

Facing Uncertainty

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[0 : 00] You know, one of the hardest things about this whole present moment is all the uncertainty. Because quite frankly, there's so much that we don't know about the future.

We don't know how long this is going to last. We don't know when things are finally going to turn around. Every time there's a prediction, that then gets revised. We don't know yet the long-term impact of this on our economy.

We don't know the impact that this will have on our way of life. And underneath all of this sits this fear of the unknown.

Because things just feel different now. And one of the hard things about the fear of the unknown is it's the kind of fear that sits underneath a lot of other fears. It's sort of the fear behind our fears.

And so the question that I want to talk about this morning is how we deal with that fear, the fear of the unknown. And I have found Psalm 121 to be a great source of encouragement over the last couple of weeks.

[1 : 04] It's a great encouragement, but it's more than that. You know, in the Psalter, this psalm is considered part of the Psalms of Ascent. These were prayers that pilgrims would either pray or sing as they made the long, dangerous journey to worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

And it's a prayer that if you understand it, and if you pray it regularly in your life, it's the kind of prayer that will give you the strength to face the uncertainty that is an unavoidable part of life, especially now in the midst of this coronavirus pandemic.

And the reason it's able to do that is because it answers two fundamental questions about this fear. First, it helps us understand why we're afraid of the unknown. Why are we afraid of the unknown? And then it shows us how to overcome that fear. So that's what I want to look at this morning. Why are we afraid of the unknown? And how do we then overcome that fear?

Looking at Psalm 121. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we pray now that you would illuminate that word, that wherever we are this morning, as we sit in our homes, as we sit with our Bibles open, if we have them, Lord, I pray that your Holy Spirit would minister to us wherever we are.

[2 : 28] Speak the words that we need to hear to our heart, Lord. And we pray that through your written word, we would come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So why are we afraid of the unknown?

As I said before, this was a prayer that pilgrims would pray or sing on their way to Jerusalem. And if you look at it closely, you see that it reveals some of the common fears faced by pilgrims.

Verse 3, the pilgrim prays, he will not let your foot be moved. This is a very practical prayer. It's a long and dangerous uphill journey to Jerusalem. And part of the journey entails a 22-mile stretch of road that goes along the edge of a steep ravine.

And so it was a very real fear that you might step on a loose stone, slip and fall and go tumbling down that ravine. That was something that a lot of pilgrims were afraid of. Verse 5 says that the Lord is your keeper.

Another translation might be your guard or your guard against attack. Bandits were a big problem on this trip. And so there were a lot of fears around being attacked by bandits.

[3 : 35] Verse 6 is curious. It says, the sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. Now being stricken by the sun is something we understand.

Dehydration and heat can wear you down, make you sick or even kill you if you're not careful. So that was definitely a fear. But the idea of being moonstruck is rooted in the ancient belief that mental illness and emotional disturbance were caused by the moon or being exposed to moonlight.

So this is where we get words like lunatic from. It's rooted in that ancient belief. And so these are all of the fears that these pilgrims would face. And so you can imagine a pilgrim preparing, packing to set out with their family on this long journey.

And they're imagining being attacked. They're imagining falling down into that ravine. They're imagining being stricken by the sun and getting sick or dying. All of these fears are swirling around in their mind.

And here's the point I want us to see. When we talk about the fear of the unknown, it's not actually a fear of the unknown. It's not because we are afraid of things that we don't know, in other words.

[4 : 48] What we're actually afraid of is what we think we do know about the unknown. In other words, the unknown is simply a blank canvas. It's neither good nor bad. It just is.

But our imaginations are really, really good at filling in the blanks. And so we are able to imagine all kinds of scenarios playing out.

And those imaginary futures are actually what we're afraid of. So the pilgrim imagines stepping on a loose stone and falling and imagines tumbling into that ravine.

And that vivid image, that becomes the source of their fear. So for some of you, if you have a fear of public speaking, what you actually have is not a fear of public speaking.

You have imagined a scenario where you are embarrassed or humiliated in front of a lot of people. And that's the scenario that you're afraid of. Some of us have a fear of flying.

[5 : 43] But a fear of flying is actually a fear of an imagined scenario where you're in a plane that goes down and crashes. And so that's what you're afraid of. Now this may sound very obvious to you, but it's actually a very important point.

On one level, your brain is doing what it's supposed to do. It is looking ahead and foreseeing possible sources of danger so that you can keep yourself safe. The problem is, we're not always very good at telling the difference between what is possible and what is probable.

What technically could happen and what is likely to happen. We're not always good at telling the difference between those two kinds of danger. So for instance, I know a lot of people who are afraid of flying.

Every time they get on a plane, they feel the anxiety and they sweat and they grip their seat and they pray for it to be over as quickly as possible. Now, a lot of people have that fear. Technically, it's possible that you might die in a plane crash.

But you know, the odds right now are about 1 in 5 million that that's actually going to happen. So it's possible, but it's not probable. On the other hand, walking down the street that you live on, your chances of dying are about 1 in 500.

[6 : 54] In other words, a lot more probable that something bad is going to happen walking down your street than it is getting in a plane. Another example is sharks. A lot of people are very afraid of sharks.

And so they get in the ocean and you're looking around, especially if the water is kind of murky, you feel that anxiety. In one year, there were roughly 14 people who were injured by sharks in the U.S. So it's technically possible that that's going to happen. But you know, in that same year, 43,000 people were injured by their own toilets. So it is far more likely that you're going to be injured going to the bathroom than you are getting into the ocean.

But see, our minds don't always get the difference. And in many of our minds, we have that vivid image of being attacked by a shark or going down in a plane. And that's enough to convince us that we need to be afraid.

So this is one problem and one way that things go wrong with our imaginations. Add to that this problem. Your body does not know the difference between a real threat and an imagined threat.

[7 : 58] So the human body has a stress response. When you perceive a threat, your body is flooded with cortisol and adrenaline. And that jumpstarts your nervous system. And then blood is sent to your major muscle group so that you can be ready to fight or to run depending on the situation.

Now, that's a natural stress response. That's what your body is supposed to do. The problem is this. Your body can't tell whether it's a real threat or one that is just in your mind. And so we know from neurological research and brain imaging that when somebody imagines being in danger, their body responds in exactly the same way.

So your body can't tell the difference. So if we put all this together, here's the problem when we face the unknown. We are very good at imagining very bad things happening. We convince ourselves that those things definitely are going to happen. And then our bodies respond as though they are happening. And you can see how this would cause lots of problems for us.

And so the question that we want to ask this morning is how do we overcome this tendency to assume the worst, believe it's definitely going to happen, and trick our bodies into thinking it is happening? And there are really two options that the psalm gives us.

[9 : 12] The first way of dealing with this fear is to look to the hills. When the psalmist says, I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?

That's referring, at least in part, to the Canaanite religion. Now much of the Canaanite religion, which is very widespread during that time, much of that religion was practiced on the hilltops. You had a pantheon of gods and goddesses who might want to help you, or they might be angry at you, or they might be disinterested in you, or they might have fallen asleep, or they might be drunk. And so you had to climb as high as you could, and you had to do whatever you had to do, clang cymbals together, bang a gong, anything you had to do, yell and shout and scream in order to get the attention of the gods.

And so there were shrines and groves of trees that had been erected on these hilltops, and you had priests and priestesses who would actually live there all the time.

And this religion was built around using spells and rituals and sacrifices to gain the attention of the gods and then coerce them or convince them to help you.

[10 : 25] That's what it was all about. And so if you're preparing for a trip, and you're thinking about that ravine, and you're afraid you might fall on that 22-mile stretch of road, you might go up to one of these hilltops, and you might make a sacrifice or pay that priestess, and they would cast a spell on your shoes, a spell of protection, of sure-footedness perhaps.

If you're afraid of sunstroke, you might go up to the hill and sacrifice to the sun god so that you would be protected from that, right? So this is how the religion worked. The Canaanite religion, in essence, dealt with anxiety by giving people the illusion of control.

The illusion of control. Now, it's human nature to want to have control over anything that we can have control over, and that's why this religion was so popular and so widespread.

And it's interesting, not many of us would probably consider ourselves to be members of a Canaanite cult anymore, but that same tendency still resides in us. You know, a long time ago, I used to be a pole vaulter, and before every vault, I had a kind of ritual that I would go through, a certain way that I would prepare to vault, and I had this weird superstitious anxiety that if I didn't do that ritual, the vault would go wrong in some way.

And, you know, these kinds of superstitious rituals are everywhere in the sports world. And even though people on one level know that it's superstition, on another level, if you try to get them to break their ritual or their habit, they're going to be very resistant to that because it's hardwired into us.

[11 : 56] But another way that I think a lot of us use or give in to this tendency to try to control the future is simply through information. We live in a society where we have access to so much information.

We've made so many advances technologically and scientifically that it's easy to believe that if we just know enough, if we just have enough information, then we will be able to make the kinds of choices that lead to the outcomes that we want down the road.

We'll be able to avoid all of the dangers if we just know enough. You know, it's amazing in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic to see how many articles are now coming out saying if we had only done this or if we had only not done that, then none of the bad things that have happened would have happened.

And, you know, it's written by some guy in his basement. And, you know, it's like, man, if only the entire world had just consulted this guy, none of the bad things would have happened.

But in reality, we all know that that's simply not true. It's this illusion of control because the belief under that is the idea that if we had just known the right information and made the right choices, we could have prevented all of the bad things from happening.

[13 : 06] That's the illusion of control at work. The truth is, and this is a very hard truth to swallow, we have no control over the future.

We have no control over the future. No matter how much we know, no matter how smart we are, no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot control what is going to happen.

I think one of the benefits, and I use that term with all the caveats, one of the benefits of this coronavirus epidemic is that I think for at least a little while, it has stripped away some of our illusion of control.

You have many countries, some of the most powerful countries all around the world, seemingly crippled overnight because of a virus.

If that doesn't teach us how little control we have, I don't know what will. And so the truth about this Canaanite religion, the truth of the hills, the hills are full of lies.

[14 : 08] That illusion of control is simply that. It's an illusion. So to look to the hills for help, to look to anything that gives us that illusion of control, those are empty promises. And so that leaves us with only one other option of how to deal with our fear of the unknown, and that's the option that the psalmist chooses, and that is to look to the Lord.

What is anxiety in a nutshell? I'll tell you. Anxiety in a nutshell is the act of imagining your future without God. Anxiety is the act of imagining your future without God.

Now just let that sink in for a minute. We imagine slipping and falling, and we can see that vividly, but God is utterly absent. We imagine that public embarrassment, or the plane crash, or something bad happening to our children.

We can imagine these things vividly, but in those images of the future, God is nowhere to be found. The assumption that we make when we envision these truths is God is utterly absent from the picture.

And so what Psalm 121 does is it invites us to re-envision our future, but it invites us to re-envision our future, but it's a future that is filled with the presence of the Lord.

[15 : 34] It's filled with the knowledge that God is our maker, that God is the one who made heaven and earth. It's filled with the knowledge that God exists and lives in our past, and our present, and our future.

It's filled with the knowledge that unlike the Canaanite gods and goddesses, our God doesn't sleep. He doesn't slumber. He is always with you.

He is always for you. He is always pouring His love into your life. His purposes are always unfolding before you. And this psalm shows us how to respond to these fears that we feel.

And the way I'll put it is this. It shows us how to pray God into our fears. It shows us how to pray God into our future. The psalmist says, The Lord will not let my foot be moved.

Right? He imagines the slipping and the falling, and then he says, But my God is there, and He will not let that happen. The Lord will guard me from attack. The Lord will be my shade and protect me from the sun and the moon.

[16 : 40] The Lord will keep my going out and my coming in forevermore. And the most powerful truth in this psalm is verse 7. Even when bad things happen, and they will, because the Bible never promises that bad things won't happen to people who believe in and follow Jesus.

It teaches that in some ways life might actually be harder for you if you follow Jesus in this world.

But what the Bible does say, and we see it in verse 7, is that the Lord is the keeper of our lives.

And that word lives actually means souls. The Lord is the keeper of your soul. He's the keeper of your soul. Which means no matter what happens, if you entrust yourself to the Lord, if you entrust your life to the Lord, then you belong to Him.

And that means your future is secure in Him. Because He has you. And you ask, well, how can I know that for sure? And of course the answer to this question is, the cross of Jesus Christ.

Right? The cross is God's guarantee that He loves you and that He has secured your future. So for those of us who put our faith in Jesus Christ and who give our lives to Him, there is nothing that you can do that will ever separate you from God's love or God's purposes.

[17 : 56] And so no matter what happens down the road, we know that God's love is with us and His purposes are unfolding as surely as they ever have been. So to bring this all together, we are facing extraordinary uncertainty right now.

Extraordinary uncertainty. And if we respond to this moment of uncertainty by imagining our future without God, by assuming bad things are definitely going to happen, and then by pretending that we can actually exert control over that future, life's going to be a real struggle for the foreseeable future.

Instead, I want to invite you to do this beginning this week. I want you to first call to mind the future scenarios that cause you the most anxiety.

Whatever those fears are, whether it's something happening to you or to somebody that you love, whether it's embarrassment or physical harm or getting sick or whatever the case may be, I want you to call to mind those future scenarios that cause you the most anxiety, the things that keep you up at night, the things that wake you up in the early hours of the morning.

I want you to call those to mind. Get them vividly in your mind. And then, one by one, I invite you to use this psalm to pray God into your fears, to pray God into your future, to re-envision those scenarios but filled with the presence of God and filled with all of the things that this psalm tells us about who God is and why we can trust Him.

[19 : 32] So, envision feeling so loved by God that even if you experience embarrassment, even if you're publicly humiliated and those worst fears come true, it doesn't really matter to you because you know that God loves you and that's all that matters.

Envision feeling so secure in God that you can accept whatever future comes and that you will simply embrace it and know that it is part of God's unfolding plan.

Envision feeling so confident in the Lord that even death no longer holds any fear for you, that it's something that you can embrace as just part of the journey into the presence of the Lord.

And if at any point along the way as you're praying these things, if at any point a voice begins to speak doubt, if you begin to doubt God's character or His love or His power, simply look to the cross.

Look to the cross which stands as a monument in history to remind us that no matter what happens, nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

[20 : 45] Lord, we thank You for Your Word and we pray now that Your Holy Spirit would do what no human wisdom or words can do and that is to take these truths and press them into our hearts so that when we look into our future, when we look into the unknown, we see it not empty where we're alone fending for ourselves, but our vision of the future is filled with the presence and the love and the power of God.

That love and that power and the truth that we see put on display in the cross of Jesus Christ. We pray this, Lord, for our good and ultimately for Your glory, Lord. Amen.