

Help for the Journey

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[0 : 00] We're going to look today at Psalm 121. They've asked me to step in just for one week, a bit of pinch hitting. And I'm really glad that when Nat was reading, she read out the heading, A Song of Ascents.

A Song of Ascents, they're a collection of hearty anthems that God's people would sing as they journey to Jerusalem. But the Spirit has arranged them for our benefit too, because they're actually songs for the great journey.

Israel were God's people on an annual pilgrimage to physical Jerusalem. We're God's people on the daily pilgrimage to heavenly Jerusalem.

The Songs of Ascent are about a spiritual journey expressed in physical terms. The troubles that might knock the Christian off the path are expressed as physical obstacles along the way.

You see, the Spirit thinks that worse than any present trouble would be to not make it to the city in the end.

[1 : 05] One of the things that's really hard about being a Christian is seeing so many brothers and sisters fall by the wayside along the road. The Song of Ascents are God's way of encouraging us to keep persevering.

Psalm 121, it's all about the help we need to make it to the city. And in this city, speaking of help, the market for help is flooded, I think.

There's no shortage of help on offer. Some of it good and some of it not so good. Where should Christians turn? To government, are Scott Morrison and Daniel Andrews able to help you when your Christian life is in trouble?

Maybe you're not very good at asking for help. You never use the GPS. You never ask for directions. When you build IKEA furniture, you don't even open the instructions.

Maybe you believe in being self-made and self-sufficient. And if you put your mind to it, you are the best person to help you when your Christian life gets tough.

[2 : 17] Speaking of self-help, the latest book on the subject which I read, the author says this. Happiness is the journey, not the destination.

Part of being happy is accepting that we're not going to be happy. I'm not sure what you make of that. You see, during times of trouble, not everyone who offers help can actually do so.

And the proof will always be in the pudding. Nice words and good intentions, they have a place. But at the end of the day, did they actually help us stay on that path?

In our church here, particularly in the morning, we're going through a season of serious illnesses, lots of physical troubles, we've got an aging congregation, lots of loneliness happening in lockdown, and of course, mental health issues abound.

All these physical troubles have a knock-on effect to our spiritual journey. At some point, even the most capable Christians will be exhausted.

- [3 : 27] Help me, is the cry. And I realise here at 5pm that lots of you are young and strong and eager. Perhaps you wouldn't describe your situation as being in trouble right now.
- Well, then that makes this the perfect time to start training yourself to suffer well. Because there's something so visceral and foggy about suffering that you won't easily be able to pull yourself out.
- The Psalms are a great place to train yourself to suffer well. Because they give us a vocabulary for our despair. We don't always know how to complain and cry out to God, do we?
- The Psalms give us the words. They articulate our feelings. What better words than to cry out God's own words back to him in our despair?
- Psalms 121, that is a great passage to begin training, training to suffer. Help me, is the tone. The question is, where will you turn?
- [4 : 40] So look at verse 1. I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? Mountains here, they're not lovely things to look at, but actually an obstacle.
- You see, if you're making a pilgrimage on foot, mountains mean falling rocks. They mean terrible heights. No clear paths through. Verse 3, it talks about your foot slipping, which is really bad if you happen to be cycling through Caulfield.
- But real trouble if you're scaling a mountain. I wonder what would be the mountains on your Christian journey? What would be the things that might knock you off following Jesus?
- These obstacles, they might be all around you at the moment. Maybe not for a few decades. And on our own, they're enough that we would give up being a Christian.
- Help me, is the cry. Verse 1, I lift my eyes to the mountains. Where does my help come from? Verse 2, my help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
- [5 : 56] Lord here is in capital letters. That is Yahweh, the personal name of God. Scott is our prime minister. Daniel is our premier.
- Philip is our archbishop. And I am not on a first name basis with any of them. But that is what Yahweh wants for his people. Government agencies, the banks, your employers.
- They know our details, but do they really know you? A personal relationship. That is the goal for God. Living with him in the city is the end game.
- And he begins by introducing himself. Yahweh is his name. And verse 2 says that he made heaven and earth.
- And that means everything. Even those mountains are just something he made and controls. Natural disasters, the wind and the waves. None of them have independent existence.
- [6 : 55] Global pandemics, strife in Myanmar, conflict in Gaza aren't too much for him. Our jobs, our incomes, relationship status, our popularity, our health, our wealth, our past, our present, our future, our parents' expectations, others' expectations.
- In fact, anything we could name, any obstacle in life are in his hands. Hands which made heaven and earth.
- And in this psalm, if you look through the verses, you can see how his help is described. There's a slide coming up on your screen now.
- And I've highlighted the language. You can see it there. Watching, watching, watching, keeping, you watching, watching. Thanks for that.
- The language here, the picture here is bodyguard imagery. Look, I'm not sure if you've ever been in the market for a bodyguard. I'm not sure why you would be. But anyway.

[7 : 59] But if you were, what qualities would you look for in a bodyguard? Would they be a really big six foot six and big muscles, good with a gun? Or would you go for someone smaller and agile, reflexes like a cat, that sort of thing?

I have no idea. But what about a bodyguard who made heaven and earth? Would that make you more confident on the journey? Verse 2, it gives all the watching language its clout.

If Yahweh made heaven and earth, then he can watch us on the journey as well. Have a look at the next slide on your screen. Verse 3 and verse 4.

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. What about a bodyguard who never sleeps on the job?

Thanks for that slide. You see, the Lord, Yahweh, he is an insomniac in the very best possible sense. If you call the church staff for help, we will come to your aid as well.

[9 : 04] Except on Mondays. Of course, that's our day off. Any other time, we'll come running. Unless it's after 10 o'clock at night.

I need my beauty sleep and all of this is no accident. So I need to get to bed. Other than that, we'll come and help you. As long as we're not helping anyone else.

We see none of those excuses are the case with Yahweh. There's no sleeping in when you're sustaining the heavens and the earth. Out there in the marketplace for help, small gods, fake gods, local gods, wooden gods, they might be asleep.

They might need you to wake them up with prayers and chants and loud shouting. You might need to channel their cosmic energies with candles and crystals and rituals and the right lunar season.

Religious leaders, well-being gurus, mindfulness coaches, they might be too busy. They might be too fickle. Unless, of course, you increase the giving.

[10 : 14] The idea of this psalm is that you line up all other help on offer in the marketplace on one hand and Yahweh on the other. And then the Christian breathes a sigh of relief because we know the Lord and he knows us.

He's the maker of heaven and earth. He is the one watching over us. The yous in this psalm, they're all in the singular. And that means if you trust in the Lord, you can insert your own name into the words.

That's how you can really drive this psalm deep down into your heart. We're supposed to preach and sing it to ourselves and to one another. So verse three, he will not let James foot slip.

Indeed, he who watches over Nat will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Mark will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord will keep Lily from all harm.

He will watch over Rhian's life. We don't need name badges like I do to remember people's names. We don't need to bargain for God's help or hope that we catch him during office hours.

[11 : 28] When trouble strikes, the Christian pilgrim can breathe a sigh of relief because they know who is watching over them. You have a helper.

Look at verse six. It talks about the sun and the moon. There's lots of worship and superstition around these great lights, the sun and moon, but they can't do anything.

Their maker doesn't allow. Verse seven, it says the Lord will keep you from all harm. It's deliberately vague, isn't it? So whatever trouble you're facing, maybe it's spiritual forces.

Maybe it's a vicious person. Anything that might knock you off the Christian journey. The answer, the Lord will watch over your life.

Verse eight, it talks about your coming and going. Are you coming in? A longer lockdown might test our faith. The answer, the Lord is watching over you.

[12 : 30] Are you going out? A bit nerve wracking these days. Not everyone socially distances. Christianity is not exactly the flavor of the month.

The Lord watches over you. For the next five years, the next 50. Verse eight, both now and forevermore. Yahweh watches over you because you have a helper.

They're fantastic promises, aren't they? Nothing out there can make claims like these. But the proof will always be in the pudding, won't it?

And so it's worth asking if that is all they are, just nice claims. You see, the danger is we read a psalm like this and think, wow, the Lord helping. That sounds great. But how realistic is this?

Was he asleep when Mark Chu was having his bike ride the other day? Where was Yahweh when the doctor delivered that diagnosis? When your boss made you redundant?

[13 : 29] Or that relationship ended? See, I hope you realize that this psalm doesn't necessarily promise physical help along the way.

Because as awful as cancer or a breakup are, it would be much worse if they caused you to die to Jesus along the journey.

Speaking of dying on the journey, this week when I was thinking about mountains and journeys, I went to the internet and I learned that over 200 people have died trying to go up Mount Everest in the last century.

Apparently from about halfway up at Mount Everest, it's called the death zone. And it's just, you know, the lack of oxygen and the altitude and the cold, everything. I don't know why you'd go up Mount Everest, but anyway, people do.

In fact, most of the dead bodies can't actually be buried. And so they're frozen lying there as people walk past, just as a reminder. It's crazy stuff. And on your screen, here's a photo, not of the dead bodies, but here's a photo of some of the plaques that people have laid down for climbers.

[14 : 40] The big one on the left in gold, it says, in memory of Robert Edwin Hall, New Zealand mountaineer who died guiding people on Mount Everest, aged 35 years.

Thanks, guys, for that slide. That's quite chilling stuff, isn't it? Very sobering, isn't it? But as tragic as physical suffering and even death are, I think it would be even worse to die to Jesus along the way.

Imagine if they had to lay down plaques for us one day in memory of a 5 p.m. female whose non-Christian boyfriend led her away from Jesus, aged 25.

In memory of a 5 p.m. male who gave up Christianity, too proud to take discipline from Mark Chu and Jeff Hall and died to Jesus, aged 31.

In memory of a 5 p.m. member who turned back on the journey, exhausted and fed up after years and years of following Jesus, aged 65.

[15 : 55] In memory of a Christian pastor who lost his battle to sexual immorality and committed adultery, aged 52.

And if you have been a Christian for any decent length of time, you will know people who at one point in your life would have considered dear Christian brothers and sisters.

But now you can all but see their plaques clearly laid on the journey in memory of so-and-so. I have a friend who used to love Jesus.

She used to be active in her faith. And then she married a friend of mine who wasn't a Christian. And now, after a few years, but now instead of reading her Bible and going to church, she goes to a secular life coach instead.

She now says that self-fidelity and self-actualization, whatever that is, are the keys to your best life. In memory of Vijay's friend who loved her sophisticated, trendy self-help and didn't mix it with Jesus.

[17 : 10] And so he had to go, aged 38. I can't think of a more loving thing to do for friends like these than to meet up with them and tell them you love them and tell them how worried you are with where they're at on the Christian journey.

To ask them if everything's okay between them and Jesus. And I don't know what physical obstacle would be troubling you. So troubling that it might knock you off your Christian journey.

We've outlined a few here, but I don't know what it would be for you. The Bible is refreshingly honest, isn't it? About life on the road. This psalm, it promises successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival.

Please don't believe any teaching that promises a trouble-free journey. The confidence here is that God watches over us to the end. Even if we physically suffer along the way.

Your life, verse 7, literally your soul is being kept safe. It is successful arrival, not bruise-free arrival.

[18 : 24] In fact, our second reading which Brendan brought to us was Revelation 3. Revelation promises that if we keep on the journey, if we keep trusting in Jesus, that one day God will make us a permanent pillar of his house, a permanent fixture, so that we never have to depart from him.

We never have to go out into the wilderness again. And if that feels like God only really kicks in in the future, verse 4 says, he who watches over Israel, that he broke into life in the past to deliver his people when they cried out from spiritual slavery.

They cried out for help. And if you look back on your journey, I'm sure you will have stories about how the Lord intervened in your past to help you.

Supremely, of course, when he entered our world in the past in the Lord Jesus to save us from our sins. And in your past, when he broke into your life with the good news of this message, the Lord is our helper.

Part of God's help will be brothers and sisters keeping us in a family, as we heard at the beginning of our service. Solid Christian friends that encourage us to keep going.

[19 : 48] Part of it will be part of God's help will be a loving rebuke, perhaps. Part of it will be part of God's help.

Part of it will be part of God's help. Part of it will be part of God's help. We are saved for the city, for the future, because God is helping us and has helped us in the past.

None of the shocks and disappointments of life are too much for him. Any obstacles of the Christian life are well within his sphere of control. If the Lord can make the heavens and the earth, then maybe I can trust him to help me on the journey as well.

And in the marketplace of help, that is an infinitely better claim than what is on offer out there. Government, large organizations, do they even know you?

Independence, inner strength, being a loner, how is that working out? Life coaches, they say it's all about self, don't they? Don't focus on the problem, focus on the solution.

[21 : 17] But our psalmist is a realist. He stares his problems in the face. He lifts his eyes to the mountains. And he invites us to join him as well.

To stare your troubles in the face until, help me, is your cry. And I don't think that that will take too long. And then ask yourself the question of verse 1.

Where does my help come from? And give yourself the good news of verse 2. You have a helper. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

And call out to him. Maybe the conversation between you and the Lord has dried up. Let me encourage you back into the habit of regularly asking God for help.

For physical needs, sure. But supremely for spiritual needs. For him to watch over you. To keep you on the journey. Safe for that city.

[22 : 24] And so what we're going to do now, just to finish. We're going to say the psalm together. It's not a long one. And I'm going to say verse 1. And you're all going to reply back with verse 2 to 8.

And the boys will have it going on the screen. So just on your screen is what you need. So, a song of ascents. I lift my eyes to the mountains. 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. Amen. Amen.