

“LIFE IS A JOURNEY”

Psalm 121 March 8, 2020

It's only week two in Lent; there's a long road ahead of us. Yet, if we're not careful, we can begin to stop paying attention. We can begin to fall into the routine of the Lenten season. Let's not forget that Lent is about upsetting the routine and turning us inward and outward at the same time. God is here, even in the most routine moments of our lives. As we journey through this season, when we pay attention and when we forget to, when we go out and when we come in, we are not alone. In the morning when we rise, give me Jesus.

The psalm today is one of the fifteen psalms (120-134) known as the Psalms of Ascent. These psalms were sung by those traveling to Jerusalem for the three great feasts. So these are travel songs, songs for the road, songs for the journey of life. They are called Psalms of Ascent not only because the people were going to Jerusalem, but because the psalms themselves lead us upward to God in our own personal walk with the Lord. And so it is in this sense that they are stepping stones to God's heart for our journey and for our life.

We all need help at times in life. The Beatles used to sing: “I get by with a little help from my friends.” The commercial for the Lifeline product carries the tagline: “Help! I've fallen and I can't get up!” Where do you go when you need help? Do you call on family? Friends? Dial 911?

It's good to have a support system in place, but we need to look further than that. History and experience teach us that no safety plan, no insurance policy, no security system can keep you absolutely safe in this life. You can follow all the safety rules, take every precaution, exercise and eat well, and things can still go wrong. That's why we need to look to God for our help. It was Ben Franklin who said, “God helps those who help themselves,” but the Scriptures teach us that God helps those who seek his help. None of us are safe until we take refuge in God.

Psalm 121 is a psalm about trusting in God's providential care. It is a travel Psalm. In fact many families read this Psalm out loud together before going on a trip. Devout Jews recite portions of this Psalm when they leave or enter their homes. They attach a small cylinder called a Mezuzah with some Scriptures in it to their right door frame. And whenever they leave or enter their home they touch the Mezuzah and recite Psalm 121 verses 5 and 8.

Do you need help this morning? Then this psalm is for you. It could be a good one to memorize and have handy for the journey of life. Psalm 121 teaches us three big truths about God's help and care for you. 1) The Creator is your helper, 2) The God of Israel is your protector. And then finally, 3) the Lord will keep you from all harm. Let's look at all three of these as we learn to put our trust in God's providence and care for our lives.

First of all, the Creator is your helper. Look at verses 1-2: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help comfort from? My Help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 121:1-2) These are beautiful verses of Scripture that have brought much comfort to God's people over the years. Many of you may have quoted these verses in times of need. They tell us several things about God and the help that he provides.

Look beyond the mountains to the God who created them. (Psalm 46:1m 90:2) The hills in verse one are part of the argument here. Mountains are symbols of strength and stability. They are great in size, long-lasting and unchanging. The creation reflects the creator. So the God who made the mountains is even greater in power and strength.

The hills are also upward in direction. We tend to look down when we're in trouble. Right? Our faces are downcast. Our focus is on our troubles and all our problems down here, and they just tend to drag us down further. But don't look down! That's the wrong direction!!! The hills are a reminder that we are to look up. You must lift your eyes to look at a mountain. But don't stop there! Are you looking high enough? You must look beyond the mountains to the God who created them because God is higher than all.

Remember these psalms were sung by travelers on their way to Jerusalem, and it is possible they may have sung this Psalm as they were nearing the hills that surrounded Jerusalem. In that case they were not only looking up at the mountains, but they would also have been looking up towards Jerusalem and the temple, the dwelling place of God.

Psalm 46 tells us "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." We read in Psalm 90:2: "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." God is bigger than the mountains and God is before the mountains. We don't look to the mountains for our strength, but the mountains get our eyes off of our problems and lift our eyes up towards God who can help us in our times of need.

So don't just look to the hills but look to the one who made the hills. Look past the creation to the Creator. As Pastor Josh Moody writes: "Nature is not the solution. ...It points to the solution." Look beyond the mountains to the God who created them.

The second truth is this: the God of Israel is your protector. Look at verses 3-6: "He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night." (Psalm 121:3-6) These verses teach us that God is not only the creator of the world but the protector of Israel. And he is your protector as well.

God never slumbers nor sleeps. Look at verses 3-4: "He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Our God is always awake. He never falls asleep on the watch. It's easy to say we can stay awake, like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, but then we fall asleep on our watch, but not God. He never dozes or nods off. He never even gets distracted. You can pray to him at any time and he always focuses on you and hears you.

Because God never slumbers or sleeps—that means that you can!! Because God is awake, you can sleep. It's like a child who can't sleep until their parent promises to stay by their bedside. Then the child trustfully falls asleep knowing their parent is there to watch over them. It's the same way with God. It doesn't matter what problem you're dealing with, you can leave it in God's hands and go to sleep at night knowing that God never slumbers nor sleeps and he will take care of it. He will take care of you.

The Creator is your helper. The God of Israel is your protector. Then finally, the Lord will keep you from all harm. Look at verses 7-8: "The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." (Psalm 121:7-8) Verse 1-6 were all in the present tense, describing what God does for you. Now in verses 7-8 we are given promises for the future, telling us what God will do for you. In these verses the psalm moves from giving specific examples to one overriding general principle. The Lord will keep you from all harm. There are several things we learn from these verses.

First of all, God watches over every aspect of your life. That's what verse 7 says: "The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life." (Psalm 121:7) The word "harm" here is a word that can mean "harm or evil." Jesus taught us to pray something similar in the Lord's Prayer where we ask our heavenly Father: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

God watches over every aspect of your life. God doesn't say you will never have problems, but he promises to be with you in your problems, and to turn all your problems to good. We have a whole string of beautiful promises in Romans 8 that assure us God is directly involved in your life and that he is for you, not against you. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present or the future, or any powers, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord." (Romans 8:37-39)

Once again these verses do not teach us that you will never have problems or trouble in your life, but rather that evil will never win out, that nothing can hinder God's purpose for your life, that nothing can separate you from God's love for you in Christ. God is for you, and therefore no evil, no permanent harm can befall the believer in Christ. You can trust God's providential care, because God watches over every aspect of your life.

Secondly in these verses, God watches over every transition in your life. Look at verse 8: "The Lord will watch over your coming and going." (Psalm 121:8) This is one of the verses that devout Jews recite when they leave or enter their homes. "The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." (Psalm 121:8)

It's usually the transitions in life that trip us up, isn't it? Once we are safe in our routines things usually go pretty smoothly, but it's the in-between times—the commute, the move, the change of jobs, the change of health, the change of relationships—it's in the in-between times where we usually struggle. This has a personal meaning for me in my retiring and looking at the transition from working

full time as your pastor and moving back to Denver to begin this new chapter in my life.

Deuteronomy 28:6 says if you obey the Lord your God: “You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.” (Deuteronomy 28:6) David’s prayer to the Lord in Psalm 139: “You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.” (Psalm 139:2-3)

This is another example of Hebrew language using a pair of opposites to express totality: your comings and going and everything in between. So it’s not just the transitions in life, God watches over all the in-betweens as well. Whether at home or school or work or away, whatever you do, wherever you go, you are safe because God is with you!

Then we have the wonderful promise at the end of verse 8: “The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.” (Psalm 121:8) God is watching over you now, and he will continue to watch over you forever. Both of these promises are encouraging!! If you had to choose one or the other, which would you choose? Now? Or forevermore? It’s a tough choice. But praise God you don’t have to choose. They are both true for the believer in Christ!

Jesus said in Matthew 28:20: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Hebrews 13:8 says that: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” And so God’s promise to watch over you in Christ is true today; it is true tomorrow; it is true forevermore.

The Creator is your helper. The God of Israel is your protector. The Lord will keep you from all harm. We are on a journey to God during this Lenten season, and Psalm 121 is a wonderful song for the journey. So take comfort in this. Learn to trust God in all things and to look for the good in all the details of life. God cares for you. He will provide for you. He is there to help you. “I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2)