

I BELIEVE IN MY HEAVENLY FATHER

Credo Series (Part 8) | Psalm 121

Do any of you Dad's here, like action movies? As my wife and kids could tell you, I'm a sucker for them and, particularly, for any story that stars the actor, Liam Neeson. Have you seen any of his movies? Some of you will know him as the hero of *Schindler's List*, the man who saved thousands of Jews from the Nazi's. Some of the kids here will know Neeson as the voice of Optimus Prime, the giant good-guy robot from the *Transformers* movies. If you are a *Star Wars* fan, then you know Neeson as the Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn. Or you may identify him as the voice of Aslan the Lion in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

In most of his roles, Liam Neeson plays a figure who combines tremendous strength with great compassion and a total commitment to protecting and pursuing the good of those he loves. Nowhere is that more vivid than when the hero Liam Neeson plays is a DAD. He does that a lot, actually, maybe most famously in a series of films called, *Taken*, where he relentlessly pursues and protects his kidnapped child and whumps the bad guys who've done her wrong. But what really impresses me is that Neeson – for all his likely human flaws -- has apparently also been an amazing Dad in real life. He raised two kids alone after his wife tragically died young in a skiing accident.

Great strength, compassion, and commitment to your loved ones is a beautiful thing in a parent. I hope you've experienced a lot of that in your own family of origin and, if not, then from others sent to meet you on the path of your life. I'm guessing that all of us who are real-life fathers aspire to being a strong, compassionate, committed presence to our children. But what I know for sure is that the archetype for all of this – the ultimate model for this kind of Dad – is not an actor in a movie. As the Apostles' Creed says in its opening line, which we saved just for today: ***I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.***

You may be interested to know that that phrase, "*Maker of heaven and earth,*" comes from Psalm 121, which is known as a "song of ascent." As Suanne and Aaron reminded us last week, there were particular psalms sung by ancient Jews as they made a pilgrimage from wherever they came from up to the mountaintop city of Jerusalem for the high holy days. The pilgrimage to that place would typically take travelers through deserts and valleys, over rivers and through ravines. There was risk and hardship along the journey. There was danger from weather and wild animals and violent thieves. These trips were like action movies only deadly real.

So, rather than singing "*the wheels on the bus*" or "*99 bottles of beer on the wall,*" the Jewish people sang a spiritual song as they went along. They declared their belief that, in spite of all their natural fears and all that might truly befall them, they were not alone. They had help. Psalm 121 starts out: **I lift up my eyes to the mountains —**

where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psa 121:1-2). Say that last sentence with me: **My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.** Now, that's some kind of help. When you're in trouble, who you gonna call? Somebody more reliable than the Ghostbusters... Someone even more attentive than the 911 Operator... Someone wiser and more powerful than local government or law enforcement. Your help will come from the Lord God Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Think about this with me. How mighty would a Being need to be who could make just this planet earth and all of the complex systems and brilliantly-engineered life forms that inhabit it? How much more mighty would that Being have to be to account for the two trillion galaxies in just that part of the universe we've been able to observe with our instruments? And how more mighty still must be the Intelligence and Power who brought into existence and holds together not just time and space but the six additional invisible dimensions of reality that physicists now theorize also exist?¹ The Apostles Creed answers: "**Almighty.**" This being could do anything – transform matter, invoke alternate histories, resurrect life, redeem tragedies.

But here is the wondrous thing the Creed and the Scriptures also tell us: This Almighty God is your "Father." ***I believe in God, the Father Almighty...*** Jesus taught that the Source of all reality and working around us and in us and for us at all times is not some impersonal Force... not some alien intelligence... not some distant, long ago watchmaker... not some Merely Mighty superpower... At the root of everything, Jesus said, is a Being who feels and thinks about you and acts toward you as your heavenly "Abba" – the Aramaic word for "Dad."

Years ago, Amy and I took our oldest child, Rush, with us to Disneyland. Rush was about three at the time. We had him in a stroller which he eventually insisted on getting out of. The place was teeming with people moving every which way and I worried he'd get knocked over. But he managed to hold his ground and then started to walk. At first, he just wove his way around the legs of the people closest to us. And then, he just kept on going. He didn't look over his shoulder to see where his parents were. He didn't seem too daunted by the size and pace of the swirling crowd. He got bumped a few times and fell down. But he got up and continued on his pilgrimage through Adventureland and Fantasyland and into Frontierland. He walked for some 20 minutes before he stopped, turned around, and looked up as if to ask for help.

And there I was. As his arms went up, I picked him up. I don't think he understood how delighted I felt at seeing him make this long journey. I'm not sure he grasped how profoundly I loved him or how at-the-ready I'd been every step of the way to come to his aid, or muster other help and resources, if he'd really needed them. In some marvelous way, Rush didn't seem surprised when he turned and I was there, watching over him. Why? Because I was his Abba, his Dad.

Five times in the eight verses of Psalm 121, we are told that the Lord God, our Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth “watches over” us. **He who watches over you will not slumber (Psa 121:3)**. I know we have a tendency to think that our well-being in life is all up to us. We feel that our security lies in our attentiveness and our action; and that’s partly true. Good fathers teach their kids to take initiative and be responsible. But the Psalmist reminds us that, even when we are unconscious and inactive, our heavenly Father is there. **He will neither slumber nor sleep (Psa 121:4)**. He is committed to your well-being 24/7, 365, every year of your life.

Again the Psalm declares, **The Lord watches over you — the Lord is your shade at your right hand (Psa 121:5)**. I went down to Missouri last weekend to visit with our youngest child, Reed. On Saturday we played golf at a public course and, halfway through, began to regret it. It was in the 90’s and sweltering. We’d not brought water and there was no refreshment cart to be found. But now and then, there was a TREE. I’d say, “Reed, come on over here.” And we’d step under it’s shade and breathe a sigh of relief. The Psalm suggests that God our Father works in our lives this way too. There’s a certain amount of heat all of us have to deal with as we make our pilgrimage in life. The pressures in school or your career or on your finances or in one of your relationships can feel oppressive at times. Maybe you are feeling the heat right now. But your heavenly Father says: *Step under my shade. Rest here with me. Talk with that person I’m providing to you. Get some relief from the heat.* I hope this church can be one of God’s trees in your life – a place shade and shelter. You can feel free to even take a little siesta here, if you need it!

The song of ascent goes on to say, because the Lord watches over you: **The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night (Psa 121:6)**. Sometimes it’s not in the heat of the day but in the cold and lunacy of the night where we need our Father’s help. Have you ever been through a really bad night where you felt like you were going crazy? Suddenly, all the worries and weight of the world came closing in. You hear the employer saying, “You’re fired” or the doctor declaring, “It’s cancer” or the spouse saying, “Divorce” or the child blurting, “I’m pregnant” or the school saying “Denied” or some critic crying, “Failure!” The Father Almighty, who does not slumber, is with you in that night. Call on him for help. He’s like a great Dad who comes into your room in the midst of your nightmare and pulls the covers up around your shoulders and rubs your back till you know: *I’m going to be OK.*

Toward the end of this amazing Psalm, the writer asserts: **The Lord will keep you from all harm — he will watch over your life (Psa 121:7)**. When I first read that verse – and there are other ones like it in the Bible – I thought: Well, that’s not been my experience or that of a whole lot of people I know. God doesn’t keep any of us from ALL harm. Jesus himself said: **In this world you will suffer (John 16:33)**. You’ll experience loss and persecution and criticism. Your feelings and your body will sometimes hurt. So what does this text really mean?

The answer, I think, is suggested by the last verse of the Psalm. **The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore (Psa 121:8)** Our Almighty Father is always at work for our good, but within the frame of **now and forevermore**. Dads (or Moms): Have you ever allowed one of your kids to go through something uncomfortable or painful, because you saw a bigger picture. You had a longer view. You understood how this experience they saw as harmful could shape or release or lead to something that in the end was very good? Jesus said: **If you, then, though you are evil [i.e. far less than God]... know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven? (Mat 7:11)**

Our Father in heaven, has the highest view possible view. He sees history not as a line he moves along but as a vast tapestry beneath his feet. He sees how all the connections work. And because he is the **Maker of heaven and earth**, he knows how to weave an apparently ugly or cut-off thread into the spectacularly good picture he is ultimately making. The Apostle Paul describes it this way: **I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... For we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom 8:18, 28).**

Now and then we catch a glimpse of God working things together for good. This photograph is such a picture. In the back row and far right of this photo is my friend and colleague Eric Camfield. In the center, holding the guitar, is Eric and Suanne's son, Clay. Walking from childhood to the mountaintop on which he now stands was not an easy journey for Clay, as it wasn't for me or maybe for you. But Clay is bound for the college of his dreams now. He is filled with faith in God. He is confident in his calling to be a great servant-leader. And that is because his heavenly Father (and his earthly parents) intentionally wove into Clay's life all of the other figures in that picture. Each of these men from our church brought their strength and compassion and made a commitment to investing in and, in God's name, **watching over** this child.

Do you recall how I said at the beginning that, in most of his roles, Liam Neeson plays a figure who combines *tremendous strength* with *great compassion* and a *total commitment to protecting and pursuing the good of those he loves*? Well, I want to say "Thank You" and "Well Done" to those guys and every man who has shown such character to their children or someone they've mentored, when no camera was on them. You've not only made someone's pilgrimage toward the New Jerusalem better than it could ever be otherwise; you've made it easier for us to trust and **believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth** -- the One to whom we can always turn for help.



¹ <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-universe-dimensions.html>