



Sermon delivered by
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Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
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"When All Else Has Failed"

(Psalm 119: 105-112)

God helps those who help themselves. Ben Franklin is the author of those 6 immortal words, not the Bible, not Jesus Christ, not even your pastor. *God helps those who help themselves* may sound helpful and logical and biblical, but such a thought is really bad theology. What is better theology is this: *God helps those who allow God to help them.* Now, that is sound and solid theology, and that is what is to be found in the Bible and on the lips of our precious Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Let's be honest: left up to us, we can do very little that is of lasting value much less goodness. But when we put all our eggs into the hands of the Almighty, it is then we may be confident that for today and tomorrow and for all the days to come our days will be days of hope and promise. God is not some emergency plan we activate when all else has failed, although that is how many of us regard faith in God. Faith in God through a faith that Christ is risen keeps us honest that God is our Plan "A," not some Plan "B," not some emergency plan when all else has failed; rather, God is **the** plan for all time, without exception.

The longest chapter in the Bible is the 119th Psalm. It is a wordy psalm, a psalm of praise, confession, proclamation, a psalm of celebrating what is known fully and faithfully about God, not what is hoped about God, but what is known to be true about God. And of all the things known about God is this: if you follow where the Spirit of God leads, you will never become lost nor will you ever be disappointed. *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

What more needs to be said? One of the hardest parts of being a pastor is having people show up wanting an answer. They have run out of answers, and they come to my door seeking the answer that has alluded them. Now, this may sound troubling, this may even sound disappointing, but we pastors rarely have the answer you need, rarely. What we do have is a reminder that the answer you are looking for does exist, and it is to be found from God. That is what we read again and again in the Psalter: *You, O God, have what I need. You, O God, can do for me what I cannot do for myself. You, O God, never fail the one who trusts in You.*

Psalm 119 is a wordy psalm for the same reason you and I become tongue-tied when we try to express an overwhelming sense of gratitude to someone. I hope you know what I mean. I hope you have had the experience where someone has done something for you, and you are grateful; you are very grateful. And you find it hard expressing to them how grateful you are for what they have done for you? At such moments, we find ourselves rambling on, repeating ourselves, and it becomes simply a variation on a theme of, *Thank you*. That's the purpose of Psalm 119. In so many words, the psalmist is saying, *You never fail me, O God; You never fail me, and I am grateful, so very grateful*, and, at times, such gratitude requires more than a simple, *Thank you*. At times, it requires a lot of words to say a simple, *Thank you*. In verse 108, the psalmist says, *Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD; accept my thank you*, and then the psalmist says, *and teach me Your ways*. In other words, give me more of what You know about living this life. Teach me what works, teach me what doesn't work life. Teach me so I don't have to suffer making the same mistake over and over and over again. Teach me Your Plan "A," O God, so I may begin everyday heading in the right direction, so I don't have to make some u-turn, so I won't have to stop to ask for directions.

You know what is so tempting, what is so seductive about this modern day of technology? It is the belief that you and I cannot get lost. Today, there is GPS. Today, we have Google maps. We have apps in our cars and on our phones that guarantee to get us where we want to go. It is tempting to believe we will never be lost again, never have to ask for directions. But such a thought is what? It's "fake news"! We may get where we want to go, but there are ways of still being lost that have nothing to do with where you are physically, and everything to do with where you are spiritually. There are ways of being lost that no app and no device can reverse or remedy. There are ways and times of being lost that require a particular light and direction that are not of this world.

You know what is frustrating for the people who ask me for some answer is that when I tell them Who has the answer, they look at me as if I am joking or, worse, that I am not taking them seriously, enough. I wish I had a quarter for each time someone has doubted me when I told them that the answer they are looking is to be found through a relationship with Jesus Christ. I cease to be amazed at the number of times someone wants an answer that has nothing whatsoever to do with God. They want an answer they can accommodate into their lives all by themselves. They want to privatize their life so they don't have to go wandering around in the realm of things out of their control.

I also wish I had a quarter for every time someone has told me, *Gus, I know what I am doing*. I have rarely found that to be the case. Few of us, if any of us really know what we are doing. Don't misunderstand me. Most of us seek to be responsible people. Most of us do come in out of the rain. Most of us seek the logical, the responsible, the respectable thing to do when it comes our turn, but do we always know that what we are doing is the right thing to do? Not really; not all the time, no matter how good our intentions may be. That's why the psalmist says in verse 109: *I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget Your law*. Make sure you hear that. The psalmist is saying, *I take*

responsibility for my life, but I know Who has Plan “A” for my life, and it isn’t me. The psalmist is saying, It’s You, O God. My life will become a train-wreck if left up to me. The psalmist is saying, My life will become a nightmare if my plan succeeds. I am reminded of what Bernie Madoff, the king of Ponzi schemes, is quoted as saying: I was too successful.

I know, I know that if I live a responsible life according to God’s plan that’s when my heart experiences joy, a joy not of my own making, not due to my success, but due to God’s giving. And I also know this: happiness is a commodity; joy is a gift, and the last time I checked only the living God of Jesus Christ can give you and me joy, not happiness, but joy, and there is a difference; there is a huge difference between happiness and joy, there is a night and day difference between happiness and joy. Amen?

I love what the psalmist says in verse 112: *I incline my heart to perform Your will, your lessons, your teachings; I incline my heart to honor the way You have designed this life. I incline my heart.* In the Hebrew, what is really being said is that, *I will bend over backwards to please You, O God, to work and to keep and to obey the teachings You have put in place.* Now, I ask you: When was the last time you or I bent over backwards to please God? When was the last time we checked our self-interest at the door and allowed the Lord to have His way with us? I am not saying we never bend over backwards to please the Lord, but I am suggesting we do not do it often enough, do we? Do we? I believe the honest answer is, we don’t.

But if we did, we would come to discover that God’s Plan “A” for my life and for your life is fairly exceptional. God’s plan for our lives is meant to knock off our socks, and the reason is how personalized God’s plan is for your life and my life. It’s almost as if the Lord is living our life for us, which, of course, is being done through faith in Christ. And, thus, it is no surprise that the Lord knows our need even before the words are upon our lips. No wonder the psalmist

goes on to say that, *I incline my heart to obey God's word and God's will forever, right to the end of this earthly age* – and I incline my heart, I bend over backwards not when it is convenient, not when someone is watching, not when I feel like it, but forever, always, without exception.

And can you imagine the joy that comes next? Can you imagine the joy on the Lord's face for a life lived that well and that faithfully and that obediently? By faith, I can, and I hope you can, too.

Let us pray: When all else fails, when our well thought-out plans do not succeed, we thank You, O God, that Your plan in Jesus never fails us, and we may trust in Your plan knowing, believing that Jesus has our best interest at heart, always. For Jesus *is* our plan, both now and forever more! Amen.