

Psalm 121
Help in Times of Trouble
a series on discipleship

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RBC participated in a church health initiative in May. The initiative included an extensive survey, the results of which help give insight for the church's direction in the coming months/years. One of the expressed desires from you – the church – was a greater focus on discipleship. Throughout the fall and possibly winter, I will be preaching a series on discipleship from the Songs of Ascents, Psalm 120-134. The purpose of this series is to equip you with the skills and practices of faith for discipleship.

Discipleship and pilgrimage are about knowing who we are and knowing where we're going. For a Christian believer, discipleship is about who we are: knowing and living out of our identity, our relationship with Jesus Christ and His church. It is also about where we're going: knowing that the path of pilgrimage is about leading us to God and living towards that goal.

So discipleship is about maturing as a Christian and moving ever closer to God. The first step of discipleship is repentance. That is what Psalm 120 is all about, as we studied last week. To repent means to say no to the ways, the practices, the thinking, the behaviours of the world and instead say yes to Jesus. To repent means to turn around and decide to follow the ways, the practices, the thinking, the behaviour of Jesus Christ. The first step of the journey of pilgrimage is repentance because saying yes to Jesus is precisely the initial step we need to take that puts us on the path towards God.

It is common to think that as soon as we turn away from the practices of the world, when we turn away from violence, deception, disharmony, and hatred; and we turn to the Triune God then all of our problems will be fixed. After all, God is love. God is good. God is compassionate. God is

powerful. God is forgiving. In fact, there are some people who turn to Jesus and say yes to Jesus because of the hope and belief that saying yes to Jesus means that life will have no more problems and trials and challenges. There is the common perception that when we repent and turn to God, suddenly we develop immunity from all of life's heartaches and difficulties. In other words, it is not uncommon for people to turn to God because of a perceived and immediate benefit – instant and life-long protection from hurt and frustration and exhaustion and weariness and relational strain.

This is faulty thinking because what then happens when a Christian believer experiences hurt or sickness or unemployment or housing crisis or family breakdown? For some, there is the assumption that the problems in my life are a reflection of or a result of my relationship with God. The assumption is that because life isn't going well – I didn't get the job I applied for or my child just got sick or a friendship is falling apart or work is overwhelming– then God has stopped protecting or caring about me.

Consider for a moment how we generally use the word “blessed” or “blessing”. We write hashtag blessed on our social media posts only when things are going well – we write hashtag blessed when we post a picture of our vacation in Hawaii or a successful hunt. We call our life or the life of another blessed when there is a new baby, or a new job offer or a move to a bigger home. We don't call ourselves blessed when things are not going well. It is almost as though our being blessed is dependent on good things happening and when something doesn't go well, we are no longer blessed.

Now I am not at all suggesting that it is appropriate or compassionate to tell someone who is going through tragedy or crisis that they are blessed. I am trying to point out that some of our language contributes to a belief, a perception, a posture, an attitude that God has stopped caring for us or that God is not with us and protecting us when we encounter a problem in life.

Psalm 121 opposes such Christian thinking about discipleship and pilgrimage. Psalm 121 tells us that maybe we're wrong about what we think the Christian life is supposed to be or will be like. Maybe being a disciple of Jesus Christ isn't about avoiding pain and being free of all problems and trials. Maybe God does care about us and protects us even though we don't know how we'll pay for the next meal or take care of a dying family member or ease our anxieties.

The reality is that when we repent, when we take that first step of discipleship, the first step towards God on our pilgrimage, life does not suddenly become easier or have fewer problems. In fact, we often get bruised after that initial movement to God. We may get weary and discouraged from the demands of life. We may grow frustrated and impatient with how things are moving in our career. We may get confused and hurt that our relationships aren't perfect. We, like our friends and colleagues, family members and neighbours, experience the highs and lows of life, the ups and downs. So repentance sometimes comes with a surprise – that when we repent and keep turning to Jesus, we keep on having problems. Our problems don't actually disappear and we don't find ourselves in the perfect state of the garden of Eden or the New Jerusalem.

The path of discipleship and pilgrimage is one that comes with trouble and turmoil, frustration and fatigue, chaos and confusion. Psalm 121 is that Psalm which is the second cry of the pilgrim.

If the first cry of the pilgrim's path, the first cry of the disciple is "save me" – which is a cry of repentance; then the second cry is "help me". The disciple at some point will reach the point of needing help. The Psalmist lists three ways that we experience harm. Now remember that these Psalms are the Songs of Ascent – sung by the people of God as they journeyed up to Jerusalem for the annual festivals. So it is normal that the Psalmist describes troubles and challenges that a pilgrim would face, that someone on a long journey would encounter.

The first way a pilgrim or traveler might experience trouble is by tripping or falling. When we travel by foot, we can experience injury. Two weeks ago, I had the great privilege of going on a sheep hunt. Now although we didn't even spot a sheep, I consider the hunt a resounding success and I personally had a lot of fun. While the five of us were bushwhacking down a mountain, I heard a voice call from behind me "rock". I turned my head around in time to see a medium sized rock rolling down, and it was moving quickly in my direction. I couldn't adjust my footing in time and watched as the rock smacked above my right inner ankle bone. I experienced a small injury from the bruising and swelling and abrasion. I was not protected from my foot slipping.

Second, a pilgrim or traveler on a long journey may experience sunstroke or heat stroke by being outside beneath the sun for long periods of time. The sun causes one to become faint and weary. When we here in Whitehorse experienced the heat wave a few weeks ago, my parents were visiting from Kelowna. While they are accustomed to dry summer heat, they were not used to temperatures in one's home to be consistently above 30 degrees. Living in an apartment with no cross breeze and getting all the afternoon/evening sun meant that my apartment was well over 30 degrees late into the night. My parents couldn't fall asleep and I needed an ice pack on my neck

to sleep. It impacted my parents so much that they admitted they were so looking forward to returning to Kelowna because they were very sleep deprived! Sun and heat can cause weariness and exhaustion.

Third, a pilgrim or traveler might experience ill effects from the moon. When a person travels for excessively long periods of time, they can become fatigued and weary which certainly impacts one's emotions. A person may become emotionally exhausted and unstable. We refer to this as lunacy, which is understood in the Bible as moonstroke. In east Africa where I lived for a year it was called madness – someone had gone 'mad'.

The three dangers outlined in Psalm 121 that a pilgrim, a traveler, a disciple of Jesus may experience are: falling or tripping, sunstroke, and lunacy. It's pretty clear this list was intended for the pilgrim on their way to Jerusalem for the festivals. But this list could be edited to reflect some of the common dangers and harm we, as disciples and pilgrim, may experience in our current day and age. There are various ways we may be harmed – sickness, illness, automobile or bike accident, sports injury or falling from a ladder. We may be harmed through fraud, theft, betrayal, gossip, lies. We may be harmed by injustice or poverty or work stress.

So when we read that the Lord will not let our foot slip and will not let the sun or moon strike us, is the Psalmist actually saying that Christians will never get an ankle injury, never get sunstroke or heat stroke, and never have emotional problems? Put different, if I sprain my ankle or bruise it (like what happened on my sheep hunt), does that mean I'm not a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ? If I experience heat stroke or emotional weariness (as my parents did during their visit),

does that mean I'm not a Christian or believer? Or if I am a believer and experience an ankle injury or sunstroke or emotional problems, does that mean the Psalmist is wrong? These questions may sound somewhat ridiculous but that mindset creeps into Christianity. It just sounds different. It sounds like "If I don't get what I prayed for, does that mean I'm not a good Christian? Or, if my family life falls apart does that mean God doesn't care about me?" This seems to be a quite reasonable conclusion based on those verses.

We all know very well that a Christian believer, a disciple and pilgrim, encounters trouble and challenge. And each of us deeply knows the ache of having watched a close friend or family member turn away from Christ when trouble hits. We know all too well the conclusion: "well, if Jesus won't prevent me from getting hurt – won't prevent me from losing my job or getting sick or my child dying or (fill in the blank) then God must not exist and not care about me".

When we experience trouble, it's normal for us to look around for help. It's also quite common to not ask for help and simply try to resolve it on our own. This is the Psalm that deals with the pilgrim's cry "help me". Let me put the Psalm in context because right now the Psalm certainly sounds like it's saying that God will protect us from tripping or sunstroke or moonstroke. As the Israelites made their pilgrimage towards Jerusalem and looked around, they would have seen mountains. For us, when we see mountains, we see grandeur, majesty, awe, beauty, hunting opportunities, recreation, wild berries. I am reminded of when my cousin, who lives in Halifax, and I traveled to Switzerland two years ago. We met at the airport in Zurich and made our way by train to a mountain village. On the way, my cousin exclaimed "Ooooh – mountains". I looked out the window and asked "where?". She pointed and replied "over there". I told her those were

not in fact mountains, just hills. She would know soon enough when we saw a real mountain.

And in time, I heard a gasp and saw a smile spread on her face as she saw a real mountain. Well, my cousin visited me here this summer. Coming from Halifax, she doesn't get to experience the beauty of the mountains. As we hiked and mountain biked and walked around the territory during her stay, she was in awe of the mountainous landscape and remarked on its beauty.

But when an Israelite on their pilgrim journey looked at the mountains, they would have seen something quite different. Where we see beauty and awe, they would have seen pagan worship practices. Where we encounter majesty and grandeur, they would have encountered fear and distrust. On the hilltops and mountains, shrines would have been set up so that people could come and worship. In the ancient near east, pagan worship meant that people would offer sacrifices to the gods, hoping that in return the gods would grant the land fertility or protection to travelers or some other benefit. Mountains were essentially the source of help because on a mountain was a priest who could cure sickness, a bracelet that could protect you from thieves or a formula to guard you against wild animals. For every kind of fear, for every kind of concern, for every kind of possible trouble, there was something a person could do on that mountain to be safe. If you feared the demons in the rocks that might cause you to trip, you could go to a shrine, a site of worship, and learn a magic formula to prevent that. If the sun caused you distress, you could go to the sun priest and pay for protection against the sun god. If you're prone to the ill effects of the moon, then buy a bracelet to ward off the moon's impact. All of this existed because of the belief that sunstroke or moonstroke was caused by a demon in the sun or moon. The demon was the agent of evil – that's why a person had to go to a shrine and worship another god: to prevent the demon from doing its evil work.

Things are a bit different in the 21st century. We don't look at the rocks or sun or moon and worry about the demons inside. But perhaps we are not so different than we might think. We still turn to magic formulas and pills for weight loss. We still turn to self-help books to fix whatever's wrong within us. We still turn to the mountains to cure something, to help us avoid trouble.

The cry of the Psalm at the very beginning says this: does my help come from the mountains? Does it come from the shrines and the sun god and the moon god and the rock god? Does my help come from those priests and priestesses and bracelets and magic formulas?

Remember, discipleship is about knowing who we are and where we're going. That means discipleship is about knowing where to turn to when we encounter trouble. As disciples, when we need help we turn to Jesus. Discipleship is about knowing that our help doesn't come from the mountains, or the books we read, or the podcasts we listen to, or the magic pills we ingest. Our help comes from the one who created the mountains. Our help doesn't come from the creation but from the creator. We need not turn to the sun or moon or rocks for help. We can go directly to the One who made them.

The Psalmist reminds us that our help comes from the One who never sleeps. In the ancient near east, there were countless gods – gods for every thing: sun god and moon god and fertility and health. But those gods often slept – think of the prophets of Baal who tried to arouse Baal from sleep and slumber. Yahweh God doesn't sleep, He is always awake and alert.

So if discipleship is about turning to God for help, what kind of help does he provide? The clue to what this Psalm is about is found in verse 7. Our English translations often read “The Lord will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life”. The Hebrew has a slightly different emphasis and nuance. Literally translated, it reads “Your soul he shall preserve evil from all shall preserve you the Lord.” Put in plain English it says “your soul shall be kept from all evil for the Lord shall keep you.

The Hebrew word for soul refers to “a living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite, emotion”. In this context it is referring to the whole of a person. The Hebrew word we typically translate as harm refers to evil or adversity.

Now in the context of Psalm 121 where we have the image of the mountains – full of the shrines and pagan worship – we realize pretty quickly that this Psalm is less about whether we physically stub our toe or get sunburnt or get anxious. It is more about God’s protection from evil power which threatens to separate us from God.

As the pilgrims were on their journey to Jerusalem, as they went on their path of discipleship, they looked to the mountains and could see the evil which threatened to separate them from their purposes. As pilgrims and disciples, our purpose, our goal is to go to God. There is much that threatens us on our journey of discipleship and pilgrimage. The point of this Psalm is that God protects us from the evil that would separate us from the path of pilgrimage and discipleship. That is the help God gives to us.

We know from reading our Bible that we will experience struggle and challenge and pain in this life. Throughout the Bible, there are countless stories that tell us faith will meet trouble. To be a Christian does not mean that suddenly our heartache and troubles will be over. Then faith is about what God can do for me rather than a pilgrimage to God. God does not promise us that he will protect us from challenges or pain or struggles. God does make a promise though. His promise is much better. He promises that he will preserve us from evil that would separate us from God. God promises to preserve us from evil in the experiences of struggle and pain.

Many of you intimately know tragedy and crisis in your family life, your work life, your physical and emotional and psychological well-being. I can think of many of your stories of faith where, in the face of extreme hardship and pain, you turned to Jesus and were protected from evil – you were not separated from the love of God or his purposes in you. He held you, embraced you, loved you, and cared for you. God has protected you from evil entering into you and separating you from Him.

You see, challenges and struggles and pain cannot hurt us unless it gets deep within us- unless it gets to our soul, to our being. Trouble harms us when it begins to slowly and decisively push us away from God. Trouble harms us when we start to believe that we are not in fact on the right journey. Cancer hurts our bodies but it doesn't hurt our souls unless we stop believing that God loves us. So God doesn't promise to stop the storm from happening but prevents the storm from entering us.

When sickness overtakes our body, when depression and anxiety impair our minds, when conflict ruins our relationships, sometimes we make a mistake. Sometimes we conclude that because I am experiencing problems, it means God has stopped caring for me, has stopped protecting me, has stopped loving me. We reason that God is looking after a better Christian than me, that God is taking care of someone who is more obedient and faithful to him. So now I'm left to fight for myself by myself.

Psalm 121 prevents us from making that mistake, from assuming that God doesn't care about me or love me anymore. Psalm 121 prevents us from concluding that God's care and concern for me is dependent on my spiritual thermometer – whether I'm hot, cold, or lukewarm.

Here's the beauty of Psalm 121: it reminds us that the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who is working towards a big picture of salvation which includes the renewal, restoration, redemption and reconciliation of all things is also concerned about the stones under our feet, the heat from the sun, and the strangeness of the moon. God, the one who never sleeps, is as concerned about what goes on in our mundane and trivial lives as he is concerned about the 'big things'. The care and concern we receive from God is echoed throughout Psalm 121.

In Psalm 120, God was named only twice but in Psalm 121, the personal name for God, Yahweh, is used 5 times. Our English Bibles read "The Lord" but the Hebrew says Yahweh which is the personal name given for Israel's God, our God. Three of those times, in verses 5, 7, and 8, we see Yahweh paired with a Hebrew verb, shamar. In fact, the Psalm has only 8 verses but 8 different times the Hebrew word shamar is used. It is translated in various ways in our English

Bibles so we often miss the repetition of the verb. Shamar means to keep, to watch, to preserve. The entire emphasis and thrust of this Psalm is God's character – he is the one who keeps, who watches, who preserves. He preserves us from evil getting inside us.

Psalm 121 is that song that is sung when we need to remember that no evil power can overthrow or overpower us. Faith isn't a game of chance. It's about security in Christ. It's about knowing and living that although the rock might trip us, the sun fatigue us, and the moon distress us, God will guard from the evil getting inside of us and separating us from God.

Christian pilgrimage and discipleship is about going to God. In this world, that means that we don't seek to escape our living environment and live exclusively with other pilgrims. We live in the same neighbourhoods as everyone else, fuel our cars at the same gas stations, eat in the same coffee shops, work in the same buildings, camp at the same campsites, hunt the same meat, fear the same things, send our kids to the same schools. Everything looks the same. But there's one difference between the disciple/pilgrim of Christ and others: we know God is preserving us, keeping us, watching over us. Whatever the trials and struggles and challenges we face, we turn to God for help, knowing he will preserve us from all evil. We don't conclude that because we're facing hardship, God has stopped caring about us. Since discipleship and pilgrimage is about going to God, it means that when we face challenges – in the big things in life and in the little things – we turn to God.

So Psalm 121 is about power and love. It is about divine power and love which protect individuals throughout the ordinary routine of life – through the ordinary experiences of being a disciple and pilgrim of Jesus Christ.