

A Song of Faith for Life's Journeys

Psalm 121

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Our psalm today is one of my favorites and is in the running for second most beloved psalm behind Psalm 23. It is special for what it says and what kind of psalm it is.

What is a Song/Psalm of Ascent?

Psalms 120-134 are called the Psalms of Ascent or Songs of Ascent. Notice that "ascent" is spelled the way it is. Ascent. Upwards.

These psalms find their purpose in the Jewish festivals, temple worship, and geography of the Promised Land. So first a quick geography lesson. Israel has both mountains and the lowest spot on earth (Dead Sea) all within this little country. Jerusalem was the capital city. Jerusalem was the center of government and the center of religion. There David kept the tabernacle and there his son Solomon built the temple of God. It was the heart of the Jewish religion and still is to this day.

The Old Testament law prescribed three festivals each year that the Jews were to come to Jerusalem and celebrate: Pentecost, Passover, and the Feast of Booths or Tents. So, three times a year all the Jews would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Here is where the topography of Jerusalem is important. Jerusalem is 2,700 feet above sea level. To go to Jerusalem required you to walk up. It's not so much a mountain climb as a long incline. This is why in the Bible, it doesn't geographically describe Jerusalem in terms of north and south, but always up. Here's one example, "*After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*" (John 5:1 ESV)

Psalms 120-134 are Songs of Ascent. "Up" psalms. Songs to sing as you ascend to Jerusalem. Songs as you approach the place of worship. The equivalent for us would be at the Crown Point campus, Broadway songs. The Cedar Lake campus – Highway 41 songs. The Hobart/Portage campus – County Line Orchard songs.

The real purpose of these psalms was to prepare the people's hearts for worship. Why? Because they were dealing with the same issues we do before we arrive for corporate worship. *What are we going to eat today? How long till we get there?* Kids were crying. People were tired when they arrived. How tired? They walked to Jerusalem. No perfectly climate-controlled transportation with ergonomically designed automobiles. No cup holders for their morning coffee. No curbside drop-off. They walked. How would you feel this morning if you walked here?

They were also sinners. They argued with their spouse that morning. They held secret sins deep within. They hoped nobody would discover the inconsistencies between what they sang at the temple and their day-to-day practice. They were...just like us.

So, the Holy Spirit inspired some songs that the people would sing as they made their way up. The songs helped get their hearts and minds in the right condition for worshiping the God of Israel.

Question: what was the condition of your heart and mind as you walked in to worship today? Did you come in prepared? Spiritually ready? Too many of us come to worship and our first thought about it is when the service begins. There's no song in your heart as come in. It is impossible to just flip the switch into worship mode. You have to bring it in with you.

There is our first application—

Prepare for Corporate Worship with Intentional Personal Worship

This was a big part of the Puritans' lifestyle, and more recently, the Dutch Reformed movement my family comes from. Make Sunday worship the highlight and focus of your week. This especially means that you make preparations on Saturday so you can be undistracted on Sunday. This may mean practical preparations for food and clothing and schedule. But most important is what the songs of ascent get to. What the Puritans called "heart-work." Arrive for corporate worship having:

- ***Time for prayer and confession***
- ***A Scripture you are meditating on***
- ***A heart happy in God***

This last one is the key one. Work to get your heart happy in God. Maybe that means a morning walk on a summer morning like today. Breathe. Remember, the Sabbath was made for man. We need to detach and unplug from the rat race and remind ourselves we were made for much more than production, tasks, and life concerns. *I am an image bearer of the Most High God.* Think about the gospel. Imagine Jesus hanging on the cross looking straight at you and saying, *I'm doing this because I love you.* Whatever it is in Scripture or song or nature, get your heart happy long before you join us here. Sing on Broadway. Pray on 41. Consider the goodness of God that you get to live near County Line Orchard donuts. Then walk in ready to worship the God of heaven.

Psalm 121

- ¹ *I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does 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 *Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*
- ⁵ *The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on 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 forth and forevermore. (Psalm 121)*

The Question: Where Do I Turn for Help?

*"I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?" (v. 1)*

This question presupposes a problem in life. We look for help when we are in need. This is the kind of problem that we can't handle on our own. We don't have the strength. We don't have the smarts. We don't have the resources. Where do we look for help? One insight into the condition of our heart is where we turn when the chips are down; when life hurts.

My daughter's response to pain or something surprising is one example. She says, "Holdy! Holdy!" Where do you turn when your life hurts? Mommy? Perhaps your good friend Jack Daniels?

The psalm begins with a question, but within the question is also the hint of an answer. "*I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?*" (v. 1) The commentators debate whether the hills are meant here as refuge or terror. To have the high ground in a conflict is always an advantage even in modern warfare. Do we flee to the hills for safety or look to them for signs of rescue? But the hills also hide dangers and marauders and invaders. So, which is it?

Remember, this is a song of ascent sung on the way to Jerusalem. To draw near to God required climbing the hills surrounding Jerusalem.

Here is a picture of the actual hills around Jerusalem:



How many Israelites saw these very mountains singing in Psalm 121? The hills meant that they were getting close. When I'm driving home from a long trip, when I hit the rock quarry on I-80, I know I'm close. It's reassuring. The hills and the ascent around Jerusalem were themselves indicators that I'm getting close to Jerusalem, close to the temple, and spiritually, drawing near to God.

Where does my help come from? *"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."* (v. 2) The psalm begins with pain and uncertainty in life. *I need help! From where will it come? "My help comes from the Lord."* The psalmist quickly reminds his heart through the lyric of this song where his ultimate hope is found. The Lord. This is God. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of Israel. The upward look is a look of expectation. I lift my eyes up. *Holdy! Holdy!*

What makes me think the Lord is able to help? *"Who made heaven and earth."* How is that for a resume? Imagine the interview. "God, I see here on your resume that you indicate an ability to help in times of need. What should make us confident you can do the job?" *I made all the heavens and all the earth.* The psalmist is no pantheist. The hills can't help. The hills don't care. But the one who made not just the hills but the universe, he's able and willing to help. *"The thought of this verse leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to its Maker. Here is living help: primary, personal, wise, immeasurable."*¹

Perhaps the key word is "up." I lift my eyes *up*. Off my problem. Off my trial. Off my seemingly insurmountable trouble. I lift my eyes up to the Lord who made everything there is. To him my eyes look for help.

How God Helps us in our Troubles

He supports us/keeps us from falling

"He will not let your foot be moved." (v. 3)

Again, a song of ascent. Going to Passover or Pentecost meant climbing. Not ropes and carabiner-type mountain climbing. More like climbing trails. These still have precipices and places where you need a good foothold. These are places you don't want to slip. In fact, the NIV translates this, *"He will not let your foot slip."* (Psalm 121:3 NIV) Slipping meant falling and that's a real danger when we are in trouble. That one thing leads so easily to another. A little slip in a dangerous place in life can have devastating consequences. God helps us by upholding us. Upholding our faith. *"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy."* (Jude 24 ESV)

God is really good at sustaining his people. How? His *promises*. His Holy Spirit within us witnesses to our hearts that God is good and trustworthy. His *people*. How often has God used the love and words of fellow brothers and sisters to help us? His *provision* – God can just flat-out make things happen. We look for miracles, but God most often works through what feel like normal circumstances but are really his providential care. All these keep us from slipping into apostasy or unbelief or utter and final despair.

I think of the hymn, *"My hope is built on nothing less/ than Jesus' blood and righteousness;.../ When all around my soul gives way,/ He then is all my hope and stay./ On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;/ All other ground is sinking sand,/ All other ground is sinking sand."*² Your foot will not be moved.

He watches over us ALWAYS

"He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." (vs. 3-4)

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*, p. 431.

² Edward Mote, *The Solid Rock*, ca. 1834.

It was believed the ancient gods slept. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal suggesting their god was sleeping or using the bathroom (1 Kings 18:27) But our God is never sleepy, never drowsy. His eye is ever on us. He's never distracted. Never tired. Never weak.

Behold he who *keeps* Israel. This word keep is repeated five more times. God is our keeper. It means he protects us. In soccer, the goalie is called the keeper. What is he doing? He is protecting the goal. A good keeper will save the day for many mistakes made on the field. A great keeper can actually win the game.

God keeps us. God protects us. This allows us to rest assured that God's got us covered. Charles Spurgeon tells the story of a poor woman who came to the ruler of the land one day and asked for compensation for some lost property. "*How did you lose it?*" said the Monarch. "*I fell asleep and a robber entered my dwelling.*" "*Why did you fall asleep?*" "*I fell asleep because I believed that you were awake.*" The king was so delighted in her answer that he ordered her loss to be made up.³

Just think, God's eye of love and care is ALWAYS on you. Always. There is no hurt or difficulty or trial that he isn't aware of. He knows you and your life better than you know yourself. "*I sing because I'm happy,/ I sing because I'm free,/ For His eye is on the sparrow,/ and I know he watches me.*"⁴

God is a "keeper" of his people

"The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand." (v.5)

In an arid climate like Israel, shade is a blessing. Shade protects from the sun. God is the protector of his people.

"The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." (v. 6)
God protects us day and night.

"The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." (v. 7)
Evil represents unknown and unseen danger. Jesus included this in his model prayer, "*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*" (Matthew 6:13) That powerful, scary, unknown thing waiting out there to get us.

"The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in." (v. 8)
We use a similar phrase—our comings and goings. This is all the activities of everyday life. We don't think about it but every time we are in a car we are an inch on the wheel away from an accident. When we walk across the street, one blind spot can mean disaster. How often are we in danger but don't realize it? How often are we preserved by God's providential hand? God's protecting us in our comings and goings.

"from this time forth and forevermore." (v. 8)
Day and night. Coming and going. God's protecting us and will forevermore.

Do you see why this psalm is loved? Who knows what lies around the bend in the journey of life? Often it is trouble and maybe you are in that right now. Psalm 121 summons us out of self-sufficiency and into God's sufficiency and power and love.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, p, 20.

⁴ Civilla D. Martin, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*, 1905.

This may sound utopic or maybe you can think of some time when your foot slipped or you gave in to despair. How can we claim this psalm in those times? I can't say it better than Eugene Peterson,

"The Christian life is not a quiet escape to a garden where we can walk and talk uninterruptedly with our Lord, not a fantasy trip to heavenly city where we can compare blue ribbons and gold medals with others who made it to the winners' circle...The Christian life is going to God. In going to God Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same governments, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God, and therefore no matter what doubts we endure or what accidents we experience, the Lord will preserve us from evil, he will keep our life."⁵

Finally, the hills around Jerusalem are famous for one other very major event. It was on a hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha where our Lord Jesus Christ gave his life as a sacrifice for our sins. And there is gospel in Psalm 121. I lift my eyes up to the hills of Jerusalem; where does my help come from? It comes from one particular hill outside Jerusalem. And one thing that happened there. And the person of Jesus and his death on the cross for me.

The ultimate help that I need is not a new job, it's not more money in the bank, it's not guidance on some decision. The ultimate help I need is to draw near to God and know my Creator through his Son, my Savior, Jesus. If today, you are in "trouble," lift your eyes up to the hills, and one in particular, and put your hope and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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⁵ Eugene Peterson as quoted by James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms: Psalms 107-150*, p. 1080.