

From Where Does My Help Come?

Psalm 121

As most of you know, this past month involved a lot of travel for me and my family. We drove over 4,000 miles in just a couple weeks, which, with four kids in tow, was interesting to say the least. But what makes those kinds of long trips worthwhile is the fact that you are going somewhere. There is a destination worth travelling to. Seeing family in Nebraska. Drinking in the beauty of the Big Thompson Canyon as you drive up to Estes Park in Colorado. Even if your trip is merely for sightseeing, each new sight becomes your destination. The point is rarely just going, but going *somewhere*. We travel in pursuit of a destination.

And even though it can be a bit clichéd, that's a fitting metaphor for life. We're all on a journey. Not just for the sake of moving, but moving toward a destination. Some place or place in life where, when we get there, we can look back and say, 'I've finally arrived.' Could be a certain position in the company, a certain kind of home or family, specific accomplishments for your kids, a fitness goal, maybe just getting away, or getting back on your feet.

The funny thing is, whatever destination we pursue, whatever place in life we think will make us feel like we've finally arrived, they all eventually leave us wanting. None of them satisfy or give us the sense of accomplishment or completion or the lasting rest we're looking for. Because every destination we select is but an echo of the real home we're looking for—not a place, but a person: God.

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine famously said of God, "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Life is a journey, and whether we realize it or not, the destination our hearts long for is nothing less than God himself.

This is true for everyone, but it's especially true for the Christian. To use a biblical metaphor, we are a pilgrim people—travelers in pursuit of a holy destination. When we believe in Christ our new journey (or *real* journey) begins. We are rescued from sin and death, given a new life, and begin a new adventure of growing in our knowledge of God. But we're not yet home. We're forgiven but not perfect. We're growing in godliness but we haven't arrived. And so, surrounded by hazards and obstructions, by grace each day we take one step closer to Jesus, in joyful anticipation of that day when we finally enjoy God's unbridled presence.

Ancient Israel was also a pilgrim people. But for them, it was often more than a metaphor. Their worship meant literally going up to Jerusalem regularly to visit the temple—to appear before God's presence, as part of their annual celebrations. A journey that involved all the joyful anticipation and potential danger common to such a trip. And Psalms 120-134 most likely

provided the soundtrack or hymnbook for that journey, a collection known as the “Songs of Ascents.”

If you look again in your Bibles at the superscript, the small print just above the first verse of Psalm 121, you’ll see the phrase: “A Song of Ascents.” And you’ll see it above every psalm from 120-134. This is a collection within the Psalms, and our best guess is that these were the songs ancient Israel sang on their pilgrim journeys “up” to Jerusalem—that’s where the language of “ascents” comes from. If you look at Psalm 122, you see a related word describing this journey: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’ . . . Jerusalem—built as a city that is bound firmly together, to which the tribes *go up* [or ascend], the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD” (Ps. 122:1, 3-4).

Our passage this morning is part of this collection. This is also the theme of our upcoming Sandy Island retreat, where we’ll look at several other psalms from this collection. These songs are given not just for ancient Israel, but to all God’s people in all times, to help us in our pursuit of God—our real journey. They give voice to the hopes, trials, and joys of our pilgrim faith. And so we want to bring these psalms to bear on our life journey, wherever we’re at, to find the help, mercy, and joy we need in our pursuit of Christ.

Psalm 121 is clearly a promise of God’s protection for this journey. First, notice the traveling imagery: the author scans the hills, his foot will not slip, the hot sun will not strike him, the language of coming and going. He’s on the move. And then notice the repeated words in the psalm and what they emphasize: the opening question—from where does my *help* come? Then the answer, my *help* comes from the LORD. Then the description of what that help looks like—the repetition of the word “keep” in vv. 3-8. “He who *keeps* you will not slumber . . . He who *keeps* Israel . . . the LORD is your *keeper* . . . the LORD will *keep* you from all evil; he will *keep* your life. The LORD will *keep* your going out and coming in . . .” Six times the word is used, a word that means to *guard* or *protect*. The main idea is clear: the LORD is your only true protection as you seek him in a fallen world.

But that raises a few questions. Why do we need his protection? Can’t I handle this on my own? What keeps me from depending on his protection? Why is this so hard when his promises are so clear? And what does his protection actually look like in our pursuit of Christ? What exactly is he promising? Does this mean we won’t have to worry about hardship or trial? And if not, then what could it possibly mean when God promises to keep us from all evil? What kind of confidence can I have in the LORD that he will actually safely deliver me to my true destination—not just what I want from life, but what I was made for—the presence of God himself?

So I want to briefly explore these questions this morning as we reflect on this psalm, three of them specifically: Why do we need the LORD’s protection? What keeps me from depending on it? And what does that protection actually look like?

1. Why Do We Need the LORD’s Protection?

Look again at the opening lines of the psalm. “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” (Ps. 121:1-2).

The song opens with a picture of the psalmist, standing there ready to embark on his journey. He lifts his eyes and scans the hills. But what is he looking for? It's possible that he's looking to the hills for help, the hills being metaphorical for God's help (e.g. Ps. 125:1-2). But far more likely is that he stands there scanning the hills *through which he must pass* in order to get to his destination. Hills that represent the dangers of the journey—treacherous paths, exposure to the sun, robbers and bandits (think of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 and the road to Jericho). The hills are the psalmist's reminder that he needs help for his journey; he needs protection for the potentially dangerous path ahead.

And the same is true for every one of us as we pursue God in a fallen world. No matter how clear the destination is in your mind, no matter how meticulously you plan your trip, there is always risk in the journey. On our return trip a couple weeks ago, we had planned to spend the night in Cleveland before our final leg home the next day. We booked a hotel, and as we're pulling into the city at almost midnight, Carissa calls the hotel to let them know we'd be a late check-in, but we're still coming—only to find out they didn't have a room for us. They were overbooked. In fact, there were no rooms in the city of Cleveland. Or Erie, Pennsylvania, as we kept driving. Or Buffalo, New York, or anywhere in between. And so finally, about 3 a.m., we pulled off at a rest stop just outside of Buffalo, told the kids to get comfortable, reclined the seats, and had a miserable half-night's sleep.

I don't know of a single family trip we've taken that we can look back on and say it went exactly as expected. There's always traffic. There are flat tires. There's a lot of fun too—games and conversations and music in the van, beautiful scenery outside. But there are also dangerous roads, dangerous drivers, car accidents, crabby kids, trips to the ER.

Such is the journey of life. Nobody plans to get laid off or outsourced. Nobody plans to get divorced. To lose a child. Nobody plans to get addicted to painkillers on the other side of knee surgery. We shouldn't have to worry about racism and discrimination in this world. We shouldn't have to worry about being unable to pay the mortgage. We shouldn't have to worry about people taking advantage of us. But the world is broken. And we are broken in. Every one of us is stained with sin to the core of our hearts.

And so if we're going to make this journey, not just to survive this life, but thrive in knowing and pursuing God, we need help. We need protection. But from where does my help come? The answer is clear: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:2).

But if the answer is so clear, then why do I have such a hard time applying it? Why do I so often feel alone, vulnerable, and afraid? Why is it that so much of my life can feel like going in circles, or spinning my wheels? I go through the motion of getting in the car, buckling up, put it gear and give it some gas—I go to church, read the Bible, pray—and I feel no more closer to God today than I did yesterday. Sometimes I'm going in the wrong direction. That brings us to the second question I want to ask . . .

2. What Keeps Me from Depending on the LORD's Protection?

If we look carefully at what the psalmist promises about God's protection, we can see behind it some of the common threats to actually depending on the LORD. For instance, sometimes we

don't depend on God because we don't think he's that interested in us. Why should the God of the universe condescend to my drama? Isn't it a bit beneath him? Who makes an appointment with a world-famous brain surgeon to get a Band-Aid for a scratch?¹ Or we think that he would be interested if we weren't such a mess. But I've sinned too much and too often for God to keep bailing me out. I don't deserve his care. It's my fault anyway; I got myself into this mess, I'm going to have to get myself out. And so we look for protection elsewhere. 'God helps those who help themselves,' right? Except that's not in the Bible.

For whatever reason, we often live as though God's not paying very careful attention to the road, like he might cross the line or fall asleep at the wheel. As though he's unaware of or uninterested in the dangers we face. But listen to the promises of vv. 3-4: "He will not let your foot be moved"—under his watchful care, not a single footstep will be misplaced. "He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." God doesn't get tired. He doesn't get bored or distracted. He doesn't need to pull off and take a nap. His care is constant and laser-focused *on you*. That's a promise. And that's a promise given to you not because you deserve it. Not because you had a good day today. None of us deserve it. It's given solely upon God's grace.

So sometimes we don't depend on God because we don't think he's that interested; he's too big. Sometimes we don't depend upon him to protect us because we don't think he's big enough. We look at the hills and size up the threat and conclude that nothing can actually get us safely through. We so fixate on the problem that we become blind to the solution. Nothing can help me break this addiction. Nothing can save my marriage. Nothing will ever rescue me from the sinful habits that ruin my relationships and hollow out my soul. Not even God. We forget the promise of v. 2: "My help comes from the LORD, *who made heaven and earth*." We're fixated on the hills, and there is the God of creation who made those hills and everything else in heaven and earth, standing over it, offering to us his help. Or listen to the promises in vv. 5-6: "The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand." The sun that threatens to strike you by day, the dangers of sunstroke and dehydration on your journey—God is your shade; he's bigger than that. The moon that threatens to strike you by night, which might be a reference to exposure to the cold at night, but more like is a reference to madness or "lunacy." One of the ways people talked about losing your mind in the ancient world and even today is to talk about coming under the influence of the moon (think lunar, lunacy); that's the picture here. But God is bigger than that. He is more than able to protect us on the journey.

So let me ask you this: if God is able to create the hills, is he able to carry you safely through them? If God is able to create your marriage, is he able to resurrect it and give it new life? If God is able to save your soul from hell, is he able to provide the rent? If he is able to rescue you from sin's penalty, is he able to rescue you from sin's power as well? If God places you in a situation, is he able to carry you through it and accomplish his purposes in it and lead you to himself?

The LORD is your keeper. Your protector. If you have Jesus, you have the God of creation on your side. That is a promise.

¹ This illustration was adapted from Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, 1980), 44.

But what does that protection actually look like? That's the third and final question I want to ask.

3. What Does the LORD's Protection Look Like?

Look at the concluding promises in vv. 7-8: "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."

There's a very real temptation to read that verse as a blank check. That if I follow God, everything is going to go well. He promises to protect me from all evil; nothing bad will happen. No hardship will befall me, life will be easy and happy. And there are some of us who come to God, thinking that that's the deal. That if I give me life to Christ, everything will be better now.

And so when that doesn't happen, when suffering remains, or hardship smacks us in the face—we get sick, our parents get sick, we lose our job, our child slips into depression or an eating disorder, our friend is diagnosed with cancer, we're spinning our wheels in life—we're left to conclude either that God lied, or that I must be doing something wrong. I'm not holy enough; there's some hidden sin I need to search for and root out. Or I'm not trusting enough, my faith is too small, otherwise I'd be healthy and happy and wealthy and prosperous, and God and I would just be having a party.

But the Christian life doesn't look like that. Life in a fallen world doesn't look like that—not according to the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture. There is a party waiting for us at the destination, the great celebration of God's victory in his presence, free from sin and evil and pain and death. But none of us here have arrived. And the journey in the meantime is war.

And so what does God's promise of protection actually mean? It's not that we won't face trials, but *that we will not be destroyed by them*. We will not be owned by them. Because we are not alone in them. Not if we have Jesus.

It's similar to the picture in Psalm 23. I don't have to fear when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—the trials and brokenness of this fallen world—not because I'm able to avoid the valley, or because I'm strong enough to take it, but because *the shepherd is with me*. His rod and his staff are what comfort me. And so whatever trials and hardship I face, I know I will not be destroyed by them; in fact God will accomplish his purposes through them, because Jesus is with me, and he will carry me safely through. That is the promise for the Christian. Listen to how the apostle Paul describes it in Romans 8:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." [Suffering will happen; but it will not destroy us] ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35-39)

That's a promise. The Lord Jesus is your true protection as you seek him in a fallen world. And what qualifies him to make that promise, what enables him unlike anyone else to protect us from all evil in our pursuit of him, is the fact that he has gone before us in defeating evil and disarming death by giving his life on the cross. He is the good shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep, and who is able to take it up again (Jn. 10:11, 17-18). Every trial, every tragedy, every sin borne out of our sinful hearts, Christ took and made it his own on the cross, that he might bear them in our place. And so if you have Christ, you are not alone in your trial, in your hardship and suffering. No matter how desperate you feel, no matter how afraid you are. Christ knows what you're experiencing. He bore it for you, and he is with you in it right now, and he will carry you through.

He is your protection as you pursue the Lord, whatever befall. And when we arrive, when we meet him face to face, it will be worth it. There is a great cloud of witness who have gone before us and can already attest. Most of all, there is Jesus "the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).

The Lord is your protector, and if you belong to him, he will bring you home.