disciples.” This word “disciples” is the same Hebrew word used twice in 50:4. Disciples are those who, through intimate association with a teacher, come to know what the teacher knows. Isaiah had disciples who received the word of God from him. He urged them not only to receive it but also to treasure and guard God’s word. It means to keep people from tampering with or adding to it. But the word “testimony” also suggests that God’s word should not be locked up somewhere; it’s meant to be passed on to others. As Isaiah adds in 8:17, by treasuring his word, guarding his word, depending on his word, passing on his word, disciples are those who wait for the LORD and hope in him. And as he concludes in 8:19–20, when people are desperate for any kind of help, disciples go straight “To the teaching and to the testimony!” meaning to the word of God.

It’s surprising that in 50:4 the servant of the Lord is described as a disciple. In what sense? Here, the focus of his discipline is his tongue. In the previous song, he said God made his mouth like a sharpened sword. Now it’s his tongue. What’s he saying? He’s telling us how important the ministry of God’s word is.

Why is God so focused on preparing his servant for the ministry of the word? It’s because the world we live in is “fallen.” It’s full of spiritual forces of evil. Apostle Paul calls it “this present darkness” (Eph.6:12). Isaiah calls it “thick darkness” (8:22). All of us are living in it. Basically, in the dark, people can’t see. They’re

⁴ 10:3; 20:6; 30:5,7; 31:1–3.

⁵ 41:10,13–14; 44:2; 49:8.

⁶ Ps.22:19; 27:9; 30:10; 40:17; 54:4; 63:7; 70:5; 124:8.

⁷ Ps.18:6; 20:2; 22:11,19; 28:2; 30:2,10; 31:22; 38:22; 40:13; 60:11; 70:1,5; 108:12; 109:26.

calling evil good, and good evil (5:20a). They're misleading people. As Isaiah said in chapter 2, only the word of God can teach us God's ways, so that we can walk in his paths (2:3). As he said in chapter 8, only when we speak according to his word do we have "dawn" (8:20b). Isaiah's words point us to Jesus, the great light, who can shine on our deepest darkness and open our blinded eyes (9:2; 42:7). This is why preparation for the ministry of the word is crucial.

And notice: the servant is not trying to fix himself. Read verse 4b–5a. "Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear..." This is the help that comes from the Lord GOD. It's such a quiet, intimate process. The awesome yet caring God is working personally on his servant. God comes to him every morning to awaken him. No alarm clock! And the servant doesn't say, "Go away! You're annoying! I'm too tired!" He responds; he gets up. Why does God visit his servant each morning? It's the first part of his day, the best part. "Morning by morning" tells us it's his daily routine. The point is not to just get up early and be more productive. God comes to "awaken" and "open" his ear. The servant has no agenda other than learning to listen to God, first thing each day. Jesus fulfilled this by rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, and going to a desolate place to pray (Mark 1:35).

Here, verse 4 uses the phrase "to hear as those who are taught." It gives us a window into his prayer life. Primarily it's not a time for talking to God but a time for listening to God. In chapter 30 Isaiah calls God our "Teacher"; we need eyes to see him and ears to hear his word (30:20–21). Yet Isaiah warns in chapter 6 that we can "keep on hearing" but "not understand" (6:9). In chapter 28 he describes how, in our sin, Bible teaching can sound like "precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line"---in other words, tedious, monotonous and habitual, like a lot of meaningless jargon (28:10,13). In chapter 30 Isaiah puts it plainly: we can be rebellious, "unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD" (30:9).

How do we "hear as those who are taught"? In Hebrew, "hear" means "to listen intelligently, intending to obey it." In Part 2 of Isaiah, God repeatedly warns us to "listen" to him.⁸ So to "hear as those who are taught" means to be fully present and seriously motivated—motivated to listen, motivated to learn, motivated to obey what God says. This is what the servant does morning by morning.

⁸ 41:1; 42:23; 46:3,12; 48:12,14; 49:1; 51:1,7; 55:2; see also 65:12; 66:4.

What happens when he responds to God each morning like this? Right in the middle of verse 4 he says, "...that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." All this listening is not just for the servant's own sake; it's to equip him to help others. Who needs the servant's help? It says "him who is weary." Isaiah shares elsewhere that God really wants to give a weary person rest (28:11–12) and new power to live (40:29).

So who is this weary person? In some sense, it's everybody. Why are we all so weary? Isaiah depicts the world we live in as a windy, stormy, dry place, a "weary land" (32:2); just living in it makes us weary. Isaiah tells us how the finality of life makes us weary, weary even of looking to God for help (38:14). In chapter 40 Isaiah describes how, when we feel like God doesn't notice or care about us, we become weary (40:27ff.). In other places, the Bible tells us that when we keep on doing good, we can become weary (Gal.6:9), or how, if we keep deceiving and sinning, we become weary (Jer.9:5).

How does God help the weary? It says here in verse 4 it's "with a word." Just one word from God has life-giving power. Psalm 19:7–8 says, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes..." God himself is our source of wisdom (Prov.2:6), and he gives wisdom through his word (Ps.119:98) if we ask him (James 1:5). God's words make us wise for salvation (2Tim.3:15), wise for living (Deut.4:6) and wise to help others. By listening to God each morning, God helps his servant develop a wise tongue that brings healing (Prov.12:18). The servant learns which life-giving word to give to which person.

Jesus our Lord fulfilled this. In his prayer to the Father for his disciples, he said, "For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them..." (John 17:8). By listening to God, he received God's words, then gave them to his disciples. Like Jesus the servant, we need to be listening to God and asking his wisdom what word to give others.

Second, "I turned not backward." Read verses 5–6. "The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." This develops further what God said in the previous song,

that his servant would be “deeply despised” and “abhorred” (49:7). It will be depicted most fully in the last servant song (52:13–53:12). Here, the point is that, as the servant listened to God, God not only gave him his word to help others; he also helped him discern God’s will for himself. And God’s will was hard. People would strike this servant, pull out his beard, pour out disgrace and even spit on him. These were the most offensive, humiliating things they could do to him.

When we even imagine that we’re being humiliated, we become furious. But through listening to God, the servant is ready to surrender even to such abusive treatment. He didn’t turn back or hide from it, but gave himself to it all. This looks forward to what Jesus would do. He would be mocked, shamefully treated, spat upon, flogged and killed (Luke 18:32–33) in order to save us from our sins.

How could he do it? Read verse 7. “But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.” Here the servant is speaking in an ultimate sense. Though he would be disgraced and shamed for a time, God would eventually glorify him forever and ever. And in the midst of all these sufferings, the servant would experience God’s help, moment by moment. God would give him the strength to determine to go through it all.

Facing such humiliation and suffering, how did Jesus receive such help from God? Luke 22:41–44 reads, “And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground.’” He received God’s help to go through all the suffering through such earnest prayer. If we want God’s help, we need to pray like he did.

In verses 8–9 the servant receives God’s help in the form of vindication. The language here sounds like a trial. No one is able to declare him guilty. This prophecy was fulfilled when many accusers appeared during Jesus’ trial to smear him with their twisted lies. After listening to it all and interviewing Jesus personally, Pilate repeatedly said, “I find no guilt in him.”⁹ Above all, God vindicated Jesus. He was crucified in shame and disgrace, but God raised him from the dead by the

⁹ John 18:38; 19:4,6.

power of the Spirit and made him Lord and Christ.¹⁰ He became the cornerstone, the only source of salvation, and Judge of the living and the dead.¹¹

Read verse 10. “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.” The alternative is to try to equip ourselves with our own kind of light, but find that it leads to eternal torment (11). What does it mean to obey his voice and trust in him? In this context, it’s telling us that we Christians need not only to receive the grace of God’s servant Jesus but also to follow him. The Bible says, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1Pet.2:21). We’re all called to share his sufferings, to be insulted for his name, and to suffer according to God’s will while doing good (1Pet.4:13–14,19). How can we do it? We’ve got to be listening to God, letting him prepare us through his word.

Read verse 7a again. “But the Lord GOD helps me...” Thank God for the humble example of our Lord Jesus, the Servant, who depended on God’s help every day, and in all the sufferings he endured. Like Jesus, may God help us spend time, morning by morning, really listening to him. Through this, may God prepare us for the ministry of his word in these dark times. And may God open our minds and hearts to embrace his will for us: to participate in the sufferings of Christ, with faith in his help.

¹⁰ Acts 2:36; Rom.8:11; 1Tim.3:16.

¹¹ Acts 4:11–12; 10:42; 2Tim.4:1; 1Pet.4:5.