

## **PILGRIMS TO JERUSALEM** **A Sermon on Psalm 121**

**by Russell Smith**

A few weeks ago I saw a great cartoon in the newspaper. The first panel showed a man entering a gas station. In the background were his car packed for vacation, his flustered wife fuming, and his children bickering. The man said to the gas station attendant, "I am a man. I am lost. And I am asking for directions." The next panel showed the man getting back into the car and the gas station attendant saying to a friend, "It must be some kind of self-help program for husbands."

Brothers and sisters, it's no fun to be on the road and to realize that you're lost. It's no fun to have a flat tire or to change your plans due to unforeseen circumstances. It's no fun, but it does happen. It's no fun when our lives get derailed, like when we get laid off from a job or we get diagnosed with a serious illness. When the events of life disorient us, where do we go to get our bearings? Where do we go to reestablish a sense of who we are and what our direction should be? We go to the Word of God. God's word tells us that when we are disoriented, God is there to guide us. It tells us that despite the worst events, God is in control of all things. It tells us that when we feel lost and confused, God is completely trustworthy.

Psalm 121 comes from a section of psalms known as the songs of ascent. These fifteen psalms were sung by pilgrims to Jerusalem during the great feast days of ancient Israel. Taken together, the songs progress from the start of the journey in a foreign land to the worship of the covenant God in His temple in Jerusalem. The second in the series, Psalm 121, tells the story of the travel to Jerusalem. I invite you this morning to look back over the centuries and imagine yourself as part of the pilgrim caravan.

You've packed provisions and money for the road. You've loaded up your pack animals and set out. Perhaps you are traveling with a band of your kinsmen, making the long and dusty journey to Jerusalem. Yes, you go through some towns, but most of the trip is through long, dry stretches of uninhabited land. As you pass by the hill country, you look up to see the dark and shadowy valleys, places where bandits and cutthroats hide. You hope that your caravan is large enough to deter thieves, but you're not entirely confident. You know of people who have never returned from their trips. Your ears strain at every sound; your eyes search the shadows.

The hills bring another thought to mind: the religions of the Canaanites. You know the high places where they worship. You have heard that they call down special favors from their gods through the magical formulae in their rituals. You've heard rumors about the sensual pleasures practiced by the priestesses. For a moment – a brief fleeting moment – the thought crosses your mind to seek out one of these priests or priestesses. It couldn't hurt to have a charm, an extra protection, just in case.

Then, you remember the pilgrim song. You open your mouth and sing, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come?” As your voice echoes, another voice answers with the familiar words, “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” You are reassured in the knowledge that your help does not come from manipulating the elements, or from tricks and chants. Your help comes from the Lord, the covenant God who orchestrates all events.

Several voices pick up the song, “He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.” You smile, remembering the roughness of this road filled with rocks and holes. You join the others, “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.” As you sing this verse, you laugh, remembering Elijah’s battle with the priests of Baal. As the pagan priest called to Baal, Elijah mocked them, asking if Baal were asleep. Baal, the god of the harvest and vine, was often in a drunken stupor. Baal sleeps, but not the God of Israel. Your God, the God of Abraham and Isaac, is always attentive to his children.

Soon the whole caravan sings with you, “The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.” You remember how the people of Egypt worshipped the sun and the moon as gods, as ultimate beings. But you know that the sun and moon were created and are subject to the Lord. You remember the story of creation. The sun may blaze down upon you, the moon may haunt your imagination, but the Lord who made them both is on your side. The Lord, the God of Israel, will stand beside you no matter how hard the sun beats down.

You are filled with joy because of your special relationship with the God of Israel. You are excited about this Lord, this keeper, this preserver, this shepherd God who keeps you in the palm of his hand, who watches your every step, and who does not allow you to be challenged beyond your strength. You and your companions burst forth the last verse, “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 and forevermore.”

Brothers and sisters, as we come back to the present, I want you to know that those pilgrims who sang that song thousands of years ago are your brothers and sisters in the Christ. The God they sang about is the God we worship. They sang to remind themselves that God guided their steps; they sang to remind themselves that God ruled creation; they sang to remind themselves that every moment was lived under God’s loving care.

We live in different times. We live in an era where our life can dramatically change in an instant and where the frequency of such changes is high. In a time of such abundant change, we are tempted to grasp about us for some kind of security. The ancient Israelites were tempted to look to pagan rituals and magic for security. Those who succumbed to

that temptation traded their personal relationship with a loving God for the quick results of tricks and techniques. The problem is that quick results never last.

Today, our temptation is to place security not in magic, but in the markets. In the recent economic boom thousands have entered the stock market thinking it a sure way to riches. These people were not investors, but gamblers. They worshipped at the alter of the “dot com,” thinking they could have security. But like Baal, the economy slumbers. Many have gotten burned.

Today, our temptation is to place our security not in the sun and moon and stars, but in ourselves. Our culture tells us to look to ourselves. “If you follow these seven habits or take this particular self-improvement course, you’ll make yourself happy.” Personal development is the goal for many. But like the sun and moon, we are creatures; we do not belong to ourselves.

Today, our temptation is to think for the moment. “Live in the now, because tomorrow may not come.” But, brothers and sisters, like our fellow pilgrims, we have a grand destiny ahead.

This psalm tells us, the church, that no matter what the circumstances, we are secure in God’s hands. It does not promise an easy life. Rather, it proclaims such confidence in God that nothing will shake it. We have this confidence because the grace of God through Christ has given us an identity that we carry wherever we go. Ephesians 2:4-10 states that those who are in Christ have already been raised up to the heavenlies. We who are in Christ are seated in this moment and for every moment evermore next to Christ in the heavenlies. Do you see the magnitude of that statement? Nothing can shake you from that seat. Like the pilgrim of old, you are so firmly in God’s hand that none of the circumstances of the journey will cause you to lose that position.

Yes, the rapid pace of change can lead to a sense of rootlessness. But with Christ there is no rootlessness. Christ gives you the identity that you carry for the rest of your days. If you are in Christ, there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any less. You are secure in your standing with God; you are seated in the heavenlies. God is your keeper. No matter what happens, he will not let you go.

So, when your oldest child leaves the house and you want to weep for emptiness, remember that your help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth. When your employer transfers you across the country and you are separated from your family until the house sells, remember that he who keeps you will not slumber. When your mom and your dad decide to split up and you wonder what you could have done to prevent it, remember that the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night. When your spouse dies and you feel like a part of you has been amputated, remember that the Lord will keep you from all evil. When you receive that diagnosis that you dread, remember that the Lord will keep your life.

Brothers and sisters, life will be painful. Life will be difficult. We live in a world still suffering under sin. But God will give you the strength to persevere on the journey to the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem. And as you make that journey, you can truly say these words, "The Lord will keep me from all evil; he will keep my life. The Lord will keep my going out and my coming in from this time on and forever more." Amen.