

Psalm 121

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[0 : 0 0] I will 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. 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. 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. Now Psalm 121 is a call to pilgrimage, and a call encouraged by the security guaranteed by the Lord. So if you turn to Psalm 121, just whilst I bring one or two thoughts to you, one or two queries I'd like to ask you as to where you are today, what your worries, what your concerns are. Perhaps you've started a new job, a new course of studies, and you face a new set of circumstances, and it fills you with some apprehension on the one hand, and on the other with excitement as to what lies in the future. What's it going to be like to have new responsibilities in family life? Maybe looking after the elderly, the sick within your family. What about bringing up young people in this country in our present time? Will you be able to cope? What about moving house? Does that fill you with some degree of anxiety, apprehension?

And yet there's a prospect of a new house. Both those thoughts, emotions go on at the same time. Perhaps when you look forward to the future, it's one thing that really presses in upon you and makes you anxious and might even keep you awake at night. Or it might be not just one thing, but a whole series of things, one after another, and they weigh in upon you. And on Monday morning when you get up, you don't really want to. You don't want to really start the day, never mind the week. And yet, you know that the Lord is calling you to it. He's brought you into those new circumstances. And you know what your responsibility is. How are you going to cope? The future can look oppressive and fill you with anxiety and fears. Where will you find your strength to cope? Well, that's basically the question that's put there in Psalm 121. If you have any of those things going through your head, well, Psalm 121 is especially for you. Now, Psalm 121 is one of 15 Psalms labeled a song of ascents. It's commonly believed that those 15 Psalms were written for the benefit and the encouragement of those pilgrims who went up to worship in Jerusalem, probably once a year, usually in groups for mutual encouragement. And they would sing those Psalms on their journey, often traveling afar.

Now, you know that Jerusalem is set upon a hill, sometimes called the Hill of Zion, and it's surrounded by other hills. From a distance, it would just appear like a line of hills in front of the pilgrim.

[4 : 4 2] Now, some of those pilgrims would be young, or with young. Some would be elderly. Others with various infirmities. They didn't have mechanical transport like we do. They couldn't simply get into a car and drive up in first gear or second gear or whatever. They couldn't guarantee that the weather would be optimal for their journey. They didn't have weather forecasts in those days. But they knew about the heat of the sun in the Middle East. And they knew that that provided a hazard for weary, exposed, slow-moving pilgrims.

And then those hills were known as being the haunt of robbers, violent robbers. It was a dangerous thing to go up to Jerusalem to worship. And yet, going to Jerusalem to worship was the right thing and the godly thing to do, and they knew that. And thousands of them would go year after year. So why was it that the pilgrims were so determined to reach Jerusalem? Well, the city and its temple were unique. The temple building itself was very impressive. And the people would be awestruck by the priests as they sacrificed animals to make atonement for sin. It was the one and only location where the Lord permitted such sacrifices. And you'll be aware that those sacrifices foreshadowed an infinitely more significant and effective sacrifice that would take place outside the walls of Jerusalem and across at Calvary.

Now, when those faithful, obedient Old Testament worshippers arrived at the temple, they found themselves in the presence of God. And it brought them great joy. The psalmist in Psalm 84 wrote this, How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

It wasn't just something in his mind. It had gripped him. It affected him, his body, everything about him. He was excited at being in the presence of God.

It was an immensely pleasurable experience for the people of God to be there worshipping the Lord in his temple.

[7 : 34] Psalm 122, the next psalm. I rejoiced with those who said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord. And then in amazement, How our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Almost as though they're dreaming. Look where I am. I'm here in Jerusalem. In that special place. Jerusalem's built like a city that's closely compacted together.

That's where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord according to the statutes given to Israel. There's obedience there. There was joy there. There's excitement there.

What a place to be. There in the presence of God. And you know what David's experience in Psalm 27. He expressed his longing to be in God's house even before the temple was built.

One thing David said, I've desired of the Lord, and that will I seek. That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. To behold the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple.

[8 : 45] The faithful longed to be at the place where the Lord met with his people, and they resolved to go and meet him there. Now, you're not Old Testament believers.

You've got something much better. As we sang earlier, you're the children of the risen King. You're the children of that one who died and is now risen and has ascended on high.

How much more glorious is your privilege? And today, we meet with the Lord and with each other. You know what Jesus said, where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them, in the midst of them.

That's an amazing promise. Amazing promise to those who live in countries where it's very dangerous to meet together. And they meet in their twos and their threes.

Amazed that the Lord Jesus Christ is with them there by his spirit. And it was for that reason that in previous centuries, believers used to walk tens of miles.

[9 : 57] Walk tens of miles to their nearest chapel, come wind, come weather. It's a great challenge to you and I here, isn't it? Are you so gripped and thrilled with the gospel that it takes you wild horses?

It takes wild horses to keep you away. For meeting for prayer and praise and hearing God's word. At every opportunity that you have. Now, are you going to be shamed by these Old Testament pilgrims who went up to the temple in Jerusalem?

And shamed by those believers who meet in secret in dangerous countries? And shamed by those people who used to walk tens of miles together to worship and hear God's word?

Now, worshipping now is just a small foretaste of the promised New Jerusalem. Where we may behold the beauty of the Lord, not for a moment, not for a day, but forever.

The magnificent temple of Solomon falls into insignificance compared to this. The New Jerusalem. Even the most amazing, memorable experiences we have now of the love and the kindness and the presence of the Lord are nothing compared to that.

[11 : 24] And those things which have been written down in history, which we are amazed at, when God has come among his people, and we've been thrilled to read it, It's going to be a very slight thing compared to that New Jerusalem.

They're just faint shadows of the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21. Listen to how John put it. Then I, John, saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for a husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. Go on living with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them, and their God. He'll wipe away every tear from their eyes. There'll be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

The shootings in Paris will be gone. The bombers will be gone. Those worrisome visits to hospital will be gone. Those disappointments that you face now will be gone, forever gone.

[12 : 40] Those family quarrels will be no more. There'll be perfect peace and joy and security there in that new Jerusalem. There's no temple in this city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are his temple.

The city doesn't need sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb its light. No wonder Anne Ross, cousin, was inspired to write, The king there in his beauty without a veil is seen.

It were a well-spent journey, though seven deaths lay between. The Lamb with his fair army doth on Mount Zion stand, And glory, glory dwelleth in Emmanuel's land.

I must take you back in time to Psalm 121. Notice the determination of those Old Testament pilgrims as they looked to the range of mountains in front of them, which included Mount Zion.

Notice the word, I will lift up my eyes to the hills. A keen mountain walker who approaches the lake district in his car eyes the mountains in front of him with excitement and a steely determination to conquer.

[14 : 08] I will lift up my eyes to the hills. Jerusalem was situated in the hills. The journey to the hills was going to be hard, yes, and hazardous, yes, but Jerusalem was there in those hills.

And the pilgrims were energized by their aim of meeting with God. When you drive a car to a holiday destination, it's the outcome of the journey that keeps you going through the heavy traffic and the fog and the bad road conditions that you meet on the way, the traffic jams and so on.

The outcome, that's the important thing. The Christian in Pilgrim's Progress was told to keep the light of their heavenly city always before him as he traveled towards the celestial city.

And you and I need to keep our destination in front of us if we're to persevere, if we're going to reach that celestial city. Are you determined to reach it?

The hills promise glory, but they speak of effort and danger.

[15 : 23] There's no glory apart from the cross. The Old Testament pilgrims would look to the hills with longing, but with apprehension.

They couldn't but be aware of the dangers and the inconveniences of the journey, and they would feel their weakness. And so they asked the question, where does my help come from?

They looked at the journey. They counted the cost of the pilgrimage. They felt they couldn't make it by themselves. They needed help. And if you're contemplating the journey to the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the celestial city, you need to look at the cost.

It's a fool who starts a pilgrimage, sorry, it's a fool that starts to build a house, but not looking to see whether he's got the money in hand.

It's a fool who starts studying for profession without realizing the hours of study and did. Jesus said to his disciples in Luke 14, 27, anyone who doesn't carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

[16 : 46] There's a cost there in this journey. In some cultures today, anyone who confesses Christ will find that their family disowns them, or worse.

So is there a cost to you today if you're thinking about embarking on the journey to the new Jerusalem? What are your fears about this?

Are you concerned about ridicule by the world? The scorn of worldly wise men? Are you worried about the loss of popularity, the loss of friendships, the loss of esteem of those in the world?

Does your journey to the new Jerusalem involve financial loss? Are you worried about that sort of thing? Are you worried about the collapsing standards of the world and fear of future persecution?

What about giving up those things that you know are wrong? You must do that.

[17 : 51] You must repent. You must turn your back upon your sin. There must be movement. You cannot stay at the bottom of the hills.

You won't make it. You won't even start. And if you're on that journey and you're halfway up and you fall asleep, you won't get there. There are dangers that you can see and hazards that you can never predict.

Some discouragements are as much figments of your own imagination as the thought that the moon might strike you at night. There's a proverb in the book of Proverbs that talks about a man who refuses to go out on the streets because there's a rumor, there's a lion about.

Very, very unlikely. You don't see lions walking around in the streets, generally speaking. Lions tend to keep away from people. But this foolish man refused to go out on the streets because he sort of grasped at that rumor, the sort of thing that goes around in the conversations of men.

Now, why aren't you embarking on the journey to the new Jerusalem? Is the real problem love of laziness, love of ease, or simply cowardice?

[19 : 22] Are you such a coward that you don't pin your killers to the mast? You don't own the Lord Jesus Christ.

You don't want to live for him. Are those the sorts of things that keep you from him, that keep you from the journey to the new Jerusalem?

Now, when you count the cost, I think you'll probably reach the conclusion that you can't make it by yourself.

But you shouldn't despair, but should ask the question of verse 2. Where does my help come from? Is there a friend that sticks closer than a brother?

Is there anyone that will help me and be my guide and my protector, my comforter, when other friends forsake me, when I find myself alone?

[20 : 23] Now, the psalm recognizes the hills, but it's not about the hills. It's not about you or your weakness or the danger or inconvenience of the journey.

No, it's taking you beyond that. It's a psalm that celebrates the security that the Lord gives. It reminds you that Christians are secure.

Pilgrims who set out with faith in God and continue to have faith in God will persevere, come wind, come weather, just as Bunyan wrote. Now, there are plenty of hazards around in Rome in the first century.

Paul wrote to the church of Rome to assure them of their security, amongst other things. And many of the Christians there at Rome were going to endure severe, cruel persecution by Nero.

You know about the lions and the human torches and so on. And those Christians would remember the words of the apostle Paul and they'd be encouraged as they faced immense suffering, far worse than we're likely to ever think about.

[21 : 44] Romans 8, 35. Paul was thinking about God. He was thinking about the gospel and he wrote this, for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor 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's in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Notice all those things that concerned those Christians that Paul's writing to, that Paul had considered, they're all created things.

And the creator is much greater than the created things, is he not? None of these created things will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Going back to Psalm 121, it was recited or sung by those ascending up the hill paths to Jerusalem, fearing exposure by day, cold by night, wearisome in the present, unknown troubles in the future.

But look at verse 2. My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. The man who composed this psalm faced the unknown hazards and was given confidence by his faith in the Lord who made heaven and earth.

[23 : 13] Now this is the first place you need to come to when you're discouraged. In Acts chapter 4, the early church faced great discouragements, great threats.

They were fearful. What did they do? They raised their voices together in prayer to God. This is what they prayed. Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them.

Now we have our little problems on the way that discourages us, that distract us, that deter us. But are you prepared to remind yourself that the Lord, your God, is the sovereign Lord, the maker and sustainer of heaven and earth and he will help you if you come to him through Jesus Christ, if your confidence is in him.

Remember what Paul said, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that's in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And if you're in him, if you're trusting in him, the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth is on your side. that's your security. Now, notice in Psalm 2 that the man who expressed his own confidence in the Lord then turns to others.

[24 : 36] He was assured of his own security but then addresses others in verse 3. As we read the Psalm, he's speaking to you and I. Listen to him.

He will not allow your foot to slip. He who watches over you will not slumber. And then in verse 5, 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. And verse 7, the Lord will keep you from all harm.

He'll watch over your life. I wonder if the man who gave such confident encouragements was a seasoned pilgrim.

perhaps he'd gone up to Jerusalem many times before and he was able to testify to the Lord's preserving power on many occasions in the past. Now, if you're discouraged by what may be or may not be in the future, are you prepared to listen to those who've gone before?

[25 : 46] There's something that we can all do and that's to think about mature Christians whose faith and life have impressed us. And then we might read stories, biographies, of Christians in the past and see how they overcame the obstacles in their path.

The writer to the Hebrews told his fellow pilgrims in chapter 13, Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. What was it? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

So remember men like John Bunyan, William Tyndale, Charles Spurgeon and the thousands of others who are nameless, anonymous believers in the past.

None of them was perfect. But he, Jesus, is the same yesterday, today and forever. And he'll not let your foot slip.

[26 : 59] Now if you feel that your feet are slipping on your way to the New Jerusalem, remember those whose feet were on the point of slipping. Those people in the Bible whose feet were on the point of slipping.

Remember for example the Apostle Peter. Remember that serious fall that he had. But the Lord Jesus prayed for him and he picked him up and he restored him.

And the Lord didn't allow him to be knocked off the path. He kept him in safety despite his fall. So are you discouraged by your many slips? Do you feel that you're no longer walking with your fellow pilgrims?

Are you weighed down by guilt of failure? Remember those precious words. If we confess our sins he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We're not by ourselves any more than a little child holding his mother's arm and the child slips, he stumbles, he grazes his knee. What does mother do? Mother bends down and washes that grazed knee and the little child is safe.

[28 : 12] Jesus said my sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish, no one can snatch them out of my hand.

You're safe if you're in Christ, if you're walking with him, if he's your savior. Notice that the Lord who keeps Israel is always vigilant, is always at hand.

In verses four to six there's an allusion to the children of Israel on their pilgrimage to the promised land, journeying out of Egypt, the place of bondage to the land flowing with milk and honey.

On their journey from danger, from their burdens, the Lord led the Israelites through the desert. During the day he led them by the pillar of cloud and at night time he went before them in a pillar of fire to give them light.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place from before the people. The pilgrim people might have slept but the Lord did not.

[29 : 25] He doesn't need sleep like we do. He doesn't get tired and lose concentration like we do sometimes on our journeys. Verse 4, He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

Your safe morning, afternoon, night. Throughout your life, the Lord is there forever vigilant protecting you from those spiritual enemies that you might be unaware of.

Now, your pilgrimage might last many years but the years are made up of days. Days of going out and coming back again to your homes.

Verse 8 reminds you that each day in your life is like the link of a chain, the whole chain of your life. Each day is like a link of that life.

[30 : 31] Jesus reminds us that each day has to be taken by itself. Each day has sufficient problems and we shouldn't worry and be weighed down about the rest of our lives that we can't possibly know.

In the desert, the children of Israel, they had to live each day as it came. Each day, they had to gather enough manna for that day. And we are told, Jesus told us to pray, give us this day, our daily bread, give us this day the strength that we need.

Some years ago, a man fell down a crevasse on a mountain in South America. He fell down the crevasse, you might know the story, and he broke his leg. He reached the bottom and amazingly, he was able to crawl out from underneath the ice, and he went back to his camp.

A severe invalid. But what did he do? He set himself small targets, just enough for the day. And each day, he got a bit closer.

If he looked at the whole journey to that camp, he wouldn't have made it. A day at the time. We've got to live for each day.

[31 : 54] Days gone by, in this country and others, including Israel, people slept in the security of their own walled cities. Each day, they go out of the city and work on the land or the local forests, and earn their living by trading or building roads and bridges and even houses outside the city.

At night, they return to the city and go through the gate to safety and security. security. They lived in security as long as they were there in sight of the city gate.

Daily, they would go in and out and not stray too far from the city gate. Safety lived, safety lay in that gate, being near to it, living in its shadow.

Shepherds, well, they had a sheepfold for keeping sheep safe from the wolves and robbers and other predators. the sheep were safe as long as they were there in the sight of that gate, the gate of the fold where they could go in and out.

Verse 8, the Lord shall preserve you from all evil, he shall preserve your soul, the Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.

[33 : 10] How? How does the Lord, your shepherd, preserve your soul? Jesus described himself as the gate.

The gate was the focus of safety. John chapter 10, I am the gate for the sheep. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved.

He will come in and go out and find pasture. He's the unique son of God who came into this world to lay down his life for the sheep, for you and me.

So have you come to him? Have you believed in him? Have you trusted in him? In him alone for your salvation? There's no other gate. He's the one unique gate. He alone is the way.

He alone is the truth, the life and no one can come to the Father through him. He is absolutely unique. Now, are you living daily in the light of the shadow of the cross?

[34 : 16] Daily in sight of that gate. The people of Israel, pilgrims on their journey from Egypt to the land of milk and honey, fed on the manna daily.

Jesus said, he's the true bread of life. Are you feeding on him? Are you feeding on him?