

The Pilgrim's Help

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[0 : 0 0] Take a look at the Psalms. It's such an important book and it's so practical. And this year we're going to take the Psalms just from one little group of Psalms called the Pilgrim Psalms. And it's not just because the kids have done Bible camp on Pilgrim's Progress, although I do think it's a good idea for us to read it over the summer, Pilgrim's Progress.

The Book of the Psalms is not a disorganised collection of playing cards. When you read the Psalms it's not like dealing out a deck and hoping you'll get an ace or at least a jack.

But it does have sections and there is an order to it, not always easy to find. But the Pilgrim Psalms are 15 Psalms altogether from Psalm 120 to 134 and the title on every one of the Psalms called the Song of Ascents. And the word is literally steps, climb, Song of Steps and climbing. And they all have the sense of journey and pilgrimage about them moving toward the true home which is God's dwelling place. Because the Christian life is not a static life. You're not meant to be stationary. But we're meant to be moving in a different direction toward our true home with God. And as we read Psalm 121 you get this idea of progress. Your foot is moving. The sun, sun by day, the moon by night. God is guarding our going out of our coming in. Psalm 121, it must be one all time favourite Psalms throughout Christian history.

This has been a favourite with believers. It's so simple. It's so uncomplicated. In fact I was tempted this morning to give over the sermon time so that we could learn it off by heart.

But then so many of you know it off by heart. I thought maybe I should explain it. My uncle Stephen, my father's oldest brother, was captured during the Second World War. He was tortured and then dumped in a prisoner of war camp. When he got into the camp somehow he'd smuggled in a small copy of the New Testament and at the back there were the Psalms given by his praying mother. His life was in constant and grave danger and he was most definitely not following Christ. Although he was raised in a godly home he'd gone a long way away. So he thought this was a useful book and what he did was starting at the back, every day when he got enough tobacco to smoke a cigarette, he would tear one of the pages out of the back because they're very thin rice paper and roll it into a cigarette for a precious smoke. Then the day came when he got to Psalm 121 and instead of tearing it out he read it and he stopped and the Psalm stung him and it stunned him and he realized in his hand he had something infinitely precious and he didn't tear any more pages out. And he says after the war that he lured Psalm 121 off by heart and then he taught other guys to say it off by heart. And when he returned alive, barely alive, this is what kept him going.

[3 : 3 1] I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. Or look at verse 7, the Lord will keep you from all evil, he will keep your life.

It's not empty optimism, this Psalm. It's not about having a positive attitude, you know, having faith in faith. Psalm 121 is written for those who are facing difficulty, distress and hardship. It's when we need real help and real assistance. And these 15 psalms, these 15 songs of a set come in groups of three.

And each of the threes is a little, it's the whole pilgrimage that we walk in miniature. That's why I had the three psalms read. So let me just put this in context. Look back at Psalm 121. Where does it begin? Verse 1. In distress I call to the Lord and he answered me. Why is he in distress? Verse 5.

I sojourn, woe to me, I sojourn in Meshech. I dwell in tents of Kedar. Couldn't go further north in Israel than Meshech or further south than Kedar? It's the furthest place from the temple and the presence of God.

And this is the normal Christian experience. Not being at home, not really fitting. Feeling you're different because you're following God. And where does Psalm 122 finish? The distress is replaced by joy and gladness. You look at the psalm, he's standing in the courts of Jerusalem in God's home.

[5 : 10] And the life there is marked by peace and security and shalom and justice and harmony because God's king is there. It's what we long for. But between the distress of Psalm 120 and the arrival is Psalm 121. And it is about the Christian pilgrimage. It's about the normal life of faith.

We stand, we learn to lean on God as we walk through distress and difficulty. This psalm is about the circumstances of everyday life because without his concrete help we are lost.

And I think the wonder of the psalm is that God is right there for us in our distress, whether it's disease or whether it's discouragement or disaster, destitution, financial failure, family difficulties, failing health, persecution for your faith. And I know some of us are finding life harder and harder.

And I point out as we begin, that does not mean that you're on the wrong track or you're following the wrong God. Psalm 121 assures us this is the normal experience of living by faith. It's how we experience God's power and presence daily. Because nowhere in the Bible does God promise to airlift Christians out of trouble. Nowhere does he promise that if you follow him somehow you'll be immune from stress, disease and disaster. There's something better. God promises to protect us and help us and be with us in the distress, through the distress, even by the distress.

We face exactly what everyone else faces. We are prone to human misery. We are prone to accidents and violence. But the difference is that God is your keeper. And what difference does that make? Why is that better? It is because of the paradox of suffering. Because it is only in suffering we learn to desire God for who he is and not for what God can do for us. Can you say that again? It's only in suffering we learn to desire God for who he is and not for what he can do for us or what he can give to us. You might think it's the opposite way around. You might think that when we suffer we learn to desire what God can give us. But you see the greatest gift that God gives us is himself. And when we suffer we lose what has become important to us and then we begin to hunger for what really matters for God. The problem for us, and I look out on you and I see you're all capable and competent, the problem is we are allergic to our own helplessness. Don't like the idea that we are needy and cannot do life on our own. We are so full of our own vanity and self-sufficiency. I don't want to be weary and heavy laden. I want to carry my own weight. I want to get on with things. I want to get sorted. I don't want to be a drain on the church or a drain on God. You ever talk like that to yourself? And the measure of your true sense of helplessness are your prayers. That's where it's in. Because the way prayer works you see is we come to God as children to a father and children are perfectly open about the fact that they cannot change their circumstances. They cannot change themselves. I don't have the strength to follow God today.

[9 : 12] And I cry out, Father help me, Father help me. We cannot learn faith in a classroom or a vacuum. Faith has to be tested before it's real. And because of our swollen pride, it's only when we suffer that we begin to be aware of our need for God and our need for help and our need for his protection.

And as we lean on him, we begin to experience his goodness. We come to see that God is our only good. God is our only good. So Psalm 121 is only for those people who know they need help and who want to know God as their only good. If you cast your eyes down to the psalm, this is how it works. Verses 1 and 2 is a great big headline. It's the sort of, it's the enlightened statement. And then from verses 3 forward, he spells out how that works in everyday life. Let me just, let's look at the first two verses, the headline.

The psalmist begins, I lift my eyes, remember he's on pilgrimage, I lift my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come. The hills are not the place of safety and security. The hills are the place of threat and danger. If you're traveling through the valley, as this guy is, the hill is the place of thieves and thugs. And as he's walking through Israel, there are also high places, the places where people serve foreign gods. All these high things that people look to instead of God, everything that's fine and excellent in the world. Whatever they are, the point is that they are bigger than the pilgrim. The hills are the problems that are bigger than you. There are things that threaten to overwhelm us. There are things that we're not in control of. There are things that you know you're not up to. Where does my help come from? Verse 2, it doesn't come from the hills.

My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. He looks beyond the hills to the one who stands behind the hills. The Lord who made heaven and earth. You know, when anxiety or fear or fatigue set in, it's so easy to look around to the high things, isn't it? And we're easily distracted and look to the high things that we're not in control of. But there is only one who we truly need. And there's only one who can truly help us. And here's the Lord who is the maker of heaven and earth.

I think verse 2 is a beautiful combination of two things. On the one hand, God is our helper. He is eager and ready to give his help. He's full of love and kindness. He reveals himself as your guardian God. He's the Lord who made heaven and earth. He's the Lord who made heaven and earth. The hills and the valleys and the ravines and the seas and the sky. It's the basic Bible belief. It's not that God set it going in the first place and then withdrew. He sustains our world. He governs our world.

[12 : 21] He's sovereign creating power. He's guiding all things toward his own purpose. He's absolutely in control of things. And do you know what that means? It means we have something in our lives, someone in our lives who is bigger than the highest mountain. This week I heard the case of the unfortunate thief who planned to rob the former CBC anchorwoman Lynn Russell at gunpoint. You might have read this in the news. The only hitch was that Lynn had a husband with her and her husband was an ex-green beret who knew how to use a gun and used it. But you see, there is something for us that's greater than what's distressing and difficult. It's God himself. And it's not violence, but God combines compassion, care and power. And his care for us is not just one thing on his busy agenda. I guess David's David short's here somewhere. I need to look in on him. The very name that he's given us, the Lord, means there is no step that you can take outside his care and outside his control. Isn't that great?

It's wonderful. And the word that brings together his power and his care is the word keep, keeper. And it's the key word of the psalm. Did you notice as we went through verse 3? Just cast your eyes down.

He who keeps you, verse 4. He who keeps Israel, verse 5. The Lord is your keeper, verse 7. He will keep you from all evil, verse 7. He will keep your life, verse 8. The Lord will keep your going out and your going out.

Now, I'm sorry about this, but the English word keep is very bland. It's much stronger in the original.

It has the idea of active, vigilant, complete care. Guardianship. Defending against enemies.

[14 : 28] Paying special attention. Not sleeping. Not taking your eyes off. Preserving, saving. So I want to turn from the headline verses and ask, well, what does that look like in daily life?

What does it mean to say, the Lord is my keeper? Or my help comes from the Lord? And I've just selected four things. We could spend a lot more time doing this.

But I've got four C's for you who like alliteration. And the first is this. God's keeping means that his care is constant.

You see, the pagan gods around about Israel, they needed to sleep. They were powerful, but they weren't all powerful. Do you remember the prophet Elijah teasing the prophets of Baal?

And Baal didn't come through, saying, ah, perhaps he's snoozing. Or he's gone off for a little break. But what a contrast here. Listen to the joyful statement in verse 4.

[15 : 27] Sorry, verse 3 and 4. He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who gives Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

We have to sleep. But the Lord who made heaven and earth, he never faints. He never grows weary. His eyes are on you individually, each of us, every moment of every day.

And therefore, the psalmist says he will not let your foot slip. He will not let your foot be moved. The problem is, I often feel like my feet are slipping. I feel like my pilgrimage and my walk of faith is very unsteady.

And sometimes, sometimes I'm not even sure where to take the next step. What does it mean that our feet are not moved?

Well, if you keep your finger in Psalm 121 and turn back to Psalm 66, I think you'll be helped. On page 481, this phrase comes up again.

[16 : 35] In Psalm 66, and I'm going to begin reading at verse 8. Bless our God, O peoples. Let the sound of his praise be heard.

Who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip. Keep reading. For you, O God, have tested us. You tried us as silver is tried.

You brought us into the net. You laid a crushing burden on our backs. You let men ride over our heads. We went through fire and through water. Yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

When God says, I'm not going to let your foot slip, it does not mean that you're going to be exempt from what feels like a crushing burden. In fact, it's in the burden that God is testing you.

They say it's God who brought us into the net, and yet he didn't let our feet slip. Because he has brought us to this present place through the danger. He's never taken his eyes off us.

[17 : 39] And it's in the danger where his care is attentive and strong. Left to ourselves, brothers and sisters, we would completely be lost. We would fall off the track all the time.

The fact that you are here today means that God has caught you and sustained you and put your feet on the track again. Do you feel like your feet are slipping?

He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. So firstly, his care is constant. Secondly, his care is close.

Let's go back to Psalm 121. In verse 5, the psalmist changes the geography of our lives. When we are facing difficulties, remember I said at the beginning that God is behind and beyond the mountains?

In verse 5, something changes. God steps in between you and the difficulty. He comes right close to you, as close to you as your right hand.

[18 : 43] Verse 5. The Lord is your keeper. The Lord is your shade on your right hand. He doesn't watch us from a distance. He cherishes each of us individually.

That's what the word is. Because he is your closest guardian. And we defend ourselves reflexively with our right hand, don't we? Years ago I was on a mission trip in Australia.

And I was driving a group of teams through the jungle. This sounds better than it was. In an old Land Rover. And it was top heavy. And it was a bush track, very uneven, and there were great big puddles.

In Australia, you sit on the right hand side of the car. You need to know that so it makes sense of the story. Anyway, as we were driving along, we hit a very deep puddle with the right hand wheel.

And the car lurched to the right. I thought we were going to fall over. And instinctively, I put my hand out the window as though I was going to push the car off the ground. It's a very stupid thing to do.

[19 : 46] And completely futile. But it's instinct, isn't it? We defend ourselves with our hands. We live in the midst of so many dangers.

I mean, let's follow the news. Some that we see, some that we don't see. And this verse says that God watches us so closely. He is closer to me than my right hand.

He will protect you before your instinct will protect you. His help is right there. You don't need to go anywhere or do anything special to receive your protection. He is your shade.

And when you're feeling really rattled by your own anxieties, you're casting around to the mountains, He is there closer to your right hand. Lean on Him. His care is constant.

It is close. Thirdly, it is comprehensive. There are no exceptions. This is the language of this. Verse 6. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night.

[20 : 46] The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep your life. All evil. I think the sun and the moon cover all the dangers and threats.

You know, from burning to freezing. From what's rational to what's irrational. From what you can see to what you can't see. God stands between us and the burning sun.

Between us and the striking moon. And He will keep you from all evil. Literally from all harm. He doesn't keep us from all danger and difficulty.

Let me say it again. He keeps us from all harm. He keeps your life, He says. Your true self. Your person. Your soul. You might say.

How can that be true? Haven't we heard on the news. Christians are getting their heads chopped off? I want another cross reference.

[21 : 48] So if you keep your hand in Psalm 121. And this time let's go to Jesus. In Luke chapter 21. It's all the way to the right. Page 881.

Luke chapter 21. Verse 16.

Jesus says. You will be delivered up. Even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends. And some of you they will put to death. That's more realistic, isn't it?

You will be hated by all for my name's sake. That's more realistic. But not a hair of your head will perish. If you dig down, I think we believe we really shouldn't have to suffer.

We deserve a comfortable life. We deserve good treatment. Things should not be too hard. And that if God was all powerful. And if he really was that kind. My life wouldn't be that difficult.

[23 : 03] So when difficulties arise. The temptation is to say I'm a really bad person. Or God's not doing his job. He's not keeping me. The point that Jesus is making here.

Is that when we suffer. It's not because we're being specially sinful. Or it's not because God's too busy. Or he cares for the next person more than you. Or because he's nodded off.

And you know. He's got other much more important things to fix. Like global crises. Jesus says. Though we die. Not a hair of our head will perish.

Because Jesus is keeping us through the suffering. That's how comprehensive his care is. Do you remember the terrible story in 1999.

Of one of the teenagers murdered. In the Columbine High School shooting massacre. She was a young girl called Cassie Bernal. And evidently when the two boys entered the library.

[24 : 05] One of the boys, Eric Harris, asked her. Do you believe in God? And she said yes. And they shot her. Along with many others. And her parents wrote a book. And then did some TV interviews on her life.

And in one of the interviews. Her father said. That in the early days. After the shooting. When the horror and the rage. Was roiling in him. He asked his pastor.

Where was God. When she was shot. And the pastor said. And I quote. God was there. And then God removed his hand.

And Cassie was shot. And then he returned his hand. And ended the chaos. I think there is a cruel view of God.

It's cruel comfort. It means that God does take his eyes off you. It means there may be things stronger than God. It means that at the point of real evil.

[25 : 04] God turns his face away. That's not what this psalm says. And it's not what the Bible teaches. There is only once when God turned his face away.

That's when his son was bearing our sins. On the cross. And since God has looked away at that moment. He will never, never, never look away from us. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

You are with me. He's been through it. And his rod and his staff are there to comfort. That's what he's keeping means. It's constant.

It's close. It's comprehensive. And finally. It's ceaseless. Verse 8. Back to Psalm 121. The Lord will keep you going out and your coming in.

When? Under what circumstances. From this time forth and forevermore. That is beautiful, isn't it? You're going out and you're coming in.

[26 : 06] Everything you start. And everything you finish. He keeps you at the beginning of the day. When you go out. He keeps you at the end of the day. He's there at the door. He's there with you. He's there at the door of you.

He keeps you when you're young and when you're old. Every venture. And for the Christian, death itself is a going out and a coming in.

And when we die, because Jesus has risen from the dead, it's changed the meaning of death. When we die in the Lord, we go out of this world and we come into the presence of Christ. I think it's an astounding promise that he will keep you from this time forth forevermore.

Just think about that for a moment. That means you are no safer after you've been raised from the dead and have lived with him for 10,000 years than you are now.

Here is the promise. The Lord will keep you from this time forth forevermore. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. That's what it means for him to keep us.

[27 : 14] It's constant. It's close. It's comprehensive. And it's ceaseless. And I want to finish with two applications and just one suggestion for you. Here are two applications.

First, I want to encourage us all to learn to talk to ourselves with the gospel. Did you notice in the psalm that from verse 3 onwards, the psalmist addresses himself?

So in verses 1 and 2, I leave my eyes, my help, my help. And then from verse 3 onwards, you, you, your, your, your, ten times. I think this is a pattern of the Christian pilgrimage.

We have to take ourselves in hand and learn to talk to ourselves. I don't mean positive self-talk so that you can feel good about yourself. I mean, I think we need to take the promises of God and proclaim them, preach them and teach them to ourselves over and over.

And then turn them back into prayer to God. Reminding ourselves of his protection and precious promise. Look, help me, I don't believe this. I think we need to learn self-talk with the gospel.

[28 : 27] That's the first application. The second is this. We need to learn to lean on him. Since his keeping is constant and close and comprehensive and ceaseless, our pilgrimage is basically about learning to lean on him, to rely on him, to live on him, to take everything to him.

You know, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul speaks about some terrible difficulties that he experienced. He says at one stage, I just spared of life itself. He was suicidal. Then he says, but that was to make us rely on God and not on ourselves.

And that means bringing my weakness and my distress to God. To what is it that's most difficult?

I mean, be honest. Be honest with God. Don't smother it or pretend. Stop trying to play God. Have you been honest with him about your weakness? Because leaning on him means allowing that very weakness, that distress, that problem, to bring you to him.

And when we come to him, he says, my power is made perfect in weakness. My grace is sufficient for you. It's sufficient for you. And thirdly, I have a suggestion.

[29 : 55] It's not hard to do. Just write it out on a piece of paper. Take it with you. Day by day, remind yourself. I lift my eyes to the hills.

To where is my help coming? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. May the Lord bless you and may he keep you, keep you, keep you.

Make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. Lift up the light of his countenance on you and give you his peace. Today and always. Take a look. Step 4 to have a. If I prepare.

Wait. Take my best. Warm. Place light on you and wife. Use the above. Ap Fantastic Columbia. Use the above. Place light on you and your Journey. rock on you.

Allan Every Hopefully you will retain something in your Ah, tpa ce by Bone. Attack on you and your path is a teenager. Hallelujah. Come back it in your Paw. prophylaurus this.

[30 : 51] Become a scholar over to my street. And it's your choice.