

Thursday, September 8 and Sunday, September 11

“Love Helps Those Who Cannot Help Themselves”¹

Selected Verses from Psalms 10, 19, and 121

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Psalm 10

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?²In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor— let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.⁴In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”; all their thoughts are, “There is no God.”⁶They think in their heart, “We shall not be moved; throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.”¹¹They think in their heart, “God has forgotten – God has hidden God’s face, we will never see it.”¹²Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.¹⁶The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from God’s land.¹⁷O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear¹⁸to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. ² Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. ³ There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; ⁴ yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Psalm 121

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴ He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
⁸ The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*

This morning we begin again with Sunday School and Confirmation and Adult Education here at Federated Church. It’s a Sunday full of energy and opportunities. We pray that God’s Spirit will dwell among us as we take this opportunity to engage in our *formation* as Christians. In Sunday School, and in Confirmation, and in Adult Education, I’ve been pleased to have Pastor Edward encourage the word *formation*.

Because we do not just learn in Education Hour each Sunday – we are not simply *educated* in the Bible and Christians beliefs. Rather, Education Hour is when we are called to take time *for our whole lives long* to be open to God’s Spirit *forming* us on our journeys.

¹ Paul Overstreet, from the song title

This evening/morning, I am beginning a five week Bible study and sermon series titled “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say,” based on the book of this title by Pastor Adam Hamilton. I hope that our Bible studies and the sermons in these five weeks are not simply about finding out if a phrase is in the Bible or not. Rather, I hope that this five week series helps us all to go *deeper* in our journeys with God and God’s word. Deeper in our *formation*.

Please join me in prayer. *Lord, help us to love you with all of our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. Help us to love you, not only with our lips, but also with our lives. Help us to move from feeling that we are yours to lives that demonstrate all that we are, and that all that we have is yours. Help us to move from declarations of love for you in church today to open deeds of love for you tomorrow in the world. Amen.*

Fifteen years ago today, the end of the story in a field in Pennsylvania could not be summed up as “God helps those who help themselves.” That’s not how the story ended for United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001.

The innocent 33 passengers and 7 crew members of Flight 93 came to the conclusion that they had no options for help on September 11, 2001. Sure, they were hoping for a miracle, as I suppose anyone would on a plane that has been hijacked. But as the minutes ticked by on that plane, they had to make decisions in lieu of an obvious miracle.

Forcing the crash-landing of the plane in Pennsylvania would mean their likely deaths, but the other option if the plane returned to Washington D.C. was that they would die *and* more people in addition to them would die.

People of many faiths – not only Christians – could be able to say that the dead were ultimately taken care of by God – because God is the eternal home for believers, taken care of forever. The passengers and crew of that plane helped themselves, in a way, and God helped them, in a way.

The passengers and crew of United Flight 93 were ordinary people put in exceptional circumstances. I have a hunch that some of the reason we might feel uncomfortable sometimes about the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is because of the *exceptional* times of life.

We would never say to parents grieving the death of a child that “God helps those who help themselves.” We would never say to the person in treatment for cancer that “God helps those who help themselves.” We would not walk up to a person this past summer standing over the charred remains of a home consumed by a wildfire, or in recent weeks, a person wading through the flooded contents of their waterlogged home, that “God helps those who help themselves.”

Rather, this phrase is much more commonly mumbled under our breaths as we react to mundane, everyday, typical frustrations of life—the times when we are in too much of a hurry *to care*. We also tend to say this phrase about people we think we will never meet, whose circumstances seem unfamiliar to us. We say it the most about people who we think are lazy. Of course, by our own definition of “lazy.”

What’s certainly most uncomfortable about the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is that you cannot say it’s true all of the time...especially if you actually read the Bible—because it’s not in the Bible.

Now, don’t feel alone or embarrassed if you thought that the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” was in the Bible. George Barna, founder of the Barna Group, has been surveying Americans

about their faith for over 30 years.² When the Barna Group asked folks about this very phrase, and asked if the Bible teaches this phrase, 53% strongly agreed and 22% agreed – put together, that’s 75% agreement.³ Did you know that people could agree that much on *anything*?

The phrase “God helps those who help themselves” also tops surveys of most “well-known” Bible verses, *in spite of not being in the Bible*.

On an episode of *The Tonight Show*, Jay Leno asked people on the street to name the Ten Commandments. Guess what was the most popular response?⁴

So if God helps those who help themselves, what explanation is there for United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001?

If you are older than 25 years of age, you most likely remember where you were 15 years ago today. I do. At the time I was working as a college chaplain and Spanish teacher for large companies, mostly in the evenings, so I had sort of reverses days—I was more often at home in the mornings. During the 8am hour on September 11, 2001, I was cleaning my bathroom. I was listening to the news on public radio, and I remember that it was obvious that the radio host was having to juggle in-coming information.

The usual prepared and even tone of the host’s voice while reporting the news was uncharacteristically *informal* as he tried to figure out how to report what was going on, particularly since, at the 8 o’ clock hour, no one knew exactly...what was going on.

One of the most common phrases that I heard after September 11th was that “nothing had prepared us for this.” What perhaps is more true is that we did not **want** to be prepared for what happened, *because it was horrible*.

I remember struggling with what I felt was a somewhat different perspective than most people. In 2001, I was in the middle of a decade in which I lived in or visited Central America a dozen times. On several of those visits, which were often with church mission trips, I had been to the sites of massacres of civilians in El Salvador. Some sites had memorials, while some memorials had yet to be built because human remains were still being discovered in the earth.

In several places, massacres of civilians had happened less than 15 years before, and the killing had been conducted by men trained at military bases in the United States. During the several years before 2001, I had learned the very uncomfortable truth that Americans had funded some very unethical and immoral things in Central America.

I was horrified on September 11th, but because I had travelled outside of the U.S., I was very sad that day to have to admit that I was not surprised. On September 11th, I didn’t know any better than anyone else who or what had conducted the airplane violence. What I had learned was that America had done a lot of things in the world with the attitude that “God helps those who help themselves,” and the “themselves” were us and nobody else. I was very saddened that we would now know what Salvadorans had felt like.

² <https://www.barna.com/about/george-barna/>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_helps_those_who_help_themselves

⁴ *Ibid.*

Eventually, it seemed that the very American, but not particularly Christian attitude of “God helps those who helped themselves” was mimicked by others. Eventually, the violence was, too. I hope all adults will come to the Bible study this morning following worship service, because we are going to crack open Bibles and we are going to study several Bible verses. We’re going to study verses that can be interpreted to *support* the phrase “God helps those who help themselves.” There are a lot more verses in the Bible that do **not** support the phrase “God helps those who help themselves.” Either way that you feel about it, please do come to the Bible study!

So.....if we can find Bible verses that would teach us to help ourselves (within reason) and Bible verses that tell us to help others, how do we know where to land, from situation to situation?

The verses from the psalms that we shared this morning leave one thing without a doubt: God loves us. So we should take the hint about how to live, and especially, how to treat one another.

A man named Paul Overstreet understands this. He wrote a song titled “Love Helps Those Who Cannot Help Themselves.” It’s about the everyday, which if you look at through a lens of God’s love, every day is quite *exceptional*. Here are Mr. Overstreet’s song lyrics⁵:

*Grandma she don't really get around good anymore
In fact to get her out the house is really quite a chore
But every day somebody seems to find a time to stop
To see if grandma needs something from where they go
to shop 'Cause you see*

*Love helps those who cannot help themselves
It cares about those hearts that's been put up on a shelf
It will introduce a lonely soul to a lonely someone else
Love helps those who cannot help themselves*

*Mr. Johnson has a small farm down in southern Tennessee
But one year he took ill before time to plant seed
And no one knows which neighbor planted or they just won't tell
But he had his best crop ever by the time that he got well
'Cause you see*

*Love helps those who cannot help themselves
It cares about those hearts that's been put up on a shelf
It will introduce a lonely soul to a lonely someone else
Love helps those who cannot help themselves*

33 of the passengers and the 7 crew members of United Flight 93 could not help themselves. And many people to this day would really like an answer from God about why what happened that day happened.

If we step back and see what was exceptional about the ordinary people on Flight 93, we see that they did not help themselves. But whatever lives they saved know that *Love helps those who cannot help themselves*, because love is exactly what made all the difference in the airspace over Pennsylvania.

The situation might have been helpless, but it wasn’t hopeless, because the passengers and crew did not act as if God only helps those who help themselves. *Their* actions showed that God *can work* through the love that helps those who cannot help themselves.

Somehow, in spite of a terrifying and terminal situation, those children of God showed love for people they would never meet and helped other children of God in the only way that they could.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.cowboylrics.com/lyrics/overstreet-paul/love-helps-those-24110.html>