

Psalm 121

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Preacher: Jonathan Griffiths

[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

It's my great pleasure to introduce to you, most of you know him already, and that's Jonathan Griffith, who will be opening the Word for us. He has a PhD from Cambridge. He has other degrees that went before that, since you can't normally just start with your PhD. And more important than getting a PhD in Cambridge was that it was in England that he met Gemma, whom he married. She was at Oxford, I think, not Cambridge. And God has blessed them with three children. He was, for many years, involved with the Metropolitan Bible Church as a senior pastor. And he is currently the head of Heritage College and Seminary. But more important, he's a friend of mine and a brother, a very good friend and a brother. And so it is a great honor to have him with us to open the Word. And Jonathan, is it all right if I pray for you? Or do you want to pray for yourself? That'd be great, George. Let's just bow our heads in prayer.

Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would move in our hearts as Jonathan opens your Word for us. Help us, Father, not to want to know more about Jonathan, but to know more about Jesus. Father, may your Word fill us with a longing and yearning to know you, to know you and see you, and to be completely obedient and delight and enjoy you. And so, Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would do a word, do a work far beyond whatever words that Jonathan can do. May you, Father, bring your Word home deep to our hearts to form us. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you, George.

[2 : 54] Well, it's great to be here. It's a real privilege. As George mentioned, we are friends. And George is a dear friend to me. Ever since we arrived in Ottawa, really from our first day here, George has been a wonderful friend. And I don't want to embarrass George, but I will say I've learned a lot from George, particularly in the realm of raising up the next generation of leaders for the Church. George has an eye for identifying young people. I think you know this here in this church and for investing in them and raising them up. And that's something I've wanted to learn from. And George and I have collaborated in that realm a little bit over the years, and we are collaborating now. And one of the things we're doing at the seminary at Heritage, which is located physically in Cambridge, Ontario, is that we're setting up remote hub sites across, well, Ontario, but actually nationally. In September, we're launching 10 hub sites for students to learn in community rooted in their local churches, but to receive top-notch seminary education. And we're partnering with Ryle Seminary to do that here in Ottawa. And we launched that in September with a New Testament course that you can ask George about and sign up for. But we're thrilled to see the Lord raising up a whole new generation of gospel workers. The need for that in Canada, I don't think I need to tell you, is urgent. And we've been much in prayer about that. I've had it as a regular prayer of mine for many years now that the Lord of the

Harvest would raise up workers for the harvest field. And we're thrilled. I was sharing with George that I just received an enrollment update just this week for the seminary. We have an undergraduate college and a seminary. And applications are up 100% this summer over last summer. It's double.

And we're just seeing the Lord really do something. So we're thrilled about that. And we're very, very grateful. But we are here to hear from the Word of God together. And we're in Psalm 121. And if you've got a Bible handy, you might like to turn back to that. I think portions of the passage will be up on the screen too. But we want to hear from the Lord through His living Word that we might be helped and edified and strengthened for the days that are to come. We are, of course, in a season where a lot of people are doing a lot of travel. It's the summer. And some, I guess, among us will be freshly back from a few days away. Others will be perhaps planning and will be packing. Just this past week I was actually over in the UK for ministry. And the week before we were in the US as a family.

And of course, it's great fun to see new places and to visit different places. But we all know that planes and trains and automobiles can bring their own delays and disruptions and frustrations. And travel that we anticipate with joy can become a headache and even worse, a nightmare. We've all been there.

[5 : 50] But however we may feel that we have it today, we should spare a thought for the travelers of old. Travel in the ancient world, as you will know, was no easy thing. Often long journeys involved walking for days on end, walking through challenging terrain, walking through lawless lands, and journeyed toward a longed-for destination took courage. And it took perseverance. And for the believer, it took faith. Our psalm this morning, the text upon which we're going to focus, is all about a great journey to a great destination and the perils and the challenges involved. Our psalm belongs to a little collection of psalms, a collection running from Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134. And these are collectively called the Psalms of Ascents. They are all psalms that focus on the journey up to Jerusalem, the ascent to Jerusalem from the surrounding communities, as the people of God journeyed to the famed Holy City to take part in the annual festivals at the great temple of God. Now, the idea of ascending or going up to Jerusalem was not simply geographical nor topographical in nature. It wasn't simply that Jerusalem was higher physically than other places. The idea was a bit more profound than that.

It was that Jerusalem was higher in stature than other places, more important than other cities. We don't tend to talk in these terms in North America, but I noticed it quite a lot when we lived in the UK. If someone from another part of the country, be it the north or the south or the east or the west, if someone from outside London was going to London, they would often talk about going up to London. Going up, not because London is elevated, it's actually in a river valley, but because London is important. If a student in the old days traveled up to Oxford to begin a new term of studies, people would say he is going up to Oxford. She is going up to Oxford. Not because Oxford sits at a high elevation, again it's in a river valley, but rather because it was seen as an important place.

The Psalms of Ascent speak of the journey of the people of God as they go up to Jerusalem to enjoy the Lord's presence in his temple. Now you and I are not on a physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem, of course, but this Psalm is not just an ancient travel log that serves as a piece of historical interest for us. No, you and I today know what it is to be on a journey to the place of God's immediate presence. We know what it is to be pilgrims and travelers, longing for a final destination, weary from the journey, anxious to arrive. And for us, as we read this ancient Psalm, our heart quickly resonates with the heart of the Psalmist. And as we give attention to what the Psalmist expresses, we learn where it is we must place our confidence. We are reminded of the basis of our hope, the grounds of our security, as we travel to Jerusalem above the promised homeland of the people of God. When we study the Psalms, we often don't look very carefully at the context, the surrounding Psalms. We tend to read each Psalm as a standalone unit on its own. But this little grouping of Psalms, 120 to 134, is presented actually as a defined group for us. They all have this heading, a Psalm of a sense. And it makes some sense to see these first Psalms, the first three, as a kind of opener to the group of traveling songs, songs to sing on the journey. And it's really interesting,

I think, to look at these openers, these three together. As a group, they're a very rich introduction to these journeying songs. Just notice with me what the first one is all about, Psalm 120. It's a cry for

deliverance. You see, the Psalmist is living in a place that he's finding really tough. He's living in a dark land among enemies. Let me just read that briefly. I mean, it's a very short Psalm. Psalm 120, in my distress, I called to the Lord and he answered me, deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. What shall be given to you and what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?

A warrior's sharp arrows with glowing coals of the broom tree. Woe to me that I sojourn in Mesh, that I dwell among the tents of Kadar. Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.

[10:56] I am for peace. I am for peace. But when I speak, they are for war. See, the journey, it starts with a sense of unrest in the Psalmist's heart. Unrest concerning where he is living at the present time. Mesh refers to the people near the Black Sea and Kadar was a people living in the Arabian desert. And the point is this, these are Gentile territories. The Psalmist is not in the Lord's land and not in the presence of the Lord among the Lord's people. And he's finding it really tough to be among the Gentiles. And so the journey begins with a sense of longing, a longing for deliverance.

It begins with a weariness of this world. It begins with a longing to be with the Lord and among the Lord's people. And then, of course, the journey takes us to Jerusalem. And the destination is the focus of Psalm 122. So just skip over there with me and notice this third Psalm in the group.

I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

And on it goes, speaking of the destination of Jerusalem itself. And in the middle of this opening set, our Psalm, Psalm 121, focuses on the journey from the Gentile lands of Psalm 120 to the city of God in Psalm 122. Now, in the middle there, Psalm 121 is the story of every believer's pilgrimage to the glorious city above, the home of the people of God. It is the prayer of every believer, of you and of me, on the way. If you are weary of this world and longing for your eternal home, this is your prayer and it is mine. Now, we're going to dig into this Psalm together and see how it is that the Lord cares for us on the journey. But before we look at the details, you and I, we need to just pause for a second here and ensure that our heart is in tune with the heart of the Psalmist. You see, in Psalm 120, the Psalmist has seen the sin and the ugliness of life outside the presence of God, of life in this fallen world. And he has set his sights on Jerusalem above, on the very presence of God. And so he is now willing to undertake a very difficult journey, a hard and dangerous journey, the journey of this

Psalm. I think you and I know the feeling of weariness that often precedes a vacation. Maybe you're heading off in the coming days, I don't know, and you're feeling the fatigue already. It gets worse before you go, doesn't it? Work has been, you know, busy keeping on top of the house and the yard. It's been tiring.

[14:06] And just packing up and getting out of town for a few days is what you want to do. And as you depart, there's a destination in mind. There's a beach somewhere, a beautiful place where there is refreshment and relaxation and sunshine and good food, whatever it is. Now, as you set off on your journey, you are propelled both by the sense of weariness of your place of departure and by a sense of joyful anticipation of the place to come. Now, that's what we see here in this section of Psalms, the weariness of the place of departure, Psalm 120, and the joyful expectation of the destination, Psalm 122. And those two bookend realities propel the pilgrim on the journey. And, you know, as I think about that, I recognize that those two things need to propel us as well. I hope you and I today see the weariness of this world and have in the eye of our heart and of our mind the prospect of heaven.

You see, if we don't, the danger is that we will slow down on the journey and perhaps get a little bit waylaid. On our summer road trips over the years, we've had one or two places that we'd like to stop along the way. There's a little town in Vermont where we've often stopped for a meal when we're driving down to the east coast in the U.S. It's a pretty little town. Roots in the 18th century. It's a nice green in the middle with three or four pretty churches and steeples surrounding the green. And we often buy a pizza and sit in the park and have a rest on the journey. And once or twice, you know, it's occurred to me when we've been driving and we've stopped there, you know, why bother driving any further? Let's just end the journey here. Let's just spend our week here.

But of course, that would be a very disappointing week. It's actually no destination, this little town. There's not much there. And you and I, we need to avoid the temptation to stop on the journey, to get waylaid by the attractive things of the world around us, the pleasures and the pursuits and the possessions that vie for the affections of our heart. We need to keep our sights set on the great destination before us. We need to keep traveling this long and sometimes weary road of pilgrimage to heaven itself. And so now the journey of Psalm 121.

This weary and perhaps somewhat fearful pilgrim begins the psalm with a cry of reassurance, a cry for help. I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

[16 : 45] Traveling on rough and precarious roads through mountainous territory was a challenging thing. And bandits could well hide in the hills and threaten the pilgrim on routes that were on patrol. There's the pilgrim looks to the rather shadowy hills and the clusters of rock to each side as the sun sets. He might well have a sense of fear and foreboding. Who will help me if bandits emerge on this lonely road? From where will my help come?

But as he looks to the hills, he remembers as well the God in whom he trusts. The God who is highly exalted. Higher than the hills themselves. It is this great question that underlies the psalm. The journey is long. The journey is difficult. How will he make it? How will he endure? From where will my help come? And the rest of the psalm, Psalm 121, is actually an answer to that question. In fact, you notice the voice changes. The speaker changes after verse 2. The pilgrim asks the question there in verse 1.

He answers it for himself in verse 2. The Lord is my help. But then the voice changes. Verse 3. He will not let your foot be moved. The Lord is your keeper. And so on. It's as though his journeying companions, fellow pilgrims along the way, now remind this believer of who the Lord is and of what the Lord is like. Where then does our help come from? Who will help us on our earthly pilgrimage to heaven above?

Who will help you and who will help me as we are weary and fearful on the journey? Well, our help comes from the creator God, the psalmist tells us, first of all. The creator God, verse 2. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

You know, when we are in situations of urgent need, it's vital for us to know that we are receiving help from someone with actual power to intervene. If you face a terrible injustice, you don't just need a sympathetic friend to hear your case. You need an officer of the law or even better, a judge.

[18 : 56] When you face grave illness or injury, you don't just need a concerned neighbor. You need a skilled clinician. You need a doctor, a specialist, a surgeon. When on a journey, if your car breaks down in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, you don't just need a kindly passerby. You need someone with a tow truck, someone with mechanical knowledge, someone who can provide real and substantial assistance. When in the midst of life's journey, you face circumstances that threaten to overwhelm you or destroy you, circumstances that frighten you, situations that grieve you beyond any human comfort.

You need not simply sympathetic friends and listening ears. You need someone truly powerful. The psalmist asks himself the question, from where does my help come? And his answer is this, my help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. This is a famous and familiar verse. It's been turned into song on many occasions and its familiarity may blunt its force actually to impact our hearts.

But consider afresh what's being said here. This one weary pilgrim on a dusty mountain road thousands of years ago, possibly isolated, clearly vulnerable, lacking protection, this pilgrim has help. Not in the local farmer down the road, not in the passing traveler, not even in the king's agent who may patrol the road. His help comes from the Lord himself, the covenant God of Israel, the friend of his people, the protector of his children, the God who made heaven and earth.

We all know that in an unequal world, people with good connections tend to get things done, tend to find things go their way in the end. That's just life in a world where power and money talk loudly. Some time ago, I saw in a news article a series of photographs that the White House photographer had taken of John F. Kennedy's children playing in the Oval Office. There's something quite touching about seeing John Jr. poking his head out under the residence.

[21 : 07] But if we belong to God through Jesus Christ, we have access to the throne room of heaven. And our helper is the maker of heaven and earth.

We may feel that our needs are rather big at the present time. It may be that you are facing a crisis today that you fear will overwhelm you, will derail you, will throw your journey off course. You may

be going through a valley that is so deep you think that prayer has become useless because there is no way for God to fix this anymore, no way for him to intervene. But here is a simple reminder. The God upon whom you and I call is the maker of heaven and earth.

I don't know if you're familiar with Newton's hymn, Come, my soul, thy suit prepare. I don't think I've heard it sung lately, but its words are familiar and it captures well the spirit of the psalm, especially the truth of verse 2. Let me just share with you the first two verses. Newton writes this, Come, my soul, thy suit prepare. Jesus loves to answer prayer. He himself has bid thee pray, rise and ask without delay. Thou art coming to a king, large petitions would thee bring. For his grace and power are such none can ever ask too much. Our help comes from the creator God. What would you ask of him even today? Next, secondly, our help comes from the watchful God.

Verse 3, he will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. It's an awful thing to be unable to sleep. Unable because you fear for your safety, because concerns for loved ones are weighing you down, because anxiety about circumstances and situations beyond your control are plaguing your thoughts and robbing you of peace.

Ever been there? For us to sleep, we need to trust that we are in safe hands. Perhaps you remember a long car journey as a child, maybe driving through the night, and you sleep because you know that your mother or your father is driving you and you're in good hands. Maybe you remember a red-eye flight somewhere, like the one I took to London last week, where I think I picked up a cold. But anyway, and although you're barreling through the air at 35,000 feet and 900 kilometers an hour, you sleep for a few minutes at least, maybe. Maybe a little longer in business class, I don't know. But you sleep because why? Well, you have confidence that the pilot knows what he or she is doing.

[24 : 08] If you have a monitored home alarm system that you keep on at night, or if there is a 24-hour security guard at the desk in the lobby of your building, it's a comfort, isn't it, at night to know that someone and if you're anxious about security, that might actually make the difference and allow you to sleep.

Verses 3 and 4 are full of very profound comfort. And I'd like to say that they are a very special comfort to the sleep-deprived believer. And I suspect there might be some among us here today. You and I may sleep in peace because our God in heaven above, he never sleeps. He is always awake. The one who keeps you, the one who keeps his people. Notice it is both the psalmist and the whole of the nation that he keeps in these two verses. The one who keeps us never sleeps, not for a moment in all of eternity does his energy wane or his attentiveness wander. Never. There is no dozing off with God above. And so there is never a moment when he is not actively watching over you, not actively keeping you. And I don't know, but maybe for the non-sleepers or the fitful sleepers or the anxious sleepers among us, maybe all you need, maybe the thing really that you need to take from this message is simply the comfort and the assurance of verses 3 and 4. He who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Our help comes from the watchful God. Next, our help comes from the sufficient God. Verse 5.

The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. It's amazing how conditions change on a journey and how our needs can change.

[26 : 15] We were out on a boat trip on the river one day and it was beautiful and it was warm and it was sunny. We needed to make sure everyone had sunscreen on. It was so bright. It would have been nice to have shade in some ways, but we didn't have that. And then quite suddenly, as happens around here in the summer, the clouds gathered in. The sky turned dark and then it turned black and the humid air seemed almost to electrify. And before we could make it to shore, the thunder began to rumble. The lightning appeared in the distance. And just as we reached the shore, torrential rain began to fall. In the space of just a few short minutes, we went from needing shade and relief from the heat of the sun to needing shelter from the pouring rain. In our journey through this life, in our pilgrimage to heaven, if we belong to Jesus, our needs change as we travel. The psalmist knew that. In the heart, in the heat rather, of the Middle Eastern sun as he walked those dusty mountain roads, he needed shade. Verse 5.

When the sun strikes down. But then, verse 6, it can be punishingly cold. In the hills, when the sun goes down and the moon lights up the night sky, a blisteringly hot environment can turn surprisingly

cold. But here's the point, the simple point. The Lord is able to make provision and he is able himself to be the provision for every circumstance the believer faces.

The spiritual, emotional, material, physical needs that you and I face on the journey will change from time to time. And as we walk with the Lord over time, you will have seen him make provision for you.

You will know about this. You'll know that in the seasons you have been through, he has been all sufficient for your every need. That's the believer's experience as we look back, and we all know that.

But most of us will go through times when change looms on the horizon, when circumstances shift, when the unexpected comes. Most of us will go through times when we imagine that the God who gave shade in the sunshine of the day will not give shelter when the chilling moon rises in the night's sky.

[28 : 32] And here's the simple point. There is no time, no season, no circumstance of life when God, our keeper, is not sufficient to keep us. We may know that in our head intellectually, but the psalmist wants us to know that in our heart, to believe it, and then to walk in the good of it.

I wonder if you today know and believe that God, your keeper, is sufficient for you to meet your needs at this stage of the journey, the stage to which he has called you to walk today.

It may seem impossible to you that he could provide what you need, but his care is all-encompassing. It is all-sufficient. Our help comes from the sufficient God, and finally, as we conclude, our help comes from the eternal God. The eternal God. Verse 7. 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. We will, sometimes you and I, have wonderful helpers and advocates in this life.

People who are for us, people who protect us, provide for us, stand up for us, help us, who do so for a time, but then are no longer there. A parent or a grandparent who is your shield from the world around, a spouse who is your supporter, an encourager, and counselor, and companion, but then who passes away, a best friend who is everything for you, but then he or she moves away, or the relationship cools, a supervisor at work even, who is just outstanding and makes a challenging job possible for you, but then gets transferred elsewhere, leaves you to fend for yourself. For all the wonderful helpers we have in this life, there is no one who is always there and will always be there. No one that is except the Lord himself. He is there and he will never be moved, never be taken away, never change, never die.

[30 : 47] He is the one person who is truly able to keep you from all evil. He's able to keep your life, to hold on to it, to never let it go. He is able to keep and guard your going out and your coming in, not only now, not only today and tomorrow, next week and next year, but from this time forth and forevermore. You see, he is the eternal God who had no beginning and will have no end, and with him on our side, with him as our friend and our shepherd and our keeper, we have one who will never leave us and never forsake us. This is a beautiful psalm full of beautiful expression and beautiful assurances. It's poetic in its presentation. It's heartwarming in its message, but I wonder if some of you, some of us, have been asking over these few brief minutes one basic question, and here it is, is it real? Is it true? I mean, it's wonderful to think of the Lord keeping us from evil, but the truth is, you and I, we brush up against evil all the time, and we sometimes feel the force of evil very powerfully, and we, in our stupidity, sometimes participate in evil, and it's wonderful to think of the Lord keeping our life, but the hard truth is that we die. I mean, believers die, sometimes well before their time. Believers can die in terrible tragedy, and so we ask, is verse 7 real?

Yeah, is this true? What does it mean that the Lord will keep us from all evil and will keep our very life? I think it's true to say that the key to understanding the psalms and reading them properly is to read the psalms as sung first and foremost by the Lord Jesus Christ, and just think on this.

The psalms are, generally speaking, kingly works. They're mostly written, actually, by King David. We know that the Lord Jesus Christ is the great and promised king to whom all the kings of Israel pointed, and very often the New Testament picks up the words of the ancient king in the psalms and show us that the ancient king was speaking for the king of kings who was to come. On a number of occasions, the words of the psalms are found on the lips of Jesus in the New Testament, and you know, I think it helps us to think of Jesus as the model believer saying the words of this psalm. I think that gives us insight and understanding. Think of his journey through life in this world. He faced danger, didn't he? And he faced trial and difficulty along a lonely path that he trod. He

walked the path of obedience through a very barren landscape, needing deliverance, just as the psalmist cried out for deliverance in Psalm 120, with his eyes fixed not just on the earthly Jerusalem but on the Jerusalem above, with his eyes fixed on the joy that was set before him, as we're told. And as he journeyed, the father cared for him, not in such a way that he escaped mockery and abuse and suffering and pain and even death itself, but the father protected him and provided for him in such a way that the father's will for Jesus was perfectly accomplished and fulfilled. The father's good plans for the son were in no way undermined by the forces of evil or the schemes of man. His life was not destroyed by the grave, but the father kept him from the grasp of the enemy. He kept his life safe even as he went down into death. The father kept his going out and his coming in. And looking at the life of Jesus and looking at the death and resurrection of Jesus, we learn in a profound way what the psalm means and what it looks like for the believer.

You see, it's not a promise to escape difficulty and suffering and death. It is a promise that God the father will carry us through these things in such a way that we will be fundamentally unharmed, in such a way that his plans and purposes for us will not be undone, in such a way that we will arrive safely at our destination, even in his courts above. Friends, I have no idea how the journey is going for you today.

I don't know what you are facing or experiencing on this journey, but I do know that if you belong to the Lord through faith in Jesus, Psalm 121 is your psalm, your promise, your confidence, and your comfort today. Let's pray together as we close. God our Father, how we thank you for your care and protection over us on this life's journey. We thank you for the hope of the destination. We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ who walked the dusty trails of this road and suffered on the journey, but who proves to us in his resurrection and ascension that you keep your children and bring each one safely home. Help us to live in the assurance and joy of that today and each day that is to come, for we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.