

Hold Me Fast

Psalm 121

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Good morning everybody. How are you? My name is Rob Gicking. I am the director of youth and family ministries here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. It is my privilege to be with you this morning and to bring you a continuation of our summer series in the Psalms.

And so today, we're going to be looking at Psalm 121. And so I'm going to read it for you now. So just read along. Here we go.

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

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.

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.

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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we come before you in need of you. Every day, every moment, we need you, Lord. Father, we ask now that you would bless us, that you would open up your word and that it would speak to our hearts, that the way we came into this room is not the way we would go out. But Father, that you would capture our attention, that you would be the focal point of our affections, that you would teach us who we are, who you are, and the beautiful way that we relate to one another because of that. Lord, speak through me. Give me words that are your words and not mine. May you soften our hearts, that together we would grow in our knowledge and understanding and love for you. Amen.

So as we begin today, it's important to note as you see in your Bible that this is a song of ascent. Many of you know what that means. Some of you might not. Remember, as of like six years ago, I was in the "not" part of that group, and so this is still fairly fresh for me. It's this idea of a pilgrimage. The song of ascent is when the Jews, the Israelites from all over the place would gather a couple times a year, three times a year, for large feasts and celebrations, and they would literally travel to Jerusalem to the Temple. And so geographically, it is an ascent. They're going uphill. You know, literally elevation is increasing. And the idea here is that these songs were to be sung or recited as they traveled along. And so this is a journey song. And no, I don't mean the band Journey. I mean this is a song for the journey.

And so it got me thinking, I was like, "Man, journeys and quests, they're the backbone of every good story, aren't they?" Right? Because journeys involve a mission or a goal to be accomplished, and then there's usually some sort of trouble. Without the trouble, it's not really a story. Like if Lord of the Rings was like, "There was a ring that needed to be thrown into a volcano." And then it was like, "And so he took his car, and drove on the interstate. And he got out, and he said, 'What a volcano,' and then tossed it." Like, that's a short book and not a very good one. Right? So we know that somewhere along the line, we've got to have some sort of problem.

And so it got me thinking. I was like, man, it's the backbone of all great stories and movies. I got to

be able to share some of my journey stories with you. And so I started thinking I've got two for you today. The first one's a little bit on the funnier side, and the other one's a little bit on the sadder side because life. All right?

It was 2017. I was approximately four years younger. And I was working at a different church in our presbytery. And one of my friends came up to me. He said, "Hey Rob, we need a speaker for this Battalion trip this weekend." And immediately I was like, "No," because I knew what the trip was. And so he says, "Well, it's a canoe trip." Now listen. I've been in a canoe before. It's not as fun as a power boat because this is a lot more fun than this, am I right? Some of you are like, no. Look, granola is for some people. Okay. I'm more of a powerboat kind of guy. But he says to me, "Hey, we want you to come on the canoe trip." And I said, "Okay. When is it?" And he goes, "Well, it's Saturday, but you need to be there on Friday night." I was like, "Man, Friday night. Oh yes, I have a huge outreach event on Friday night." And I said, "Where is it?" He said, "Well, it's three hours away." And so I'm going classic dumb young man stuff in my head. I'm going, "The event starts at 7:00 on Friday night. It'll be over at 9:00. It'll take an hour and a half to clean up. That's 10:30. Three hours from then? Yeah, I can do that." And so I get in my car, and he says, "Oh, by the way, I need you to bring one of the students with you." So I got a student, and we're driving all the way out in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night. And, you know, I'm tired.

So I get to the camp, and the guy greets me. His name his Chip. And Chip greets me. He's like, "Hey Rob, so glad you're here." And I said, "I'm happy to be here, Chip." And he says, "Here is your tent." And I was like, "What? You set up a tent for me. This is great." And so I pulled the zipper. And I look inside, and there's another person in there. I said, "What? Chip, there's a guy in my tent." And he goes, "Yes, he's sleeping." And so I'm sleeping on the ground in a tent. In case you don't figure this out, I'm not much of a wilderness guy. Right? Air conditioning is wonderful, and so is my bed. And so I'm sleeping in this tent with this—I don't know him. Like, you don't introduce yourself and be like, "Hey, I'm Rob." You know. So it's like I don't know who's—I'm overwhelmed, to be honest with you.

And so the next day, we get in the canoe, and I get paired up with the kid who drove with me. Now, the kid who drove with me is in sixth grade. Now, I told you I like powerboats more than canoes, but I am very aware that canoes are most often effective when they ride flat on the water. I played football in college. I take pride in my largeness. And so I was sitting in the back of the canoe, and the guy says, "All right. It's a 12-mile trip." And I'm looking up at Ethan, who's like, "You good up there?" Yeah. I'm like, "All right. This is a one-man job for 12 miles. You got this, Rob." I did not have this, Rob.

And so about three miles in, I was like, we got to be getting close. We're nowhere near close. And to make matters harder, it hadn't rained in like four weeks. So the river that we were on was a creek bed. And so every once in a while, you'd scrape against it. And Ethan was very sweet and would go, "You want help?" And I'm like, "What are you going to do?" So I get out of the boat, and I have to push Ethan in the boat.

This was a journey. Let me tell you there were multiple points along that 12-mile stretch of creek that I thought, "I am not going to make it. I did not bring food. I am thirsty. I am like 500 pounds more than this kid." That's a journey right there. And, of course, it culminates with exactly probably what you think is going to happen. We're a mile left to go, and there's like a little drop, a little waterfall. And I needed a new phone approximately ten minutes later because we tipped our canoe.

So, you know, that was awesome. So, you know, James and Nathaniel, like they asked me, "Hey, do you want to"—I was like, "Get away from me. I'm not going on anymore CSB trips."

Here's a different story for you. This one's a little more recent. Last year, prior to coming to our

church, I did work at other churches in the past. But I had a season where I was operating an event venue and business park as a general manager of a large facility. We had local businesses on our property that paid rent to the landlord. I was the go-between for them. And then we also put on lots of large events from concerts to car shows and all kinds of things.

And around February of 2020, right before COVID hit, the owner of the property decided that he no longer wanted to do this, and he was going to sell the business. And so I found out in February that I had about a month to two months left to find a job. And then COVID hit. And it was really hard to find a job. And so I became unemployed right at the time that a pandemic strikes our world. And I started to go through a lot of interesting feelings, feelings that I'd never felt or processed before. Fear in a different quantity than I've ever felt before. Anxiety in a different amount than I've ever processed before.

But something really tragic started to occur. I started to feel worthless. Here I am. I'm a man. I have a wife and a child. And I don't have a job. How am I going to provide for these people that I love? This is my job. What are you doing, Robert? Are you serious? You can't find a job? What is the matter with you? What's wrong with you? And this voice, you know—some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. You start to hear your own self, and you just cut down, and you cut down, and you cut down. And I got to this place where I realized I was actually unable to answer the question, "Am I going to make it?"

When everything is stripped away, what sustains you? What keeps you going? Some of you might be asking this question, too. Maybe you've asked it in the past. But some of you might be asking it this very morning. And here is my encouragement to you, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. If you are asking this question, then this psalm is for you because it is the exact question that the psalmist is asking.

If we look carefully, we observe in verse 1, he says, "I lift up my eyes." I lift them up. Well, where was he looking before? Presumably down. You know the feeling when you're exhausted, when you feel like there's just no hope in this. You're looking down. You're distraught. You're depressed. You're exhausted. And he says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" This is a rock bottom question. Will I make it through this? How?

He looks at his circumstances. He looks around, and he is in despair. Maybe the journey is really, really hard. Maybe there are things going on in his life as he makes this journey that make it harder. We know this feeling, yes? I told you about my job, the circumstance. I'm jobless in a pandemic, and I'm afraid. "God, will you provide? You promised to take care of me. Will you?" The circumstance is one thing. But we all know as we read scripture that there's another thing that's really important for us to be aware of, and that's what's happening inside of us in our own heart. So I have my circumstances, and I have my inward sin issues. My circumstances are that I'm jobless, and I'm afraid. My inward issue, my idol issue of success was coming out full boar and wreaking havoc in my life. "I lift my eyes up to the hills. From where does my help come from?"

It's important to recognize that in the Old Testament, hills were used in two ways. The first is a place of safety. The hills offer height perspective. God does a lot of tremendous things on hilltops. But there's another side. It's a place of treachery. It is the hideout, the haunt of robbers and thieves. So it's unlikely, and it's confirmed when we read verse 2, that the psalmist is satisfied with the answer, "I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come from?" It's not the hills because even if you could get to the top of the hill, that might offer him temporary relief from his circumstances, but not himself. The hills simply will not do. There is no height to which I can climb where trouble will not find me because there is no height to which I can climb that I can be rid of myself. I go wherever I go.

So where is his help? Verse 2 continues, "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." Amen. He lifts his eyes, he looks to the hill, and he says, "Is it the hill? No." He looks past the hill to the creator. And he says, "It's not the hill. It's the Lord who makes the heavens and the earth." That is the answer. We're already done the sermon. Yes? I mean, that's beautiful. He wastes no time in telling us the truth and delivering it to us and inspiring us with hope.

But I love it because he goes on. He says, "Now what does this help look like?" And for the next six verses, he tells us. Verse 3, "He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber." This is an interesting verse that causes us to stop and ask the question of what does that mean, right? He will not let your foot be moved. Having torn two ACL's, I can tell you this is probably not a literal verse. Right? So what does it mean? It's pointing to something. Does it mean that we're not going to suffer? Does it mean that Christians should expect all kinds of awesome and incredible things? Like I'm a Christian. And I walk into work, and they go, "You know what, Rob? You're worthy of a promotion. How does an extra 600,000 sound?" No.

So what is he saying? Your foot will not move. But we also read in the New Testament in John 16:33, "In this world, you will have trouble." So how do we make sense of this? The idea here is bigger than today. The psalmist is telling us and reminding himself. They remind one another as they make this difficult journey. God will not let my foot be moved. God does not let the end of our story change. The chapters between one and the end of the book are open, but the end result does not change. He who keeps you will not slumber. "He will not let your foot be moved."

He's going to go on and continue to explain. "Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." Our destiny in Christ is secure. Absolutely secure. Completely secure. So secure that the one who keeps it doesn't sleep, doesn't slumber.

I told you God does incredible things on hilltops. And I couldn't help but make the connection in 1 Kings 18 when Elijah faces off with the prophets of Baal, and really God faces off against nobody.

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. [ESV]

It's an incredible picture, this event. It's incredible because God, just a few verses later—fire. I love it because Elijah says, "Maybe he's sleeping." He points out the weakness and the insufficiency of every other thing we put our hope in compared to the sufficiency and perfection of our God, the one true God who keeps you, who never sleeps nor slumbers. Everything else I put my hope in is bound to fail me at some point, including myself. But we serve and worship a God who neither slumbers nor sleeps and who keeps me perfectly.

Continue on with me. "The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand." Now I had to look that up. "Shade on the right hand" is not a phrase I often use in my daily conversations. So

what does it mean? Well, it's a picture of the Israelite army. And so they are right-handed men. And the shield goes on your left hand to protect you, and the right hand holds your sword. It's a picture that your right hand is vulnerable. My left hand is shielded; my right hand is not. And the shade of the Lord is protection, tied closely to the mother hen who spreads out her wings over her chicks, which is a picture Christ uses for Jerusalem as He walks towards the cross.

Verse 6, "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night." The sun represents the height of day. The moon represents the height of night. At the most extremes of the day and the most extremes of the night, neither all the day has to offer nor all the night has to offer can cause harm to the ones who God looks after.

Verse 7, "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." Again, we will suffer in this world. It's part of God's plan, in fact. "In this world, you will have trouble, but I leave you my peace." And God will keep your life. Verse 8, "The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever more." There's nowhere we can go where the Lord does not keep us.

The psalmist is not just going on and on without reason. Right? And for many of us, this is not new information. Right? That Jesus loves us, that the Lord keeps us, that He cares for us, that He protects us. It may not be new, but it is most certainly needed. And that is why the psalmist tells us and tells himself again and again, verse after verse, "No, my hope is not in the hills. It is in the Lord. And this is why." And I love that. Because when I was going through what I was going through last year, and as you go through the pain and suffering that this world brings, you need to be reminded of God's love and His protection.

I struggled a lot as I prepared this sermon because I wanted some sort of moment of application that I thought would just bring it all home, and we could all, you know, celebrate together. And I wasn't finding it because, again, this just doesn't seem to be that new, that exciting perhaps. But here's what I realized as I prayed. My circumstances may wear me down, and my inward sin may distract me greatly, but my God does not alter in His love or protection over me. That when I am faithless, He remains faithful. That when I fail, His love is never failing. That when Satan accuses me, Christ acquits me. That as others persecute the church, God preserves the church. And as the journey overwhelms me, I must be reminded that my God overcomes so that as the storm rages, I might rejoice.

How do you rejoice in suffering unless you know the outcome is secure? How do you praise in the midst of the trial? How do you continue on as hope is torn away from you, and you feel that nothing is going right, and it never will? When you get to the rock bottom, and you lift your eyes to the hills, and you say, where is my help? How are you going to rejoice unless in your heart by God's grace, you have the faith that you are saved? And then you believe the promises that because you are His, you will never be let go. Amen?

Howell Harris, the Welsh evangelist of the Great Awakening once wrote,

"I feel my spirit leaving all places and men here below and going to my Father, and to my native country. Home. Yes, my own home. And if a child longs for his father, a traveler for the end of his journey, a workman to finish his work, a prisoner for his liberty, an heir for the full possession of his estate, so in all these respects I can't help longing to go home because the Lord keeps my end, and because the Lord keeps me, and because the Lord keeps you."

We can take the next step. And Psalm 121 promises this, that no matter how much trouble we face, circumstances, or cause ourselves, inward sin, between now and that homecoming, our God will

keep us. He will keep your life forever.

I spent a lot of my life putting my hope in other things. I thought that if I just had enough success, if I achieved enough and enough people acknowledged that achievement, that I'd be okay. So God takes it away. I thought that if I was athletic enough and I was popular enough that it would be okay. So I've torn two ACL's. I thought that if I could be funny enough, if I could get to a place where I really just brought a lot of light to wherever I was, that that would be enough. Here's the reality. And I am overjoyed to tell you this. That as we suffer, and as God allows us to suffer, it is for our benefit and His glory. Because it is in my weakness that He makes me strong.

If you don't know Jesus Christ, and you are running around, and you're looking to hills to satisfy you, may I exhort you this morning. Don't look to the hills. Look to the hill where our Savior lugged a cross up and took your place, took the death you deserve and died in your place to have a relationship with you and free you from the need and the desire to find your hope and your help anywhere else. Everything else you put your hope in, everywhere else you look for help is going to fail you. And I pray that it does so that you might find your hope and your life in the one true God who loves you so much that you will never look anywhere else again.

If you do know Jesus Christ, and you say, "I still look elsewhere," well, join the club. Because I find myself all too often looking to other things to satisfy the longings of my soul and looking elsewhere to provide comfort in a time of need. And I need to repent of that. And so you do, you repent, Christian, of all the times you seek your comfort elsewhere. And you worship.

I struggle with the application, but the application is worship, isn't it? It's to go, "Oh my goodness. You love me that much? O Lord. You keep me even after I stray?" You worship. And then you do this. You say to your soul and to the other friends in this room that the journey is hard, but the end is secure. "For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation awaits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God." Romans 8:18-19.

If you're suffering today, know that you are not alone. If you're broken today, know that you are not alone. If you are in need of a fresh reminder, meditate on this psalm this week. And let us know because we would love to come through that with you. Let's pray.

Dear Lord, you are good beyond compare. Your glory is everlasting. You are capable to uphold your promise to keep us, and you do. Father, forgive us for the times we look to other things for comfort. Remind us of the way that you love us even when we look other places for comfort and renew in us a right spirit. Father, for those who are suffering, remind them that you, too, suffered. Comfort them in the midst of it. Encourage those of us who are in their lives to weep with them and struggle with them and be with them in the midst of the trial and the pain. Lord, we are grateful for you, and for your promises, and for your love. May we go out of here in full confidence, not knowing what tomorrow brings but knowing what our end is and that you do know and that you do keep us, and preserve us, and protect us. We are yours and yours alone, O God. Amen.