

This morning we are continuing in the series on the Psalms. We are spending the month of June in what are called the *Psalms of Lament* or *Psalms That Meet Us in Our Sorrows*. Then in the month of July we're going to be looking at *Psalms That Lead Us in Worship*.

We were together last week looking at Psalm 77, and next week--you'll see in your bulletin it says this morning Psalm 100, but in fact, that will be next week, not this week. We're in Psalm 121. Psalm 121 is not itself a Psalm of Lament. I chose it, however, to be a bridge between *Psalms That Meet Us in Our Sorrows* and *Psalms That Lead Us in Worship*. It has both: elements of lament and crying out, and elements that definitely lead us in worship.

Is a brief Psalm, but one that even if you have not been in church very often, you will have somewhere heard it quoted. Or its themes will certainly be familiar to you. While it is short in duration, it is breathtaking in its beauty.

Hear now God's word to us from Psalm 121. The psalmist writes:

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.

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.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me. We bow our heads, we close our eyes, but Lord, we say to you from our hearts---we look to you and we ask you where does our help come from? Your word gives us that answer: That our help comes from the Lord. So Lord, we would ask you, according to your promises by the power of the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would send help to us this morning to instruct us, to comfort us, to lead us, to strengthen us---not in ourselves, but in you. For you are the Lord, and you are good all the time. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I've only been with you a couple of July's---I know it's just getting started...What is today? Is today July 1? Tomorrow is July 1, there you go. Two years ago, I started here. Two years ago this Sunday was our first Sunday with you, so I haven't been with you long enough for you to know that not a July will be able to go by, so long as the Lord allows me to be with you, that you will not hear something about the Tour de France.

Yesterday began the 100th edition of the Tour de France. It was a great stage. But it's perhaps new to many who were watching it for the first time, or even for the first few times. Since the moment that the stages and the map of the Tour de France were released in the fall of last year, every team that was going to compete in the Tour de France was not just studying its routes, many would ride every route between the time when the map was announced and yesterday. They would study it with Google maps. They would send out their reconnaissance groups and they would study every corner of every finish. So they set out on the island of Corsica, for what would be a 213 kilometer race, roughly 150, 140 miles. Largely flat. It was expected to be what every beginning stage of the Tour de France is, it was going to be fraught with emotion, fraught with nervousness, potential wrecks, narrow roads, everybody wanting to get to the finish line the fastest. Because on the first stage of the Tour de France, whoever finishes first gets the yellow jersey. For the big guys, the sprinters, this would usually be the only time which they could ever wear the yellow jersey. Yesterday was no different. They had studied the stage, they had looked at the map, they had studied every corner of the very perilous and curvy finish where they would reach speeds of 45 miles an hour.

Except...that over their race radios, where all the teams are able to speak to their riders in the peloton of 193 riders through these little ear pieces---much like Pastor Flora and the worship team wears in their ears---and who speaks to them are their coaches. And literally, six miles from the finish they hear over their race radios, you will not be able to finish at the finish line. The finish line will now be three miles earlier, because one of the team buses was stuck underneath the finish line. Everything was thrown into confusion. So a map and a finish, that yes, they had spent millions of dollars preparing for, all the advertising dollars hoping for, the finish was now completely uncertain. Two miles out---now the finish suddenly changes yet again. The bus had been removed. Now the finish line was back where it was originally. So as the race would continue, the roads became more narrow, the confusion over race radios, wrecks were becoming more and more common. And people's Tour de France's were completely dashed.

Whether you know the map of your trip does not mean you know what you will encounter. The Psalm that we have set before us is what is called a *Psalm of Ascent*. It is the second of the Psalms of Ascent which begin with Psalm 120 and stretch fifteen more to Psalm 134. These Psalms of Ascent were written because they were on a familiar journey. This journey was taken to Jerusalem, and it was a familiar journey, a familiar map, one that they knew. But the psalmist understood that though the map is certain, though their destination was already planned, years of practice---the perils that they would face and the unpredictable nature of the journey caused within them a desire to cry out to the Lord. They are crying out for help, because they are pilgrims on a journey. You and I are pilgrims on a journey. The question is, the psalmist tells us, where our help comes from. The question is, *Where Does Your Help Come From?*

The answer is given to us in this Psalm. So let's look together. You'll see *The Pilgrim's Journey*---we'll be looking at verses 1 through 2---*The Pilgrim's Song*, verses 3 through 6, and *The Pilgrim's Hope*, verses 7 through 8. The Pilgrim's Journey, Song, and Hope.

So let's look together, then, first at The Pilgrim's Journey. As I said, the Psalms of Ascent were Psalms that were for the journey to Jerusalem---literally, Mount Zion---where the earthly presence of the Lord was known to be in the Ark of the Covenant. And in this Ark was the chest that had within it the Lord's law, and with it, the Lord's presence in the temple, in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion. So these psalmists would lead God's people. You will see here both the incredible individual nature of this Psalm, but also it was given to the nation of Israel as a corporate people as they would journey to Jerusalem, to Mount Zion---to journey there, because they longed, both individually and corporately, to be in God's presence. So this Psalm is meant to be both corporate and individual in nature. In fact, incredibly individual, because it opens for us---the psalmist is asking a question, verse 1. "I lift up my eyes to the hills---where does my help come from?" And then he answers it in verse 2. So it's incredibly personal, because the rest of the Psalm, then, is the psalmist speaking to himself of the promises of God as he is journeying to Mount Zion. To get to Mount Zion means he must travel in this journey over the mountains to get there. And this Psalm, although it was an individual psalm---he was writing it as one who is on the journey---but it was then to be given to the corporate people of Israel for their worship, and it was to become part of God's people's corporate worship.

What I want to say to you this morning at the very beginning, as you hear these words again---"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"---looking at the God of Genesis, who says that I have created all things, and I have created you to be my people. That expression of God's covenant-keeping nature, which is the word 'LORD' there, is mentioned five times within this Psalm. He is a God who has picked for himself a people and he says, you will be my people and I will be your God. And now they're talking about journeying to be in the Lord's presence. The reason why this is so important for us right here at the beginning, is because we need to say to those of you this morning who profess to be Christians,

[believers] in the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in him for salvation---you need to understand that those who wrote this Psalm and those who sang this Psalm as the nation of Israel, are brothers and sisters in the Lord to us.

Because we have---what they only had in seed form, we have in its full fruition. Consider for just a moment what the psalmist says in verses 1 and 2: "I lift up my eyes to the hills---where does my help come from?" He's saying, I'm thinking about Mount Zion. So let's put on our biblical imagination, guided by God's word. He's looking up to the mountain, thinking about traveling up to Jerusalem. And there on Mount Zion was the Temple where they would know that they could worship the Lord and the Lord's presence was there. So he would long, and he knows that from there his help comes. So there they are giving to us in seed form what we say as those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We look up to the hill, where does our help come from? Mount Zion would be for us Golgotha, the mountain upon which Jesus Christ would be crucified.

How can I say such a thing? Because we hear it from our Savior's own lips, when he says to the woman at the well in John---where he says to her these words as she questions him as a Samaritan who worships a false god, who worships a god who is in battle against the Christian God. She says, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where he must be worshiped is in Jerusalem." And Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth." Jesus says---what was in seed form in Psalm 121---that we do look up to a hill, and that hill was the cross of our Savior Jesus Christ. And he tells us that from that place would come salvation, and from it also the promise of resurrection, and from that place the giving of his Holy Spirit. But nonetheless our help comes from the Lord. What they saw was, yes, that help comes from the Lord, but they didn't see how it was going to come. We, who are the recipients of the New Testament see and have resources for strength in the midst of our life's journey. Where does our help come from?

What do I mean? Why would they be traveling to Mount Zion? It was to be in the presence of the Lord. It was also to offer sacrifice for their sins, but also they longed to be in God's presence. It is no different in the New Testament, except what comes into full fruition in the New Testament through Jesus Christ is that there is no longer a need for sacrifice for sin. Because on the cross, Jesus cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus understood being separated from the Father, for the Father had laid our sin on him and he could not look on his Son. Jesus was separated from the Father. He went to the hill. He died on that mountain. He died on that cross so that no sacrifice would ever need to be made again, because on that day all of God's wrath against sin was poured out on his Son. It was paid in full. My eyes look up to the hill. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. That is the message of the cross.

But remember, they not only long to go to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice---but in Christ that need for sacrifice is fulfilled, paid in full---but also they long for God's presence. No longer do we have to travel to Jerusalem to be in God's presence. For Jesus said, the worshipers my Father desires are those who worship in spirit and in truth---meaning when Jesus said, it is better that I leave you, otherwise, the Holy comforter, the Holy counselor, The Holy Spirit will not come to be with you---meaning Jesus, who is now present at the right hand of God the Father has not left us alone. He's given us his Spirit which is everywhere present where the Christian is. Wherever you go, whatever room, whatever trouble, whatever car, whatever circumstance you find yourself in---if you are a professing believer in Jesus Christ, you have the promise of his presence. Your help comes from the Lord.

Here in this Psalm 121 is giving to us that invitation. Because the psalmist is looking out, desiring to go to be in the Lord's presence and it is for us a sign of what was to come in Christ. So this Psalm is for us very powerful. They look to the Lord. We look to the Lord. But we now have resources in the midst of uncertainties, in the midst of loneliness, in the midst of longing. We can go to the one whose help has been sealed for us in Jesus Christ.

Not only is this the pilgrim's journey, it is also *The Pilgrim's Song*. Look at verses 3 through 6. He says these words: "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." They are singing first, in this pilgrim's song, of God's attentiveness. It says to us that the Lord does not sleep, meaning his eyes are never diverted by distraction or slumber.

This summer's fully engaged swim teams around Columbia are competing. We've been at swim team meets each of these last couple of weeks, and as I've walked through the throngs of parents and children running around the pool, I decided to do a brief, clearly unscientific evaluation: How many people are on a device? So as I was walking around, going over to the food table, going over the other side of the pool, waiting for my daughter to go into her meet, I looked around---young, old, everybody in between---I lost count of how many people were completely distracted by the screens in front of them, not paying attention to the very reason why they came.

And this came powerfully home to me that it doesn't take screams to be diverted. It simply takes throngs of people to easily be distracted and diverted and to lose where you are. Some very close friends of ours were at the very same swim meet. And the mother became separated from her son and she couldn't find him and he couldn't find her. And if you've ever been to a swim meet, you know the next thing you could be looking for each other and going around the pool the in the same direction and never run into each other. But after a few minutes what gripped her heart as she was calling out his name, was fear. She had lost sight of him. He had lost sight of her. She was busy, she had other children to pay attention to, and he had his meet. He would get out of the pool and maybe she wasn't right there when he got out....but they eventually met up and embraced. And this is a picture for me, that even when we don't intend to lose track of one another, even when it's very easy to try to pay attention to your child, the next thing you know, you can blink an eye, you can turn around, and they're gone. Every parent in this room has likely experienced the fear that grips you when that happens.

The reality is that we have a Father who is never distracted, who never loses sight of us, who is never diverted. In all of his glory and all of his mystery God can keep his eyes on the entire earth. We also hear this through the words of Jesus himself when he says, do not worry about what you will eat or what you will wear, for the Lord knows your every need. Not a hair can fall from your head that the Lord doesn't know. He knows everything about you. He knows where you are and where you're going. Before a word is on your tongue he knows it completely, the psalmist says.

The Lord knows your coming out and your going in. The Lord is before you and behind you. That is a Lord who does not sleep. And because of God's attentiveness, which we see in its most beautiful expression in Jesus Christ, God, who knows our every sin, sent his Son to be sin that we might become the righteousness of God. We know that a God who not only knows our coming and going, every word, every thought, every motivation---he knows every sin that we've ever committed or that we ever will commit---and yet his face towards you is one of loving attentiveness. Do you see, then? If God is that attentive and does not sleep and slumber, [do you see] how we can learn to sleep and slumber and rest in him?

This pilgrim's song is one of God's attentiveness, but not just of his attentiveness, it is also [a song] of his power. Listen to what he says in verses 5 and 6. He says, "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." I want to

read this---I rarely read word for word anything that I've written because I don't want to bore the socks off you, but let me read this because I don't want you to miss this. "This Psalm uncovers for us the remarkable extent of the Lord's protection, his powerful protection. It is all-encompassing. Verse 6 uses the opposites of sun and moon to demonstrate the vast and personal nature of God's power watching over us. And it does so on two levels. God's power is seen both in the natural and in the personal." Let me explain. The natural. He gives the sun and the moon. Why does he mention the sun and the moon? It took me years, not just to studying this Psalm, but to see what it looks like worked out in people's lives. The reality is there are many for whom the sun and heat causes great weakness, but also fear. There are those who are allergic to sunlight, but there are those for whom the moon is also a great peril. One of my dear friends in New Jersey would frequently have to have a sunlight lamp on in his kitchen because the nighttime moon in its phases caused disorders and depression and discouragement. Night was not something that he looked forward to. Ask any ER doctor, on a full moon night, what happens in the ER. They will tell you many stories.

This Psalm is telling us that while on the natural level the sun and the moon both have their power over the earth, they also on the personal [level] can cause great fear and anxiety. He's saying that the Lord's watch over you, by his power---they are singing of God's encompassing, vast, personal and natural power, because it is God who has created all things---the sun to rise in its course and the moon to follow. And none of it will be able to remove his love, his care, his power over you. Though it may tempt you to doubt his goodness, though it may cause you to wonder whether the Lord loves you, whether he will care for you---this Psalm screams out to us, and we see in the full fruition of Jesus Christ---that if this is what God has done---to send forth his Son to be in the full light of day, to receive our punishment, to go into the night of the death, to be laid in the grave, but then to be raised on the third day for our sin, for our salvation---how much more would he not watch over us?

The pilgrim's song is one that sings of God's attentiveness and his power, but this Psalm finishes with *The Pilgrim's Hope*. It is a hope in the goodness of God's care and the certainty of his promise. The certainty of God's care where he says these words: 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." Here is a challenge, however. In the NIV translation which you have before you, the word translated in verse 7 as the word 'harm' actually should be translated as the word 'evil.' The ESV---the English Standard Version---actually makes this translation, I believe, more precisely. Because the word 'harm' leads us into this false understanding that the goodness of God's care means I'm not going to see difficulty, but that's not what the Psalm is saying. He's saying specifically that the Lord will keep you from all evil. What do we mean? Because it introduces some serious questions for us in regard to our hope. Is this actually true? Does he keep us from harm, as it's so often translated and understood? You see, the goodness of God's care is not the promise of ease, but protection from evil. Is it any surprise, then, that the Lord Jesus would teach us how to pray and say, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from...evil." So what is being stated here is not protection from trouble. It is the Lord's prayer in seed form here. What this means is that we will still face trouble in this life. We cannot remove the walk of the Christian, the following of discipleship of God---of the covenant-keeping God--we cannot hold that in the one hand and believe that we will not face trouble in this life. But the promise is that even in the midst of our trouble, God's goodness can be known and experienced.

Now some will say, isn't that incredibly, religiously, convenient. That the way you explain away earthly troubles is that you just pad it with your Christian pat answers. I will tell you that that is quite true---that many of us often reduce other people's deep troubles by offering verses so quickly, that we make another person's struggle in trouble feel very trite. But we need to be very serious about the very deep troubles that we even have existent in this congregation. As I said last week, there are those of you who are struggling deeply with cancer, with the idea that this is going to be the last year of my life. There are those of you who have very deep struggles emotionally, physically, relationally. The answer is not a trite answer: Well, the Lord is good. The answer will always and inextricably be

God's goodness---because we see God's goodness in the midst of the greatest struggle. That God, while we were yet his enemies---that Jesus Christ, who is at the center of the biblical Christian faith, suffered great trouble, to the point of being separated from the Father---and yet he was raised to life. If that is what he has done for us while we were yet his enemies, then if you know him---or if you were offered him today if you do not---then with him is not the promise of ease, but the promise of his goodness in the midst of trouble, because we see it in the cross of Christ. The Lord suffered for us, but God's goodness was seen in the suffering. In the midst of our suffering, in our trouble, we might be tempted to doubt God's goodness. But the message to us in the midst of our trouble is the Lord will keep you from all evil, meaning not all trouble, but there is no trouble that will ever separate you from God's love, Romans 8. Nothing can separate us from his love. But in the midst of [trouble] God will make his goodness known, and we will see him and experience his power in ways that we could never have imagined.

Let me use the words of Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian, in his book, *To Be Near Unto God*. He says these words: "A year of your life can never be understood by itself. Every year of your life must be viewed in connection with your whole life in the hereafter. Because it stands so and not otherwise before God, and is so, and not otherwise, to be explained. But if this year the child of God must go through a period when God puts him in a smelting furnace or makes finer cuttings on the diamond of his soul, then though the tears may make his eyes glisten, he will nobly bear up in exultation of faith. For then it is certain that he is in need of this, that it cannot be otherwise, and that if it did go otherwise, his life would be a failure forever. That God, as, if you will, the great jeweler, has a plan for our journey to him, which is not seventy some odd years, it is an eternity. And when we journey to him we need to see all of our life's troubles and difficulties in the span of eternity, but God's goodness in the midst of it---that in the moment of this trouble, God as a jeweler decides that he will take this trouble to make the diamonds of our souls shine all the brighter. Because the diamond must have the facet of suffering. There is no other way."

For Peter himself says in his letter, it is difficult for even the righteous to be saved. Because we don't really want to trust the Lord, now, do we. We doubt his goodness. And yet the Lord allows his goodness in the midst of our trouble to be used as a megaphone to announce his faithfulness. The Lord's goodness is seen in the midst of trouble.

Finally, it is also *The Pilgrim's Hope* in the certainty of his promise. I learned from Doctor Calcoun, my seminary professor, that these verses, 7 and 8 of this Psalm, were for most of the church's history understood in Latin. Now why does that matter? Because in the fourth century there was a Latin translation of the Hebrew and Greek, and it was called The Latin Vulgate, which by the sixteenth century was the official Bible before the Reformation. And in Psalm 121, verses 7 and 8 are not translated as we have them here. They were translated like this: May the Lord keep you from all harm and he will watch over your life. May the Lord watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Do you see the difference? In the Latin it was translated as a wish, but in the actual Hebrew it is never set forth as an 'if' or a 'may.' It is set forth in a verb tense as a settled, certain matter. The Lord will keep you. The Lord will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Because the name LORD is there, the covenant-keeping God, who, according to his character---his goodness, his power, his attentiveness, his love, most fully seen in the giving of his Son---is never a wish for the Christian. It is always the hope of certainty that the Lord will do this.

I finish with these words. Malcolm Muggeridge, a British theologian and writer, when he reached seventy-five wrote these words: "Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not

through happiness, whether pursued or obtained. This of course is what the cross signifies. And it is the cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the psalmist wrote this for you. He wrote it for us. Because the journey is certain. We will all die. We will all meet the Lord. Where does your help come from? This psalmist tells us that hope and help come from the hills, from the Lord. The cross, in all of its suffering, in all of its glory, in all of its promise, is our only help---not just for the forgiveness of sins, but for the place from which we gain grace and strength, because the Lord is attentive to you. The Lord's power is for you. The Lord's love is for you. It is through the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ that he calls you inexorably to himself. What troubles you today? How is God, by the megaphone of his goodness, crying out to you, calling you to find help in him alone? I look up to the hills---where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. For the Lord is good---all the time.

We look to you, oh Lord, this morning, by the power of your Spirit and word working together, by your promise, may you show us that help in our hearts, our minds, and our lives. There are those here this morning, Lord, who are experiencing deep trouble. Father, I pray may this Psalm be to them a gift of your grace, because there is help from you. You have loved us beyond measure. You have forgiven us for sure. You have offered us a refuge and strength. So Lord, do your work in our midst that we may know your goodness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.