

## JOURNEYING MERCIES

### Psalm 121

Lake Joseph Community Church, August 19, 2018

Were I given a dollar for every kilometre we here today have travelled this summer I would probably be a very rich man. If I were offered all the air miles earned by everyone in this church today since we were here a year ago, I'd likely be able to enjoy free first class travel for the rest of my life. We're a generation of travellers, and when we travel we're grateful for "journeying mercies." Perhaps we even pray for this particular grace. After all, when we stop to think about it, it's something of a miracle that we've traveled so often and so far and find ourselves safely nestled in the Lake Joe Church sanctuary this morning.

Psalm 121 is all about journeying mercies. It's popularly called "The Pilgrim Psalm" because it gives us the picture of a pilgrim making his way to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Using a little sanctified imagination we could envision the scene in this way: the pilgrim has come a long way, on foot and alone. One evening at the setting of the sun he rests his weary body by the side of the road. When he awakes early the next morning he catches sight of the Judean Hills in the distance. And there in the midst of them is his sacred goal, Jerusalem! But as he looks at those far away hills, he wonders whether he's able to safely reach his destination. There are still many dangers to face and risks to take—will he fulfill his dream to worship in the great Temple there? He reflects, remembers and then he prays, "I lift up my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The balance of this psalm is commentary on these words, and with restored faith and courage he sets out to complete his journey.

This psalm is one of the most popular in all of the Psalter. Next to Psalm 23 it's probably the most loved of all the Psalms. Why is that? Few of us will go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, certainly not in the way the psalmist did his. Surely we love this Psalm because speaks not only of safe travel to Jerusalem but of journeying mercies on the road of life. As we look down the road that takes us into the future we see many dangers and difficulties, risks and hazards, but we can find confidence and take courage because as we make our way through life the Lord goes with us and cares for us. We can sum it up in this way: life is a perilous pilgrimage and our God is the perfect protector.

#### LIFE IS A PERILOUS PILGRIMAGE

We can think of life as a pilgrimage that takes us from the cradle to the grave. We here today are at different stages of our journey; some just beginning, others in the midst of it and some drawing near the end. As we make our journey we all have goals to reach, the "milestones" of life. Our ultimate goal is what John Bunyan has called in his classic allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, "the celestial city."

We soon learn that life's pilgrimage is filled with dangers and difficulties, risks and hazards. Psalm 90 gets it right when the writer declares, "We live for seventy years or so (with luck we might make it to eighty), and what do we have to show for it? Trouble. Toil and trouble and a marker in the graveyard" (*The Message*). For the most part we're powerless against many of the tragedies and trials of life. We can't prevent them and we can't do much when they strike. We wonder if we're going to get through it all; it's when we ask with the psalmist, "I lift my eyes to the hills (i.e. "I look down that perilous road that leads into the future"), where will my help come from?" and we find the psalmist's confident answer, "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth!"

#### GOD IS THE PERFECT PROTECTOR

The Bible often speaks of God as the Helper of His people. For example such Old Testament characters as Abraham, Jacob, Joshua and David are all assured of God's help, and in the New Testament Jesus speaks of God's providential care and redemptive grace in the Sermon on the Mount, supported by the testimony of Paul and others. And this is also the confidence of Christians today—how often have we heard friends who have gone through especially difficult times say, "The Lord was with me," or "I got through it with God's help." Perhaps we ourselves have said the same.

Psalm 121 promises that God will be our “keeper” or “guardian” on the pilgrimage of life. The Hebrew word “to keep” is found six times in these few verses, a term that speaks of close, careful watchfulness. The Psalmist declares that His watch over us is *constant*: “He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you . . . will neither slumber nor sleep. “ He provides protection that’s *comprehensive*: “The Lord watches over you . . . the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.” Indeed, His care is *complete*: “The Lord will keep you from all harm . . .”

But does that final affirmation not raise doubts and questions for us? Who of us can honestly say that we’ve never somehow suffered in this journey we’re on? In fact it would appear from the the evidence of the Bible that God’s people may especially suffer, and especially those who are most faithful! For instance, we could mention Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Joshua, David and Ruth. And how about Peter and Stephen and Paul? One can’t study the history of the Church nor consider the plight of countless Christians today without being struck by the extent of pain and anguish. Some us at Lake Joe Church this morning can testify to the same in our own experience. So what are we to say in the face of it all?

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The answer is in the word translated “life” in verse 7. Some versions of the Bible translate the word as “soul,” and it can be used in either way. When we think of the soul we’re considering that which is our “essence,” our true self, and that’s what God protects, whatever may happen to our circumstances, our possessions and even our body, that which is the “essence” of us will survive and even thrive, thanks to God’s special care.

This surely is in the message of grace that comes out of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Good Friday He suffered unspeakably, not only to the death, but to the place where He cried out in His anguish, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” But of course God had not forsaken Him, but had watched over His soul and His life and raised Him from the dead on the third day! Therefore Paul can confidently declare “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And so can we, whatever we may meet on this pilgrimage that is leading us onward to our goal in “the celestial city!”