

My Help Comes from the Lord

Psalm 121

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Good morning CPC. It is once again a pleasure to worship with you. I invite you to open your Bibles at this time to Psalm 121. Listen as I read it into your hearing.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. [ESV]

Shall we pray?

Gracious God and Father, I do thank you, Lord, for the opportunity that you've afforded us to enter in and to reflect upon the beauty of this psalm. I pray, Father, that as we step through it methodically with a sense of anticipation that you would help us to read, to mark, and to inwardly digest what you have to say to us this morning. Take this word and press it into our understanding to lift us above the difficulties and the exigencies that we run into or have run into this year, Lord God. Let us leave here with encouragement. Let us leave here with strength. Let us leave here with confidence in you as a result of hearing into your word. This I ask in Jesus's name. Amen.

This is a message that I've entitled *My Hope Comes from the Lord*. Today, as we start a new series in the book of Psalms, we'll be drawing from a collection of psalms referred to as the songs of ascent. This is a collection of 15 songs stretching from Psalm 120 to 130. This collection is reflective of what pilgrims or sojourners would draw from as they made their way to Jerusalem for the annual feast of Passover, unleavened bread, weeks, and tabernacles. Because Jerusalem is elevated, the travelers would sing these songs on their way to worship as they approached the holy city.

Some, as they have studied and read these songs of ascent, have come up with a different interpretation. They see these songs as rather being reflective of a historical event from when the people of Israel were drawn out of their 70 years of captivity in Babylon and brought back to the holy city. And as they were making their way to the holy city from 70 years of exile, they would sing the songs of ascent. And I think this next one is a bit more fanciful from what I can tell, but still others see a corresponding from the 15 songs to the 15 steps that lead up to the temple. And so they would say that as the Levites were at the steps of the temple, they would sing a song and then ascend the steps, and sing another song and ascend the steps until they made their way up all of the 15 steps into the temple. Either way, or however you are interpreting these songs of ascent, they essentially reflect for us the people of God going up into the house of the Lord. These are traveling songs.

And we see them as traveling songs because of the language that we find particularly in Psalm 121 as it speaks of God guarding the feet of the traveler so that they would not be moved or they would not stumble or slip or fall. In fact, as you look at the Psalm, the language of coming from or coming actually act as bookends to the Psalm. We see that in verse 1 as well as in verse 8. It gives us sort of an interpretive picture of how we are to see the songs because nestled within that coming, where does our strength come from, our hope come from, God guarding our coming out and our going in, we see sprinkled throughout that the Lord is our keeper, our watcher. So in the midst of our comings and our goings, the psalm is crying out to us, travelers, the Lord is watching over us. The Lord is keeping us. The Lord is preserving us in our going out and in our coming in.

This psalm is more than a road trip psalm, for in it we see that it celebrates the providential care that God has for the traveler. And this picture of traveling is not merely the wide and open road, but it's the traveling through life's journey, the Lord providentially guarding His people. And so it's out of a place of confidence that the psalmist, wearing the accoutrements of a traveler, sings in confidence, celebrating God's providential care.

This psalm can be broken down into four stanzas. We see verses 1 and 2 grouped together, and 3 and 4 grouped together, and 5 and 6 grouped together, and 7 and 8 grouped together. And so you could essentially break the psalm down into those four groupings. But I think as we pay attention to the use of the personal pronouns here in the psalm, it actually fits the structure better, in my opinion, to break it into two large groupings. On the one hand, you see in verses 1 and 2 the psalmist singing and praising and celebrating God out of a sense of confidence. He's making his confession that the Lord is his help. But then finding his confidence confirmed and bolstered by something of an amen chorus from verses 3 through 8 as the corresponding voice says, yes, the Lord is your help.

But let's unpack that a bit. Let's ruminate on that. Let's meditate on that. Let's consider the fact that as the Lord helps you, He is your help that won't let your foot be moved. He's your help that is your protector or your shade. He is your help that watches over your life in a complete fashion. He's your amen corner.

When we think about that idea of an amen corner or the language of call and response, we see this in different worship traditions. And particularly in the African American church, you'll hear folks from the crowd cry out at the preacher is preaching. Preach on. Well, all right now. Or, take your time. It's their way of encouraging the preacher as he steps through.

And so in verses 3 through 8, in response to the psalmist crying out with his confident confession, we see the language of confirmation coming along and encouraging the psalmist in his reflection. So we see something of a dialogue here. But I'm tempted to wonder if the psalmist is experiencing something of an internal dialogue similar to what we find in Psalms 42 and 43 where the psalmist is speaking to himself in the midst of difficulty, and he's using language like why art thou downcast or disquieted within me? And he's speaking to himself. And he encourages himself by saying, hope in God. I think there's room to see in a practical sense as we are maybe in the role of the psalmist as a sojourner looking to speak confidence in our own hearts, looking to preach the gospel to ourselves that we come by with sort of an antiphonal response to our own confidence saying, hope in God. Not only is He your help, but He won't allow your foot to be moved. And so either the psalmist has a traveling companion encouraging him, or the psalmist is encouraging himself in the Lord.

We'll consider these things in the following two headings. In verses 1 and 2, we find the sojourner's confession. And in verses 3 through 8, we find the sojourner's confirmation.

In the opening words of Psalm 121, we see the sojourner speaking out of a place of devotion and confidence. And as I describe him speaking out of a place of devotion and confidence, I'm already taking up a particular interpretation of the text here, an interpretation that you have to land on based on how you see the opening words, "I lift up my eyes." What does it mean when he says he's lifting up his eyes? And how is he seeing the hills? Or in what light does he see the hills? Is the psalmist looking at the hills in sort of a relative sense puzzled by the source of his help? Where does his help come from? What does the psalmist see when he looks at the hills? I'm not saying, well, is he seeing something different from hills? Or as he looks at the hills, is he considering the hills from something of a negative connotation? For in that light, in that structure, the hills were fraught with dangers. It's in the hills that you would find the attacks of maybe animals or robbers and things of that nature. And the hills were where you found the rough terrain where you could stumble and fall and land on the jagged cliffs below. So the hills could represent danger. But the hills were also a placed where the high places were representing the sanctuaries dedicated to false gods and their fertility cults.

And so as the psalmist is taking on the role of a sojourner, perhaps as he looks at the hills, he's seeing dangers, toils, and snares that could cost him his life, that's tempting him with idolatrous practices. And as he cries out to his source of help, he sees his help ultimately coming from the Lord in the midst of it all. That's not an alien thought for us particularly in 2020.

2020 has been fraught with many dangers, toils, and snares. 2020 has caused us not only to consider the pandemic but also start to look outside to see if we're seeing the signs of the apocalypse and looking for the horses. 2020 has not only caused us pressures and concerns because of the pandemic, but we see this social unrest that also causes us to be concerned. It divides us as a worshipping community. It puts us on opposite sides of the discussion wondering what's the best or the most biblical or the solid position to take? And as we struggle with the pandemic and the social unrest, we also have to live life in our own personal context, and so in our family lives, we find pressure, struggles, and health concerns.

And so like the psalmist, maybe we cry out from a perspective of lament. As I look to the hills, where does my help come from? And we find in ourselves the confirming word saying, my help comes from the Lord. And, unfortunately, we follow that up sometimes with when is my help coming?

So for us, as we take sort of a negative connotation concerning the hills, we find in this psalm a lament that acts as a rallying point for us in the midst of our weakness. But I submit to you as we give our attention to Psalm 121, we don't find the language of lament. We find the language of confidence.

This is shown to us a couple of different ways. First of all, as we look at the language here that says, "I lift up my eyes," that tends not to be used in a sense of dread. As I look up and I lift up my eyes, I'm not looking up in dread at the hills. But it's more along the lines of the language of desire and longing. It's the same language that Potiphar's wife uses in Genesis 39:7 as she looked up at Joseph with longing and desire encouraging him to lie with her, not for nap time, but you know.

But not only do we see this in the Genesis passage, but even in a passage we read earlier during our liturgy. When we look at Psalm 123:1, we see the following. "To you, I lift up my eyes. O you, who are enthroned in the heavens." What is the psalmist saying there? As I look up to you, O God, with passion and longing and desire, you being the one who's enthroned in the heavens. And he expounds on that in saying that the way the servants look up to their masters, I look up to you. So in the phrase, "I lift up my eyes," we see a phrase that speaks to us of longing.

But even in how we see the hills or mountains in scripture, hills or mountains weren't just areas that were fraught with danger. They weren't just areas where you found the high places. They were areas that represented sectors or sections of transcendent experience and encounters with God.

In Genesis 22:14, we see Abraham ascending the mount for this transcendent experience where he's called to offer up his son, and he has an encounter with God. In Exodus 3:1-2, we see Moses in the mount standing before the burning bush in an encounter with God. Again, in Exodus 19, we see Moses ascending into the clouds almost up Mount Sinai to have an encounter with God. And even in Ezekiel 28:13-15, we see that in the mount is where the Garden of Eden is described as being situated, a place of transcendent experience and encounter with God.

So as the psalmist looks up in longing at the hills, he's not necessarily fixated on the hills. He's considering the maker and the creator of the hills. And he sees his God. And so as he begins to muse over the hills, he does so in the same way that the psalmist does in Psalm 8 as he says,

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? [ESV]

When I consider the cosmos, the whole created order, why do you even care about me? The psalmist is overwhelmed. He is caught up in seeing the majesty of God.

And so as the psalmist in 121 sees the hills, he sees the fingerprint of God. He sees the very creation itself representing the glory of God. And here's the speech of the creation testifying to the power and the grandeur of God. He sees God.

Now, as emotional as that may sound, you may think, okay, well, that sounds beautiful. But what helps us scripturally in our interpretation? I'm glad you asked because when you look over at Psalm 125:2, you see the psalmist doing something similar. There, he looks out at the hills that surround Jerusalem, and he doesn't say, wow, those are some really cool hills. He then takes the leap of seeing in these hills, so the Lord surrounds His people. The surrounding hills testify to him of the way that the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever more. Here, the psalmist has a memory tool that reminds him that God is so much greater. So much greater than what? Fill in the blank.

He's greater than COVID. He's greater than our politics. He's greater than our struggles, every one of them. He's greater than our pains. He's greater than our hurts. He's greater than our frustrations. When we're surprised by our pain and hurt by our pain, God doesn't say, I didn't see that coming. He says, look to me. I'm so much greater. And so as the psalmist draws us into this text to consider the creator of the hills, the sustainer of the cosmos, the creator of the whole created order, he says, turn your eyes on the Lord and watch the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. So that's the psalmist's confident confession.

But along with him, he has his amen corner. If that doesn't really resonate with you, just think of when my wife is here, and she hears the preaching. And bubbling up in her is a response to the calling out of the word of God. And so you hear her say things like, "Mhm. Oh, you better preach." That's not a threat. It's an encouragement. Or, "Take your time" while some folks may be thinking, please don't take your time. Please hurry on. And so she serves as something of an amen corner as the preaching is taking place.

Here, the psalmist, as he has proclaimed in confidence that the Lord is his help, his help comes from the Lord, he has an amen corner that says, let's unpack that a bit. What does it look like for God to be your help? He's your alert help. He's your constant help. He's your complete help.

We see that He is our alert help in verses 3 and 4. And as much the same way as Psalm 46 reminds us that the Lord is our ever present help in a time of struggle, and 2 Chronicles 16:9 reminds us that the eyes of the Lord go to and from throughout the earth looking to show Himself strong, here, the psalmist says, "He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Dr. Robert Smith says it this way, "Not only has He neither slumbered nor slept, He hasn't even batted an eye." The Message Bible says it this way. "The Lord does not doze off or fall asleep." The same cannot be said about Derek Pulliam.

I shared this earlier. I'll share it again because it just keeps coming to mind. In times past or in too many occasions, I can remember taking my kids to the movies. And as we sat in the movies, particularly one movie comes to mind. It was the movie *Brave*. I remember sitting there watching the movie and thinking to myself, this movie's a little choppy. I mean, the story kind of looks good, but it seems like they've left some needed parts for the movie on the cutting floor. And then at the end of the movie as my kids were asking me what I thought of the movie, I just kind of told them, well, I thought it was a little choppy, and it kind of ended pretty quickly. And so Ryan, who was sitting on my lap at the time because she was much smaller, was serving as something as a blanket during the movie and kind of lulled me to sleep. And she reminded me, daddy, you kept falling asleep and dozing off during the movie.

And so what is true of Derek Pulliam is not true of Jehovah God. He does not doze off. He does not sleep. He keeps vigilant watch over our lives. And in that vigilance, He does not suffer our foot to be moved. He keeps us from stumbling.

We saw something of this stumbling or slipping when we walked through Psalm 73 where the psalmist looked at what he thought was the good life when he saw the wicked living it out, and he felt like he was going to slide or backslide. He was describing some unsteadiness in his walk. Not only do we see that language of slipping or stumbling, which is the idiom of unsteadiness, but we also see that language used in Psalm 38:16 as the psalmist says, "For I said only let them not rejoice over me who boast against me when my foot slips." That is to say, Lord, while I am surrounded by my enemies who are looking for me to stumble, looking for me to be tripped up, keep me from those moments of utter and complete failure and embarrassment when they seek me out to boast over me when I'm an unsteady witness.

We're reminded that the Lord does keep us in those moments. For it's psalms like Psalm 18:33 that says, "He made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me on secure heights," or Habakkuk 3:19 as it says, "The Lord is my strength. He makes me feet like the deer. He makes me tread on my high places to the choir master with stringed instruments." And so in our moments of unsteadiness, in our times of slipping, the Lord is our vigilant help right there with our slipping feet prepared to catch us and to steady us.

But not only is God pictured here as our vigilant and alert help, He's also our constant help in verses 5 through 6. "The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." As your keeper, your vigilant watch, your one who looks to preserve you, He stands as your shade.

In a militaristic context, you could imagine a soldier holding his shield on his left-hand side and his offensive weapon on his right-hand side. And so on his left side, he was protected, but he was vulnerable on his side of attack. So it was always good to have your right-hand man holding his shield on his left-hand side to not only protect his left-hand side but act as a shield to you. And here, the psalmist is saying, the Lord stands in my place of vulnerability to protect me. And in this language that says, "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night," the passage is essentially saying that whether it is in the daytime or in the nighttime, those foes, those objects, those obstacles that look to come and attack you, you still have your right-hand man there. The Lord most high stands, and He stands to protect you against all threats, to be the protected shade over your entire life. He's your alert keeper. He's your constant keeper and help.

But He's also your complete help. The Lord will keep you from all evil. The Lord will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore. It would seem that as the psalm is moving on, it continues to build. As you've presented Him, psalmist, as being our alert and our constant keeper, now you're presenting Him as our complete keeper. What else does that leave? It leaves me in a place of confidence. The Lord keeps me.

And I'm sure that you would admit, as I'm willing to admit, that proximity at times does matter. Life is hard. It's meant to be that way. I believe strongly that all of the difficulties and the exigencies and the pressures of life are prayer pressured to drive us to our God. They are challenges that cause us to be pressed further and further into the mold of Christ as we fall down upon the God who is our helper and our keeper.

We see in the gospels that Christ was constantly walking among His people. We see that in the midst of turbulent storm and topsy-turvy waves, He was there to preserve them. And as the looming shadow of Calvary was being cast over His life, His concern was still extended to His people. We see in the gospel of John 14 that as He is preparing to leave to prepare a place for His people, He says, I am praying for you. I'm going to depart, but I'm praying my Father to send you another comforter. And then again in John 17 as He offers up a high priestly prayer for His people, His concern continues to be for them. He knows that He is going to depart and go to His Father. He knows that in His departure, they won't have that sense of His proximity around them. And so Christ prays. He prays to the Father saying, when I was among them, I protected them. But as I am about to depart and come to you, I ask that you would protect them. And a part of that protecting promise that Christ unpacks for us is as He actually

walks down that road of suffering and as He serves as both offeror and offering lifting up His life as an oblation over our sins to be poured out for us.

But we don't see His protection ending there because after His crucifixion, His death, and His resurrection, the scriptures speak of His ascension into heaven at the right hand of the majesty on high. In that ascension and in His heavenly session, Hebrews 7:25, it pictures Christ interceding for us or ever living to make intercession for us, to protect us, to save us, and to preserve us completely like we see the psalmist saying here. As we think about how does He protect us from all evil, how does He protect our lives, and how does this protection have a certain eternality to it, it's a gospel protection, a protection where He accomplishes for us our redemption and secures for us an eternal redemption that not only preserves us as if it were fire insurance but the type of salvific benefits that are applied to us where our savior walks our life out with us every step of the way.

When I came to Psalm 121:7-8, it led me to think about the work of our savior praying for us. It made me think of a song that we used to sing, "Somebody prayed for me, had me on their mind, took the time to pray for me. I'm so glad they prayed. I'm so glad they prayed. I'm so glad they prayed for me." And then it would go through saying, "My mother prayed for me, had me on her mind and took the time to pray for me. I'm so glad she prayed. I'm so glad she prayed. I'm so glad she prayed for me."

But in this text, it goes beyond that because my savior prayed for me. And He prayed for you. And He prays for you. And in 2020, He has you on His mind. And ever living to make intercession for you, He continues constantly to take the time to pray for you. Aren't you glad He prays? Aren't you glad He prays? Aren't you glad He prays for you? I am.

Heavenly Father, thank you, Lord, for your help, your alert help, your constant help, and your complete help. I pray, Lord, that as this word has been brought forth, I pray that you would take it, every aspect of it that speaks to the very needs of your people and that you would seal it to their hearts. Seal it to our hearts, Lord, in such a way that we, like the psalmist, will celebrate you and your providential care out of a place of confidence. This I ask in Jesus's name. Amen. God bless you all.