

We Journey On *Psalm 121*

**First Presbyterian Church
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So, when do you feel it? That sense that you have escaped the gravitational pull of Baton Rouge and you are truly headed on a pilgrimage to your favorite place? Maybe if you're going to a camp on False River, as soon as you cross over the Mississippi bridge you feel freedom coming. Or when you're safely across Mobile Bay, you know the beach in Florida can't be too far. Maybe it's getting just far enough north where the leafy deciduous trees take over that you know deer are very close. I'm not talking just about vacation, like Schlitterbahn or Universal Studios. I'm thinking of the place you go to find peace. To regroup. To get connected to God and the ones you love again. Pilgrimage.

If you look closely, in most Bibles, Psalm 121 is subtitled, "A Song of Ascents." There are fifteen of them. These were psalms to be sung on the way to Jerusalem. At an elevation of 2500 feet, with the temple at the top, Jerusalem was always "up," no matter where you came from in Israel. You ascended the holy mountain up to the temple where the LORD I AM, the one true God, had promised his name and presence would dwell. God intended Jerusalem to be a pilgrimage site, commanding his people to come three times a year for the great festivals. One went up to offer sacrifices of atonement and thanksgiving. In a very real sense for the Jews, Jerusalem was where you went to meet God.

The opening line makes a lot of sense when you realize Psalm 121 is a pilgrimage psalm. "I will lift up my eyes to the hills." We're walking up steep and winding paths. We're catching sight of the high hills of the holy city. As children have asked ever since families took trips, "Dad, why are we doing this? How much longer?" Son, look up at the hills. They're high and strong. But think about it. From where does our help really come? Not from the actual hills. But the high hills remind us of the LORD I AM. Our God made heaven and earth. That's who we're going to meet, and if it takes a lot of effort, well, it shows God that we love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Sacred places, familiar places with a history for us and for a people, can all be a great boost to our spirits. But we know that these external journeys are just a way to engage the internal journey. Our heart's true pilgrimage is to God. If you're

not questing for God, you won't meet him just by going to a holy site. But if your heart pursues God, in his reality, as the satisfaction of your soul's longing, it doesn't matter where you are. You're on the way.

The first verse asks the most basic question for every person who seeks to live an authentic, vibrant, flourishing life. "From where does my help come?" We know the first principles of Twelve Step groups. They are bedrock reality for a life that is free and fruitful. I acknowledged my helplessness. I turned to a higher power. How do you know someone is still going to go further down the tank of a slavery to alcohol or pornography or spending or oxy? They tell you, "It's ok, I got this." That's one of the first things my lovely smart granddaughter learned to say: *I got it!* It is the human cry of self-sufficiency. It can sound like a thrilling trumpet when you first proclaim your freedom to do and be anything you want. But to stay with that almighty "I" and you're barreling towards the hell of an isolating self-trap. The beginning of a life with God begins by acknowledging I cannot solve my own life. The first leg of the journey of pilgrimage is lifting up our eyes out of the fog of self and saying "God, I realize it now, I need you. I want you. I'm coming. Won't you guide me? Won't you help me?"

A pilgrim on the journey to God sings out, "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." That word for "help" is a beautiful Hebrew word, *ezer*. It was first used by the LORD when he saw that it was not good for the man to be alone. I will make an *ezer* for him. Not a maid. Not a trophy. Not a project manager. An *ezer*. One called alongside to do for us what we could not do alone. A complement. A completer. One who is other than we are. Who has something we don't have. Most times in Scripture, though, this word is used for God. For no human *ezer* can ever truly complete us. How often we expect a mate to do for us what only God can do and how many relationships crash and burn with disappointment. The *ezer* that is a person is meant to point us to the true helper, our gracious Triune God. Only with God as our destination, our companion and helper can we view our earthly partners in the right perspective.

What a joyfully privileged time we live in. The Psalmist could not know what we know. My help comes from the LORD. How? Hear the miraculous news. The heavenly Father made you and loves you. He knows you cannot reach him on your own. So he sent help. Twice. An ancient writer marveled that God stretched forth two hands to help and save us. He stretched forth one hand as he sent his Son to become one of us. "Here, here I am," says God in Jesus Christ. "I've crossed the great divide. I've come from heaven to earth. I am here where you can see me and

hear me and touch me.” And then God stretches forth his second hand. He sends the Holy Spirit to us. The Spirit joins us to Jesus. He relocates us out of ourselves as primary identity. Into God. Here, get in Jesus. Jesus as the Son of God who became the Son of Man goes back to his Father. He takes you with him. And all three our lives, the three divine persons who are the one God keep helping us. The Father keeps drawing us. The Son keeps interceding with his atoning sacrifice for us, cleansing us of sin. The Spirit keeps working in us from the inside out, changing us and growing us. All this is what it means to say “My help is in the name of the LORD.”

And one more word about that. I mentioned it last week. When God helps us, it does not diminish us. It restores us. My granddaughter fiercely wants to become more herself by brushing her own teeth or putting on her own shirt. I got it! So we let her try and learn, maybe fail, and learn. With God it’s different. His help does not diminish us. It frees us. You want to be a slave to your raging anger all your life? You want your children at your funeral to dance around the reality that you were known mainly for being cruel and loud? Let God help you and you can become, even now, known for your love and mercy. Which is the better summation of a true, authentic life? You want the essence of your life to be the snarky cynicism of a person that always has a witty, oh-so-smart remark but is actually bitter and hurt all the time? Is that the true you? Let God help you and learn how much more you feel like *you* when joy arises from the inner spring of his Holy Spirit. That’s how you really become you! My help comes from the LORD.

Next, Psalm 121 declares “The LORD is your keeper.” The one who protects you on your journey. Your journey through this life. Your journey into knowing and loving God. The weaving of the word “keep” soothes us in its very rhythm. “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.” Right now the LORD keeps you. Into the future, the LORD keeps you. In the daily rhythm, through the seasons of the years, through the journey of a life, God is with you. Guarding you. Companioning you. Watching over you.

It’s lovely. Peaceful. And, on the face of it, completely untrue! “He will not let your foot be moved.” Really? I think that was me whose foot slipped on the bank and put my face in the dirt. “The sun shall not strike you by day.” Really? We kept their boys while my daughter and her husband celebrated ten years of marriage. She sat out by a pool, and I’m pretty sure that was the sun that smote her white skin red! “The LORD will keep you from all evil.” That’s just not so. The shredder is hard at work against God’s people, and everyone of us knows what it is

to hold onto the tatters of lives ripped by violence, illness, accident, madness, calamity or just plain drift. We are profoundly *not* kept from all harm.

I'm quite sure the psalm writer knew this when he put down these words. I'm quite sure the Holy Spirit knew this when he inspired the writing of this psalm. Something else is going on. Something beneath, or more than, the literal level. Jesus prayed for his disciples and every believer who would come after during the great prayer before his arrest. Interesting the parallels. Psalm 121 says, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills." John 17 begins, "Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father' . . ." Jesus faced imminent betrayal, a kangaroo trial, brutal beating, a horrifying sense of forsakenness and the hard wood of a cross. His Father would keep him from none of these things. Yet Jesus prayed in confidence that the Father would receive him, that the glory they shared in eternity past they would share in eternity to come. He prayed for us, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you *keep* them from the evil one." In other words, I don't ask that you spare them the pain of living as yours in this rebellious world. They have a mission to complete and it will cost them everything. But keep their souls intact. Keep their faith vibrant. Keep their hope alive. Let them reach the goal of pilgrimage, life in your presence. He closed, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am." That's the keeping Jesus asked for. That we would make it through to be with him in the love and glory of the Triune life. That's where we're going.

The testimony of Christians around the world and through the ages is that this keeping power of God is real. I believe that we have much to learn from the persecuted Christians around the world. As it gets harder for us here, we may not be able to keep all the comfort and power we have. But our fellow believers around the world are way ahead of us on the journey of pilgrimage. They will send back word to us. I recently read on the Voice of the Martyrs some snippets of the story of Pastor Matateu in Mozambique. In 2020, he fled Islamists who captured his village and killed over 70. His heart is broken for the neighbors and family he has lost. Today, with his home destroyed, he knows what it's like to live in makeshift camps for the displaced. But his faith remains a bright fire. He says,

What could separate me from God?" Matateu asked. "Death? No! The war? No! So of course I will continue to serve my God. Because He gave Himself, I will always give myself. The people out there, I need to give them hope and counsel and my testimony. I have lost everything just like them. When I fled, I left my food [and] my house was burned down. But Jesus was not cut out of me; He was not burned out of me. So I continue to encourage and serve.

They cannot burn Jesus out of me. I cannot lose what is most precious. They cannot cut Jesus out of me. They cannot stop me getting Home. The LORD is my keeper. The LORD keeps me from all evil. The LORD will keep my life. The LORD will keep my going out and my coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

If we are looking to ourselves for help, we will not know this hope. If a hurricane or an illness or a break-up or a mugging happens, we will despair. But if God is our *ezer*, our helper, we have a source deeper and greater than ourselves, greater than the world, greater than the evil one himself. Jesus prays that his Father would keep us. In reply, the Father sends the Holy Spirit into the hearts of his people to sustain us all the long journey. The Triune God actively keeps us. All three divine persons are at work to keep us on the mission field of our daily lives, showing his love and sharing his gospel. All three divine persons guarantee our passage home. Not our luxurious comfortable passage. But safe, assured passage home.

They can burn my home, but they cannot burn Jesus out of me. They can cut out my heart, but they cannot cut Jesus out of me.

Are there witnesses in this room to this truth? Can you say even in the midst of suffering, "The LORD is my keeper." Somebody say Amen if this is so!

Dear ones, we are on a journey. The long, long journey of life. The journey to God, our true home. The journey of his mission for us in the world, our true purpose. We will not make it if we look only unto ourselves. Psalm 121 calls us to lift up our eyes. To own the truth that sets us free, "My help comes from the LORD." Then, only then, can we journey in the depths of joy and peace and hope: The LORD will keep your going and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore."