

Psalm 121

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much for coming this early morning, this beautiful summer, and this hot day that will get even hotter, which may have been what motivated you to come to the 730 service.

Well, not some of you who are regulars here, but if you are new to the service, or even St. John's, my name is James Wagner, one of the other ministers here. And Jacob didn't mention this, but I think, Jacob, this is your first time to officiate at Holy Communion, and it's quite a significant experience for us as priests to do that.

And in the Anacan Church, we consider the true marks of the churches where the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are duly ministered. And rightfully here, you're trained to preach as a priest, a pastor, what the Bible calls presbyters.

And after that, then you're equipped to preside at what we call the Eucharist or Holy Communion, but a pretty special morning for you, Jacob. And thanks for doing this first here at the 730 service. This morning, we're going to look at a psalm, which we did read from the prayer book. And you're welcome to turn back to the prayer book for that, but I'll be preaching from the psalm that's in your Bible.

[1 : 27] And if you pull that out of the pew, if you haven't already, turn to page 516, and there you'll find the psalm that we did read earlier, which is 121.

And so this morning we begin a mini sermon series, and it's called Psalms for the Journey. You'll see that on the front of your service sheet there in orange. Beautiful images there. The Psalter is a really practical prayer book, and we're going to take three psalms from a section that's called the Psalms of Ascent.

We could call them the Pilgrim Psalms, and there are 15 in this section, from chapters 120 to 134. And this Psalms of Ascent, the word ascent literally means steps in the original language.

I don't know if you knew that. We've had actually three, no, two sermon series at St. John's, one back in 2005, another one in 2015, on all 15 of these psalms of ascent.

[2 : 43] But this is my first time actually to learn that that word doesn't actually refer to ascent like as we think of the ascent of Jesus after his death and resurrection ascended into heaven.

But it's fascinating, and it literally means steps. I found that quite helpful. So these psalms were used by pilgrims as they journeyed step by step to Jerusalem for major feasts.

That was one application of them. Those journeys were arduous. They were adversarial. But they were also adventurous. And our daily journeys of faith, discipleship, and trust are also the same.

And not all that different, though. I do know that we don't have to have an arduous, adventurous, adversarial journey when we come to our major feasts on Christmas and Easter and Pentecost and Ascension.

They're not that threatening to us. These 15 psalms of the psalms of ascent, or step psalms, break down into five groups of triplets.

[3 : 53] And we're only looking at three, beginning with 121 today. And it's a favorite psalm, rivaling Psalm 23. In our prayer book, Funeral Liturgy, there are three options of psalms that can be used, along with 23.

And one of them is Psalm 121. Today's psalm, and all three in this series, are psalms for the journey. They are pilgrim psalms. They are psalms of ascent, or step psalms.

And step by step, we make that journey. Taking steps isn't all that easy, as it turns out. We take our steps for granted sometimes, at times, ever since our initial steps in life.

And as it ends up, our development of taking our first and last steps in life is a metaphor for prayer. None of us remember how hard it was to take our first steps in life as a child.

We will all find out how difficult it becomes to take our final steps at the end stage of life. And in between, taking steps isn't so hard, but deserving of gratitude and not to be taken for granted. [5 : 05] So we don't want to take for granted steps taken spiritually and prayerfully. Psalm 121 is in the middle of this first triplet of stepping psalms.

Psalm 121 begins with, and you can look there, but I'll read the first verse. In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me.

The psalmist's prayer starts in distress. Psalm 122 ends in peace and goodness. You can look there at the end of Psalm 122.

For my brothers and companions' sake, I will say, peace be with you. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. Not only peace, but goodness is the goal of prayer and praise to the Lord our God.

Psalm 121 is in between these two psalms for those who are facing difficulty, distress, maybe even disaster. And it's when we need real help, real assistance.

[6 : 10] And Psalm 121 assures us this is the normal experience of living by faith. Step by step, we experience God's power and his presence daily through prayer.

God doesn't promise to kind of airlift Christians out of trouble, but he promises his presence to us through prayer. He doesn't promise immunity from stress, disaster, or disease.

But he gives us the needed help and keeps us during, by, and through distress. So we're going to look at two things this morning that say very much about God and the circumstances that we face. And one is that God is a, well, a pilgrim helper, but he's also a people keeper. So first let's look at God as our pilgrim helper from this psalm.

Let's face it, we need all the help that we can get. Christianity isn't getting any kind of help we can get, though. Discipleship is turning to the one who can help like no other.

[7 : 33] God is our help in the place of our greatest need. And God helps like no other, no one else, and like no self-help.

God knows, even more than we do, or want to admit sometimes, that we need help. I wonder, do you know when the word help or helper first comes up in the Bible?

Just kind of pause there as you're kind of scanning the Bible. It's Genesis chapter 2, verse 19, which reads, It is not good that the man should be alone.

I will make him a helper fit for him. So it wasn't good for man or woman to be on his or her own. And Adam needed help to serve the Lord.

So Adam wasn't alone anymore, but that didn't mean that Eve replaced God, because God is the helper. He's the pilgrim's helper. God is our helper in all capital letters.

[8 : 38] The first time helper is used about God, though, is in 1 Chronicles 12, verse 18, which Nora read. And it reads like this, and I'll read that again.

Then the Spirit closed Amasai, chief of the 30, and he said, We are yours, O David, and with you, O son of Jesse. Peace, peace be to you, and peace to your helpers.

But he doesn't stop there. The emphasis actually isn't on the helpers that David is actually now getting. He finishes by saying, For God helps you.

So David is given help, which points to the one who helps him, who helps us. God is our pilgrim helper. The pilgrims who use Psalm 121 on the way to Jerusalem, and all who pray it, are reminded of God, who is our helper.

God is our helper and the source of all our help. And we need this help because we face, as the psalmist pictures here now, hills and mountains.

[9 : 48] Now, mountains, while beautiful and bold, are daunting and dangerous. Psalm 121 begins in these words, I lift up my eyes to the hills, the mountains.

From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. We fail to appreciate the threat of mountains.

I know they're beautiful. We look in that direction northward, and we see how beautiful those mountains are, those hills. And they just seem so beautiful and bold.

But it's more than that. Of course, we drive over them at times, around them every day like I do. We climb them for recreation, maybe daily, or weekly, or on long weekends.

But the psalmist doesn't see the hills, mountains like we do. They were not a safe place, yet they were unavoidable. And we all face hills and mountains in this life that are sometimes threats, and other times just challenges.

[10 : 52] And most of us are facing our own hills, mountains, as it were, in work, relationships, health, or future, as we look in the past.

And not only do we as individuals face these challenges, but we face them communally as well. We need a helper. We pilgrims need that helper.

And Jesus told his disciples in John chapter 14 that he would send a helper on the night that he was in the upper room before his death, the own hill that he would die on.

And the word translator helper connotes someone beside or alongside of us. In reality, the same spirit that clothes Amasai is the one who also clothes us.

The spirit is the one who fills the poor in spirit who know that they need a helper, that they can't do it themselves. A help that is saving and a redeeming help, not just around us like shirts and pants being clothed by this helper, but actually in us.

[12 : 15] A helper who is a unique helper, who points us to our greatest need, satisfied by Jesus uniquely, and helps those who can't help themselves.

So this is what the psalmist is saying at the beginning in these first two of the eight verses, that we all need a helper. We need a pilgrim helper who is the Lord.

So now let's turn to God as our people keeper. While the Lord is our pilgrim helper, the dominant picture of God in this psalm is the Lord is our people keeper.

Seven times the word keep or keeps or keeper is used here. Keep is a pretty dominant theme in the psalms. It's not just in Psalm 121. And it mostly is in reference, though, to God's people when the word keep comes up.

We are people called and challenged to keep covenant and law with God, and often we actually don't do that. The Lord is perfect, though, in keeping his covenant and law with us.

[13 : 25] We are not kind of matching his keeping as he keeps us, though. So this psalm is a beautiful reminder that more important than our failure to keep God's covenant and law, God keeps not only covenant and law, but he actually keeps us.

And that makes God's people a kept people. God keeps us, which then means that he preserves, he upholds, he defends us.

So God keeps us. He's the people keeper. And I don't know what comes to mind when you hear the word keeper, but at first when I was thinking about this, I thought beekeeping, beekeepers.

Any beekeepers in the audience this morning? We're like small bees in some ways that God keeps. He's a people keeper. And he's a beekeeper as well.

It's kind of wonderful to think about that. I hope you don't think that that's trite. But then I remember a castle that I visited just a couple of weeks ago down in South Carolina.

[14 : 36] Nothing like the castles in England and other places throughout the world. But it was designed as a Moorish castle of the North African kind, which later influenced the castles in Spain.

And the keep in the architecture was at the center of the castle and the defense of the structure. A fortified tower and strongest part of a castle.

And it was the last refuge in case of an attack. When you think about God as our keeper, think of the Lord as our central defense system.

It reminds us that we are defenseless apart from God. We can't defend ourselves from all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and of course the devil.

And our keeper is God who is our spiritual defense. The Lord is our people keeper. And how does he do this? How is it that he's our people keeper?

[15 : 41] Well, the psalm shows us that he always does. He's available to keep us. And of course, he's able to. So let's look at these three things really briefly.

First of all, always. God is always our people keeper. The psalmist between distress and peace praises God who keeps us. So when taking steps one at a time and likely to stumble and fall in verse 3, we read the keeper God is always with us.

God may not prevent us from a fall, but he doesn't lead us into falls and failures. The psalmist prays that God never sleeps nor slumbers.

You see that with 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.

So God always cares for us. God never wearies or wanders. He never gets distracted or is drowsy. Nothing ever slips past the Lord, even if we slip up.

[16 : 52] The Lord never slumbers or sleeps, which means he doesn't hold office hours because he's always with us. That's the first thing, always. Available, though.

Furthermore, God keeps us close by because he's available. Verse 5 through 6. Look down and read with me. 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. God is with us at all times, watching us with great attention.

He's available. And he's not attending to other things that he needs to stop and put down or aside. He's not like a friend or a parent or a spouse who won't put down their screens.

I hear a laugh out there about that. You have some experience with that? I can do that. But nothing separates us from the love of God because he attends to us and is available always.

[17 : 55] We never interrupt God since he is available to our prayers, our cries, our wounds, our injuries, and our attentions. Always available.

But he's also able. Look down with me in verse 7 to 8. 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.

Our people keeping God makes promises and he's able to deliver on them. This doesn't mean that the Lord will keep us from all harm.

Harm will surely come our way. We will suffer ruptured relationships, terminal diagnoses, vocational challenges, serious suffering. But the biblical God defends us from all evil.

And not only keeps us from all evil, but for life. From evil, but for life. And this is the purpose of our people keeping God.

[19 : 05] He's all about the good life with the good news of Jesus Christ. His ability to eat is so comprehensive that it is the going out and the coming in and forever and ever, says the psalmist.

His ability is life restoring and redeeming and renewing because Jesus is the way and the truth and the life.

That resurrection life that's promised actually here. The Lord will keep you from all evil. He will keep you and keep your life.

And just as Jesus promised to give his followers another helper in John 14, he's the pilgrim helper. He's also, we see, the people keeper here.

Which makes me think of Paul's letter to the Galatians when he writes, if we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

[20 : 13] You see, our Lord is the pilgrim helping God and the people keeping God, but he doesn't do that for or instead of us, but he does it in us and with us.

Jesus gives us the Spirit so that we can keep in step with the Lord. And that's how the people keeping God works in our journey. Step by step.

Sometimes by suffering, yet really satisfying. But always step by step with the Spirit and never alone.

So as we read and pray these Psalms of Ascent, just three of them, this week and the next two weeks, these stepping psalms, let's call forth on Jesus to send his Holy Spirit so that we can keep in step with the Lord.

Some of us may be at the beginning of the journey. Some of us may be at the end of the journey. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. And I think every stage has its challenges.

[21 : 22] All which calls forth prayer. Prayers like these ones. If you don't have your own words, then pray these. I know that we think that the end stage is the hardest, and I don't doubt that, given my care for the sick.

This past Thursday, I had a great privilege of visiting three of our members, two at VGH and one at UBC in hospital. All prayerful people and grateful for the Lord's care through his people to them. But I think all stages, whether you're at the beginning, at the end, or in the middle, are stages of great discovery and discipleship, great depth in the relationship with the Lord, and knowing that the Lord is our helper and our keeper by his Holy Spirit who fixes our eyes on Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith, our hope, and our love in him through prayer.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Thank you.