

Harris Creek Baptist Church
Derek Davidson
Series: Soundtracks
July 30, 2023

Hope for the Journey

Psalm 121

A song of ascents.

**¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?**

**² My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.**

**³ He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;**

**⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.**

**⁵ The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;**

**⁶ the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.**

**⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;**

**⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.**

Good morning church! Good morning! It's good to be with you this morning. Hey—real quick—every time I'm in the service I get to worship, and I'm just really so grateful for our worship team led by Drew Greenway. Can we give a round of applause for our worship team? (*Audience cheers*). Truly, I know most weeks it's Drew up here or it's JP up here, and they're gifted. They have a lot of gifts that God has given them. They also love Jesus—so be encouraged you're led each and every week by people that love Jesus first and foremost.

My name is Derek Davidson. I have the privilege of serving families in this church with the kids in youth ministry. If we've never met before—my wife, Kelly, and I have been married for six years. We have four kids, ages ten, eight, seven, and three. It's a handful. And some of you are really quick with math. You're like, “Married for six years? Ten, eight, and seven?” My wife and I have only been parents for four years because all of our kids are adopted through foster care. So, it's been a journey that we've just been on these last four years. And some of you are parenting veterans and so you already knew this—I am learning this: traveling with kids is stressful. Can I get an “amen,” parents? (*Audience says “amen.”*)

Yeah, recently, I traveled by myself and it kind of felt like a spa day. You know, my flight was delayed, and this meant I was by myself a little bit longer. No worries at all. Security line was long and it's like, “Whatever. This is easy.” Because when you're traveling, when you're flying, you're navigating parking, security lines, tickets, luggage, rental cars, and you add the kids on top of that. They have their needs, their emotions; they get hungry; they get thirsty; routines are

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off; you're always missing that time when you travel; it never works out. I promise my wife and I are decent parents, but a lot of our rules we throw out the window when we travel. We're pretty strict with screen time. Our kids have these kid tablets that they don't get to use very much—except for when we travel. Then, we charge those things up and they can use it as much as they want. We're pretty strict with food. We don't do a lot of fast food—except for, every time we travel, they get a Happy Meal and they're sometimes happy. And sugar—we try to be careful with sugar because sugar affects kids, but man, on the plane... get the juices and get the airplane cookies. We're just going to do whatever we can to help that journey be a little bit better. My parents kind of did that with me, a little bit unintentionally. I grew up in the 90s as a 90s Christian kid, which meant I didn't have cable, so anytime we went to hotels, I got to watch SportsCenter. It was the best thing in the world, like Disney World. Still to this day, when I go stay in a hotel, I don't even watch SportsCenter anymore; I just stay in a hotel. I love it. It's like the Pavlov's dog thing. Every time I go to a hotel, it feels like the best thing in the world because when I traveled, I got to do that. I don't know what you do when you travel. I don't know what you do with your kids. I'm sure there are things that you do to help the journey. There may be certain snacks that you always get on your road trips or a certain drink you always get on your road trips. Maybe you're the sunflower seed guy; you get that cup right there. Maybe there's a podcast or a certain artist that you listen to when you go on road trips.

There are things that we all do to help us on our journeys and help us have hope for the journey ahead. I tell you those stories, not just to introduce you to my family, but because we're in this series called “Soundtracks” where we're looking at the book of Psalms. And this morning we're in a psalm, Psalm 121, which was literally a soundtrack for the Israelites as they traveled. Psalm 121 is in this group of Psalms called the Songs of Ascents. It's these group of songs that the Israelites would sing. It's a group of songs. “Songs” and “Psalms.” It's hard. It's a group of songs that the Israelites would sing as they journeyed to Jerusalem. See, we have a picture of Jerusalem that we're going to put up here. This is modern day Jerusalem, and as you can tell, it's on a higher elevation. Anytime the Israelites were traveling to Jerusalem for religious rituals, for festivals, to worship, to sacrifice to God, they would always be ascending. They'd always be traveling uphill, and they would sing the songs to remind themselves of the hope that they had in God, the God that they were going to worship. Why would they need hope on a journey? Like I said, traveling with kids is stressful, but I'm talking about airplanes and cars and tablets. It's not that bad in 2023, even though I may complain about it. If you're an ancient Israelite, traveling to Jerusalem, you're not taking the airplane; you're walking. You're walking a long distance over days. You're on a path that's only called a path because other people have gone the same direction. It's not paved. That's a hard journey. You're outside. You're dealing with sun and cold and wind. It's exhausting. It's tiring. It can be dangerous. There are wild animals. There're potentially criminals along the path. They would sing the songs as a reminder of the hope that they had in God as they journeyed. That's what we'll be talking about this morning: having hope for the journey.

Now, why do we need to hear that this morning? I don't think any of us are going on a pilgrimage anytime soon, though some of you may still have road trips left with your kids. If so, God bless you, I'll be praying for you. But I think we need to hear the psalm this morning because, like the great theologians Rascal Flatts taught us (*audience laughs*)—and I know Rascal Flatts didn't write it—“life is a highway.” Right? Our lives are a journey. We're on this journey

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called life and there're great moments. There're beautiful moments. There're fun moments. But then there's hard moments. There're moments you never saw coming. There's miscarriage and loss, and grief, financial struggles, prodigal children. How do we continue to have hope for this journey we're on when so many hard things come along the way? What do the Scriptures have to say about that?

The Psalms are a depth of riches for life's biggest questions. There're so many genres in Scripture, but Psalms is a book of songs, of prayers, of pleas, from people towards God. Martin Luther actually preached through the book of Psalms. It was the first book that he ever preached through. He said that the book of Psalms was the Bible in miniature. Everything we see in Scripture, we can see in this one book. The Benedictine monks would pray five psalms a day as they worked in order to connect with God. In the Psalms, we see the depths of humanity, the depth of our faith, as we connect with God. And this morning, we're going to let Psalm 121 show us how we can have hope for this journey of life. So, let's look at our text. Starting in verse one: **¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? ² My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.** Man, this psalm is so beautiful, so poetic. You may have heard these lines in a song before. The first point that we get from the psalm, just in these first two verses, is really simple:

1. Our God Helps.

In this first verse, the author of the psalm is looking towards the mountains. This can be one of two things. One: he's looking at the mountains and he's remembering the Creator of those mountains. So, he's looking at the mountains and the mountains are helping him to worship God. Or it can mean something a little different. This is what I think it means and others think this as well: he's looking at the mountains in contrast to the God of the mountains. Why he may have been doing that is because along the mountains in this area is where a lot of pagan religious rituals would happen. When you are reading the Old Testament, you'll hear about high places oftentimes throughout Israel throughout that Canaanite area. This is what it is referring to. In the hills, there'll be shrines like this, where people would sacrifice to the false gods of that time. Along a well-traveled path, there would be places, shrines, that you could stop off, and you could sacrifice to the false gods in order to have safety along your journey. So, the author of the Psalms and the people singing this song are looking at those hills knowing that's where religious rituals are happening. They're reminding themselves that that's not where their help comes from. Their help doesn't come from those gods. Their help comes from the true God. Their God. The Creator of the mountains. The Creator of the hills. It's almost like we could rewrite the psalm like this: "I lift my eyes to the hills. Does my help come from there? No, my help comes from the Lord." I really think that makes it so applicable for us today because, so often, we look to the created things rather than the Creator. We look to other things for our help rather than to God.

First, a quick story. This right here is David Blair's key (*image of a key appears*). Does anyone know who David Blair is? That's okay. I didn't know who David Blair was until this week either. Has anyone heard of the Titanic? Right—big Leo fans? Well, David Blair was actually the second officer on the Titanic. He was assigned to the Titanic until about a week before it left for its maiden voyage, the fateful voyage we've all heard of. When he left the Titanic, to go to the job he was reassigned to, he took this key with Him. This was the key to his locker, which

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shouldn't be a big deal, except that the only pair of binoculars on the ship was in his locker. So, when they left for the voyage, the crew that was assigned to be lookout, to be looking out for danger ahead of them, for an iceberg—they had to use their eyes because they couldn't access the one thing that can help them: binoculars. This is a true story; the key is on display in a museum in China. It's been sold in multiple auctions throughout the years. And it's tragic to think that the thing that could have helped them was just out of their reach. What's even more tragic is that God that can help us. We always have access to Him, but we so often turn to things that are inadequate. I so often turn to things that are inadequate. As I'm walking through struggles in life, as we are walking through struggles in life, sometimes we don't even pray about it first. We turn to the things of this world, other people, ourselves, family struggles, financial struggles. We would rather check out with our phone or have a glass of wine that turns into two or three. We'd rather call our parent that we think has the best advice or our college friend that we think has the best advice before we even pray about it to our God. We so often turn to other things before we turn to God for our help.

Christians have pointed to three lies that we tend to believe about ourselves, about our ultimate identity, about where we find our ultimate help. The three lies are this: "I am what I have," "I am what I do," and "I am what others think of me." And I think we each are prone to believe one of these lies more than the others.

The first one: "I am what I have." My money, my bank account, my possessions, my car, my house, the things of this world—that's what defines me. That's where I go to for my help.

The second one: "I am what I do." My resume, my job, my promotions, my GPA, my athletic ability, myself. I define who I am. I am who I turn to when I need help.

And the last one—this is the one I'm most tempted to believe—"I am what others think of me." My reputation, my friendships, people's perspectives of me. Others define who I am. Others are who I turn to when I need help.

The truth is that only God defines us. Only God can give us our ultimate help. See, we may not have been tempted to stop off of Highway 84 to worship to false gods. But there are false gods in our life that we are tempted to turn to for our help. Too often, we worship the created things rather than the Creator, the one who can bring us help. What this psalm teaches us is that God is our help.

But we have a God who does more than help from afar. Starting back in verse 3: **³ He will not let your foot slip— he who watches over you will not slumber;** **⁴ indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.** **⁵ The Lord watches over you.** We don't have a God who helps from afar. We have a God who sees us, which is our second point:

2. *Our God Sees*

Our God is near. He's personal. He never sleeps. He never takes his eyes off of us. And again, it seems like the author of this psalm is comparing God to the false gods of that day. There's a lot of stories about the false gods of that day who would party, use their powers, use the things that they had. They would party so they would oversleep, and then the people would have to wake

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them up in order to get help from them, which sounds kind of weird. We actually have an example of that in Scripture. In 1 Kings 18, the prophet of God, Elijah, is in this battle with “the prophets of Baal.” And of course, nothing is happening when the prophets of Baal are trying to do something, because Baal's not real. And so Elijah starts to mock them in verse 27; he says this: **“Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.”** And what the psalmist and the Israelites are reminding themselves of is that their God never sleeps. He never slumbers. He always has their eyes on them. Their God is personal. The personal name for God, Yahweh, is used three times in this chapter. Six times the Hebrew word “shamar,” which means “to keep or guard,” but in a sense of nearness, is used. The depiction of God in this chapter is a personal God. Tara Leigh Cobble, who's a Bible expert who writes the Bible Recap, says that God in the psalm is like a bodyguard. He's not far off in a watchtower. He watches, but he's near.

When our kids first came to our home, sleep was something that was really hard for them. They really struggled with sleep. One of our kids, in particular, would only sleep if my wife Kelly was in the room. And I know it's not just adopted kids. I'm sure some of you parents have gone through those seasons where your kids want you right next to them when you're sleeping. So, my wife would do what any good parent would do: she would wait till our kid fell asleep and she would leave the room. But of course, at 2am, our kid would come back to our room and Kelly would go back to the room and help our child fall asleep. But we didn't want that to continue, so we kept pushing our kids to sleep. Eventually, our child was okay with Kelly just sitting outside the room; as long as Kelly was sitting with her back to the door, our child would fall asleep. And then eventually, our child was okay with just the lamp being on in the room. As long as the lamp was on in the room, our child would feel safe and fall asleep. And now, all of our kids, man, they pass out. You know the kids sleep when their feet are on the pillow, their arms are off the bed. They pass out like rocks because they feel safe. They know that they're watched; they know that we're near and they sleep soundly.

The application for us this morning is this: do we believe that our God sees us? And not just theologically. As I was in this text this week, I was thinking, “I know I believe that theologically. God, I know you see everyone, but do I believe that you see me?” Do you believe that God sees you personally, that he is near to you? If you don't, that's okay. You may be wondering, “How do I believe that? How do I believe that God sees me?” I want to encourage you: you're doing it. You're showing up. You're surrounding yourself with other people that believe that and can point you towards the God that sees. Continue to go to God in your unbelief. Ask Him to help you in your unbelief, because what this psalm teaches us is that our God sees us.

He does more than see—jumping back into the text at the end of verse five: **the Lord is your shade at your right hand; ⁶ the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. ⁷ The Lord will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; ⁸ the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.** Our third and last point this morning is:

3. Our God Protects.

In verse 6, we see that God is protecting them from two things. The first one is the sun. That's pretty easy for us to understand here in Waco, Texas in the summer. I was playing pickleball

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outside this week, and it took me two days to recover after. That sun is strong. If you're on a long journey, walking over days—man, shade brings relief. It would bring comfort and peace. They are reminding themselves that the Lord is their shade. The second thing that the psalm is saying is that God protects them from the moon. That's a little bit interesting. What does that mean? How could God protect them from the moon? Well, ancient civilizations thought that moon rays would affect your emotions and your mind. It's kind of interesting. Over a long journey, there'll be a lot of physical toil, but there also be an emotional toil that would go alongside of that. They thought it was the moon rays that affected them. I don't think that's the case and that's okay. What I think we can take away from that is there's a figurative sense of the sun and the moon. The sun is obvious. The moon is subtle. God protects them from the obvious things and the subtle things. God protects us from the obvious dangers and the subtle dangers. God protects us from both.

Right when I say that, there's a conflict inside of me and I'm sure a lot of you, because maybe it's felt like God hasn't protected you in your life. **Either yourself, or a loved one, or at least from afar, youth.** It seems like God hasn't protected them. What do we do with that? This isn't a new question. People have had to wrestle with this question for a long time. I believe the Israelites, as they sang this song, did believe that God would protect them on their journey, would protect them from the dangers on their travels. And even if he didn't, they believed he would protect them in eternity, both now and forevermore.

They give me the mic to preach up here about once a year. So, last summer, I told you that we were giving our youngest daughter swim lessons. I'm happy to report she's crushing it. She doesn't need her floaties anymore. She's a big girl. She's swimming. She's jumping off the side. She's doing cannonballs. She's swimming around in the shallow water. She loves the water. She has so much fun in the water. So, what she loves to do is to swim to me. She'll go from the steps, and I'll go out about five or six feet, and she'll push off and she'll start swimming to me. But because I'm a good dad. I sometimes I take a few steps back and it makes that five-foot distance about a seven-foot or ten-foot distance. My daughter makes it, but she struggles. There's a little bit of pain involved. She's not super happy with me. She takes in a little bit of water, but I'm doing that because I ultimately want her to be safe in the water, not just have fun in the water. I think we need to really understand and believe that God's ultimate goal isn't for us to be safe in this world. God's ultimate goal is to reconcile the world and us to Himself through Jesus Christ. God's ultimate goal isn't our safety in this world, but our safety and eternity. Sometimes being safe in this world lines up with being safe in eternity, and sometimes it doesn't.

This is a theme throughout Scripture. Paul picks up this same idea in Romans 8 when he says this: **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: (He's quoting Psalm 44 right here) “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”** ³⁷ **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.** ³⁸ **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,** ³⁹ **neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** If you've been in church before, you've probably heard those last two verses a lot. But oftentimes, they're removed from the first couple of verses because Paul

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experienced all of those things. Paul experienced hunger. Paul experienced hardship. He was persecuted and he ultimately experienced the sword. Yet he believed he would never be separated from Christ Jesus as Lord. He knew he was protected in eternity.

Now, I know there are stories in this room. That temporary pain feels anything but temporary. I'm so sorry. God is so sorry. For myself, our journey the last four years has been nothing I ever thought it was going to be. It's been much more hard, much more difficult than anything I've ever anticipated. And I know the hardship that we've experienced pales in comparison to some of the hardship in this room. For some of us, the pain that we experience in this world will never make sense on this side of eternity. My prayer for you is just to keep going. Keep going on this journey and be encouraged that you join a long tradition of believers that have experienced hardship and difficulties on this journey, but have still found God to be faithful in the end. And some of us, and I can be in this category as well, we are living our lives for protection in this world. We are living our journeys in a way to be safe in this world. And we're going to miss the journey that God has for us. We are pursuing safety in this world rather than safety in eternity. And God wants to tell you this—you're going to miss out. That's not the journey He has for you. Because God will protect us and, ultimately, He will protect us forever.

In summary, we have hope for this journey because our God helps, our God sees, and our God protects. Before we wrap up, we're going to spend three minutes on our own, writing out our own psalm. Our own prayer. The Psalms can teach us more than just theologically; they can teach us how to pray, how to connect with God. That's how the church has read the Psalms throughout the last 2000 years. So, we're going to spend this morning writing a prayer for ourselves that we can pray every single morning before we go on the journey for that day. We're going to use Psalm 121 as our structure. To help, I wrote out a prayer and we're going to put it on the screen using the themes that we looked at:

God helps -- Lord, I can turn my eyes to my mind, my money, my reputation—does my help come from there? Nope! You are my help!

God sees -- Thank you that You see me at all times. When my family is struggling, You are present. When I struggle with self-doubt, You are there.

God protects -- Thank you for protecting me from evil and help me to live today with my eternal protection at the front of my mind.

So, whether you're watching at home or you're here, you can take out your phone, take out a journal, and spend a few minutes using this psalm to write out a prayer to God. You can do that prayerfully. My prayer is that we would pray that each morning this week to help us live the journey as God intended.

Some of you are still writing. That's okay. You can keep going. I'm just going to close with a story. Every morning I read a devotional from this organization called “The Voice of the Martyrs.” It shares a story of a believer throughout Christian history, current believers, believers in the past that have suffered for their faith. There's one I want to share with us this morning.

“When Voice of Martyr workers met Sister Tong in China, she had recently been released from prison after serving six months for hosting an unregistered house church meeting in her home.

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When they asked her to tell them about the prison they expected to hear about hardship, discomfort and suffering. ‘Oh yes,’ Sister Tong replied with a glowing smile. ‘That was a wonderful time.’ The workers quickly looked at the translator, thinking there must have been some confusion in translating their question. After all, they’d asked about a Chinese prison, not some vacation spot. But there was no translation error. Sister Tong had understood the question and she answered it honestly. She thought prison was a wonderful time because God had ministered to her heart while she was inside, offering her comfort and peace even in the midst of suffering. In addition, she had opportunities to share the gospel with other women in her cell, and several of them had accepted Christ. Sure, it was hard to be away from her family. But for this Chinese Christian, the presence of Christ and the opportunity to minister in His name made even prison a wonderful time.”

I read a story like this every single morning, and it challenges me because it puts my life in perspective. It challenges my faith. That's a different faith than I have every single day, but it's the same faith that we can have. It's the same perspective that we can have because they worship the same Jesus that we do. They found the same Jesus to be faithful. No matter what happens in this world, they found Him to be faithful in eternity. That's the fate that we can live out. My prayer for myself, my prayer for us is that we will live the journey each and every day with that in mind. Let me pray that we would.

God, thank you for your Scriptures—that holiness towards you. God, thank you for the witness of the church that points us towards you. God, thank you for your faithfulness. Thank you for the ways that you displayed your faithfulness throughout time and history, especially 2000 years ago on a cross, where you looked at the journey that you had, the suffering that you had to endure, and you said it was worth it. God, I know any faithfulness I have pales in comparison to faithfulness that you've already shown me. Thank you for the grace when I am not faithful. God, empower us to live this journey with you in the forefront of our mind. We love you so much. Amen.