

Confidence in God's Care For You
Psalm 121:1-8
Faith Evangelical Free Church (Manhattan, KS)
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Our text for this morning is Psalm 121.

Psalm 121 is what's known as a "Song of Ascent" -- there are 15 psalms that bear this description or this title, and all of them were written to encourage Jewish travelers as they made their way through the Judean wilderness to Jerusalem, to worship at the temple and attend annual festivals such as Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Songs of Ascent would have been a bit like a family always singing "Jingle Bells" on the way to and from picking out a Christmas tree, or how the Alma Mater and Wabash Cannonball are reverently recited (and danced to) before K-State football games.

Just as these songs are meant to pass time, draw you closer to one another, and prepare you for the main event, Psalms 120-134 were meant to ease the minds of weary Jewish travelers, encourage them as they hiked through forests and up mountains, and prepare their hearts and minds for confession, reflection, and celebration upon reaching Jerusalem.

My hope this morning is that you and I can engage in one of the songs -- Psalm 121 -- in a similar way. We may not be traveling together on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but we are gathered to worship and grow closer to our God. Psalm 121 helps us along in our everyday journey toward a deeper relationship with God by offering and promising this encouragement: **that you can be confident in God's care for you.**

You can be confident in God's specific and personal care for you.

I'd like to read Psalm 121 and as I read I invite you to listen and reflect on how the psalmist promises that God cares for you. If you can, think about how you've known that to be true in your own life, or about a struggle or difficulty you may need to apply this truth to, and keep those examples in mind as we look at God's Word today.

Psalm 121:

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?

2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

4 Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

So the psalm begins, in verses 1 and 2, with the psalmist asking and then answering his own question -- "Where does my help come from" and "my help comes from the Lord".

He starts out by saying "I lift my eyes up to the hills" -- a fitting piece of imagery for one who would have been singing this song as he (or she) traveled toward Jerusalem, a city built in the higher hill country above the valleys of Judea.

The meaning behind the psalmist lifting his eyes to the hills and wondering from where help might come is the subject of some debate among biblical scholars and interpreters.

It could be a reflection upon the majesty and power of God as seen in his creation -- you look out on something as grand, solid, and strong as the mountains and think, "wow, I worship a God who is capable of making all THAT." If you've ever hiked the Konza trail on a warm spring day, or caught the sunset at the Top of the World...you may know what it's like to be filled with a sense of awe and confidence in God through looking at his creation.

Another interpretation for the psalmist's examination of the hills is that he is concerned -- he knows he needs to get to Jerusalem, knows the road before him is his only choice, but also knows that traveling through the mountains is dangerous. His question, "where does my help come from" flows from his concern about the road ahead. Certainly we can all relate to having a goal set before us and thinking, "If I'm going to get this done I'm going to need help."

A third possibility is that as the psalmist looks toward the mountains he is also looking toward Jerusalem and the temple, where the Jews believed God dwelled, where a special manifestation of his presence could be found. The psalmist draws some encouragement from knowing he's headed toward a place where he's met God before. Perhaps for some of you coming to church every week creates a feeling of peace and comfort, or maybe you've got a quiet place by Tuttle Creek you like to retreat to, or a particular table at a coffee shop where it is easier to find peace and the presence of God.

No matter the reason the psalmist looked to the hills, he offers only one answer to his question, only one source from which to find the help he sought: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Be confident in God's care for you -- the one who made the heaven and earth is the same one who is ready, able, and willing to help you as you journey, when you're in trouble, and when you need to find a place of safety and rest.

Pastor and author David Platt once remarked that the God who placed the stars throughout the universe and holds the planets in their orbit is the very same God who, while doing and sustaining this mighty act and billions more, takes the time to listen to you, to hear your prayers, to care specifically for you as an individual.

Be confident in God's care for you. This is the foundation of Psalm 121, and from it the psalmist will continue to encourage you to trust in God by giving three examples of the ways God cares for you:

... He never grows tired of helping you.

... He stays close to keep you safe.

... He is able to care for the whole of your life.

Let's take a look at the first point, drawn from vv. 3-4, that you can be confident in God's care for you because he never grows tired of helping you.

The psalmist continues his encouraging song, saying "[God] will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber or sleep. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither sleep nor slumber."

When I was in high school I worked at a 9-hole golf course, as an attendant in the main shop. It was a pretty small business and I often worked alone. One time I was scheduled to cover the afternoon shift on a Sunday after having spent all Saturday night at a school dance.

Wearied from the previous evening's festivities, I dragged myself into work, clocked in, and did my best to lean on things in an attempt to stay upright and awake.

But...at some point I knelt down behind the shop's counter to look for more scorecards...and then I sat down...and then I laid down...and then I fell asleep. I woke up about an hour later with my friend standing over me, poking me with a golf club and asking me if I was okay. To this day I have no idea how many people might have come in during my nap looking for help (a few simply signed in and headed out to play the course).

Now I'm sure none of you have ever done anything like that...but perhaps you can still relate to the simple truth that as human beings, we get tired -- we have limits. We cannot be all things to all people, nor can we navigate the hardships and challenges (and school dances) of this life on our own or without rest.

But the thing is, we often need the most help when we are at our weariest. We need help from someone who can rise above our limitations and see us through our difficulties when we have no strength left to give.

We need the God who the psalmist describes in vv. 3-4 -- the one who never wearies, never tires, never sleeps, and who is able to help us as we begin to slip, trip, and fall over the hardships in this life.

The promise that God "will not let your foot be moved" is a tricky one to understand, because we want it to be saying that God will never let anything bad happen to you -- but unfortunately part of living in a world that's still plagued by sin is dealing with difficulty and suffering, whether created by our own sins or caused by things beyond our control but that are nonetheless ours to endure.

But the promise in Psalm 121 is that God will never be absent during your time of need -- he has no need for rest and can never be exhausted by your need for his help.

God promises this in many other places throughout Scripture. In Deuteronomy 31:6 which says, *"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you."*

God will not let your foot be moved, will not allow you to slip, will not abandon you to some terrible fate that he's not ready to help you with and journey alongside you, every step of the way.

Be confident in God's care for you because he will never grow tired of helping you.

As the psalm continues, you and I can be further encouraged by the truth that God stays close to keep you safe.

In vv. 5-6 we read, *"The LORD is your keeper, the LORD is the shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day nor the moon by night."*

For me, this is one of the coolest poetic images in all the Psalms, but you have to have a little bit of historical background in order to catch it.

The Lord is said to be our keeper, a translation of the Hebrew word *shamar*, meaning protector or guardian, and also described as the shade on our right hand.

In many ancient cultures the right hand was the hand of power. A soldier or guardian would most often be stationed at the right hand of a king or leader in order to provide protection or defense at a moment's notice.

In vv. 5-6, you and I are promised that the soldier and guardian standing at our side is none other than God himself -- standing so near as to be able to cast a protective shadow over you.

I think it's often very hard for us to imagine that God is ready and willing to guard us in our times of need because so often our greatest needs are connected to things that we perceive as personal failures or sins, or as problems so great that no one could possibly want to be on our side.

But it is for exactly those moments, those desperate and difficult circumstances, that God promises to be our guardian. There is no hole so deeply dug that God is not willing to jump in right alongside you and help you find your way out.

Take a moment to think about something you're struggling with. Maybe it's a particularly difficult relationship with a friend or family member. Perhaps you're overwhelmed at your place of work and are scared that you cannot accomplish all that is expected of you. Or maybe there is some sin that you can't shake and feel powerless to stop.

Whatever your struggle, try and visualize it before you...and as you do that, if in your mind you're standing alone before the things that you're afraid will defeat you...correct that image and know and believe that God is there beside you, his hands on your shoulder, looking out upon the troubles and evils that would love to see you fall, and saying "if you want to come after my son or my daughter, you'll also have to come after me."

The psalmist is not promising the absence of pain or failure in this life. But he is promising that, when you encounter adversity, you will remain upheld and cared for not by your own power, but by the preserving hand of God.

Be confident in God's care for you, because he stays close to keep you safe.

The last promise in Psalm 121 is that God is able to care for the whole of your life.

"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."

There are two important things to note in these closing verses of Psalm 121.

The first is that here the range of God's protecting care has been fully spelled out and that the psalmist understands God to be watching over and carefully involved in the whole sphere of your life.

The phrase "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in" is a kind of expression meant to capture all the movements of your everyday life. From when you rise and leave your

home to when you return, God is there throughout, keeping watch and ready to stand by your side through both joy and pain.

The second important thing to note is this: at no point in these verses or the previous 6 is God's promised care dependent on you or how you feel that day.

Whether or not you feel close to God, whether or not you feel right with God, whether you're having a day where the promises of Psalm 121 are bursting within your heart or a day when they are no more than cold words on a page...vv. 7-8 assure you of this: God's care for you is not dependent on how you feel, whether or not you've got it all together or figured out.

It is his promise to keep you from all evil. His promise to keep your life. His promise to watch over you no matter where you go or what you do. God invites you into a rich and close relationship with him, and these promises will be a lot easier to believe when things are going well, but they may also be much more precious when things are all wrong.

In the summer of 2015 some friends of mine who live in Kansas City found out they were pregnant with their 2nd child, a baby girl they decided to name Elizabeth (Ellie for short). They were absolutely thrilled, but at 21 weeks everything changed. Ellie's brain wasn't developing properly, and doctors told them that if she made it to birth she would not live very long. My friends were devastated, and as the weeks and pregnancy continued that devastation only grew as it became clear that Ellie's condition was indeed "incompatible with life."

On December 24th of 2015 Ellie's heart stopped beating, and later that evening my friends both welcomed and said goodbye to their daughter.

Ellie's story is difficult to hear and incredibly hard to try and understand, and some of you might be closer to it than others having experienced a similar loss. My friends went through a great deal of grief and sorrow after receiving Ellie's diagnosis. They struggled to make any sense of what was happening, struggled to understand how to best love their daughter, and struggled to continue their everyday lives with this sadness and pain.

And yet, despite all the pain and tragedy, they were still able to see God's care for them. I want to read to you what they wrote on a website which is dedicated to both the memory of their daughter's life and to the way God has used Ellie's story, to encourage and inspire others to seek ways to bless one another, as my friends felt blessed by both God and their community even while enduring incredible suffering.

*Throughout the 12 weeks between Ellie's diagnosis and the day she was born, we were blessed in tremendous ways. First and foremost, we were blessed by the presence of the God who is sometimes best felt in difficult times. He met us in our darkest moments and gave us peace that we simply cannot explain. Passages in the Bible that are easily skimmed past in good times become the cries of our hearts in tough ones. Texts like Psalm 46... **"God is our refuge and***

strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way... We are blessed, not because we're shielded from all harm, but in the brokenness that defines so much of our world, we have a God who does not let us linger on our own. This is so hard to explain because it simply transcends human logic. But those who have walked similar paths and as a result felt the nearness of God in ways like never before, they too understand the deep abiding blessing from God that we experienced in our hurt.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 16, Jesus tells us that while on this earth and in this life we will experience tribulation, and pain, and great hardships...but he also says to *"take heart, for I have overcome the world."*

The promises of Psalm 121 find their fullest expression in the life death, and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

God never grows tired of helping us, and so great was his desire to care for us that he sent his Son to die for our sins on the cross.

God stays close to keep us safe -- as true as this was when the psalmist wrote it, you and I can experience an even greater closeness with God through our relationship with his Son Jesus Christ. Never has God been so close to those he loves as he is now, with his Spirit dwelling within those who call on Jesus and confess their need for forgiveness and a Savior.

God is able to care for the whole of our lives, which is why Jesus made promises like *"I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly"* and *"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."*

This week, brothers and sisters, be confident in God's care for you.

As you encounter difficulties, when life happens, pay attention to where you turn. Do you, like the psalmist, lift you eyes to the hills and seek the Lord? Or do you turn to lesser things in order to seek a quick fix to your pain and frustration?

Lesser things are okay...things like books and movies and games and good food and drink have their therapeutic and entertaining place...but if you go to them in order to seek real peace and comfort, you'll likely be left feeling frustrated and alone. Netflix has not come that you may life, and have it abundantly -- only Jesus can claim to have done that for you.

Be confident in God's care for you and seek him in your times of need. Trust that he never grows tired of helping you, that he always stays close in order to keep you safe, and that he is able to care for the whole of your life.

